

BILLY WATERS

SONGS FROM THE SHADOWS



SCOTT & MARSH

— 1775 - 1848 —

AGE OF **REVOLUTION** - MAKING THE WORLD OVER

BILLY WATERS: Songs from the Shadows

Copyright 2024 © by Selena Scott & Ben Marsh



Developed with Megan King and Mary L. Shannon, author of *Billy Waters is Dancing: Or, How A Black Sailor Found Fame in Regency and Victorian Britain* (Yale UP, 2024)

BILLY WATERS: Songs from the Shadows is created for schools and fully authorised for non-profit educational use, courtesy of the Age of Revolution project. Reproduction for commercial use or sale is strictly prohibited. It is just one of many **FREE online resources** for teachers supported by the Age of Revolution project. It includes an online gallery of over 100 revolutionary objects, carefully selected from museums and collections across the UK, with fascinating facts and information written specially for teachers. Choose from our range of tried-and-tested historical enquiries, creative challenges, activities and ideas, to bring classroom learning to life across the curriculum, for all ages. A **digital version** of this graphic novel and **additional learning materials** to support its use can be found at:

ageofrevolution.org

Thanks to Himan Heidari, Suchi Chatterjee, Angeline Morrison, Tony Montague, Jacob French, Alfie Marsh, Aki Pasoulas, Anna Husband, and colleagues at schools and museums who helped with the project.



HOW TO APPROACH THE STORY

It is not easy to recover and write the histories of marginalised people in the past

The archive of what is left to us is contaminated—it is an expression of power relations

We actually know fairly little about **Billy Waters**—what we DO know is in this story

But we can sometimes learn from what we don't know, or don't know for sure

And we can try harder to find ways to restore voices from the shadows

At many points, the dialogue draws on text from real records or people to inform the story

At some points we had to use our imagination

For the evidence or the 'facts' often only get us so far ...

Where there are gaps in footprints, we either have to stop following, or make small jumps

Historians might jump different ways, based on their assumptions and interpretations

At moments in this story, you are given the choice of choosing one panel or another

You should think about **WHY** you might choose one path or outcome

1775 - 1848

AGE OF **REVOLUTION** - MAKING THE WORLD OVER

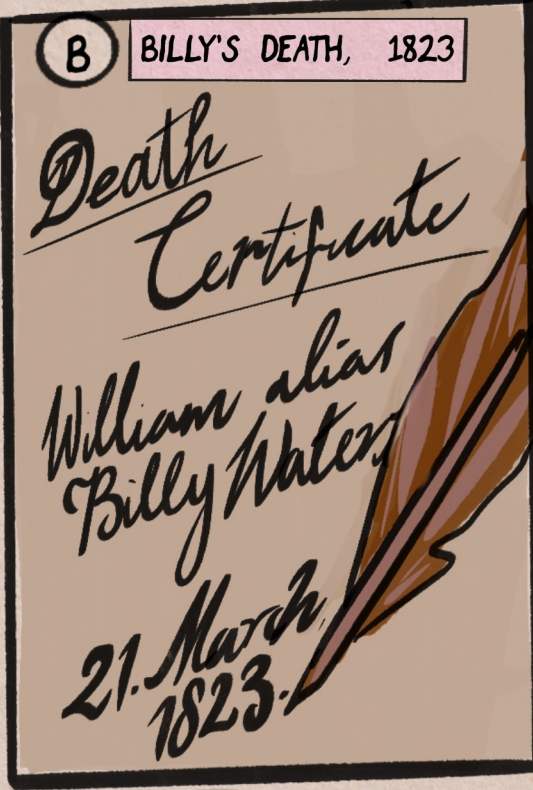


THIS IS A STORY OF MY LIFE. YOU MIGHT EXPECT IT TO START ON MY BIRTHDAY - I BET YOURS WOULD, BUT I DON'T KNOW WHEN THAT WAS. NOBODY DOES.



