

Richard Salmon (1843-1915) : Waterman and Publican at Long Reach Tavern

Richard Salmon came from humble origins. He became a Licensed Thames Waterman and owned six barges. He was also the publican at Long Reach Tavern on Dartford Marshes for over 30 years. This biography was written with the assistance of Colin Williams and Alan Smith, who are descended from Richard.

Richard was born on March 25th 1843 in St Mary Cray. His parents were Richard (a labourer) and Matilda Salmon (the birth certificate shows that Matilda was illiterate). They were both born in Woolwich and had four other children, all girls. Richard was baptised on August 6th 1848 at St Paul's Cray. The 1851 census shows Richard (aged 42, a labourer) and Matilda (aged 30) living in Eltham with their children Eliza (14), Isabella (12), Emma (10), Richard (8) and Jane (4). From these ages, it seems that Matilda was only about 16 when she had her first child.

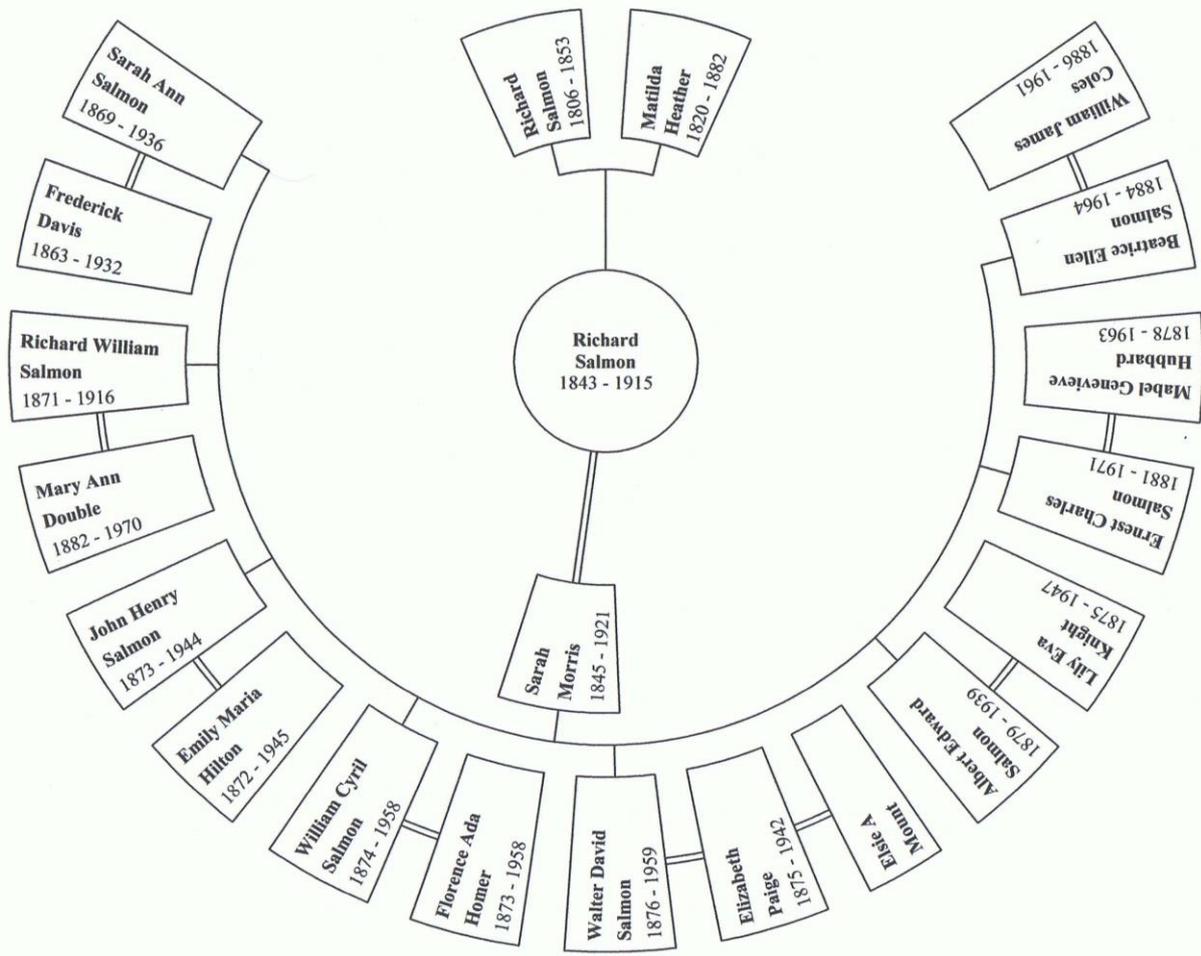
The family moved to Dartford after the 1851 census. Richard Salmon (senior) died there on December 16th 1853, when his son was aged 10. Richard's death certificate says that he died at his home in Plough Court, Dartford aged 47 of dropsy. This is an old term for the swelling of soft tissues due to the accumulation of excess water and can be caused by congestive heart failure. Plough Court was in a road that was then called Waterside and is now called Lower Hythe Street. A large scale 1868 map shows that Plough Court consisted of a terrace of small cottages. In the 1800s, this area of Dartford, which was near the Wharves on Dartford Creek, contained overcrowded housing with poor sanitation. Plough Court no longer exists, its site is now occupied by a building supplies yard. Dartford Creek is the name given to the tidal section of the River Darent, about 2.5 miles long, which connects Dartford to the River Thames.

