

The Watermen's Homes at Hastings



At the end of March, the last remains of Alice Sutton were scattered on the Thames at Blackwall Point from the passenger vessel "Salient" in a service conducted by The Reverend Frank Hackett, the former Port of London Chaplain. Alice's final resting place was in the exact spot where her husband Roland's ashes were scattered in 1975. On that occasion, The Reverend Frank officiated on the tug "Hurricane" on which Roland or "Jim", as he was known in the trade, was skipper for J.W. Cook, Wiles Lighterage and The Mercantile Lighterage. Alice died just 3 months before her 100th birthday and was born at Orchard Place where she went to school and played on the foreshore from East India Dock to Trinity Wharf and at various places in Bow Creek which surrounded the settlement at Orchard Place. As far as we know, Alice was the last surviving former resident of Orchard Place before the houses were demolished in 1937 to make way for industry and more recently developed as a part of the Dockland Development Corporation renewal of Docklands.

After Roland died, Alice moved to the Watermen's Cottage homes in 1978 where many of her friends from the East End had moved to when HRH Princess Alexandra opened the complex in 1974. In those days it was buzzing with reminiscing of Docks and Wharves and short nights and eight and teas and dropping them off afloat round the bar into the small hours at night. There were nicknames like "Ironchest" a former tug captain for General Steam Navigation and "one eye above the coaming" describing a former lighterman named Nelson. The retired Treasurer of the former Watermen, Lightermen, Tugman and Bargeman's Union, Bill Kitchener would be the "Barrack Room Lawyer", filling out everybody's forms and making sure those who could not speak for themselves were properly represented. The residents enjoyed the community hall for all the social events from the New Year's Eve Party and Wedding Anniversaries to Special Birthdays as well as keep fit, Whist Drives, Bingo and the annual visit from the working lightermen organised by the trade union starting on the coach at "The Aberfeldy" pub close to East India Dock Road. The coach had a number of stops on the way down taking around 5 hours to cover a journey that should only take 2 and after an enjoyable day at Hastings with the residents interrogating the working freeman on what is happening on the river they returned to "The Aberfeldy" to drop everyone off well after midnight. The annual visit by The Master and members of the Court is a little more refined but equally enjoyable in its own way. In the 37 years Alice was resident at No.50 Watermen's Close she became the longest to reside there and the oldest to survive which is a record unlikely to be surpassed. As the numbers of working freeman have declined since the 1970's we have seen less watermen and lightermen choosing to spend their retirement years in the comfort and safety of these unique cottage homes which were designed and built for their benefit. The 48 bungalows are refurbished and modernised to the highest standard each time a long term tenant vacates a property and the on-site warden, Martin Hackett, and his team of gardeners and site maintenance technicians keep the grounds and shared amenities in pristine condition. Applications and enquiries can be made to the Assistant Clerk, Watermen's Hall, St Mary at Hill, London EC3R 8EF.