

SURVEY OF LONDON

VOLUME 48

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GENERAL EDITOR: ANDREW SAINT

VOLUME 48

Woolwich

Edited by Peter Guillery



The track that was to become Powis Street. View from the west in a watercolour of c. 1780 by Paul Sandby

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Preface

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The history of Woolwich and its buildings is not as well known as it should be. This year, 2012, is a good moment to tackle that. It is the 400th anniversary of Henry VIII's inauguration of royal shipbuilding at Woolwich, and it is timely in other ways: 2012 has seen Woolwich celebrate its status as part of the newly Royal Borough of Greenwich, welcome the arrival (a kind of return) of the King's Troop, Royal Horse Artillery, host parts of the Olympic Games, and witness the start of works towards a Crossrail station, and Europe's largest development by Tesco.

Woolwich is changing fast, but it is a place where history demands respect. The presence of the Royal Naval Dockyard led to the establishment of the ordnance depot that became the Royal Arsenal, Britain's greatest historic armaments factory. That depot was also the first home of both the Royal Regiment of Artillery and the Royal Military Academy before they moved to imposing premises on either side of Woolwich Common. Between these establishments, the town, for such it became, was home to some early workers' mutualist initiatives, including southern England's greatest co-operative movement, the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society, and the Woolwich Equitable Building Society. Woolwich was the first place in Britain to be represented by Labour at all levels of government, the only London borough to oversee its own post-war comprehensive development programme, and the site of nationally significant experiments in system-built housing and car-parking. All that, and there are traces of an important Iron Age settlement, not to mention one of the handful of churches designed by A. W. N. Pugin, the extraordinary structure that is the Rotunda in Repository Woods, partly designed by John Nash, an unusually complete municipal precinct with one of the country's finest Edwardian town halls, a major shopping district, the Woolwich Free Ferry, and much worthy ordinary fabric besides.

It is fifty-six years since the Survey of London devoted a parish volume to south London. This book is the first step towards remedying this long neglect – Woolwich will be followed shortly by Battersea. Both projects continue the series' long-standing commitment to study areas of London undergoing rapid change and to promote a fuller understanding of their past environment, so that what is built in the present can be better conceived and have deeper value. That belief has underlain the Survey of London since it was started by C. R. Ashbee in the 1890s.

Topographical equity was a factor in the decision to tackle Woolwich but more important were the urgings of colleagues in English Heritage and others outside the organization who feared the slighting of this special district's past, understudied and undervalued, in a headlong rush to regeneration after decades in the economic doldrums. A changed financial climate has slowed development since 2008, but investment in Woolwich has continued and great changes have been made and are in the offing. This in-depth and inclusive historical study, something only the Survey of London is set up to provide, will help experts and the general public alike to understand the area's past, appreciate its landscape, and shape its future. Prepared during great transformations, with inevitable losses, it will also endure as in some measure an elegy.

This is the fourth Survey of London parish volume to be produced under the aegis of English Heritage, and the third to be sponsored by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, with Yale University Press as publishers. It is also the first to have had its entire text openly disseminated in draft form prior to publication, using the English Heritage website to invite comment and

stimulate interest. This experiment, following on from the digitization of earlier parish volumes and monographs through British History Online, furthers the Survey's commitment to making its work ever more widely accessible while maintaining high scholarly standards and devotion to traditional publication in book form.

Woolwich

Contents

List of Illustrations	xi
Introduction	
Central Riverside Area	
Woolwich Dockyard Area	
The Royal Arsenal	
Powis Street and Green's End Areas	
Wellington Street Area	
St Mary's and Morris Walk Areas	
Royal Artillery Barracks and Royal Military Repository Areas	
Cardwell and Woodhill Areas	
Brookhill Road Area	
Woolwich Common and Royal Military Academy Areas	
References and List of Abbreviations	
Index	

List of Illustrations

BL	British Library
BMPD	British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings
EHA	English Heritage Archive
EHLO	English Heritage London Office
GBC	Royal Borough of Greenwich, Environment and Planning Department, Building Control files
GHC	Greenwich Heritage Centre, Woolwich
LMA	London Metropolitan Archives, City of London Corporation
NMM	National Maritime Museum, Greenwich
OS	Ordnance Survey
RAHT	Royal Artillery Historical Trust, Firepower Collection
RCHME	Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England
TNA	The National Archives

*Front endpapers: Woolwich Royal Naval Dockyard and environs from the north, c. 1850. Watercolour by George Scharf in BL
© The British Library Board (Add. MS 36489A, items 23-4)*

*Back endpapers: Woolwich Royal Naval Dockyard and environs from the south-west, c. 1850. Anonymous watercolour in BL
© The British Library Board (Add. MS 32375, ff.90-1)*

*Frontispiece: Track that became Powis Street from the west, c. 1850. Watercolour by Paul Sandby in BMPD (1904.0819.55)
© The Trustees of the British Museum*

fl Woolwich,4DC /TmD 23D60 Annotations

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- . Odeon Cinema, auditorium, . Photograph by
John Maltby, in EHA (BB87/3656)
- . - Beresford Street, . EHLO photograph
(59/3710)
- . Holy Trinity, Beresford Street, interior, c .
*Pencil-and-wash drawing by the Rev. E. D. Jordan in
LMA (P97/MRY/214/17)*
- . Woolwich Empire, Beresford Street, interior, .
EHLO photograph (59/3708)
- . Woolwich Baptist Tabernacle, Beresford Street.
Postcard in GHC
- . Gatehouse to the Third West Kent Rifle Volunteers'
Drill Hall, Beresford Street, . EHLO
photograph (67/9/HB/7432)
- . The Autostacker, . *From Metropolitan Borough
of Woolwich commemorative opening booklet (in GHC)*
- . Woolwich Dockyard, . *Watercolour prepared for
King William III under Edmund Dummer in volume
in BL © The British Library Board (King's MS 43,
ff.*