THEY'VE TOLD MY STORY AS BEST THEY CAN - BUT I DIDN'T WRITE NOTHING DOWN, LIKE OTHERS DID. SO IT'S NOT WHAT SOME FOLK MIGHT CALL HISTORY. MY HISTORY'S LIKE A RECIPE WITHOUT ALL THE INGREDIENTS. A SONG WITHOUT ALL THE INSTRUMENTS...

MAYBE WE SHOULD START AT THE END? TROUBLE IS: BILLY WATERS ENDED IN MANY PLACES. YOU CAN CHOOSE WHICH ONE. FIT ME INTO YOUR STORY.



NEW YORK
1783



BILLY WATERS WAS FROM NEW YORK, AND MUST HAVE BEEN BORN AROUND THE TIME OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION. THE BRITISH HAD LOST THE WAR, AND THOUSANDS OF REFUGEES LEFT THE PORT TO FIND NEW HOMES - INCLUDING FORMER SLAVES - WHILE OTHERS HAD TO STAY BEHIND. AT SOME POINT IN HIS YOUTH, WATERS MUST HAVE TAKEN UP THE FIDDLE.

PINKSTER FESTIVAL c.1795



EVACUATION OF THE BLACK LOYALISTS,
22ND MAY 1783



WORKING THE DOCKS, c.1800



MANY THOUSANDS OF YOUNG MEN EARNED A LIVING AS MANUAL WORKERS ON THE DOCKS AND MERCHANT SHIPS, IN MIXED COMMUNITIES. THRIVING TRADE AROUND THE ATLANTIC - INCLUDING IN COTTON, SUGAR AND ENSLAVED PEOPLE - MEANT THAT SEAPORTS LIKE NEW YORK GREW ESPECIALLY QUICKLY. BUT LOW PAY, COMPETITION AND THE THREAT OF WAR OR INJURY MADE FOR AN UNSTEADY LIFESTYLE.

ONE DAY TO MY GREAT JOY, A CAPTAIN ASKED WHETHER I WOULD GO ABOARD AS A SAILOR INSTEAD OF STAYING ON SHORE AND MINDING THE STORES. I ANSWERED HIM WITHOUT HESITATION.

I DIDN'T WANT TO SHIP OUT TO SEA BUT THE DOCK WORK WAS UNSTEADY AND I OWED MONEY. WAS GONNA GET KNOCKED DOWN, OR DRAGGED OUT - MAYBE BACK TO SLAVERY.

A



B

5TH OCTOBER 1811



DECEMBER 1811 TO MARCH 1812

THE MANY NAVAL CONFLICTS OF THE AGE OF REVOLUTION CREATED A HUGE NEED FOR MANPOWER TO CREW FIGHTING SHIPS. BILLY WATERS ENTERED THE RANKS OF THE BRITISH ROYAL NAVY WHILE IT WAS FIGHTING AGAINST FRANCE AND SOON ALSO THE UNITED STATES. THE BRITISH NAVY RECRUITED SAILORS OF ALL NATIONALITIES AND ETHNICITIES - OFTEN AGAINST THEIR WILL - SERVING AS A STRICT EMPLOYER BUT AT LEAST OFFERING A STRUCTURE FOR REGULAR PAY AND THE PROSPECT OF STATE SUPPORT AND PRIZE MONEY





THE WORK WAS HARD

BUT I FOUND COMFORT IN MY FIDDLE

DAMN BILLY. KNEW YOU COULD ACT THE CHIEF PART AS TOPMAN, AND COULD TIE A KNOT, SEW A SAIL, WORK THE RIGGING, AND HEAVE THE LEAD

AND NOW YOU MADE QUARTER GUNNER.

