

THE LORD MAYOR'S "VIEW OF THE THAMES"

On the north bank of the Thames just beyond Staines Bridge, on the Essex foreshore a mile or so beyond Leigh, at Yantlett Creek on the Isle of Grain and at Upnor on the Medway in Kent, stand four old stones or pillars bearing the City arms. From time to time someone is moved to ask their significance. They were in fact the boundary stones marking the limits of the Corporation's former conservancy rights over the Thames and parts of the Medway and Lea. By virtue of several royal charters, the earliest of which was granted by Richard I in 1197, and also by an act of parliament of 1394 which appointed the Mayor as conservator, the Corporation exercised this jurisdiction for rather more than six and a half centuries until, following a law suit with the Crown which was also concerned with claims to the soil and the bed of the river, it was removed by the Thames Conservancy Act of 1857 and given to a new board of Thames Conservators.

We do not know when stones were first erected to mark the limits. The existing stones all date from towards the end of the City's period of interest but owing to loss and damage and the effects of weather and sometimes tides upon soft stone they had been renewed periodically. In 1755 when the stone near Leigh, which was known as the Crowstone, had been missing for several years, the Lord Mayor, Stephen Theodore Janssen, personally supervised the erection of a replacement. The account in the Repertory reads as follows:-

"At Nine a clock [in the morning] the Lord Mayor walkt to Crow Stone point, eastward of and two miles from Leigh and in the parish of Prittlewell, where a hole was dugg, within High Water Mark, and a Pillar plac'd therein of Portland Stone as a Mark of the Limits of the City of London's jurisdiction, on the Essex side of the River of Thames, being the exact spott where the Antient Mark or Pillar of this City's Boundaries was formerly fixt, according to the Memorys of the Oldest Men now living in Leigh or that Neighbourhood".

On one side of the stone was incised the arms of the City and the date 1285, apparently regarded as an important date in the history of the conservancy, and on the other "God Preserve the City of London". Such inscriptions were usual on all the stones.

Periodically the Lord Mayor and Aldermen with a goodly retinue would make a "View" of the River. I shall have more to say of the View later but in brief it was a sort of nautical beating of the bounds in the course of which the four stones were visited. At each of them the City's claim to its rights was made by placing the City sword at the foot of the stone while the Lord Mayor and Sheriffs and the rest of the company drank wine to the toast of "God Preserve the City of London". The City's title was jealously guarded. In 1771 when the stone at Upnor was found to have had the letter I.H.H. recently cut upon it by direction of the local lady of the manor, Mrs. Hill, the Lord Mayor ordered them to be immediately defaced in his presence. Following the Lord Mayor's visit it was customary for his own name to be incised upon the stones and this may have been an additional reason for their periodic renewal as space ran out. The stones at Leigh, Upnor and Yantlett were last renewed in 1837 only twenty years before the City's jurisdiction came to an end. On this occasion taller granite pillars were erected but at Leigh and Upnor the smaller stones previously in use were left standing by their sides. The older stone at Leigh has since the last war been re-erected in Priory Park, Prittlewell. That at Upnor still stands besides the more modern pillar and in 1947-48 the Corporation paid for its repair. The stones at Upnor, which are now in the village, formerly stood like those at Leigh upon the foreshore itself.

In the earlier centuries of the City's jurisdiction the principal concern of the conservancy was fishery preservation. Fish was an enormously important item in the diet of medieval and Tudor times and the early City records abound with ordinances concerning the removal of weirs and of kiddles, which were screens of stakes or hurdles thickly interwoven with brushwood and erected in the tideway to trap fish and in which many immature fish were caught. Orders regulating the size of nets are also frequent and these were not to be so small-meshed as to be destructive of fry. A watchful eye was also kept on encroachments and obstructions and fouling of the river. In the course of time the emphasis in conservancy work passed from fishery preservation to improvement of navigation and the Navigation Committee, first appointed in 1770 and which remained in being until the jurisdiction was lost in 1857, became one of the busiest of the committees of Common Council.

