

WHITTINGTON'S LONGHOUSE*

The legend of Dick Whittington needs no embellishment but research in national and civic archives has proved that the man himself surpassed the legendary figure. From time to time the records yield fresh evidence of his character, influence, wealth and charitable disposition. This article has resulted from difficulties experienced when indexing the slight drawing made by John Oliver in February 1667/8, on which he wrote 'Almes houses Whittington's Guift', which were quite plainly not his well-known almshouse nearby on College Hill. The Longhouse and Almshouses over, which Whittington established in Vintry Ward, were unostentatious and could never have become a public monument to an eminent citizen. Indeed this farsighted benefaction seems almost to have been forgotten. We read of it first in the seventeenth century, at a time when the inhabitants of Vintry Ward were moved to make a protest against its destruction.

The Longhouse was a public convenience, a privy, at other times known as a house of easement or a house of office. The structure was indeed long, for it consisted of two long rows each of 64 seats, one side for men and the other for women. 'Longhouse' became a general term to denote a privy and it may be that the term originated as a result of Whittington's edifice. He had a very practical sense of public health, for the seats overhung a long narrow gully that discharged into the Thames and was flushed by each tide. On the other hand he saw nothing unhygienic in people living above the privies, for there was at that time a cesspit under or adjacent to most houses. Whittington provided five or six rooms over his privies for the almsfolk of the parish of St. Martin Vintry and endowed the Longhouse with rent from at least one other house in the parish. Early in the seventeenth century it would appear that the parish no longer wished to house their poor above the privies, for the City from 1632 was letting five chambers over the common privies to John Wood for 20s. per annum. The subsequent tenants were John Harrison, 1646-8, and John Sampson, 1649-70. As the wharf here was later described as a timber wharf it may be significant that earlier in the century a Henry Harrison and a William Sampson were both Yeomen of the Woodwharf. Ogilby and Morgan's map of 1677 depicts a ship laden with timber and also a collier at the wharves west of Dowgate.

After the Great Fire of 1666 the site of the Longhouse was staked out for rebuilding by John Oliver, one of the City Surveyors, who wrote upon his sketch 'Tennis Court Docke, over the Prive Almshouses Whittingtons Guift'. Oliver staked out an adjacent site on 19 March 1668, and described it as adjoining the 'Longhouse'. Meanwhile each year from about 1607 Vintry Ward in its annual wardmote presentment

had complained to the Lord Mayor and Aldermen that the City had failed to provide a lanthorn and candlelight outside the Longhouse and another within the house whereby 'many inconveniences have happened', which lights ought to have been maintained by the Chamber of the City for that 'Mr. Whittington gave a house for the maintenance thereof from which the Chamber of London receives all the rent'. In 1691 the Ward said that it had made the same complaint annually for about 82 years, a sad commentary on the efficiency of ward presentments as a means of redress.

After the Fire the City leased the greater part of the site to an adjoining lessee, reserving only a sufficient area for 12 seats. On 12 April 1671 a lease for 61 years at a rent of £10 per annum was granted to John Peck, dyer, of 'part of the ground at the lower end of Tennis Court Lane contiguous to his dye house whereupon before the late dismal fire stood a common house of office'. The residue thereof, being the north part measuring 25 ft. by 15 ft., was reserved for the said public use, but Peck was given permission to build over the same above the first storey. The lease was granted upon condition that Peck arched over the gully and ensured a good conveyance to the river. In Oliver's book of surveys he depicts the arch over what he calls Longhouse Dock with a crown measuring 8 ft. In a subsequent petition Peck complained that the cost of arching over the Longhouse Dock amounted to £62 and he sought some reduction in rent. After comparison with rents of adjoining properties Peck's rent was reduced to £6 per annum and he was granted by the City a new lease for 60 years from Michaelmas 1673.

Meanwhile the Longhouse Dock or channel was clearly shown and named on the plan attached to the Letters Patent of 4 December 1671, which granted to the City all land reclaimed from the river and embanked for the proposed open quay by the Thames. The plan accompanying this paper is a composite drawing based on the Letters Patent and Oliver's surveys.

In 1675 Vintry Ward besides the annual wardmote presentment sent a petition to the City Lands Committee complaining that the City was not maintaining the house of easement nor providing the lights in accordance with Richard Whittington's bequest. The Committee found 'as well by the Chambers books as by the affydavitts of severall persons who for many yeares inhabited thereabouts and the certifycates of the Deputy and Common Councilmen of the said ward that this City before the said fire did constantly maintaine and repayre the said house and provid lights'. It was ordered that the Chamberlain should pay 100 marks to the Ward towards rebuilding the said common house. In October 1677 it was further reported that the house of easement had been well and substantially rebuilt by the ward, which as yet had received nothing from the City towards the same. It was

again ordered that the Chamberlain should pay the 100 marks and take a receipt from the Deputy and Common Councilmen 'in full of all their demands and pretentions'.

