

## **SOUTHWARK: LONDON'S SECOND CITY?**

Read by Robin Sherlock,  
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Number 233 Southwark Bridge Road is an unpretentious terrace house, unremarkable until you notice, high up on its front wall, small plaque bearing a familiar mark – the identifying mark of the Bridge House Estates.

When I chose the title of this talk, I had not as yet seen this plaque, but it has led me neatly into what I want to explore with you to-day, that area of the south bank generally known as the Borough of Southwark. The Clink, the Globe, the Bishop of Winchester's Geese, the Guildable Manor, the Ward of Bridge Without - perhaps one or two of these ring bells, for they represent aspects of this ancient history.

The name "south work", ie Southwark, came from the south work, in other words, a river wall matching its counterpart across the river. People lived there and plied their trades even earlier than the time of the Romans; burial sites and flint tools attest this. Southwark was indeed a vibrant area before the City crystallised into the form we recognise to-day, an embryo city you could say. But the arrival of the Romans marked a quantum leap: the river could now be crossed with comparative ease, and in due course a wooden bridge was built, roughly one hundred yards to the east of the first stone bridge, whose 800th birthday we celebrate this year. Legends grew up, intimations of death and destruction gave rise to the old cry "London Bridge is broken down,/ Dance o'er my lady Lea". Trade multiplied in both directions, even more so as the City developed and the new stone bridge bore increasing traffic. (The huge print on the wall of the corridor leading to the Members' rooms brilliantly illustrates work in progress at the end of a later London Bridge) So surely this 800<sup>th</sup> makes it even more appropriate to talk of that south side of the Thames with which the City became increasingly involved?

Nor was Southwark's trade restricted to materials and commodities. One author comments that the borough's nearness to the City, and its loose system of government in the different manors (estates), made it a sanctuary for anyone in trouble, especially if he was fleeing the City authorities. But another reason for such a concentration of undesirables was trade of a different sort, which developed as citizens of the City found that they could cross the river with relative impunity (or should I say impurity?) and enjoy pursuits outlawed on the north bank, The stews of Southwark became notorious;

the prostitutes of the Bankside became known as “Winchester Geese” since they plied their trade within the “Liberty” or estate of that bishop, whose see stretched from Winchester to the Thames. However comforting to the consciences of the mayor and aldermen banishing such trade south of the river might have been, it did not help law and order to be maintained. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century there were seven prisons in the area; the best known, the Clink, giving its name to other institutions, yet there was continuous riot and disorder, to such an extent that the City authorities felt constrained to pass an edict. This ordered the wherry-men, who were normally hired by the good (or not so good) citizens of the City to row them across the river to the pleasures of the borough, to moor up their boats at night to stop this practice. It was not until the nineteenth century that the situation was finally brought under control.

The taverns too were many and popular. Borough High Street was for many years the site of some wonderful old courtyard taverns, where horses could be changed and visitors to the City accommodated overnight. The last to survive is the George, but perhaps the most famous was the White Hart, with its galleried yard, long demolished. It was there that Jack Cade had his headquarters when he launched his abortive attack on London in 1450. And Charles Dickens describes the last White Hart in “Pickwick Papers”, it being the place where Mr Pickwick met Sam Weller.

Then there were the theatres and bear-baiting rings, which flourished in the borough, the players or actors having been driven by an edict of 1580 across the river to (yes, of course) Southwark. The Globe, the Rose and the Swan were built, indeed there is a marvellous story of how one playhouse was literally dismantled and its timbers carried piece by piece across London Bridge at night and re-erected on the South Bank.

All this disorder, regulated rather loosely by the courts set up in the different manors of the borough, was a great nuisance to the Crown, as was the collection of income, which derived more from tolls than from land. The monarch’s sheriffs had great difficulty in collecting these tolls and rents, and it may have been this, plus the notorious reputation of Southwark, which persuaded the guardians of the young king, Edward III, in 1327 to grant the City of London rights over a certain manorial area described as “the said town of Southwark” in return for a payment of £11 per annum (of which more anon) This area was known as the Guildable Manor, which from 1328 was administered by a Bailiff, appointed by the City Corporation, which a couple of centuries later appointed a Steward.

However, despite taking control of the town the problem of legal control remained, especially as the area around the original settlement grew in size and prosperity. The City Corporation therefore decided to acquire the two manors adjacent to the Guildable Manor, the Great Liberty and the King's Manor. The administration was entrusted to one John Eston, counsel to the Bridgemasters, who was more than equal to the task. In 1550 another charter was approved and on 9 May the Lord Mayor took possession of the Borough, riding round the precincts to the sound of trumpets. Southwark thus became just another part of the City. But possession came at a cost, £647.2s 1d for lands and 500 marks for liberties. And where did the money come from? Not from City's Cash, which one writer comments sourly was in its "usual emaciated state", but from the one known source of ready cash, the Bridge House Fund. This was surely appropriate because the Fund, which had existed since the 12<sup>th</sup> century, had over the years received substantial bequests of estates, many in south-east London, of which some still remain. The links between the City and Southwark were further strengthened by the appointment of the Bridgemasters as collectors of the profits of the liberties, who thus became responsible for administering the liberties. Such was their importance that in 1520 they were made bailiffs.

