Introduction
London and its Port

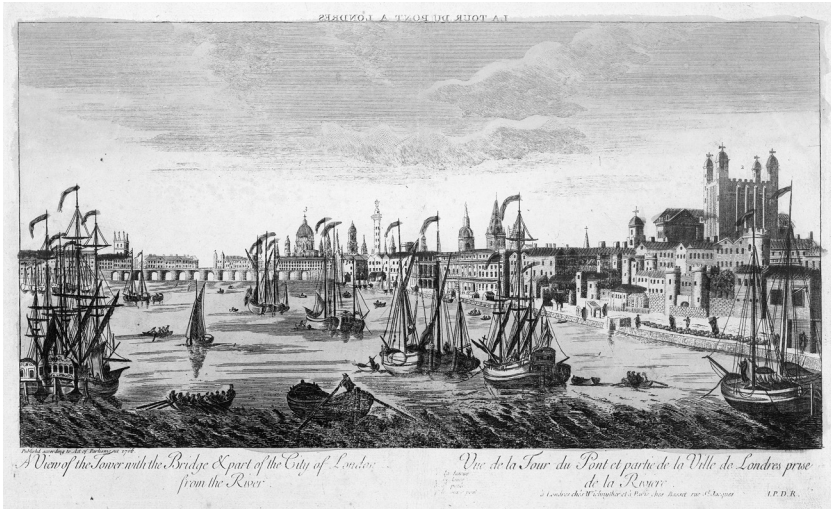

Illustration 1 The Pool of London in the mid-eighteenth century. The Legal Quays are to the right of London Bridge. Image: General Views of London, 1766, © London Metropolitan Archives (City of London).

Until its docks closed in the later twentieth century, London remained what it had been since Roman times: a port city. It owed its existence to its role as a gateway, and in the late eighteenth century, port-related activity was central to economic prosperity. London was a port: the port was London. Over the following century, it ceased to be the focus of an increasingly diverse London economy, though no less essential. London's nineteenth-century growth would have been impossible without its port. By the late nineteenth century, its prime function was serving the burgeoning local market for overseas produce created by the capital's population

growth. By then, 14 million tons of shipping with cargoes entered each year. A hundred years earlier, the figure had been 2 million.[1]

Geographically, the port continued to shape London. As activity expanded eastwards beyond its historic heart, industrialisation and settlement followed, as in the case of downriver West Ham. There was more to the port than handling shipping and cargoes, though this employed large numbers of skilled and unskilled workers as well as the owners of facilities and their managers. The industries generated included victualling, shipbuilding and repairing, rope and sailmaking, sugar refining, milling and serving the needs of seamen ashore. In the City, as well as elsewhere in London, there were many merchants, shipowners, shipbrokers, insurers and bankers. In short, as well as being much else, London was a maritime metropolis.

The capital has never lacked historians. Jerry White's magisterial three-volume study spanning the eighteenth century to the twentieth century, Roy Porter's *London. A Social History* and Schneer's *London 1900. The Imperial Metropolis* are three outstanding examples of the fascination its past continues to exert.[2] To a varying degree, political, social, economic and cultural facets have separately received attention, and continue to do so. Few general London histories, academic or popular, pay much attention to its port, although publicly momentous events like the 1800s dock building boom, the decline of shipbuilding and the 1889 Great Dock Strike usually feature. Even where there is a narrower focus, such as economic history or mercantile activity, mentions are few.[3] This is not to suggest that there are not studies that throw valuable informed light on elements of London's port history. Indeed, as will be clear from its chapters, without their assistance, this book would have been impossible to write. But it is fair to say that you could read a lot of London history without gaining much awareness of the maritime dimension.

London's port itself has had relatively few historians. Until the appearance of Rodwell Jones, *The Geography of London River* (1931) and James Bird's *The Geography of the Port of London* (1957), the only work that traced it from early origins was Joseph Broodbank's two-volume history

[1] PP 1902 XLIV.1 [Cd. 1153], RC on the Port of London, Appendices, 232–9. See Appendix A.

