



*Deptford's waterside location has played a crucial part in its development*

# Radical Deptford: A Place in Constant Motion

*From Henry VIII's Royal Docks to Michael Craig-Martin and Herzog de Meuron's Laban building, Deptford embodies progress*

*Deptford's got this great ability, as in a lot of poor towns, to absorb and yet remain the same. It's got a tremendous ability to defend itself... it will take on anybody. Any authority, any challenge. It will look it in the eye and give as good as it takes; it's a fantastic place for that and always has been.*  
**Deptford Stories, 2006**

Even just a cursory look at Deptford's social history, as told by its people, its community historians, as well as through its 'official' history, reveals the extent to which this place is, while traditionally economically precarious, culturally rich and distinct.

Something about its bounded nature, bordered as it is by the Thames and the Ravensbourne on two sides and a major high road and the railway on the others, amplifies the sense of distinction. It's something that writer Seb

Emina, in his article *Seven Days in Deptford*, describes as 'town-ness', and that Michael Ondaatje describes as a 'port accent' – but it could equally be called determined self-sufficiency.

There is an element of them and us that comes from centuries of surviving at the edge. However, it is equally a pride in being rooted in a place that has consistently married high and low culture, absorbed and then ultimately embraced the outsider (however painful a process that has on occasion proved) and been an engine of innovation for hundreds of years.

To a certain extent, the two things are symbiotic, this economic fragility and reputation for radical experimentation. It is not always a comfortable relationship: there is a sense that Deptford has a history of being 'done to' or experimented on, rather than

having been allowed, independently, to generate its own responses to its own predicaments. And yet the consistent waves of innovation – from the naval to the horticultural, social work to municipal architectural, the educational to the religious – that flow from this place are mostly linked to ideas people bring with them, and in turn Deptford's willingness to embrace and develop them. The sense of being 'done to' may have created significant social strain at times but equally this experimentation has contributed considerably to the sense of Deptford as a place.

Research and innovation began in Deptford in 1513 with Henry VIII and the establishment of the Royal Docks. Its geography – proximity to London and the palace at Greenwich, as well as the connection of the Ravensbourne to the timber yards of Kent – at this early stage already played a role in its development. Royal patronage ensured that Deptford remained a place of historical importance: its first shipwright was the captain of the *Mary Rose*; Francis Drake was knighted here by Queen Elizabeth I; the East India Company had a trade yard here from 1607 until late in the 17th century; and Olaudah Equiano, the slave associated with the ultimate abolition of the practice, was bought and sold here in around 1760.

This strategic importance deepened significantly in the time of Samuel Pepys. As chief secretary of the admiralty, his encouragement of naval research and development on the site of the Royal Docks was a critical reason for its continued use. Again, Deptford's geography played a role: its proximity to the navy board, admiralty and court

in London was one of the principal reasons that it was chosen as the site of new or experimental construction. *The Lenox*, launched from Deptford in 1678 as the first of Pepys' 'Thirty Ships', remained the backbone of the fleet for the rest of the century.

Second only to Pepys as a diarist of the period was John Evelyn, who took up residence on the edge of the Royal Docks at Sayes Court Manor, the ancestral home of his wife. It was Evelyn, and later his descendent William, who initiated a new phase of innovation on this site, his celebrated horticultural experiments with plants and planting proving as hugely influential as his writing. This innovation and that of the neighbouring dockyard brought international attention and new creativity to Deptford. Tsar of Russia Peter the Great lodged at Sayes Court for three months while studying the docks and renowned wood carver Grinling Gibbons lodged in the Manor Cottage while plying his trade across the city, no doubt in part attracted by the fine artisanship of the dock's figurehead carvers.

Deptford's dependence on the docks as its main driver for employment started to become a curse rather than a blessing as the dockyards' fame and relevance faded. Meanwhile, Pepys' golden era declined as the docks themselves contracted in the Victorian era and the site became a victualing yard and cattle market. Taken over by the War Office in 1914, it became the army supply reserve depot during both World Wars, contributing significantly to Deptford as a focus of bombing by the Luftwaffe and

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*The mid-1960s to 1970s in Deptford was a period of extraordinary social upheaval met with radical thinking*

the area's consequent devastation. The site lay unused for a few decades until being purchased by Convoys (newsprint importers) in 1984, and eventually came into the ownership of News International before being sold to Hutchison Whampoa in the mid-2000s.

