

Royal Victoria Dock

Curator
Marieta Evans

Contributor
Peter Stone, "The History of the Port of London" Author

Difficult to imagine nowadays but all the Royal Docks area, before the docks were built, was just marshland.

Although the Port of London was already thriving before the Royal Docks opened, the earlier docks upstream on the Thames, such as the West India, East India, London, and St. Katharine's, had been built for sailing ships, which were relatively small.

Below
The Royal Docks, 1950 to 1979 collection (Newham Heritage Service)



Above
Aerial View of The Royal Docks (Museum of London - PLA Collection)

The Victoria Dock was huge for its time, with 3 miles of quayside enclosing nearly 100 acres of water.

By the middle of the 19th century ships were being powered by steam engines and built of iron and getting much bigger.

The older docks were too small to handle them. The entrance locks were too small and the docks were too shallow.

Another factor was that the old docks were built before steam trains. By the middle of the century trains could carry goods around the country. But by then all the old docks were surrounded by urban area so it was difficult and expensive to bring railways to them.

In the Royal Docks area, with nothing more than marshland for miles, 19th century entrepreneurs had the perfect opportunity to build what was necessary from an empty canvass. As it was marshland it was relatively easy and cheap to buy the land and excavate the dock.

Whilst older docks had been built by merchants and ship owners – here, it was a group of railway engineers who got together to develop and build the Royal Victoria Dock at the same time that a railway line was arriving in the area with the opening of North Woolwich Station in 1847.

It was the perfect coup, to build new bigger docks at a place where you could connect them to the railway system and in an area where many other factories were opening in the 19th Century.

Royal Victoria Dock

The Victoria Dock was the first of the Royals to open. The Parliamentary Bill that approved the creation of the Victoria Dock was passed in 1850. It took 5 years to build and was opened by Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband, in 1855.

There were several reasons why they chose that specific location for the Victoria Dock. It was further downstream than the older docks, where the river was deeper and therefore accessible to larger ships. And it was then a completely isolated area, with no buildings around.

And because there was nothing around, there was plenty of space to create railway sidings right alongside the docks.

It was the first dock to be built specially for steamers, whilst still accepting sailing ships, the first to have hydraulically-operated lock gates and one of the first in Britain to have direct links to the railway network so that goods could be transferred from ship to train.

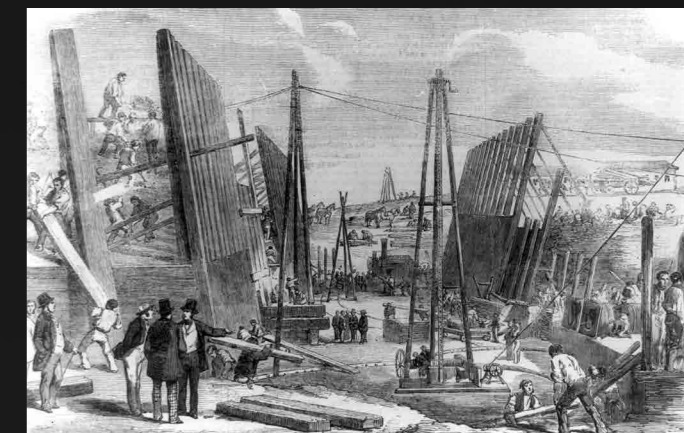
The sidings into the Victoria Dock linked directly to what was then the East Counties & Thames Junction Railway, which went from North Woolwich to Stratford and from there linked up with the rest of the country.

The Victoria Dock was huge for its time, with 3 miles of quayside enclosing nearly 100 acres of water. It became well known for specialised trade, in particular wines, grain, meat – imported from Australia, New Zealand and South America – fruit and tobacco arriving from all the corners of the Old Empire.

From the beginning there was a tobacco warehouse, wine vaults, and coal sidings at the Victoria Dock. By the end of the 19th century there were several specialized warehouses for frozen meat at the Royal Victoria.

It was a very successful venture and over the next decade it became the busiest dock in the Port of London.

Echoes from the Docks



Above
Construction of the Royal Victoria Dock, 9 September 1854 (Illustrated London News)

Asif Shakoor, Associate Fellow at the Royal Historical Society, University College of London

"The opening of the Royal Victoria Dock in 1855, saw early arrivals of South Asian seafarers on vessels such as the Belle of the Sea which arrived at the Victoria Dock from Calcutta, British India on 5th of July 1858, bringing Goods onboard under the command of Captain Lewis. From 1855 to 1900 some four dozen South Asian seafarers died on arrival at the Royal Victoria Dock and were buried un consecrated in unmarked public graves in West Ham cemetery. The Illustrated London News reported 2,000 South Asian

seafarers stayed at the Royal Victoria Dock for a period of ten days commencing in the first week of August in 1892. In December 1917, just over two hundred BAME seafarers arrived with my grandfather, Mahomed Gama, and stayed at the Royal Victoria Dock for a period of one month, whilst the SS Khiva was refitted for its new role of transporting American troops from New York in the First World War. These men served Great Britain in war and peace - such is the forgotten legacy of these men."



Above
Royal Victoria Dock circa 1955 (Newham Heritage Service)

With thanks to Asif Shakoor, an Independent scholar with a specialist interest in BAME seafarers in the First World War. His grandfather, Mahomed Gama, enlisted in the Mercantile Marine and arrived at the Royal Victoria Dock on the SS Khiva in December 1917.

Royal Albert Dock

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The Albert Dock was the second of the Royal Docks to open in 1880.

