# THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF MARY LACY

PETER GUILLERY

Mary Lacy, born in Wickham, Kent, on 12 January 1740, grew up unwilling to accept imposed boundaries.[1] 'My father and mother were poor, and forced to work very hard for their bread. . . I had so much of my own will that when I came to have some knowledge, it was a difficult matter for them to keep me within proper bounds.'[2] Her autobiography, *The History of the Female Shipwright*, published when she was 33, presents 'many evident tokens of that restless and intractable disposition';[3] it also reveals that among her many adult accomplishments was a compelling ability to write good narrative.

She left home, aged 19, disguised herself as a man, and went to sea, taking the name William Chandler, and finding herself a place as a carpenter's apprentice on board HMS *Sandwich*. She proved herself able, not least as a fighter; 'it was a most lucky circumstance that I had spirit and vigor to conquer him who was my greatest adversary, for if I had not I should have been [so] harassed and ill treated amongst them that my very life would have been a burden.'[4] Her maritime career during the Seven Years War and life thereafter up to 1772 have been researched and described by Suzanne J. Stark in *Female Tars: Women Aboard Ship in the Age of Sail*.

Ashore, 'William Chandler' became a shipwright's apprentice in Portsmouth Naval Dockyard in 1763. She completed a standard seven-year apprenticeship and was given a certificate of her status as a shipwright in 1770. This implied skills in mechanical drawing, arithmetic and writing. She would not have lasted out her apprenticeship had she not also proved herself capable of demanding physical work. 'The work of ship-builders is very hard, and demands not merely the customary skill and quickness of the handicraftsman, but great manual strength; they must either carry heavy beams or woodwork from the workshops to the ship, or else they must convey ponderous timbers complete to the workshop for affixing in the ship, and with these they must ascend and descend the ladders.'[5] The work did take its toll on Lacy; 'our company was ordered to tear up an old forty-gun ship, which was so very difficult to take to pieces that I strained my loins in the attempt, the effects of which I felt very sensibly at night when I went home, for I could hardly stand and had no appetite to my victuals. But notwithstanding my legs would scarce support me, I continued working till the ship was quite demolished, and then we were ordered on board the *Sandwich* to bring on her waling, which was very heavy.'[6] She was forced to give up the trade she had worked so hard for in late 1771, as a 'false friend' and disability brought on by rheumatoid arthritis obliged her to reveal her true sex; it being implicit that being a female was presumed to be incompatible with being a shipwright. Helped by a Mr Richardson, whom Stark speculates may have been a solicitor, she petitioned the Admiralty under her own name, and in January 1772, was granted 'a Pension equal to that granted to Superannuated Shipwrights',[7] that is £20 a year. Lodging with Richardson in Kensington through 1772, she went to Deptford, the site of the nearest Naval Dockyard to London, to collect her money. There, she relates,

> I was met by one Mr. Slade, who had removed thither from Portsmouth Yard by order of the board. He had not seen me before in women's apparel; yet having heard of my metamorphosis, he inquired kindly after my health and offered his services to conduct me back to Kensington.
>
> On the road thither, he expressed a great affection for me; and at the same time requested me to give him my hand at the altar, allowing me a proper time to consider of his offer. Though I had repeatedly declared that I would remain single, yet afterward, having the utmost reason to believe that there subsisted a real and mutual affection betwixt us, and that the hand of Providence was engaged in bringing about our union, I at length gave my consent; in consequence of which we were married and now enjoy the utmost happiness the state affords; which I have the most sanguine hopes of a continuance of, since my husband is not only sober and industrious, but having been convinced, ever since the year 1762, of the important truths of Christianity, his conduct towards mankind in general, founded on a love of virtue, is upright and exemplary; at the same time that in his conjugal relations he behaves in the most endearing and indulgent manner. Thus united, I have, by the blessing of God, attained more than a bare chance for happiness in my present state, and have also the most solid grounds to look for the permanent enjoyment of it in future.[8]

