

Once upon a time in Chinatown

Stranded in a hostile land, the first Chinese to arrive in Britain set themselves up in East London's Limehouse, where they built a thriving community, despite the lurid image painted of them by the gutter press.

BY STUART HEAVER

The earliest Chinese migrants to Britain were employed by the British East India Company. They arrived in the East London docklands in the 1780s, aboard merchant vessels carrying tea, ceramics and silk.

The ships docked in an area that was then known as Limehouse, a thriving, industrious entrepot and already the most cosmopolitan district in the most cosmopolitan city in the land. Among the few first-person accounts that exist from Chinese sailors of the period is an oral one given by Xie Qinggao, from the 1780s or 1790s. He reports being impressed by London's wealth, its imposing buildings and, perhaps not surprisingly for a sailor, the ready availability of prostitutes.

"There was a big cultural mix," says Clifford Pereira, visiting research assistant at the University of Hong Kong, who worked on the PortCities project in 2012, which investigated the origins of the Chinese community in London's docklands. "If you visited a pub in Limehouse in this era, you were likely to be served by an Indian from Goa with Portuguese family connections or greeted by an Irish landlord with Scandinavian connections. It was a real melting pot."

Although the Chinatown that sprang up in Limehouse endured for a century and a half, most local residents are oblivious to this aspect of the area's history. Today, nearby Limehouse Basin, once the scene of frantic dockside industry, where Chinese mariners might have sought employment or a passage home, is now a smart marina for luxury motor yachts, where the well-heeled can be seen enjoying an alfresco lunch



at a riverside restaurant owned by celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay.

At 17 Pennyfields, once the centre of the Shanghai community in Limehouse, a popular restaurant called Noodle Street is doing a steady trade in take-away dim sum. It has been open for 11 years, but has no connection to the area's historical Chinatown. "We had no idea," says manager Moon Trung. "It was a customer who told us this building used to be a pub in Chinatown."

Many of the 18th century Shanghaiese who likely frequented that pub would have been among the founders of London's original and now largely forgotten Chinatown. (It was large-scale emigration from Hong Kong in the 1960s that led to the emergence of the current Soho Chinatown, in the West End.)

But for all the ways these Chinese mariners were pioneers, they often found themselves stranded with little hope of returning to their homeland, at the mercy of freezing winters, destitution, racism and loneliness. Many had joined short-handed British trading ships, smuggled aboard in Macau and Guangzhou to work the passage. Pay was poor, disease was rampant, and just being on board contravened an Imperial Chinese decree outlawing emigration. Even worse, the employment of a Chinese on any return voyage from London was severely restricted by the British Navigation Acts, which generally prohibited the use of foreign ships, and required the employment of English and colonial mariners. Arriving in Limehouse in the late 18th century, these men found themselves trapped there.

"The sailors who came to Chinatown had no money, no English and no power, and they were under the control of the vessel's captain," says Barclay Price, author of *The Chinese in Britain: A History of Visitors and Settlers* (2019). "Most did not want or intend to stay in Britain, they had family at home in China and there was an aversion to being away from their ancestral home."

Most men signed on in the hope of earning enough to make the return voyage as a passenger, but with no job in London, no foreign language skills and no contacts, many became destitute. There was eventually a public outcry over the rising numbers of destitute Chinese and other Asian crewmen begging on the streets of Limehouse, and the East India Company felt compelled to provide lodging for them, taking

Right: a Chinatown cafe in London in 1911.

Picture: Getty Images

Left: Limehouse Causeway was once home to the British Cantonese community. Picture: Stuart Heaver

"THE SAILORS WHO CAME TO CHINATOWN HAD NO MONEY, NO ENGLISH AND NO POWER, AND THEY WERE UNDER THE CONTROL OF THE VESSEL'S CAPTAIN."



over a disused barracks, called King David's Fort, in neighbouring Shadwell, and converting it into a hostel for Asian seamen.

It is still possible to visit King David's Fort lane, just north of the Shadwell basin, though the fort is long gone. Kayaks and sailing dinghies are now stored where merchant ships from all over the British Empire once had their brimming cargoes unloaded onto the quayside by an army of dockyard workers.

