CHAPTER 1

Central Riverside Area

The riverside between the former naval dockyard and the Arsenal stretching back to the High Street is where settlement began more than 2,000 years ago, on firm and fertile Thanet-sand beds along the edge of the Thames and between expanses of marshland. Here was the Iron Age fort or oppidum. On a spur of higher ground immediately to the south-west perched the medieval parish church. Its successor of the 1730s is slightly further inland – a retreat from erosion, yet still prominent. Below, where the early town stood, antiquity is absent and even remnants of the area’s eighteenth- and nineteenth-century faces are scarce. Old Woolwich has been blasted. This is partly because industry has been a major presence, and at a large scale, since at least the sixteenth century. A single wharf, just east of Bell Water Gate and lately a car park, saw the origins of both the naval dockyard and the Arsenal in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries before the establishments moved, respectively, west and east. The area’s houses were largely humble, so subject to frequent renewal. Industry and housing have given way to commerce and public amenities, including a park (Ill. 17). It is symptomatic of a churning history that in 2012 about half the ground covered in this chapter is subject to development schemes. Housing is scheduled to make a comeback.

Woolwich High Street is the spine of the chapter, and yet it is curiously absent – so little of substance stands on it. The High Street may have had Roman origins as part of a route linking riverside settlements. But of its pre-Georgian buildings, let alone the Roman, virtually nothing is known, and its north side has entirely lost the character of a high street. What there is to say about medieval and earlier Woolwich is mostly presented in the Introduction. This chapter starts with an account of the area’s industry and institutions from the sixteenth century to the end of the Georgian period, principally the first dockyard and gun wharf and England’s first state ropeyard. The eighteenth-century parish church of St Mary Magdalene is then set in place after a preliminary description of its medieval predecessor. The rest of the ground follows, divided to look first at the riverside lands north of the High Street, taking in some old houses, chapels and pubs, and then industrial and other developments since 1800, including the infamous slum that was known as the Dusthole, as well as the Woolwich Free Ferry and Foot Tunnel. The history then crosses the High Street, on the south side of which there are some modest survivals from the eighteenth century, as well as two spectacular cinemas of the 1930s where the west end of Powis Street meets Parson’s Hill. Finally, attention returns to the site of the ropeyard, replaced in the 1830s with Beresford Street, where there has been a peculiar mix of buildings. Notable among these are three that have gone – Holy Trinity Church, the Empire Theatre and the Autostacker.

Early industry and institutions

The military-industrial sites that preceded and stood between the naval dockyard and the Arsenal have received little attention, though lands here were in state use from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. On the riverside, immediately east of Bell Water Gate, was Gun Wharf and, to its south–east along the line that is now Beresford Street, was the Woolwich Ropeyard. The Crown used the wharf for shipbuilding from 1512 for a short while before the more western dockyard was established. The ropeyard was built in 1573–6. It closed in 1833, up to which time the wharf appears to have continued in associated use, though not for guns after 1671 when the Board of Ordnance moved to the Warren.

Gun Wharf

The origins of the naval dockyard in Woolwich lie in the construction from late 1512 of three galleys and the Henry Grace à Dieu (or Great Harry), a 165ft (50m)-long and up to 1,500-ton experimental carrack that, when launched in October 1515, was probably the largest warship in Europe. A ship of this size required deep water for its launch, and the depth of the river at Woolwich might have determined the Crown’s move to the site. It is also possible that use was made of an earlier and much humbler private shipyard. A key figure in the project was William Crane, a court musician and merchant who was close to Henry VIII. He had fingers in many pies and was paid both for work on one of the galleys and for the hire on a yearly basis of a wharf that was used for building the Great Harry. A long warehouse, for the safekeeping of timber, canvas and provisions, and a smithy, for making anchors, nails and tools, were put up with other buildings, and the ships were presumably built in and launched from one or more mud-cut docks. The first mention of a dock in the accounts was of that used to house The Sovereign in 1514–15. There is compelling evidence that Crane’s wharf and, adjoining to the west, another with a salt-house (hired from Marion Daniel, a fishmonger’s widow) were combined to form what became known as Gun Wharf or Gun Yard, a 265ft (about 80m)
river frontage immediately east of what is now Bell Water Gate, extending up to where Globe Lane once ran, with a squarish plot back to the High Street. This open riverside site would have lain amidst the small town of Woolwich, the disposition of which at this date is essentially unknown, though there were at least a few sixteenth-century buildings on the High Street, Warren Lane and the west side of Hog Lane by the sixteenth century (see below). The documentary evidence for the origins of the dockyard at this location seems confirmed by the fact that in 1541 the remains of a large old vessel, speculatively identified since as The Sovereign, which is known to have lain in dock at Woolwich in 1521, were found on a slipway under a disused steamboat graving dock near the middle of this wharf. In 1538 the Crown purchased outright what had been Daniel’s wharf, but the warship remains suggest that at least one dock fell into disuse soon thereafter. By the 1540s naval shipbuilding in Woolwich had been relocated westwards to higher ground; flooding may have been a problem. In the time the wharf and its warehouse came to be used for the storage of heavy ordnance, perhaps also armament, that is as a ‘rudimentary Arsenal’. The early Tudor Office of Ordnance was responsible for supplying ships with guns and much other equipment, so a base in Woolwich would have been highly desirable once the naval dockyard was firmly established. Close, but not adjacent, to the western dockyard, the wharf was comparatively close to Tower Place, where weapons testing began by the mid-seventeenth century. The already substantial warehouse may have been rebuilt in brick in 1657-8 with the formation of the ropewalk. From this point the wharf was also used for the receipt of imported hemp bales and tar, and the shipping out of finished rope, all carried or carried about 60 ft (18m) to and from the ropewalk along Bell Water Gate and the High Street (II. 18). It gained a new crane and a thatch-roofed workshop in 1580, and further rebuilding and improvement included a house in 1585. Frequent floods necessitated numerous repairs – a crane was rebuilt in 1586 and the warehouse in 1603, as a big single-storey U-plan block about 110 ft (34m) square. By this time, storage was of brass and iron ordnance, gun carriages, ammunition, including gunpowder, saltpetre and miscellaneous tools and provisions; in addition, ropewalk yards aside, the site was used for minor repairs, as of gun carriages, and for refining saltpetre. But its usefulness to the Ordnance had been outgrown and the upheavals of the Dutch war of 1667 stimulated a move. In 1671 Ordnance storage transferred to Tower Place (see page 134 and, in exchange, Sir William Pritchard, himself a wealthy supplier of rope to the government, was granted the Gun Wharf site for use as a private wharf for ‘merchants’ guns, timber, etc.’. In fact it was at least in part leased back to the Crown. This transition was perhaps managed by Paul Linby, a Crown servant who had been the Ordnance ‘cramage man’ at the wharf since the 1660s, and who had a seven-hearth house in 1694 (only seven houses in the parish had more). The ropewalk kept its foothold, but in 1671 William Bodham, Clerk of the Ropewalk, informed the Navy Commissioners that the wharf was ‘now so much ruined by the weight of guns, and the ground so worn by brick and tile cart, which daily make bold to load their lighters there, that the men carrying down cables are forced to go up to their ankles in mire.’ He urged fencing in the north-west corner of the wharf, where the crane stood, to be a ‘liberty’ for the ropewalk. Something of this nature seems to have come to pass. The High Street or south part of the plot was speculatively developed in the 1720s, but the riverside wharf remained open through the eighteenth century, in part at least for stacking timber (III. 8). By 1807 the ropewalk used the whole wharf with two large cranes. Cart transfers continued, a much-lamented inefficiency that contributed, no doubt, to the demise of ropemaking in Woolwich.

**Woolwich Ropewalk**

The Crown established the Woolwich ropewalk in the 1570s to make large cables, an essential requirement for navy warships, to supply both Deptford and Woolwich dockyards. This, an exceptional initiative, was the country’s first naval ropewalk, a substantial state project realized through a contractor. It was usual for the government to rely on contractors for manufactured goods – shipbuilding in the naval dockyards was exceptional. Rope was crucial for the navy and, in the quantities used, expensive. It spent £3,916 buying cordage in 1570, as much as twenty-two per cent of its total allowances and a significant proportional increase on earlier years. An experiment in basing the manufacture of government rope in Lincolnshire, begun in 1566, had been substantially failed in 1584. Most rope for navy ships was imported, largely from the Baltic and Russia, whereas in 1557, the Russia Company had set up production by English ropemakers, an approach thought more economical than shipping the raw material, hemp, to England – Russian labour was cheap. But in 1572–3 the Crimean Khan, Devlet I Giray, burnt Moscow to the ground and, with Ottoman support, attempted to conquer all Russia. In England it was perhaps felt that the supply of a vital commodity needed to be made more secure. In 1573 Thomas Allen, a Muscovy Company merchant and government contractor who had imported rope from Danzig since 1559, was granted £800 by royal warrant to build a ropewalk in Woolwich to agreed plans, with a promise that any excess would be reimbursed. It may be relevant that another eminent Muscovy merchant, George Barne, had bought the Tower Place estate in 1576. The new ropemaking facility was situated half a mile (0.8km) from the dockyard, uphill and south of the riverside settlement with its north end close to Gun Wharf, on an oblique line now marked by Beresford Street (III. 18). The riverside and High Street were probably already largely built up, so this may have been the best sufficiently long stretch of flat ground available. An estimate for the buildings covered a 600ft (180m) long cable house, a 400ft (120m) two-storey ‘wayhouse’, a smaller yarn-laying house, a tar house and a hemp house, all of timber, and a brick storehouse by the water, probably a rebuilding of that on Gun Wharf. Expenditure by 1576 was £736 8s 4d. Unusually, the ropemaking was enclosed, not in the open air. Allen leased the yard, paying a substantial annual rent, probably £100. Presumably holding a contract to supply the navy with cables from the new factory, he was succeeded by his heirs, perhaps until 1605. Ropemaking changed little until the last years of the Woolwich Ropewalk. Hemp arrived in hales and was soaked, then beaten and combed straight (‘buttched’). It was then spun into yarn by spinners, or ropewalkers. These men wrapped as much as 40lbs (18kg) of hemp fibre round their waist, their thumbs on the three to four rods on a bolt. But with the other two hands forming the turn and here...
was the skill—with the fingers of their left hands. Spinners walked as much as 20 miles (32km) in a working day. The white yarns thus made were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often tarred to prevent rot, and making a cable. By the late eighteenth century a white yarns were often...
which put them all into a very great Consternation, and gave such a Crack when it was full of the Inhabitants, much, that many were trampled under Foot, and hurt in alarm.  

As to the dating of the church, Elliston-Erwood hazarded that the nave was Norman, the chancel and body of the south aisle thirteenth-century, and the tower and east end of the south aisle fifteenth. A brass somewhere on the south side to William Prene, rector, who died in 1494, described him as builder of ‘this chapel and the tower of this church’. The chapel in question may have been at Prene’s chapel.

The chapels in question were of chalk and flint, faced perhaps with Reigate stone.  

