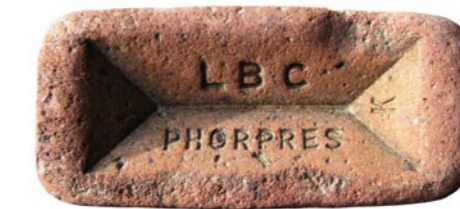




Surrey Docks Farm History Trail

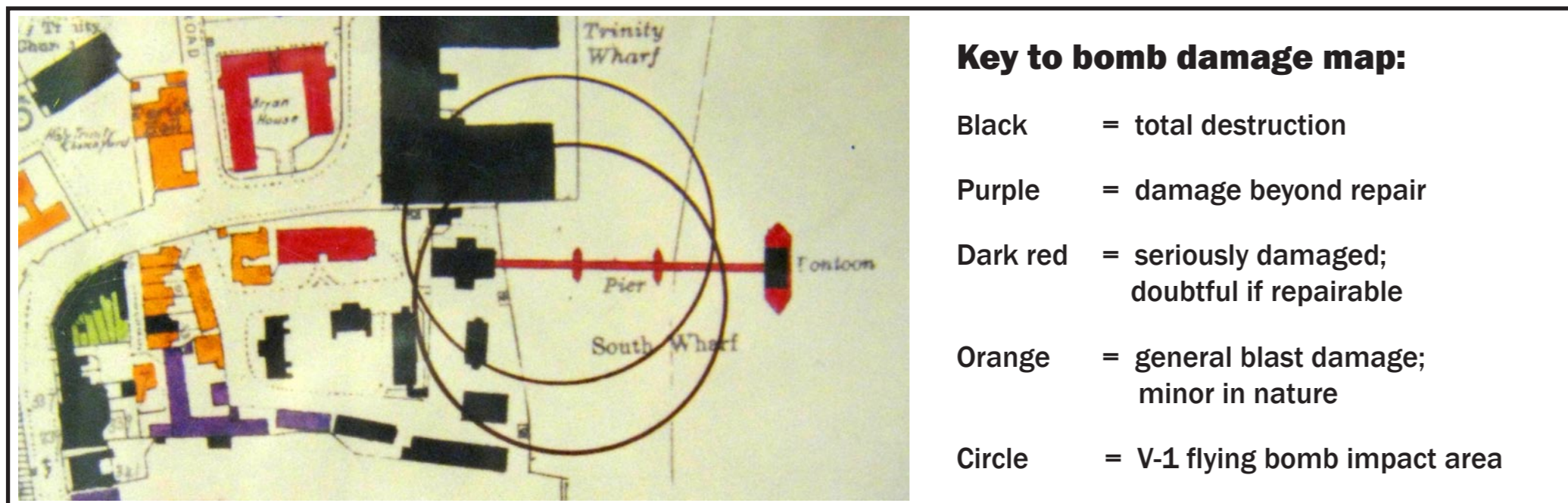
5. World War II and the River Fire Station



Surrey Docks was pounded by hundreds of bombers on the night of 7th September 1940, the first major air raid of the Blitz, as the Germans tried to cripple London's docks. Much of this area was destroyed by bombs and the resulting fires.

The Farm's site, South Wharf, was at the time a scaled-down smallpox receiving station for observing suspected smallpox cases before transporting them by road. Part of the site was also being used by the Auxiliary Fire Service as a river station. On the night of the bombing, the site was surrounded by fire, and everyone had to be evacuated by river.

Further attacks occurred over the duration of WWII; the map below shows the damage to South Wharf from bomb impacts and the subsequent spreading fires. Some buildings were destroyed, and many others badly damaged. There are some surprising survivals however, such as the 18th-century brick wall, much of which still stands despite it being in the midst of one of the areas of total destruction. The pier was badly burnt, though its iron structure left intact, as can be seen in the photo lower right. Needless to say, the smallpox receiving station never returned to this site.



Above: detail from London County Council 1939-45 Bomb Damage Maps. Reproduced with kind permission of the London Metropolitan Archives.

While all traces of war damage have been removed from the land, the rubble and remains often ended up in the river, and much of this can still be seen today at low tide. Rough clumps of solid black material have been found on the foreshore – these are probably molten metal, likely to be WWII-related, and this gives an idea of the intensity of the fires that raged here. The scatterings of loose bricks all along the foreshore are also likely to be from buildings destroyed in the war.