I expect that Matilda and her children would have found life hard after Richard's death. Isabella Salmon died in 1854 aged 15. Burial records record show that she died in Dartford Workhouse. Eliza Salmon (Matilda's eldest daughter) married William Goodhew, a waterman, in 1855. Richard Salmon, aged 16, was apprenticed to him in 1859.

By 1861, Matilda's family were living in a property next to the Phoenix beerhouse (named after the nearby Phoenix paper mill) in Waterside, Dartford. The house, which no longer exists, was opposite Plough Court. The census that year shows Matilda aged 41, a paper mill labourer, with her children Emma (20) and Jane (14) plus her nephew William Heather (6). Richard Salmon is shown aged 18, a mate on the New Phoenix, a 30 tonne sailing barge based at Dartford and employed on the mill paper trade. The ship was in Dartford Creek on the night of the census. The other person aboard was Alfred Francis Gee, aged 26, the ship's master. The 1861 census shows that a significant number of men living in Waterside worked as watermen and lightermen. Soon after the census, Richard's sister Emma died aged 20. The following year (1862) his sister Jane died aged 16. It must have been a grim time for the family.

Richard became a Licensed Thames Waterman and Lighterman in 1865. In the 1800s, boats were the best method of transporting heavy goods. In 1839, a group of local landowners and business proposed a scheme to improve the Dartford and Crayford Creeks by dredging and making cuts to straighten the channel. They applied to Parliament for authority to do the work and the Act for this was passed in 1840. The work was completed in 1844 and led to a large increase in the amount of traffic¹. Even after the improvements, Dartford Creek was only navigable to vessels with a shallow draft. Large boats would sail along the Thames to its junction with the River Darent and moor there. Materials for Dartford would be transferred by lightermen to barges which were then sailed and/or pulled up Dartford Creek to wharves, where the barges would be unloaded. The process would be reversed to export goods from Dartford. In 1895 a lock was built near the Dartford end of the Creek. This enabled water levels at the wharves to be maintained at low tide, making loading and unloading of the barges more efficient and led to a further increase of traffic on the Creek. Trade later declined, as road transport became quicker and cheaper. Dartford Creek is no longer used to transport goods, the wharves have all closed and the lock is derelict.