BUT DAMNED IF YOU AIN'T JUST AS FLASH ON THE FIDDLE

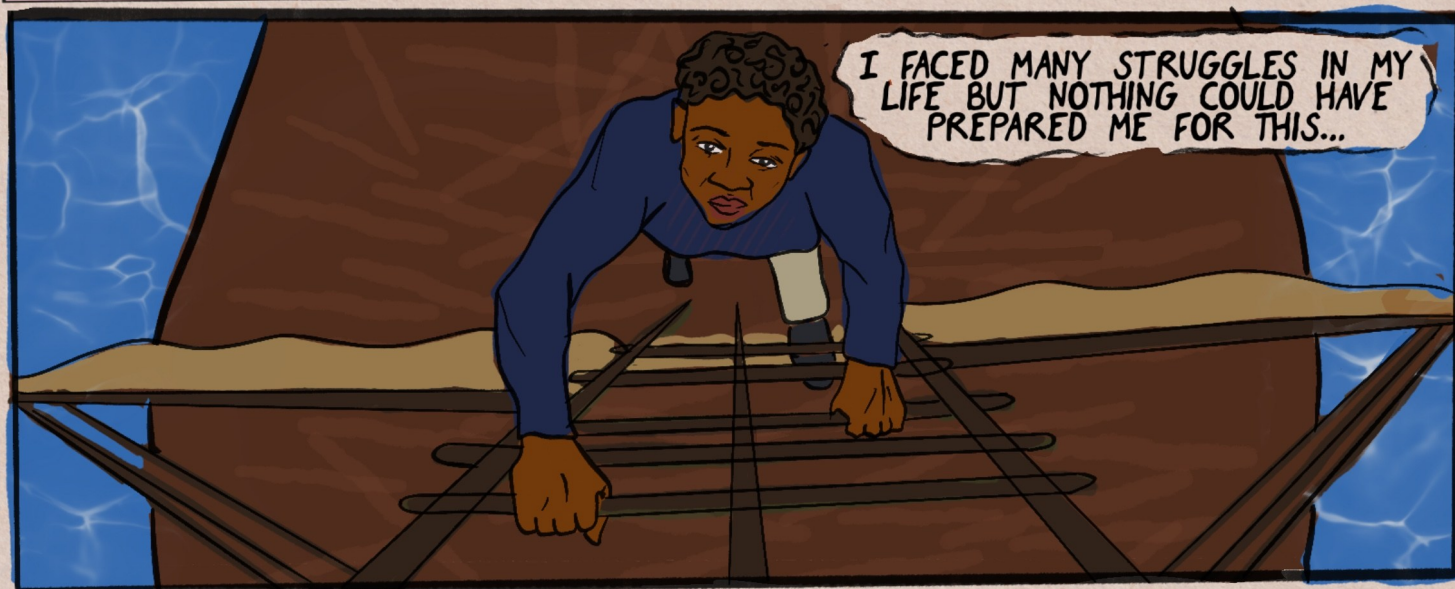
c. JANUARY 1812



c. FEBRUARY 1812

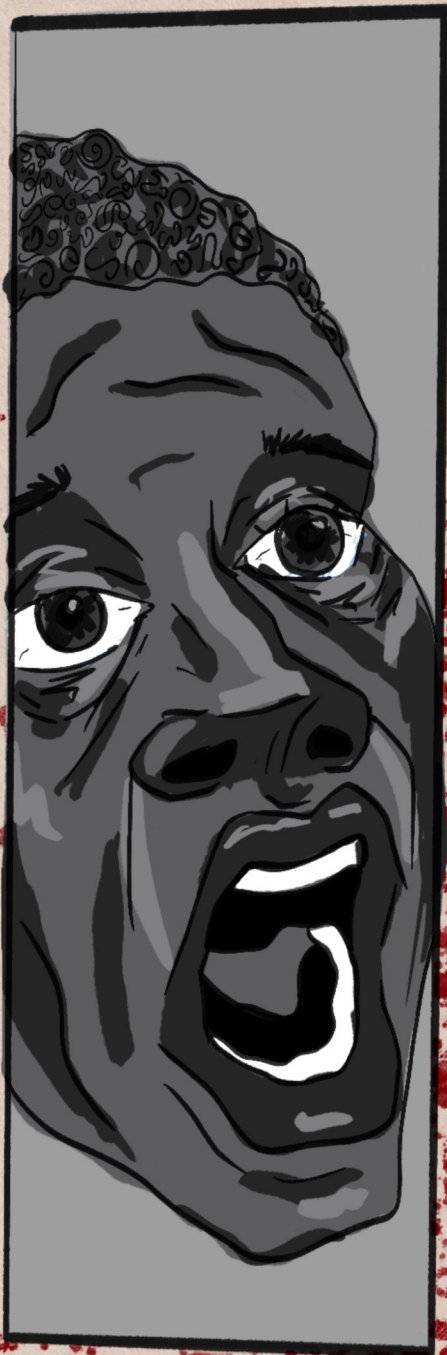


c. MARCH 1812





CAPTAIN'S LOG: HMS GANYMEDE: "CADIZ BAY, 3RD MARCH 1812. WM WATERS FELL FROM THE MAIN YARD AND BROKE BOTH HIS LEGS AND OTHERWISE SEVERELY WOUNDED HIM"



BILLY'S DANCING DAYS ARE OVER. HE'LL NEED TO REST - BUT WATCH THE WOUND CLOSE AS BEST IT CAN. HE WAS SINGING IN HIS SLEEP

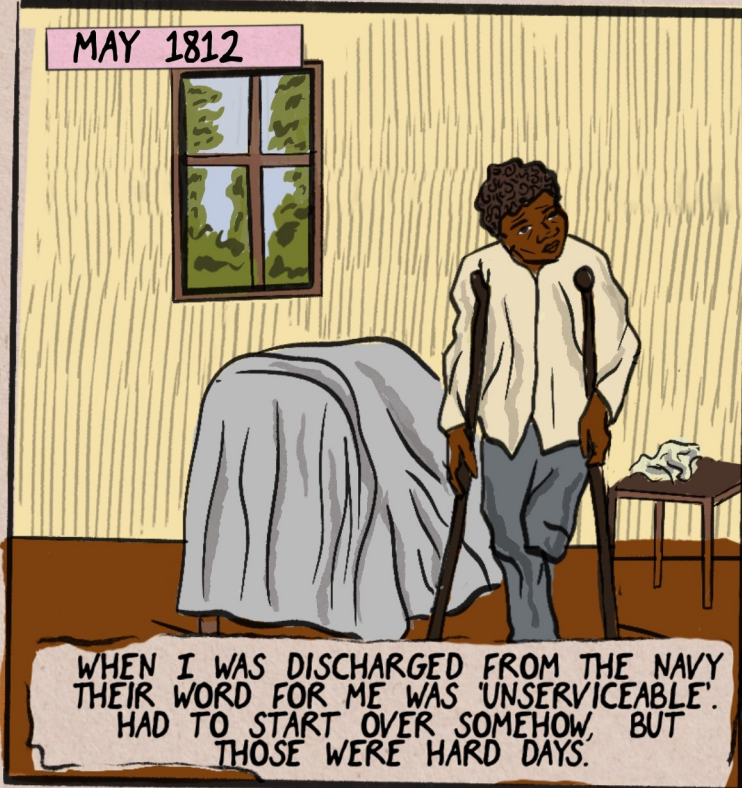


THE ARMED FORCES AND THE MARITIME WORLD BROUGHT HUGE RISK OF INJURY. THOUSANDS OF SAILORS AND SOLDIERS SUFFERED AMPUTATION - TO SAVE THEM FROM INFECTION AND DEATH. SURGERY BEFORE ANAESTHESIA WAS BRUTAL AND QUICK, AND SURVIVORS FACED MAJOR CHALLENGES TO COPE IN A WORLD WITH FEW SUPPORTS. NAVAL SERVICEMEN MIGHT GET CHARITABLE HELP FROM THE ROYAL GREENWICH HOSPITAL, WHICH BY 1815 PAID SMALL SUMS TO MANY 'OUT-PENSIONERS' AND HOUSED 3,000 'IN-PENSIONERS' (RETIRED SAILORS).