[2] Jerry White, *London in the 18th Century, A Great and Monstrous Thing* (Vintage Books, London, 2012); *London in the 19th Century, A Human Awful Wonder of God* (Vintage Books, London, 2008); *London in the 20th Century, A City and Its People* (Bodley Head, London, 2001); Roy Porter, *London, A Social History* (Penguin, London, 1994); Jonathan Schneer, *London 1900. The Imperial Metropolis* (Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1999).

[3] For example, see Michael Ball and David Sunderland, *An Economic History of London 1800–1914* (Routledge, Oxford, 2001); David Kynaston, *The City of London. Volume I: A World of Its Own 1815–1890* (Pimlico, London, 1995).

published in 1921. As a senior dock company officer, he was a participant in the most recent developments he covered and was far from neutral. However, by separately considering interests such as wharfingers, lightermen and the Thames Conservancy, Broodbank highlighted the port's complexity. As geographers, Rodwell Jones and Bird emphasised physical and industrial aspects, avoiding the impression that docks were the most significant aspect of operations. More recently, there is Peter Stone's admirably comprehensive narrative *History of the Port of London. A Vast Emporium of All Nations* (2017). However, neither Stone nor Broodbank approach their subject from an analytical perspective or set developments within a broader context.[4]

Individual aspects of London's maritime past have attracted far more attention. For the 'long nineteenth century' between 1780 and 1914, there is a considerable body of specialist work dealing with port architecture, marine engineering, shipping, shipbuilding and port labour, from which I have benefited. But what both the general port histories and more specific investigations have in common is a separation of the port from London's wider history. It is as if these spheres existed in isolation from the metropolitan environment. Yet it was this that made it unique.

I pointed out some years ago that port historians had rarely treated their subjects as urban entities.[5] This criticism no longer applies to the same extent, as Michael B. Miller's *Europe and the Maritime World* (2012) and John Darwin's *Unlocking the World. Port Cities and Globalisation in the Age of Steam 1830–1930* (2020) testify.[6] There is also a greater willingness to recognise that the basic functional characteristics of all commercial ports – trade gateways handling cargoes and shipping – provide a basis for the comparative analysis of port cities themselves.[7] But as a port city in the long nineteenth century London defied comparison. It was a world city before others followed. As a great national and European marketplace, financial and political capital and an imperial power, already

[4] Joseph G. Broodbank, *History of the Port of London, Volumes 1 and II* (Daniel O'Connor, London, 1921); L. L. Rodwell Jones, *The Geography of London* River (Methuen & Co., London, 1931); James Bird, *The Geography of the Port of London* (Hutchinson, London, 1957); Peter Stone, *The History of the Port of London. A Vast Emporium of Nations* (Pen & Sword, Barnsley, 2017).

[5] Sarah Palmer, 'Ports', in Martin Daunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000), 133–50.

[6] Sarah Palmer, 'History of the Ports', *International Journal of Maritime History*, 32 (2020), 426–33: Michael B. Miller, *Europe and the Maritime World. A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012); John Darwin, *Unlocking the World. Port Cities and Globalization in the Age of Steam, 1830–1930* (Allen Lane, London, 2020).

[7] Robert E. Lee and W. R. Lee, 'The Socio-Economic and Demographic Characteristics of Port Cities: A Typology for Comparative Analysis?', *Urban History*, 25 (1998), 147–72.

by the early nineteenth century, it brought together 'all treasures that the four quarters of the globe possess' and, as we shall see, then continued to do so as a new world economy forged by steam power emerged.[8] Underpinning these developments was a physical and human infrastructure of facilities and working lives.

My study is not a conventional port economic history. Measures of efficiency, comparisons of performance with other ports and detailed investigation of trade flows, costs and earnings are largely irrelevant to its core purpose. As the title indicates, it is about the relationship between London and its port. By describing this great city as a 'Maritime Metropolis' I am not suggesting that this is the only, or even prime, historical description London merits. It might fit the late eighteenth-century city to some extent, but certainly not the diversity and scale of the metropolitan economy as it developed thereafter. London was far less a maritime city in 1900 than in 1800, not because port activity had diminished but because this was dwarfed by so many other aspects. Even so, the description highlights what for some will be an unfamiliar aspect of London's history and accords it the prominence it deserves.

