

The History of the Port of London – A Vast Emporium of All Nations

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The author of this book originates from London, and explains that his family used to work in the Docks and associated trades linked to the Port of London. He has studied the history of London, so this work is a natural progression for him. The book is, as its title implies, a chronological history of the Port of London, extending down the River Thames to Tilbury in Essex.

The book is divided into eight chapters, beginning with the Roman period, and early Saxons, and concluding with the final chapter, which is called 'The Modern Port of London'. The text provides an historic account of the development of the docks in London, and the role they played in the social history of the East End in particular. There are accounts of the call-on procedure, which is a predecessor of the modern 'zero hours contract', and you gain a good feeling of the reality of working in the docks throughout the ages.

The book highlights just how important the Port of London was to the U.K., and to the British Empire. At one stage just before the Second World War, the port handled 28% of the entire maritime trade of the U.K.. The Port of London suffered heavily during the war from aerial bombing, and V1 flying bomb and V2 rocket attacks. Many industries moved out of London, and did not return afterwards, and many of the population went with them.

Changes were underway before that war, but afterwards the history is centred around change and decline. The centre of balance of the Port of London moved downstream as the size of ships increased, and containerisation came to the fore. There are sixteen photographs in the centre, but they do not add much to the overall content of the book. Likewise, the diagrams are acceptable, but I would have preferred more maps and diagrams. There are few accounts of the ships or companies that used the port, but that is not the intention of the author.

Altogether, within the size and nature of the book, it provides a comprehensive account of the history of the port. Fortunately, I have a copy of the Port of London History and Development Notes for Students dating from 1960, which has far better maps and information about the working of the port, so the two complement each other. According to the publicity material, this is the only book that tells the whole story of the history of the port, and whether or not that is correct, it is fair to say that this book adds significantly to the historiography of the subject.