On 7 July 1685 George Peck (John's brother) and other inhabitants of the parish of St. Martin Vintry complained to the Court of Aldermen that the common house of easement under Mr. Peck's building was a great annoyance and very little used and petitioned that it might be closed. Upon a report from the City Chamberlain as to what inconvenience would attend the closing, the Aldermen ordered that the place should be locked up by the inhabitants until further order. Five years later, on 20 July 1690, other inhabitants of the parish and ward in a petition to the Court of Aldermen stated that Sir Richard Whittington gave to the said ward a certain building called the Longhouse with at least 60 seats for men and 60 seats for women, and also over the same five apartments for five pensioners of the parish: that the same was burnt down and partly rebuilt at a cost of 100 marks with six seats for men and six for women; that John Peck had built over the Longhouse and George Peck had built over the common dock which conveyed the Thames water up to the Longhouse and purged away the soil; and that George Peck had obtained an order, upon pretence of an annoyance, for locking up the Longhouse without the consent or knowledge of the ward to their great damage and prejudice. The petitioners prayed that the common house might be reopened so that the inhabitants might enjoy the benefit of the gift. The Court of Aldermen ordered that the four sworn Viewers should report on the complaint and that Mr. White and Mr. Collett, Common Councilmen on behalf of the ward, and Mr. George Peck should have notice when the view was to be held.

The Viewers, Joseph Titcombe, Thomas Seagood, George Halton and Jonah Lewes, made their view on 22 July 1690, and reported to the Court of Aldermen on 26 July:

We find two longhouses, one for men the other for women in common, the doors whereof were locked up which we are of opinion ought not so to be, but being opened we perceived the defect which renders them useless which defect is as followes. The said Mr. George Peck or his brother his predecessour hath built an Arch over the dock and hath raised the bottom of the said Dock under the Longhouses so high near the Arch that we are of opinion the tide cannot have sufficient ingresse and regresse to purge away the soyle of the said Longhouses as it ought to have. And we are of opinion that if the bottom of the dock under the Longhouse and Arch were sunk downe so deep as the other part of the said dock next the Thames the tide would purge away the excrement and prevent any annoyance for the future and further we find that from the south end of the Longhouse the said Mr. George Peck or his predecessour has built over the said dock by virtue of a

lease taken from the City according to the demensions thereof And further we find that the said Mr. George Peck or his predecessour hath built over the remaining part of the said dock from the building aforesaid to the river of Thames which is four and forty foot in length or thereabouts which we are of opinion ought not so to be but to lye open for the air to carry away the sent of the said Longhouses. All which nevertheless we humbly submit to your Lordships and Worships grave wisdom to determine.

On 31 July 1690 the report was considered by the Court of Aldermen who, having heard what Mr. Peck had to say, ordered him forthwith to open the common houses of easement and take care that all impediments of the water flowing to the same be removed. In August 1690 the matter was again referred to the Viewers and to the Comptroller who was responsible for the terms of Peck's lease. Nevertheless Vintry Wardmote in December 1690 presented the Lord Mayor, Aldermen and Commonalty of the City or the Chamber of the City, for they were credibly informed that Mr. Whittington gave a Longhouse of Easement situated in the parish of St. Martin Vintry for the benefit of the ward of Vintry and others, and six rooms or chambers over the Longhouse for the use of the poor of the said parish, the parish paying 6s. 8d. per room to the Chamber of London; that the 128 Longhouse seats had been reduced to 12; that the passage to the Thames had been encroached by buildings and for want of cleansing 'is likely in a little time to render the remaining 12 seats unuseful'; that the poor had been deprived of the benefit of the chambers ever since the Fire; and that the City or the Chamber of London had leased the said ground and received the rents to its own use. Had the complainants known the City had been receiving rents from the chambers long before the Great Fire. They continued to present the same complaint each year until 1713, but the City paid no more attention to this complaint than to the constantly reiterated moan against the lack of lanthorns.

On the expiry of the lease to John Peck the City granted to Walter Pettyward of Enfield a lease of the building over the common houses of easement and common sewer against the lower end of Tennis Court Lane for 21 years from Michaelmas 1734, for a fine of 30 guineas and the old rent of £6 per annum. The next lease was granted to Roger Pettiward, D.D., of Putney, for 21 years from Michaelmas 1755, at the same rent and for the same fine, with a covenant to convert the houses of easement, which were not only useless but a great nuisance to the neighbourhood, into some useful building for the improvement of the City's estate. However, the next lease, to the Rev. Roger Pettiward in 1772, specifically reserves the house of easement (which is shown on a plan by George Dance to be under part of the premises) to the use of the inhabitants of the ward as the same has been anciently used. By now Tennis Court had become known as Joiners Hall Lane, for the

