WAKEMAN'S WANDERINGS

LONDON'S BILLINGSGATE.

The Greatest Wholesale Fish Market in the World—Older Than Auld Reekie Herself—Its Ancient Fish-sellers Are No More—Interesting Surroundings and Odd Characters.

[Copyright, 1892, by Edgar L. Wakeman.]

London, Sept. 20.—You can fairly smell Billingsgate market, the greatest wholesale fish market of London, and the most important fish market in all the world, long before you can see it. It is not an unpleasant odor. It has a hint of the sea air about it. Tar and cabins are suggested by it. Tar and cabins are suggested. Thoughts of your nostrils, along with the coming of the first rays of the morning sun, broke in the attic and late Monmouth, it is the most characteristic of the stuffy market and its surrounding therefore. It carries the fishy phrase of young and London's grim water-side environment and the sights of ships and rigging down into the widening Thames and on past quaint Margate to the wide free market of the blue North sea. There in that wondrous sea harvest field, from Dover to Upper Norway, are reaping the fisher fleets.

In olden days, indeed not more than a quarter of a century ago, there sent thirty "pickies" direct to the London market. And a pretty sight it must then have been, when the fleet came up laden to the Billingsgate wharf, just outside the shadows of historic London Bridge, the Dutch hold-o'-boats, with their lodging polished sides aloft, half hidden in the river mist, masts packed with flounders and small slimly crowded baskets piled upon the deck, crews of sturdy men in yellow filled with the sweet of cod and shell weather boots, bagged with herring, cod and ling, and all about the wharf and crowding like flies thereof, all manner of closely anchored fishing craft, sailors, fishermen, oysters, Billingsgate fishwives, and the ladies too, engaged in the chaffering and bartering of caper selling and buying.

But that day is past. The ribbon color and brightness are gone. Hard necessities thrift and modern methods have banished the fine ladies who in gentle "dimmerie" mood made their own purchases at Billingsgate and took back into choice London society the wonderous stylings of the Billingsgate women, whose bonnets were the marvel and wickedness in all the world. The fishwives are gone, and their only vanishing representatives are at the Claddagh, Galway, Ireland.

Some words scurry about the North sea ground, seeking the fish, and when they are taken and bring them to the mouth of the Thames. Here other larger fast sailing steam craft are taken, and these, varying in number according to the season, daily bring the vast fish supply of London, landing it at the city docks of Billingsgate, much as the fish supply of New York city is set down in the East River at the back doors of remarkable old Fulton Market.

Billingsgate market still stands just where it has stood for centuries. How many centuries no man knows. Immediate without reverence for even the antiquities of a fish say a fellow by the name Billing erected a wharf upon the same spot in Queen Elizabeth's reign, and hence its name. But I have seen the preamble to an act of parliament on 10 and 11 of William III to make Billingsgate a free market for the sale of fish, in which, among other "whereases," is one reciting that "Billingsgate has time out of mind been a free market for all manner of floating and salt fish, as also for all manner of lobsters and shellfish." Tradition, which is good history when authorities differ, lends the place its more fitting antiquity and insists that it was its origin to Belin, an ancient king of the Britons, who flourished 400 years B.C., and who, observing an opportunity to gain like a true Briton, erected a gate here through which the fishermen at Billy were made to pass and pay toll before they could sell their fish and hence the name Belin's gate, finally corrupted to Billingsgate.

However all this may be Billingsgate is the oldest wharf on the Thames, and that is saying much for it on the line of age. The market building and the ground it stands upon is owned by the London municipal authorities. Its river frontage is 200 feet and its superficial area is 40,000 square feet, affording sites for seventeen shops and two large public houses. It is located in the densest part of what may be termed waterside London, on the south bank of the Thames. Just above it, to the west, is old London Bridge—a bridge probably better known in the literature of fiction and travel than any other similar structure in the world.