That is the end of the autobiography that Lacy published in 1773 under the name Mary Slade from an address in King Street, Deptford. Stark interprets the marriage as a thin fiction, pasted in to allow the 'story' to conclude with reassuringly conventional morality. Earlier the autobiography titillates with episodes of Lacy's flirtations with other women while dressed as a man, for which excuses are made in the preface, 'in a clumsy attempt to discount Lacy's lesbian propensities.'[9] There is support for the view that the marriage was invented, beyond the fact that no registration has been traced by either Stark or the present writer. 'Mary Slade of King Street, Deptford', whom we can take to have been Mary Lacy, given later circumstances, moved into a new house in Deptford with Elizabeth Slade in 1777. From sometime between 1790 and 1795 Benjamin Slade, probably identifiable as the then Purveyor at the Naval Dockyard, lived in the house next door.[10] The Slades were not relatives of Lacy's through marriage, as after her death 'Mary Slade' was described as a 'spinster and shopkeeper', her properties having passed to George and William Slade, millers and gentlemen of Halstead, Kent, who, like Benjamin, were more likely to have been relatives of Elizabeth Slade than of Mary Lacy, given the designation 'spinster'.[11] The relationships between these people remain unclear, as was perhaps intended, but perhaps Lacy had taken Elizabeth Slade's surname to pass as a sister.

Of the life of Mary Lacy after 1773 nothing has previously been written. It lacks the excitement of war at sea and sexual concealment, but it has great interest in respect of artisanal social mobility and speculative house building in the late 18th century, especially because she was a woman. Stark speculates that 'perhaps she found work as a house carpenter',[12] and doubts that this 'extraordinarily independent and strong-willed'[13] woman settled into the life of a dutiful wife. Spot on – she became a speculative house builder in Deptford for at least the next ten years. She appears to have died a decade later. A Mary Slade was buried at St Nicholas, Deptford, on 6 February 1795, after which the house-building 'Mary Slade' disappears from rate-book listings.[14] She ended her days not as so many other naval pensioners did, nearby at Greenwich Hospital, in the boredom of communal pipe smoking and yarn spinning (her talents for the latter notwithstanding), but in a big double-fronted house at the centre of a terrace that she had built herself and which for long thereafter carried the name 'Slade's Place'. Given the carpentry skills she had earlier acquired, Lacy appears to be a rare documented example of an 18th-century woman who was a builder, in a literal sense, rather than in the sense of being one who ran a building firm, through inheritance or business acumen.


Fig. 1. 'Slade's Place' (Nos 104–122 Deptford High Street), showing houses built by Mary Lacy in 1775–84 at Nos 104–108 and the site of her own house at No. 110 beyond.
© *English Heritage*

'Slade's Place' survives in part as Nos 104–108 and 116–118 Deptford High Street (Figs 1 and 2). These five houses are all that remain from what was a row of ten substantial houses (Nos 104–122) built in 1775–84.[15] In April 1775 'Mary Slade of King Street, Deptford' bought the freehold of a large plot of undeveloped land with an approximately 200ft frontage to what was then called Butt Lane for £480.[16] Where the money came from is unclear, but the pension of £20 a year would have provided good security for a mortgage, perhaps arranged via Richardson, at a time when few artisans could count on any regular income. The pension was equivalent to about six months earnings for a carpenter,[17] and if, as the later description implies, she was also working as a shopkeeper, it was not her only income. By 1777 four houses were up, including the biggest (No. 110), with a 30ft front, in which Mary and Elizabeth Slade were already living.[18] The other houses were all considerably smaller, for the most part with 18ft fronts. Three more were up by 1779, and a final three, at either end, followed by 1784.[19] House building was expensive, a brick house of this size costing £100 or more to build, which was more than two years' wages for a reasonably well-paid artisan.[20] Like many other entrepreneurial builders Mary Lacy would have found it difficult to undertake many houses at a time; it has been calculated that 77% of builders in London built five houses or less in 1775.[21] Even so, by Deptford's standards these were substantial houses. As one might expect from Lacy's character, in the local context they were distinctly ambitious.

