

Ken Ripper

Monday, 30 January 2013

London Bubble Theatre Company

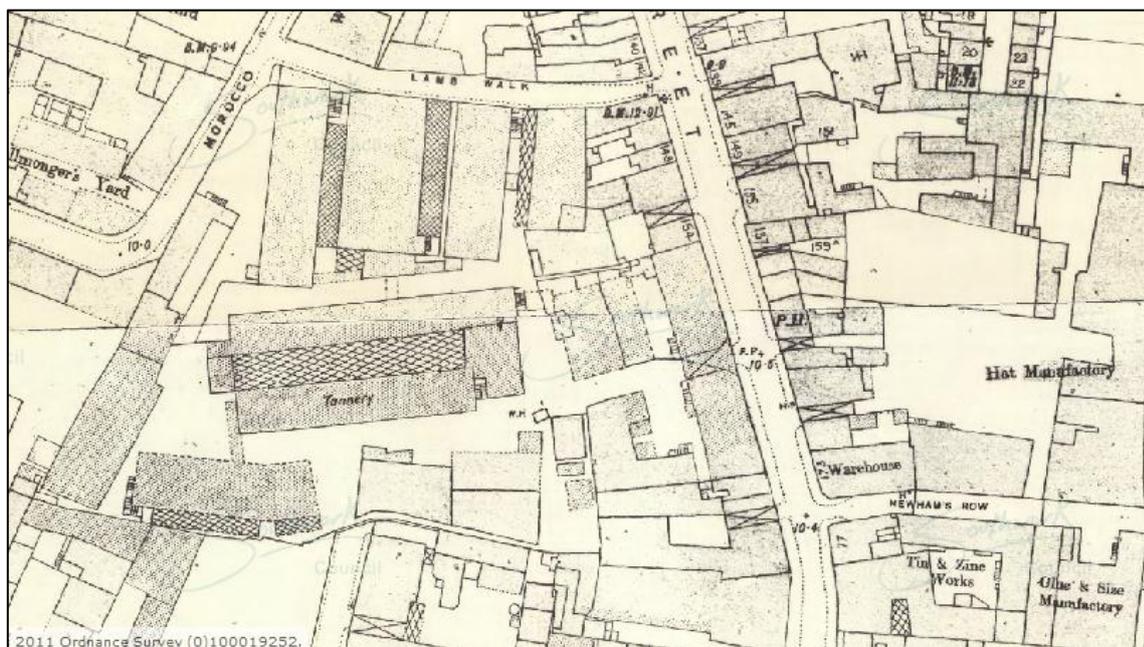
Swedish Church, Lower Road, Rotherhithe

Work in Bermondsey, Rotherhithe & Deptford .. Docks to Desks Project – section “Whiffs and Pongs”

Ten smells captured in jars gave the assembled group of about 20 the prompts to recall the smells of the district from their earlier days. Some were more evocative than others for me and it was the same for other members of the group and this largely depended upon where we had our formative years. The smells of the tanneries and food factories provoked stronger memories for Beormundians whilst the smells of the docks and the river were more significant to those who had been brought up in Rotherhithe.

For me, the greatest memory that was provoked by the smells was of a Geography field trip when I was in the first year at St Olave's Grammar School at Tower Bridge. I don't recall the name of the teacher, which is sad bearing in mind the impact that he had. Along with some other good Geography teachers when I was at Bacon's (after leaving St Olave's I went to Bacon's), particularly Miss Burge and Miss Davenport, he was probably a significant force in my later becoming a teacher of Geography. My interest in Geography remains until today, some half a century later.

The field trip we undertook in 1961 consisted of walking from the school to Bermondsey Church, St Mary Magdalen, and the working our way back to school by way of Bermondsey Street, Tooley Street and the many side streets. On the way we noted down all the smells and the factories from which they emanated. There were tanneries, hat manufactories, leather goods workers, scent



producers, spice importers, bonded warehouses, fruit warehouses, vinegar brewers and so many more. The major dockside wharves were Hay's, Butler's and John Brown's which formed the basis of Tooley Street earning the epithet “England's larder” (I'm not sure whether that was England or Britain or London but suspect that London's larder was more likely as it was alliterative). Today,