In 1799, the East India Company brought in an English-speaking Chinese employee called John Anthony (his Chinese name is not known) to manage the barracks. Anthony recruited an English partner, Abraham Gole – who could speak Hindustani and had worked in India – to assist him at the hostels in overseeing the South Asian lascars.

Some months later, Anthony decided to marry Gole's daughter and settle in Britain. He was baptised and set up home with his new wife, Esther, in Angel Gardens, near the hostel. He subsequently became a respected and wealthy member of the local community and submitted a formal petition to parliament for the status of a British subject, so that he could purchase property with his wife. He bought a large mansion in Leyton, on the outskirts of London, but died a few months after his British citizenship was approved by an act of parliament in 1805.

Gradually, more Chinese began to settle outside the official hostel, which would close in 1830, but life was hard and impoverished seamen remained a public concern. There was the risk too of infectious disease introduced by ships from overseas. The first cholera epidemic in Britain started in the East End docks in 1832, and claimed 800 lives.

The Better Maintenance and Care of Lascars and other Asiatic Seamen Act was passed in 1814, and made legal provision for indigent Asian sailors to be provided for by the wealthy shipping companies that employed them. Later, some found themselves in the Strangers' Home for Asiatics, Africans and South Sea Islanders, opened in 1857 in nearby West India Dock Road.

The advent of steamships and the establishment of Hong Kong and the treaty ports after 1842 led to a



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rise in the number of Chinese mariners in Limehouse. As numbers swelled, local women became essential to the Chinese mariners establishing a recognisable Limehouse Chinatown (a term that was not widely used until about 1890).

"The men needed someone local to access local markets if they set up a business," says Pereira, "so they did the same as Portuguese merchants did in Indian Ocean ports and set up home with local women."

By the 1850s, many Chinese seamen were housed at the Oriental Quarters by the riverside in Shadwell. These modest lodging houses were frequently run by English women who often spoke Cantonese or Shanghai dialect. The women went by names such as Canton Kitty or Chinese Emma, and some offered gambling houses and opium rooms among guest services.

By 1890, two distinct Chinese communities were embedded in Limehouse. Northern Chinese and those speaking Shanghai dialect tended to live around Pennyfields to the east, while the Cantonese community, usually from Guangzhou or Hong Kong, lived closer to the docks in Limehouse Causeway.

Before the turn of the 20th century, the number

of Chinese in London was put as low as 100 people. The 1911 census reported 247 Chinese in the capital, rising to 337 by 1921, but the census numbers could be misleading, as they discounted about half the men of Chinatown who were mariners and often aboard ship for long periods.

Despite its small size, from the 1850s the Chinese community in Limehouse had been increasingly perceived as a source of cheap labour. Employment of Chinese workers by local shipping companies was vehemently opposed by the local seamen's union, which indulged in racist slurs and violent intimidation to combat what members saw as undercutting by foreigners.

In 1908, there were violent clashes at the nearby Board of Trade offices on East India Dock Road, when British seamen repeatedly attempted to prevent Chinese men from signing on for work. Police were called and had to escort Chinese seamen home, for their own safety. In 1911, British seamen rampaged through Cardiff's Chinatown and set fire to all 30 Chinese laundries there, as well as a number of Chinese boarding houses. These violent disturbances were



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tagged the Chinese laundry riots and spilled over into London's Chinatown, where windows in Limehouse Causeway were smashed by an angry mob.

By the early 20th century, old Chinatown had also become the subject of lurid newspaper reports and sensational depiction in popular literature and even Hollywood movies, where it was portrayed as an exotic and dissolute slum of brothels, gambling houses and opium dens. This was the world of *Limehouse Nights* (1916), a collection of short stories by novelist Thomas Burke, where crime, vice and social deprivation were rife, and vulnerable European women were led astray.

"Out of the coloured darkness of the Causeway stole the muffled wail of reed instruments and though every window was closely shuttered, between the joints shot jets of light and stealthy voices and you could hear the whisper of slippers and the stuttering steps of the satyr and the sadist," wrote Burke with his customary hyperbole.