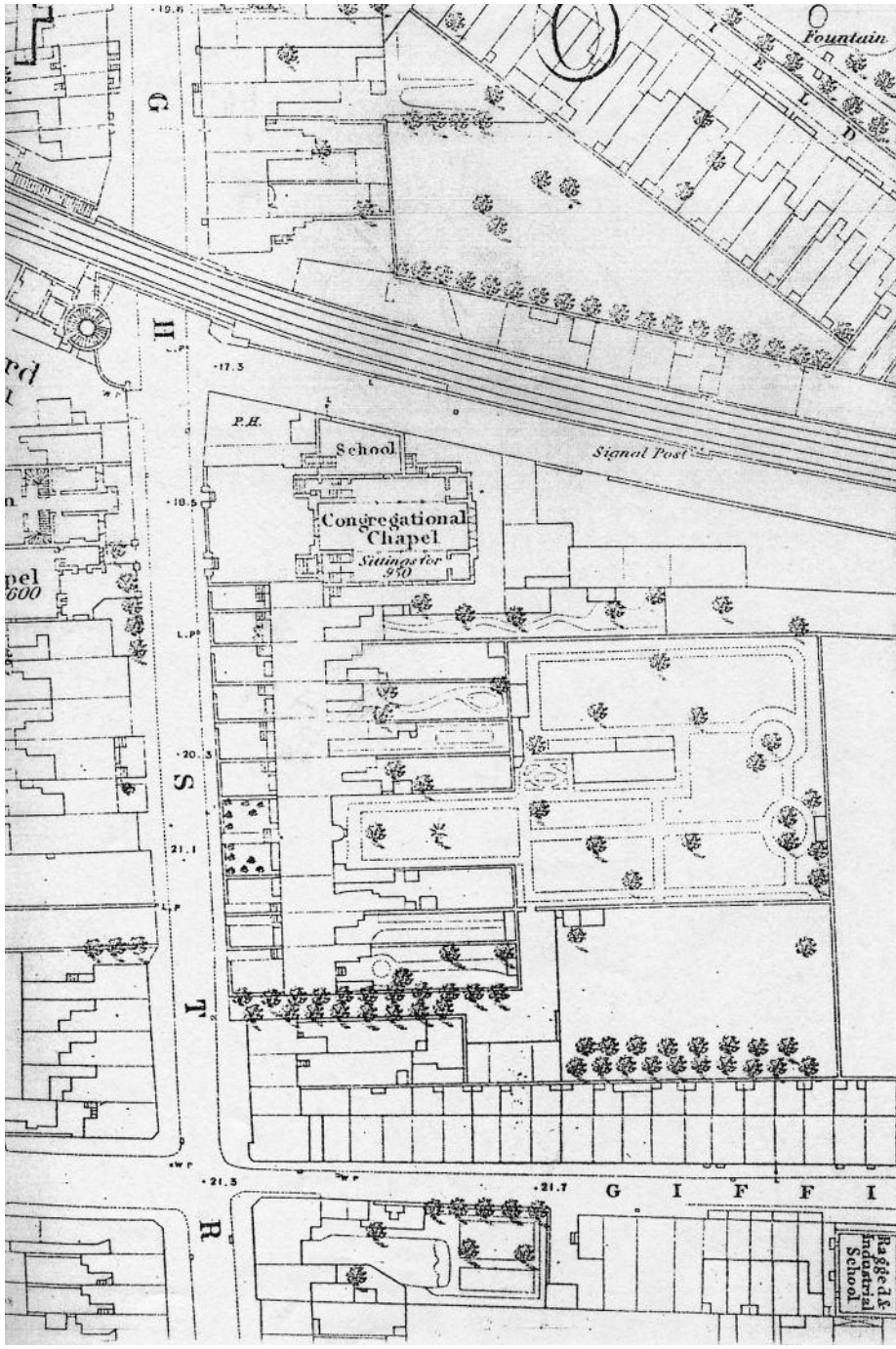


Fig. 2. 'Slade's Place', the ten houses immediately south of the Congregational Chapel, as mapped in 1868. *Ordnance Survey 1868, 1:1056, sheet XI.30*