The period covered was one of major technological transformation – the transition from sail to steam shipping – so the impact of this on port facilities, management and labour is a central theme. The fact that there was a real difference between how the Port of London functioned before and after steam technology took hold is the justification for the book's division, not intended to be exact, into the first and second halves of the nineteenth century. As a long-established port city, with trade global before much of the rest of the world, it did not suffer the extreme economic and social traumas experienced by some new or remodelled port cities. But like these it had to adapt to the consequences of the triumph of liner trades, with its effect on the balance of power and influence in the capital's maritime communities.

As well as new material, the book brings together a range of sources, primary and secondary, antiquarian and scholarly, generated independently and rarely considered together. From the maritime history perspective, sail to steam was an obvious theme. Other themes, of possibly greater importance for the historical record, emerge from what is a wide-ranging investigation covering at least 130 years of London's past. If the concept of *laissez-faire*, for example, were not already almost entirely

[8] See Martin Daunton, 'London and the World', in Celina Fox (ed.), *London – World City 1800–1840* (Yale University Press, London and New Haven, 1992), 21–41; the quotation is from *Letters from Albion Gale* (Curtis and Fenner, London, 1814), cited in Celina Fox, 'Introduction. A Visitor's Guide To London World City' in Celina Fox, (ed.), *London – World City* (Yale University Press, London & New Haven, 1992), 11–20.

excised from the lexicon of reputable discussion of the mid-Victorian State, it would be seriously undermined by the evidence here. For government the Port of London had unique status: its success was a measure of national prosperity. It could not be entirely left to its own devices. There was an enduring sensitivity to the performance of London's great port. In 1799, radical government action, with financial commitment, led to the introduction of docks and other reforms. In 1909 came creation of the Port of London Authority, close to nationalisation. The years between these two benchmarks were marked at first by protectionist policies, which influenced the way the port functioned. When free trade brought these to an end and customs officers were a less dominant government presence, there came Board of Trade shipping offices and active suppression of crimping on the Thames.

The London Thames was both a public highway and a sewer. These functions have garnered scholarly attention from transport and environmental historians, but the river's role in serving wharves and docks has generally been overlooked.[9] Yet for Londoners the shipping and lighters that crowded the water, attracting the attention of artists, were daily reminders of London's trade and commerce. Major changes to the capital's riverscape – the replacement of Old London Bridge by the New, along with the construction of the Thames Embankment and Tower Bridge – were issues for its port. So too was the role of the Corporation of London and subsequently the Thames Conservancy Board in river management. Conflicts between port and river users, between urban improvers and waterfront businesses, as also between shipowners and those responsible for dredging, were endemic and rarely resolved. Indeed, the fundamental question 'To whom does the Thames belong?' has continued to resonate.[10]

The maritime metropolis I portray, which includes shipbuilding and other maritime industries, was more than facilities, trade and business. For this reason, the book also deals with the Londoners who worked there as well as their waterfront communities, which gave parts of London a distinctive, sometimes misunderstood, identity. London has been well served by historians of labour. Anyone familiar with the work of Gareth Stedman Jones or David R. Green, among others, will not be unaware of the impact of casual employment and the pressures faced by skilled and unskilled workers and John Lovell has provided an unparalleled

[9] T. C. Barker and Michael Robbins, *A History of London Transport. Volume One – The Nineteenth Century* (George Allen & Unwin, London, 1975); Bill Luckin, *Pollution and Control. A Social History of the Thames in the Nineteenth* Century (Adam Hilger, Bristol, 1986).

[10] See Vanessa Taylor, 'London's River? The Thames as Contested Environmental Space', *The London Journal*, 40 (2015), 183–95.

analysis of late-nineteenth-century port trade unionism.[11] My longer perspective builds on such foundations. It is clear from this that, as far as the maritime sector was concerned, the industrial action of the seventies and eighties, culminating in the 1889 Great Dock Strike (re-examined here), was not as exceptional as it might seem and that involvement in earlier labour disputes was not entirely restricted to skilled workers. Indeed, when considering the nineteenth-century London labour force as a whole, the maritime sector, although occupationally divided, stands out as exceptionally unionised. Where militancy was muted, this was sometimes because union strength allowed achievement of objectives by other means. Theirs was 'an economically strategic location'.[12] Time imperatives, swift voyage turn-around in the case of cargo handling and payment on completion in shipbuilding, could make the threat, and reality, of labour stoppage a powerful weapon.

