

# Branding a place to market

## “Kasbah? Never heard of it!”

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A recent meeting about all things ‘heritage’ with aims of collating and presenting workers’ stories, touched on the underlying negativity encountered when referring to an old part of Grimsby Docks as ‘The Kasbah’. “Never heard of it!” “No such place!” and subsequent refusal to engage with any talk about it, referring instead to stories from “down dock”. Stories though are in danger of getting missed. We all know that once this happens social and cultural history becomes lost.

Today’s Grimsby Dock is a thriving modern port with many modernised buildings, and as many other port towns will know, the ‘modern’ necessitates gatehouse security and subsequently, extremely limited public access. But the basis of Grimsby Dock, the reason for its growth into what was once the world’s largest fishing port and therefore the unique heritage of Grimsby, became largely ‘out of site, out of mind’ by, I would say, most towns people.

It was a stalwart few, intent on saving Grimsby’s unique contribution to the history of food preservation – the Ice Factory – that awakened many to what valuable history the town was in danger of losing. You cannot miss the huge building built on the cusp of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to produce enormous blocks of ice on an industrial scale for the sole reason of enabling fish to be transported by train to as far away as Billingsgate fish market in London. I say ‘cannot miss it’ but for many years you couldn’t get anywhere near it due to ‘not having a good enough reason to’ to get onto our dock land. Meanwhile, other old buildings fell into disrepair and crumbled. Was it intention that this should happen? Perhaps we’d better not go there!

These other old buildings built from the 1870s at the start of the burgeoning fishing industry, were added to in no organised fashion but as need dictated. As fishing commerce grew so did the supportive industries and spin-offs – all within a relatively small area defined by the layout of railway lines and dock sides and becoming a densely-packed network of buildings. Whether or not ‘The Kasbah’ was used as a throw-away term amongst just a few workers in that area, a definition of *kasbah* can help to visualise that old working environment:

- narrow and maze-like streets
- generally free from [car] traffic [and in some cases even motorcycle and bicycle traffic]
- unique among highly populated urban centres
- a settlement larger than a village but smaller than a city; in short, a town.

Whatever we call this part in dock history, the mis-matched buildings and diverse uses from bank to warehouse and from a trade to smokehouse to café, its buildings demonstrate well the evolution in the fishing trade and unique to the UK.

At a public meeting in 2009 at which our Civic Society took part, it was resolved to press for a “conservation area of Kasbah and its surroundings” following on from recommendation from

English Heritage that a conservation area be formed to include “docks peninsula including Dock Tower, Kasbah and Dock Offices”. In 2011, the term ‘Kasbah’ was also used in a DVD by the then owner of Alfred Enderby Fish Smokers (long-standing and still functioning within Kasbah area) when the firm gained PGI status for Grimsby Smoked Fish. And so the term was being used to denote the specific area on the docks and interest in its fight for preservation was growing.

But as we all know, ‘fight’ can take time with many knock-backs on the way. By 2016 the company running the *modern* docks authorised demolition of some buildings to make way for more of the modern, most notably the Cosalt Building (Cosalt continues as a business today albeit in a different form to its original business of providing **Coal, Salt and Tanning** to the fishing trawlers - the latter being waterproofing for sails and rope). However, this action no doubt was the catalyst for the designation of *The Kasbah Conservation Area* in 2017, recognising the unique set of fishing industry buildings and smokehouses. Indeed, in addition to Listing the Ice Factory, a further 8 properties are Grade II Listed with a further 11 locally Listed as being ‘of special interest’. ‘The Kasbah’ became central to Grimsby Heritage Action Zone (HAZ) in 2017.

The problem as I see it is that how can our town’s rooted history, our heritage, be reawakened by talking about *Grimsby Docks* when it lives now as a thriving commercial port, without using ‘labels’ such as ‘The Kasbah’ however much construed, to delineate a time period or a particular focus?

Without such a ‘place brand’ as I see *The Kasbah* as being, a coherent visual identity with a strong narrative about location, culture, history, future aspirations and community of a place cannot be successfully told. The task Great Grimsby has, is to get across to its inhabitants – particularly those who worked ‘down dock’ in its fishing hey-day – that a *physical place* (whether you believe it existed or not) also transcends time and space, by separating itself from the modern day. Talking about *The Kasbah* enables stories about a time the likes of which is never likely to happen again. No doubt the current dock environs will have, in time, its own story to tell but that will be for the future to record.

## Sources

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