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Article

# Dockers in Poplar: The Legacy of the London County Council’s Replanning of Poplar, East London

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## Abstract

Using Sydney Harpley’s sculpture, *The Dockers*, installed in Trinity Gardens on the Lansbury Estate in Poplar, this article will examine the London County Council’s reimagining of a key centre in London’s East End. Installed in September 1962, these *Dockers* sit within the post-war planned vision of the capital and are, as Frank Mort describes, “cultural visions” of a new London. For hundreds of years, Poplar served as part of the Port of London’s industrial heartland. After the Second World War, the London County Council assumed the River Thames would continue to be the heartbeat of Britain’s industry. The Port of London was the country’s largest and busiest port. The London County Council recognised that, in London, the most depressed and congested areas with bad housing housed working people. However, by referencing one part of the culture of this part of London, the London County Council was relying on a homogeneity of experience, difficult to defend in 1960s London. Using the initial reception of *The Dockers*, as well as the sculpture’s subsequent vandalism and destruction, this article shall analyse how the London County Council’s vision for post-war Poplar changed through the rapid deindustrialisation of the 1980s, through to the rapid gentrification of the area in the 21st century.

## Keywords

deindustrialisation; Docklands; East London; gentrification; housing; Poplar; Sydney Harpley

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

This article uses the sculpture of two dockers by Royal Academician Sydney Harpley (1927–1992) to examine the London County Council’s (LCC) vision for post-war Poplar, asserting that this sculpture of Londoners be read alongside the LCC’s actual planning policies and realisation of a rebuilt post-war Poplar (Figure 1). No longer in situ, these *Dockers* were part of the LCC’s “wide range of cultural visions” for post-war London (Mort, 2004, p. 123). This area of London, dependent on the docks and associated industries for centuries, was an important area for the Port of London’s trade and commerce coming in and out of the docks. The docker was a familiar figure in Poplar and sat alongside a collection of other human-figurative sculptures on housing estates in London such as neighbours and family groups. The LCC harnessed the

bodies of ordinary dockers, in sculptural form, to communicate its policies on housing and community.

This article uses Harpley’s *Dockers* to examine the changes in Poplar from the post-war era to the present. Much of this change is linked to the collapse of industry on the docks and Poplar’s proximity to the financial district of Canary Wharf, constructed on derelict dockland. The vandalising of *The Dockers* represents the changing role of the docker in Poplar from its installation in 1962 through the subsequent decades of deindustrialisation, regeneration of nearby Canary Wharf and 21st-century gentrification.

## 2. The London County Council’s Replanning of Poplar

Poplar is a district in East London, within the old County of London (which existed between 1889 and 1965), what



**Figure 1.** Sydney Harpley’s *The Dockers*, Lansbury Estate, installed in 1962. Source: Photograph of Sydney Harpley, *The Dockers* (1962).

is now referred to as Inner London. It remains part of Greater London and is within the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, both created in 1965. Pre-war Poplar was a working-class, relatively poor area, with much of its employment reliant on the docks and associated industries, described as “practically unrelieved depression, so pitiful was the poverty, so inescapable the drabness” (Tinton, 1938, p. 929). The 1943 County of London Plan clearly set out the defects of modern London and served as the template for post-war reconstruction not just in London, but across the country. Within the plan, the “defects of modern London” were listed as inadequate housing, lack of open space, traffic congestion, and mixed development—all present in Poplar (Forshaw & Abercrombie, 1943, p. 3). Subsequent to the County of London Plan, Poplar’s Lansbury Estate—the location of *The Dockers*—formed one of 11 neighbourhoods of the Stepney and Poplar Area of Comprehensive Development identified in the *Administrative County of London Development Plan 1951 Analysis* (LCC, 1951a). Lansbury became neighbourhood number nine (Dunnett, 1951, p. 28). This represented a reimagining of the three neighbourhoods of Stepney, Bow, and Poplar; “the overcrowded, insanitary and obsolete buildings, with their drab, monotonous and cramped surroundings were to be swept away” (Dunnett, 1951, p. 6).

