

Four Gates

2007

Galvanised mild steel
Each Gate 220x680x30cms

So how do you build four sets of gates almost seven metres across and two and half metres high? It is quite a prospect. That is one hell of a lot of material and ground to cover particularly when no opening can be bigger than the size of a baby's head (100mm) but at the same time you have to maximise the ventilation for exhaust fumes. Even to design four gates of that size is a big deal.

For me it all has to be meaningful and with layers of meaning. The design has to be based on a good story. There has to be a reason for the way the gates look. So I undertook a great deal of research, some very specific to the Millwall Docks and Timber Wharves and some much more general about trade and ships. I read books, went to museums and archives, and watched Port of London Authority films. I watched "Moby Dick" and "Master and Commander" to see how sailing ships worked. I am a magpie and will plunder ideas from anywhere. It is not necessarily logical this fitting together of ideas and stories. It is about seeing the connections between things.

It turns out that the docks are themselves the way things are connected. Exploration in North America by the Hudson Bay Company using ships built from Baltic timber to satisfy the needs of the fur trade leads to timber resources being exploited in North America. That North American timber is stored on the ground that will become the Timber Wharves Estate. The Baltic timber trade dries up. The Hudson Bay Company feeds its men on buffalo meat hunted further south on the prairies which once cleared of buffalo turn from seas of grass to seas of wheat which causes the grain trade to shift from the Baltic to North America. It is this wheat that fills the silos of the Millwall Dock and goes into MacDougal self-raising flour. It is about seeing how the gigantic relates to the very tiny. Macro shifts in trading patterns affecting millions of people mean I can eat a slice of fluffy Victoria sponge cake at 4pm yesterday.

These things like gates and sculptures come to represent places and therefore people. It is great then if people can be involved in the work of making something like this. In this case many people made beautiful drawings that went into the designs. They worked hard. They could not have known how their part would turn into the whole. Yet their various styles and images work together to make a whole story. So now we have the four designs on four sheets of A4 paper. These flimsy perishable ideas have to be turned into something solid enough to back your car into.

It only became possible for me to build these gates once we had worked out that they could be broken down into manageable panels. On the face of it I couldn't fit the whole span in my workshop. It took quite a while to work this out. The panels have to work as a whole but they could be manufactured separately. While there is some lifting gear in the workshop everything has to be manhandled. It turns out that the gates weigh in total 4.6 tonnes and have been completely moved by hand six times and individual panels many times more than that.

Typically all the four openings are not the same size so I had to devise a method of construction, which would allow for batch production but have enough tolerance to accommodate the variation in size. This means that the gates have a slightly Byzantine bracketing system but it meant that manufacture could be completed inside three months. This is no mean feat given the complexity of the design. Solutions to this kind of problem only emerge from the kind of nagging thought that comes from sleepless nights. I find these practical solutions require as much or more creative thought as the artistic solutions, which come much more naturally.

The manufacture is based on the use of a plasma cutter to cut out the detail of the designs from 6mm sheet steel. The plasma cutter causes an arc to strike between a tungsten tip and the steel sheet like very fierce lightning, so fierce to look at it will blind you. The resultant puddle of molten steel is then blown out with compressed air; the super heated gas then melts your laces and the stitching in your boots. Each sheet of steel weighs 100kg and was delivered in batches of ten. We used about 30 sheets. There is a large amount of waste from doing this and so it seemed like a good idea to use these off cuts in the gates rather than the 16mm round bar that I specified in the original design. These "fingers" of steel that link the more obvious drawings are sometimes leaves, sometimes waves or clouds. Had I not decided to use these off cuts my workshop would now be full of tiny pieces of steel. I like the idea that enormous strength can be produced from welding together thousands of small irregularly shaped pieces into a single fabric. It seems a good model for how society should work.

This method of construction was only possible because of the dedication and tenacity of my two assistants Arek Zykin and Jarek Blaszczyk. It was they who had to clean up each piece of metal, using grinders all day every day for weeks on end. They worked amazingly hard. Metalwork is a painful unpleasant process and I am thankful for their cheerfulness in putting up with it. I am keen on making my work as perfect as I can and we all suffered to achieve that. I value the extremity of it.

The scheme is based on the idea of the four corners of the globe with each gate representing a corner. The inference is that these corners all come together in Timber Wharves and the Millwall docks. Docks are built at the watershed of a river and the sea. The river allows trade to flow internally and the dock is the gateway to external trade. So the four gates are both four corners but also four rivers...