After the Victoria Dock opened trade continued to increase.

Following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 larger, long-distance ships from Australia, New Zealand and the Far East were arriving, but many were going to Liverpool rather than London because of better deep-water facilities there.

To keep London's port at the forefront, it was decided to add a new dock on land to the east of the Victoria Dock.

The Victoria dock and the new dock were to be linked, so, apart from the extra berthing it would bring, the new entrance by Galleons Reach would save ships about 4 miles of river navigation.

The year before it opened the company received royal assent to name the new dock the Royal Albert Dock and to rename the Victoria Dock as the Royal Victoria.

The Royal Albert was opened in June 1880 by the Duke and Duchess of Connaught on behalf of the duke's mother, Queen Victoria.

Below
Railway tracks running alongside Royal Albert Dock
(Museum of London - PLA Collection)



Above
Royal Docks 1968, the Watson family emigrating to New Zealand
(Granville Watson Family Collection)

It was highly impressive when it opened for business, extending to 85 acres with its 3 miles of quay lined with warehouses.

The new Royal Albert could receive larger ships than Royal Victoria.

Railway tracks ran alongside the dock. Trains could run straight into transit sheds, where the lines were sunk below ground-level to make loading easier. The loading cranes were hydraulically-powered and fresh water was supplied to each ship by hydrants.

It was the first of the London docks to be lit by electricity, making 24-hour work easier.



Above
Views of The Royal Docks in 1968 from ship bound to New Zealand
(Granville Watson Family Collection)

It was the first of the London docks to be lit by electricity, making 24-hour work easier.

The Royal Albert initially specialised in grain and, after refrigeration was introduced, frozen meat, fruit and vegetables. Royal Albert dock had the largest and most up to date cold storage accommodation of meat, up to 646,000 carcasses.

It was also intensively used for passenger ships and ocean liners.



Above
Royal Albert Dock, 1914 (Newham Heritage Service)

Below
Gallions Hotel (Newham Heritage Service)



The Gallions Hotel and the train terminal dockside
Passenger travel was increasing in the latter 19th century, particularly to other parts of the empire and shipping companies, such as P&O, were beginning to carry passengers as well as cargo. So the dock company created a passenger terminus at the Royal Albert, together with the very stylish Gallions Hotel, which opened in 1883. The Great Eastern Railway ran passenger trains directly to the adjacent Gallions station from Fenchurch Street in London and passengers could reach their ship through a tunnel from the hotel.

Below
Gallions Hotel, from a card, date unknown (Newham Heritage Service)



King George the V Dock

Curator
Marieta Evans

Contributor
Peter Stone, "The History of the Port of London" Author

The last of the Royal Docks to open was inaugurated in July 1921 by King George and Queen Mary.

Work to build King George the V Dock had commenced in August 1912 but its completion was delayed by the First World War (1914 – 1918).

The King George V was the most modern dock in the world and able to accommodate ships of up to 35,000 tons.

Forty-nine cranes on dolphin berths, not attached to the shore, allowed cargoes to be simultaneously transferred between ship and shore. Or Lighters, flat bottomed barges operated by skilled workers called Lightermen flanked both side of the ship, making loading and unloading extremely fast.

Ships arrived here with different cargoes from all around the globe. The warehouses were also connected to the railway system.

The King George the V, Albert Dock and Royal Victoria formed the biggest enclosed dock system in the world, the water alone amounting to almost 250 acres - the world's largest surface of impounded water.

The King George V was the most modern dock in the world and able to accommodate ships of up to 35,000 tons.

The King George the V Dock also included a dry dock for ship repairing facilities.

At that time, London's imports were of a much wider variety and volume than those of any other port in the world – and the Royal Docks were the Port Of London's pounding heart.



Above
King George V Dock and cutting bridge (Newham Heritage Service)

The Royal Docks & the War

In the Second World War, London Docklands became a prime target for the Luftwaffe. The worst came during the Blitz when, from 7 September 1940 London was bombed on fifty seven consecutive nights.

It is estimated that some 25,000 bombs hit Docklands during the entire war. As well as the inevitable destruction there was also a huge amount of human suffering and damage to infrastructure.



Yet somehow, the docks continued to function and never stopped operating.

The 1950s and '60s were a golden period for the Royals, but the writing was on the wall.

The Closure of the Docks

During the Second World War American forces developed the concept of roll-on/roll-off. A trailer could be filled anywhere, pulled to the docks by a truck, and rolled onto a ship. There was little need for dockers or dockside warehouses and as goods were increasingly moved by road transport there was less requirement for the rail links at the Royal Docks.

Containers went one step further. In 1965 an international agreement was made to standardise their size and they gradually became the normal way to transport goods around the world. The biggest container ships were too big to navigate up the river as far as the Royals.

During the 1970s and '80s it became more cost-effective for freight companies to use Tilbury or other ports. Most of London's docks and wharves closed in the 1960s and '70. The Royals hung on until 1981 but only because they were being subsidised by the government. That wasn't sustainable and the last regular shipping finished in 1981.