After the Second World War, London’s economic power and industry were compromised due to bomb damage. An additional threat to this was the depopulation of London: Between 1919 and 1939, the County of London’s population fell by 502,000 (Abercrombie, 1945, p. 27). Though it was essential that the LCC rebuilt

London to attract and maintain young, fit working people to work in its industries, such as the docks, the LCC also aimed to thin out the population of London to ease overcrowding. Its aim was to take control of depopulation to ensure London did not lose too many young families and people of working age; “the time has come to capitalise this gradual decline, and to produce such conditions as shall induce the young married people to remain and bring up families in what should be attractive urban surroundings” (Forshaw & Abercrombie, 1943, p. 33). Using human-figurative sculptures, the LCC attempted to reassert a London identity in a city depopulating and bomb-scarred, reassuring the “borough’s best elements” (Forshaw & Abercrombie, 1943, p. 8) that London was a desirable place to remain and bring up a family. Sculptures such as *The Dockers* existed alongside images in films and publications on London’s planning distributed by the LCC, and offered a “rich fantasy life, in that they dramatized elaborate and highly inventive images of the city, as much as actual policies for the rebuilding of London” (Mort, 2004, p. 124). In reality, post-war rebuilding was slow, leaving many families to take the active decision to move away from London, for which a few sculptures, slow rehousing, and living amongst building sites for years would not reverse. Hatherley (2020, p. 86) suggests this depopulation did not succeed as the LCC intended, describing how the LCC’s post-war programme of depopulation went even further in practice as the New Towns absorbed a large amount of London’s skilled working class, leading to the population of London falling to 6.8 million in 1981 from 8.6 million in 1939.

The LCC's post-war replanning of Poplar was dominated by the Lansbury Estate, "a monument to the London County Council" (Allen, 1994, p. 122), in terms of its size as well as featuring in the national Festival of Britain Live Architecture Exhibition in 1951 (Dunnett, 1951). The Lansbury Estate offered a vision of future planning and a marked departure from the mainly 19th-century housing stock. Lansbury represented a deliberate improvement in the housing of the working-class people of Poplar and "the elevation of low-income housing" (Liscombe, 2006, p. 322). The Lansbury Estate was planned in four stages, the first being for the 1951 exhibition. Atypically of much of the LCC's planning, the Lansbury Estate was designed by different private firms. The housing of the east site was designed by Geoffrey Jellicoe, the shopping centre and marketplace by Frederick Gibberd, Ricardo Street nursery and primary schools by Yorke, Rosenberg, and Mardall, and the Roman Catholic Church by Adrian Gilbert Scott (Dunnett, 1951, pp. 13–21). Much of the Lansbury is relatively low-rise, reflecting a post-war modernism sympathetic to a soft, vernacular appearance:

The social housing at Lansbury achieved its aim of being an intimate village by setting housing in leafy areas, much with their own gardens or else immediate access to green space, predominantly low rise and small scale. Access between different groups of houses was through a succession of green, landscape spaces, which were closely integrated and acted like village greens. (Atkinson, 2008, p. 31)

### 3. The London County Council's Patronage of the Arts Programme

Sydney Harpley's *The Dockers* was installed by the LCC in Trinity Gardens, adjacent to Trinity Church on the Lansbury Estate in 1962 as part of the LCC's patronage of the arts scheme. The scheme formalised the LCC's practise of installing sculptures and murals on housing estates (as well as schools, further education colleges, and parks), a process that had already begun in the immediate post-war years (Pereira, 2009). In the financial year 1956–1957, the LCC devoted £20,000 a year to the patronage of artworks (Jackson, 1965, p. 224). This figure was arrived at as a proportion of the total rebuilding costs: "The approximate value of new architectural work and open-space development in 1954–55 was £20,000,000; we think that £20,000 a year would be a reasonable sum for the council to set aside for the purposes we have in mind" (LCC, 1956, p. 205).

The 1948 Local Government Act enabled local authorities to finance cultural endeavours such as drama, music, and the visual arts (Pereira, 2015). Thus, the LCC began installing works on housing estates with early examples being Peter Laszlo Peri's Lambeth sculptural reliefs, *Following the Leader (Memorial to the Children Killed in the Blitz)*, *Boys Playing Football*, and *Mother and Children*

*Playing* (installed between 1949 and 1952 on the South Lambeth Estate and Vauxhall Gardens Estate). The conditions of the welfare state introduced new housing, schools, and hospitals and enabled artworks to be shown in a new variety of settings, with contemporary art reaching a wider audience than ever before. In 1953, the New Town of Harlow established the first permanently sited outdoor collection of sculptures (Pereira, 2015). The LCC also held open-air sculpture exhibitions every three years from 1948 to 1963, allowing the public to walk amongst and touch the sculptures (LCC, 1948, 1951b, 1954, 1957, 1960, 1963). The South Bank exhibition of the 1951 Festival of Britain also played a key role in establishing outdoor contemporary sculpture as part of the post-war landscape of London. Sculptures were installed as part of the exhibition's external design by sculptors, including Siegfried Charoux, Henry Moore, Mitzi Cunliffe, and Barbara Hepworth (Cox, 1951, p. 90).