Fig. 3. No. 203 Deptford High Street, a typical Deptford house of 1775–6.
*© Crown copyright. NMR*

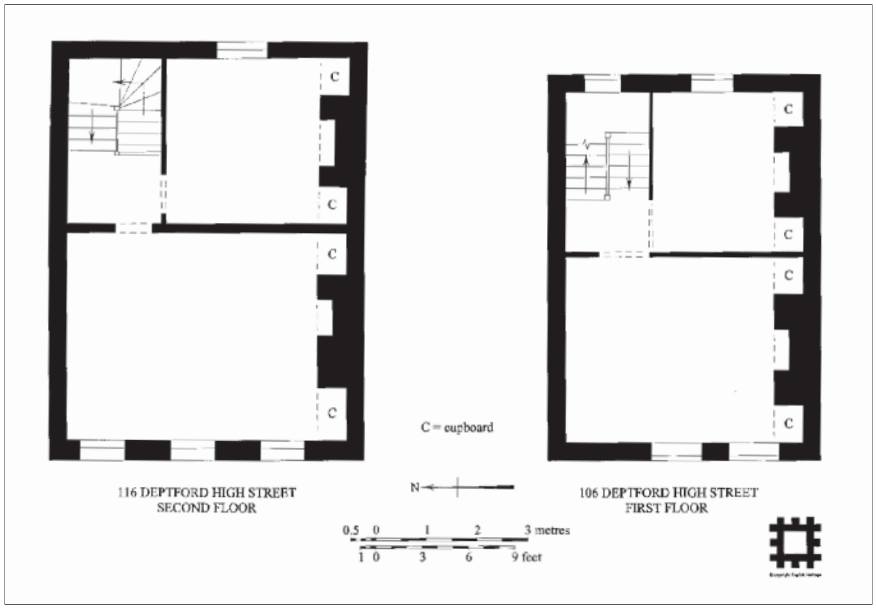


Fig. 4. Reconstructed upper-storey plans of two of the 'Slade's Place' houses built by Mary Lacy, No. 106 Deptford High Street, of 1775–6, and No. 116 Deptford High Street, of 1783–4.


Fig. 5. The second-floor front room in No. 116 Deptford High Street in 1974.
*London Metropolitan Archives*

Deptford was, and remains, an exceptional place. Expanding around its naval dockyard, an early industrial facility at the heart of the rise of British seapower, it was by 1700 a large 'town' with a population of about 10,000, close to, but not part of London. Few English provincial towns were then more populous; Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool and Leeds were all smaller.[22] Through the 18th century Deptford retained an edge-like status as an urban satellite, neither a London suburb nor an independent town with its own hinterland. Its local economy was, unusually for the time, overwhelmingly dependent on wage labour. The shipbuilding population that walked to work from the town to the naval dockyard formed Deptford's backbone. It was highly artisan – skilled, literate, Dissenting, democratized and independent-minded. Towards the end of the century wider social and economic developments, including both prosperity and insecurity generated by the vagaries of war, began to push Deptford's monoculture in both bourgeois and proletarian directions, with a related decline of the artisan class. As well as Slade's Place, numerous smaller eighteenth-century town houses survive on and around Deptford High Street (Fig. 3).[23]