Just below it to the east is the new Tower Bridge, in process of construction for the past six years. Immediately adjoining, to the west, are the great Levant and Spanish fruit markets, and on the other side, seaward, stands the huge Doric fronted London custom house. Immediately opposite, across the Thames on the Surrey side, is the tremendous reach of the Surrey Commercial docks, vast, grim, black and half in ruins, and the Thames at this point between London and Tower Bridges is called "the Upper Pool." It is said twenty times more floating traffic then any other reach of water approaching it in size upon the face of the globe.

Owing to the dense massing of river traffic at this point and the inconceivably congested nature of the population, numerous of streets and meeting lanes, alleys of street traffic banking up against and hemming in Billingsgate from all directions, it would almost seem that London would have long since found some more accessible and convenient depot for the disposal of her enormous fish supply. Yet all attempts to abandon Billingsgate as direct fish trade have proven futile. "Conservatism," tradition and even superstition hold all efforts of this character. Dealers tell me they would go out of the business if they had to leave Billingsgate. Fishermen would not feel easy about their consignments to any new market. Oysters have repeatedly told me that they lose confidence among the poor of the East End would not buy an out fish that had not the time honored seal of Billingsgate inspection upon it.

The varieties of fish which are in their respective seasons delivered at Billingsgate market number nearly 100. During this month I have noticed perch, pickerel, pike, gilt, mackerel, roach, salmon, gurnets, halibuts, herrings, flounders, turbot, sprats, jack, ling, plaice, dogs, pawns, codfish, mullets, whelks, codfish, trout, soles, gudgeons, eels and conger eels, dogfish, cod, bream, brill, hake, shad, whitings, skate, smelts, whitebait, tench, sturgeon and perhaps a dozen other varieties, and the total weight is from 12,000 to 15,000 tons per month or 150,000 tons per year.

Of this vast quantity fully two-thirds reaches London by railway. All the fish from Ireland is sent across St. George's channel in fast steamers and thence by rail. Salmon and trout all come by rail much of the northern North Sea ports, taken off east Scottish shores, and even some of the mackerel from about Yarmouth and Scarborough, are for the sake of time saving thus transferred. Small wheeled, fast load vans are provided by the railways. These are dragged by horses from fishing stations or quays to railway stations, wheeled into the railway vans, and thus brought to London without breaking bulk. On arrival here they are wheeled to the street and dragged by horses through the streets from various stations to Billingsgate. Fully 100,000 tons of fish annually reach the market in this manner.

Over three fourths of all the fish consumed by London pass inspection at Billingsgate. As the market is the property the officials for this purpose, four in number, are appointed by the Corporation of the Fishmongers' Company, one of the oldest but still thoroughly active Guilds or Trades Companies of London. It has a fine Fishmongers' Hall near London Bridge, and expends every thousand pounds in promoting the sale of dog-of fish. All fish condemned by its inspectors are immediately conveyed in a swilling barge, treated with carbolic acid and sent to fertilizing works at Hackney, where after being baked dry they are ground to powder and sold at about five pounds per ton to the strawberry and hop farmers of Kent for fertilizing purposes.

The fish steamers arrive alongside the market at all hours of the night and early morning. At precisely 3 o'clock in the morning the market opens. Long lines of plank are laid from the market quay over barges and pontoons to the steamers' decks, and every canvas of fish is brought over these in baskets and bags on porters' heads and backs. At the same time the salmon vans are unloading on the landward side. But six can be cared for at the same time. The confusion and scurrying must be indescribable.

One who witnesses the scene for the first time is filled with amazement that the largest and most polished capital in the world will tolerate such antiquated methods. But the porters are wonderfully adroit, alert and carry incredible loads. I have seen many loads with from 200 to 300 pounds weight. They will positively look under a barrel of herrings which weighs 200 pounds, and there is no question that many of these fellows can easily get about the market with upward of 400 pounds apparently distributed upon head and back.