The Waterbailiff, whose office was extinguished in 1857 and who like the Swordbearer, the Common Cryer and the Common Hunt became one of the esquires of the mayoral household, was sub-conservator of the Thames under the Mayor. It was part of his duties to patrol the river looking out for offences and encroachments. In the 1630s and probably at other periods

also he made monthly searches of the river between Blackwall and Staines and was paid a total of £18 on this account in 1633. It was doubtless more difficult to police the eastern half of the jurisdiction and in the same year he received the much greater sum of £56.7s.8d. for a number of searches east of Blackwall intended to "remove annoyances and reform the great abuses of the fishermen". The Waterbailiff was also paid for arranging for the removal of specific obstructions such as a great lighter sunk near Nine Elms, a 'cawsey' made by one Mrs. Peele near Battersea, or trees growing in the river near Chertsey Bridge.

The Lord Mayor himself was accustomed to hold a number of conservancy courts each year, with power to empanel juries, make inquisitions of all offences committed upon the river and to proceed upon the verdict of a jury to the punishment of offenders. In the 17th century the courts were held four times a year and from the detailed record of the conservancy expenses which are entered in the City's Cash accounts of the 1630s and 1640s it appears that the procedure was then as follows. In late July or August each year writs were directed to the sheriffs of the four riparian counties, Middlesex, Surrey, Essex and Kent, to summon county juries to appear at conservancy courts held before the Lord Mayor. Having been charged with the articles of their enquiry these juries were subsequently escorted to and fro upon the river by the Waterbailiff and his assistants and twelve oarsmen to search out encroachments and offences, the Middlesex and Surrey juries travelling from Blackwall west to Colney Ditch and the Kent and Essex juries going east of Blackwall. In September another four courts were held at which the juries presented their verdicts and further courts were held in spring and summer at which persons who had been presented were tried and fined. At a later period the courts were held as many as eight times a year.

These conservancy courts were not held within the City boundaries but at various places near the riverside within the four counties. The Middlesex jury was often summoned to a court at Westminster Hall or perhaps to Fulham, the Surrey jury to the Southwark Courthouse or to Putney, the Kent jury to a house in Deptford or Greenwich and the Essex jury frequently to the Anchor Inn at Stratford Langthorne in West Ham on the river Lea. Particulars survive of payments for fitting up these places, for the expenses of the jurors' dinners, for the very much greater expenses of the Lord Mayor and Aldermen's dinners, and many other items. In October 1633 a maid who brought some pears for the Lord Mayor at Greenwich was rewarded with a shilling and a similar sum was given to the porter of Sir Thomas Cotton, son of the great antiquary and collector of manuscripts,

when the Lord Mayor and Aldermen walked in his garden at Westminster at the time of the holding of the Middlesex conservancy court in June 1633.

Normally the Lord Mayor held the courts for Middlesex and Surrey on one day and those for Kent and Essex on the next day. About every seven years, however, the courts of conservancy held in the late summer were combined with the "View" of the jurisdiction by the Lord Mayor and Aldermen of which I spoke earlier. This was a much more elaborate and ceremonial affair occupying as much as five or more days. One such view took place in August 1633 and from the record of expenses in connection therewith it is possible to build up a picture of what happened. On this occasion the Essex jury was summoned to attend on 14th August 1633 at the blockhouse at Tilbury where the Lord Mayor was greeted with a salute, he and the aldermen having travelled there in the Mercers' Company barge - one presumes the City's barge was for some reason out of commission - with their retinue in three hired barges. From Tilbury they crossed to Gravesend where the captain of the blockhouse there similarly greeted them by "shooting off divers pieces of ordinance" and the court for the Kent jury was held at the Town House in Gravesend. After dinner at the Angel, the party set forth for Rochester, the Lord Mayor and Aldermen going by coach and the officers and servants on horseback. Some undescribed contretemps occurred en route for a poor woman whose husband "was hurt with a horse" was given 20s. towards his relief and another poor woman whose horse was hurt was also given 20s. Supper and lodging were provided at the Crown in Rochester and next day, 15 August, the Lord Mayor and Aldermen went by water from Rochester to Queenborough and back to Gravesend. On this part of the journey they travelled from Chatham onwards in one of the king's pinnaces from Chatham lest "the weather should have proved stormy", the master, Captain Cooke, being rewarded with £6 and the mariners with 40s. The opportunity was seized of buying some oysters from a poor man fishing for them in the Medway as the party passed. Supper and lodging were at Gravesend and dinner also on the following day.