When Mary Lacy began building Slade's Place there were scarce any bigger houses on the street, and few anywhere else in Deptford. Her speculation was locally unparalleled in many of its genteel attributes, 'standard' though these had become in central and west London. The houses formed a more-or-less uniform three-storey terrace set back behind courts or front gardens (now covered by shop extensions), with plain and flat brick fronts of loosely Palladian proportions (Figs. 1 and 2). Raised ground floors made the most of the views to the west across the open fields that then remained between Deptford and London. There were long back gardens, with Mary Lacy herself taking what was much the biggest, 250ft long widening out to be about 120ft square to the rear.[24] Internally, the only two houses to have been recorded (Nos 106 and 116) were both laid out with front and back rooms on each floor, with staircases rising alongside the back rooms (Fig. 4). This was the 'standard' house plan in higher-status eighteenth-century London speculations, but one that was rare in Deptford. There was full-height plain panelling throughout in No. 116 (Fig. 5); in a house of the 1770s of this size so near London a more opulent or fashionable finish with moulded panelling might be expected. The Slade's Place houses have more striking oddities when considered in relation to late-eighteenth-century speculative building in central London. The fenestration of the fronts is curiously asymmetrical, and irregular from house to house. Inside the recorded houses some fireplaces are not centred to the rooms, and there were originally no windows in the back walls to light the staircases on the upper landings, as was conventional in houses of this layout. Further, there is a plank-and-muntin partition dividing the staircase from the back room on the top storey in No. 106 (Fig. 6), a surprisingly rustic feature in a house of this form and date so close to London. These 'vernacular' elements are pointed out not to impugn Lacy as a builder, but to illustrate the intermediate nature of the housing. It stands between artisan and bourgeois town-house building traditions, mixing genteel fashionability with customary asymmetry. To regard the departures from the regularity and uniformity of the classically-rooted 'standard' as solecisms would be to assume a desire to speak the 'classical' language. However, in this artisan milieu classicism was still regarded as a collection of discontinuous parts for selective incorporation into a 'vernacular' tradition.[25]

Slade's Place seems to have succeeded as an upmarket speculation as the houses were initially inhabited by the bourgeois and professional classes, implying that Lacy herself retained respectability. Early occupants included Reverend Dr Wilson (at No. 104 from 1781–4), Captain Sainway (at No. 112 around 1790), and a number of other men and women listed in directories as 'gentry'. Doctors and solicitors followed in the 19th century and there was a ladies'

school at No. 106 in the 1860s. In 1869 Deptford lost its dockyard, unemployment took hold, and the High Street declined into poverty. Nos 112–114 became the Deptford Industrial Home & Refuge for Destitute Boys *c.*1870, and Lacy's own house was divided to house a bootmaker and a cheesemaker, and then demolished early in the 20th century.[26]

Stark has placed Lacy's life in the context of other 18th-century maritime women. It also needs to be considered in relation to other contemporary women who were entrepreneurs and builders. The former were not unusual. From a study of fire office registers it has been calculated that 1301 firms in London in the 1770s (about 8% of the total) had female proprietors, of which 553 (41%) were family concerns. The vast majority of these firms were small, well over half insuring capital valued at £100 or less. In the manufacturing sector there were proportionally fewer female-owned firms, except in clothing and textiles. It is not known how many of the 531 general building and construction firms active in London in the 1770s were headed by women, though the answer is certainly few. Documented examples include Elizabeth Harrison of Drury Lane, a 'carpenter', and Mary Grisson of Billiter Lane, a 'bricklayer'.[27] Perhaps most famous in this context was Eleanor Coade, who from 1769 manufactured patented artificial stone, which substance has given her name enduring currency.[28] However, in none of these instances is it known that the woman who was running the business had risen from poor origins to acquire a building-trade skill independently before going into business. Such a career path was probably impossible without the subterfuge that permitted it and consequent upward social mobility for the truly indomitable Mary Lacy.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am grateful to John Curtis of the South London Press and Mr Francis of Juicy Fruits for permitting access to two of the surviving houses built by Mary Lacy. For inspiration, information and photographs I am indebted to Joanna Smith, June Warrington and Derek Kendall, colleagues in the Architectural Survey division of English Heritage.