The LCC called on the Arts Council to assist in the patronage of the arts scheme, namely the director of art and members of the Arts Panel (LCC Advisory Body on Art Acquisition, 1964). Acknowledging its lack of artistic expertise, the LCC felt:

The council could not responsibly carry out a sustained programme of expenditure of £20,000 a year without advice which (a) embraced a comprehensive and expert knowledge of the world of art and (b) was able to provide a substitute for the exercise of personal taste which is not possible in a corporate body...The council has two things at stake, its reputation and a considerable amount of invested money. It will suffer in both respects if it is found in a year or two to have made unsatisfactory purchases through pursuing bad policies. (LCC Advisory Body on Art Acquisition, n.d.)

The LCC and the Arts Council often disagreed over what artists to use, resulting in a "war of taste" (Garlake, 1993). Each artwork considered had to go through the relevant LCC department, then the General Purposes Committee, and then finally the Arts Council sub-committee (Garlake, 1998, p. 53). "Differences arose from the incompatibility of social and aesthetic criteria; for the Arts Council 'standards' were the pre-eminent value, while for the LCC the interests of the 'man in the street' remained supreme" (Garlake, 1998, p. 55). Harpley's *The Dockers* represented a compromise between these two agendas. Harpley was an established figurative artist, having first displayed his work *Seated Girl* at the Royal Academy in 1954 (Buckman, 1998, p. 542). Already a member of the Royal Society of Sculptors, he became a fellow the year after *The Dockers* was installed, in 1963 (Art UK, n.d.). By depicting two typical working-class figures, the LCC's desire to install art for the "man in the street" was fulfilled.

This "war of taste," and the adoption of the Arts Council in the LCC's patronage of the arts scheme offer the question of whether *The Dockers* and other artworks

installed by the LCC were “good art.” Whether or not works of art are good is highly subjective. However, by consulting the Arts Council and working with artists that were royal academicians, members of professional societies such as the Royal Society of Sculptors, and had established careers before working with the LCC, the LCC was clearly engaging with questions of quality and taste. The art and housing of the LCC was a top-down activity. Confident in its “expert paternalism” (Matless, 1993, pp. 167–178), the LCC used artists who were from outside these communities. Though some of the artists the LCC used were working or lower-middle class and from London such as William Mitchell and Sydney Harpley, the LCC’s activities differed greatly from the collaborative community work of the later Greater London Council and associated organisations such as Greenwich Mural Workshop and the Whitechapel Gallery’s Education Department in the 1970s and 1980s (Crook & Steedman, 2013, pp. 8–9). Harpley was the son of a cabinet maker and electrician, born in Fulham and raised in Dagenham. Through his professional status gained through his art school training at Hammersmith School of Art and then the Royal College of Art (Chris Beetles Gallery, 2022), Harpley would have been deemed a relative outsider in Poplar.

The LCC installed human-figurative sculptures including dockers in Poplar, mother and child figures such as Franta Belsky’s *The Lesson* on the Avebury Estate in 1959, and neighbours as in Siegfried Charoux’s *The Neighbours* on Highbury Quadrant Estate in 1959 and Uli Nimptsch’s *Neighbourly Encounter* on the Silwood Estate in 1964. These depictions of “types” of citizens, posed within the landscape of their housing scheme, are caricatures of Londoners. As Jolivet (2009, p. 22) describes, regarding the works in the Lion and Unicorn Pavilion in the South Bank exhibition of the Festival of Britain, “national character is replaced by national caricature.” Thus, with *The Dockers*, London’s character is replaced by a London caricature—the LCC’s idea of Londoners. By depicting dockers in Poplar, the LCC was appealing to a specific section of the community. Typical of much of the country’s post-war planning and appeals to citizenship, “justifications for the proposed community-based, post-war reconstruction were based around appeals to a shared national history and national identity” (Allen, 1994, p. 231). This is problematic to modern eyes as it excludes those who do not share that common heritage and culture. This commonality of experience in a city as diverse and varied as London, even in Poplar with the predominance of the docks, is hard to defend: In 1944, it was estimated that around 60% of Greater London’s population were born elsewhere (Abercrombie, 1945, p. 27).

#### 4. Sydney Harpley’s *The Dockers*

*The Dockers* stood larger than life-size, at 8’6” tall, and depicted two dockers bearing a heavy weight, manoeuvred from a crane. The bodies of the two men merge

with the joint effort, standing as a monument to the strength of the docker, showing the hard, physical work involved in manually unloading cargo from ships. It is difficult to judge how readable the sculpture was to the people of Poplar as the sculpture no longer exists and so I have never walked around it, viewing it from all angles. However, in Figure 2, it is possible to see the left arm and face of the docker on the left. His arm melts into the load, his face is pressed against it, showing a strained expression. Although not a realistic portrayal of two men performing this particular task, initially it would have had a plaque on the plinth with the title of the artwork. Thus, although the piece appeared visually ambiguous and confusing with its heavy, unclear forms, it would have been clear to those who stopped to consider the work that this was a pair of dockers.