The Thames - Europe
The St. Lawrence - the Americas
The Nile - Africa
The Ganges - the Far East

The Process

I undertook four days of drawing workshops during half term 23rd-26th October 2006 at the Cedar Centre in Timber Wharves. There had been several trips arranged by the Cedar Centre as a prelude to the workshops including visits to the V&A, the Design Museum, and The Museum in Docklands, Tower Bridge and the Tower Hamlets Local History Library as well as a half-day of web research. My design process involves immersion in the subject of the project. Important and evocative images then float to the surface like oil on water. In this case I made all my research available during the workshops, including books and films and encouraged people to draw the images I needed. Inevitably people drew what they wanted to and of course the final designs have reflected the decisions of the participants. I have welded these diverse drawings into four narratives that make sense both intellectually and visually. Most importantly these designs provide pleasure to the casual passer-by and to anyone who decides to follow the paths the stories within the gates suggest.

I have laid out a particular interpretation of the gates in this document, which is one, that interests me. However it is perfectly possible to ignore that interpretation and just enjoy the gates as a set of attractive images or to make up other stories that the images imply.

For me inevitably any discussion of trade in relation to Great Britain must acknowledge the Port of London as the commercial hub of the Empire. I don't think anyone any longer pretends the Empire was a benevolent enterprise. At best it was a commercial proposition coloured by individual acts of goodness at its worst it was a commercial proposition discoloured by exceedingly

questionable moral acts and judgements and extreme violence. To erase an understanding of the colonies from the history of the docks would in effect erase that history. The docks only existed to serve the Empire. The iconography of the gates was always going to reflect the docks so it has inevitably come to be underscored by an understanding of Empire.

The Thames - Europe

On the left hand side we begin with images of two trade unionists. The lower figure is Ben Tillet, one of the charismatic leaders of the 1889 dock strike. Above him is the Polish dock leader Lech Walesa whose Solidarity movement forced the collapse of Communism in Poland. Trade with the Baltic and Gdansk, Walesa's hometown was central to Millwall dock trade. At the bottom of the pedestrian gate is the Finnish god Kullervo who represents the Baltic trade in grain and timber. Kullervo had a brutal and short life full of murder death and cruelty. Xong Ring chose the image because she liked it not because of the story of Kullervo. However he does seem to represent the hardness and cruelty of life in the docks. His horn could be interpreted as the dockers' twice daily call to 'the stones' from where dockers were selected for work in a manifestly corrupt and exploitative system. Above him are his hound and the top and a dog creature from the Gundestrup Cauldron. Images from this object continue on the next panel symbolising Britain's Celtic heritage and by extension successive Germanic and Viking invasions that typically used the Thames as an artery of pillage but also settlement. At the bottom of this panel are a woman and child taken from a photograph of a group of Island women from 1930's. In those times the majority of Islanders were Catholic and so maybe she is a Virgin and Christ too. On religious festivals Islanders would set up shrines in the street and decorate the entire neighbourhood. The Catholic Church was the prime social organisation. Interwoven with the Celtic imagery is a selection of capitals from Canterbury Cathedral a reminder that the stone for some of Britain's major buildings was imported down the Thames from Caen in France. Stone from Caen is what makes the Tower of London white. At the top of the next panel is a crane operator, one of the top jobs for dockers. Beneath him is a Thames barge and a Thames pleasure boat, which used to take day-trippers to Southend. The adjacent panel has a cargo ship at the top. Beneath is a woman in a fur coat, holding a snake. While trade in mundane bulk goods formed the vast majority of imports, there was a much-documented trade in luxury goods. The trade in fur was the reason the Hudson's Bay Company pursued the exploration and exploitation of what became Canada. Both panels of the right hand gate have bits of tree in them. The importance of timber for a country whose dominance of the oceans depended on ships cannot be underestimated. The right-hand panel of the right-hand gate is topped by the central granary of the Millwall docks at the top and Old Father Thames at the bottom. The McDougal brothers operated their milling business from the Millwall docks. They were the inventors of self-raising flour. Dockers handling grain bandaged their feet to prevent grain from getting inside their boots. The use of these cloths led to the term 'toe-rags'.

The St. Lawrence - the Americas

The image begins on the right-hand side with a stoker. Steam ships revolutionised the docks. As they were so expensive to run, with fuel and crew costs, the speed of turnaround in port had to increase. This led to the rapid development of innovative goods handling equipment. The Millwall Dock was where pneumatic grain handling was pioneered. Below the stoker is an apple tree symbolising the trade in fruit from the Americas. On the pedestrian gate is another sailor but also a lookout - "There she blows!" He is searching out a pod of three whales drawn by Anharul Haque whose representations are muscularly direct and consequently life-like. These appear on the right-hand panel of the left-hand gate. London was briefly a major whaling port until the Greenland fishing grounds were fished out and then again when the Antarctic fishing grounds were opened up. But London could not compete with Norway and New England in their hunger for the whale. Beneath the sailor is a caribou. On the next panel is a large cactus and above it a birch bark canoe the workhorse of the Canadian fur trade. Next to the cactus and dwarfed by it is a tobacco store figure of a sailor. Tobacco was a major import to the docks principally from Virginia and the West Indies initially based on slave plantations. The next panel has a tree at the