Below
General Shipping view of KGV dock 1950s to 1960s (Newham Heritage Service)

Echoes from the Docks



Above
Aerial View of The Royal Docks (Newham Heritage Service)

Roy Isherwood, Ship Engineer

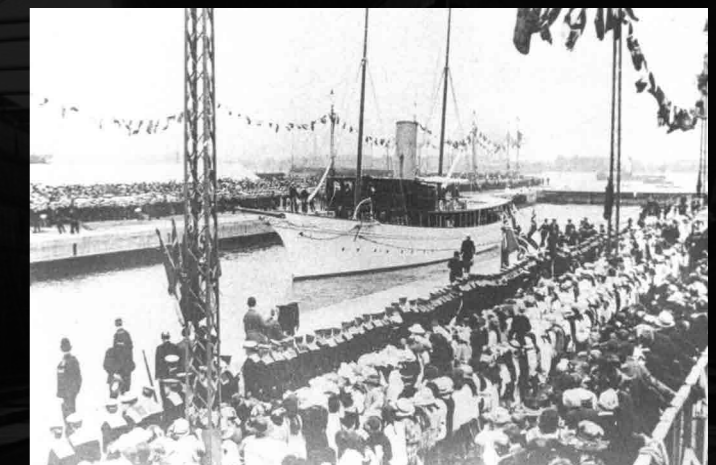
"After a long trip across the seas, on arrival to the final destination it would not be the captain who would take it to the finish line...but a local pilot. For example, if arriving to the Royal Docks, the ship would slow down off Gravesend and the pilot would come out to the ship in his boat, meet the captain, look at the papers, get the information on which dock and berth the vessel had to go to, and from there on, assist the steerage of the ship to the docks – because he, being local, would have a better understanding of the tides and river bed depths

and journey obstacles to get the ship out of trouble.

In the engine room most of the engineers were on standby during this time.

On arrival at the docks the Tugs would pull into the berth. Then Customs would board the ship and check the Bonded store. Crews would change, the Ship's Chandlers would bring new stores for next voyage, and us... we would go out for a well-deserved break to Canning Town Seaman's mission or some east end pubs!"

Below
Opening of King George V Docks, 1921 (Newham Heritage Service)



North Woolwich Station

Curator

Marieta Evans

Contributor

Dave Fennessy, North Woolwich & Silvertown Past and Present Group

The line between Stratford and Canning Town dates back to 1846 - when the Eastern Counties and Thames Junction railway was opened from Stratford via Stratford Bridge, later Stratford Market Station, to Barking Road, Canning Town.

It was originally intended to exclusively carry coal traffic, from the huge sidings at Thames Wharf.

The line was extended to North Woolwich the following year and opened to passengers, and so in 1847 North Woolwich Station opened as the southern terminus of the Eastern Counties and Thames Junction Railway.

The first North Woolwich station was made of wood and existed just inside what would become the park. It was replaced in 1854 with the brick building.

Services were extended north to Palace Gates in 1887.

The station was built just a short walk away from the pier, where customers wanting to travel south of the river could board a ferry.

The line later became part of the Great Eastern Railway (GER) - which also had services running from east London to Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk in a broadly similar way to the modern-day Greater Anglia network.

By 1900, the area around the route was thoroughly urbanised, with docks and goods depots employing thousands of people and bringing profitable goods and passenger traffic to the line.

Right

North Woolwich railway by Tidal Basin Station (Newham Heritage Service)

Below

North Woolwich Station (Newham Heritage Service)



It was originally intended to exclusively carry coal traffic, from the huge sidings at Thames Wharf.

In 1923, Britain's railways were merged into four main groups, with the GER becoming swallowed up by the London and North Eastern Railway.

After the London Passenger Transport Board took over all bus, tram and railway systems in 1933, a new trolleybus service ran alongside much of the route to North Woolwich, severely impacting on train revenue. The new trolleybus service started in 1938 along North Woolwich Road

The line suffered multiple bombings during the World War II Blitz. After the war, passenger traffic further declined as workers were rehoused in 'prefabs' near Beckton and Wanstead Flats.

In the 1960s, local goods depots began to close as British Rail withdrew from single-wagonload traffic which were better suited for road transportation.

Further decline of its use was due to the introduction of containerisation, which progressively decreased activity in the Royal Docks during the 1970s until their closure in 1981.

In 1979, the station became part of the North London Line extension until it - and Silvertown station, the next stop on the line - were shut down in 2006.

Both areas are now served by DLR stations instead.

The North Woolwich Old Station Museum opened on the site in 1984, using the original station buildings and one disused platform to explore the history of the Great Eastern Railway.

Featuring a reconstructed 1920s ticket office as well as engines, carriages and other railway memorabilia, the museum closed in 2008.

Below

North Woolwich Station, Bomb Damage, 7th September 1940 (Newham Heritage Service)



Royal Victoria Gardens

Curator
Marieta Evans

Contributor
Stephen Pewsey, *Local Historian*

For over 800 years the land where the Royal Victoria Gardens are located was owned by Westminster Abbey, and used for grazing livestock.

The history of the Gardens is closely linked to the arrival of the railway and building of the docks in the area. As the British Empire expanded and steamship technology developed, the original London docks were too small to cope with the growth in trade. New docks were planned for what until 1847 had been largely marshland, infested with malaria.

In advance of the construction of the docks, the area was opened up by the building of a railway between Canning Town and North Woolwich, with North Woolwich station opening in 1847 and linked by steam ferry to Woolwich. The steam ferry was opened as part of the land speculation which saw the building of the railway, Royal Victoria Gardens and the development of Royal Victoria Dock.

The area boomed, and was soon abuzz with people arriving by ship, by train, coming to the area for work, businesses and trade. And very soon, they would too be coming for pleasure.

The Pavilion Hotel had been built at the ferry terminal by 19th Century entrepreneur William Holland.