HASLAR HOSPITAL,
PORTSMOUTH, 1812



MAY 1812



A



B



PENSION OFFICE, GREENWICH, 2 JUNE 1812

PENSION

28	NO.	NAME	ENTRY	IMMEDIATELY Wounded and last served	SERVITUDE	ANNUAL PENSION.	TOTAL
1206		Sir Henry	12	12	12	12	12
1207		G. Watson	12	12	12	12	12
1209		W. Mayhe	24	24	24	24	24
1214		W. Waters	24	24	24	24	24

IT IS WHAT IT IS. £5 TILL ANOTHER
THREE MONTHS' TIME

YOU KNOW THAT COMES TO 13 PENCE A
DAY. IT DON'T GO FAR!

THERE'S WORSE PENSIONS IN THIS
LEDGER THAN 13 A DAY! YOU GOT A
LUCKY NUMBER. DON'T SPEND IT ALL AT
ONCE





MY EFFORTS EXCITED MUCH MIRTH AND ATTENTION AND WERE WELL REWARDED



PERFORMERS OF ALL TYPES TRIED TO FIND A WAY TO STAND OUT TO PASSERS-BY IN CENTRAL LONDON'S NOISY STREETS. THEY HAD TO CUT THROUGH AMONG THOSE SELLING FOOD, FUEL, SERVICES, AND GOODS IMPORTED FROM EMPIRE OR MANUFACTURED IN BRITAIN. BY 1820 BILLY WATERS WAS A FAMOUS CHARACTER, KNOWN FOR HIS LIVELY PERFORMANCES, AND HE FEATURED IN WELL-KNOWN PLAYS AND BOOKS THAT OFTEN MOCKED HIM OR CLAIMED HE WAS A FRAUD.

c.1821



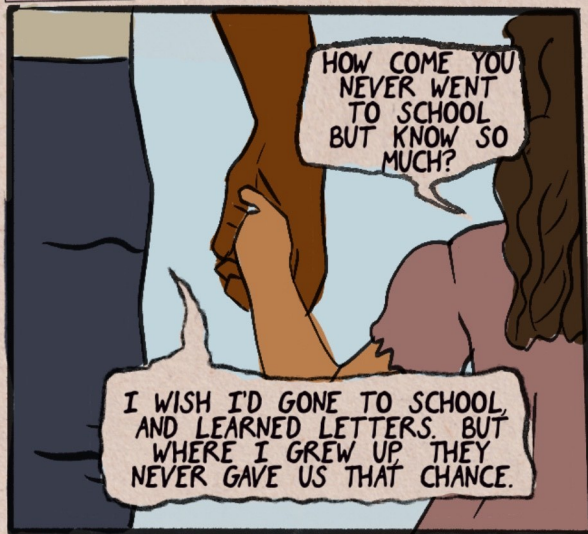
ST GILES, c.1814



c.1816



c.1819



IRISH FREE SCHOOL, c.1819



LONDON'S EXPANSION BROUGHT DIFFERENT VOICES AND CULTURES TO THE CITY. ST. GILES WAS A DISTRICT FULL OF SLUMS, WHERE LARGE NUMBERS OF TENANTS LIVED TOUGH LIVES IN CRAMPED CONDITIONS. IN SPITE OF HOW IT WAS MOCKED BY WEALTHY OBSERVERS, PATTERNS OF FAMILY CONNECTION AND SOCIAL LIFE HELPED SUSTAIN COMMUNITIES.