As early as 1607–9, reports were made of the churchyard’s effect on health, but found a more compact plan, with thicker, irregular walls to the tower. The main walls, it was reported, were of chalk and flint, faced perhaps with Reigate stone. The 1758 document mentions abundant monuments and in the main chamber an Alter Piece, consisting of the Descealep wrote on a handsome table under a Pitcht Pediment, supported on the sides by two Carrouches, between the Lord’s Prayer and Creed, over which are Moses and Aaron, also the wall on the North and South side, as well as the East is painted with a view of the Clauses, Cherubims heads, etc., discovered by the somning drawing aside of Scarlet Curtains proceeding from a Piece of Architecture, with Columns, etc.

The demise of this church followed from its exposed position near the edge of what had become a precipitously sandy cliff after the rerouting of the main road (Woolwich Street) in a shallow curve to its north in association with enlargement of the dockyard in 1607–8 and 1619. As early as 1631 local residents petitioned the Admiralty that the road was in a poor state, ‘so that the foundation of the parish church is thereby in danger’. It was ‘in hazard speedily to fall’, repeated the parishioners three years later when nothing had been done, ‘and the bones of the dead are washed out of the churchyard into the river’. These fears may have been assuaged, for in 1658 order was made for the vestry room to be fully fitted out ‘for records and ornaments’, monuments still being added right up to the 1720s.

Alarm was renewed, however, around 1720 (the exact chronology is uncertain) when part of the roof sagged, ‘and gave such a Crack when it was full of the Inhabitants, which put them all into a very great Consternation, so much, that many were trampled under Foot, and hurt in courting to get out of the Church’. This crisis, plus the shaky foundations, the smallness of the old church and a recent leap in Woolwich’s population, spurred the project of procuring a new one. The timing looked propitious, for in 1718 the so-called Fifty New Churches Act was passed. Woolwich was not then adopted by the Commissioners thus established, but permission was sought and granted from the Crown to send out a brief or national appeal for money. This went out in 1718–19 attached to an estimate of £5,969 for rebuilding the church ‘with the utmost frugality’, prepared by John Wonnell, bricklayer, John Simmons, joiner, and Bonham Manste, workman. The appeal brought in almost a quarter of the sum required, not enough to start work and obliging the parish to soldier on with the old church for a further generation.

In about 1728 a further setback took place, as a fresh appeal of that date describes:

Now the Commissioners for New Churches did make a small grant, but the total raised was still not enough to to soldier on with the old church for a further generation.  

The next stage came in 1728–9, when the Vestry formally resolved to build a new church higher up the hill to the south, on 1½ acres purchased from the Bowater family. Matthew Spray, a bricklayer from Deptford, where he had built houses and lived on what is now Albury Street, was appointed in August 1729 to dig foundations and carry them up to ground level according to an agreed plan. That no doubt took place, and some 6,350,000 bricks were made, but the superstructure was further delayed pending appeals to the King and the Commons.

In 1732 the parish obtained an Act of Parliament sanctioning the Commissioners to grant £3,000 on top of the £2,538 already collected, thus almost realizing the sum of the old estimate, which still held. Spray and the carpenters, William Reynolds, who also had property in Deptford near Albury Street, and John Henshaw, could now embark on the carcase of the church, which was said to be ‘almost finish’d in July 1734. In February 1739 it was, with the tower, reported to be ‘some time since built ... and well covered in’, but money had again run out. The situation was rescued by a legacy from Daniel Wiseman, who had been employed in Woolwich Dockyard before being promoted to Clerk of the Cheque at Deptford Dockyard. Wiseman died that month leaving £2,500 for finishing the church. A further Act of Parliament was needed to resolve certain implications of the legacy, but once that was passed the interest could be completed. The consecration took place on 9 May 1740. That same year the churchyard was extended by a further purchase from the Bowater family.

Outline plans, 1880, and in 1753 at half scale

St Mary Magdalene, Woolwich, 1728–9

20. From the south-west in 2009

21. From the south-east in a watercolour of 1799

22. Ground plans, 1880, and in 1753 at half scale

23. Architecture, with Columns, etc.

24. The Benevolence Gallery

25. Boiler-house

26. Wiseman died that month leaving £2,500 for finishing the church.

27. Chapel

28. Vestry

29. Entrance to crypt

30. Chapel

31. Organ

32. Chapel

33. Chapel

34. Chapel

35. Chapel

36. Entrance to crypt

37. Vestry

38. Boiler-house

39. Benevolence Gallery

40. 43
and walled in, the old church demolished, and a makeshift vestry added at the south-east corner of the new one.

The new parish church was a solid, old-fashioned piece of builder’s work in the guise of plainer buildings by the Office of Works or the Ordnance (Ills 20, 21). There is no need to look beyond Matthew Spray and his coadjutors for a designer. Six-bay parish churches in just such a plain stock-brick style, with shallow end-projections and round-headed windows lighting the galleries over lower windows to the aisles, had been built in the London area since at least the 1670s. The exterior’s most individual feature is the sparing use of Portland stone dressings. No doubt for ‘frugality’, these are confined to window and door surrounds, sills, parapets, plinths and the weighty principal cornice, which is coved along the sides but slightly enriched on the tower. The corners all round are marked by virile brick piers. These, together with the way in which the tower is half-engaged in the body of the church and topped off bluntly without a balustrade or lantern, help give the west front a sturdy look. The parapets are deep, and relieved by blank windows. The tiled roof is hidden at the west end, but it could be clearly seen at the east end, where it finished in a hip. The slight projection here for a sanctuary was marked by a Venetian window, similar in form to the one now in the same eastern position at the end of the colonnade of 1893–4. This was entirely lined beneath window level with the fine oak joinery of which a rearranged portion now forms the reredos in the south chapel (Ill. 24). It was divided into panels containing the tables of the law by fluted Ionic pilasters and, in the centre, engaged columns. Its quality suggests that through Wiseman’s legacy the internal finishing may have been executed to a higher standard than the exterior, but the craftsmen’s names are not recorded. There was a deep-bellied octagonal pulpit on a high base north of the centre, moved from its original position at the head of the central aisle. The only other surviving fitting of note from 1740 is the royal arms, which hung over the eastern projection before 1893 but are now in the porch beneath the tower.

Records of alterations to the church are scanty before the 1870s. Some features of the sanctuary in an early photograph (Ill. 24), including a pretty iron communion rail, suggest work of around 1800, tallying with a payment...
for work to the cornice round the chancel in 1811, this could have involved the architect-builder Richard Martyn, who was replanning the churchyard at the time. An organ made by John Byfield was given in 1754 and installed in the ‘upper gallery’ at the back of the nave, suggesting that, and probably also hot-water heating in about 1827. Hoadley in St Saviour.

A large and raw-looking east window showing Christ involved the destruction of the original Venetian east window. Between window and pediment there is a panel inscribed ‘Nec despicat [sic] qui pecore solituri exemplum me van repepat deo’ (You who are accustomed to sin, lest you look down, make by my example atonement unto God), a version of a verse associated with St Mary Magdalene. It loomed above the town, visible, if not legible, from the High Street until blocked by view from the Old Cinema (Ill. 38).

Internally, however, J. Oldrid Scott’s work is a most successful solution to the problem of adding a chancel to a Georgian town church (Ill. 23), and one that may be something to his brother G. G. Scott junior’s lengthening of the nave at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. At the centre of the design is the chancel compartment, framed on three sides by Venetian arches that take their cue from the restored east window. It is slightly deeper than wide, so the arches are round-headed across the church but elliptical towards the transepts. The tall flanking columns are of red stone (overpainted in white at the time of writing), while the smaller ones framing the east window are of red Irish marble (also overpainted). The floor rises in stages by ten steps to the altar, with compartments in-between for a pavement in red and white marbles. The chancel ceiling, with its modern coffee and tea making machines, and the ‘peaceful Lounge’ in the gallery. The works were partly paid for with proceeds from the closing of Holy Trinity, Beresford Street, and the sale of its church halls.

The extension lengthened St Mary’s by some 30 ft (12m). It does nothing for the church’s external proportions, while the excrescence of transepts and south-side vestries in further plain brickwork, this time with Bath stone dressings, lacks grace. The liveliest feature in the pulpit is the architecture of the former Venetian east window. Between window and pediment there is a panel inscribed ‘Nec despicat [sic] qui pecore solituri exemplum me vane repepat deo’ (You who are accustomed to sin, lest you look down, make by my example atonement unto God), a version of a verse associated with St Mary Magdalene. It loomed above the town, visible, if not legible, from the High Street until blocked by view from the Old Cinema (Ill. 38).
the churchyard, 'crowded to repletion with bodies', was closed to burials, as were other London parish churchyards; a parish cemetery was formed in Plumstead. The Woolwich churchyard's graveyard was extended from 1809 to 1812, who spent his last more than 1,200 tombs. A memorial cross to the victims of the Prince Albert, who never lived, sculpted unknown and sculpted by Thomas Earp, was erected in 1879.

The churchyard owes the essence of its present form to a transformation of 1831–3 that turned the burial ground into a public garden. The recently formed Metropolitan Public Gardens Association (MPGA) prepared a scheme for converting the northern part of the ground in 1834, but this found no favour with S. G. Scott and, like plans for the building, the project remained in abeyance until Escreet's arrival in 1862. This was one of many times when public access to Woolwich Common was being hotly disputed, possibly moving Escreet, a headlight Christian Socialist, to join with Basil Holmes of the MPGAs to see to the conversion of the whole forest. The MPGAs inserted the layout, J. Pasmore Edwards undertook the costs, and the Local Board of Health took on the upkeep. Gravestones were stacked up against the outer walls, and the ground was levelled, though coffins, it was said, and a number of large tombs remained undisturbed. Supplementary gravel paths were laid across the north side of the church and meandering round the margins, new railings were put up, and many trees and shrubs were planted. To the east there was an octagonal open area with a drinking fountain, and to the north, along the southern side of the church, a viewing point was formed to encourage enjoyment of the prospect across the river.

Woolwich Borough Council further enlarged St Mary's Gardens in the early 1830s as a result of Comprehensive Development Area clearances, to the west up to the east side of Greenlaw Street, out along the north side of the church, and to the south-east in connection with the formation of the John Wilson Road, the former way G. P. Youngman, landscape architect, prepared plans and by 1836 new tombs with granite railings were added, and was inserted, with further clearance of tombs and perimeter railings, and removal of the drinking fountain. The church added a Calvary on an island to the north-west. Greenwich Council's widening of Woolwich Church Street in 1830 was accompanied by the reformation of the northern vista, whereby the estate of the manor of Charlton (the church behind a brick retaining wall.

Lissens and Vincent document numerous churchyard tombs of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, local notable including a number of military officers, and hundreds of inscriptions were recorded in 1813. The market probably spread onto the High Street. The almshouses were managed through the Goldsmiths' Company, which rebuilt them in 1775 to provide more adequate accommodation, and, no doubt more to the point, trade was unregulated. It had become such through Sir William Langhorne, who provided for poor girls in the workhouse to be taught reading, needlework and knitting, a schoolhouse with an attached iron room, and a master was added, and the whole ensemble was rebuilt in 1755, with a ramp alongside.