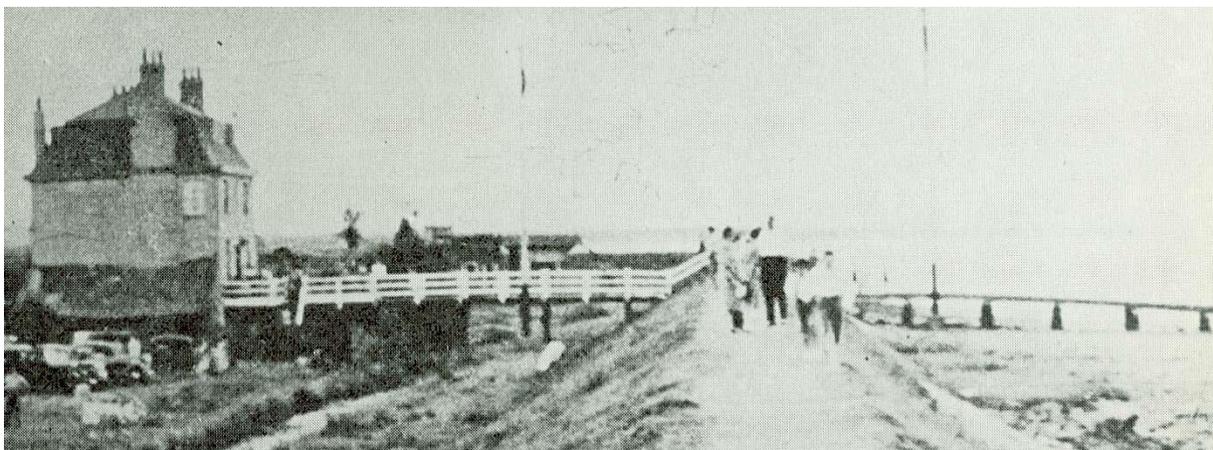
On September 30th 1866, Richard married Sarah Morris at Bromley St Leonard Church, Poplar in East London. He was aged 23 and his occupation is shown as "waterman." She was born in Dartford and aged 20 years 9 months (although the certificate says that she was of full age, meaning 21). Sarah was illiterate – she was not able to sign her name. One of the witnesses was Richard's only surviving sister, Eliza Goodhew. Richard and Sarah went on to have eight children (8 boys and 2 girls). Their names were Sarah Ann (b 1869), Richard William (b 1871), John Henry (b 1873), William Cyril (b 1874), Walter David (b 1876), Albert Edward (b 1879), Ernest Charles (b 1881) and Beatrice Ellen (b 1884).



Hourglass family tree of Richard Salmon

The 1871 census shows Richard (aged 28, a navigator), Sarah (25, a rag cutter at a paper mill) and their daughter Sarah (2) living at 42 Heath Lane, Dartford. This property was half way along Heath Street on the south side, next to the Salutation beershop. The building no longer exists, the Phoenix Place housing development is on its site.

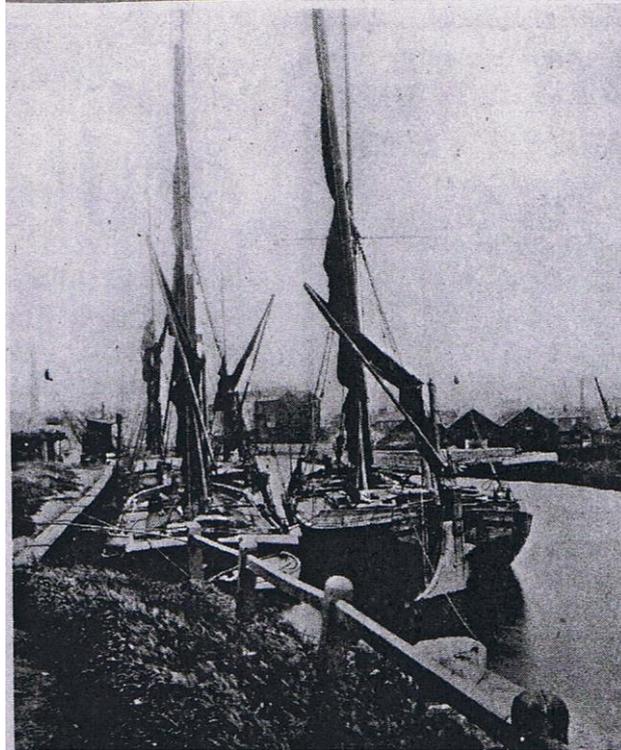
Sometime between 1874 and 1881, Richard Salmon became landlord of Long Reach Tavern. This inn opened in the late 1780s². It was in isolated position on the marshes, about 2.5 miles from Dartford and looked out over the River Thames, about 250 yards from its junction with Dartford Creek. It was brick built and was approached from the river by a landing stage. In the basement there was a kitchen, scullery and cellar for beer and wine. The ground floor consisted of a small bar, tap room, public parlour and pantry. The first floor had three bedrooms and a sitting room. The second floor contained four bedrooms. The inn was entered via a bridge that led from the top of the river embankment and was frequented by watermen working on Dartford Creek. It was not connected to a supply of drinking water, which was supplied to the tavern in barrels.