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- . Royal Arsenal area. *Based on the modern OS*
(© Crown Copyright and database right 2012.
All rights reserved. Ordnance Survey Licence number
100024900)
- . Royal Arsenal area, . *EH photograph*
(2651/24495/23)
- . Royal Arsenal site plans. *Based on various archive*
sources
- . Royal Laboratory, c . *Watercolour attributed to*
Gamaliel Massiot in NMM (PZ0746)
© National Maritime Museum, Greenwich
- . Effigy of Brig.-Gen. Michael Richards, .
EH photograph (DP097845)
- . Royal Brass Foundry, . *EH photograph*
(DP135235)
- . Royal Brass Foundry, . *EHLO photograph*
(BL13531)
- . Royal Brass Foundry, ground plans, and
. *Based on plan in BL (King George III's*
Topographical Collection 17, item 25d) and measured
survey
- . Royal Brass Foundry, cross section, . *Based on*
RCHME measured survey
- . Royal Brass Foundry, interior, c . *Watercolour*
attributed to Pieter Verbruggen or Michael Angelo
Rooker, in Stichting Verzameling Semeijns de Vries
van Doesburgh, the Netherlands
- . Royal Brass Foundry, . *EHLO photograph*
(BL13532)
- . Stained-glass lunette, from the Royal Brass
Foundry, . *EH photograph (F891091)*
- . Great Pile, c . *Drawings of south workshop*
elevation and north gate in BL © The British
Library Board (King George III's Topographical
Collection 17, items 25e and 25g) and of south
storehouse elevation, a copy of 1780, in TNA
(MPH1/14/17)
- . Dial Arch, . *EH photograph (DP135021)*
- . Royal Military Academy (Building), .
Engraving by Michael Angelo Rooker based on a view
by Paul Sandby in LMA (SC/PZ/WO/1/14)
- . Building (the Academy), . *EH photograph*
(DP076055)
- . Building)135131)

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- (1862,0614,214) © The Trustees of the British Museum
- . Royal Artillery Barracks, Artillery Place, north gateway, . Photograph in EHA (Air Ministry X66762)
 - . Royal Artillery Mess, . EH photograph (DP021232)
 - . Royal Artillery Mess, plans, and . Based on various archive sources
 - . Royal Artillery Mess, staircase, . EH photograph (DP021215)
 - . Royal Artillery Chapel, cross section, . Drawing in TNA (MPHH1/596/1)
 - . Royal Artillery Theatre, c . Ink sketch by Rowland H. Gilby in GHC (Vincent cuttings, vol.5, p.131)
 - . Royal Artillery Theatre, . Based on various archive sources
 - . Church of England Soldiers' Institute, Wellington Street, c . Photograph from Gale and Polden's Views of Woolwich courtesy of GHC
 - . Royal Artillery Barracks, barracks block, . EH photograph (DP021275)
 - . Royal Artillery Barracks, c . Photograph in GHC (Surrey Flying Services 1908)
 - . Royal Artillery Barracks, . Photograph in EHA (AFL03/Aerofilms/A112196)
 - . Royal Artillery Barracks, . EH photograph (2896/27322/19)
 - . Royal Artillery Barracks, computer room, . Photograph in EHA (PSA Collection G/11,683/9)
 - . Royal Artillery Barracks, . Pen and ink drawing by Peter Cormack
 - . Barrack Field, c . Postcard in GHC
 - . Crimean War Memorial, Royal Artillery Barracks, . EH photograph (DP021246)
 - . Bhurtpore gun, Royal Artillery Barracks, . EH photograph (DP021268)
 - . Former Royal Artillery Hospital (Connaught Mews), . EH photograph (DP96216)
 - . Royal Artillery Hospital, ground plan, . Based on drawings in TNA (MPH1/522/2, MPHH1/575, WORK43/167)
 - . Former Royal Artillery Hospital, . EHLO photograph (BL13461)
 - . St George's Garrison Church, c . Postcard in GHC
 - . St George's Garrison Church, ground plan, . Based on drawing in TNA (WORK43/197)
 - . St George's Garrison Church, c . Postcard in EHLO
 - . St George's Garrison Church, c . Photograph in LMA (P97/MRY/214/12)
 - . St George's Garrison Church, enamel-mosaic, . EH photograph (DPEMC /Span <Lang (en-GB)/MCID 63DC /T1f (1TJE3

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- . Royal Military Academy, ground plan, .
Based on drawing in TNA (MPHH1/244/3)
- . Royal Military Academy, staircase, .
EH photograph (DP135120)
- y, Royal Military Academy, barrack room, .
Anonymous lithograph in LMA (Collage 22800)
- . Royal Military Academy, dining-hall, c. .
Photograph from (en-GB)/MCID 8DC ()Tj EMC /Span 4Lang (en-GB)/MCID 8DC dEMC 0s 8DC /T@f@f-@f-@f@f