Ken Ripper

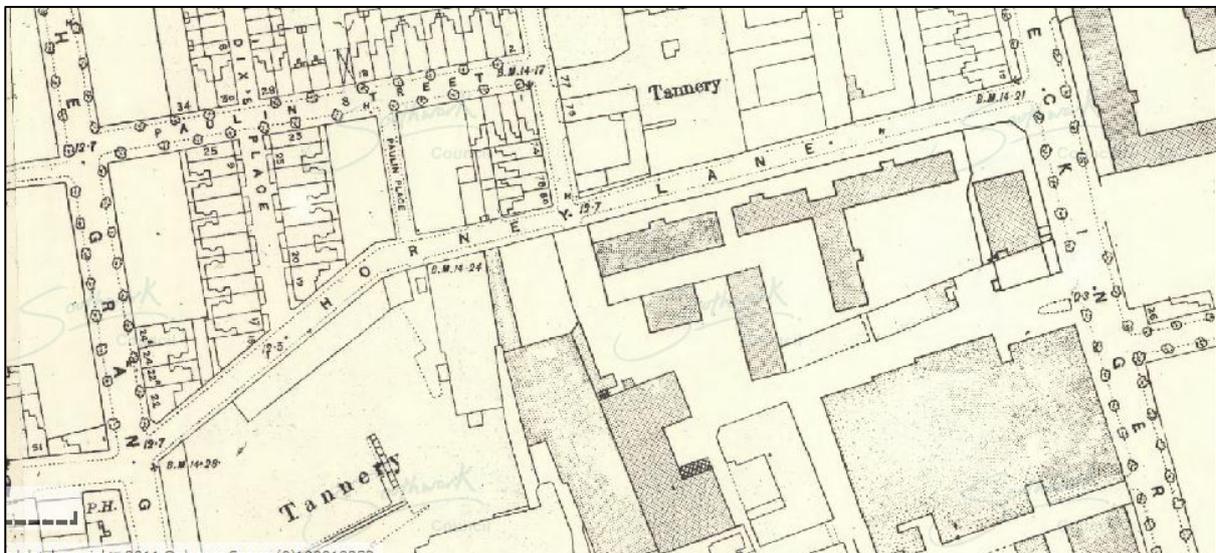
when I walk along Bermondsey Street I still get the feeling that I can smell those aromas and even see the buildings from which they escaped as they were in those days.

The words on the buildings such as street names like 'Tanner Street' or on factories like 'Morocco Leather' were redolent of far flung places which were described in Geography books at school. The world's produce seemed to be here with boxes of bananas from Jamaica, butter from New Zealand, tea from India and so many other products and places. From reading the packaging, the words on the sacks, the sides of tea chests and even the place names the world came to me. These products were then distributed across the country and lorries bearing the names of wholesalers buzzed around Bermondsey like busy ants gathering food for their nests. The activity emphasised Britain's position as the head of the Commonwealth and harped back to the days of Empire. We were too young to have lived under the days of the Empire but our old school books and our comics and our adventure based library books gave us the impressions of a once golden age. As a boy of about 7, I had an old version of my father's AA book which contained a gazetteer of the major places in Great Britain all of which had grown on the back of the success of The British Empire. I'd take the book and a red biro and a ruler and sit on the windowsill of Bermondsey Town Hall and mark off the places in the book which I could read from the addresses on the sides of the lorries transporting goods to, from and around Bermondsey.



The bonded warehouses under the railway arches in Druid Street and Crucifix Lane were particularly pungent. There were bonded warehouses all the way along the railway arches through Bermondsey. The one under the St James' Road arch had an ill fitting door and by pressing your nose up to the gap you could smell the alcohol and as kids we used to pretend that we were getting drunk by sniffing in these pungent aromas.

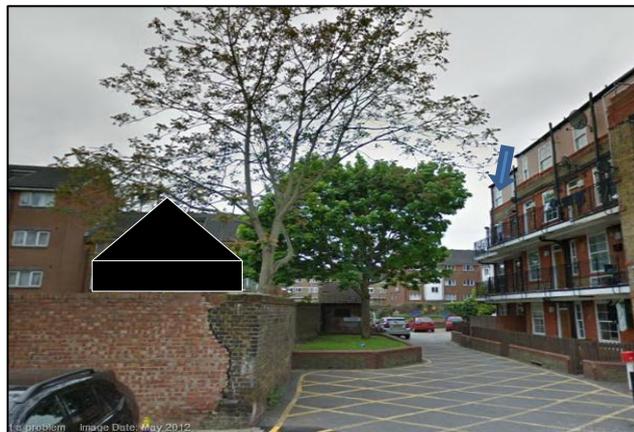
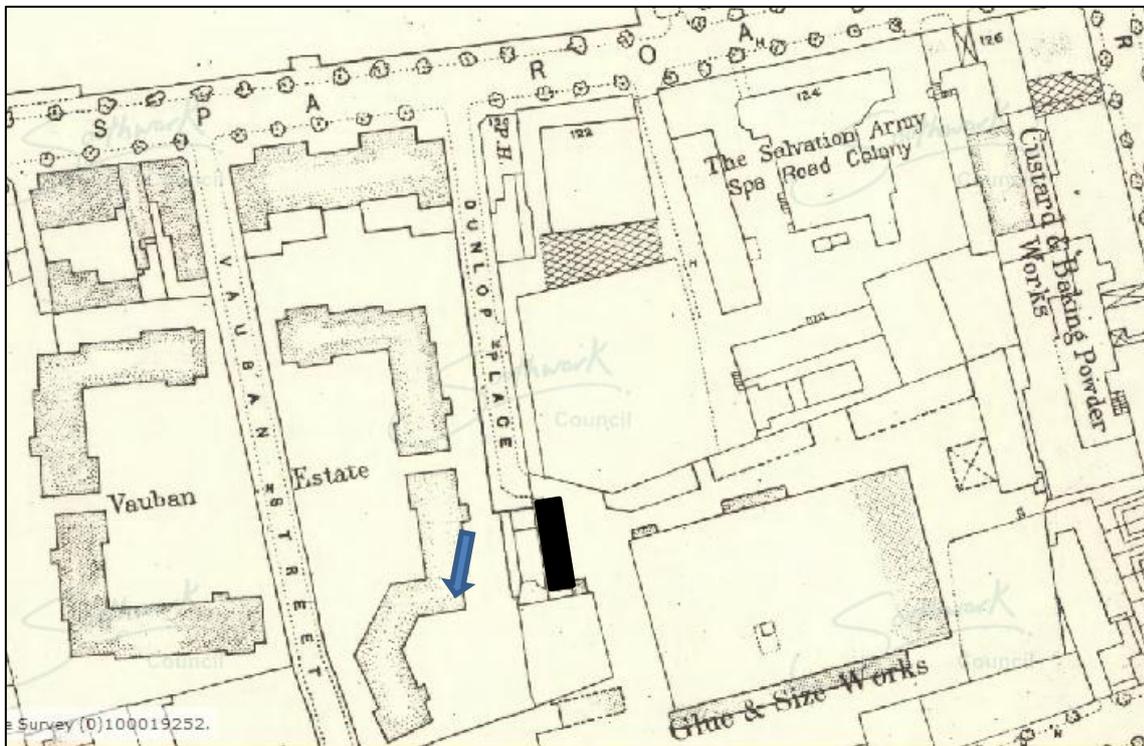
The street in Bermondsey with the worst smells was Horney Lane which ran from The Neckinger to The Grange. The reputation of the street was such that it was later renamed Grange Walk. On the