Woolwich Market and watch-houses

The story of Woolwich is complicated, and it has been repeatedly misunderstood. A market probably existed in Woolwich for a long time before it was incorporated as a borough in 1819. The whole freedom of trade privilege, consisting of collecting tolls was then granted to Sir William Barne, a major local property holder and justice of the peace who lived at Tower Place, and Hugh Johnard, Clerk of the Chrease at the naval dockyard. A market house may have been built at this point or soon after the north-east corner of the ropeway (latterly the corner of Warren Lane and Ropeyard Raft). This was then on the south side of the High Street, the only route through Woolwich, and thus a central location (Ill. 18). In 1879 Sir William Pritchard gave this market house to the parish for the benefit of the poor, and in 1888 the market house itself may have been enlarged by the 1760s in part or whole onto waste ground where the churchyard once stood. New Street was laid out and the workhouse itself may have been enlarged in 1878, when legislation set up the Woolwich Town Commissioners and empowered them to form a market on a new site, the old market was said to be desired for want of adequate accommodation, and, no doubt more to the point, trade was unregulated. New premises were duly laid out, with streets named after the intended market (see page 250), but the chosen site was then on the town's periphery and the relocation never took hold. Trade continued in the old market house and at Market Hill, and around 1930 Sir Thomas Maryon Wilson, to whom the Charlton estate had descended, cleared the area that had been developed in the 1720s. This provided a large open space, to which the parish pump was moved (ills 12, 13) and a market house.

There was, however, a drift of traders towards another new open space, Boversfield Square. Despite attempts to establish the market at Market Hill, with paving and other improvements in 1868, it was to Boversfield Square that Woolwich Market finally moved in 1888 (see page 267). The open ground at Market Hill was later reduced in size.

Almshouses and parish workhouse

The first recorded almshouses in Woolwich were built and endowed by Sir Martin Boves in 1536–2. This was a group of five dwellings on what was then East Street and is now Warren Lane's south-west side; between them were 69–73 High Street (ills 8, 33). Boves, an eminent goldsmith and Mayor of London in 1545, had bought an estate in Woolwich in the 1530s and built what came to be called Tower Place (see pages 124–5). He died in 1566. His almshouses were managed through the Goldsmiths' Company, which rebuilt them in 1775 to present more generous accommodation for five widows, with two rooms and a kitchen each in a two-storey block of buildings that survived until 1928. The almshouses had been sold to the parish and the charity diverted to the town hall because the neighbourhood had come to be dominated by prostitution.

In 1621 four small tenements that backed onto the gardens of Boven's almshouses and faced the ropeyard were given to the poor of Woolwich by Richard and Ann Sims. After Sir William Pritchard's bequest of the old market house for the poor in 1675 the Vestry acquired adjoining ground and built three more almshouses. A parish workhouse, a three-storey U-plan block, replaced all these in 1752–3. Following a bequest in 1734 from Ann Withers, who provided for poor girls in the workhouse who taught reading, needlework and knitting, a schoolhouse with an attached iron room was added to the workhouse itself may have been enlarged in 1758, but even if it was quickly outgrown again. By 1820 two additional houses of ten rooms each had been purchased to accommodate more than 300 people in all, but even this was fewer than half of those in the parish receiving poor relief.
patterns of settlement and development

Little is known about the early houses of Woolwich. From the eighteenth century there are fragments, from earlier nothing. Thin documentation and archaeology of demolished buildings only slightly improve matters. Before the seventeenth century most houses were probably small, timber-built, of simple construction and designedly short-lived, few would have risen more than a single storey with a garret. Some bigger properties stood along the High Street by the sixteenth century, including the ‘manor’ house, Woolwich Hall, which until the 1760s stood where Hare Street now joins the High Street, and the rectory. The latter had a large plot and was freestanding in “the Grove” at the west end of the High Street on its north side, until it was replaced on an inland site in 1809–11 (see page 243). It is unusually difficult to do justice to Woolwich High Street as a historical entity – so little survives, and the evidence for what has gone is so thin (Ill. 38, 52). The south side, where there is still some early fabric, is treated separately below.

Two substantial buildings of the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries survived long enough to be noticed by antiquarians, despite having declined into use as rough lodging houses. Both had two low storeys with garrets and were timber framed with continuous jetty fronts. One, perhaps once a tavern, was away to the east, where Warren Lane now meets Ship and Half Moon Passage. The other was on the west side of Hog Lane (later Nire Street), an early

approach to a river landing, and therefore a prime location. It was a long range and a building of some quality. Its northern half was cleared without fuss for the formation of the free-ferry approach in the late 1860s. The southern half finished its days in 1905, condemned as unfit for habit- tation, but the subject of unsuccessful calls for preservation, and so recorded (Ill. 24, 30). There was a crown-post roof with at least one moulded tie beam.30

Adjoining, at 4 and 5 Nile Street, a twin-gable-fronted timber-framed building with much taller storey heights was probably seventeenth century in origin. This was not entirely demolished until the mid-twentieth century, after a spell as the Ferry Eel & Pie House.31 The contrast between it and its neighbour may reflect a wider change in scale in seventeenth-century Woolwich. Population growth, prosperity associated with the dockyard, proximity to London and the changing relative costs of materials would have brought major changes to house-building. At 57–64 High Street, east of Meeting House Lane (now on Warren Lane), two adjoining ranges, both probably timber-framed and perhaps built as seven houses, had a seventeenth-century look (Ill. 31).

In the 1660s seventy per cent (197 of 280) of households in Woolwich, as in Deptford and Greenwich, had two to four hearths. Late seventeenth-century Woolwich, like its sister Deptford, appears to have had a broadly new build- ing stock of small speculatively built houses (four rooms or fewer) for a largely prospering population. Most rooms in new houses would have had fireplaces. Some eminent parishioners had sizable houses near Bell Water Gate.32

By the 1740s the old riparian part of the town had become densely built up, with a complex array of alleys near the water (Ill. 8). Along the High Street develop- ments were now more likely brick, with typical front- ages of about 14ft (4.3m). Behind, plots were generally smaller. Between Bell Water Gate and Hog Lane, Surgeon Street had one-room plan houses, probably of the early eighteenth century and timber-framed. The place name

North of Woolwich High Street

år of Walworth, designed by George Hall Graham and build by Hudson and Burgess (Ill. 28). It was a modestly

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CHAPTER ONE

Central Riverside Area

32. Market Hill, view from the cast, c.1907, showing (from left to right) the Crown and Anchor, the Crown and Cushion, and, behind the former Market Place, the entrance to Rolly’s Steam Wharf. All demolished

‘Caribbean Isles’ on Barker’s map was probably a colloquial- ism for a ramshackle maze, crowded, rough and lawless. Poverty had grown increasingly problematic, as reflected in the expansion of the workhouse. In Woolwich things deteriorated quickly when wars did not provide work. Easy access to the river facilitated transience, and exacerbated misery. By the early eighteenth century parts of the riverside were probably associated with prostitution, perhaps a result of the lodging of sailors. But other aspects of public health and anti-social behaviour were more overt matters of concern. In 1775 the Vestry instituted twice-weekly rubbish collections because, despite its expense in paying parts of the town to make it more ‘commodious’ and ‘healthful’, many of the Inhabitants do constantly throw out of their houses into the Streets and places of the said pavement, Rubbish, Soil, Sand, Dirt, Ashes and other matters of nuisance, which make the said streets very Nasty and Offensive.” Local radicalism is hinted at by the presence, albeit temporary, of Thomas Paine, as the keeper around 1760 of a stay-maker’s shop, probably on the north side of the High Street near Glass Yard.33

On Surgeon Street and on narrow alleys west of Hog Lane eighteenth-century houses were replaced in the 1840s. Further east were smaller houses, including Richardons’s Buildings, an early-nineteenth-century court of eight back-to-backs off Harding Lane.34

There were numerous pubs near the river. On the west side of Bell Water Gate the Bell Inn, present by 1654, was owned by the Coopers’ Company from 1708, along with houses adjoining to the north that were rebuilt in 1848. It closed around 1942. Across the road the Marborough (later the Waterman’s Arms and then, from the 1830s, the Steam Packet) lasted somewhat longer. The Crown and Cushion on the Market Hill corner probably had early eighteenth-century origins. It was altered under the hand of Henry Roberts, architect, in 1875, wholly rebuilt in 1939–41 to plans by William Stewart for Mann, Crossman and Paulin, and demolished in 2006 (Ill. 32).35
On Hog Lane there was the Green Dragon, grandly rebuilt around 1835 as the Nile Tavern, then demolished in 1887. The Ship and Half Moon stood next to an eponymous landing by 1772. It was rebuilt around 1830 and was later a women’s lodging house into the twentieth century. The King’s Head was part of the development of the 1720s around the market. Along the north side of the High Street west of Market Hill stood the Carpenters’ Arms, rebuilt in the 1840s and again in 1924–5. There too was the Crown and Anchor, of seventeenth-century origins and in a big five-bay building by the early nineteenth century that was refaced in 1860 and demolished in 1974. Further east on the High Street were the Coach and Horses, and the Duke on Horseack (formerly Duke William), both demolished in the 1880s, and the George and Dragon, rebuilt in 1847 and reputedly the roughest public house in the area in 1900. The north side of what is now Warren Lane had the Three Daws, the Marquis of Granby, the Royal Standard, and the Crown and Masons’ Arms, the last rebuilt in 1864. This small area north of the High Street held fifteen of the forty-seven Woolwich taverns and public houses listed in a directory of 1823.56

Post-Restoration Nonconformity would have been strong among the skilled working people of Woolwich. Following the Act of Toleration, Presbyterians came out of conventicles and around 1690 built a modest wooden meeting house in what was said to have been an orchard near the river, close to Cutt’s Stairs, and what later became Meeting House Lane. The building was enlarged, but in 1800 was abandoned to use by Methodists and then Unitarians before it was demolished in the 1840s. Near by there was another wooden meeting house for Baptists from about 1690 to 1772.57 A different group of Baptists gathered from 1753 on Hog Lane and built a small meeting house in 1757. The congregation increased and in 1761 constructed the Enon Chapel on the north side of the High Street near its west end, on a site close to that of the rectory. Reportedly rebuilt in 1772, the chapel was a simple three-by-three-bay box to which a lean-to narthex was added in 1886, when its interior, galleried on three sides, was refitted to seat 285. An associated school, funded through the will of Christopher Wrenn, a local baker, was built behind the chapel in 1825 and enlarged with a second room in 1892 to serve purely as a Sunday school. Chapel and school were demolished for the rebuilding of the free-ferry approach in 1964.58