Deptford's reputation for engineering innovation shifted direction with the arrival of Sebastian de Ferranti. An electrical engineer, Ferranti established the world's first electric power station to generate at high tension (up to 10,000 volts) in 1889. Cables were laid along the line of the railway to supply the west end (some of which remained in use until 1933) and after renovation in 1900 it also supplied tramways and railways with power, with extensions added up until 1948.

Stone & Co was another major industrial innovator and local employer, and underneath companies of this scale a series of independent retailers, costers and tradesmen flourished: the Coffee Tavern & Institute; varnishing workshops; flower sellers; Italian organ grinders and ice-cream vendors; carpenters; small-scale boatbuilders; joiners; multiple ironworks; G Chapman's oil & colour shop; quality dairies supplied by local farms; butchers; china warehouses; the Vine & Still Distillery (mixing poor British brandy with foreign grapes and improving the quality to French standard for a fraction of the price); Old Attwood's Toy Shop; Chris Carey; and the 'Recycling Queen' of Deptford. All have added to the area's trading vibrancy over the decades, reinforcing Deptford's heritage of innovation – of making and doing, creating something from nothing – that the high street and its many artisan studios continue to encapsulate.

As the Royal Docks declined, Deptford's heritage of radical experimentation moved inland. Stimulated by the increased poverty the closure of the docks created, outside attention on the area shifted in the late Victorian period towards new approaches to the 'moral uplift' of the poor – both charitably benign patronage and innovative social engagement.

On the one hand, initiatives such as the Deptford Fund – established in 1894 by a group of society ladies lead by Queen Victoria's daughter-in-law, the Duchess of Albany – resulted in the founding of The Albany, an institution that later proved to be an engine of creative experimentation in its own right. At the same time, the intent of these initiatives was moral correction and improvement within a certain set of criteria and to a certain social level. The Deptford Fund was established as part of a long line of similar projects: the establishment of the Bluecoat School in 1715, the National School for Deptford's Poor in 1816, the Adley School in 1821 and the Ragged School in 1844 were

followed by the School of Domestic Economy in 1899, the Clothing Guild and the Sick Kitchen and Babies Hospital in the early 20th century.

At the same time, Deptford's impoverishment stimulated radical grassroots approaches to education and social mobility. Inspired by George Birkbeck's programme for innovative adult education, Deptford established its own Mechanics Institute in 1827, while local artisans, activated by the Spa Fields political meetings of 1816, established the Thames Shipwrights Provident Union lead by John Gast in 1824.

MacMillan sisters Margaret and Rachel moved to London in 1902. Driven by the beliefs of Keir Hardie and the Fabien Society they established the School Treatment Centre in Deptford Green in 1910 and the Rachel Macmillan Nursery School four years later. Rejecting the 'old idea that poverty is the result of weak character', the Macmillans wanted working-class 'children to think for themselves and discover the world through play'.<sup>1</sup> They were followed in 1913 by the establishment of the Co-operative Women's Guild, an organisation built by local people to fight for family allowances and provide working-class families with less humiliating access to basic resources.

Deptford's history of municipal architecture and planning is another area in which it has been consistently at the forefront of new thinking – for better or worse. 'By 1900,' writes community historian Jess Steele, 'most of the dilapidated old houses of Armada Street had been cleared for LCC tenements. They were well built... [and the]



Detail from a hand drawn replica of John Evelyn's own 1623 map

whole area, which had contained some of the worst slums, is a surviving example of the potential for good-quality clearance. The LCC blocks retain a municipal elegance which puts 1960s planners to shame'.<sup>2</sup>

Blogger, activist and local historian Bill Elson also recalls some moments of good decision making relating to planning. He cites the original building of the Crossfields Estate in the 1930s, which separated residential and light industrial buildings but retained an important proximity between the two, sustaining a heritage of interaction between engineering and artisanship that the Royal Docks had originally enshrined. The Trinity Laban is another example of the unification of creativity and engineering, both in terms of Rudolph Laban's philosophy and practice but, more specific to Deptford, the marriage of embedded arts and world-class architecture that the building represents (bringing together celebrated creative practitioners Michael Craig-Martin and Herzog de Meuron).