top representing the North American timber trade. It was this trade that was supposed to break the dependence on the Baltic trade and resolve the Baltic trade deficit but even with huge tariffs placed on Baltic goods its trading power was not broken until steel ships became the norm. Beneath the tree a sailor prepares to light a cigarette. The next panel has Anharul's whales at its centre. Above is a warship. This refers to the North Atlantic convoys, which saved Britain from starvation during the Second World War. The eastern lock gate of the Millwall docks was so badly bombed during the war that it was never repaired. At the bottom is a grizzly bear again referring to Canada. A galleon of the type used by Christopher Columbus tops the next panel. Below the galleon is an image of an umiak, an Inuit women's skin boat. So while we were saved by the Americas during the war, our wars and diseases had decimated the First Peoples of America over the previous three hundred years. It is over their bodies that American wheat fields now spread across the prairies.

The Nile - Africa

The Nile extends from the heart of Africa and is the world's longest river. Africa is the source of the dominance of the British Empire for three hundred years. That power was based on the African slave trade supplying labour for sugar and tobacco production in the West Indies and the cotton fields of America. London was not a slaving port as such unlike Bristol and Liverpool but it benefited hugely from the products of slavery. On the left hand panel we start with a British navy sailor. From Cape Town to Alexandria the British Navy was active in supporting Britain's colonial trade in Africa. Next to him is a ceremonial spade used to cut the first sod of the Suez Canal drawn by Azharul Haque whose drawing is as delicate as his brother's is tough. At the bottom of this panel is a rhinoceros symbolising all the exotic animals of Africa. At the top of the next panel is a Fang mask from Nigeria. African masks symbolise the mysteriousness and exoticism of the Dark Continent. In the middle of this panel is a snake above a selection of Benin bronze heads taken from Benin in a British punitive raid in the 1890's. It is from this raid that most of the Benin bronzes now in the British museum come. The Republic of Benin seeks their return. The next panel has a coiled snake at the top. Beneath is a tea clipper. Tea was a major import and the cause of the Opium wars, again over a trade deficit, this time with China. Britain forced China to accept opium rather than hard currency in exchange for tea. Indian farmers were encouraged to grow opium poppies rather than food. The clippers raced to bring home the first crop of the new tea growing season. Beneath the clipper are another snake and a bird reminding us that North Africa is the winter home of Europe's migrating birds.

At the top of the next panel is a selection of Benin bronze heads. Lord Nelson forms the centrepiece of this panel. He famously defeated the French at the Battle of the Nile. The French flagship Orient exploded spectacularly and Napoleon's sea power was crippled. Some 3,000 French prisoners and wounded were abandoned by the British to starve to death. In the fixed panel next to the gate more snakes surmount another Benin head. Beneath Nelson is a Benin bronze plaque. The pedestrian gate has a selection of birds at the top with two lookouts seeming to reach into their midst. Below the birds are two Nile crocodiles. On the extreme right hand fixed panel is a representation of the Egyptian god Hapi, a fertility god who controlled the annual flooding of the Nile. Curiously but accurately he has breasts. Beneath him is a rhinoceros.

The Ganges - the Far East

This gate encompasses a huge range of cultures from China to New Zealand, from Persia to Polynesia. At the centre of this vast area is India, 'the Jewel in the Crown' of the British Empire. On the fixed panel is an image of Ganga, goddess of the Ganges. She is portrayed again on the left-hand panel of the left hand gate this time astride a gharial the freshwater crocodile of the Ganges. The pedestrian gate is dominated by Matsya an avatar of Vishnu who saved humanity and the sacred Veda text from the flood along with samples of the birds, animals, plants and seeds, which were put into a ship. The gigantic golden fish then dragged the ship through the turbulent oceans all through the long night till the storm ended and Brahma created the present world. There is a snake in the top left hand corner. At the bottom is a mask from Papua New Guinea. The islands of the Pacific provided a powerful image for Europeans of paradise on Earth.

The left hand panel of the left hand gate has Ganga at the top and an orchid below. The next panel has a hummingbird dipping into the orchid. Both hummingbird and orchid are symbols of the luxuriant beauty of the Orient. At the top of this panel is a three masted Barque drawn by Abul Hadi. At the top of the left-hand panel of the right hand gate is a representation of Tien Hou the Chinese god invoked to protect sailors. Beneath him is a ram. It was wool that would prove to be the main export of Australia and New Zealand and turned them into viable colonies. London controlled the wool trade for 150 years. Below the ram is an Indian elephant, workhorse of the trade in exotic hard woods such as teak not only in India but also in Burma and Malaysia. At the top of the next panel is a Maori warrior above a tramp steamer and a kangaroo. At the bottom of the panel is a snake.