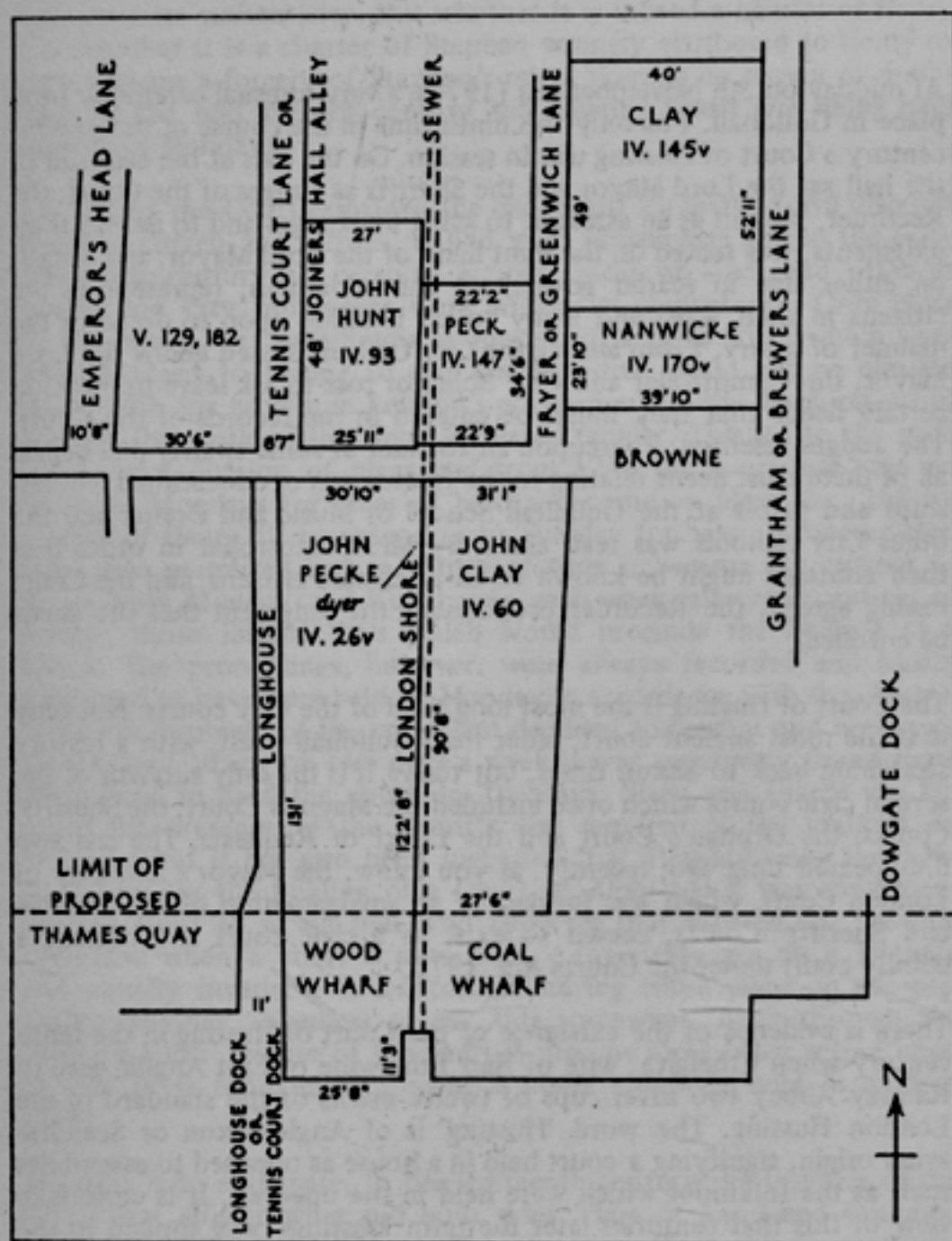
Joiners' Company had built a hall midway along the lane, and later as Joiners Hall Buildings.

On 14 October 1797 a new lease was granted to Douglas Pettiward, widow of Dr. Roger, in which newly erected warehouses on the site were described as being on the south side of Greenwich Street, which ran east to west at the south end of Joiners Hall Lane. The lease, which was for 54 years at a rent of £20 per annum, still reserved the house of easement, which was depicted on the plan. The next lease, which was for an extended site including a frontage on the Thames and a jetty into the river, was granted to the Governors, Assistants and Societies of the City of London for the Mines Royal and for Mineral and Battery Works for 80 years from Michaelmas 1851, at a rent of £80 per annum, and this lease again reserved the common house of easement under part of the premises, with a cistern above. The lease was subject to many assignments and the site became known as the Golden Heart Wharf.

The convenience seems to have been discontinued during the period of that lease, probably on the occasion of some rebuilding, for no similar reservation appears in the next lease made to the lessees of Cameron Wharf on 21 March 1935. In 1953 the site was included in Redevelopment Unit No. 10, which resulted *inter alia* in the closing of Joiners Hall Buildings and Greenwich Street and the acquisition by the Corporation of the leasehold interest in Cameron Wharf. Whittington's Longhouse was situated just on the western boundary of the new Public Cleansing Depot, close by the entrance to the lecture hall of the Little Ship Club in a much-widened Bell Wharf Lane. It seems appropriate that the largest public convenience that has ever existed in the City should have been on the doorstep of the modern Public Cleansing Department.

A.S.L.

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(a) A sketch plan of Whittington's Longhouse and its environs, based on Oliver's post-Fire surveys and the plan attached to the 1671 Letters Patent to the City.