Long Reach Tavern in 1936

The 1881 census shows Richard, aged 38, a licensed victualler and waterman, living at Long Reach Tavern. Also listed are his wife Sarah (35) and their children Sarah (11), Richard (9), John (8), William (6), David (5) and Albert (1) as well as a lodger.

All six of Richard's sons were apprenticed to their father and became Licensed Thames Watermen and Lightermen³. The Mersea Museum website shows that Richard owned six sailing barges that were recorded in the Mercantile Navy Lists. The names of the barges were Ben, Eliza, Elizabeth, Four Brothers, Henry and Lydia. This fleet handled trade along Dartford and Crayford Creek and also brought commodities from London. Sometimes the barges were used to transport horse manure collected from London streets to Dartford and Thameside farmers².



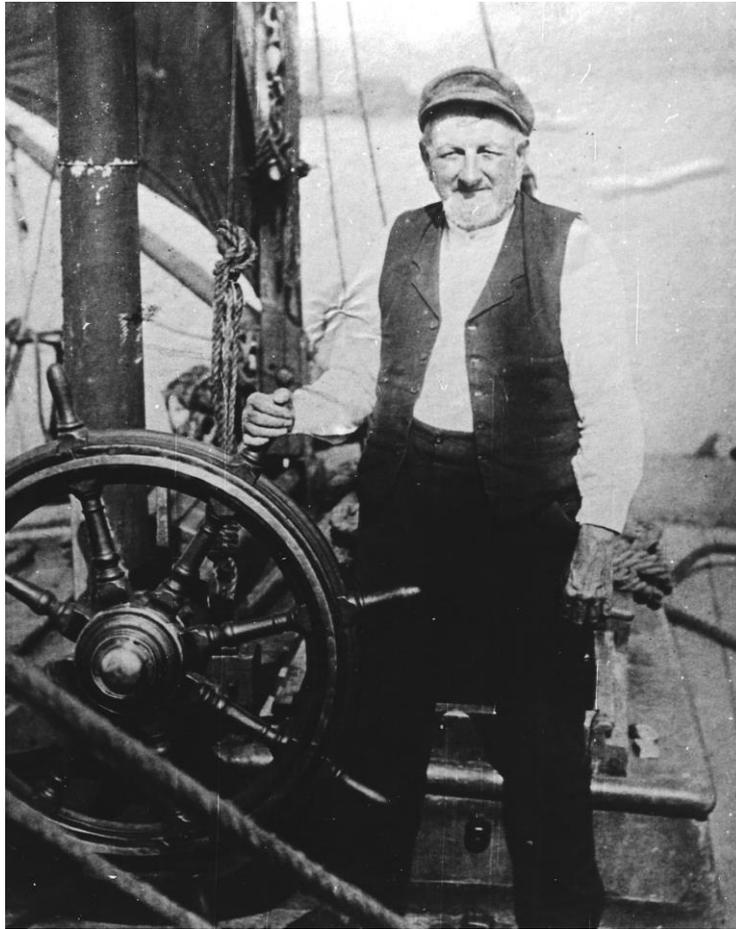
Sailing barges on Dartford Creek (1913)