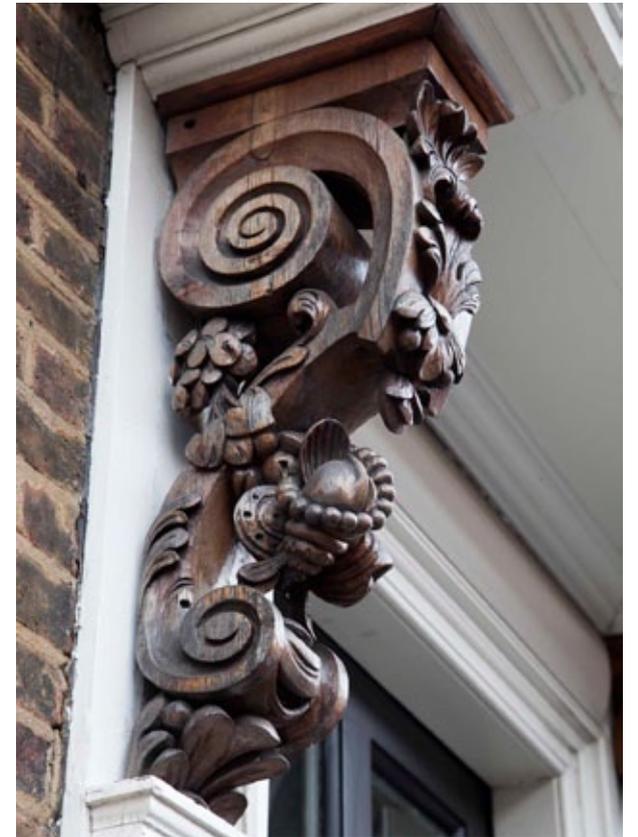
Radical thinkers around municipal planning, such as Nicolas Taylor, were local Deptford residents in the 1960s. As chairman of the Lewisham Planning and then Housing committees (1972-1986), Taylor halted much of the proposed demolition of Deptford's Victorian terraces and persuaded the council to adopt a new policy of either renovating existing terraced housing or building new terraced housing or low-rise flats instead. He also pushed for the demolition of high-rise estates where they had demonstrably failed, such as the example of Milton Court.<sup>3</sup>

Echoes of all these grassroots initiatives were encapsulated in the mid-1960s with the transformation of the Albany into a force of significant social change under the stewardship of Paul Curno. During what feels like another golden era in Deptford's history, the mid-1960s to 1970s was a period of extraordinary social upheaval met with radical thinking – some deliberate and some accidental – that continues to reverberate around Deptford today.

'I arrived in Deptford in August 1966,' says Curno. 'It was a time of turmoil. All the houses were being knocked down for redevelopment and people were living in a state of dereliction, waiting to be moved. It was the beginning of people's participation in community development and planning, [a result] of the experience of new towns and the lack of attention [and] involvement of local communities.'

'While I wanted something kind of revolutionary I didn't want to alienate the majority of Deptford people. Right at the beginning, what we depended on very heavily was local community people offering their time and in my first few months I was going round knocking on doors. I would say, "I've just been appointed as director of this building up the road. Do come and look at it. Its vast, nothing's going on there. What would you like to see going on there? Is there anything you could help me get on there?"'<sup>4</sup>

Curno's ideas drew on the Peckham Experiment, a community centre where people could access a multiplicity of services from the newly established NHS to swimming, and in an environment without the social stigma of a charitable institution. This inspiration was combined with new thinking in social work around



Wood carving has been a staple of Deptford for centuries

preventative care. It also invoked recommendations that The Albany had received from BASSAC (the British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centres, which had brought social workers to live alongside their constituents, most famously at Toynbee Hall)<sup>5</sup> that had drawn the centre partially into the ideas of the Settlement Movement.

Curno's intention to put the arts at the heart of this social centre was revolutionary. The arts were, he felt, 'something that everybody could be involved in and could gain from'. His experimentation with new ideas attracted Gulbenkian Foundation funding for three community-arts posts whose appointees became The Combination, putting on political shows from which new claimants unions and radical grassroots action emerged.

