

ODE TO OLD ERITH

It was always a shabby, funny town, when I was small:
It's only claim to fame, I suppose, was the River,
which ebbed and flowed in muddy brown and grey regularity,
providing an ever changing picture of dreams for the eyes of the young and old,
or the idle, to dwell upon.

It was always a strange, little, sprawling town,
with nothing at all of importance to merit a place in the shape of things to come.
Here it nestled, like a favourite, comfortable, patchwork shawl, the fringes of
which tapered towards the creeks of Slades Green and Crayford;
dwelling a moment at Bexley and Welling;
crossing to Bedonwell and Bostal.
Beneath the folds haphazardly tumbled Northumberland Heath, with upper and
lower Belvedere here, and Barnehurst there;
in between glowing a patch or two of changing green, as the woods and parks
filtered through the embroidery of stitches
that held it together with fields and ditches;
eventually sweeping around and down
past abbey wood marshes
and back to the river.

It was always a friendly, squat, little town,
with industry forming a warming collar
around its neck; the ribbon of water wandering by firmly held in its place,
loosely tying a flexible knot of strength
against the fogs and mists
of all that threatened the pattern of sleeping security.

Quickly, quickly, write it down
before those that remember have long been forgotten,
with nothing to show
and no-one to know how reshaping
and raping could possibly happen,
and why such a garment lies in tatters,
threadbare and worn, and all that matters
is sadly forlorn and desolate now,
abandoned, exhausted-
and those that permitted such devastation
have gone, long gone ...
moved on.

Just for a moment indulge in nostalgia,
name a few names for memory to conjure
the magic that hustled and bustled under
the harlequin cloak, before the plunder
of planning and banning and closing
tore the patches asunder.

The Causeway of old, with convenient railings
on which you could lean to gossip, and yarn,
and gaze on a scene of rocks, and mud,
and pools of water in which you could paddle,
when the tide was out, with wagers to swim
to the other side of the river –
there was even sand
for children to dabble.
Piers and jetties, chains and things,
wet warm timbers, ropes and rings
which held the dinghies and yachts and boats
buoys and floats bobbing
when the tide was in.

The fat black barges gliding by
with ochre brown sails riding high in the water
like graceful swans;
the diligent tugs, tooting and fussy,
pushing and shoving, eternally busy.
Tramps and Cruisers and Men-O-War;
Coasters and Colliers and Steamers galore;
port and starboard, for and aft,
every conceivable waterway craft,
casting off and heaving to –
the Pilot's Hut with the tide times on view.
Regattas and pennants and flags a –blowing,
never-endingly coming and going watermen,
merchantmen, rowing and rowing-
straining backs and muscles aquiver,
Doggett Men too-
the pride of the River.

The coal, the grain, and the flown mill;
Fraser's Pond and Bunker's Hill-
the Cinder Path, the Rec', the Terries,
the Seamen's Home; picking blackberries.
The Ritz, the Rialto, the Oxford, the Rex;

the Locomotive- Sunday School texts.
The Cobbler, the Smithie; the disinfect can;
the Sea Scouts, the Saw Mills; the School Board Man.
Frank's Park fireworks, Callender's Band
tightly packed in the small bandstand.
The betting slips; the Registrar;
the Library Museum; the four-ale-bar;
little boys fishing with tiddlers
in jar.

The 'Rose and Crown' and the 'Wheatley Arms';
gipsy weddings, the crossing of palms.
St. Fidelis; 'Bob-the-Devil';
running round tombstones in the
Old Church yard to ward off evil;
the wicket gates at the level crossings.

Swiftly, swiftly, paper and pen,
put down the words and
remember them

Gone are the Cobbles, the alleys,
the paths, the trams, the prams,
the open air baths.
Bye-Brothers; Linwood's the Salvation Army
on Burton's corner every Sunday.
The gutters, the shutters, the Home-and-Colonial;
the World Stores, the Maypole, the neatly professional
patting of butter with spatulas wooden;
kippers for tea, faggots, pease pudding.
the Fibro; Selfe's; Penton-and-Deans;
shrimps and cockles and coffee beans.
Starkey's, and Randal's printing presses;
the local paper done on the spot;
gammon from Davis; the wet-fish shop.

The hub of it all was Mitchell's Store,
the very core of the town, with personal
assistants, yards of material measured
with care, the buttons, the cottons,
the crimping of hair; second hand furniture
round the corner; three brass balls if you
wanted to pawn a thing on two;
the Knackers' Yard; the Late Night Final;

the Laundry; the Dairy; the Men's Urinal.
checks of tin from the Co-op Stores;
Mence Smith's; Dales; and pails
of manure yours for the taking;
barber's poles; Groom's and the smell
of baking.

It was always an honourable, vulnerable town
that could be the reason for knocking it down!
Tear out its character, flatten its face-
we'll soon think of something to put in its place.
Never mind what, and never mind where
move it around a bit- up in the air!
Let's have some changes- let's have some 'go'-
What were we putting here? Someone must know!

And so it went on, and on, and on
until all that we knew of Old Erith had gone
It took them some time to take it apart;
dying by stages, a work of 'art' you might say,
in a way –
All that was good was whittled away, and all
that was bad was left to decay
of its own accord.

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I could write more but I've gone on too long,
progress, we know, has got to go on- but
why did it happen and where did it start?
We're left with a town without a heart,
not better but worse than we had before!

There's very few left who remember it now,
the new generation could not really care
about something they never would know or share.

Sadly, sadly, read it through,
the ones who recall it all-
you, and you
the ones who grew up with me
when I was small – born here,

and taught here, and worked here-
you know what I'm writing of-
you understand and,
if you've a moment or two in hand,
go down by the River
yes, it's still there- and stand
and share with me dog-eared regrets
for the 'used to be'-
of the rough little, gruff little
Erith we knew, and read to yourself
this Obituary.

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Written by Pat Watson
March, 1982.

[Taken from www.erithmuseum.org.uk]