

Summary notes from Discussion Session #1: Heritage

These notes are intended to act as a summary of the views and opinions raised at the discussion session on heritage, held on Tuesday 17th May and which 14 people attended.

Where is Bermondsey geographically?

- Bermondsey's borders were broadly agreed as being from London Bridge to the Rotherhithe Tunnel.
- The Blue was considered by many to be its heart
- However, some felt there were several hearts to Bermondsey.
 - Bermondsey station is an important geographic identifier.
 - Although Bermondsey Street can feel a long way away it was the parish centre of old Bermondsey.
- It was felt important to be clear that Rotherhithe is not Bermondsey.
- Rotherhithe's even greater relative physical isolation meant its communities were even more close knit.

What does Bermondsey mean to people?

Bermondsey was industry

- The docks, railways, carpentry, food factories; the larder of London.

Bermondsey is its people

- Working class, hard-working, proud, strong, and resilient – still smiling and united.
- Good for friends, bad for enemies!
- Big families; many know each other well.
- Bermondsey is in your blood; Bermondsey's coat of arms still elicits a warm emotional reaction.

That is changing...

- Some didn't know their neighbours, and it was commented that this is particularly true of neighbours who rent; they weren't perceived as being as locally invested.
- It was believed that most people who live in social housing do know their neighbours.
- Increasing diversity should be celebrated, but many believed Bermondsey has been more mixed than people perceive for a long time:
 - Industry attracts immigrants
 - Docks made it an international hub.
- Decline of employment and jobs meant many have had to leave.
- Several believed that if Bermondsey was a village it would be derelict by now.
- It was felt that there are too many pawn shops, betting shops, fast food.
- But others believed that there are seeds of hope, and Bermondsey is still there if you scratch the surface.

- This was especially true of newcomers, who felt the community spirit was very strong in Bermondsey compared to other places they've lived.
- It was commented that there is so much going on locally, but perhaps people just don't know it, so forums for interaction and communication are key.

Physical character and architectural references

- Bermondsey's history is unique, and that's evident in its architecture.
- It is the history of London.
- Physically it's very mixed; unlike other neighbourhoods which tend to be far more residential.
- The different eras of industry and development are evident, which makes it aesthetically interesting.
- Its oldest buildings are on Bermondsey Street, they are pre-Georgian, and of small scale.
- Bricks were considered to characterise Bermondsey, and some people felt this mattered a lot.
- Others felt it was the quality of design not so much the materials which make a difference.
- Arches also signpost and signify Bermondsey to many.
- Stone is another common local material and can be found in many of the oldest buildings.
- Bermondsey used to have a lot of pubs; these remain important architectural landmarks.
- Breweries have come full circle; and although positive that the arches were being used for food and drink industry again; the 'booze cruise' culture that is emerging is not so welcomed.
- City Hope Church was talked about as an important local landmark.

Perspectives on newer development

- The development on the south-side of Chambers Street was thought to be too dark, drab and imposing.
- Bermondsey Spa was considered to work well, especially its relation to St James Church.
- An example of good integration of old and new was cited near Kingstairs Close on Elephant Lane.
- Gated communities made people feel unsafe.
- It was thought that there was too much segregation through design between new comers and existing residents; for example some new play facilities are only accessible to children from particular developments.
- Too many grey and dark colours are used; it can feel oppressive.
- There was a general feeling that a lot of the time design could be a lot better.

Considerations for new development

- It was felt important that new development opens up around and celebrates the historic and architecturally buildings that remain.
- It should complement and be sympathetic, not constrain and encase.
- The massing of some development felt overwhelming and too imposing.
- Bigger buildings should be broken up by creative design and spaces between buildings.
- New development should not turn its back on the surrounding context and communities.
- Gated areas made people feel unsafe.
- Tonally it would be good to see a lighter colour palette; even lighter tones of brick make a big difference.
- Spaces for congregation, for people to sit and talk, and for children to play are important.
- Spaces should not be segregated.

Influential individuals

- Notable individuals in Bermondsey's past include Alfred and Ada Salter, the Carr family.
- Ada's Beautification Committee made a big difference; people were given window boxes and bulbs to plant, trees were planted.
- They cared for their employees, and the community
- There is a Quaker connection
- But Bermondsey's strength is its community, not individuals