Jenny Harris, director of The Combination, is quoted as saying, 'We could be anything: a mural, a disco, a rock band, a play or a 10-minute piece of agitprop. We could animate a community to perform their own piece.'<sup>6</sup> It was The Combination's rootedness in the community that drove their success as a mouthpiece for it. Although they were not originally from the area they soon became embedded in it, and part of Curno's strategic success with The Combination and Albany as a whole was to draw the younger generation of Deptford families into his project. This combination of external progressiveness and local engagement allowed The Albany to create genuine opportunities for social mobility. Employees such as Andy Stuart moved from what she describes as the



The- 2011 version of Deptford's May Day Jack procession, which dates back to the 16th century

happy but cramped poverty of the Crossfields Estate – as one of a large Romany travelling family – to senior social work practitioner at Lewisham Council (via Goldsmiths university and the Rainer Foundation) in a generation.

The Combination and the Albany's social worker Ann Curno were also directly involved in encouraging families on the Crossfields Estate to voice their demands to be moved in the mid-1970s, when a major new highway was built right through its middle. Although this migration of families out of Deptford has consequently been viewed with considerable ambivalence,<sup>7</sup> what is certain is that what followed – the rental of the empty housing stock to single or childless families – established an entirely new creative community in the heart of Deptford.

In a sense a precursor to many of the 'creative hub' concepts that have followed, both in Deptford (principally the Faircharm/Creekside Artists Studios, APT and Cockpit Studios) and across London, Crossfields' cultural energy – its major contribution to the area – was a planning accident driven more by need (accommodation for teachers, students and tutors) than by any intention to transform the area's economy. But transform it did, the estate generating famous musicians such as Dire Straits and Squeeze as well as the more local energies of artists who stayed in the area – and have remained there.

'There was a lot of resentment towards artists [particularly those who had arrived at Crossfields],' says Andy Stuart, 'and I remember when The Combination first came, my mum said "You're not going in that place with all them flea-ridden hippies!" But they integrated really well and people... Well, its about change, isn't it, as well – difference.'<sup>8</sup>

'There was an element of people looking at us as a load of left-wing trendies,' says Kathy Crossman, Crossfields

resident and the Albany's music programmer and PR at that time. 'Certainly on Crossfields Estate there were a lot of young people [who] weren't necessarily Deptford – you know, they'd come into Deptford. But a lot of people who came in then are now proper Deptford, the big Deptford community, because we're still here.'

As with the arrival of Deptford's Afro-Caribbean community in the 1950s and the Vietnamese community a few decades later, the predominantly middle-class migration to the Crossfields Estate brought economic and social revival as well as tension. While many of its new residents appeared to live lives entirely alien to Deptford's established white working-class communities, theirs was perhaps just a different version of 'outsider-ism' as compared to the one that Deptford was used to up to that point.

Culturally Deptford has always been a-buzz, its events communal and lived on the streets, such as the Deptford Fair every Trinity Monday with its 'theatre shows, waxworks, wild beasts, popular dancing, balloon ascents, "rural sports", weight-lifting [and] "freak shows"'. The 1838 fair featured "Arabs"; decades earlier the Surprising Irish Giant and the Learned Pig had been the star entertainments all over London. There were also boxing booths, fortune-tellers, scores of minor stalls and gallons upon gallons of beer.'<sup>10</sup>

The Deptford Fair was one of many annual processions, including the May Day Jack in the Green, a festival dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries in England, with which Deptford was particularly associated. Bawdy and anarchic, the Jack was a figure of outsider culture and although the festival waned under sustained Victorian disapproval, it has returned to Deptford in recent years.

Even within the establishment bounds of religion, Deptford's public celebrations, its Catholic festivals, took

equal place on the town's streets. 'The old tradition of Rogation-tide became a Perambulation of the Parish, more commonly known as "Beating the Bounds"... [where] the route had to follow the parish boundaries exactly,'<sup>11</sup> and participants would find themselves wading through the area's creeks and over bushes and muddy fields.

This melding of public and private finds expression in another of Deptford's innovations: Graham Corneck, the evangelical Dean of St Paul's, grew his congregation from what he describes as 'five to sizeable' by focusing on 'All-age Family Worship: "happy clappy" songs, not separating the congregation halfway through, teaching drama, people coming up to the front to pray for others ... there was a great sense of involvement.'<sup>12</sup> Again, Corneck's success was founded on engagement with the community and his innovative approaches find echo today in Iain Jones's Bear Church.