Below
Royal Victoria Gardens, early 1900s (Newham Heritage Service)



In 1850 he began to expand his hotel and lay out the hotel grounds, opening them as the Royal Pavilion Pleasure Gardens in 1851, attracting large numbers of visitors who had come to London to see the Great Exhibition.

The Gardens became one of the biggest sensations and attractions in London, and people came from far and wide came to enjoy the shows.

There were trapeze artists, hot air balloons, fireworks, a maze, a rose garden, open-air dancing, and even "baby shows".

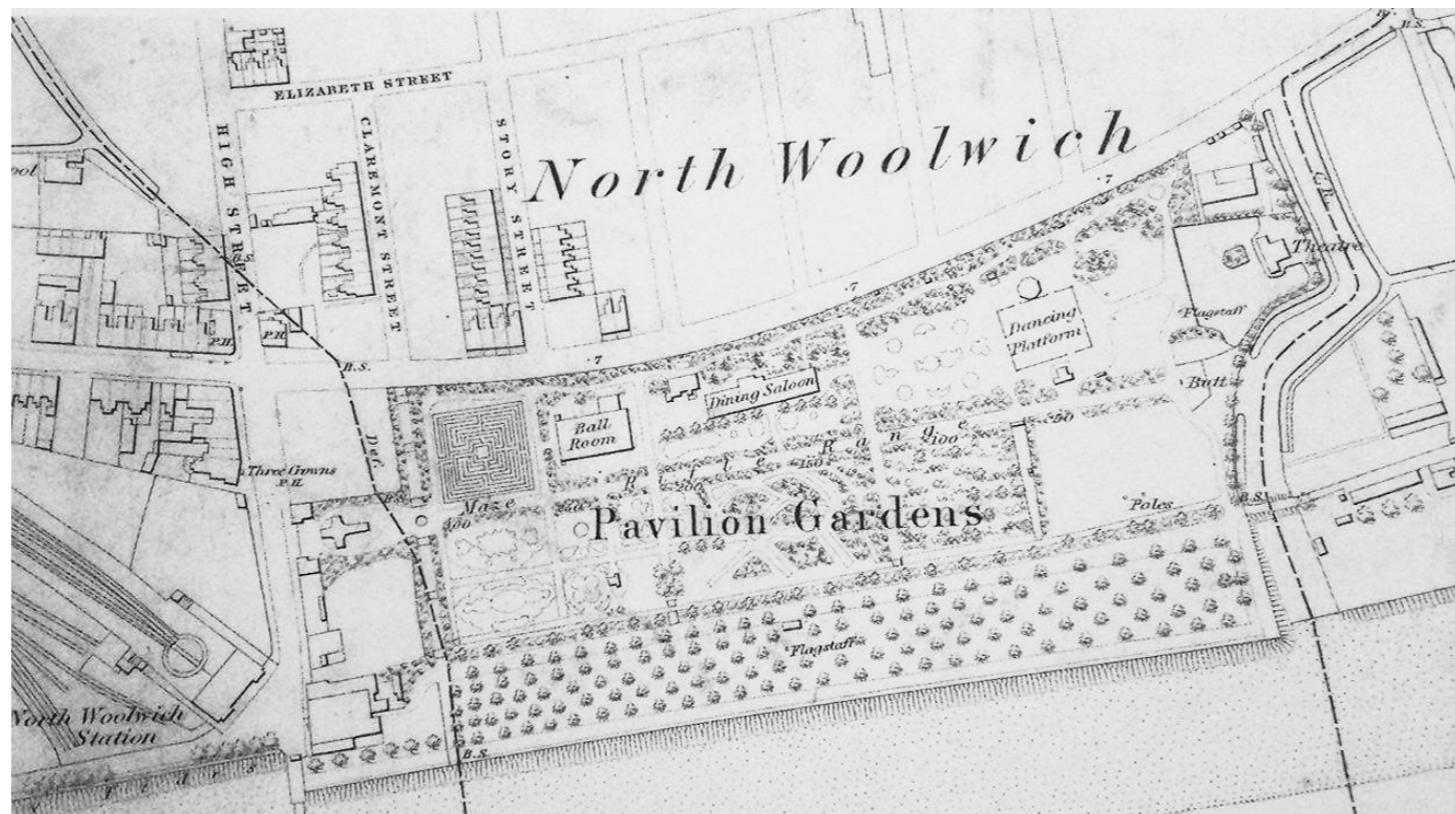
By 1859, the *Stratford Times* mentioned a "riverside terrace, winding walks among green turf and beautiful flowers, a maze, gipsy's tent, rifle gallery, large ballroom and refreshment room." There was also an Italian garden, a Chinese dancing platform and a stage beyond the lake.

The Gardens became one of the biggest sensations and attractions in London, and people came from far and wide came to enjoy the shows.

By the 1884 though the place had declined, the gardens were losing money, William Holland was bankrupted with large debts and it is even claimed that he escaped his creditors in a hot air balloon.

The Gardens acquired a seedy reputation that is was full of prostitutes, drunks and local toughs, and not the sort of place respectable people would go to.

The Pleasure Gardens closed as an attraction and there was fear that they would be built over.



Above
Royal Victoria Gardens, pre 1914

Below
North Woolwich & Pavilion Gardens Map, 1870

This whole area was surrounded by toxic smoke from the trains, the ships, the factories and so the local community was determined to keep this site green as 'a breathing space', the lungs of North Woolwich.