The 17th and 18th August were a Saturday and a Sunday but on Monday 19th the civic party set forth on the westward portion of the view, the Middlesex jury having been summoned for that day to the Bush Inn in Staines. The markstone just beyond Staines Bridge was visited, the Lord Mayor and Aldermen were entertained at Mr. Benjamin Stone's house on Hounslow Heath, and also dined at the Bush. For supper and lodging they moved on to the Saracens Head at Kingston where the Surrey jury met next day, the 20th August, at the Town House, and the proceedings terminated with dinner at the Saracens Head. When I tell you that the expenses

include also payments to the City waits and trumpeters and to the Common Hunt for his attendance with the hounds you will appreciate that a very enjoyable time was had by all.

This continued to be true of the Views of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of which there exist some excellent narrative descriptions, although there were certain hazards. At this period it was usual for the Lord Mayor and his party to be accommodated for the seaward part of their journey upon one or more Admiralty or Trinity House Yachts. In 1771, the Lord Mayor, Brass Crosby, Alderman Rossiter and a number of the Officers descended from the yacht into two boats in order to visit the Leigh stone. "The wind and tide meeting and the water being very rough and the sea running very high the Officers' boat got ahead and made the shore before the tide dropped", but the Lord Mayor and Alderman Rossiter ran aground about a mile from shore. One can picture the consternation! They had to be rescued by being carried to a flat bottomed punt brought out from the shore which was then drawn by twelve men through the shallow water and over the mud to the beach.

But let me conclude upon a happier note, a description of the View of the eastern half of the jurisdiction in 1796, an occasion of particular splendour owing to the presence off the Nore of ships of both the British and Imperial Russian Fleet. On Thursday 14 July the Mayoral party left the Mansion House at 8 o'clock in the morning, partook of an "elegant breakfast" with the Deputy Master of Trinity House at Blackwall and went on board the Trinity Yacht which, escorted by several other yachts, proceeded to Gravesend for the holding of a conservancy court. They dined at four o'clock at the Falcon at Gravesend, where the guests included the Mayor of Gravesend, and after a "pleasant and convivial day" set sail at nine in the evening to anchor off Yantlett two and a half hours later. Next morning at 6 a.m. they took to boats for the customary visit to the Crowstone. At 10 a.m., after breakfast, the Trinity Yacht set sail for the Nore. There, upon the Lord Mayor's arrival, both the British and Russian men-of-war manned ship and, after sailing round the whole fleet at anchor, the Lord Mayor went on board the Russian man-of-war Europa where he was received "in the most polite manner" and with a salute of eleven guns. Russian and English ships again saluted the Trinity Yacht as she passed Sheerness and entered the Medway. They anchored off Rochester where the Mayor of Rochester "supped and passed the evening with his Lordship" at the Crown Inn. The next day, Saturday, 16 July, the customary visit was paid to the stone at Upnor, the Lord Mayor and his party being accompanied there by the Mayor, Aldermen and Common Councilmen of Rochester and preceded by

the Marines Band from Chatham. Later the Lord Mayor gave a dinner at the Crown in Rochester, attended by the Mayor and other civic dignitaries of that City, senior officers of the British and Russian Fleets, the Major General of Marines, the High Sheriff of Kent, and other distinguished guests. The Mayor of Rochester was seated on the Lord Mayor's right and the Russian Vice-Admiral on his left. Numerous toasts were drunk including as well as the loyal toasts, "the Empress of all the Russias", "Prosperity to the City of Rochester", "Prosperity to the City of London", "the Fisheries of the Rivers Thames and Medway", and "a Speedy, Honourable and Permanent Peace" for this, you will recall, was the time of the wars with France. On Sunday the Trinity Yacht sailed down the Medway, to be greeted once more at Sheerness by the Russian men-of-war manned and saluting, passed Gravesend about two, anchored in Half Way Reach for the night, and arrived at Blackwall at half past nine next morning "all in perfect health, after a pleasant voyage".

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