It would be a mistake to deem the residents of this traditional, industrial area as incapable of appreciating or understanding art. Indeed, some dockers were also artists. Port of London Authority docker A. V. Conn was an artist who died in 1973 aged 76, and that year saw an exhibition of his paintings at London Dock House, Wapping. He used both the countryside and his life working on the river as his subject. Conn was also a regular contributor to the Port of London Authority’s staff arts and crafts exhibitions (“Exhibition is tribute to docker,” 1974). Docker and artist Terry Scales was employed mainly at the Surrey Commercial Docks after the Second World War and, like Conn, took inspiration from his working environment. Scales produced work for the newsletter of the Surrey Commercial Docks including portraits of the dockers as they retired (White, 2016).

*The Dockers* stood upon a plinth—still visible today—on a slightly raised part of Trinity Gardens, near the newly-built Trinity Church (Figure 2). A V1 flying bomb had destroyed the original Trinity Church (Ward, 2016, p. 100). Also, just to the west of the site where *The Dockers* was installed, a V2 bomb hit the houses at the corner of Upper North Street and East India Dock Road (Ward, 2016, p. 100). Thus, *The Dockers* was surrounded by newly built housing and a church with a community hall attached, setting these traditional dockers against their contemporary architectural surroundings.

*The Dockers* was unveiled in September 1962 at a cost of £1,200, out of the LCC’s annual budget of £20,000 (LCC, 1956, p. 576). Trinity Gardens was a newly created green space on the corner of East India Dock Road and Upper North Street. *The Dockers* was made of glass-fibre reinforced resin with a concrete centre, a material typical of many of the LCC’s artworks, the use of expensive bronze being an exception. Despite the aforementioned tension, *The Dockers* was one of the most dynamic of the LCC’s housing estates’ human-figurative sculptures, with its “exciting cantilevered form” (“The dockers come to dockland,” 1962).

Situated northeast of the industrial Isle of Dogs in East London, and thus near to the West India, East India, Millwall, and Poplar docks, the figure of the docker



**Figure 2.** Empty plinth of Sydney Harpley’s *The Dockers*, Lansbury Estate.

was an obvious choice for Poplar. Though Harpley was commissioned by the LCC to produce a piece for Trinity Gardens, it seems the choice of subject was his own (“The dockers come to dockland,” 1962). The LCC emphasised the appropriateness of the subject to this area:

Mr. Harpley’s choice of subject—“the dockers”—is particularly appropriate as Trinity Garden is situated only a short distance from the West India Docks and less than a mile from the East India Docks. Mr. Harpley spent many hours sketching in and around the docks before finally arriving at his design of two dockers manoeuvring a load suspended from a crane. (LCC Parks Department Press Office, 1962)

It seems the work was not based on any particular sketch, but, according to Harpley, was “an interpretation based on the atmosphere I felt” (“Untitled newspaper clipping,” 1962). Harpley was well known for sculptures of young girls such as dancers, acrobats, and girls on swings, all works suggesting movement (Chris Beetles Gallery, 2022), such as the aforementioned *Seated Girl*. Looking back on Harpley’s career from 1987, Chris Beetles (Chris Beetles Gallery represents the estate of Sydney Harpley) remarked, “the balletic beauty of youth and fitness continue to concern [Harpley] as he translates the vigour and delicacy of the female body into the acceptably tangible solid bronze” (Beetles, 1987). Harpley did sculpt male figures, such as a portrait memorial to Jan Christian Smuts

and busts of Edward Heath, Lee Kuan Yew, and Prince Albert of Monaco (Buckman, 1998, p. 542). The movement and dynamism Harpley favoured for young girls is, with *The Dockers*, deployed rather less successfully as the heavy, awkward movement suggestive of the toil of the dockworker. This adds poignancy to *The Dockers*, as:

The difficult moment when a movement fails, adapts or changes direction is increasingly explored. So it is imperfection as well as perfection that interests [Harpley] more and more and this gives the figures a tension, an added reality to which the eye and heart can relate. (Beetles, 1987)

The awkwardness of *The Dockers*—at once valorising the figure of the docker and also showing his awkward, heavy toil—reflected the nature of this commission, common to other LCC commissions. On the one hand, the LCC commissioned or purchased a work to highlight a new housing estate that had resonance with the local population. On the other, the artist exercised their skill and imagination which, in this case (perhaps with hindsight), reflected tension and vulnerability. The two men are shown completely consumed and anonymised by their work. Perhaps Harpley formed an impression of dock workers when he sat sketching amongst them and expressed it through the work.