The 1st Duke of Westminster, who was Chairman of the North Woolwich Acquisition Fund, launched an appeal, to which Queen Victoria donated £50, and when the necessary funds were raised the Duke handed the land to the London County Council, the London Authority, and the site re-opened as public gardens as Royal Victoria Gardens in April 1890.

The Gardens suffered bomb damage during 1940 and a little of the Victorian Pleasure Garden layout remains today in the riverside path and the central walk and it is still one of London's few truly river side parks.

Below
Royal Victoria gardens and disappeared viewing platform, 1963 (Stan Dyson)



Harland and Wolff North Woolwich Site

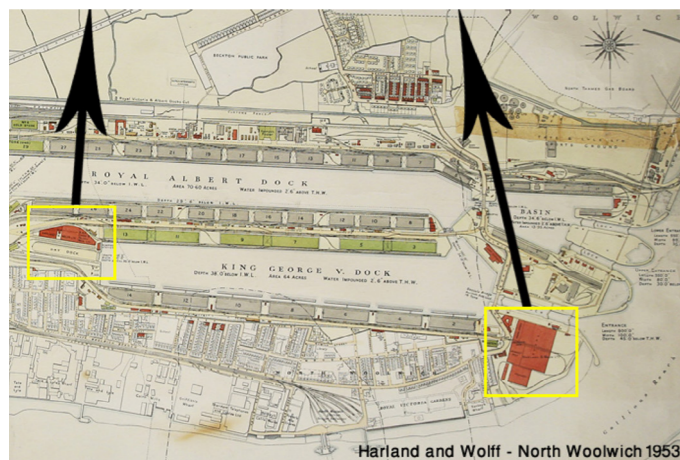
Curator
Marieta Evans

Contributor
Stephen Pewsey, *Local Historian*

Harland & Wolff is a shipyard in Belfast, Northern Ireland, now specialising in ship repair, conversion and offshore construction, but famous in its heyday for having built the majority of the ocean liners for the White Star Line, including the RMS Titanic.

Although another six H&W repair yards were dotted along the Thames at London Docks, Surrey Docks, Millwall Docks, King George V Dock & Tilbury, The Harland and Wolff yard in North Woolwich was the largest in London.

The Harland and Wolff Yard in North Woolwich operated between 1924 and 1972.



Above
Map of Harland and Wolff, North Woolwich, 1953

In the 1930s they built at this site vessels for the Grand Union Canal Carrying Company, the first of which were known as the *Star Class* or *Small Woolwich*. Later they built 24 vessels of the *Town Class* also known as The Big Woolwich class.

They also built working boats, like lighters. A lighter is a type of flat-bottomed barge used to transfer goods and passengers to



Above
View of Harland and Wolff from King George the V Lock (Museum of London - PLA Collection)

Vessels of various types, including cruise liners and Navy destroyers, were repaired here in giant warehouses.

and from moored ships. Lighters were traditionally unpowered and were moved and steered using long oars called "sweeps" and the motive power of water currents. They were operated by skilled workers called lightermen and were a characteristic sight in London's docks until about the 1960s, when technological changes made this form of lightering largely redundant.

The yard also worked on refits for major vessels, including warships. They undertook a range of repair and maintenance contracts for marine equipment. Other works were for instance support the building of eight marine diesel platforms.

Vessels of various types, including cruise liners and Navy destroyers, were repaired here in giant warehouses. So were pieces of marine equipment such as buoys and piers.

Although little or close to nothing remains of Harland and Wolff in King George the V, the shipyard gates can be found in Lyle Park, Silvertown.



Above
Harland and Wolff Promotional Poster

This riverside stretch of land where once stood Harland and Wolff is now the site of the housing state *Galleons Lock*, which includes a wildlife reserve and a riverside path, a very different and tranquil landscape compared to the loud and busy place it once was.

However, the maritime and shipping heritage of the site is still kept in the name of most of the roads and streets in the residential development, such as Hartlepool Court, Fishguard Way, Felixstowe Court, Inverness Mews, all named after seaside towns and cities.

Echoes from the Docks



Above
Launch of the Blue Circle from Harland and Wolff Slipway, 1971 (Michael Poulter)

Michael Poulter

"An aunt of my wife told me many years ago that she was a 'scrubber'. It turned out that she worked in H&W dry dock. Her job was to remove the grime from the bottom of the ships.

I was once taken to see a timber carrier in dry Dock that had hit an iceberg. There was several metres of 100mm thick steel curled back like the top of a sardine tin. I wished I had a camera then.

In 1967 I started working for Harland and Wolff Ltd. North Woolwich London E16 until it finally closed in 1971. It had over 4 thousand employees from all parts of Newham (East Ham, West Ham & Silvertown mainly). It had a large factory, dry dock and three working slipways. The last two ships I remember being built were a cement boat for the Blue Circle company and the London Atlas a floating crane.

I believe the Blue Circle was the very last vessel to be launched. The London Atlas was before that. If my memory serves me well the only other vessels were a number of fishery vessels for one of the Mediterranean countries.

I was in the Estimating / design office up to the company's closure. For some unknown reasons the 8/9 people in that office were the last to be let go. I was there for 2 months after all the workers left. Apart from applying for jobs I spent a lot of time just walking round the site. Very quiet.

I did get a job as I left. I ended up doing a planned maintenance scheme for Woolwich ferries and the sludge boats that went from Erith to a lightship at "bottom deep" a few miles off Southend"

Loraine Patterson

"My Great Aunt, Annie Margaret Patterson, born in 1907, worked in Harland and Wolff as a cook. A lot of people in my family had connections to the site, including Ann's brother

George who worked in the offices. Ann lived in North Woolwich for her whole life, never married, and drove a car, which was unusual for women in those days."