These moments of shared communal togetherness weren't and aren't confined to festivals, however. Interviewed as part of the Albany's *Deptford Stories* project in 2006, two sisters, Anne and Margaret, described their experience of Deptford High Street in the 1920s and 1930s. 'I remember going to the sweet shop at nine o'clock at night to buy sweets and that. Go for walks and it would be full of life. They used to have what they called "Showrounds" in the high street, bingo and shows like roundabouts and that. At the top of the high street itself, the Broadway end, there used to be a place called The Wembley and they used to have a lot of bingo and hoopla, all that sort of stuff down there. Plenty of life.'

The vibrancy of Deptford's cinemas (The Electric Palace, Broadway Picture Playhouse, The Kinema and Palladium), theatres (Deptford Theatre and the Broadway in its first incarnation), private masqued balls (for the area's more affluent classes) and music-hall events (the original Albany hosted dancehall nights and magic lantern shows) were underpinned during the day by the theatre of the market. Peter Cordwell, former editor of local newspaper *The Mercury*, describes Deptford Market as he found it in the 1970s. 'It had a real buzz to it. It hit you straight away, just that it was so colourful and busy. I think we talk very much these days about a multicultural society but in those days, that's what it was. It didn't need a title back in the mid-'70s.

'I've got a theory about Deptford High Street and why its so special and I think its because its got two ends. I think lots of high streets drift off into other roads and so you can't do it. Deptford High Street has got two distinct ends to it and I think that keeps in the characters and so, as you go down, you see everybody as a part of Deptford High Street. It's just that Deptford High Street magic, I think. It was a magical place.'<sup>13</sup>

This absorbing and sustaining of cultural difference, of community engagement, grassroots activism and the role of the market as the cyclical moment of coming together, all underpin Deptford's radical heritage as much as its history of artisanship and industry. 'It is,' says Bill Elson, 'a place in constant motion.'

It remains so today, as Seb Emina's article demonstrates. Futurecity's conversations with local

cultural stakeholders have emphasised the potential for Convoys Wharf to play a positive role in Deptford's future. Momentum would be maintained by engaging with, supporting and expanding on local initiatives around key local issues: creating a beneficial night-time economy; retaining and expanding audiences for cultural institutions and retailers alike; and fostering independent initiatives by creating a fertile environment for them.

At the same time, the opportunity for Convoys to initiate a new era of a Deptford that is looking outwards, once more playing a more significant role on London's cultural and economic stage, is significant. The Seven Key Projects for Convoys Wharf afford the potential for both, and this cultural strategy aims to create the context in which local and national expertise can be brought together with Hutchison Whampoa's reputation for high-quality stewardship and ownership to trigger a positive future. This would be underpinned by Deptford's talent for progressive innovation – for always going forward.

<sup>1</sup> Steele, Jess, *Turning the Tide: A History of Everyday Deptford*, p150-153

<sup>2</sup> Steele, Jess, *Turning the Tide: A History of Everyday*

<sup>3</sup> Nicolas Taylor also wrote a cult classic for municipal planning called *Village in the City*, which called for a return to low-rise terraces. Taylor belongs to one of Deptford's most established generational families. Source: <http://deptfordptrs.com>

<sup>4</sup> Paul Curno, interviewed as part of Albany oral-history project *Deptford Stories*, 2006

<sup>5</sup> BASSAC merged with the DTA (Development Trusts Association) to become Locality in 2010. Its Innovation Director, Jess Steele, is also one of Deptford's community historians, and author of the excellent *Turning the Tide: A History of Everyday Deptford*

<sup>6</sup> John Turner, interviewed as part of Albany oral-history project *Deptford Stories*, 2006

<sup>7</sup> This flight of traditional working-class families has been attributed to the 'gentrification' of estates such as Crossfields, although it was also in great part due to the building of new communities in places such as Bexleyheath, which were opened up to families following the expansion of the rail networks

<sup>8</sup> Andy Stuart, interviewed as part of Albany oral-history project *Deptford Stories*, 2006

<sup>9</sup> Kathy Crossman, interviewed as part of Albany-oral history project *Deptford Stories*, 2006

<sup>10</sup> Steele, Jess, *Turning the Tide*, p99

<sup>11</sup> Steele, Jess, *Turning the Tide*, p104-105

<sup>12</sup> Graham Corneck, interviewed as part of Albany oral-history project *Deptford Stories*, 2006

<sup>13</sup> Peter Cordwell, interviewed as part of Albany oral-history project *Deptford Stories*, 2006