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Greenwich at the end of the 17th Century

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THE second half of the 17th century was a period of decline for Greenwich. At the Restoration in 1660 it was a compact waterside town preserving much of its medieval character—still clustered mainly round the church, though there was some development to the east of the Palace and on the slopes of Crooms Hill.

The easiest journey from London was by water to Garden Stairs (still there west of Greenwich Pier) or to Crane Stairs (at the east end of the Palace). The town was built facing the water and several houses on the east side would have had their own landing stages.

The traveller by road had to cross the Ravensbourne at Deptford Bridge, there being no lower road across the Creek until the 19th century. As he approached Greenwich he would pass Queen Elizabeth's College, founded by William Lambard nearly a hundred years earlier, which still stood in open fields.

The old Tudor Palace was delapidated and vandalised, the Tiltyard towers were in ruins and the barns and stables had been converted to other uses. Some parts were being used as living accommodation: eight people paid hearth tax for no fewer than twenty-eight hearths in the "King's Barn" in 1664, so this may have referred not only to out-buildings but also to other parts of the Palace which could still be made habitable.

THE OLD MANSIONS

The Court had gone from Greenwich and with it the nobility and others who had lived in mansions around the Palace. Some of the houses remained but by this time either empty or divided into tenements. Swanne House, belonging to the Courtney family, stood on the site of the present Greenwich Market: it had once had attached to it most of the land from Crooms Hill to South Street but by 1669 it had been sub-divided into ten dwellings.

Copped Hall (later called Heyton Hall) stood where the west wing of the National Maritime Museum now is. It was beside the main road to Woolwich which, from Greenwich Church, ran through what are now Stockwell and Nevada Streets, under the Queen's House, down East Lane (now Eastney Street) and along

PLATE VI (*opposite*): Greenwich from the Park—oil painting by Henrick Danckerts done for Samuel Pepys, c. 1669. In that year Pepys records a visit to view the scene and the foreground figures are said to be the artist with Mr. and Mrs. Pepys. (Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.)



Old Woolwich Road, skirting the marshes. The Hall had been in the 16th century a home of the Ropers, of whom William married Sir Thomas More's daughter, Margaret.

East of the Palace on the riverfront, where the Generating Station now stands, was the beautiful building later known as Crowley House after its 18th-century owner. It had been built by Sir Andrew Cogan, who was a fervent Royalist, but during the Civil War was bought by Gregory Clement, M.P., for £832, less than a fifth of its reputed cost. The house was not quite finished when Clement acquired it but Sir Andrew had spent vast sums on such things as Spanish tiles and marble paving. There was a magnificent carved oak staircase and a superb first-floor dining room with views of the river from Deptford to Blackwall. Clement appears to have taken good care of the house and completed some building work. He also obtained a pair of stoves from the Palace kitchens, complete with Royal coats of arms. At the Restoration he was beheaded as a regicide and the house was occupied by Cogan's son-in-law, Christopher Musgrave.

The house next door on the east was the residence in 1664 of Captain Cocks, a hemp merchant, who was a close if somewhat disreputable friend of Samuel Pepys and who appears constantly in the latter's diary during his time in Greenwich. Further to the south near the top of Love Lane (now Vanbrugh Hill) William Lambarde's old manor house of Westcombe was in the possession of Sir Theophilus Biddulph.

ROYALISTS AND ROUNDHEADS

London had been on the whole Parliamentary and so too, despite their recent proximity to the Court, were the people of Greenwich. When Fairfax defeated a Royalist force on Blackheath, some hundreds of the soldiers who fled into the town were hooted and pelted by the Greenwich watermen. Nevertheless some of the Court musicians who had made their homes near the Palace—the Laniers, the Mells and Daniel Farrant—were still there at the Restoration. (Alfonso Ferrobosco had died before the war began.)

There were also local men who remained Royalist. William Boreman the younger, who lived in the family house on the south-west corner of East Lane and Hog Lane just behind Trinity Hospital, had been Clerk of the Green Cloth to Charles I and responsible for providing Queen Henrietta Maria's household with food and money during the first part of the war. At the Restoration he was made Keeper of Greenwich Park and became a very influential man

locally. His house had gardens and a cherry orchard and Pepys, who spent many pleasant evenings there, particularly enjoyed the venison pasties. As the deer in Greenwich and Eltham Parks had been killed during the Civil War Sir William's supply must have come from further afield.

