

“RIPA REGINA”: ‘SOKE’ AND ‘STEW’

Read by Historian Alderman Gordon Haines
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Mr President, Fellow Historians,

As Alderman for Queenhithe I suspect there would have been considerable disappointment amongst the assembled company had I not selected; “**Ripa Regina**”: ‘soke’ and ‘stew’ as the subject for my paper.

“The Thames was the river which curled through the affairs of state — noble or ignoble, bloody or benign...it was once the source and centre of the City’s being. That is why...the great palaces of nobility and clergy were built on the banks of the river.”

Since its genesis, Peter Ackroyd’s ‘Sacred River’—just described—has spawned riches and destitution in equal measure.

‘**Ripa**’—the banks of a river—define the boundaries of human life: they enclose and divide; they provide safety and a source of food, disease and constant danger.

In 883 King Alfred the Great granted his brother-in-law, Ethelred, land at Aedershyd—later known as Edred’s and then Ethelred’s Hythe and today’s Queenhithe—and anointed him the first *Earldorman* or *Elderman* (later *Alderman*) in London following his defeat of the Danes and the re-establishment of the City in circa 886. The harbour already existed—once a Roman dock—and now in the 21st Century the only remaining Anglo Saxon one in the world. It’s modern name dates from Queen Matilda: the riverbank was the Queen’s ‘soke’ and became known as ‘**Ripa Regina**’—the Queen’s *hithe* or *quay* after the dues and profits of the dock had been given to the unpopular and arrogant Queen of Henry 1. In the Middle Ages ‘**Ripa Regina**’ was the foremost harbour in the City (closely followed by Billingsgate) and successive Queens charged a toll for its use until the 15th Century. All vessels using the Thames as a highway through the City were required to moor for duty assessment.

The first mention of Queenhithe as a Ward is in 1265 when it is identified as the Ward of Simon de Hadesok.

The ancient roots of Queenhithe stretch back to the beginnings of our recorded past, reflecting the source of our City’s greatness in finance and trade whilst echoing the voices of the dispossessed and destitute floating like flotsam at the edges of the City’s wealth, washing up in the ‘stews’ where they served the nobility with their bodies and the exchequer with their taxes, tolls and fines.

A microcosm of our City's history, Queenhithe offers us the opportunity to reconstruct some scenes from the past that illustrate the seemingly indestructible link between bank and brothel! To prevent us sitting in judgement of our fellow citizens it behoves us all to recall the Guardian newspaper headline of the 14th October 2009; 'City bankers regularly offer prostitutes to clients!'

London, by far the largest settlement in England during the medieval period, had been marked out for special status as early as the reign of Alfred the Great. William the Conqueror granted London a Royal Charter in 1067, confirming the autonomy and privileges the City had accumulated during the Saxon period. The Charter gave London self-governing status, paying taxes directly to the King in return for remaining outside the feudal system. The citizens were therefore *burgesses* rather than *serfs* and, in effect, free men.

A '**soke**' was used in Early English Law to refer to either the privilege of holding court, usually connected with the feudal rights of Lordship, or a district over which local jurisdiction was exercised. Its origin between 1250–1300 derives from a combination of the Anglo-Latin *soca* and the Old English *socn* meaning the right of inquiry, prosecution and jurisdiction—in its strictest sense 'to investigate or seek' (Domesday Book 1.273).

From its inception the '**soke**' enshrined the right of a landowner or appointed administrators to hold court and administer justice whilst exacting the fees and fines arising from the execution of that justice.

Queenhithe is one of a number of existing City Wards whose existence corresponds with a '**soke**', *Portsoken* being the most obvious: the '**soke**' at the gate—or port—to the City.

Queenhithe's position on the riverbank made it a highly desirable acquisition for Queens, the clergy and the powerful *portreeve*—the individual charged with exercising the administration of the '**soke**', upholding both civil and criminal law. Until recent history the crowded City of London clustered along the north riverbank with a small sister settlement across the Thames at Southwark. Trade was largely via the water. The Queenhithe dock was deep but cut into the gently sloping bankside, providing a perfect mooring spot for vessels of all shapes and sizes.

An Inquisition in the reign of Henry III recognizes 'the Queen's soke' and in 1603 John Stow recorded that: '**Ripa Regina**, the Queen's Bank or Hithe, may well be accounted the very chief and principal Water gate of this Citie...'

No citizen was exempt from its tolls.

The *pontage*, *murage*, *pavage*, *cheminage*, *picage*, and *tronage* applied to the mooring of vessels, the unloading of goods and the trading of corn, fish and

later fur, made royal ladies independently wealthy, enabling them to raise armies—in the case of Matilda (1139)—or for Eleanor, wife of Henry II, to be ‘ill-conditioned and unprincipled’, buying her divorce from Louis VII of France.

The Thames brought London wealth, beauty and dignity by its trade but those who wandered the towpaths, surviving in the labyrinths of Queenhithe and Bankside lived in a different existence of squalor, misery and suffering. By the Middle Ages the river was associated with license and bad language, smuggling and theft, mortality and filth. To work on, or by, the river was in itself disreputable. Inevitably prostitutes joined the *tosh*—the *flotsam and jetsam* of the riverbank; those human beings who were the throw away rubbish of City life.