Woolwich Ferry

Curator

Marieta Evans

The Woolwich Ferry is a free vehicle ferry service across the River Thames connecting Woolwich to the south with North Woolwich to the north, licensed and financed by London River Services, the maritime arm of Transport for London.

Historians believe that has been a connection across the Thames between what is now Old Woolwich and what would later be North Woolwich at least since the Norman Conquest in 1066.

Old Woolwich (South Woolwich) across the Royal Docks is the oldest inhabited part of Woolwich, dating back to an Anglo-Saxon riverside settlement.

In the Anglo-Saxon times, the suffix -wich meant a settlement or town with extensive artisanal activity and trade. Woolwich meant a trading place for wool.

In 1671 cross-river traffic increased following the establishment of the Royal Arsenal, a site for armaments manufacture, ammunition proofing and explosives research for the British army.

To enable movement of troops and supplies, the army established its own ferry in 1810.

Below

Approach to the Ferry, 1901 (Newham Heritage Service)



Around 1880 the Metropolitan Board of Works took over toll bridges in London and opened them to free public use, and it was suggested that the Board should fund a free crossing of the Thames in east London.

The ferry has operated a free service since an Act of Parliament in 1889, and no tolls can be imposed without Parliamentary consent.

The service was officially opened on 23 March 1889, with the paddle steamer *Gordon*. The *Gordon* was named after General Gordon the hero of Khartoum, who was born in Woolwich and studied at the Academy. The sister vessel, *Duncan* was introduced on 20 April. The *Duncan* was named after Colonel Francis Duncan author of 'The History of the Royal Artillery'.

By the end of the 1920s the rise in motor traffic had put pressure on the ferry's capacity and a third vessel was introduced.

In 1922 the two original boats were replaced by two new ones, *Squires* and *Gordon*. The *Squires* was named after William James Squires, twice mayor of Woolwich.

The ferry has operated a free service since an Act of Parliament in 1889, and no tolls can be imposed without Parliamentary consent.

In 1930 two new boats were added, *Will Crooks* and *John Benn*. William Crooks was Woolwich's first labour MP and was also Mayor of Poplar. Sir John Benn was also MP for Devonport for six years.



Above

The Woolwich Ferry "Will Crooks" boat (Newham Heritage Service)

In 1963, three new diesel ferries were delivered: *James Newman*, named after a former Mayor of Woolwich, *Ernest Bevin*, named after a Labour MP and trade union pioneer who was affectionately known as the "docker's king councillor" and *John Burns* named after John Elliot Burns, a Liberal MP who led 1889 Great Dock Strike and who coined the phrase "The Thames is Liquid History".

In 2019, the 1963 boats were replaced by new vessels *Dame Vera Lynn*, a tribute to the East Ham "force's sweetheart", a singer who's songs became popular in the Second World War. The *Ben Woollacott*, is a tribute to a teenage deckhand who drowned in an accident while untying mooring ropes of the ferry *Ernest Bevin* in 2011. Ben came from a family of Thames watermen that had worked on the river for six generations.

The Woolwich ferry has made several appearances on TV and film. The *John Benn* is seen being destroyed by the titular monster in the film *Behemoth, the Sea Monster*. In "Strained Relations", a 1985 episode of the TV series *Only Fools and Horses*, the character Uncle Albert asks Rodney, played by Nicholas Lyndhurst, if he had ever been on board a ship to which he replied "Yes" but then added it was "only the Woolwich Ferry".



Above

The Woolwich Ferry "Squires" boat, built 1922 (Newham Heritage Service)

Echoes from the Docks



Above

The Woolwich Ferry "John Burns" (Newham Heritage Service)

Colleen Russel

"I was 5 years old when the 1963 boats arrived. My early memories are of Mum and Dad taking us across the water to do the shopping. Dad always bought a bag of Percy Daltons Peanuts, so that we could feed the pigeons on the deck. As we grew and became independent, the Ferries became our playground. We played for hours on it, going back and forth, playing hide and seek... As we became teenagers, it

was a place to meet up with your boyfriend. When I had my first son, I would take him in his pram on the ferry to 'do the shopping'. In fact his first words, apart from the usual mum, dad sounds, were "That's your lot". When the boat was fully loaded the Captain relayed these words via the tannoy to the deckhands to inform them that the boat was full. He must have heard it so many times he started to say it himself!"

Robert Rogers

"This was the only world cruise we kids could afford. We'd take the 69 Bus from Canning Town and our own food and drink.

It was a 'world cruise' as you could see the ships of many nations sailing along Old Father Thames to the various docks".



Above

Woolwich Ferry, 1976 (Newham Heritage Service)

Brunner Mond Factory – Site of the Silvertown Explosion

Curator

Marieta Evans

Contributor

Graham David Hill, "The Silvertown Explosion" Author
Colin Grainger, Local Historian

The Silvertown explosion occurred on Friday, 19 January 1917 at the Silvertown site of Brunner Mond, a munitions factory that was manufacturing explosives for Britain's First World War military effort.

The explosion claimed 73 lives and injured almost 500 but these figures have always been thought to have been an underestimate...

The blast destroyed over 900 houses, left up to 70,000 badly damaged, and left thousands of families homeless.