Among members of the local gentry who did not support the Crown was Colonel Thomas Blount of Wricklemarsh, a convinced Parliamentary and one of the two men in Kent whom Charles I refused to pardon in 1642. He was the Justice of the Peace to whom John Evelyn applied after being waylaid and robbed just outside Bromley. Blount set up a hue and cry and shortly afterwards one of the robbers was captured and most of Evelyn's valuables recovered.

Colonel Blount was a man of strong convictions and great enthusiasms. He organised a mock battle on Blackheath between Cavaliers and Roundheads—which the latter no doubt won! Evelyn became friendly with him and was invited in 1656 to see his newly invented plough. The next year it was his way-wiser, which measured the miles a coach travelled “showing it by an index as we rid along—very pretty and very useful”. Blount was a member of the Royal Society and Pepys and other Committee members spent an afternoon testing his new types of coach springs on Blackheath. Later Pepys tried his friend's chariot with the new springs again and found it “pretty well but not so easy as he pretends”.

Little is known of the old Wricklemarsh House where Blount lived. It is probably the castellated building, rather like Charlton House, which appears in a late 17th-century print by Francis Place. However the Hearth Tax returns of 1664 show Charlton House assessed at forty hearths and Wricklemarsh with only twenty-three, the same number as the Presbytery on Crooms Hill. It may well have been an old house built round a quadrangle with a few large rooms—only discovery of a contemporary picture of the house would decide the question.

Travers' map of 1695 shows it as having a vineyard but Evelyn tried the wine and pronounced it “good for little”. There was also a warren to ensure a supply of fresh rabbits for the table—Greenwich Park was similarly stocked before the Civil War.

LIFE IN RESTORATION GREENWICH

What was the town of Greenwich like to live in immediately after the Restoration? The local residents were probably, like most of the country, pleased on balance that the Commonwealth was ended, for few appear to have held extreme views during the war.

They had seen their own Vicar, Dr. Creighton, sequestered early in the Commonwealth and had suffered from some of the petty rules introduced. For instance in May 1663 Abraham Dry of East Greenwich had been fined for "keeping ninepins"; another man was fined for swearing and a third for being "taken in an ale-house in Greenwich in the time of public worship upon the Lord's Day".

Memories are often short and the failings of the earlier Stuarts were probably forgotten in the expectation of fresh activity which would bring plenty of business to the Greenwich waterside community. The employment of most people in the town was connected with the river or the sea. Lightermen and watermen were in honourable trades and sons were often—in some cases still are—apprenticed to their fathers. The river was always full of boats carrying people and goods up and down stream. Pepys commented in September 1665 during the worst of the plague how sad it was to see no boats on the river. Not only were there few persons wishing to travel but the towns refused to allow travellers from other areas to land. Pepys himself had trouble in September on arriving at Greenwich by water when attempts were made to refuse him entry.

PRINCIPAL OCCUPATIONS

Parish registers of the 1660s rarely give information about occupation but by the end of the century details of the men's work are shown. In Greenwich there were 169 baptisms in 1693 and no fewer than 84 were children of fishermen, watermen or mariners. The next largest category were the children of market gardeners.

Market gardening was very important in the Greenwich area. Dutch and Walloon refugees had introduced superior skills to this country at the end of the 16th century. They had originally settled near the south coast but at the beginning of the 17th century had moved into the London area. They grew cabbages, cauliflowers, carrots, turnips, parsnips and early peas, all of which were rare in England at the time.

Transport by water was easy and Greenwich was well placed by the river to import its own needs and to supply the London markets. The soil was not ideal for market gardens but the normal method of husbandry was to use heavy dressings of night soil and street sweepings well endowed with horse manure. This was an extremely practical arrangement all round. There were of course no sewers and householders were responsible for the disposal of all domestic waste and for cleansing their cess-pits. Failure to do so could lead to fines in the Manor Court or later at the Petty Sessions. At the

Manor Court held in East Greenwich in 1645 Richard Hewes was fined 6d. "for that he hath not carried away the dunghill by his stable in Lamb Lane" and Edward Wood was fined 1s. for "flinging his filth in his majesties hieway".

Frequently areas that had been dug for gravel for ballast would be filled in with raw manure and then enclosed with palings, ditches or mud walls. This may well have been done at the top of Blackwall Lane where there were extensive market gardens at least from the 17th to the 19th centuries. There were also large areas of market garden between Deptford and Greenwich and around South Street.

