

Where did she first set foot ?

Where was it?

For years I had read the story of Marie Madeleine's arrival in England. She had left Ostend on 8th November but took two days for the journey and arrived in London on the 10th after a storm tossed voyage and landed in a fog. The fog coming in across the marshes would have been bad enough at the best of times but in November – the very thought makes you feel cold and shivering. Imagine what it must have been like for those who had survived a storm tossed voyage, spoke virtually no English, had to disembark, find a hotel, somewhere to change their clothes then assume a different persona and find a vehicle to take them to their destination. Their destination was an address written on a piece of paper. We don't know how long all this took but by the time they had found their way around, stumbled into a room where some hundreds of men were seated in a circle in the dark some time must have elapsed. By great good fortune they had encountered an English gentleman who saw to their luggage and booked a cab. Then off they went – to spend another two hours going round in circles looking for the address. At last the cabbie had had enough and said he didn't know where it was. Saved again – by an English lady who knew the area, Somers Town. And there the story of the Faithful Companions of Jesus in England begins.

A few years ago a group of FCJS came to make a pilgrimage to the places where Marie Madeleine had been in England. They made their way round the country till eventually they were back in Somers Town where the pilgrimage had started. Before their departure they made a quick visit to the East End, Poplar, to meet the community. We were delighted they had come and filled them in on the history of Howrah House, Poplar and Pope John House.

For several years previously I had begun to wonder where Marie Madeleine had arrived in England. I vaguely assumed the south coast somewhere but then I actually began to think. How would she get from the south coast? There was no railway (Steam trains had been invented but in 1830 there was no passenger rail network.) So it had to be by boat (We're long before the years of air travel!) Perhaps by stage coach – but we are specifically told that they took a cab – and since a cab in those days was a horse drawn vehicle it's not likely they would have made it in two hours. Those two hours were in London.

So it had to be by sea. Coming from Belgium the most direct route for London was up the river Thames. Sometime in the 1970s a catamaran route was run for several months from Tower pier (Tower of London) to Ostend. At the time it could not be sustained and closed down but at least the idea was there. In 1830, Blackwall dock, ten minutes walk from Pope John House, Poplar, was thriving.

In January 1661 Pepys noted that he travelled by boat to Blackwall where he saw a new dock and wet dock holding. In the entry for September 1665 he records, "in digging the late dock, they did twelve feet underground find perfect trees over-covered with earth, nut trees with branches and the very nuts upon them." By Blackwall the Thames crosses the Meridian three times. Its meandering

reaches have ensured that Blackwall has always been the most convenient landing point for London. It lies in a sheltered loop of the river, its anchorage protected by Blackwall rock reef about 300ft long and 159 wide. It was the victualing point for outbound vessels and from there set out some of the great voyages of discovery; Frobisher's second voyage to find the North-west passage, in 1606 the Virginia Settlers, under Colonel John Smith in the ships Susan Constant, Godspeed and Discovery to America (the Mayflower sailed later from Rotherhithe).

By 1817 Blackwall had at least nine inns, five along the river front. Several of Blackwall hostelries were small public houses but they included two inns of somewhat superior status, the Plough and the Artichoke. (I wonder which one Madame D'Houet and Julie Guillemet used) Whitebait was served in the inns. For much of the nineteenth century the Cabinet attended an annual Whitebait Supper at Blackwall or Greenwich. In the early 1830s the Globe tavern was the base for an extensive horse omnibus company. By 1837 the Royal Eagle Company were running boats hourly during the summer months from London to Blackwall where whitebait was eaten by "civilised persons, with no little gusto, at the Artichoke or Plough." There were fashionable eating places and inns continued to benefit from the custom of travellers passing through the area until Greenwich became more popular and suppers discontinued in the 1880s.

Although there is no record of Marie Madeleine's point of arrival in London in 1830, (as far as I know) there is an entry in the Testimony of **Mother Felicitas Mayer** which states in the Journey to St. Malo 1831 "Our Venerated Mother was recalled to France from Somerstown by very urgent business------. They took the steamer "Lord of the Isles" from **Blackwall**, London' for Jersey.

So, maybe, the pilgrimage should start at Poplar.

Things you ought to know

Pocahontas (of American fame) settled not far from Blackwall. She is buried at Gravesend.

The Margate packet (boat) from London Bridge. "At Blackwall the wicker hand baskets were opened to furnish heavy sandwiches, with bottles of brandy and water." (Dickens:Boz essays)

The invading Danes sailed up the Lea from Blackwall and erected a fort at Ware.

And if you are really intelligent and really want to know

Quays denote the places where ships could be legally discharged and loaded

Wharves were designed to pass goods to and from barges only

Docks were essentially small open harbours that were cut into the bank and could be used by every type of vessel

In good literary fashion I take full responsibility for any omissions, commissions, faults, failings etc. – and would be very glad if anyone could contribute to or improve on this account

Helen Downe FCJ

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