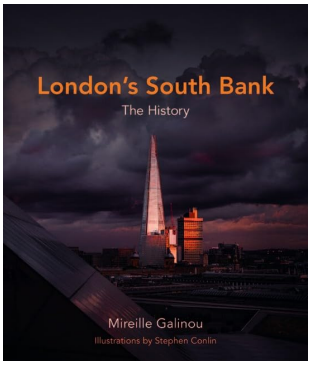
London's South Bank: The History

Author: Mireille Galinou

Reviewed by Clive Orton



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The simple title gives little clue to the scope and depth of this remarkable book, which sets out to be a quest for the 'soul of London' (p. 358–9). I shall try to approach it in a similarly poetic vein, by linking it to the Biblical story of the Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones, in which God asks the prophet Ezekiel 'Can these bones live?'[1] In this book, I ask, do the bones (the historical facts) speak to us, and tell us more about ourselves, our present, and even our future? As I start to write, I have deliberately not yet read the conclusion, so that I too am on some sort of a quest.

The book is extremely well illustrated, with a wide range of maps, panoramas, prints, historical paintings, modern works of art, and photographs. Collecting them and negotiating copyright permissions must have been a daunting task. Of particular note are the panorama-maps of each area at each date, which give a vivid view of the rural to urban shift over the years. One slight drawback of the more densely built-up areas is that the pointers leading to named features can easily be lost in the dark grey mass of buildings. Perhaps a contrasting colour would have been better? Nevertheless, the panoramas are a valuable resource. The book is well presented, with only a few hanging cross-references (eg, p xx), and the quality of the printing is excellent.

The South Bank is defined as the area from Vauxhall to St Saviour's Dock, Bermondsey, and stretching inland as far as the Elephant and Castle. This area is shown to include the centre of gravity of London, however it is measured, increasing its importance in the story of London itself. For this book, it is divided into four areas: Vauxhall and Lambeth, Waterloo, Borough and Bankside, and Southwark and Bermondsey. On the whole, these work well, although I felt uncomfortable about a boundary down the length of Borough High Street.

The core of the book is Chapter 3, *The Sweep of History*. This is a detailed and well-illustrated gazetteer of the sites and the buildings of the areas, with links across time for the longer-lived, , which is presented through four snapshots, at around 1600, 1770, 1845 and 'now' (1950s–2022), with a separate account for pre-1600. Archaeologists may feel shortchanged by the relatively brief 'pre-1600' section, but archaeology is found throughout the later sections, for example Bermondsey Abbey, Brandon Place, and the delftware potteries of both Southwark and Lambeth.

However, I felt that the coverage of the Roman period was patchy – plenty of religion, death and burial, but short on military and commercial aspects. Why, for example, is there no mention of the *mansio* in Southwark Street;[2] the amazing wall-plaster (the best in London) and the carved list of names, which may be military, from the Winchester Palace site;[3] or the wooden warehouse floor found at the Courage's site in Park Street?[4] The whole chapter is a comprehensive and detailed account of many significant locations, some of which were new to me. I regret the omission of Kirkaldy's Testing Works (now Museum), also in Southwark Street, which is of national significance for its contribution to the infrastructure of Britain's Industrial Revolution.

Chapter 4 puts flesh on the bones of Chapter 3, with accounts of people and circumstances that made significant contributions to the character of their area. There is so much here that really touched me, that I can only highlight one or two examples, focused around the theme of Fall and Resurrection. On the large scale, we can see the 'railway blight' slums around Waterloo, followed eventually by the Festival of Britain and the South Bank Centre; the re-emergence of Bankside Power Station as the Tate Modern; then the warehouses near London Bridge giving way to The Shard and 'towermania'.

I can personally compare the move of artists into 'the empty shells of industry and commerce' to the colonisation of empty warehouses and the old Port Medical Centre by archaeologists in the 1970s and 1980s to work on and store the finds from nearby excavations – a strange sort of 'full circle'. The theme of theatre crops up widely, from The Old Vic to The Globe, emphasising the area's relationship to the rest of London.

For archaeologists, a highlight of Chapter 5 is a pseudo-dialogue between an architect (Graham Morrison, of Morrison and Allies) and an archaeologist (Chris Constable, Borough Archaeologist of Southwark). Despite their obvious differences, I was encouraged by the extent of their common ground. After some heart-searching about the meaning of 'soul' and whether an urban area can have one, the outcome of the quest for London's soul is revealed – it's Waterloo. A good choice, I thought. The final flourish is another panorama, unusually viewed from the north, showing how the south bank is somehow the focus of the north.

As for my personal quest, did the bones live? Yes, they did, and they spoke to me in a quite remarkable way. Whenever I visit, I shall never again see these areas through the same eyes, and for that I am grateful to the author and her illustrator. They have done the South Bank and its visitors a great service.

1. Ezekiel 37.3.
2. *London Archaeol* **5** (14) (1988), 375–81; *London Archaeol* **16** (7) (2022), 171.
3. *London Archaeol* **6** (2) (1989), 31–9.
4. *London Archaeol* **6** (10) (1991), 255–62.