Other occupations in 1693 were those to be expected in any community—tailors, barbers, potters, carpenters, glaziers, bricklayers, bakers, cheesemongers, chandlers, and so on. The number of baptisms rose dramatically after the Restoration and remained at the higher level at the end of the century. This may indicate not a large increase in the birthrate but simply a reluctance of parents to have their children baptised during the Commonwealth. It is interesting that during that period a father is named for every child baptised in Greenwich, with the exception of two babies which had been abandoned. At other periods the number of illegitimate children was considerable and it is unlikely that the moral climate of a community would change over night. It is possible that pressure was brought to name the father or the child would not be baptised.

CARE OF THE POOR

The role of the church and vestry was very important to the ordinary people of Greenwich, particularly in administration of the Poor Law. Source material for the second half of the 17th century is limited but we know from the Overseers' Accounts that foundling and destitute children were boarded out with local families and later often indentured as apprentices. Physicke and salve were bought for the poor when necessary and rent was sometimes paid for the old or boarding-out allowances paid to parishioners to care for them. The insane were sent to Bethlem and the paupers were buried at the parish expense.

Nevertheless the extent of the hardship and distress suffered by the needy is reflected in the extraordinarily large number of charities founded during this period. They ranged in importance from John Roan's school for poor townborn children of East Greenwich, Sir William Boreman's Green Coat School and William Hatcliffe's almshouses, to a bequest of bread to the value of 2s. 6d. a week to be shared among fifteen poor widows.

Because Greenwich was a riverside port with a large transient population of seamen, some of the poor were not catered for by the parish or local charities, which had no responsibility for non-Greenwich people. Many sailors were discharged from their ships often sick or injured, with none of their wages paid. Samuel Pepys was deeply concerned about the situation when he was working at Greenwich in 1665: "The great burden we have upon us at this time at the office is the providing for prisoners and sick men that are recovered, they lying before our office door all night and all day, poor wretches. Having been on shore, the Captains won't receive them on board (probably for fear of plague) and other ships we have not to put them on, nor money to pay them off or to provide for them." He records that he gave some little money himself to such men and describes an occasion when "a whole hundred of them followed us, some cursing, some swearing and some praying to us".

John Evelyn was equally troubled by these things and by problems caused by the large numbers of French and Dutch prisoners of war for whom no State provision had been made. Many were billeted in the old Tudor Palace at Greenwich and Evelyn spent large sums from his own pocket to help them, while the King ignored his appeals that they should be either fed or sent home. It is probable that the efforts made by Evelyn on behalf of destitute seamen were largely responsible for the eventual setting up of Greenwich Hospital.

THE TREATMENT OF SICKNESS

The parish had a pest-house on Maidenstone Hill that was used as an isolation unit for the contagious sick; it is shown on Travers' map of 1694. It does not appear that it was used to house the poor except perhaps in very special circumstances. The first workhouse was not built in Greenwich until 1724 when the high cost of out-relief (in total about £800 a year) moved the parish to believe that the poor would be happier, and possibly self-financing, in "a commodious house where those that are absolutely necessitous are better provided for than they were before, and many of those who were before burthensome to the Parish, have exerted themselves as to live by their own industry".

LAW AND ORDER

Lawlessness was a problem. There were footpads not only on Blackheath and Shooters Hill, and Pepys on the occasions that he walked from Greenwich to see his wife at Woolwich always had a companion with him. Once when returning to Greenwich by water

he found so much ice on the river that he walked part of the way home. It was a bright clear night but he still took one of the watermen with him, carrying a light, by which he read his book as he walked!

The hearth-tax returns for 1664 are signed by four petty constables and two high constables, while most other areas had two only of such officers. The duties of constable were supposed to be undertaken by all citizens in turn but it became common practice to pay to have one's duties fulfilled. There was a temporary lock-up for offenders in Stocks Lane (which ran parallel to the river, north of Fisher Lane) and prisoners were taken before a magistrate for minor offences or to quarter sessions at Maidstone in major cases.

Water was supplied to the townspeople by the common well in what is now Stockwell Street. The Palace and Royal Hospital were supplied by the conduits which collected rain and spring water from the gravels of Blackheath. At the end of the century water was pumped from the Ravensbourne and supplied on payment to subscribing householders.

Street lighting was non-existent in the 17th century, except for outside lamps erected by individual householders or tavern keepers. When Pepys persuaded a local lady to change into her nightgown so that he might "see how to have her picture drawn carelessly—for she is mighty proud of that conceit" he went for a walk in the street while she was preparing herself. Unfortunately it was very dark and he took a wrong turning, finished up by the Park wall and could not find his way back to the house. By the time he did so the lady had tired of waiting and gone to bed. Greenwich was a small place in which to get lost and Pepys knew it well but he suffered from the lack of street lighting on a moonless night.