Brunner Mond had established a factory at Crescent Wharf in 1893 to manufacture caustic soda made from soda ash shipped from Cheshire but by 1912 the manufacture of these products ceased, leaving the fully equipped chemical plant idle.

Two years into the First World War, the Army was facing a crippling shell shortage.

The War Office decided to use the factory's surplus capacity to purify TNT (Trinitrotoluene) an explosive used in shell production from 1915 onwards, despite opposition from Brunner Mond and the fact that the factory was in a densely-populated area.

Their fears became a reality at 6.52pm on January 19, 1917 when a fire in the melt-pot room caused an explosion of 50 tonnes of TNT.

The TNT plant was destroyed instantly, as were many nearby buildings, including Silvertown Fire Station opposite. Much of the TNT was in railway wagons awaiting transport.

Many buildings in the immediate vicinity as well as streets of houses were immediately destroyed in what is still regarded as the biggest explosion ever on the British mainland.

Fires raged in the nearby flour mill and on ships in the dock. Silvertown Lubricants Oil, which stood on a site next door, was ravaged.

The blast destroyed over 900 houses, left up to 70,000 badly damaged, and left thousands of families homeless.

The red glow in the sky could be seen for miles around, and numerous accounts talked of fires been seen as far as Maidstone and Guilford, whilst the blast was heard up to 100 miles (160km) away including at Sandringham in Norfolk and the Sussex coast.

Below

Damage after the explosion, 20 January 1917 (Newham Heritage Service)



The Ministry of Munitions announced the explosion in the following day's newspaper, and ordered an investigation published on 24 February 1917.

A definite single cause of the explosion was not determined but it was found that the factory's site was inappropriate for the manufacture of TNT.

Management and safety practices at the plant were also criticised: TNT was stored in unsafe containers, close to the plant and the risky production process.

The report was not disclosed to the public until the 1950s.

Echoes from the Docks



Above

Silvertown Explosion. North Woolwich Road 1917 (Newham Heritage Service)

Joan Plant

My father was away in India on National Service at the time of the fatal explosion and my mother was working over the river at Woolwich Arsenal, working late into the night preparing items like shells for the troops. Mum told me that the two huge solid iron gates at the complex were blown shut by the force of the blast. It was incredible. But as they came home that night the women weren't allowed to go into that part of Silvertown. Having come through the Woolwich tunnel they were told by police to go straight home and stay indoors.

There was nothing official about what had happened. Everyone was frightened that the explosion may have been down to the Germans and they were fearful of what might be about to follow in the hours, days and nights ahead.

Mum would also tell us about people who were walking along the road getting blown off their feet and killed or being badly. However it was so lucky that the blast had not happened during the day time when the other factories and the school would have been occupied".



Above

Building in the Royal Victoria Docks Damaged by the Silvertown Explosion, 1917 (Newham Heritage Service)

Tate Institute

Curator
Marieta Evans

Contributor
Stephen Pewsey, *Local Historian*

Silvertown was named after the former rubber factory owned by Samuel Winkworth Silver, that opened in the area in 1852. Silver's factory supplied the world with practical rubber and gutta-percha cable insulation, which led to the laying of undersea cables and ability to send messages by telegraph and later telephone across the oceans.

But of all the factories that overshadowed the industrial skyline of Silvertown in the 19th and 20th centuries, when the area was one of Britain's biggest industrial hubs, Tate & Lyle still dominates not only the skyline, but also the markets and is still the largest sugar refinery in Europe.

Tate & Lyle
Tate & Lyle was founded in 1921 from a merger of two rival sugar refiners: Henry Tate & Sons and Abram Lyle & Sons.

In 1878 Henry Tate opened his Thames refinery specialising in sugar cubes, and 1882 Abram Lyle's new London refinery in nearby Plaistow Wharf, opened and began refining sugar and producing Lyle's Golden Syrup.

The two business owners, Henry Tate and Abram Lyle didn't meet in person and in fact when on the train down to work they always made an effort to make sure they were travelling in different carriages.

By the mid-twentieth century Silvertown and part of North Woolwich were full of factories, and what is worth highlighting is that while the thriving docks provided a lot of jobs, it was mainly manual jobs available to men whereas the factories offered clerical work and employment for women as well.

Tate & Lyle was without a doubt one of the most popular places for men and women to work at because it offered the best wages, generous bonuses three times a year, there was a nurse and medical facilities for employees on site at the factory and a great social life at the Tate Institute.

History of Tate Institute
In 1887 Henry Tate set up the 'Tate Institute' opposite the main entrance to the Silvertown factory. The 'Institute' was a large-scale social and welfare club, for the recreational benefit of the Tate & Lyle workers. The Institute closed in 1933 and the building was used as a local library until 1961. After that, it reopened as a very popular community and social hub for Tate & Lyle workers and their families.

More recently the Tate Institute has been used by local community members as a hub for arts activities and in 2022 the building was awarded central Government Funding (LUF) in order to bring it back into community use.

Below
Tate Institute years after closing down (Courtesy of Stan Dyson)



Below
Tate Institute serving the community (Date of picture unknown)



Above
Tate's Christmas Party at the Tate Institute, December 1963 (Courtesy of Stan Dyson)

The 'Institute' was a large-scale social and welfare club, for the recreational benefit of the Tate & Lyle workers.