ROSE AND CROWN, ST GILES, c.1820



ORANGE STREET, c.1821

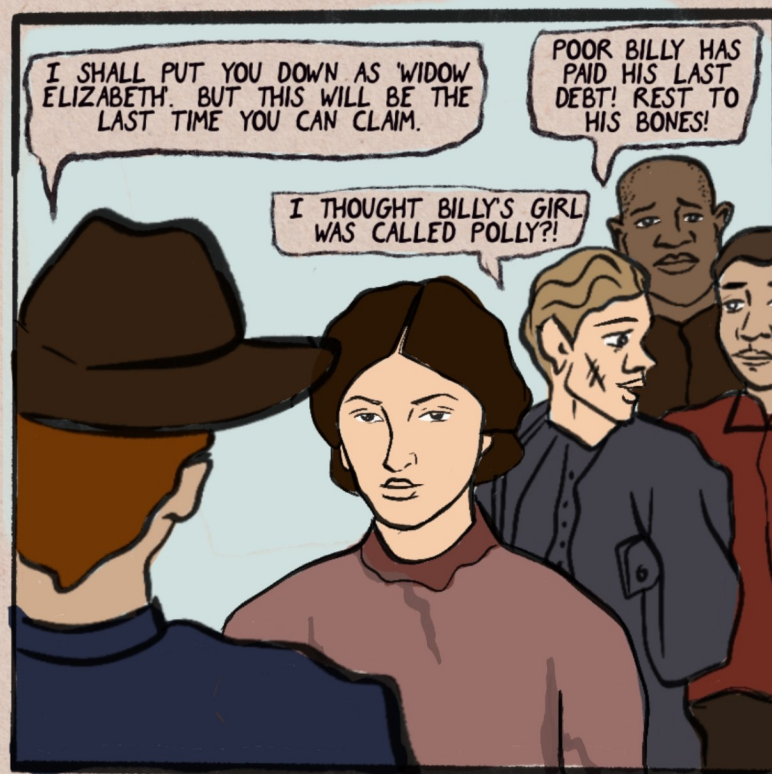


THERE WERE MANY THREATS, WITH LOTS OF POVERTY, CRIME AND DISEASE. MANY OF THE RESIDENTS WERE MIGRANTS WHO NEEDED CHEAP LODGINGS AND WORKED IN LOW PAID JOBS. LIFE BECAME HARDER AS NEGATIVE VIEWS SPREAD ABOUT POVERTY OR CERTAIN GROUPS OF MIGRANTS, AND AS AUTHORITIES CLAMPED DOWN ON BEGGING.