Not only were the roads unlit but few were paved either. Some sections of the main road were cobbled—outside the Church, for example, and beneath the Queen's House—but for the most part they were cart tracks which became muddy and often impassable.

LOCAL PERSONAGES

It has never been established where Pepys stayed in Greenwich. His diary suggests that it was to the east of the Palace and tells us that he lodged with a Mrs. Clarke and her family and that her daughter, Mrs. Daniels, lived next door. There are several Clarks in the hearth-tax returns for 1664 but no Daniels. However, next door but one to a Mr. Richard Clarke there is a Mrs. Ann Neale. Could the collector have simply misunderstood her name? If so, Pepys lodged on the east side of East Lane.

Through Samuel Pepys we get a picture of many local people. John Evelyn, whose own diary can make him seem rather worthy and dull, appears in Pepys' references as a warm entertaining character, sometimes a little enamoured of his own poetry, but with a keen sense of humour, great compassion and a capacity for giving and receiving friendship.

There is Theophilus Biddulph of Westcombe, "a sober discreet Man"; Sir William Hooker of the Grange, Crooms Hill, "a plain ordinary silly man I think he is, but rich. Only his son, Mr. Lethulier,* I like for a pretty civil understanding merchant, and the more by much because he happens to be husband to our noble, fat brave lady that I and my wife admire so." Sheriff Hooker goes down to posterity as "keeping the poorest, meanest dirty table in a dirty house"—but this was his house in Eastcheap. Perhaps he had a better housekeeper at the Grange.

Pepys introduces us to Nicholas Lanier, master of the King's musicians, who "sings in a melancholy method, very well and a sober man he seems to be", and to Edward Coleman, musician, composer and singer whose "voice is quite spoiled and when he begins to be drunk he is excellent company, but afterwards troublesome and impertinent".

Although the strategic position of Greenwich must sometimes have threatened the safety of the town—for example when the Dutch in 1667 burnt much of the English fleet at Chatham—there is little evidence that local people were greatly involved in the political struggles of the late 17th century leading to the Revolution of 1688. Evelyn had a close-up view but as an onlooker rather than as a participant. Nor does there appear to have been a strong Catholic community in the town; in fact only one recusant was listed in the subsidy lists of 1641, so religious conflict could not have been an issue.

The vicar of Greenwich from 1658 to 1704 was Dr. Thomas Plume—a remarkably long time for one man to hold a living. He became a Dean of Rochester in 1679 and was an Archdeacon at the time of his death. He was an excellent preacher for both Pepys and Evelyn comment favourably on his sermons and the large numbers who attended his services. However one suspects that his congregation later diminished for in May 1677 he was preaching on "the duty of gratitude" and reproaching those who made "excuses to abstain from public worship and that frequently take physicke on the Lord's Day". Some of his parishioners were probably

* Afterwards Sir John Letheuillier, grandson of a Cologne merchant and married to Hooker's daughter, Anne.

worshipping at the Dissenters' Meeting House at Deptford.

Plume's old gothic church collapsed in a great storm in 1710, its foundations having been severely strained by the number of burials around it. A writer in 1700 put it graphically: "The first part of Greenwich Town that I came into was the churchyard, where the numbers of dead had almost buried the church, that could each corpse buried against the church wall raise his head but half a foot above the surface of the earth he lies on, he might peep in at the church window on a Sunday and frighten the whole congregation out of the church."

HUGUENOT IMMIGRANTS

The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 led to many Huguenot refugees fleeing to this country and a number of them settled in Greenwich, led by the distinguished Henri de Massue, Marquis de Ruvigny. He had been Deputy-General of the Reformed Churches in France and was 80 years old when he came to England. Nevertheless he remained extremely active politically, raised four Huguenot regiments for William III and continued to move in high social circles. Evelyn tells of meeting the Marquis at the christening of Sir John Cardin's son at Greenwich Church and then dining at Ruvigny's apartments in the Queen's House.