Ken Ripper

north side of the road, opposite the flats, were tanneries. There were tanneries from The Neckinger to Maltby Street and the smell was that bad that as kids we would walk the long way round via Abbey Street or Spa Road wherever we going rather than walk along Horney Lane where the smell was guaranteed to make you wretch. At the end of Horney Lane where it joined The Grange was an old tannery building which had been turned into a large bakery which produced wonderful smells of baking bread but were swamped by the gut wrenching output from the tanneries further along the street.

When my family lived at 77 Vauban Estate, off Spa Road, the factory opposite was Young's Glue Manufactory. The position can be seen by the blue arrow on the plan below and the ensuing image. The smell from boiling offal, hooves and bones was truly disgusting and the filth that came from the factory affected everybody. The black grit spread across the estate and covered everything. My mother complained that if she left her baby outside on the landing in his pram, the baby's face as well as all the blankets were covered in flecks of black grit from the chimney in the factory.



Ken Ripper

And there were rats and flies. Both seemed large and thrived in the factory. At the entrance to the factory was a 'cottage'. This can be seen in black on the plan and image above. The 'cottage' was used to store incoming hides, bones and hooves before they were treated inside the factory. Sometimes they would stay in the cottage for months, rotting away. In the maggoty weather of the summer the roof of the 'cottage' would shimmer white in the heat and bright sunlight as the maggots of flies basked in the warmth.

Not all the smells were awful. The two jam factories, Lipton's in Rouel Road and Hartley's in Tower Bridge Road, oozed their sweet sticky smells; Shuttleworth's gave out a sickly chocolate aroma; Peek Frean's gave out different smells according to the biscuits they were baking; oil shops across the borough all smelt the same, of paraffin.

In Blue Anchor Lane was Bermondsey Motors. The parts department above the garage was filled with car and lorry parts all preserved in a coating of hypoy gearing oil. Walking up the outside staircase was an adventure and you knew you were getting closer as the hypoy smell got stronger and stronger and then you opened the door into an Aladdin's Cave of metal parts all glistening in the tender care of the motor parts man.

Many pubs had, and some still have, a shellfish stall outside the pub. Sitting next to one these with a pineapple juice and an arrowroot biscuit on a Sunday morning whilst Dad had a drink is mixture of smells I'll never forget.

Dad had a coal yard in Dockley Road. I would play in the coalsheds as Mum shovelled coal for people who chose to collect their coal in portions of a hundredweight. Dad would be out in his lorry delivering coal to houses and flats all over Bermondsey and he'd be out from before breakfast until late at night. The smell of coal when in stacks and when burning linger with me until today as does the smell of the tar covered jute that Dad used to repair worn coal sacks. In the area we called 'the office' there was a cast iron coal burning stove. Mum would send me to the greengrocer's shop on St James' Road to buy a pound of chestnuts. I'd bring them back and roast them on the stove and eat them whilst sitting on coaly old coal sacks.

Alongside the coal yard was Priter Way which led to the railway arches where Lipton's stored their oranges used in the making of marmalade. As the doors to the arches were opened the smell of oranges wafted out from the darkness. Eating the oranges was an unpleasant experience, they were so bitter.