Early Victorian improvement

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries some of the land between the river and the High Street pertained to the Bowater Estate, but more, including the former Gun Wharf site and property to the west of Hog Lane, belonged to what became the Maryon Wilson Estate (Ills 3, 5). Further east the major landowners were the Taplin family in the sixteenth century, the Kirk family in the seventeenth, and then, by marriage in the eighteenth century, the Roupell and Boyd families, most of whose estate was also in Charlton. In the early nineteenth century Robert Pringle Roupell and Robert Boyd also held the land between the ropeyard and the High Street (Warren Lane), where Ropeyard Rails had been built up with houses on its north-east side, to either side of the almshouses.59
Hog Lane appears still to have been respectfully occupied in 1841, with thirteen watermen and two shipwrights, but the area between Globe Lane and Meeting House Lane, owned by Roupell and Boyd, had become known for prostitution. It was cleared and redeveloped in 1847–48. This was the period of the vigorous local campaign to clean up Woolwich through drainage, but the opening of the Eastern Counties Railway Company’s line to North Woolwich in 1847 and the appointment of George Aitchison as District Surveyor in 1845 seem to have been more immediate spurs to this initiative. The scheme was overseen by Philip Hardwick, with whom Aitchison was closely connected, and whose architectural practice was at this date handled by his son Philip Charles Hardwick. James Walker, the comparatively eminent and even more elderly engineer, was also retained to push the embankment out on a straighter line behind a brick and mass-concrete river wall. This was done in 1854 but an intended pier was successfully opposed by H. B. Roff (see below). By 1852 two-storey cottages, somewhat larger than their forerunners and much more regular, had been laid out, mostly by James Samuel Sonnex, a local builder, along wide new streets named after naval heroes – Rodney, Nelson and Collingwood (Ill. 33). By 1854 the area had been largely populated by the middle-class male inhabitants are bullies [pimps], dock and waterside labourers, costers, hawkers and tramps. The women are prostitutes. No law runs in these streets. The north side of the High Street between Nelson Street and Collingwood Street was ‘perhaps the roughest of all the points in the Dusthole’. Women with broken noses, swollen faces, bare dirty unkempt faces and heads, draggled skirts, frayed edges everywhere, coarse Irish faces, bare arms. No men about. Of the High Street it was said, in cheerier tones, that ‘English labourers, costers, hawkers and tramps. The women living and following their dreadful business in this neighbourhood are so degraded that even abandoned women will refuse to accompany them home. Solicitors are forbidden to enter the place. One public house there is shut up three or four times in a day sometimes for fear of losing the licence that once abolished the area’s prostitution: ‘The whole riverside area, including its newer streets became a dismal and notorious late-Victorian Alsatia known as the ‘Dusthole’, a reference, it seems, to the prevalence of coal dust from neighbouring wharves. The district, almost industrial, had received growing quantities of coal in transit and had come to be populated largely by people of Irish descent. The Salvation Army established a Rescue Slum Home here and in 1890 General William Booth highlighted the area’s prostitution: A decade later Charles Booth’s social survey also found much to deprecate: the Dusthole was ‘a house of call for all the tramps from London to Kent and vice versa. The male inhabitants are bullies [pimps], dock and waterside labourers, costers, hawkers and tramps. The women are prostitutes. No law runs in these streets.’ The north side of the High Street between Nelson Street and Collingwood Street was ‘perhaps the roughest of all the points in the Dusthole’. Women with broken noses, swollen faces, bare dirty unkempt faces and heads, draggled skirts, frayed edges everywhere, coarse Irish faces, bare arms. No men about. Of the High Street it was said, in cheerier tones, ‘Seaport town street, fair sprinkling of brothels, generally in coffee shops’.

Ropeyard Rails was deplored as well (Ill. 37). The ‘Rails’ were already densely populated in the 1840s, mostly by labourers, many in a couple of lodging houses. Fifty years on there had been some rebuilding and the population had almost doubled; there were eight lodging houses, two of

54. Engraved design of 1848 for baths and reading rooms by George Aitchison junior, architect

55. Cross section as built

56. Ground plan as projected in 1850

57. Ropeyard Rails from the south in the late 1850s. All demolished
which, in three-storey buildings of the 1880s, each had more than forty residents at the census of 1891. Most of these people were identified as labourers, hawkers and ‘laundresses’. Ten years on Charles Booth’s survey found assassinating stinks’.

in the 1890s and sanitation, the high rents and overcrowding that made was not just the coal dust, the poor quality of the housing the town’s skilled and respectable workers had deserted. It went home to breathe in purer air’.

the Hare Street and Ferry end, where it was worst, and ‘so bad in the streets that you shopped quickly away from

1808 along the north side (Ill. 33). Complaints about the price of gas led to the formation of the rival Woolwich Consumers’ Protective Gas Company in 1843, led by Lewis and David Davis of Green’s End. This firm took and redeveloped a wharf on the west side of Glass Yard. In 1830 its two 2417 (80 kcwt) diameter gas-holders were replaced to make room for a retort house, and the premises were extended towards the High Street, where an Italianate office building was erected next to the Carpenters’ Arms. These works were further enlarged in 1862 and in 1872 when the embankment to the west of the former naval dockyard was remade with a steeply sloping brick wall that survives in front of the Woolwich Free Ferry’s marshalling yard. Both the Woolwich gas companies were amalgamated with the South Metropolitan Gas Light & Coke Company in 1884, after which Woolwich was supplied with gas from the Greenwich peninsula, the western (Consumers’) wharf closed immediately, the eastern (Equitable) wharf in 1887.”

slum clearance sites were declared in 1935–8, at Bell Water Gate, Nile Cottages, Glass Yard, Ropeway Roads and Surgeon Street.76

Coal wharves was a presence in the eighteenth century and, no doubt, earlier, but after 1800 huge population growth greatly boosted demand. Through the nineteenth century much Newcastle coal was landed at several Woolwich wharves. One was at the end of Glass Yard, another on the former Remnant’s wharf, west of Bell Water Gate. This became Strother’s Coal Wharf in the 1830s. The depot was redeveloped as Warren Lane Wharf in the late 1870s by his son, Frank Kirk, in partnership with Joseph Randall.77 The whole Hardin’s Lane area, everything north of the High Street from the Arsenal west to Meeting House Lane was taken into the Arsenal in 1913 for the building of additional war-time factory sheds; these were cleared around 1930.78

Woolwich Power Station (demolished)

Charles Tuff (later Tuff and Hoar), wholesale corn, hay and straw merchants and cartage contractors, took over the old Consumers’ Gas wharf and land to the west as far as the former naval dockyard in the early 1880s. The site continued as Tuff’s Wharf until the 1910s when it was taken for the new ferry approach.79 The former Equitable Gas site was a coal wharf for a short time before it was taken on by Kirk and Randall, building contractors of more than local eminence, who built sheds there in 1901–3. John Kirk, of Kirk and Parry, builders, had been based at the adjoining wharf to the east by 1865. With much government work his was the biggest building firm in Woolwich, employing 169 in 1866. The depot was redeveloped as Warren Lane Wharf in the late 1870s by his son, Frank Kirk, in partnership with Joseph Randall.77 The whole Hardin’s Lane area, everything north of the High Street from the Arsenal west to Meeting House Lane was taken into the Arsenal in 1913 for the building of additional war-time factory sheds; these were cleared around 1930.78

Woolwich Power Station and environs from the south east in 1903. Newly all demolished

39. Woolwich Power Station and environs from the south-east in 1903. Nearly all demolished

56. Woolwich High Street, 1904, looking west, with the Hare Street and Nile Street junctions in the foreground. Nearly all demolished

CLO, gas and electricity

Woolwich Power Station (demolished)

Sebastian de Ferranti and the London Electric Supply Corporation built the world’s first high-voltage AC central electricity-generating station in Deptford in 1887–91. They intended to supply Woolwich. However,

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a local consortium, the Woolwich District Electric Light Company, was formed in 1896 as a rival and gained the favour of the Woolwich Local Board of Health. Nothing was done until 1903, when the easternmost 480 ft (148 m) frontage of what had been Roff’s Wharf, adjoining Globe Lane, was taken and steamboat repair shops there converted for a modest power station. Street lighting was introduced to Woolwich from 1890, and 58,000 ft (17,700 m) of mass concrete (Ills 37, 38) was completed in 1927, with the engine-house elongated and the reinforced-concrete lattice-framed coaling jetty that still bestrides its line was built in 1930. Woolwich Power Station was notably efficient. Unlike most municipal stations in London, and despite its hemmed-in site, it was kept going from 1934 as a ‘selected’ station under the Central Electricity Board, its supply linked into the National Grid. Further improvement ensued. In 1976, the first part of a hulking new steel-framed boiler-house, east of the engine-house, was added. This was the only major power station in the country to be built by council direct labour. It was not fully brought into use until 1984, when, following nationalization, the British Electricity Authority ran the station. The southern section followed in 1982–7. Begun to designs devised under Tee in the 1930s, the boiler-house was seen through thereafter by his successor, W. H. Gimson. Given the town-centre location, an architectural effort was made. Vertical ‘special brick’ strips in glazed-panel walls added a laconic Art Deco veneer, and extensions of the older buildings to the south onto Market Hill gave the complex coherence from the High Street, perimeter walls and railings went up only in the early 1960s. Three chimneys that rose 275 ft (84 m) were a local landmark, fluted ‘for balance and dignity’ (Ills 28, 37, 39, 68).

There were further slam clearances east of the power station by 1949, making room for a huge coal yard that extended up to the Arsenal. But Woolwich Power Station soon came to be outmoded. One chimney was taken down in 1976 and generating stopped altogether in 1978. Demolition followed in 1979–80.

**River access and crossings**

There were five river stairs in the town centre in the 1740s, vital links given the poor state of local roads and the isolated location of Woolwich (Ill. 8). From east to west these were known as Cutts’s, Ship (or Sheep, later Ship and Half Moon), Blue Anchor (at the end of Globe Lane, previously called Teddy Tree or variants thereof, possibly Golden Anchor in 1707, and marked Parish Water Gate in 1867), Bell Water, and Green Dragon (later Hog Lane). Further east old Warren Lane (what, confusingly, is now Ship and Half Moon Passage) also gave onto the river.**

**Bell Water Gate** was the main landing point for traffic in and out of the town, and it has the last of these river stairs properly to survive. The landing itself was repaired, altered and improved in 1843 at the expense of the parish. It was then thought to be the best place for a public landing because of its central situation and proximity to the High Street. Much altered, these stairs still lead to a paved causeway with an adjacent stone-sett slip of similar

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40. Woolwich Power Station, block plan showing sequence of development, 1912 to 1957

41. Woolwich Power Station coaling jetty, 1930–1, looking downstream in 2008
Steamboat wharves

In 1834 the Woolwich Steam Packet Company was established, running boats between Woolwich and Hungerford Market, Charing Cross, and thus much improving the town's links with London (Ill. 42). It did a roaring trade and a good-sized pier was built in 1840 at Roff's Wharf, the eastern part of which was given up to the steamboat company for a workshop. Further connections came with railway lines. In a scheme to link Woolwich to London that was independently promoted by its engineer, George Parker Bidder, the Eastern Counties Railway Company indirectly instigated a paddleboat-steamer ferry service across the Thames in 1837, using Roff's pier, to lure customers onto an extension of its lines from Stratford to uninhabited North Woolwich.

At Roff's Wharf the steamboat company built the first of two covered graving docks in 1843–4, reusing parts of an early Tudor slipway (see above). It was from here that in 1871 the company inaugurated services to Clacton, the beginnings of that resort. The whole of Roff's Wharf was run from 1876 by the London Steamboat Company, the main operator after amalgamations of Thames estuary excursions. Here, in September 1878, the office was used as a temporary mortuary following the sinking of the company's Princess Alice and the loss of close to 700 lives; a year later the pier was destroyed by the Canada, a runaway ship. Declining trade from Roff's Wharf was overseen in the 1880s by the Thames Steamboat Company and then the Victoria Steamboat Association, which around 1890 moved a reduced seasonal service to North Woolwich. The railway's 'penny ferry' carried on until 1908, after which the rebuilt pier at Roff's Wharf was removed; its counterpart on the north bank survives in a ruinous state.