The Huguenots were allowed to use St. Alfege's Church for a special service after morning worship until they built their own chapel. Evelyn, who had lived in France for a time during the Commonwealth, went to the service on more than one occasion and comments in April 1687 that about 100 emigrés attended. The rate books of 1694 list other possible Huguenots, including Monsieur Gronynott in London Street, M. Selvening in Park Wall West and M. Francone in Billingsgate. Incidentally Francone paid by far the highest rates in Billingsgate and his property may have been the King's Head built by Sir Andrew Cogan, which the Lanier family ran as a music house and which Pepys visited with such enthusiasm so often. The Teulon family, who took a leading part in Greenwich public life were also of Huguenot origin.

POPULATION AND HOUSING

The 1693 rate books give an interesting picture of Greenwich before the redevelopment caused by the building of the Royal Hospital got really under way. The subdivision of older houses into smaller units is confirmed by a newspaper cutting in the Martin Collection describing a journey through Greenwich to Charlton Fair in 1700. "I took notice of several good houses on the left hand (of the church) which looked like habitations fit for christians to

live in." These would have been the houses in Church Street rated between £10 and £25, with Dr. Plume's vicarage rated at £40. "But in some parts of the town the huts were no bigger than wigwams, scarce big enough for a man to lye at length in without putting his head or his heels in the chimney corner." These were probably some of the properties in the complex of lanes running parallel to the river between the Church and the Palace—Fisher Lane, Stable Street, Turpin Lane, Dock and Tavern Roe—where rates were nearly all between £2 and £4. The books show no "esquires", few "mistress" and a large number of widows.

Fisher Lane lists thirty-two residents paying hearth tax in 1664, mostly for one or two hearths, while in 1694 there were fifty-one persons paying low rates in the same lane. There would be no room for additional development in the confined waterside frontage and one assumes that houses were subdivided into smaller and smaller units.

The hearth tax returns of 1664 list 630 persons in the Parish of Greenwich and it seems reasonable to multiply the number of "hearth holders" by five, giving a population of something over 3,000. In 1694 rates were paid on 1,023 properties in the parish (the hearth tax had ceased in 1689) and if one allows the same average of five persons per house, remembering that ratebooks include stables, etc., as well as residential property, there would be an estimated population of about 5,000.

Although the population had certainly increased over that period it seems likely that the town had become a much poorer and more run-down place. The proposal to build first a new Palace, later changed to a hospital for seamen, had necessitated the demolition of many buildings. Some of these were shabby, subdivided houses which had once been impressive homes while others were hovels squeezed into any remaining scraps of land. But a blight must have extended from Church Street to East Lane. The ruins of the Tudor Palace were not finally cleared until the end of the century and there were no conservation societies to save them from vandals.

The only houses of any substance built in the parish in the later part of the century were at the top of Crooms Hill—the "villas on the waste" outside the west wall of the Park and the attractive residence now known as the Manor House, built by Sir Robert Robinson in 1695 (Plate III).

THE PARISHIONERS' OWN STORY

After the church collapsed in 1710 the inhabitants of Greenwich sent a petition to the Crown asking for help in its rebuilding. The

town had, they claimed, been for 20 years depopulated of its wealthier inhabitants and the largest houses had been empty for years. Such wealthy residents as remained were tenants-at-will and not involved locally. Nine-tenths of the inhabitants (probably a calculated overstatement) were seamen, watermen and fishermen. Tradesmen were "in low condition through giving long credit". They claimed that 3,000 widows and children had become chargeable on the parish because heads of families had been lost in the great storm of 1703 when many ships and small craft were sunk. Other fathers and husbands had died when three of the ships accompanying Sir Cloudesley Shovell home from the Mediterranean went down off the Scilly Isles (again, while the numbers lost were large, these were probably exaggerated).

The town was certainly in a sorry state. Many inhabitants were on parish relief, shopkeepers on the verge of bankruptcy, and it was even difficult to find somewhere to eat. A contemporary writer commented: "For Greenwich, like a Spanish town, is under such a scarcity of fresh meat that a gentleman, not long ago, came down with a design to lye all night in the town but was forced to go back to London at 7 o'clock at night, against the tide, because never a publick house in the town could procure him a supper."

Samuel Pepys said at the end of 1665: "I have never lived so merrily as I have done this plague-time" and later as a memento he commissioned "Dancere" (H. Danckerts) to paint the view from the Hill (Plate VI) describing it in 1669 as "a very pretty place". Just over a century later in 1778 "the dryness and salubrity of the soil and air, the conveniences of the Park, and the attractiveness of the neighbourhood and proximity of the capital contribute to make it a desirable residence for people of fashion".

But in the years between the town reached a very low ebb.

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