



*Town Pier, Gravesend*



*View of the river Thames from Town Pier*

## **GRAVESEND GLEANINGS by Debbie Radcliffe**

### **History of the Albion Waterside site area (commissioned by JTP)**

#### **Canal and railway**

**The Canal Basin** lay originally at the western end of the Thames and Medway Canal, which was built in the early 1800s and opened on 14 October 1824. Its lock gates gave entry to the River Thames. It was seven miles long and provided a way for barges to go from the Thames to the Medway without sailing round the Isle of Grain, thus saving a coastal journey of 46 miles. The canal basin is said to have a paved floor and except for a small section of brick walling was simply dug out of the chalk and had no brick or masonry walls. However, owing to tolls charged and tidal difficulties it was never very successful.

**The Gravesend and Rochester Railway and Canal Company** was formed in 1844 and a single-track line alongside the canal was opened in 1845 with a station here that appears to have been near the lock (now vanished) between the basin and the rest of the canal. This was soon superseded when the line was taken over by the South Eastern Railway and this stretch of line taken out of use when the line from the new Gravesend Central Station joined it at Denton in 1849. A stretch of water between Gravesend and Higham remained, with the railway alongside. The last barge made use of it in 1920 and it closed in 1935. The basin was taken over by Gravesend Council in 1972 for a marina and the canal was filled in between the basin and Mark Lane. At the western end of the Canal, there stood until 1942 a small cottage, the roof of which was an upturned hull of a boat, with a window in one side.

#### **Bathing and beer**

**The Albion Baths** were built by James Roper in 1835, with vapour baths, showers and a saloon where one could read the papers. Five years earlier (1830) James Roper had built a **steam corn mill** and later used his engine to pump water from the canal into the Albion Baths. At his death in 1836, the mill was sold with the Baths to Harwood & Co. In 1862 the baths were owned by a Mr Broadbridge. The baths closed in the 1870s as the area became

more and more filled with smelly and dirty industry. For many years they apparently lay as a 'muddy pool'. A house called 'The bath house' was however still there in the 1930s.

**The Albion Ale Shades**, dating from 1869, had been the beer house attached to the Albion Baths and took on a licence when the baths closed. It was rebuilt in 1910, closed in 1962 and was demolished following a fire in 1965.

**Albion Parade** is the name of the cobbled track running parallel to the river which has been home to sheds and works on both sides. It was the approach road to Albion Baths – hence the name. *[See 1869 map].*

### **Other 19<sup>th</sup> century businesses between the canal and the river**

North of the canal basin there was a very large brick shed, which also had stabling for a number of horses. This building had a massive roof of "timber slates and three pairs of lofty lattice gates" on the north and south fronts. It had previously been occupied by **Nettleingham, Son and Hills, coal merchants** but in 1862 was owned by the South Eastern Railway Company and rented by William Lake, of Chalk, for storing large quantities of straw (300-500 loads).

The adjacent buildings on the south and east sides were Henry and Arthur Huggens' **soap works** *[identified in 1869 map, still there in 1899 map]* next to a couple of cottages. On the north side and to the east were two houses, and the North Star beer house (opened 1853). To the east of this block were more cottages and then Mr Todd's Steam flour mills and the Albion Baths.

There is a report in the local paper (January 1862) which describes a fire and refers to the businesses within the site area. The article describes the impact of the fire on the pub.

*"Mr Goodwin, of the 'North Star', and the numerous occupants of that and the adjoining houses on the north east portion of the block were in the constant dread of seeing their homes burnt at any instant, and Mr Goodwin filled his house with coalies who had come ashore from the coal hulks to remove his furniture, and although the occasion was itself serious, the scene of confusion was so ludicrous as to excite merriment. Stationing himself at his beer engine, he declared emphatically that the beer "shouldn't be burnt," and bade his dusky attendant drink it out, giving it away to all hands in the most lavish manner. The consequences may be easily imagined; the Coaleys and their loads of effects tumbled up and down, and such a degree of damage was done that fire itself could hardly have surpassed."*

The land between Albion Parade and the river Thames gradually became occupied by heavy industry. **Robert L Priestly, Engineers**, dated from the 1870s were boiler makers, marine and general engineers, shipbuilder and ships' smiths as well as undertaking fine metalwork and castings. At Albion Parade their site was known as **Milton Ironworks** (see 1899 map). By the 1970s they were at Denton Works in Mark Lane and later were making tunnel boring machines, including an early attempt at the Channel Tunnel.