Eighteenth-century London was a fusion of neighbourhoods, which remained the case even as the city spread well beyond its ancient core in the nineteenth century. Sea-related occupations dominated water-front parishes on both sides of the river, so I have paid some attention to the Surrey shore, as well as the better-known maritime quarter of Wapping. Exotic 'Sailortown' dominated contemporary perceptions of East London until obscured by an immiserated 'Outcast London' image. It is the latter that has attracted most critical scrutiny but both were distortions. As I seek to show, meeting the needs of a transient seafarer population was just one element of a local economy that included docks and maritime industries and was not totally based on casual, unskilled labour.

The book is in two sections. Part I – The Sail Era looks at the relationship between London and its port before the introduction of steamers carrying cargoes from distant parts of the globe, which transformed the Port of London, along with the shipping industry. Until mid-century, most of the shipping it handled were sailing vessels powered by wind. Despite the apparent modernity of docks, the port operated much as it had done over past centuries. Chapter 1 deals with the character of the Port of London in the late eighteenth century and the background to subsequent reform. Chapter 2 considers dock financing and construction

[11] Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London. A Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian Society* (First Published 1971. Reprinted with a new preface, Penguin, London, 1984); David R. Green, *From Artisans to Paupers, Economic Change and Poverty in London, 1790–1870* (Scolar Press, Aldershot, 1995); John Lovell, *Stevedore and Dockers. A Study of Trade Unionism in the Port of London, 1870–1914* (Macmillan, London, 1969).

[12] Frank Broeze, 'Militancy and Pragmatism: An International Perspective on Maritime Labour, 1870–1914', *International Review of Social History*, 36 (1991), 179.

and Chapter 3 their trade, business operations and workforce management. The focus shifts to the London and the river port in a lengthier Chapter 4. This considers other elements of port reform, including compensation to injured parties, replacement of London Bridge and the Corporation of London's role in river management. It also looks at the introduction of steam shipping into wharf trades and the cargoes these handled. Chapter 5 moves beyond the port, first to maritime industries and their workforce, particularly timber shipbuilding, then to economic activity in London's maritime districts and the experiences of those who worked and lived there, temporarily in the case of seamen.

Part II – The Steam Era deals with the impact of steam shipping from the 1850s when steamers began carrying cargoes from distant parts of the globe. This was more than a technological phenomenon. The movement from sail to steam transformed the character of the shipping industry and required the Port of London to accommodate ever larger vessels, running to regular timetables and handling hitherto unprecedented quantities of produce. Chapter 6 examines the phases of the transition to steam shipping, the effect on London's trade and the dock building response. Wharf investment and conflict with public authorities over the Thames Embankment and Tower Bridge are also considered. Chapter 7 initially deals with the economic problems faced by the dock companies and the eventual outcome. It then turns to port labour and industrial conflict, notably the 1889 port-wide strike. Chapter 8 further pursues the themes of Chapter 5, looking at iron shipbuilding, sugar refining and flour milling. It focuses again on the maritime districts, including the myth of 'Outcast London' and developments affecting the sailor economy. As well as labour issues, Chapter 9 takes up again the question of river and port governance. It examines the role of the Thames Conservancy, the background to the 1902 Royal Commission on the Port of London, conflicting proposals for reform, and eventual establishment of the Port of London Authority in 1909, which ushered in a new phase of London's relationship with its port.

In conclusion, it is impossible in a single volume to provide a comprehensive explanation of all that was involved in serving as the capital's port and how the two interreacted. Omissions, some intended, others not, are certainly many. Nevertheless, my hope is that the scope of this account metaphorically succeeds in relocating London's maritime sector to where historically it properly belongs, within the broader economic, social, cultural and political history of London.