The Watermen's Steam Packet Company, formed in a fight-back against loss of trade, had taken the forefront between Glass Yard and Hog Lane in the late 1830s. It built workshops at what it called Albion Wharf, but succumbed to its rival company in 1870. Its wharf was then sold to William Rose and Albert William Mellish, millers and partners at the Steam Flour Mills on Woolwich New Road. In 1871 John Kirk built them a tall flourmill. First known as Town Mills, this was enlarged to the east in 1911–12, by when it had been renamed A. W. Mellish Ltd's Free Ferry Mills (Ills 45, 47). It was cleared in the mid-1970s.

Woolwich Free Ferry terminals

Ferries across the Thames at Woolwich have ancient origins (see Introduction). Through most of the Victorian period crossings were made by two paying services. One was from Roff's Wharf, for foot passengers only, on the 'penny ferry' to the railway at North Woolwich. The other was from immediately west of the Arsenal at the end of Warren Lane (now Ship and Half Moon Passage) where there was a public drawdock. From 1839 a horse-raft ferry crossed from here to the 'barge house' at North Woolwich (to which the military had long run a ferry from the Arsenal). The Old Barge House Ferry Company was wound up in 1889, when the Woolwich Free Ferry opened.

In the late 1870s the Metropolitan Board of Works took on all London's bridges over the Thames, freeing them from tolls. Unfairly, from the standpoint of east-London ratepayers, this affected nothing downstream of London Bridge. Prompted by a ginger group, the Woolwich Local Board of Health was among several authorities to take up...
a campaign for this imbalance to be redressed. In 1882 John Robert Jolly, newly elected a Liberal MBW member from Woolwich, introduced a deputation from the Arsenal and the newly-opened Albert Dock. The MBW declined to consider a tunnel, so, in the importance of better vehicular cross-river transport, John Mowlem & Co. could begin work on the contract to form the approach roads and river walls, with pontoon decks linked by covered staircases and the whole was held in place by fixed dolphins at either end. In 1910 the south end of the ferry approach was widened and equipped with public lavatories; passenger shelters were projected but remained unbuilt. The ferry was very well used, especially by commuters – peak demand came at 7–9 am and 4–6 pm. Daily traffic doubled to about 24,000 passengers by 1910, and the original three ferries were replaced by four new vessels, also paddle wheel. Plans for dealing with this problem eventually included a ambitious scheme for a traversable river barrage.

The southern ferry approach at the end of Nile Street was flanked by blind-arcaded walls. From the shore, where there was a new river wall of brick-faced mass concrete, there extended two 157ft (48m)-long lattice-girder steel fall-bridges that could be hydraulically operated (ills 42, 43). Held between a timber guide-frame at their outer edges, these gave onto the floating pontoon or landing stage, of wrought iron and timber. This had two decks, an upper one for vehicles and a lower one, with waiting rooms, for foot passengers. Triple-hinged flaps on the upper deck lowered onto the correspondingly twin-deck boats. The pontoon decks were linked by covered staircases and the whole was held in place by fixed dolphins at either end.

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In the late 1930s problems generated by demand for the ferry traffic 7½ d. But there were still no other nearby vehicle river crossings, and the service stayed free. Its capacity had almost doubled, as had the costs of the building project since 1910, to more than £2 million. It was acknowledged that the ferry had become somewhat less convenient for foot passengers, though they were now given small shelters.

The marshalling yard was not laid out until 1961–8. A vehicle park with a kiosk café, if it always allowed a riverside walk, something of the public space that was still desired, and paid for, by Woolwich Borough Council. Related facilities were added around the same time, accounting for some of the additional costs. Servicing arrangements around the old ferry landing had been rudimentary, and in 1974 it had been decided that the new set-up should include a ferry maintenance gridiron, with workshops and administration buildings. This involved raising the river wall. Woolwich & Co. and Marples, Ridgway and Partners saw to the engineering, while the workshop and office block was initially designed by architects to the LCC’s Special Works Division, with Scherrer and Hicks, architects, on the job in 1964 (ills 47 and 51). There were ferries for mooring dolphins and, at the causeway’s end, two steel lattice-girder link spans or hinged-bridge loading ramps, mechanically operated and adjustable to a 30ft (9m) tidal range. These are operated by a double-portal hoisting or lifting tower (ill. 48). This massive structure, which functions by means of 30- and 40-tonne counterweights, is 20ft (6m) wide and 97ft (30m) tall above low water. Standing on precast concrete piles, it is made of reinforced concrete, preferred to steel for the sake of appearances. The design was approved by Bennett – Woolwich Borough Council asked in vain whether the tower might be made smaller. With shuttered concrete facades everywhere, the terminal is unblinkingly utilitarian. When the new terminals opened in 1966, Desmond Plummer, leader of the Conservative opposition on the GLC, extracted the fact that each vehicle journey on the ferry cost 7½ d. But there were still no other nearby vehicle river crossings, and the service stayed free. Its capacity had almost doubled, as had the costs of the building project since 1910, to more than £2 million. It was acknowledged that the ferry had become somewhat less convenient for foot passengers, though they were now given small shelters.

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riverside walk to the east. A raised platform between the workshop and the causeway remains open, though scarcely used, offering views of the ferry, the workshop and, at low tides, the big wooden gridiron. Shuttered concrete wraps round the workshop in a manner more Brutalist than utilitarian, the staircases particularly reminiscent of the LCC Special Works Division’s Corbusian approach to the South Bank."

On the abolition of the GLC in 1986 Greenwich Council took responsibility for the Woolwich Ferry, and a two-storey block of prefabricated offices was put up to the south of the workshop. The council withdrew in 2008 and management of the ferry passed via Transport for London to the Serco Group plc, which also runs the Docklands Light Railway. The ferry continues in operation, still busy and still free (Ill. 49).

The ambulance station on the ferry approach is the successor to a smaller facility that stood on the north side of Woolwich High Street opposite Parson’s Hill. This was built in 1924–5 for the LCC, under which the Ambulance Service for London had been established in 1914. Woolwich was already relatively poorly provided for when it was decided that the nearest station, at Lee, should be moved to New Cross. Local pressure persuaded the LCC to establish a base for two vehicles in Woolwich. Plans for the new roundabout at the relocated ferry approach forced a move and provided an opportunity for a larger garage for three vehicles. This was built in 1967–8 with and alongside the ferry workshop by J. & J. Dean (Contracts) Ltd to plans that had been settled in the LCC in 1964. The white-brick clad ambulance garage is at road level above ancillary spaces on falling ground."

The Woolwich Foot Tunnel, a free river crossing and a public work by the LCC, opened in 1912 as a supplement to the free ferry (Ills 46, 50). Once prominent, its southern riverside rotunda is now well hidden, nestled in a re-entrant angle of the Waterfront Leisure Centre. It stands at the head of a lift shaft and stairs that lead down to the tunnel under the Thames.

A foot tunnel had long been desired, and repeatedly mooted. In 1832 Henry Palmer’s steamboat-dock and railway scheme included a ‘passage’ under the river at Woolwich. After a skiff overturned in the fog in 1873, drowning nine men on their way to work, a private scheme promoted an all-hours toll subway linking Woolwich at Bell Water Gate to North Woolwich, with ramped approaches so that field artillery could be wheeled through. The engineers for this project, which gained Parliamentary approval in 1874, were F. S. Gilbert and James Henry Greathead, the inventor of a highly efficient tunnelling shield first used in the Tower subway of 1868–9. Work began on the north bank in 1876 but there were difficulties with both the contractors and the tunnelling. Thomas Andrew Walker took over, and Parliament granted an extra five years for completion in 1879. Thereafter, however, attention turned to the possibility of a free crossing and, like toll-subway initiatives elsewhere, this one came to nothing."

The free ferry was not infrequently suspended in bad weather, particularly during early morning fog, and many Woolwich people were thus prevented from getting to and from work. From 1898 the Local Board of Health and then the Borough Council sent regular and ever
more anxious deputations to the LCC urging the provision of a foot tunnel, like that built between Greenwich and the Isle of Dogs in 1900–2 (see Survey of London, vol.44). Promises were made in 1904 when the LCC stifled another private initiative, but the Rotherthiller Tunnel of 1904–8 took precedence and it was late 1908, when the North Woolwich railway ferry ceased, causing the free ferry to become even more crowded, before anything was done. The LCC gained Parliamentary powers in 1909 and its Chief Engineer, Maurice Fitzmaurice, produced plans for a scaled-down version of his predecessor Alexander Binnie’s Greenwich tunnel. The building contract went to Lord Scott & Middleton, and work commenced in 1910.

Survey of London

CHAPTER ONE
CENTRAL RIVERSIDE AREA

66

67

Post-industrial riverside

Waterfront Leisure Centre

After the move of the ferry terminal in 1966 the old ferry approach had lost its raison d’être and the whole area between Glass Yard and Bell Water Gate, much of it owned by Greenwich Council, was ripe for redevelopment. There had been an intention in 1962 that this area would become public open space, and there were regular gatherings of elderly Woolwichers on the disused riverside platform. Want of funds led the council in 1971 to devise a plan for a commercial office development that would finance both outdoor landscaping and indoor recreational facilities. This sports-centre idea had been passed around. From 1976 there were plans for baths and a recreational centre on part of the Arsenal, and then there were hopes for similar facilities on the south side of Bersford Street (see below). In 1977–4 Morgan Grampian (see page 203) put forward a scheme for offices, rising to nine storeys on the east side of the ferry approach, with a council car park and ‘neighbourhood’ sports centre alongside. The project included public promenades from the High Street to and along the river, with a ‘sitting-out area’ and viewing platforms. The land was cleared, but infill put paid to the scheme in the late 1970s by when a plan for a major council sports centre in Charlton was also abandoned. Greenich Council, for which the elusive sports centre had become something of an obsession, was also having difficulties with another large development at General Gordon Square. It regrouped around new plans for a wider riverside area on the closure and demolition of Woolwich Power Station in 1986–8. Thereafter Dobby Foard and Partners, architects, prepared plans for a leisure complex with a small swimming pool to stand west of Bell Water Gate, with residential development above and over to Glass Yard across an open path. The power-station site was to have a Sainsbury’s supermarket and a Homebase DIY store under more flats, with a garden centre, petrol station and pub. There might also have been a restaurant on the power-station jetty and car parking extending up to the Arsenal, all with a riverside walkway. Ambitions for the Woolwich leisure centre grew. The scheme was recast and work began in 1985 with the laying out of the riverside walk behind a new river wall west of Bell Water Gate. The residential component had been abandoned, but there were still hopes for a smaller retail store to the east. The project was handled as a ‘design and build’ contract, undertaken for the council by Norwest Holte. The leisure centre was built in 1986–8, along with the car park and a toilet block on the power-station site. N. Twomey was the project co-ordinator, with Alexander Jones as structural engineer. Subcontracts went to Stuart Miller Associates, architects, who in turn employed Robert Noble of the Charter Partnership, architects. Composite Structures supplied steel roofs and staircases, and glass curtain walling was by Heywood Glazing Systems. The development had grown to comprise two blocks either side of a path on the line of the old ferry approach (once Hog Lane and Nile Street). This separation was abandoned during the building works, as was an open riverside viewing balcony. The origins of the sprawling complex as two separate polychromatic brick-faced build- ings with slate roof-aprons are visible, the linking section having glass walling and separate roofs (ills 51, 52). The eastern Pool Block, was given an impressive array of swim- ming facilities, a 25m fitness pool, plus beginners’, deep-water, lagoon and flume pools. ‘Three hundred thousand