These Billingsgate porters are regarded as the strongest, quickest and most athletic men in London. They live in every respect like the entire race of the Thames and the aristocracy of the Whitechapel district. Their only earthly ambitions are to eat, drink, visit "penny gaffs" run and dog fights and excel in pugilism. They are diseased and the strictest regulations exist regarding their conduct, even in the atmosphere of Billingsgate. To lose their license is worse than imprisonment as a criminal. Their "reputations" among their fellows, the costers, and the East End slums are gained by their prowess and strength here. It is their world, their kitchen, bedroom, church, and they are really curiosities in social or literary study.

They outlight especially in odd sounding nicknames. In my few visits to Billingsgate I have already come to know and be favorably known by "Dirty Jim," "Corky Jim," "Black Mike," "Jack the Fiddler," "Happy Jack," "Johnny Shoeblack," "Jimmy Fingers," the latter because of his thieving propensities, "Blue Nose Mike," "Cross Eyed Joe" and "Four Ale Jim." The latter is never quite in his best motions as he drinks his ale or seven quarts of ale before breakfast. The cash of all these Billingsgate porters, like that of the costers, to which class they have married affinities, is "free fill me" and its wholesome is too abhorrent for transfer. They are peculiar two classes in their daily market work—those who bring the fish from the steamers into the market, who are called "shovers," and those who remove the fish to the stalls on wagons or the costers' carts, who are called "molesters."

The pugilists of London chiefly have their origin among the Billingsgate porters. They have their regular champions at "seven stones," "eight stone six" and "eleven stone." and Officer 246, Policeman F. Wade, informed me that there is not a man among them who has not at some time or another appeared in a Whitechapel ring. Bill Goode, who fought Sharkie, is still a keepsed porter here. Among many curious characters I saw Cornelius Callahan, known as "Mike the Tipster." He is a no-to-do-all and a privileged person. He makes great ostentation of his knowledge of the state of the market. Getting up at 3 o'clock in the morning, he goes down the fishing steamers, and then just before the market opens he slips about among buyers and sellers and whispers "the tip o' the day" in their ears. The sixpenny is always forthcoming. On saturday afternoon, just before the market is closed for the week, they "have a game with Mike." He regularly appears for his buffeting, and often in the rough play that ensues poor Mike is nearly killed. Then the hat is passed, and from six to ten shillings sometimes paid the willing victim.

All Billingsgate fish are sold by auction, and a veritable Babel the place is from 5 to 8 o'clock. There are two classes of sellers. One comprises the regular commission men to whom the fishermen consign their catches, and the other is a thoroughly British institution, popularly known to Billingsgate from time immemorial as "bummarers." These are really middle men, who position all possible sets to combine and force the regular commission men, who have but a short limit of time in which to sell, to dispose of lots at ridiculous prices, and through similar combinations often compel retailers to purchase at exorbitant rates. But however interesting may be the interior of Billingsgate to the casual visitor, the adjacent thoroughfares from midnight, when the first retail buyers begin coming, until the close of the market at 8 o'clock, provide far more strange and curious pictures and groupings. Upper and Lower Thames Street, Eastcheap and Great Tower Street, Tower Hill, Fish Street Hill, St. Mary-at-Hill, St. Dunstan's Hill, King William Street, Arthur Street, and last west, Grace Court and Love Lane, are apparently entirely flooded with hundreds of railway fish vans, green grocery wagons and costers' donkey carts and barrows.

There is no other place in London where such a vast and so odd a jumble of vehicles and folk may at any one time be seen. Over 4,000 vehicles for the bringing or taking away of fish are here. With these are 10,000 costers men and women and an innumerable, indescribable host of petty street vendors and hangers on. If you can arrive here on a foggy morning early, when the first rays of the sun are filtering through the fleece folds of mist flagging up with the tide along the Thames, you will then know old Billingsgate as Dickens and Thackeray knew it, and will long for power and space in which to paint with pen or pencil one of the strangest, oddest scenes to be found in this mighty London town.

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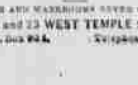

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