To prostitute is derived from a composition of the Latin *pro* and *statuere*—given a literal translation of *to expose* or *to place up front*.

As a major highway since Roman times the Thames had needed stairs as landing places. The Agas map of 1560 shows 30 between Westminster and the Tower alone—excluding those built to serve the palaces and homes of the nobility.

Stew Alley Stairs were at the south end of Stew Lane in Queenhithe.

Stew Lane remains to this day although the stairs do not.

Here, over the course of the first half of the last millennium—many thousands of prostitutes queued to wait for the wherries that would take them across to the brothels of Bankside, to the notorious ‘**stews**’ of *Slut’s Hole*, *Whore’s Nest* and the euphemistic *Maiden Lane*. Outside the control of the City Guilds, theatres, bear pits and brothels flourished—with some 22 inns along the old river wall of the riverside road, the Clink and 18 brothels under the rent control of the Bishop of Winchester, making him a handsome profit. The land where the brothels stood had been granted to the Church by King Henry II in 1161.

However, many women elected—or were forced by the presence of the King’s spy-masters in Southwark—to work north of the river in the ‘**stews**’ of Broken Wharf and St. Michael Queenhithe.

‘**Stews**’—the archaic noun for ‘brothel’ (although in the modern idiom understood to refer to establishments specifically dedicated to prostitution) developed from the Middle English *stewen*; to bathe in a steam bath, the Old French *estuver*; to bathe and evaporate and the Vulgar Latin *tufus* meaning hot vapour.

Queen Matilda used some of her independent wealth to found the first public toilet in the City in 12th Century Queenhithe in an attempt to reduce the putrid smelling stream of excrement and urine that ran through her ‘**soke**’ debouching

directly into the Thames; ‘at every ebbe of the water there remain the entrails of bestes and other filth’.

Evidence that Romans had chosen this site for baths a thousand years before was uncovered when archaeologists discovered the remains of a Roman bath amongst the foundations of Fur Trade House.

By 1350–1400 all derivations of **stew** had combined to refer to a hot sweaty room of nudity and ill-repute; to *stew in one’s own juice* was to suffer unaided in the consequences of a visit to such rooms!

Since bathing was a group activity and partakers had to disrobe there was prolific opportunity to engage in sexual activity—and also in robbery, since thieves often made off with bathers belongings once they had disrobed, having no fear of being chased!

MA Laughran in *Prostitution in London 1161–1546* examines the policy of several centuries of City governance towards the **stews** and concludes that three main motivations determined elected courses of action: financial, public health and keeping the peace. From the 12th Century there was a conflict resulting from the authorities’ vested financial interests in prostitution and the ‘public good’ spoken of in government proclamation. The desire to collect taxes through *putage*—a tax on prostitutes—had to be balanced with a need to protect public hygiene if the City was to retain its position as a leading trading centre.

There are many recorded illustrations of financial gain over-riding a strict interpretation of the law or righteous moral indignation.

On March 11th, 1427, John Tanner, scrivener, proclaimed that his **stew** for women on Barkerislane in Queenhithe was a good and honest hot bath. The authorities accepted his word but warned that any violation would result in a fine.

On March 16th, John Bekker, a brewer, similarly swore that he would allow only “...good and honest women to stew...” at his bathhouse.

John Bekker also attested to the respectability of his **stew** at Broken Wharf in Queenhithe on that same day, promising that he would only allow good and honest men to bathe there and that he would not allow any laundresses or washer women to enter.

In 1429 Thomas Warwick, a woodseller, stated that he would properly conduct his **stew** in Venureswharf in Queenhithe and this seems to have been accepted by the authorities without further investigation.

Between 1471–1514, 65% of cases coming before the Bishop of London’s Commissary Court related to adultery, fornication and prostitution yet only a

small proportion were ever convicted and imprisoned or worse. Fines were the most common punishment; profit was the ever present motive of the authorities—far greater than any moral zeal or drive to protect the public.

Alice Wyger was one “common litigious person adjudged worthy of punishment” yet her punishment was suspended. She was warned that if convicted again for any offence within the same jurisdiction she would be required to pay a fine of 2s.

Another was Hawise Murdes who “by favour of the court” paid an unspecified fine and was warned that “if she be accused of that same hereafter she must submit to judgement without redemption”.

A spicer named William de Dalton was convicted of owning a brothel “to which married women and their paramours resorted.” Providing a rendezvous for married women and their paramours was a grave offence in the **soke** so the authorities sentenced William to prison. However, due to the intervention of ‘influential friends’ the authorities relented and he was released.

As centuries passed and the resident and transitory population of London increased, the threat of plague, a syphilis epidemic and popular unrest at the squalid and sordid living conditions of riverbank dwellers began to result in a more co-ordinated attempt to close the **stews** of Queenhithe and Bankside. In June 1340 the City selected twenty people from each Ward to act as a jury under the Mayor and Sheriffs to gather “...all the evildoers and disturbers of the King’s peace...” over the course of several nights. At the conclusion of this raid several malefactors had been apprehended including John de Catton “...a keeper of a common bawdy house...” and John le Clerk, a churchman who was a “...receiver of bawds...” along with William ate Pond for keeping company with “...persons of ill-fame...”