52 Woolwich High Street area, 2008, showing the Free Ferry beyond the Waterfront Leisure Centre, with the former Granada and Odeon cinemas (left) and Callis Yard (bottom right)
gallons of water are used to provide waves, waterfalls, fountains, underwater springs and lighting, monsoon rains, rapids and vortexes, a hot whirlpool spa and a giant fountains, a lounge bar overlooks the pool courts, squash courts, a projectile hall, fitness and dance rooms and a sauna suite. A short stretch of Woolwich High Street has escape widening on its south side and preserves, patchily, a number of early buildings (Ills 51, 52). Old names for places to the rear – Cow, Cock and Dog yards – may relate to agricultural use, possibly connected to Woolwich Hall. The subsequent settlement pattern here was rather different to that across the High Street or further east. This was essentially ribbon development, a comparatively tidy row of houses, continuous by the early eighteenth century (Ill. 3), that probably always incorporated shops. These properties faced the market on the widest part of the High Street and had good-sized back gardens, beyond which lay orchards. Among the trading sections of Woolwich society this would have been a desirable address. In the eighteenth century the frontage belonged to the Bowater Estate, parts transferring to the Powis Estate in 1799. A group of three with Nos 110–112 was replaced in the late 1840s by James Stone, a grocer. He had a post office here by 1851 and continued into the 1890s. In 1886 Henry John Edwards, another grocer, extended the building to the rear and made other alterations that perhaps included the present shopfront; the fascia cornice may survive from the 1850s. Alfred Skillman took the premises for a furniture shop in 1909, diversified and spread to No. 109. Skillman & Sons became known as the best ironmonger in South London. The building’s east flank wall had a mural, People of Greenwich: Unit Against Racism, designed and painted in 1984 by the Greenwich Mural Workshop (Stephen Lobb, Carol Kenna and Chris Cardale) for the Greenwich Action Committee Against Racism, and funded by the GLC and Greenwich Council (Ill. 54). It was painted over in 2008.

The shop-house at No. 109 appears to be a rebuild of about 1820, with later stucco embellishment. From the late 1820s Matthew Smith had a tobacco factory here. The building was known as the Kent Tobacco Works in the 1890s when the stucco band between the upper storeys bore the legend ‘smoke sweet as a nut’, a packet-tobacco brand reference. The inner parts of the shopfront above, the façade has scarcely altered since.

A smaller house at No. 110 that had been built as one of a group of three with Nos 111–112 was replaced in 1784–5 with the present three-storey property. The builder was Robert Everett, a Woolwich bricklayer who had a brickfield on the east side of the ropeyard. William Stripe, an auctioneer, was here from around 1810 into the 1830s. The property became the Bank Tavern beerhouse in the 1840s and was partially rebuilt for Charles Beazley’s North Kent Brewery of Plumstead in 1852, when it was called the Coat & Badge. Soon after, it became dining-rooms. A hipped roof, nineteenth-century stucco façade embellishment and...
any early interiors were all removed in the late twentieth century.112

The oldest surviving houses in Woolwich are at Nos. 111–112. They cannot be dated more precisely than to the early eighteenth century, when they looked across the widest part of the High Street to the parish watch-house, cage, stocks and pump. They appear as the middle and western units of a group of three equivalent properties in the earliest extant land-tax return of 1737. The evidence of their fabric suggests that they were then fairly new.113 Houses such as these would then have been standard in Woolwich. They are of timber-frame construction, refaced in brick that has been stuccoed. Each originally comprised just three rooms, in two full storeys and garrets, refronted in brick that has been stuccoed. Each originally had rear-staircase plans, unusual in smaller Woolwich houses. A single-storey timber bakehouse range was added around 1830 to the rear of No. 112, also then new, that was demolished in 1849. Separately refaced in the later twentieth century, these properties retain their eighteenth-century form, with a steeply pitched gambrelled roof. There may still be some original fabric inside, as an original central chimney stack survives. The ground layout laid out was via staircases alongside the chimneys, to indicate a traditional house form that was widespread in eighteenth-century Woolwich (Ill. 132). Beyond Furlongs Garage (see below), No. 130 was built in 1926 for the Wellbeing Estate Ltd and Nos 131 and 132 are probably both early nineteenth-century buildings, perhaps put up after the widening around 1830 of a particularly narrow stretch of the High Street. Both have rear-staircase plans, unusual in smaller Woolwich houses before 1800. No. 131 has a centre-valley roof and No. 132 a steeply pitched roof, probably tile-covered.114

Ferry Place was an alley that linked the High Street to orchards in the western units of a group of three equivalent properties in the early eighteenth century, when they looked across the High Street to the parish watch-house, cage, stocks and pump. There is another much-altered eighteenth-century house at No. 132, with an interruption in the western units of a group of three equivalent properties in the early eighteenth century, when they looked across the High Street to the parish watch-house, cage, stocks and pump. An open space hereabouts was known as Cow Yard in the eighteenth century. (Ill. 33) The formation of the Powsie estate and Ferry Street led to gradual infilling of land behind the High Street after 1834 when the path from the High Street to Cow Yard had become Callis Alley, taking its name from Thomas Callis, a landowner and vestryman in the late eighteenth century. Along the west side a row of six small houses, Callis Cottages, was built up around 1857. The ground behind remained open, save for some private stabling.115

In 1899 Woolwich Local Board of Health acquired the yard site for a storage depot, alternatively designated a yard or a stone yard, for its workforce and materials associated with building, of roads and otherwise. The Powsie Estate undertook to enclose the ground with brick walls and two pairs of entrance gates. Before long the yard was brought under the aegis of a committee set up to address the Board’s office accommodation. In 1896 it was agreed that it should be adapted to replace existing municipal dust-yard facilities that adjoined the (Old) Town Hall, a site wanted for a public library and offices (see pages 245–7). The Board’s surveyor, H. O. Thomas, prepared plans for stables and cart shelters. The horses that were used for the collection of dust or refuse were big, strong cart-horses, known for their ability both to pull heavy loads and to pick their way carefully, sometimes walking backwards, through confined spaces and across uneven surfaces.116

Comparisons were made, not with other municipal stabling, but with commercial facilities, including those of Grome & Blackwell at Charing Cross, and Thomas came up with a scheme that was approved in 1897. John Oliver Cook was engaged as architect to design a building for sixteen horses, cart shelters, accommodation for the stable-keeper and an office, with the potential for enlargement for another fourteen horses. He prepared alternatives, for the horses to be at ground level or on the first floor over the cart shelters and office. The latter, marginally cheaper, was favoured, and permission to borrow for the project was sought. It was March 1899 before the building contract could be let. It went to Edward Proctor, a local builder, and the work was completed in September 1900.

The whole multi-part stock-brick building along the north side of Callis Yard is that of 1899. The eight-bay main range originally comprised a van and cart shed under first-floor stabling with a forage store above. All the stable windows would once have been of the same two-pane type, with high sills to light the stalls from above. Inside, brick piers inserted on the ground floor supported boxed metal girders. Cast-iron columns were added on the first floor, custom-made for affixing stall dividers, were supplied by H. & G. Measures of Greenwich. The left return main board lining and remnants of a hay loft. The roof line, with prominent weathervanes atop gables, is unchanged, though with lantern glazing replacing slated above what was a louvred-vent clerestory. Integral to the east of the main range is what was the horse ramp, laterly remade as stairs. Adjoining, a three-storey brick building of 1899, had offices below the stable-keeper’s residence. A low western overhang was rebuilt as a two-storey block in the 1960s or 1970s.117

The east side of the site was tidied up in 1940, by the removal of Callis Cottages, the realignment of Callis Alley with a new boundary wall, and the building of an engine-house and a store shed. In 1952 Woolwich Borough Council converted the ground floor into light industrial use, building an office floor above, using two storeys above what had been a louvred-vent clerestory. Integral to the east of the main range is what was the horse ramp, laterly remade as stairs. Adjoining, a three-storey brick building of 1899, had offices below the stable-keeper’s residence. A low western overhang was rebuilt as a two-storey block in the 1960s or 1970s.117

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adjacent land up to the High Street were acquired by MacDonald Egan Developments and Revcap, the east range of buildings was cleared. Approval was gained for plans by Alfred Hall Monaghan Morris, architects, for a gated community, with blocks rising up to ten storeys enclosing the retained main stable block. These were then put on hold, the yard became a car park and the stable block saw use as a Pentecostalist church.

**Furlongs Garage**

Furlongs Garage comprises a forecourt to the High Street with buildings extending back to Povis Street that straddle rights of way known as Dog Yard and Mortgramit Square. It is a complete motoring complex of the mid-twentieth century that was said to be the largest in south-east London at the time.

This was once the site of the Dog Yard brewery, perhaps established by John Hare (or Hare), here by the 1730s and probably the son of another John Hare who had property in Greenwich, including a still, in the 1690s. He was succeeded by Richard Hare and Robert Salton, after whose deaths the brewery, a dozen Woolwich public houses and fields to the south were assigned in 1782 to the Povis brothers, William, Richard and Thomas, who were brewers in Greenwich. The brewery passed through various other hands in the early nineteenth century and was rebuilt in 1849 as Davison and Bosman's Lion Brewery. Around 1876 it was taken by Pickford and Co., carriers, and replaced with sheds.

Western parts of the brewery site had been laid out as Mortgramit Buildings in 1875–8. Later designated a ‘square’, this development in fact had only three sides (Ill. 158). Woolwich experienced extraordinary population growth and pressure on housing during the Napoleonic Wars. What was built here was, even by the low standards of the time, unusually dense and barrack-like speculation. It was also exceptional among the time’s low-grade housing for being depicted when new (Ill. 58). The developers under a Povis lease were John Morris, a High Street oil- and colour-man, George Graham, a local builder, and Thomas Mitchell, a Povis Street stay-maker – thus the odd name, though a John Seeley was also involved. On ground plan there were thirty-five units round the ‘square’, in back-to-back ranges on two sides, with seven more across Dog Yard. Three facing the ‘square’ and the yard, apparently briefly known as Long’s Court (which seems to imply the involvement of John Long – see pages 372–3), were evidently built as one-room dwellings in two-storey ranges with balcony access to the upper rooms. However, they may never have been so occupied – they were rated as two-room cottages. Many fell empty in the 1820s and 1830s, but few were unoccupied in 1841, when the census found 293 people living here, mostly labourers where occupations are identified. The courts, abandoned around 1888 when the leases expired, did not last long enough to be chronicled as a slum. In 1835–7 Mortgramit Square was redeveloped with stables and sheds for George Plume’s cartage business. In 1932 Woolwich Borough Council’s Electricity Department built a neat sub-station that still stands on the east side of Dog Yard.