**E A & H Sandford, Lock Entrance Works** was another nineteenth century business in the area, specialising in engineering and lifting equipment. The family had been fishermen specialising in shrimps and had a number of fish shops. They also supplied water to passing ships. In the nineteenth century William Sandford ran schooners and colliers as well as tugs. Some of the family became involved in engineering such as tug repair and maintenance. Milton Parish Church's iron gates were made by Messrs E.A. and H. Sandford Ltd. of Thames Iron Works, Gravesend. E A & H Sandford (Lifting) Ltd are still in business in Albion Parade today.

**Barton's Timber Wharf** was in the neighbourhood from at least the 1930s. In 2013 there was an attempt to recover the body of an airman, Eric Williams, who was shot down on 15 October 1940 during the Battle of Britain. He had sadly crashed at the end at the Barton timber yard at around 1230 hours whilst attacking the Luftwaffe with 46 squadron.

**William Howlett owned and managed a barge fleet** here from at least the 1840s.

**The Gravesend & Milton Gas Light Company** was on the south side of the canal and had moved here from Bath Street in 1843. to avoid river dues on coal and to be adjacent to the canal basin of the Thames and Medway canal. They consisted of a retort house, gasometers and a tramway. Gas manufacture ended in 1958, and the works were demolished, leaving only the gas-holders.

**The Borough Electricity Works** began in 1900 run by Gravesend Corporation, initially for the trams. It was nationalised in 1948 and closed in 1970.

**Central Electricity Generating Board Laboratory** was built on the filled in section of the canal at the east end of the canal basin and included the Central Radiochemical Laboratory. It has since been demolished

**Nuclear Electric Laboratories**, since demolished, was responsible for commercial nuclear generation.

### Local pubs

**The North Star Tavern** changed its name to the Engineer's Arms in 1862 and appears to have closed in 1901. It is described as being on the corner of Canal Road and Albion Parade, so can be identified on the historic maps.

Part of Canal Road was previously Gas Works Road. **The Canal Tavern** has been in business since about 1817 and is identified as a public house in the historic maps.

Albion Road was laid out before 1870 with good middle-class housing, but by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century these had deteriorated and become a street of poor quality accommodation

No. 7 Albion Road was a public house called **Albion Tavern** between 1839-1946. It is now a double fronted detached house

No 8-9 Albion Terrace (opposite Brunswick Road) was the location for a pub called the **Phoenix Tavern**. It was established by 1841 and in 1869-70 was part of a consortium (The Licensed Victuallers Tea Association, founded in 1867) who were selling tea in response to grocers' selling beer and wine. It was rebuilt in 1965, known as the **Phoenix Arms** and closed around 2001. The Gravesend & Dartford Muslim Association formed in 1970 and bought the former pub in 1982. The building acts as a mosque as well as an inter-faith education centre for children to learn about Islam, and a diversity training base for police officers.

At 11-12 Augustine Road there was a pub called **Trafalgar Shades**. It was in existence in 1866, closed in 1959 and has since been demolished.

### **Gordon Promenade**

Gordon Promenade appears in the 1899 map but until the late 1880s it was largely a stretch of saltings either covered by seaweed or by high Spring tides nearly up to the wall surrounding the New Tavern Fort. When a schooner called the 'Spring' sank, loaded with bags of cement, it was decided to purchase the damaged cargo and use it to create an embankment. Some of the cement bags remained visible until 1978, when work to strengthen the sea wall was undertaken in connection with the Thames Barrage (flood defences). The Countess of Darnley opened the western section of the Promenade in August 1886. The 'Spring' was repaired, re-floated and renamed the 'Gravesend'.

At the eastern end of the promenade is the clubhouse of the **Gravesend Sailing Club** (founded in 1894 at the Rosherville Hotel and moving to this site in 1905) whose members use the Canal Basin for laying up and fitting out their craft.

### **Major-General Charles George Gordon (1833-1885)**

The Promenade takes its name from Colonel Gordon who was a great benefactor to the town. He came to Gravesend in 1865, aged 32, by which time he had already acquired a reputation for extraordinary achievement by bringing an end to the Civil War in China. He became Commandant of The Thames Forts with the mission to reconstruct and update the Thames defences which the Government believed necessary to counter a possible invasion by the French. This included the first extensive overhaul of the **New Tavern Fort**. While he was carrying out these refurbishments, Gordon lived at Fort House in Gravesend.