But how to put this charter of 1550 into effect, given that the borough of Southwark covered a large area and contained a substantial number of inhabitants, not all of whom were "squeaky-clean? The offices held by the mayor and those aldermen who were past the chair, charged with maintaining the peace, did not really form an integrated system for "the order and correction" of the borough as one writer, David Johnson, puts it. And so, a month after the coming in to effect of the latest Charter, Southwark was given the status of a ward, the ward of Bridge Ward Without; Sir John Ayliffe was appointed, along with two deputies, but Common Councilmen were not, for some reason, put forward. It is interesting to reflect that had Sir John gone on to become Lord Mayor, he would have pipped our own Sir John Chalstrey to the post as the first barber-surgeon to hold the position.

However, the creation of a ward, while bestowing on the borough a new dignity, still did not provide a co-ordinating authority for an area that was in practice governed as if it were a loose collection of villages. In practice the townsmen were left to govern themselves. Nor did many of the aldermen stay there for more than three years, a couple of them, for example, offering themselves successfully for election by the ward of Dowgate. (Nice to think that in 1992 the electors of Dowgate were generous enough to elect a Southwark man as councilman!). Another man, John Hawkins, was not found acceptable to be elected an alderman, but the Court of Alderman nonetheless took advantage of his reluctance to serve by electing him to Bridge Ward Without, only to act as they already did sometimes in the other 25 wards and relieve him of his duties, fining him £500.

What the inhabitants thought, I can only guess, but socially each alderman of the ward was indistinguishable from his fellows, ie just as grand. It thus seems that the Court of Aldermen could not be bothered to set up the necessary machinery for the people of the ward to elect someone of their own. In practice, as I have pointed out already, the real power lay with the inhabitants of the borough, who (to use a cliché) got on with it.

The Bridge House Estates' holdings of land in Southwark were extensive and, as was common practice, were marked with a sign to identify them. The first record of any such sign is dated 1525 in an account entry for the hall of the Bridge House (where incidentally the Court of Aldermen met when matters to do with Southwark were to be discussed), a building that has long since vanished. In 1601 the mark was incised on two stones marking the division between properties owned by the Estates and Christ's Hospital. It may be that the present design of the mark was designed by a surveyor to the City Corporation, and it continued to be used, as the plaque attached to the front of 233 Southwark Bridge Road, to which I referred at the start of this talk, attests. And it is this mark which is commemorated on the tie of the present committee, and on the tie and cufflinks worn to-day by jurors of the Court Leet of the Guildable Manor of Southwark, which exists to-day.

So, at this point, I leave history, which I hope illustrates how the City and Southwark were for many centuries bound to each other, and turn briefly to what is happening to-day

I have mentioned the somewhat loose system of government exercised in the past by the courts of the different manors. Though Southwark is now a borough in the local government sense, uniquely there still exists the Guildable Manor of Southwark, perpetuating in essence, if not in practice, the ancient local system of law, and which still has authority to hold its own Court Leet. This it does every year at a church service in March or April, usually held in St George the Martyr, Borough High Street, popularly known as "Little Dorrit's Church". This event is entitled the Quit Rents Ceremony and Court of Exchequer, which is held in the presence of the Queen's (not the City's) Remembrancer. The rent of £11 (ie eleven quits, the rent fixed in 1327) is counted out piece by piece to the reply "Good Service", and the Queen's Remembrancer directs that this be applied to charitable purposes. Freemen are also admitted and luncheon follows (of course). The ongoing links with the City Corporation are recalled at a ceremony each autumn, attended by the Recorder of London, as High Steward, accompanied by the Secondary as High Bailiff. The officers of the Guildable Manor are sworn in, along with the jurors (of which I have the honour of being one). But alas even the attendance of these grand officers is not as stately as it used to be; however it is all great fun, and a modest lunch is again held.

These age old links between City and borough are further commemorated at a dinner held once a year, to which the Chief Commoner of the day, the Lord Mayor-Elect and the Sheriffs are invited. How appropriate that this can also be held in the crypt of St George's, not only because it is one of the benefices of which the Corporation is patron but because, a few years ago, we gave a generous sum to help the underpinning of the building.

I hope that you will of your bounty conclude on a personal note. My links with Southwark go deeper than this civic history. In 1600 a branch of the Sherlock family came over from Ireland and settled on Bankside, John Sherlock practising as a whitesmith. A couple of my ancestors were baptised in St Saviour Southwark, and so prosperous did the family become then (not now!), that William Sherlock and later his son Thomas were educated at Eton and St Catherine's College Cambridge and then ordained. William went on to be Dean of St Paul's – an appointment upon which, Macaulay records in his History of England, “a clamour broke forth such as perhaps no ecclesiastical appointment has ever produced”. Thomas, a noted Tory, nicknamed “the plunging prelate” because of his habit in earlier years of swimming in the Thames, eventually became Bishop of London in 1748. Sadly his brilliance as an ecclesiastical advocate alas gradually gave way to gout, making it necessary to rule the diocese from his bed in Fulham Palace until he died in 1761. (Incidentally, do go and visit Fulham Palace and look at the Sherlock Dining Room, which has been brilliantly restored and found to have a magnificent rococo plaster ceiling).

I cannot aim any higher ecclesiastically than being a Lay Reader in the City, licensed to St James's Garlickhythe, Joint Honorary Chaplain to the Guild of Educators (a potential livery company) and Parish Clerk of St Saviour Southwark (alias Cathedral) – though I suppose gout is a possibility, given the port which still flows at Corporation functions!

Let me draw to a close by commenting that all that is now left apart from the long and confused history of the City's jurisdiction over the borough of Southwark and the survival of the Courts Leet, are the physical links represented by the bridges and the existence of a few remaining Bridge House properties in Southwark. How ironic if it had proved impossible to build that bridge, whose 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary we celebrate this year. What would we be now?