A lot of great stories of the women working at Tate & Lyle – "The Sugar Girls" are collected in the book of the same name by Duncan Barrett & Nuala Calvi (a book to be recommended by anyone interested in learning more about this part of the Royal Docks History)

Echoes from the Docks



Above
Drinks at the Tate Institute after playing sports (Kevin Russell Family Collection)

Kevin Russel

"It was a community hub for Tate & Lyle Workers. You had a bar at the front for Tate & Lyle workers, then a function room at the back for wedding, birthdays,

retirement parties, and you could also go there for social events, have a few pints and then move the party down somewhere else in North Woolwich"



Above
Tate's Christmas Party at the Tate Institute, December 1963 (Courtesy of Stan Dyson)

Glynis Webb

"The Tate Institute has a lot to answer for...it was a social club and where I met my husband...we had big dance events, darts competitions, and ever so often they held big socials and you could buy your tickets to go there..."

they had a disco and of course as it was a subsidised club for workers and community members it was affordable to go there. It was a good excuse for people in the community to dress up."

St Mark's Church

Curator
Marieta Evans

Contributor
Stephen Pewsey, *Local Historian*

The building that nowadays host the Brick Lane Music Hall in Silvertown was first opened as St Mark's Church in 1857 when the area had become highly industrialised but people lived in very tough conditions.

Canning Town and Silvertown were amongst the most deprived areas of the country, in which we now know as Newham, but which was part of Essex at the time.

A lot of families were living in extreme poverty.

Following a severe outbreak of cholera, an appeal was placed in *The Times* newspaper to raise funds for a church which would act as a community hub to serve the beleaguered district.

Enough money was raised to commission the leading architect of the day, Samuel Sanders Teulon (2 March 1812 – 2 May 1873), to design a new church for the area.

Teulon, born across the river in Greenwich to a French family, was one of the most popular English Gothic Revival architects, famous for his use of polychrome brickwork and the complex planning of his buildings.

Below
St. Mark's Church 1971 (Newham Heritage Service)



The church was founded in 1857 but for the first years, until Teulon's vision was completed, it was housed in a temporary iron building.

When the powerful Gothic revival design of St. Mark's opened in 1862, it was a triumph of decorative brickwork and a masterpiece of Gothic Revival, providing a proud new landmark and becoming the focus of community life, with a rectory and a school.

In 1917, following the devastating explosion at the Brunner Mond chemical factory, St. Mark's was used as temporary shelter providing food and comfort for many of those rendered homeless.

The church continued to be the focal point of the area including during World War II when, after much of the surrounding area was reduced to rubble during the Blitz, it continued to serve the local community in many practical ways, including turning its grounds in to vegetable growing allotments.



Above
After the Vicarage was destroyed in the blitz, the grounds were turned into allotments (Newham Heritage Service)

The old St Mark's Church has turned a full circle as Brick Lane Music Hall, and also holds a licence to be used for weddings and civil ceremonies.

Despite receiving Grade II listed status, the first listing of any building in the Royal Docks area, St Mark's became isolated and run down during the 1970's and 80's. The church itself was declared redundant in 1974 and bought by Newham Council in 1979 with the intention of turning it into a museum however plans did not progress.

Suffering from neglect and vandalism, the building caught fire in 1981 and could have been destroyed, had it not been for the accumulation of pigeon-muck which fell through the collapsing roof and extinguished the flames.

After the fire a theatre company Brick Lane Music Hall took over the building, converting it to its present use in 2003-2004

to host traditional music hall and live shows since 2006. The building was rescued and restored, and in 2003 thanks to the creativity vision of Vincent Hayes, Brick Lane Music Hall founder, a brilliant plan was masterminded to put the building back into community use.

Under Vincent's vision, the interior received a make-over to provide a new home for Brick Lane Music Hall – complete with box office, bar and reception area, seating and tables for 180 guests, magnificent stage, professional kitchen, offices and dressing rooms.



Above
Interiors of St. Mark's Church, now Brick Lane Music Hall Theatre

Because of the success of the conversion, which turned out to be a remarkably good fit with the architect's original vision, English Heritage awarded St Mark's a Grade II* in 2012, paying tribute to this continuing use of the building and acknowledging the care and consideration taken by Brick Lane Music Hall to preserve its integrity.

At the same time, the War Memorial in the grounds which was also restored and returned to use, was honoured with its own Grade II listing and it is here that the community still meets every year on Remembrance Sunday for an outdoor service with the laying of wreaths.

The old St Mark's Church has turned a full circle as Brick Lane Music Hall, and also holds a licence to be used for weddings and civil ceremonies – so local couples can marry here just as many others did in St. Mark's in decades gone by.

However, the maritime and shipping heritage of the site is still kept in the name of most of the roads and streets in the residential development, such as Hartlepool Court, Fishguard Way, Felixstowe Court, Inverness Mews, all named after seaside towns and cities.

Below
A wedding in St Mark's in the 1940s (Courtesy of Colin Grainger)



Echoes from the Docks



Above
Show Must Go On! (Brick Lane Music Hall Collection)

Robert Rogers

"I first went to Brick Lane in 2005, when I used to take my Mum, who loved the place. We went there many times, but sadly my Mum's health deteriorated to the point she need a wheel chair to access the shows. In 2011, I donated the money for a defibrillator unit to be purchased in memory of my Dad who had died of a heart attack and BLMH placed a memorial for

dad at the Music Hall. The building and shows keeps alive the traditions of the Music Hall, to the point that you quite expect as you leave at the end of the show, to walk out into a gas lit, foggy, Victorian street, horses braying and the sound of horseshoes on cobbled stones with the hansom cabs and carriages waiting to take you home."



Above
Brick Lane Music Hall Collection