Plume was succeeded here by Furlongs, a firm with a long Woolwich pedigree, and a name that has been well known locally for two centuries. In 1812 John Furlong set up as a cabinet maker on Povis Street. His sons and grandson diversified, becoming auctioneers, estate agents, valuers, undertakers, removal contractors, upholsterers, steam-carpet beaters, etc.’ A further step into the world of motoring was a logical progression after the First World War and John Furlong, great-great-grandson of the founder, set up a motor-car garage at Murray’s Yard. This was given up for expansion of the council’s electricity depot and a more ambitious approach was adopted at Mortgramit Square in 1938–9 when Furlongs built the still extant multi-storey ramped garage with additional access from under a showrooms at 160–162 Povis Street (Ills 47, 53). The LCC had undertaken to see to it that this site was used for car parking when two large cinemas opened to the west in 1937. There was a small filling-station forecourt and, on the east side of Dog Yard, a three-storey workshop and store with a caretaker’s flat, linked by a high-level bridge. The architects were Gower Newman and J. A. Eames, and the builders Thomas & Edge. The four-storey garage block, brick clad with a reinforced-concrete frame, was mainly for the maintenance of vehicles, with just one parking level between a north-lit top-floor workshop and two lower repair floors that included first-floor greasing and washing bays. The modern façade showroom façade incorporated a neon sign; there were two show floors below top-storey offices.

Furlongs expanded onto the High Street in 1935–6, demolishing Nos 125–129 for a service and filling station, designed by Lewis Wilson, architect, in association with T. P. Bennett & Son. Behind a chequered-paved forecourt, still largely intact, there was another car showroom to the west with an accessories store to the east, both in front of additional workshops. In 1957 three pump islands were replaced with one, under a new canopy for self-service operation, and the showroom was relocated to the east side. The west showroom was made a shop in 1994 and the forecourt is now used as a car wash (Ill. 60). The garage behind is still used for repairs and parking. Redevelopment of the whole site was intended as part of the Woolwich Triangle scheme of 2007–8 (see page 220), which envisaged a hotel facing Woolwich High Street.
Parson’s Hill area

Parson’s Hill was originally a path that doglegged up from the High Street to link the old rectory and parish church. The road and its early nineteenth-century houses have been all but entirely erased, the lower east side through clearance in 1927, the upper parts under the dual carriage-way that is John Wilson Street and into St Mary’s Gardens in the 1960s (Ill. 295). As a result it is not obvious that Woolwich High Street continues across the ferry-approach roundabout. Despite these changes, two great cinema buildings of 1936–7, the Granada and the Odeon, do give this place a strong identity, anchoring the south side of the roundabout with two of the most exciting buildings in Woolwich. The former Granada has one of Britain’s finest cinema interiors.

Ebenezer Building (former Granada Cinema)

The earlier of the two cinemas to open, by just four months, was the Granada, to the east and facing Powis Street. By the 1930s there were several cinemas in Woolwich, but nothing approaching this scale — the Granada had seating for nearly 3,000. Sidney Bernstein had built up his Granada circuit since 1930 and by the time he came to Woolwich was expanding rapidly with a track record for building Britain’s most glamorous cinemas. Here Cecil Masey and Reginald Uren were his co-architects. The builders were Bovis Ltd.161

The west end of Powis Street had been widened in 1934–5 leaving that side of Bernstein’s plot awkwardly aligned in relation to the High Street, but cinema architects were accustomed to resolving circulation from tight frontages into big auditoria on backlands (Ill. 61). The layout resulted in what are essentially two joined buildings. At the front the booking vestibule, foyer and café-restaurant occupied a low range with an elegantly curved front (Ill. 62). Bernstein believed that the public wanted interiors of traditional architectural characters, not the Odeon’s ‘streamlined-modern’. Yet his Woolwich cinema is just that externally, perhaps because of the proximity of a competing Odeon. Masey’s first scheme was outwardly four-square classical. The change, probably a reflection of the involvement of Uren and made after plans for the

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6a. Entrance front to Powis Street, 1937

6b. Ground plans of Granada (left) and Odeon (right) cinemas as built, 1936–7

6c. Foyer, 1937

Granada Cinema, 1936–7
CHAPTER ONE

CENTRAL RIVERSIDE AREA

rare even in cinema decoration, [that] goes far towards
wrote it up as having ‘a complexity and lavish exuberance
built Granada cinemas. The
relief with a huge frieze lettered ‘GRANADA ‘.
that was once less exposed to view , but always essentially
behind is in an outwardly utilitarian brown-brick block
height glazed fin that was neon-lit at night. The main hall
Odeon had been submitted, introduced neat Dudok-like
shaped, buffet-faience surfaces, punctuated by vertical fins, seem
to owe, as Michael Stratton has pointed out, more to car
history than to architectural precedent. Neon-tube light-
tubes disguise ventilation ducts, and flanking lion and unicorn panels are also probably by
Poulain. There was a ‘mighty’ Wurlitzer organ, regularly
played by Reginald Dixon, in front of a large stage under a
fly tower; there could be theatrical productions as well as
cinema.
The Granada made a huge impact. It ‘was truly magni-
ficent and Woolwich had never seen anything to equal it . The whole interior was lit by subdued lighting,
enhanced by glittering chandeliers. Crimson velvet seats
offered comfort, which alone was a boon to cinema-goers
enhanced by glittering chandeliers. Crimson velvet seats
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facile and Woolwich had never seen anything to equal
it. The whole interior was lit by subdued lighting,
Flights of stairs lead from the former booking vestibule straight onto a spacious inner foyer, off which the audi-
torium opens at eight angles (Ill. 61). Carverine styling continued throughout, notably in trowels for concealed
lighting (Ill. 67). Despite much alteration internally, origi-
nal seating with decorative end panels does survive.

Modernization in 1994 saw decoration stripped out, but
the Odeon had become a listed building when it closed in
1981. It reopened as the Concert Cinema in 1983, and was
further altered in 1990, when a floor was inserted over the
stairs to permit twin screenings. Final closure as a cinema
came in 1999.

The building reopened as Gateway House in 2000,
following acquisition by and adaptation for the New
Wine Church. This denomination began in the 1990s in
Greenwich with a group of about twenty-five people of
Nigerian origin and had grown to have about 300 mem-
bers, with Dr Tayo Adeyemi as Senior Minister. The
church has expanded further since and is said to be able to
fill its spaces twice over on Sundays. The main auditorium has a capacity of 250, and the smaller hall that was made
from the former front stalls seats about 40.

133–146 Woolwich High Street

The Granada Cinema displaced a nineteenth-century
for occupation by the family of Dr James Tees, an Irish-
county gentleman, with Dr Tayo Adeyemi as Senior Minister. The
church has expanded further since and is said to be able to
fill its spaces twice over on Sundays. The main auditorium has a capacity of 250, and the smaller hall that was made
from the former front stalls seats about 40.

The Granada Cinema displaced a nineteenth-century
The Granada Cinema displaced a nineteenth-century

George Smith, identified in a lease as a wine merchant
in the remaking of John Wilson Street.

1938

The Granada Cinema displaced a nineteenth-century

1827

The Granada Cinema displaced a nineteenth-century

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The Granada Cinema displaced a nineteenth-century

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The Granada Cinema displaced a nineteenth-century

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people flocking and made Holy Trinity the most fashionable church in Woolwich. In this proprietary chapel sittings were used as auction rooms before it was demolished in 1950.

**Empire Theatre (former Theatre Royal, demolished)**

J. F. Savill’s travelling theatre set up on Smith’s side of Beresford Street in 1835 in a portable building, probably cast-iron framed. This was designated the West Kent Theatre and had assumed the prefix ‘Royal’ by 1837 when it opened a permanent building – three-bay pediment-framed and chapel-like, end on to the street, a standard small theatre of its time. Briefly also called the Duchess of Kent, the venue settled by 1839 to being known as the Theatre Royal. This was substantially enlarged southwards in 1848 by the addition of a five-bay block that permitted a new auditorium parallel to the street with a capacity of 420, work that appears to have been carried out through Frank Matcham, architect, with Samuel Barnes, of Poniss Street, acting as builder for H. J. Borley and Mansell of Artillery Theatre in Lambeth. Samuel Barnard from Peckham, took over and a second extension followed in 1893, taking the premises further south to wind up with a symmetrical tripartite façade and a capacity of 842, this time with Edward Clark as architect. Another reconstruction for Barnard ensued in 1899–1900. Matcham returning to work with Thomas & Edge, builders, to raise the building a storey and reconstruct the interior for another doubling of capacity. Though lavish enough, this was not one of Matcham’s grander theatres (Ill. 70). It was, in fact, a music hall, with a line in sensational, if not lurid, productions. A visitor in 1900 found the theatre ‘cramped, about 2,000 people, not more than 12 soldiers in uniform and hardly 50 women. The rest all young men and boys.’ Cinema, introduced by 1913, became the only use in 1931 at what had been renamed the Woolwich Empire, but only until 1947 when variety performances returned. The Empire ended up as a strip-joint before its licence was taken away in 1958. The building was demolished in 1960.

**CHAPTER ONE CENTRAL RIVERSIDE AREA**

A short distance north-west from the theatre there was a Wesleyan Association Chapel of 1840. The Salvation Army had this in the 1890s, and it was still a chapel in the 1910s. It was last used as the Hostel of Our Lady. John Churchill, a resident as a child in the 1920s recalled that it was 'one of a very big room, one wood table and a big wooden cubard to keep food in. There was about five families in that room, each had old wood boxes and an old wood tables and a big coal fire in which we all sat around. Only mothers and children were allowed in the hostel, no men. The was only one out side toilet, no bathroom, we all went to the public barbers.'

The hostel was demolished in the early 1940s. Across Ropyead Rail, on the site of the former workhouse, at the High Street (Warren Lane) corner, was St Saviour’s Mission School Church, built in 1873, deep in the impoverished Duthiehole. Designed by Arthur Blomfield, in advance of his work on the parish church, this was a plain but handsome brick building with a robust dignity befitting a mission in such a deprived quarter. It was used as auction rooms before it was demolished in 1959.

Near the High Street end of the north-east side of Beresford Street, the Salvation Army, with E. J. Sherwood as architect, built a local headquarters in 1884, known as its ‘barracks’ or as a temple. A simple hall, this was a base for missionaries on the edge of the Duthiehole, from which the aim was to rescue prostitutes and other fallen souls. The castellated building was converted to commercial use in the 1960s and demolished in 2007.

Pastor John Wilson, ‘a great burly Scotman’ who had come to Woolwich on the recommendation of Charles Spurgeon, had a peripatetic Baptist congregation in Woolwich from about 1875. He built it up and then in 1895–96 erected the Baptist Tabernacle, a vast place of worship, to designs by Walter Henry Woodroffe, architect, with J. Smith & Sons of South Norwood as builders (Ills 71). The red-brick and stone-dressed classical front gave onto a large galleried interior with seating for 2,000. As with earlier foundations in the vicinity, the location was chosen with a view to missionary improvement in the Duthiehole. But Wilson’s membership was mainly from artisan families, hailing from a wide area. Membership dwindled and the building was last used for worship in 1969; it was demolished soon after. The congregation moved to a site off Sandy Hill Road (see page 413), exchanging properties with the council.

**Union Street**

The south-west side of Beresford Street was once a neighbourhood of small houses. Into this a school was introduced in 1884.