During his stay in Gravesend he became very concerned about the welfare of the local poor. His charity work included teaching and he even changed two rooms at Fort House into classrooms with the second room doubling at times as an almshouse. He also rented a small house in East Terrace for older children to gain a chance of higher education. He left the town in 1871 and died in Khartoum in Sudan in January 1885.

In 1886 Gravesend Council leased part of the fort grounds called 'The Captain's Field' to create the Gordon Recreation Grounds. In 1910 the council bought all of the leased land from the War Department.

## **New Tavern Fort**

The banks of the narrowing stretch of water known as Gravesend Reach became important for the siting of defences to oppose the way upstream to an enemy fleet. Artillery forts were first established here in 1539/40 under Henry VIII's national scheme of defence against a feared continental invasion. These were improved and supplemented by other works during the following centuries.

Work on the New Tavern Fort began in 1780 and was built during the American War of Independence to guard the Thames against French and Spanish raiders operating in support of the newly formed United States of America. It was redesigned and rebuilt in the mid-19th century to defend against a new generation of iron-clad French warships.

By the start of the 20th century, the Thames defences had been moved further downriver to the estuary and the fort was disarmed. Its grounds were opened to the public as pleasure gardens, but the fort was taken back into military use temporarily during the Second World War. Today the fort and its magazines and other underground structures have been restored and are open to the public. It is unique in the UK for its display of guns and emplacements ranging from the 18th to the 20th centuries.

## **Gravesend – General history**

Gravesend is identified as Gravesham in the Domesday Book of 1086 when it belonged to Odo, Earl of Kent and the Bishop of Bayeux, half-brother of William the Conqueror. The name probably derives from graaf-ham: the home of the reeve or bailiff of the lord of the manor. In Old English, the name could also mean 'place of the end of the grove or copse.'

### **A defensive town**

In 1380, during the Hundred Years War, Gravesend was ravaged by a French and Spanish fleet which had sailed up the river Thames in response to the English army's plundering in France. To prevent a repeat of this atrocity, Henry VIII placed guns to the east of the town and erected Tilbury Fort on the northern bank to protect London's seaward approach. Almost incessant warfare in the 18th century produced a demand for improved fortifications and the New Tavern Fort was constructed during the 1780s, and extensively rebuilt by General Gordon between 1865 and 1879.

During the World War I a pontoon bridge was built across the River Thames between Gravesend and Tilbury, which stayed in place for three years (1915-1918). It stretched from the gardens of Clarendon Royal Hotel, just east of the Pier, to a point between the Worlds End pub and the main entrance to Tilbury fort on the north bank. The timber pontoon bridge was constructed by men of the Royal Engineers. It floated on 67 lighters which could be moved to provide a gap in the middle. It was twenty feet wide and had to be substantial enough to cope with a changing tide that could differ in height by up to 20 ft, depending on whether it was low or high tide.

The main purpose of the bridge was to facilitate speedy movement of troops and military equipment between Essex and the Kent coastal ports. It prevented the need for travel

through London's built up residential areas and acted as a physical barrier in the event of a German naval attack on the City via the river Thames.

### **A connected town – by road and boat**

Gravesend lies to the north of the old Roman Road that connected London with the Kent coast (Watling Street) and its location on the south bank of the Thames estuary, with close proximity to the capital, has ensured the town's importance over the years. Stagecoaches changed horses in Gravesend on their routes, in both directions, from London to Canterbury or Dover to Faversham.

In 1401 the town was awarded a royal grant which allowed local men to operate boats between London and Gravesend. This became a popular alternative to travelling by road, where highwaymen inevitably lay in wait.

In his journey round England in 1722, Daniel Defoe described noted that Gravesend was *"the town where the great ferry (as they call it) is kept up between London and east Kent. It is hardly credible what numbers of people pass here every tide, as well by night as by day, between this town and London: almost all the people of East-Kent, when they go for London, go no further by land than this town; and then for sixpence in the tilt boat (a large rowing boat covered with an awning) or one shilling in a small boat or wherry, are carried to London by water."*

### **A mercantile town**

Gravesend's market originated from a charter dating from 1268, the year in which the area comprising the two parishes of Gravesend and Milton was granted town status by King Henry III.