Dockers “took a pride in their strength and skill and bred their sons to the same calling” (Turnbull & Wass,

1994, p. 491). These industrious dockers, completely absorbed by their toil, represented the ideal, docile worker. This sculpture gives no voice to the real figure of the docker, at this time, unionised, vocal, and proud. Instead, the LCC was “privileging a heightened moral or ethical idea of how London would function in the future” (Mort, 2004, p. 123).

Local paper the *Stratford Express* featured contemporary local feelings and opinions. Despite press often featuring the more vocal, often negative, observer, press articles provide an interesting insight into *The Docker's* reception. The *Stratford Express* of 14 September 1962 gives a rather underwhelmed report of the unveiling: “The rain-soaked curtains slid away and unveiled two ‘unwanted’ dockers” (“Untitled newspaper clipping,” 1962). The Minister of Trinity Congregational Church (the church adjacent to the sculpture), Reverend Jack Andrews, is quoted in the newspaper: “It’s too near the church—People might think it’s got something to do with us. Still, the schoolboys and pigeons will soon make short work of it” (“Untitled newspaper clipping,” 1962). Docker Bill Wilson said, “The general feeling is of disgusted amusement. Lots of the boys can’t believe it” (“Untitled newspaper clipping,” 1962). Jack Dash, a figure well-known on the docks for his trade union activity, diplomatically said, “It’s nice to know there’s a tribute to our physical labours. I’m pleased our services to the community are being recognised” (“Untitled newspaper clipping,” 1962).

### 5. Dockers and the London County Council’s Planning and Reconstruction Message

Harpley’s sculptural depiction of dockers was a key part of the LCC’s planning and reconstruction message. Dockers, as well as being relevant and important to this part of London, were seen, even as late as the 1970s, as “among the elite of the British work force, with restricted (family) entry into an occupation which was well paid, relatively secure and for the most part interesting and enjoyable” (Turnbull & Wass, 1994, pp. 492–493). Depictions of workers and industry were prominent in the post-war period: In 1950, the Artists International Association held the exhibition “Coalmining” dedicated to depictions of coalminers (Lindey, 2018, p. 137). The LCC installed Siegfried Charoux’s *The Neighbours* on the Highbury Quadrant Estate in 1959 in front of one of the estate’s housing blocks. These neighbourly figures were workers, like Harpley’s *Dockers*—Charoux “certainly got a feeling for men who work with their hands at dirty jobs” (“Savouries and sweets,” 1959).

The theme of the docks and the figure of the docker complemented the LCC’s emphasis on working people in London. Such paternal romanticism sat alongside the wider cultural “valorisation” of working people in this period (Garlake, 2001, p. 3). Much of the replanning of London set out in the *County of London Plan* concentrated on the more industrial and working-class areas of London, including areas in East London

such as Poplar. These are the areas that much of the four defects (Forshaw & Abercrombie, 1943, pp. 3–7) of London outlined in the *County of London Plan* applied to: “Constructed as the ultimate urban nightmare, badly bombed during the War, yet inhabited by self-sacrificing, working-class families, the East End had potent and ready symbolism for LCC reconstruction plans” (Allen, 1994, p. 182). Both *The Dockers* and the Lansbury Estate communicated the LCC’s ethos.

Across the road from, and contemporary to, *The Dockers*, the LCC installed another artwork inspired by the docks on the Birchfield Estate. In an underpass in the housing block, Gorsefield House, is a black and white tiled mural showing the boats and cranes of the docks—again, emphasising the industrial nature of this area (Figure 3). This was also installed by the LCC but produced under the LCC’s Design Consultant Scheme, which involved the LCC employing two design consultants, William Mitchell and Anthony Hollaway, to produce artwork for LCC sites (Pereira, 2009). LCC design consultant Anthony Hollaway collaborated with architect Oliver Cox on the mural (Pereira, 2009, p. 112). Architect Walter Bor discussed the docks and dock workers when working on the Lansbury Estate in the 1950s in an interview from 1992, explaining the special and specific considerations of post-war planning and reconstruction in the East End:

The docks at that time were still thriving. The London docks [were] among the most important in the world still. And the dockers made up a very high percentage of the population. So they had their jobs there, and they wanted to live nearby and so on...we tried to bear in mind the kind of people who would be living there. (Allen, 1994, pp. 184–185)