In 1891, those living at “Long Reach Hotel” were Richard Salmon (48, barge owner), his wife Sarah (45) and their children Sarah (22), Richard (19, apprentice lighterman), John (18, apprentice on barge), William (16, works with father's barge), David (15), Albert (10), Ernest (8) and Beatrice (6).

Joyce Green Hospital, on Dartford marshes, was used to treat smallpox patients that were brought downstream from London. The hospital isolated patients on old ships, called Endymion, Atlas and Castilia, that were moored near the Long Reach Tavern from 1884 to 1903. One day, a woman patient attempted to reach out from one of these hulks to talk to Richard Salmon in his boat, when he was delivering supplies. Richard was concerned that he may have been infected with smallpox and so returned to the Tavern immediately, where he isolated himself until he was sure that he didn't have the disease². The 1894/5 report of the hospital's Medical Superintendent contained the following item, which relates to a different occasion:

The Contractor for Household Coal and Coke has employed Salmon of Long Reach Tavern to deliver his consignments. A barge load of coal arrived on Saturday last in charge of his two sons. They both refused vaccination. As these men live on the river bank and gain access to the Hospital by boat, it is practically impossible to keep them off the premises. I recommend therefore that the Clerk to the Board be instructed to write to the Contractor and point out to him that he holds his contract on the condition that men employed by him shall submit to vaccination and that this condition is not being complied with.

The winter of 1895 was unusually cold and Dartford Creek was frozen for 6 weeks. There were also large chunks of ice in the Thames Estuary, which restricted trade on the river². In January 1896, Richard saved a man who had fallen overboard from a barge into the Thames. The rescue required a heavy rowing boat that was high on the shore to be speedily launched. This was done by the combined efforts of Richard, one of his sons, his wife and daughter Sarah. A poem about the incident “The Launch of Salmon's Boat” was written by George Dunlop, a local farmer. It is included as an appendix to this article.



Richard Salmon on one of his sailing barges (date unknown)

The 1901 census shows Richard (aged 58, waterman, barge owner and licensed victualler) at Long Reach Tavern. Also resident were Richard's wife Sarah (56) and their children Sarah (31), David (24, waterman), Albert (21, waterman), Ernest (18, waterman) and Beatrice (16). By 1911, the inhabitants were Richard (68, publican and lighterman), Sarah (65), Sarah (41, assists in business), Ernest (28, general labourer) and Beatrice (assists in business). Also living at Long Reach Tavern were two boarders who were both Licensed Thames Watermen – William Coles (25) and Frederick Davis (46). Frederick married Richard's daughter Sarah in 1915 and William married Beatrice in 1914.

In 1911, the Vickers Engineering Company (who had factories in Erith and Crayford) set up an aerodrome / testing ground on Dartford Marshes, near the Long Reach Tavern. Prototype aeroplanes were transported to the airfield in sections and assembled in a hangar there. The first fatalities occurred in 1913 when two airmen were drowned when a new biplane design, being test flown, came down in the River Thames. Richard witnessed the accident and gave evidence at the inquest. The incident didn't deter Richard from flying as he later went up from the aerodrome in a plane². After the outbreak of war in 1914, the airfield was used to base aeroplanes to defend London from raids by German aircraft. It was also used to train pilots. A Royal Flying Corps camp was set up on the land around Long Reach Tavern². In early 1915, the Salmon family were moved out of the Tavern, which was taken over by the RFC to be used as a canteen and for sleeping quarters.

