

RYE LANE: A SHORT HISTORY

At the beginning of the 19th century, when Rye Lane was called South Street, Peckham was “a small, quiet, retired village”. In her diary of the years 1822-1868, Mary Woolley described her grandfather’s house in Peckham Rye as surrounded by fields. A stage coach ran from Peckham Rye to Mansion House. There were very few buildings. A painting from 1810 depicts typical old-world cottages.

But there were at least two fine properties at the northern end of Rye Lane: Hanover House, designed by Sir John Vanbrugh and built (according to Woolley) in the latter part of the 17th century, approximately where the Car Phone Warehouse shop is today. It was demolished c.1835. Across the road, now the location of JP Sports, was Peckham Lodge, where banker Timothy Brown hosted radical soirées for famous celebrities of the day.

For some time, Peckham’s only church was a non-conformist meeting house on the corner with the High Street. This was replaced in 1817 by Hanover Chapel. In 1819 a Baptist Chapel opened, only to be demolished to make way for the railway in 1863, when the existing church was built opposite the end of what is now Highshore Road. There was also a strong Quaker presence; in 1826 the Meeting House in Hanover Street, close by Rye Lane, opened for a somewhat elite congregation. An Anglican church, All Saints, just off the Lane, was consecrated by Bishop Samuel Wilberforce in 1872.

This ecclesiastical expansion went hand in hand with the commercial development of Peckham, encouraged by the extension of the Grand Surrey Canal in 1826. Rye Lane, as the artery to the pastoral idyll of Peckham Rye, took second place only to the High Street. Over the 19th century, whereas Peckham had been seen as something of a rural retreat noted for its salubrious air, it gradually became a suburb of London, sufficiently close to town to attract those who worked there. My own house dates from 1838, and is part of what was a significant property boom, largely dedicated to serving the aspirations of middle-class merchants. In 1851, Thomas Tilling began a horse-drawn omnibus service which ran services into town. A bus every 15 minutes ran from Peckham Rye (King’s Arms) down Rye Lane to Gracechurch Street, with hourly services to Fleet Street from the Rye, and to Oxford Street from Hanover Chapel. These services, rather than the railway, initiated the early growth in the numbers of City workers living in Peckham. But the running of train lines through Charles Henry Driver’s splendid Rye Lane station, which opened in 1865, made Peckham “very accessible” and greatly intensified the demand for homes in Peckham. As one guide remarked in 1892: “It is no wonder then that it should be a favourite place of residence among those whose vocations call them daily to the city or West-end.”

Ancillary to this residential expansion came a mushrooming of retail trade. In the late 1870s the demolition of the houses on one side of the High Street (to make way for new tram tracks) accelerated the development of Rye Lane, which would become one of the leading shopping streets in South London, with its ‘golden mile’ of prestigious stores, housed in imposing buildings (which Mr O’Looney is best qualified to extol).

I will mention, in particular, George Bussey’s setting up, in 1867 (no.133) a business manufacturing and purveying guns and associated equipment and incorporating a shooting range, soon to be overtaken by the making of sporting equipment. Jones & Higgins famous

store began as a drapery shop, also in 1867 (no.3), described in one review as “Greater London’s Greatest Store”. Holdrons, another grand retail emporium, opened in 1882 (no.53, later 135). In the 1890s, branches of famous London shops were attracted to the business opportunities that Peckham offered: including Lipton’s (no.98) and Dunn’s (no.106). Peckham’s Public Hall (no.164) served the community and came to include access to the wonder of the age: silent films. The late Victorian building now housing HSBC (nos.47/49) was rightly judged “of particular note” when appraised for Southwark Council. It was originally built for Jones and Higgins in 1895, but leased in the same year to Midland Bank at an annual rent of £250. The manager was paid £200 a year, with a bank house attached!

Expansion continued into the 20th century. I will notice Freeman, Hardy & Willis from 1904, Austin’s, which began in Brayards Road as a dairy, extended to the much-loved second-hand and antiques business in Rye Lane from 1905, Boots from 1907 (no.20), the Electric Theatre from 1908 (no.133), a J.Lyons teashop from 1910 (at no.26), Stead & Simpson from 1911 (no.89), The Tower Cinema from 1914, Woolworths from 1913 (nos.91 & 93), Marks and Spencer in 1916 (nos. 54-58, where Argos is now), Morgan & Collins drapery store established before WWI (nos.61/67, “all glass and chrome” and paying “the best wages in Peckham”). Despite the Great Depression of the 1930s, development persisted. C&A opened in 1930 (nos.72-74, now McDonalds), British Home Stores in the same year (where Primark is today). Sainsbury’s opened a store in 1931 (nos 61-63, now Clarks factory shop). In 1932 the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society built the prestigious Co-operative House (nos.259-267), remodelled on a store that had opened in 1913, and additional to a pharmacy that had opened in 1928 (nos.202-204). In 1934, William Margree described Rye Lane as “the Oxford Street of South London” and argued that as a shopping street it certainly had no rival outside Central London. This was Peckham’s heyday, and part of its prestige was the construction of the art deco buildings on which we are focusing this evening.

Then came the Second World War. Somehow, Rye Lane survived and in the aftermath continued to serve a large catchment area of South London. Barry Jenkins recalls the 60s. The Bussey Building, where we meet today, housed many manufacturing businesses, some of them sweat shops. Barry remembers Bussey as a great centre of employment, making tents, jewellery, stockings, plywood and a Rootes motor dealership. John Lewis had workshops behind the main Bussey building. Rye Lane boasted at least four grocers, Cullens (“a gem”), Home & Colonial, Greggs and Sainsbury’s, four pubs, two Co-op stores, five tailors, numerous shoe shops and two Lyons tea shops, the big department stores, two C&A’s, Woolworths, Jones & Higgins, BHS (where Primark is today), Marks & Spencer, and gas and electricity board showrooms. The station arcade had a British restaurant on the upper floor. Of the pubs, Barry particularly remembers Hennekeys (“fantastic with galleries”).

Nevertheless, there were signs of decline: in 1949 Holdron’s large store had closed, and gradually others would follow. Other suburbs, such as Lewisham and Bromley, developed their own shopping centres, and a drop in demand reflected a decline in employment opportunities, particularly as the docks closed and the great print industry was relocated.

One by one, famous businesses deserted Peckham, and few now remain. Jones & Higgins closed in 1980. All but the section containing the clock tower was demolished five years later. In 2003 listeners to the BBC Today programme voted Rye Lane “the fourth worst street in London”. Traffic congestion, always a problem, was now judged a “vision of hell”.

Nevertheless, on 10 October 2011, at 10.21 pm, Rye Lane was designated as part of one of two central conservation areas, providing a basis for conserving its architectural heritage. It falls to us to strive to preserve what we can.

Derek Kinrade

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