The *County of London Plan* discussed industry throughout, revealing the importance of London as an industrial city in the post-war years (Forshaw & Abercrombie, 1943, pp. 84–98, 126–135, 177). Indeed, the *County of London Plan* described, “In nothing is London more itself than in its industry” (Forshaw & Abercrombie, 1943, p. 5). The LCC recognised that in London the most depressed and congested areas with bad housing housed working people, such as Poplar:

There is the more deep-rooted social evil that so much of London’s industry has been dependant on the existence near at hand of low-income wage earners. The demands for casual dock labour, for low-wage cleaners, in offices, or for low-wage railway workers have forced the development of areas in which the houses were as cheap as the labour. An old and decayed labourer dies and is buried, the house lives on. (Carter & Goldfinger, 1945, p. 22)

The docker, so familiar in Poplar, was used to communicate the outrage about bad housing as well as the LCC’s plans to improve housing. Harpley’s *Dockers*



**Figure 3.** Anthony Hollaway with Oliver Cox’s Docklands mural, Gorsefield House, Birchfield Estate, 1960s.

communicated this message on the Lansbury Estate by emphasising the LCC’s new housing at Lansbury. By providing housing near to the docks, the LCC recognised the casual nature of dock labour, acknowledging that dock workers had to be near their place of work both morning and afternoon to attend the “call-on” (Dash, 1995, pp. 54–56). By providing good quality council housing, as at the Lansbury Estate, the LCC tried to contribute to the quality of life for these workers so essential to the economy of London.

## 6. Post-Industrial Poplar

With the establishment of the National Dock Labour Scheme in 1947 and the results of the Devlin Committee in 1965 (Turnbull & Wass, 1994, p. 491), the once casualised nature of dock work became more secure and lucrative. In the words of an ex-docker, “It was never just a job—it was always much more than that. Being a docker was a way of life. It was the greatest game in the world” (Turnbull & Wass, 1994, p. 487). Indeed, two years after *The Dockers* was installed, the London docks saw their best year, when trade exceeded 61 million tonnes (Port of London Authority, 2022).

However, between 1978 and 1981, over a quarter of the area’s 37,000 jobs were lost (Foster, 1992, p. 172). Containerisation meant that ships could no longer come upstream as far as the London docks, where the river is narrow and winding, and the docks

were neither deep nor wide enough for container ships. In the 1960s, deep water berths were built at Tilbury, further downstream, shifting focus away from London. Containerisation required fewer workers and the need for warehouses disappeared, causing a significant change in the infrastructure, location, and working patterns of the docks (Port of London Authority, 2022).

Following years of different, competing ideas for the increasingly derelict Docklands area, the London Dockland Development Corporation (LDDC) was formed in 1981 to manage the regeneration of the area. The LDDC’s aim was to re-brand the Docklands, attract investment and a wealthier clientele, and “project an image of a future in which the squalor of Docklands is transformed into an alluring environment” (Ball, 1996, p. 99). The wealthier incomers often termed “yuppies” (young, upwardly mobile professionals) were in stark contrast to the longer-term, dockland residents, “incoming yuppies compose images of status, of pioneering, and of the ‘Venice of the North’” (Massey, 1993, p. 145), a reference to the early LDDC’s desire for the Docklands to have the feel of Venice with its waterways. With the deregulation of the financial markets in The City in 1986 and the need for office space coinciding with the opening up of industrial land in the London Docklands, the nearby Isle of Dogs underwent intense regeneration, creating office space (Ball, 1996, p. 97).

The collapse of the docks and associated industries and the subsequent actions of the LDDC impacted



people in areas like Poplar and the nearby Isle of Dogs. People had “seen their whole world changed before them” (Foster, 1992, p. 170). Whereas the LCC planned for local people, the “borough’s best elements” (Forshaw & Abercrombie, 1943, p. 8), to make inner London attractive enough for working-class people to stay and not leave for a better standard of living in the New Towns, the LDDC and Thatcher government of the 1980s certainly did not:

The government has favoured a “demand-led” approach with the emphasis on creating a new local economy attractive to firms and prospective resident from outside the area. In terms of employment strategy the Docklands UDC [Urban Development Corporation] has switched emphasis from attempting to provide manufacturing jobs towards office and warehousing schemes and retail complexes. In the housing field, UDC efforts have focused on the private sector construction of owner-occupied dwellings while waiting lists for council housing have risen. (Pacione, 1990, p. 197)

The housing policies of the LDDC created community tension and reflected the LDDC’s desire to change the demographic of the Docklands area: “In the LDDC’s housing policy the private sector dominates. This reflects the LDDC’s redevelopment philosophy which aims at changing the social character of the region through the attraction of young professional groups” (Page, 1987, pp. 61–63).