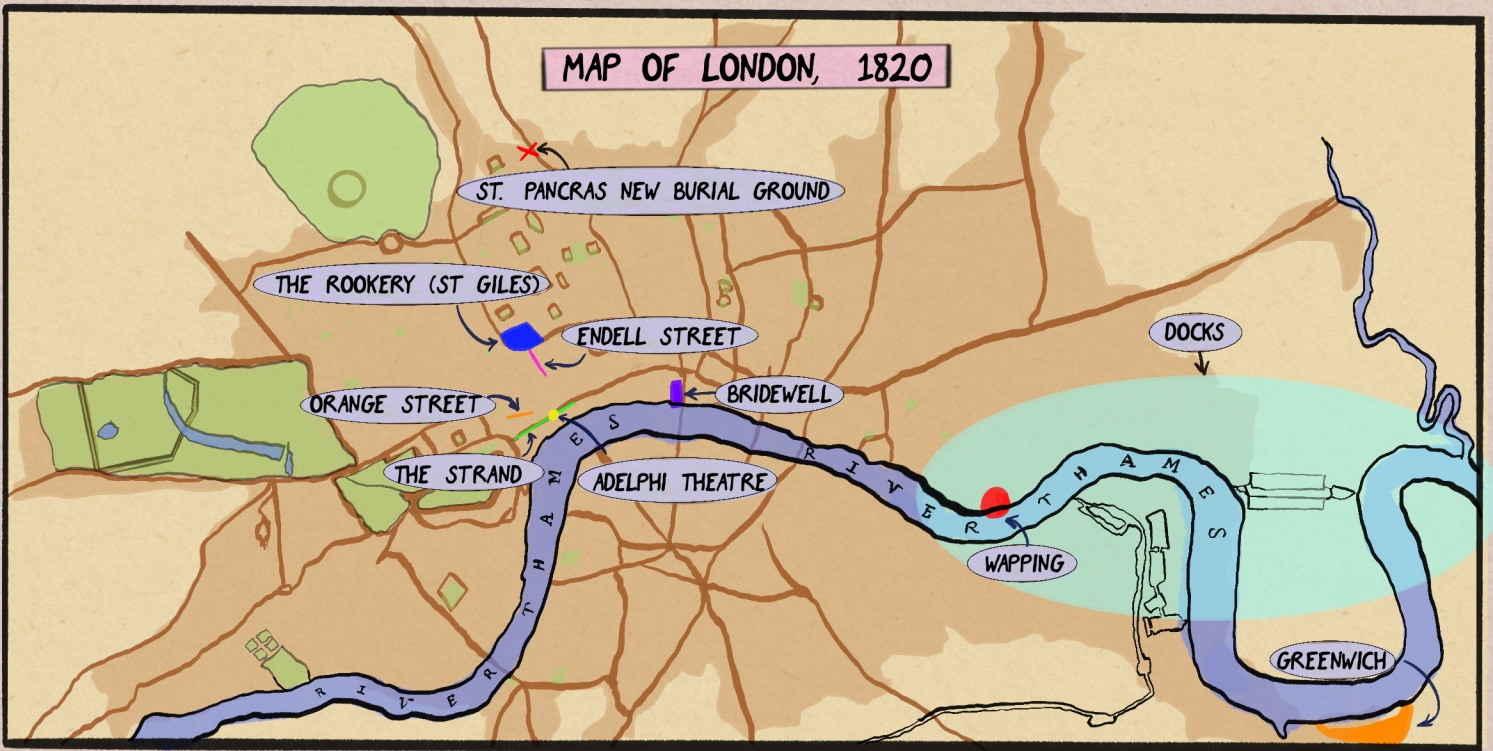
ST GILES, MARCH 1823



PENSION OFFICE, GREENWICH 21 APRIL 1823



MAP OF LONDON, 1820



c. 1820S



QUESTIONS & REFLECTIONS

a. What different experiences did Billy Waters have during his life?

b. Why do you think we know so little about him compared to others?

c. How and why might people have viewed Billy Waters differently at the time?

d. What approaches can historians use to restore marginalised people to view?

e. Can you make any links between his history and the world today?

SOURCES FROM THE TIME



The notorious Black Billy "At Home" to a London Street Party.

Printed by Thomas Kelly, coloured aquatint, London (March 1822)

Source: Wellcome Collection. Public Domain Mark.



"He supports himself, and those dependent on him, by Fiddling, Dancing, and Singing, through all parts of the metropolis; affording a lesson to the thoughtful, and no little amusement to the thoughtless."

- painter **Thomas Busby**, in *Costume of the Lower Orders of London*, 1820

"They come in flocks out of the back parts of St. Giles's ... we fear the evil has accumulated again ... we are obliged to relieve such an immense number of Irish in that parish, that it takes half our money."

- parish overseer, **Joseph Mills**, in *Parliamentary Report on Vagrancy*, 1816

"He was formerly a sailor, and he received a trifling pension since he left the service. A short time prior to his death he was elected King of a party of Beggars in St Giles's ... He resided with his family in the house of Mrs Fitzgerald ... His remains were yesterday removed from the Workhouse, to the New Burial Ground, St Pancras, where he was interred. He was followed to the grave by his wife and children, with a few old friends - some professional ones. He was forty-five years of age."

- obituary, **Morning Advertiser**, 22 March 1823

1770-1789



1790-1810

1775 - American Revolution begins
c. 1778 - Billy Waters is born, probably in New York
1778 - Irish Catholics allowed to join British Army
1783 - British evacuate New York incl. 3,000 Black Loyalists who fought or fled for freedom
1789 - French Revolution begins
1789 - autobiography of Olaudah Equiano published

1790-1810 - Waters gains experience as a sailor
1799 - New York passes 'gradual' abolition of slavery act
1807 - British abolition of the transatlantic slave trade

1810s-1840s - High emigration from Ireland to London

1811-1814

5 Oct. 1811 - Waters enlisted in British Royal Navy and ranked as 'Able Seaman'
2 Jan. 1812 - Waters promoted to 'Gunner's Mate'
3 Mar. 1812 - Waters suffers accident aboard *HMS Ganymede* in the Bay of Cadiz
2 June 1812 - Waters starts claiming naval pension in Greenwich, London