Although by the 15th Century, London remained relatively stable during the decline of the feudal system, repressive measures attempting to cope with an influx of commoners from the Shires, culminated in the City authorities’ decision to eliminate the most frequent cover profession for prostitution—the public baths or ‘**stews**’. All **stews**, even honest ones, were proscribed and offenders were made to pay a fine to the City Chamber—along with an additional fine to the Lord Mayor and Alderman. Financial penalty was again preferred to any moral correction for offenders.

Legislation did, however, provide for all citizens to be allowed to keep a hot bath, but only for their own personal cleanliness and that of their households. No longer would the City allow “...the wives, sons, daughters, apprentices and servants of the City to be drawn and enticed into the **stews** to the great dishonour of the City.”

Queenhithe, as the centre of the fur trade, required particular legislation during the time of Henry VII and Henry VIII. A proclamation was issued stating that; “Whereas the common and lewd women who dwell in the City of London... have from time to time assumed the fashion of being clad in the manner and dress of good and noble damsels of the realm...it is ordered by the Mayor, Sheriffs, Aldermen and Commons of the said city, that no such lewd women shall be so daring as to be so attired...but go attired openly with a hood of cloth or ray, and with vestments neither trimmed with fur...so that all folks may have knowledge of what rank they are, on pain of imprisonment...”

An ordinance passed by the Court of Common Council on 20th April 1417 ordered the abolition of the **stews** in Stew Lane, seeking to end the “sojourning of lewd men and women, of bad and evil life” and ensuring that “no man or woman in the City or suburbs thereof, should from henceforth keep any stews.”

On 13th April 1546 the elderly Henry VIII eventually closed the Bankside **stews** with a royal proclamation that sought to bring to an end the “toleration of such dissolute and miserable persons as have been suffered to dwell in common open places called the **stews** without punishment or correction for their abominable and detestable sin.”

This seemed to result in no noticeable diminution of prostitution. In fact, many believed that the situation became worse with prostitutes scattered across London rather than regulated in **stews**. In 1550 Robert Crowley wrote;

“The bawds of the stues in taverns and tipling houses be turned all out: many myght be founde...if officers would make serch al England through out.”

The author Patrick Dillon refers to 16th and 17th century London as; “a city spinning out of control.”

On Friday 24th November 1553 Wrothesley’s Chronicle reports that one Sir Thomas Sothwood, priest—alias Parson Chekyn of St. Nicholas Cole Abbey in Olde Fish Street—was paraded through Queenhithe and “rode about the Cittie in a carte” after being found guilty of offering the sexual services of his wife for money. At that time parsons were anyway not allowed to marry; some, however, did so—ignoring church teachings—whilst others had concubines. Parson Chekyn had decided to overcome his difficulty of being discovered to be “in possession of a wife” by selling her to a butcher. A popular parson, the populace of Queenhithe—upset by his dishonesty, not his morality—arrested him, tied him to a cart and pelted him with rotten eggs and the contents of chamber pots. He was deprived of his living as St. Nicholas though later was given the living at St. James Garlickhythe, eventually retiring to an estate in Essex where he lived until a ripe old age!

Women elicited rather different treatment.

In 1575 Dorothy Clayton was a prostitute who: “contrary to all honesty and womanhood goes about the City in men’s attire”. She was ordered to stand in the pillory for two hours “in men’s attire” for public shame and then committed to Bridewell.

Plague, fire and the construction of larger sea-faring vessels, too large to dock at the hithe, achieved what ordinance and statute could not, and by the mid 17th Century Queenhithe’s reputation as the hub of the City’s sex trade had all but disappeared. William Shakespeare’s call through the words of King Lear from across the River in 1606 to “keep thy foot out of the brothels” seemed to be coming to pass.

In the closing years of the 19th century John Burns described the River Thames as “liquid history” and the bankside dwellings that give it definition provide much of the living history of the City of London.

Ripa Regina the Queen’s *bank* or *hithe* is the microcosm that reminds us that it is people—their social organization and environmental context—that combine to make history. Rivers bring trade—trade brings wealth—wealth brings power. **Sokes** were the feudal bedrock of our modern City’s enormous wealth.

But throughout the epochs of history, wealth and power have evidenced a tendency to spawn greed—greed breeds excess—excess breeds dissolution—dissolution is the bedfellow of despair.

The existence of **stews** at the heart of the burgeoning wealth of the City illustrates the dichotomy of balancing the pragmatic administration and governance of a fluid, rapidly expanding complex economic environment with the protection of citizens dependent on a system of governance that has enjoyed a unique and singular relationship to the Crown and evolving national government that continues to this day.

The City of London remains a unique electoral constituency where *business*—the modern equivalent of the **soke**—still exercises a right of governance in conjunction with resident citizens of Wards.

We leave it to future historians to assess whether Kate Banyard’s 2009 declaration to MP’s that ‘City bankers try to generate clients by offering trips to brothels’ will be the subject of a GHA paper at the turn of the next millennium!