Whilst the LDDC was interested in retaining some of the dock infrastructures, such as cranes, warehouses, and dock basins, to sell the area on its history and waterfront location as well as maintaining “key environmental resources of the area” (Ball, 1996, p. 99), less concession was given to the people and culture of the area that Sydney Harpley’s *Dockers* represented. The loss of jobs in the area covered by the LDDC was devastating. The replacement of dock-related jobs with jobs in the finance sector, attracting huge wealth to the developments at nearby Isle of Dogs, was supposed to benefit areas like Poplar with a “trickle-down” effect (Foster, 1992, p. 172). This is not to say that dock work was unskilled, rather the contrary, but it required a different set of skills to ones required in the finance sector:

The job was also highly skilled and specialised according to the cargo to be handled or the equipment to be used, contrary to the assumption made by many observers that brute force was the essential and exclusive requisite for dock work. (Turnbull & Wass, 1994, p. 490)

Ex-dockers found it hard to transfer their skills so specific to dock work to the finance and service sector jobs created at Canary Wharf. “Moreover, high unemployment locally, and the ‘stigma’ of being a former docker, pro-

duced a redundant population who found it very difficult to secure alternative employment” (Turnbull & Wass, 1994, p. 488). A chasm opened between long-term residents and the aims and aspirations of the LDDC. The LDDC, unlike an elected body such as a local council, was not democratically controlled—a criticism often aimed at the LDDC (Page, 1987, p. 63). Reg Ward, the chief executive of the LDDC, said of local people’s anxieties that the changes were not benefitting them:

Sadly, it would have been hopeless to assume that we could have persuaded local people that their future did not lie with a continuation or recreation of the past, but in an entirely new range of economic activities that they simply could not see themselves as suited for and that had nothing to do with their aspirations. (Foster, 1992, pp. 173–174)

Much of the building work on the Isle of Dogs, including the Docklands Light Railway and the Limehouse Link Road tunnel affected people in areas like Poplar with noise from the construction. People in Poplar and nearby Limehouse took proceedings against the LDDC and Olympia & Yorke for the nuisance and, in some cases, ill health caused by the building works (Foster, 1992, pp. 175–176; see also Dyer, 1991, p. 602). In 1990, residents formed a pressure group, South Poplar and Limehouse Action for Secure Housing (SPLASH), to fight the negative effects of construction work in their area (Philo, 1993, p. 195).

## 7. The Vandalism of Sydney Harpley’s *The Dockers*

In September 1981, the *East London Advertiser* showed *The Dockers* being hosed down by two firemen. The corresponding article explained that, for the last 10 years or so, people had been making holes in the sculpture using chisels and drills. Vandals had stuffed kindling into the holes and set it alight, hence the firemen. A Tower Hamlets Council spokesman said that since the council took over the sculpture in 1965, it had been damaged three times (“Fireman damp down all that remains of *The Dockers*,” 1981). The sculpture was pictured in John Boughton’s blog in 2015 with its legs remaining shortly before the sculpture was removed; in 2016 when I searched for it, it was gone (Boughton, 2015). Thus, the sculpture was vandalised from the early 1970s to the 21st century, reflecting the period of Poplar’s deindustrialisation (with the nearby East India Docks closing in 1967) and recent changes relating to its proximity to Canary Wharf. Common to many public works installed by the LCC and other bodies, *The Dockers* reception was “not one of unmixed and immediate adulation” (Pereira, 2015). Similarly, Henry Moore’s *Family Group* installed in Harlow in 1956 was vandalised resulting in Moore having to repair it (Pereira, 2015).

*The Dockers’* vandalism and attack are of particular interest as dockers were so specific to that area and

by reinforcing Poplar's relationship to the docks through building the Lansbury Estate and installing *The Dockers*, the LCC unwittingly bound that area's future with the collapse of industry on the docks. For many local people, the docks had shaped their lives over a period of 200 years: "It was something with which they identified, and in which their hard physical labour had played an important part" (Foster, 1992, p. 174). The destruction and attack of Sydney Harpley's *Dockers* sit within wider protests from residents about the changing nature both of their area and the type of employment on offer: "It would appear that the cherished hope of urban revitalisation through 'capitalism with a social conscience' is a chimera" (Pacione, 1990, p. 197).