**Chapels and missions**

The block bounded by Creton and Maclean streets, where a supermarket stands, was laid out at the beginning of the nineteenth century for the Poniss Estate as a rectangle of streets called Union Street and Union Place, linked to the High Street by Gough’s Yard and otherwise only accessible from Poniss Street. Between 1807 and 1831 some plots were developed with about forty-four-rate houses (Ills 81, 184). Little more was done until the frontages were fully built up in the early 1840s, with the northern arm then called Union Buildings; there was no link through to Beresford Street until 1873. In the early 1880s the area was thought to be outside the ‘colony of idle dissolute people’ that was the Duthiehole, but whether through actual or perceived decline, it came to be termed by association. Most of the houses were replaced in 1898–1900.

Across Union (now Maclean) Street there had been open ground, a builder’s yard. The School Board for London moved to acquire this for what was to become Union Street School in 1881, despite some dissent about the risks of falling between two stools on a site at the margin between areas of slums and respectability. The school was built in 1884–5 (Ill. 114), at first to accommodate 600 in nine schoolrooms, but immediately enlarged to make space for another 206, with designs, signed off by E. K. Robinson, that left further enlargement a possibility. Asymmetry in the Domestic Revival building, less studied than incidental, perhaps marked this stuttering start, though the side elevation to Maclean Street was regular, with decorative panels bearing the school’s name and date.

In 1920–1 the LCC remodelled and enlarged the school in the south-eastern direction always intended, to stripped Arts and Crafts designs, probably prepared by W. A. Richards. The irregularly massed additions had large windows for better cross-ventilation standard for the time (Ill. 184). They allowed the infants and a babies’ room to be accommodated below the girls, with the boys and their...
The somewhat anomalous tower that is Riverside House was the main product of, and is now the only survival from, a post-war development sweep across Beresford Street. In 1952 Woolwich Borough Council began to plan for the relocation of business premises from its St Mary’s practical workrooms on top. There were now eighteen classrooms and three halls in what remained an extremely squalid and depressing part of Woolwich.’

...Drill Hall, Beresford Street, – 1889. Gatehouse to the Third West Kent Rifle Volunteers. This was the main product of, and is now the only survival from, a post-war development sweep across Beresford Street and Woolwich High Street, making the Hough Street Relocation Area, Gough’s Yard and its Union Street continuation had became Gough Street in 1904 and then Hough Street in 1938. Early assumptions were that there would be several small commercial premises, above which flats might be built – W. H. Gimson could not foresee demand for offices. However, what little interest there was fell away and in 1937 the Ministry of Works suggested building offices, dreading the possibility that it would lease some for its own civil servants. A newly formed property development group, Gula Investments, previously Gula-Kalumpong Rubber Estates in Malaya, took this up with Arthur Swift and Partners, architects, projecting two buildings in 1948, one of three storeys, the other a nine-storey point block. Another office tower was planned for central Woolwich at the same time (see page 246), and, with no firm government commitment, there was nervousness about the market for offices in this location. The LCC completed the widening of the roads in front of the site in 1961 and the plans were revised to comprise a seventeen-storey tower and a five-storey L-plan block along Beresford Street. The latter was to include shops until that was vetoed by the LCC – shops would encourage drivers to stop their cars on the intended through route. In the event, Woolwich Polytechnic was lined up to lease the lower building, the height of the tower came down to fourteen storeys and the project gained planning permission, the first large office building in south-east London so to do. Woolwich Borough Council later renamed the project as the ‘beginning of Woolwich as a new commercial centre.’

The blocks were built in 1963–4, with Bylander, Waddell and Partners as consulting engineers and Tersons Ltd as builders. Gula Investments (also then building St Andrew’s House, Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow, with the same architects) publicly proclaimed faith in the potential of eastern parts of London to sustain such development, but remained concerned by the proximity of ‘obsolescent’ buildings, thinking likely tenants would be put off. In 1965 the firm submitted a scheme for the whole area west to Hare Street, rejected by the council, which reserved the initiation of such a large project to itself, thinking it not the place of a private developer.**

In 1963, J. T. Stratford & Sons, Woolwich barge builders, took a lease of the top floor in what had (misleadingly) been dubbed Riverside House. Other space was slow to let, but the block was gradually filled by the LCC Architect’s Department, Greenwich Council’s Children’s Department, the London Electricity Board, the British Egg Marketing Board and Artizans and General Properties Ltd. Many others have followed, latterly in tax offices. The Polytechnic retained the lower block into the 1990s.***

These starkly utilitarian buildings have precast concrete-panel walls faced with ‘white Norwegian quartzite’, on reinforced-concrete frames with outer load-bearing columns that terminate as pilots to part-open ground floors (ILL. 47). Beyond a small set-paved courtyard, arboreal but desolate, the High Street frontage was left open for car parking. John Betjeman described Riverside House as ‘an absolutely square block built solely with the intention of making money and not to make Woolwich beautiful’.****

The Autostacker (demolished). One building from this phase, the most interesting, did not last so long. In a determined attempt to get to grips with the town centre’s parking problems Woolwich Borough Council co-ordinated the building of a multi-storey car park with the introduction of parking meters (see page 193). Various sites for this car park were considered and in 1958 W. H. Gimson reported in favour of Ropeyard Rails, presenting two alternative schemes for the parking of 500 cars via ramps or mechanization. There were no mechanized car parks in Britain at the time, but Gimson had learned about overseas models. He contacted the Mitchell Engineering Company, which was developing ideas for a structure wherein drivers would leave locked cars on the ground in lifts, from the tops of which dollys would move the cars into densely packed bays. There was also a visit to a ‘semi-mechanised’ facility in Birmingham. The project became a collaboration when Shell-Mex and BP Ltd, a joint marketing venture, agreed to buy the site, that of the Empire Theatre, and to run a petrol station and ground-level workshops while the council saw to the building and running of the car park. The plan for two eight-storey structures involved closing the southern part of Ropeyard Rails. In 1959 the Parking Research Co., with T. and P. Braddock as architects, worked up a detailed scheme for what aimed to be the country’s first fully automatic car park, to patented designs including a scale model by Auto-Stackers Ltd. These were devised through the incentivenss of one of that firm’s directors, Col. J. A. Stirling, a Scottish civil engineer, who started from a Meccano model and adapted methods used for stacking timber to the conveyors, lifts and dollies principle. This gained the support of Shell-Mex and BP Ltd, the Borough Council and the LCC. It went up at the same time as the comparable Zidpark at Southwark Bridge, but that was not a local-authority project. The Borough
Council Development Committee’s minutes noted defensively that it was ‘a somewhat ambitious scheme, but there is no reason why Woolwich should not be pioneers’. The Autostacker was built in 1960–1 with four lifts for lodging 256 cars on its open decks. Automation systems were supplied by Standard Telephones & Cables (Ill. 73). 

‘Hats off to the Borough of Woolwich! This lively, go-ahead part of London is setting an example in dealing with its parking problem that ought to be studied – and copied – by local authorities up and down the country.’

So said The Motor magazine, and when the Autostacker was opened by Princess Margaret on 11 May 1961 most of its spaces had already been booked under contract. But it could not be made to function properly at the opening, not even for Fyfe Robertson on the Tonight television programme, nor soon after, and numerous subsequent tests failed to persuade the council that it was reliable. Robert L. Gee, who had succeeded Gimson in March 1960, had, before the opening, refused to certify payments because of concerns about operability. Stalemate resulted until the council took possession in 1963, charging Auto-Stackers Ltd with failure to complete its contract. Ignominiously, the Autostacker was demolished in 1965–6.

Royal Sovereign House and Macbean Street supermarket

The former Union Street block, the roads of which had been renamed Bunton, Creton, Hough and Macbean streets, had come up for consideration as a site for a multi-storey car park in 1956–8, to be built by the landowner, the Ogilby Estate. When the Autostacker failed, the idea was revived, and in 1962–4 the estate intended a ramped multi-storey garage with a six-storey office block. The land then became one of several parcels that the Ogilby Estate sold to Chesterfield Properties Ltd. In 1966 that firm proposed development across the whole south-west side of Beresford Street up to the backs of properties in Powis Street and Hare Street, offering new roads and a pedestrian shopping precinct alongside the car park and office block. Houses began to be cleared and a bus station came into the scheme. Chesterfield Properties and Greenwich Council joined together and, after three years planning, in early 1971 unveiled a grand project for an enclosed and air-conditioned shopping centre – ‘there will be “malls” or paths, between the shops’, the council explained. This was to be under a twelve-storey office block, with a bus station alongside under a car park. The architect was Max Gordon of the Louis de Soissons Partnership. There were difficulties over the acquisition of sites on the south side of Macbean Street and the scheme was withdrawn.

A much reduced plan emerged from Chesterfield Properties in 1978, initially as a single block linked to Riverside House, but worked up in 1979 by the same architects and the Bylander Waddell Partnership, consulting engineers, to be an office block on Beresford Street, in front of a supermarket with basement parking, effacing Hough Street. These were built in 1980–1. Unrelieved red-brick-clad elevations with curved corners rise to turrets on the five-storey office building. Named Royal Sovereign House, presumably after the ship of 1701 built in Woolwich, it came to be occupied by Hyde Housing and Maritime Greenwich College, for international students. The supermarket was opened by Presto and then taken by Safeway, before being divided for Lidl and a gym.

On Bunton Street (once Union Buildings and then Myrtle Street) adjoining the south entrance to Callis Yard is Qube House, a seven-storey block of fourteen flats, grey-clad with patterned green panels. This was built in 2008–9 by Grangewalk Developments to designs by FCS Building Design Consultants with Solidoak Ltd, building contractors. It replaced the Union Arms, a tavern of 1936.

The Baptist Tabernacle was replaced by the Woolwich Catholic Club, built in 1979–80 after plans to relocate the club from its former premises on Woolwich New Road to General Gordon Square foundered. It was designed by Robinson, Kenning and Gallagher, architectural consultants, working under J. W. Kennedy & Co., surveyors, with Sykes and Son as builders. It is a low and severe range with plain brown-brick facing and tinted windows in black anodized aluminium frames, boarded up since 2009 (Ills 116, 231). The rerouting of the south end of Beresford Street left a triangle of open land beside the club. This was landscaped and paved with benches round a circle; it is scarcely used.

Berkeley Homes

A ‘masterplan’ for the development of a large cleared site, essentially the north-east half of the area covered in this chapter, was put forward by Berkeley Homes in 2004 (see page 187). This aimed to take that company’s regeneration work at the Arsenal westwards as far as the Waterfront Leisure Centre’s car park, the former Gun Wharf site, which Greenwich Council sold to the developer. Allies and Morrison Architects prepared a revised scheme in 2007–8 (Ill. 178). This envisages the effacement of Warren Lane for a realignment of Royal Arsenal Gardens following the axis of the old ropeyard (part of the new layout was proposed as Rope Yard Square). There are to be flanking buildings along Beresford Street and the Arsenal up to the river. This configuration arises from the need to allow for the rising tunnel of Crossrail as it approaches a station in the former Arsenal.

In 2009 Geminex Hotel and Leisure Management acquired a part of the former Ropeyard Rails area for a 130-bedroom six-storey Holiday Inn Express. Berkeley Homes (Urban Renaissance) Ltd and then the Key Homes Fund took this forward with designs by Allies and Morrison Architects for a Royal Arsenal Hotel on the north side of Beresford Street. The hotel’s rooms were sold in advance to private investors and in 2012 work for Park Inn (part of the Rezidor Hotel Group) was begun by Bennett Construction.