Richard Salmon died on April 14th 1915 aged 72 at the Dartford Union Workhouse Infirmary, which was on West Hill, Dartford. The cause of death was hepatic cirrhosis and bronchitis. Cirrhosis of the liver is an occupational hazard for publicans, as they are expected to drink with their customers. Richard used to smoke a pipe², which may explain the bronchitis. He was buried in East Hill Cemetery. The Dartford Chronicle contained the following short obituary:

The death occurred on the 13th inst of Mr Richard Salmon, landlord of the Long Reach Tavern, at the age of 72 years. Mr Salmon was well known in the town and district, his house at Long Reach being a favourite resort of those who visited the riverside. The funeral took place on Wednesday at Dartford Cemetery, Messrs Mackney being the undertakers.

Probate records show that Richard did not leave a will. Administration of his estate, valued at £149 14s, was granted to his widow Sarah, who died in 1921 aged 75. She was buried in the same grave as her husband. Their son Albert Edward Salmon was also buried there in 1939. The stonework is inscribed:

In loving memory of / my dear husband RICHARD SALMON who died April 14th 1915 aged 72 years / Also of SARAH his wife who died March 20th 1921 aged 75 years. Also / in memory of / their dear son / ALBERT EDWARD / SALMON / who died August 13th 1939 / aged 61 years / Reunited



Richard Salmon's grave

After the war ended, the RFC camp was closed and Richard's son, John Henry Salmon took over as licensee until his death in 1944. His daughter, Mrs Emily Hart, then ran Long Reach Tavern. It was flooded in 1953, closed in 1957, damaged by fire in 1958 and demolished in the early 1960s. All eight of Richard's children are buried in Dartford, six in East Hill and two in Watling Street Cemetery.

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References

1. *London and South-East England (Historic Waterways Scenes)* by Martyn Denney (1980)
2. *The Tavern on the Marsh* by Adrian Herbert, Mr W J R Salmon and Mrs F Salmon, Dartford Historical and Antiquarian Society Newsletter Number 22 (1985).
3. Apprenticeship records on FindmyPast website

The Launch of Salmon's Boat.

(An Incident of January 31st.)

Heroes are mostly modest ;
But it wants the loudest note
To tell with the tongue
Of a great bell rung
How Salmon launched his boat.

Scanning the London river
With a keen and practised gaze,
From his tavern door
On the Long Reach shore,
In drifting winter haze,

Stood trusty bargee Salmon,
Watching for his boats and boys ;
And he quizzed the rig
Of each schooner and brig
And growled at the blustering noise

Of an impish little steam-tug,
With its throttle valve tied back,
All smoke and steam
And a syren scream
And a wave in her murky track.

A down the stream a barge came,
Close by the Kentish side ;
And a barge-boy bright
For his home that night
Pulled hard on the ebbing tide.

Ah ! but the treach'rous wave wake
Lapped over the low boat rail ;
In the midst of the race
In an instant's space
Were the boy and the spectre pale.

But Salmon saw the danger,
And a steam-boat raised the cry,
With her fog-horn yell,
And a clanging bell
As she went surging by.

Only one boat at the Tavern,
And that lay high on shore—
From the grassy sedge
To the water's edge
Stretched twelve good yards and more,

Then Eternity was real,
And Life but a misty dream,
To the man on the bank,
And the boy on the plank,
For death held the middle stream.

The boat was very heavy—
Nor could Salmon and his son,
With lusty lift,
The great weight shift ?
Then cried he, " Quick boy, run,

" And call your eldest sister,
And your mother to the boat,
For with God's love,
And a hearty shove,
We'll get that skiff afloat ! "

God bless you, now, Dame Salmon ;
Your arms so stout and brown,
Strength of two men,
And pluck of ten,
And heart for half a town !

Courage makes them giants,
And Salmon's lass and wife
Snatched back the breath,
From the jaws of Death,
And gave the drowning Life !

I'd stake the wealth of Cræsus
Against a single groat
That heroes' blood
Was in full flood
When Salmon launched that boat !

GEORGE DUNLOP.

Dartford, February 4th, 1896.