Even as the docks were closing, dock work was being undermined in the Thatcherite era through the dismantling of the National Dock Labour Scheme and the deregulation of dock work, undermining the long-fought for employment rights and protections of dock work (Turnbull & Wass, 1994). The continued vandalism of the sculpture perhaps typified the much-reviled "yuffie" (young, urban failures, failing to get a job, a contrast to the yuppie), "a group of youths denied access to the fruits of economic growth" (Short, 1989, pp. 174–175). Community tensions arose with the obvious division of wealthy incomers living cheek-by-jowl with residents disenfranchised by the area's deindustrialisation. For instance, the Isle of Dogs Neighbourhood Committee pointed out that the average local household income was £8,500, but a two-bedroom property in the area was £185,000, making the new, private housing in the area unaffordable to local people (Short, 1989, p. 185). Tensions and protest were reflected in acts such as the spray-painting of incomer's expensive cars (Massey, 1993, p. 145). The 10 September 1988 was even declared "National Anti-Yuppie Day" (Short, 1989, pp. 185–186). The sculpture's ongoing vandalism embodied the experience of living within the shadow of rapid deindustrialisation and "one of the most important and controversial urban redevelopment schemes in Western Europe" (Page, 1987, p. 63).

The destruction of *The Dockers* coincided with the interruption of the LCC's vision of Poplar and Poplar people. No longer the "planners' visions as complex social fantasies about the city" (Mort, 2004, p. 150), *The Dockers* became out of date and a source of frustration—or irrelevance. Indeed, similar acts of vandalism were encouraged to discourage "yuppies" from moving into the Docklands area. In 1987, a letter in the *East London Advertiser* observed:

I was delighted the other day when sitting with my younger sister on the Isle of Dogs and saw some youngsters ripping up newly planted trees and using them to attack yuppie homes. Hopefully some young people locally will still have some fight in them and will repel these new Eastenders by making life unbearable for them. (Short, 1989, p. 187)

## 8. Poplar Today

Poplar, despite being less than a mile from the finance and banks of Canary Wharf has, for the past few decades, seemed a world away from that wealth. However, "Canary Wharf is coming for Poplar at last" (Burrows, 2019). Controversially, Poplar has seen recent attention and focus on some of its housing: post-war council housing built for the local, working-class population by some of the most famous architects of the day. Poplar's Balfron Tower was designed by Ernő Goldfinger and opened in 1968, and Robin Hood Gardens was designed by Alison and Peter Smithson and finished in 1972. Tensions have arisen between regenerating the housing stock for local, existing residents and selling the housing of Poplar on its fashionable, brutalist aesthetic and proximity to Canary Wharf (Burrows, 2019). Much of this change has been down to the organisation, Poplar Housing and Regeneration Community Association (better known as Poplar HARCA). Poplar HARCA has been accused of gentrifying Poplar through selling off assets such as Balfron tower: "Where once Balfron looked out over declining docks, it now winks at the towers of Canary Wharf, whose bankers are a target audience for the new flats" (Wainwright, 2022).

## 9. Conclusion

The destruction of *The Dockers*, their physical attack, occurred alongside the decimation of industry in Poplar, and the anger and community tensions that arose from that rapid change. The LCC isolated these sculptural dockers in a world that fell away around them as, unbeknownst to the post-war LCC, the docks in London would quickly become redundant. Indeed, council housing historian John Boughton describes the Lansbury Estate and the impending closure of the docks in the area around Poplar as "less the first breath of a new world than the dying gasp of the old" (Boughton, 2018, p. 101). This joining of the Poplar docker to the Lansbury Estate, with the hindsight of a deindustrialised London, shows how Sydney Harpley's *Dockers* were "at best ill at ease in the present, and doomed in the future" (Stedman Jones, 2017, p. 277). East India Dock, near the Lansbury Estate and Sydney Harpley's *Dockers*, was the first of the London docks to close, in 1967. The rest of the London docks followed, culminating in the closure of the Royal Docks in 1982, leaving 22 km<sup>2</sup> of land derelict (Keith & Pile, 1993, p. 12). Perhaps Harpley's *Dockers*, like the 1980s "yuppies" and "yuffies," became just an irrelevant "contemporary urban folk-tale" (Short, 1989, p. 174).

Poplar, traditionally working-class and industrial, has become expensive and desirable to live in due to its proximity to Canary Wharf and the financial jobs based there. *The Docker's* empty plinth (Figure 2) serves as a poignant reminder of the industry and community in Poplar and the changes that were forced upon it. The absent

sculptural dockers now bear witness to the increasing unaffordability of Poplar, exemplified by the commodification of Poplar's council housing stock. In July 2022, the newly refurbished apartments in Poplar's Balfron Tower went on sale. Whereas the LCC built the Lansbury Estate and Balfron Tower for local, working-class people to provide affordable council housing for people working in the nearby docks and associated industries, now Balfron Tower is sold on its proximity to Canary Wharf, City Airport, and Central London. Prices start at £375,000 (Londonecastle, 2022).

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### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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