Several sandbag-shaped lumps of concrete can also be seen on the foreshore, alongside where the riverwall juts out on the right. These are probably hydraulic concrete, used in wartime to quickly plug holes in riverwalls damaged by bombing. Bags of this would be deposited where needed, solidifying on contact with water.

Escape from Downtown, and the dreaded doodlebug



Bermondsey resident Bill Brenland was a 12-year-old boy on the first night of the Blitz, living nearby in Rotherhithe Street, and remembers Downtown (this area of Rotherhithe) being cut off by flames. The only means of escape for residents was via Acorn Passage, the public access way alongside this site, from where they were taken by barge across the river.

Later in WWII, London was attacked by V-1 flying bombs; the above map shows two to have impacted here. The V-1 was an early type of cruise missile which looked like a small aircraft. Its characteristic droning sound led to its nickname of 'doodlebug', and when its motor cut out, an ominous silence warned of its imminent impact. Bill remembers a terrifyingly close encounter with this menacing missile here in the neighbouring streets. He and his friends were on the riverside when they first saw it overhead, and fled in what they assumed was the opposite direction, only to find it had the same idea:

'In Bryan Road, the doodlebug was coming skimming along the roadway without its engine running, ever so low, terrible; ... how it came from being up in the sky, and then turn sharp left and then turn right ... it was below the railings of the flats in Bryan Road... and we were running towards it, my mates were petrified – they just stood there, and I threw myself on top of them, and next minute – bang, its wing tip had caught on the wall which was part of the Roman Catholic nunnery opposite the Farm, and all the bricks came down on me. The ARP warden came down afterwards, he didn't believe that we'd been down that turning – he said you should all be dead.'

The Auxiliary Fire Service and South Wharf River Fire Station

For about 14 years, through WWII and after, this site was also used as a Fire Service river station. The Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) had established a station here at South Wharf in 1939. They shared the site with the smallpox receiving station, which no longer used the river – this left the boat house and adjoining workshops (where the wildlife area and pond in front of you now are), the river frontage, pier and pontoon, available for the Fire Service to use and as moorings for their fire-boats.

The Auxiliary Fire Service was formed to supplement the Fire Brigade during war-time. Thousands of civilians were recruited and trained, and hundreds of new fire stations were set up, such as this one.

South Wharf continued as a river fire station throughout the war, despite the heavy damage to the site. With the smallpox receiving station having been abandoned, the full site was transferred to the Fire Service in 1941 for their use. The AFS had now become integrated with the National Fire Service, who used South Wharf during wartime as the River Thames Formation Workshops. Here the fire-boats and vessels from all the river fire stations on the Thames were maintained. An aerial photograph of 1947 shows many new sheds and buildings constructed on the site, especially along the riverside over the foundations of those that were destroyed, and these are likely to have been for this maintenance and repair work. The Fire Service continued to use South Wharf right up until 1953, well beyond the end of the war.



Above: this brass button from an Auxiliary Fire Serviceman's uniform was recently found on the Farm's foreshore – perhaps it came from someone working at this very AFS station?



The war-damaged pier – note the blistered paint and the burnt and buckled timbers of the walkway.

© London Fire Brigade / Mary Evans Picture Library

Clearance, emptiness, haulage and storage

Aerial photographs and the memories of local people fill in the gaps of what happened here in the following decades.

Between 1955-60 all the remaining buildings on the site were demolished (except for what is now the forge), and the damaged pier was removed. The site lay empty and overgrown for several years, before being used as saw-mills and a timber yard in the 1960s. Then in the 1970s it was used by haulage companies to park lorries and store or repair shipping containers. Local residents remember the growing stacks of containers dominating the view over the walls at this time.

In these post-war decades, the use of the site for timber, containers and haulage mirrored that of many of the neighbouring wharves along here. Like them, it might have become just another housing block – however, in the 1980s a new and unexpected use was found for this piece of land.

Now return to the riverside to find panel no. 6, between the bronze pigs and goats, to find out about this site's fruitful new use.

This history trail was created from the research and contributions of dozens of volunteers and local people, and the findings of investigations with the Thames Discovery Programme, as part of a Heritage Lottery Fund project at the Farm in 2013/14. All of the photographed objects on this panel were found by project participants on the Rotherhithe foreshore, many alongside the Farm itself. Further information and resources on the site's history are available - see www.surreydocksfarm.org.uk.



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