One story in *Limehouse Nights* was made into the film *Broken Blossoms* (1919) by D.W. Griffith and the movie inspired *Limehouse Blues*, a jazz number from the early 1920s that became a standard. A few

years later in 1934, *Limehouse Blues* became the title of a Hollywood film set in and around the notorious London docks. This was also the murky and mythical world of novelist Sax Rohmer's fictional Chinese villain Dr Fu Manchu. This image of Limehouse Chinatown concocted by popular media offered the British public an exotic distraction from economic hardship, as well as a scapegoat on which to blame it.

"There was racial stigmatisation and Chinatown gained lots of notoriety," says Halima Khanom, heritage officer at the Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives. "Thomas Cook [the travel agent] organised bus tours so people could ogle at the community – it was consumption of Chinatown in a voyeuristic way."

The Tower Hamlets archives are filled with sensational Chinatown newspaper headlines from the early 20th century, when "newspapers of the period like the *East End News* and *East London Advertiser* were full of racial stereotyping, but that is just the way the British media reports on ethnic minorities", says Khanom.

In 1910, an official investigation was launched following complaints by a Miss Robinson, the headmistress of a local school, of two alleged cases of Chinese men cohabitating with underage English girls. No evidence was found, and the detective inspector in charge concluded that the average Chinese resident of Limehouse was of a "most peaceable inoffensive, harmless character: he is on good terms with his neighbours most of whom speak well of him. He is picturesque in a region where it is sadly needed."

Sober evidence and multiple reports of a peaceful, hard-working and self-contained multi-ethnic community did nothing to diminish the colourful portrayals of Chinatown.

"British perceptions of the Chinese were coloured by myths of Chinatown that were perpetuated by newspapers, books and films," says Price. "The myth was driven by the tabloid press that Chinese men were luring white women into prostitution in Chinatown – it was complete nonsense."

The sensational reporting and the mythical Limehouse Chinatown it reinforced gave Chinese people an unjustified negative image, and many later migrants avoided Chinatown because of the stigma associated with it, but leafing through old press cuttings at the Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, it is evident that Chinatown was also reported on as an important part of the East End community.

On February 21, 1942, for example, the *East End News* carried a report of how 14 Chinese sailors from Pennyfields lost their lives while serving in the British merchant navy. A Chinese ministerial visit to Limehouse was covered in 1915 and there are countless articles on Chinese farewell dinners, school events, businesses, weddings and funerals – all reported alongside the street battles, raids on gambling houses, feuds, drug trafficking rackets and the alleged scandals implicating young white women.

Chinatown had already started to fade in the 1930s as shipping in the London

docks declined. Then, during World War II, the area was flattened by bombs. The last bricks of this Chinatown were carted off by London slum clearance programmes in the 50s.

But for street names, few traces of Limehouse Chinatown remain. Just north of Pennyfields is Canton Street, connected to the south is Ming Street, not so far from Pekin Street.

Near the junction of East India Dock Road and Birchfield Street is the Chun Yee Society, established in 1906 and starting, as did some other Chinese organisations, as a "tong", secret societies, often with political links back to China. The Chun Yee Society remains a registered British charity, and offers a Sunday school facility to local youngsters.

In Limehouse Causeway, the historic dock buildings of Limehouse wharf, where the first Chinese arrived, have been restored in nearby Narrow Street, but even Number 21, once a popular Chinese grocery store, is now just an ordinary social-housing block.

Venture north into Salter Street, however, and there is a striking memorial to those pioneering Chinese immigrants and their legacy, a circular sculpture glinting in the intermittent spring sunshine, created in 1996 by artist Peter Dunn, to commemorate London's original Chinatown and its people.

The two giant dragons with burnished metal scales tower over a bus stop to commemorate "the early days", says Pereira. "Those East India Company sailors were essential to the establishment of Chinatown," he says, which also makes the sculpture a beacon of hope, or at least welcome, for those today who might choose to make a new kind of perilous journey, from a territory in southern China to the United Kingdom. ■



Picture: Getty Images



Picture: Getty Images



Picture: Stuart Heaver

Top, left: Limehouse docks, in 1872.

Top, right: *Opium Smoking – The Lascar's Room* (1872), inspired by Charles Dickens' 1870 novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

Right: the Chinese Freemason Society in Limehouse in 1927.

Right, centre: Pennyfields, London Chinatown, in the early 20th century.

Far right: a dragon statue in Salter Street, Limehouse, commemorating the old Chinatown.