1803-1815 - Napoleonic Wars

1815-1820

1817 - Joseph Johnson described among London characters in book *Vagabondiana*
1818 - Society for the Suppression of Mendicity founded to stop people begging
1819-20 - First images of Water's costume published; wife and daughter mentioned
1820 - Places of Waters' street performance and residence in St. Giles documented

1821-1829

26 Nov. 1821 - *Tom and Jerry, or Life in London* play opens at the Adelphi Theatre
13 Dec. 1821 - Waters arrested for mendicity (street begging)
c. 20 Mar. 1823 - Waters dies, probably in St. Giles workhouse infirmary
21 April 1823 - Widow Elizabeth claims pension payment
1824 - Vagrancy Act
1829 - Roman Catholic Relief Act allows Catholics more political rights

1830-1839

1840s - Ceramic figurines of Waters created in Staffordshire and sold

1832 - Great Reform Act gives vote to middle class men
1833 - British Act abolishing slavery in most of British Empire
1834 - New Poor Law Act creates new strict approach to workhouses and begging
1834 - Termination of the East India Company's trading charter

1847 - Slum clearance in creation of New Oxford Street
1851 - Henry Mayhew publishes *London Labour and the London Poor* (3 vols.)
1870s - Revivals of play *Tom and Jerry* (featuring Waters) in British theatres

1840s-1870s

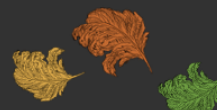
April 2023 - Camden Council approves official blue plaque in Bucknell Street

TIMELINE

1775 - 1848

AGE OF **REVOLUTION**
MAKING THE WORLD OVER

GLOSSARY



Bridewell	A former palace in the City of London which became a large prison and hospital; 'Bridewell' became a common name for jails in other British or colonial cities.
British Lines	Area controlled by the British Army, which occupied New York and other American cities for long periods during the American Revolution
Caricature	Drawing that makes someone look funny or foolish because it exaggerates parts of their appearance; Political cartoons were especially popular from the late eighteenth century.
Cat-gut	A slang term for violin strings, though actually made from sheep, goat, or cattle intestines
Catholic Free School	A charity school set up to support the children of poor Irish Catholics in St. Giles; It aimed to improve behaviour, literacy, and religious practice, and housed around 150 in the late 1810s.
Impressment	The practice of forcing men into military service by a group also known as 'the press gang'; The British Royal Navy relied on this method in wartime to crew its ships with experienced sailors, causing outrage especially among Americans, but it ended after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815.
Infirmary	A section of a larger institution where the ill are cared for, or a small hospital
Pinkster	A spring festival of Dutch origins, which became in late eighteenth-century New York an African-American holiday at which enslaved and free blacks drank, danced, dressed up, celebrated, and often shared customs with African roots (similar to 'Junkanoo')
Quarter Gunner	A type of promoted crewman in the Royal Navy who was in charge of maintaining guns
Refugee	Someone who has been forced to flee their home or place of origin for fear of attack or persecution
Rookery	An overcrowded London slum in St. Giles, built on the site of an old leper colony, with a tangled mass of buildings, alleys, and walkways; From the eighteenth century it became notorious for housing thieves, beggars, prostitutes, and as a place of disease and deprivation next to the posh West End – also nicknamed 'Little Dublin' or 'The Holy Land' because of its migrants.
Topman	Experienced and athletic sailor, responsible for climbing the masts, rigging, and setting the sails
Unserviceable	A word used to describe people or vessels that were no longer working or could not do their job
Vagrancy	Being homeless—wandering beyond your place of birth without a job or income—and often subject to mistreatment or laws which punished it as an offence, including fines and prison
Workhouse	An institution forcing the poor who cannot support themselves to labour in return for upkeep; Often run by parishes and badly managed, and more brutal after 1834's New Poor Law