

Dowgate Ward - then and now

By Alison Gowman, Alderman for Dowgate

Dowgate is one of the 25 Wards in the City of London. Historically its name is said to derive from the Anglo Saxon word "dou" meaning water as the Ward was the site of the original water gate into the City. The river access also meant that it was the ideal spot to eject the City's rubbish and so it was either literally dumped into the River or else placed on small boats and rowed out to sea. Just to show that things do not always change, the City's Environmental Services Department is still on the Thames at the boundary of Dowgate Ward. The City's rubbish now goes in barges down the River and what cannot be recycled is dumped into a landfill site at Mucking (that really is its name).

The Romans made their home in this part of London and the site that is now Cannon Street Station was the Roman Governor's Palace. There has not been a full excavation of the area but further investigative work has been carried out as the new Cannon Place is being built and the results of this will add to the Museum of London's knowledge. Not surprising that a new building (now the headquarters of the Prudential) was named Governor's House after the Roman site.

The 13th - 16th Centuries saw a busy trading time for the English economy that was much assisted by the Hanseatic merchants who had privileged rights to trade in the City. They were based in the Stalhof - Steelyard - that is now remembered in the small passageway called Steelyard Passage. The Stalhof sat on the River right under the current Station. The riverside walkway by Cannon Street Bridge has been renamed Hanseatic Walk to commemorate their contribution to City life.

Samuel Pepys is said to have run up the river steps (now by The Banker pub) to warn the Lord Mayor of the Great Fire and those steps are recorded in the badge of the Vintry and Dowgate Wards' Club. Not far from this spot is the only fire station in the in the City - Dowgate Station. This has now one fire engine which boasts the name Dowgate on its door. The Station has been coping with the redevelopment of the building all around it and has remained operational throughout. It will soon be undertaking a wider role of centralising the London Fire Brigade's Fire Investigation team at Dowgate Station.

The four Livery Halls in the Ward reflect the original business carried out here. The Dyers and Skinners both needed access to water to carry on their trades and the odours of their respective crafts were probably not noticed in the general effluence flowing in the Ward. The Tallow Chandlers were likewise the sort of business that you did not particularly want in your back yard. Only the Innholders positively attracted custom to this area. Sadly none of those businesses are actually carried on in the City but the ensemble of Georgian buildings make this area a delightful architectural haven of courtyards and interiors.

Dowgate saw the founding of the Bible Society 1804 and the British Communist Party in 1920 and although there is a predominance of offices in this area there is still room for innovation but no party politics please.