Fig. 6. The head of the staircase on the second floor in No. 106 Deptford High Street in 1998, showing the plank-and-muntin partition to the back room. *© Crown copyright. NMR*

## NOTES

1 This article arises from a reading of Suzanne J. Stark, *Female Tars: Women Aboard Ship in the Age of Sail*, London, 1998. The last chapter of this book discusses the early life of Mary Lacy up to 1772, and is based on her autobiography[Mary Slade, *The History of the Female Shipwright; to Whom the Government Has Granted a Superannuated Pension of Twenty Pounds per Annum, during Her Life: Written by Herself*, London, 1773]. Another version of the present article on Mary Lacy's later life appears in *History Workshop Journal*, L, April 2000.
2 Slade, *op. cit.*, unpaginated.
3 *Ibid.*, preface.
4 *Ibid.*, unpaginated.
5 Henry Mayhew, 'The Woodworkers: Ship and Boat Builders', *Morning Chronicle*, 5 Sept. 1850.
6 Slade, *op. cit.*, unpaginated.
7 Admiralty minutes, as quoted by Stark, *op. cit*, 165.
8 Slade, *op. cit.*, unpaginated.
9 Stark, *op. cit.*, 124.
10 Lewisham Local Studies and Archives (hereafter LLSA), property deed A96/18/23; *ibid.*, Parish of St Paul, Deptford, Ratebooks (hereafter RB), 1775–90 and 1795; Roger Morriss, *The Royal Dockyards during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars*, Leicester, 1983, 157.
11 LLSA, property deed A/96/18/22.
12 Stark, *op. cit.*, 167.
13 *Ibid.*, 167.
14 RB, 1795 and 1800; London Metropolitan Archives, P78/NIC/008, St Nicholas, Deptford, burial register.
15 Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (hereafter RCHME), 'Deptford Houses: 1650 to 1800', unpublished report, 1998; for a published summary see Peter Guillery and Bernard L. Herman, 'Deptford Houses: 1650 to 1800', *Vernacular Architecture*, XXX, 1999, forthcoming.
16 LLSA, property deed A96/18/23.
17 Leonard D. Schwarz, 'The Standard of Living in the Long Run: London, 1700–1860', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, XXXVIII, 1985, 37.
18 RB, 1777.
19 *Idem.*
20 Dan Cruickshank and Neil Burton, *Life in the Georgian City*, London, 1990, 220.
21 David Barnett, *London, Hub of the Industrial Revolution: A Revisionary History 1775–1825*, London, 1998, 121.
22 E. A. Wrigley, 'Urban growth and agricultural change: England and the Continent in the early modern period', in Peter Borsay (ed.), *The Eighteenth-century Town: A Reader in English Urban History 1688–1820*, Harlow, 1990, 42.
23 RCHME, *op. cit.*, *passim*.
24 LLSA, Map of the Titheable Lands in the Parishes of St Nicholas and St Paul, Deptford, 1844; Ordnance Survey Map, 1:1056 scale, 1868.
25 Elizabeth McKellar, *The birth of modern London: The development and design of the city, 1660–1720*, Manchester, 1999, 155–187; Peter Guillery and Bernard L. Herman, 'Negotiating Classicism in Eighteenth-century Deptford', in Elizabeth McKellar and Barbara Arciszewska (eds.), *Re-constructing British Classicism: New Approaches in Eighteenth-century Architecture*, forthcoming.
26 RB, 1775–1870; *Post Office Directories*, 1792–1886; Ordnance Survey Maps, 1:2500 scale, 1894 and 1916.
27 Barnett, *op. cit.*, 118, 208–16.
28 Alison Kelly, *Mrs Coade's Stone,* Upton-upon-Severn, 1990, *passim*.

If you would like this document in a different format, please contact our Customer Services department:
Telephone: 0870 333 1181
Fax: 01793 414926
Textphone: 01793 414878
E-mail: customers@english-heritage.org.uk