In 1792 Samuel Ireland describes Gravesend as being *"the first port on our river, well situated for commerce, and is famed for fish, filth, and asparagus."*

Gravesend has been a customs and pilot station for the Port of London for many years, being the place where river pilots are exchanged for coastal pilots.

In 1514 King Henry VIII granted Trinity House a Royal Charter to regulate pilotage on the Thames. Aits estuary to the Port of London Authority and, from 1st October 1988, the pilots became directly employed by the PLA.

Daniel Defoe described the customs procedure in 1722. *"All the ships which go to sea from London, takes, as we say, their departure from hence, for here all outward-bound ships must stop, come to an anchor, and suffer what they call a second clearing. Here a searcher of the customs comes on board, looks over all the coquets (a sealed document stated duty had been paid) or entries of the cargo, and may, if he pleases, rummage the whole loading, to see if there are no more goods than are enter'd; which however they seldom do, tho' they forget not to take a compliment for the civility, and besides being well treated on board, have generally three or four guns fired in honour to them when they go off."*

### **A Spa town**

The town's first baths opened in 1796, in gardens called The Grove, with lodging houses and cottages. This was a time when Gravesend and the surrounding area was a popular and prosperous Spa Town for holiday makers. The premises had a selection of different types of bath as well as bathing machines and a Reading Room. The proprietor, Henry Ditchburn, then sold the Gravesend Baths to a company which redeveloped the entire area. The oriental style Clifton Baths were designed by the architect Amon Henry Wilds and completed in 1836. There was sea water bathing, hot and tepid baths, and male and female swimming facilities. But pollution was increasing in the river and in 1903 they were sold by the freeholders, the Darnley Estate, and demolished. Clifton Pier was built near to the Baths to service visitors coming via steamers.

### **An industrial town**

Gravesend is primarily identified as being an industrial town and port in northwest Kent, on the south bank of the Thames estuary. Although Kent is known as 'the Garden of England' it has, since the 16th century, been an industrialised county. Boat, barge and shipbuilding took place to meet the needs of fishing, commerce and the Royal Navy. Kent's industrial revolution really dates from around 1850 with the rise of the building materials' industries and engineering. Gravesend was known for being full of seamen, and historically had a very large number of inns, taverns and beer-houses.

### **A sailors' town**

The town's riverside location has attracted seamen from all round the world and in 1882 they could get decent lodgings between voyages at the Sailors Home and Rest. This was handed over to the government during the First World War and afterwards was sold to the Shipping Federation for their new Sea School. This was established in 1918 to train deck and catering boys for the Merchant Navy, funded by the government.

Having access to the river Thames has always been key to Gravesend's development and character. A G Linney describes the river character in the 1930s in "The Lure and Lore of London's River."

*"At present the anchorage below Gravesend is not particularly interesting to the voyager passing by: barge and coal tiers, several hulks, the training ship Cornwall and the Gravesend Sea School's Triton, pleasure craft, and so on. Probably the most striking feature to the casual observer is the tug fleet. Bunches of stout tugs represent one of Gravesend's industries, though no longer do Thames tugs go questing down Channel, their skippers chaffering with shipmasters as to terms for a tow home. In the days of sail Gravesend tugs might get as far as the Scillys. The tug-owning firm of Watkins is a century old, and their red-banded funnels have been a familiar sight ever since the days when Turner painted 'The Fighting Temeraire' being brought upstream by Watkins 'Monarch'.*

## Miscellaneous information relating to Gravesend

- Princess Pocahontas, daughter of Chief Powhatan is buried in St George's Church and commemorated by a bronze statue that was installed in the church gardens in 1957. Known as Rebekah after her baptism in 1613, Pocahontas was a Native American woman who was influential in the settlement of Jamestown, Virginia. She married the Virginian colonist John Rolfe and returned to England with him, to raise money for the struggling colony. Having become seriously ill on board when returning to America in 1617, she died and was buried in the town. Her grave was lost when the medieval St George's church was destroyed by fire in the 18th century.
- The first German V1 flying bomb to strike Britain in the Second World War landed on a lettuce patch in Gravesend on 13 June 1944
- Gravesend bus. This is late 19th century slang for a hearse with a pun on the idea of the grave being at the end of the line.
- Gravesend sweetmeats - a mid 19th century colloquialism for shrimps
- Gravesend twins - mid 19th century slang for 'solid pieces of excrement' inspired by the sewerage outfall at Gravesend

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