
RECENT RESEARCH

MORE ON BERMONDSEY FLOODS - OR RATHER STOPPING THEM

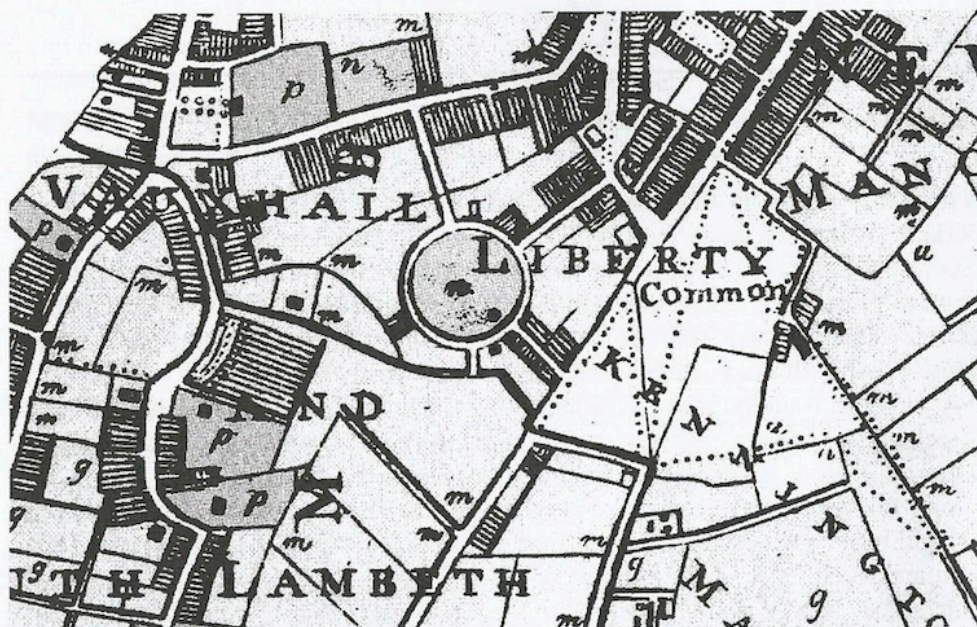
Graham Dawson

This story starts in Lambeth not Bermondsey. In Easter term 1350 (TNA KB27/357 rex f10, published in 'Public Works in Medieval Law, Vol 2', Selden Society Vol 40 (1928)) a dispute arose as to who was responsible for repairing the bridge at Hazardsmarsh which carried the road from London to Croydon (ie Brixton Road) which was broken and for cleaning the ditches next to it which were filled with sand causing them to flood the road. The previous year the Surrey jury had returned that the villages nearest to the bridge, namely Lambeth & Stockwell, Clapham, Streatham & Leigham and Wassingham & Roydon (the latter two were in Battersea) ought to repair the bridge and clean the ditches along the road on either side of the bridge and ditches further from the bridge should be cleaned by those whose property abutted them and the bridge was broken and the ditches by the road were blocked by the default of the said vills and the ditches further away by default of the landowners who are listed.

Later the four vills came and denied that they were liable for repairing the bridge and cleaning the adjacent ditches. They said that in 'ancient' times there was a ditch which carried water through the middle of Bermondsey Priory which caused floods there and because of this the Priory approached the archbishop and other lords of the four vills and asked permission to change the course of the water to save the Priory from the floods. This was agreed and the Priory built a bridge and dug a ditch there and therefore he was responsible for their upkeep.

A later case throws more light on the situation. In Michaelmas term 1371 the four vills as above and the abbot of Westminster, as lord of manor of Roydon, denied that they were responsible for cleaning the ditches and that the Prior of Bermondsey was responsible for cleaning the ditch from Estbridge at Hazardsmarsh, by which the road from London to Croydon crossed the ditch, as far as Eldlond, the Prince of Wales & his tenants of Kennington and Vauxhall (by then Vauxhall actually belonged to Christ Church Canterbury) were responsible for the ditch from Eldlond to the road which ran between North and South Lambeth (ie Albert Embankment) and from there to the Thames was the responsibility of the abbot of Westminster as lord of manor of Roydon (KB27/443 rex f20).

This 'ditch' is clearly the river Effra and these cases show that this once continued north-eastward from the north end of Brixton Road (so it remained on the east side of Brixton Road) to run through Bermondsey and the unnatural looking right angle turn it now makes to run into the Thames at Vauxhall was created by



The course of the river Effra on Thomas Milne's land usage map c1800. The river runs parallel along the east side of the present Brixton Road from its source in Norwood, turns sharply to the West at Kennington Common (Kennington Park) to flow to the south of the Oval Cricket ground (seen as a circle, above) to enter the river at Vauxhall.

the Priory of Bermondsey diverting it westwards. Since this crossed the Brixton Road the Priory also had to build a bridge over it. The later case shows that the Priory only dug a short ditch from the Effra to 'Eldlond' where it must have joined a pre-existing waterway, presumably a little rivulet of the Thames and it was probably the existence of this that caused the Priory to site the diversion there.

So where did the Effra go originally. There was a ditch which formed the boundary of Newington and Camberwell though this started somewhere west of Walworth Road; this flowed under the Old Kent Road at Thomas Warring and then formed the boundary between Bermondsey/Rotherhithe and Camberwell to reach the Thames at the Earl's Sluice on the boundary between Rotherhithe and Deptford. To the north of it near Walworth Road was an area called in the 14th century Walworth Marsh but which later became Walworth Common which suggests that cutting off the upper part of the Effra caused the marsh to dry out and become common land (a similar cause has been claimed to explain the dry-

ing out of Moorfields in the 15th century in that Charterhouse diverted the upper part of the Walbrook stream to feed their conduit (Stephen Myers in a lecture to LAMAs May 2012)). There was a marsh south of Walworth Marsh in Camberwell called Wrotenmarsh which also disappears probably for the same reason and the same might apply to Hazardsmarsh which lay east of Kennington Common (now Kennington Park) and which also disappears after the 14th century.

It will be seen from this that the Effra did not actually run through Bermondsey Priory as was claimed. There was a more northerly stream which ran under Newington Butts, which was called the Tigris in the 19th century for some strange reason, and which continued north easterly to run under Tabard Street at its southern end where it was called the Lock Stream; it then ran under Long Lane and Bermondsey Street but even this is north rather than through Bermondsey Priory and is a less likely candidate since it is further away from the point of the diversion and there are no disappearing marshes along its course.

This is an example of how monastic houses in the 12th and 13th century could make changes to the infrastructure that could transform the landscape. Unfortunately, we do not know when this diversion took place except that in the mid 14th century it was regarded as 'in ancient times' but since Walworth Common was still marshy in the 14th century some time in the 13th century is most likely. The Priory itself does not seem to have preserved a record of this because it is not mentioned in its early 15th century annals.