

Poverty, work and life in the Victorian docks

Living conditions. A docker's life

If a dock worker was successful at the call-on, an hour's work unloading a ship would earn him 5d (5 old pence).

A bed for a night and use of the kitchen in a common lodging house cost 2d.

Look at the food prices below from 1901. How long would a docker have had to work to earn enough to buy this food?

A loaf of bread	3d
Milk (one pint)	2d
Cheese (one pound)	10d
Eggs (one dozen)	11d
Bacon (one pound)	10d
Chicken (each)	1s*
Tea (one pound)	1s/2
Cup of hot eels	$\frac{1}{2}$ d
Pint of pea soup	$\frac{1}{2}$ d

*One shilling (1s) = 12 old pence (12d)



The call-on

Every day up to 3,000 men arrived at the docks hoping to get a few hours' work unloading the ships that arrived in the docks from all over the world.

A man called a 'ganger' was in charge of choosing who would work on the docks that day. He had a certain number of tokens to give out.

The Great Dock Strike 1889

The dock workers who walked out on strike wanted:

- a rise in pay of 1d to 6d an hour – known as 'the Docker's Tanner' (a tanner was another word for sixpence)
- a minimum of four hours' work and pay each day
- 8d an hour for overtime from 6pm to 6am.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rUWLKRxS24>

Main Activity

The Great Dock Strike - create information sheet

Research about why and what happened.

Points to consider:

- The Victorian Royal Docks
- Industry and manufacturing
- Poverty, work and life in the Victorian docks
- The call-on

Challenge:

Draw a banner that could be carried by a striking docker. Use the stevedores' banner as inspiration.



Additional Information

THE VICTORIAN ROYAL DOCKS

In the 19th century the population of London grew from just under a million in 1800, to over 5 million in 1901, mainly due to migration from other parts of Britain and overseas. In the early 1800s, many poorer migrants settled in the already crowded areas immediately to the north and east of the City of London itself. However, the construction of the great dock systems - including the Royal Docks and the related industrialisation of the surrounding areas encouraged the growth of the city out to the east. Work at the docks Work for many men living in east London was connected to the docks. Some found employment as labourers in the construction of the docks, and some at the docks

themselves, in the transit sheds or warehouses, or in related trades and industries. There were a range of skilled and semi-skilled jobs in the warehouses including samplers, warehousemen and customs officials. Related trades included rope, sack and nail makers, dock coopers - who repaired barrels - and divers, who went underwater to retrieve cargo that had fallen overboard and to make sure there were no obstructions in the docks that could damage the ships. Skilled workers called stevedores loaded the cargoes onto the ships, ensuring that cargoes were balanced evenly and in the correct order to be unloaded at different ports. The least skilled - and least well-paid work was that of the dockers themselves who unloaded cargoes and moved them from the quayside to the transit sheds and warehouses. Using claw shaped hooks of varying shapes and lengths - known as dockers' hooks - they lifted cargoes transported in barrels, sacks, bales, casks and crates. Due to the fluctuating numbers of ships arriving each day in the docks, none were employed as permanent workers. Instead they would have to crowd around the dock gates early in the morning for an event known as the 'call-on'. When the dock gates opened men called 'gangers' would come out; each would have a handful of dock tokens which they would throw out to the men who were so desperate for work that fights would often break out. If a docker caught one of the tokens he could come inside the dock gates and start work for which he was paid 5d (approximately 2p in decimal coinage). As the gangers were paid a bonus for discharging ships quickly, they would often pick a large gang of men to complete the job in less than half a day. The main demands of the dockers during the Great Dock Strike (1889) were that the rate of pay be increased to 6d an hour (the 'dockers' tanner') and that a man be taken on for at least half a day

Industry and manufacturing

For many centuries, large scale industries, and those producing foul smells or poisonous waste, had been sited to the east and south of the City of London, far away from the wealthy areas to the west. By the 1800s these included iron works, shipbuilding, chemical factories, tanning and cement works. The coming of the docks led to many industries, factories and family businesses setting up close by, to manufacture the raw materials that were being brought in from all round the British Empire. Two of the most successful businesses in east London were Sir Henry Tate's sugar refinery producing cube sugar at Thames Wharf in Silvertown and Abram Lyle's sugar refinery - which also produced Lyle's Golden Syrup—at Plaistow Wharf. The two rival companies merged in 1921, forming Tate & Lyle which today is one of the longest established companies still operating in Newham. By 1939 Tate & Lyle's Thames refineries in Silvertown had become the largest cane sugar refinery in the world, producing 8,500 tons a week. Today this refinery produces 20 000 tonnes of syrup products, 30% of which are still exported by ship via the Thames. In 1870 The Gas Light and Coke Company (the GLCC) opened its works along the side of the River Thames between the mouth of the Barking Creek and the Royal Victoria Dock. Originally covering 100 acres of marshland, the gasworks soon extended over a vast area covering 600 acres and including eight iron gasholders. The area became known as 'Becks Town' (later Beckton), named after the Governor of the GLCC, Simon Adams Beck who founded the works. It became the largest gas works in Europe serving 4.5 million customers at its peak. The by-products of this gas production included coke, coal tar and sulphur. Coke was used for iron production, while local companies such as Burt, Boulton & Haywood used coal tar to create disinfectants, and the sulphur was used to produce sulphuric acid used in products such as fertilizers. The Royal Docks were connected by

rail and canal to Stratford in the north of today's borough of Newham, so secondary industries grew up around the goods yard and the wharves, employing hundreds of people in what is now the Olympic Park.

Sweated labour

Married women in the 19th century did not usually go outside the home to work so many women and children in East London were employed as what were called 'sweated labourers'. This was when the manufacturing process was broken down and workers performed a single task such as matchbox making, usually in their own homes for very poor pay. A matchbox maker, for example, had to make 144 matchboxes in order to earn 2½d. 21 Housing The opening of the North Woolwich railway in 1847 and the Victoria Dock in 1855 formed the catalyst for the rapid development of the former marshland as a residential area. By the 1870s streets were being laid out near to North Woolwich railway station, and the transformation of the area was complete in 1880 by the opening of the Royal Albert Dock. Rows of poor-quality terraced houses were built, usually with two rooms upstairs, two downstairs and a scullery at the back. As demand for cheap housing was high, often these were subdivided and rented out to several families. Charles Dickens, visiting Canning Town in 1857, was shocked by the squalid conditions: 'People who worked at the recently opened Victoria Docks were forced to live in a slum built on a marsh. There were few roads, no gas supply and open sewers ran through the streets'. In contrast, the workers at GLCC at Beckton lived in well-built company houses in Winsor Terrace, many of which are still standing. The company also provided a worker's canteen, mission church and sports ground.

More information can be found:

<https://spartacus-educational.com/TUdockers.htm>

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/section-great-1889-dockers-strike>

<https://www.ideastore.co.uk/local-history-online-exhibitions-dock-strike>