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Trains and boats and planes

A self guided walk around the riverside and docks at North Woolwich



Discover how a remote marsh became a gateway to the world
Find out how waterways have influenced economic boom, decline and revival
See how various transport networks have helped to transform the area
Explore a landscape rapidly evolving through regeneration

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discovered through walks







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Trains and boats and planes

Explore the changing riverside and docks at North Woolwich

For centuries the part of East London now known as North Woolwich was a remote marsh by the River Thames. Then from the 1840s it became a gateway to the world.

Three new docks - Royal Victoria, Royal Albert and King George V - and the trades that grew around them transformed this area into the industrial heart of the world's largest port.



A busy day in King George V Dock (1965)
© PLA / Museum of London

But this success was not to last.



The DLR and University of East London campus
© Rory Walsh

When the docks closed in 1981 North Woolwich was left isolated and in decline. So a series of projects were established to revive the area, complete with new buildings and transport networks.

This walk follows North Woolwich's story of boom, decline and revival. Find out how its geographical location affected its fortunes. Discover why sites built for industry are now used for leisure.

Travel on routes made over and under the Thames. See houses built on shipyards and watch planes land on water.

Also see how North Woolwich is evolving into a new landscape.

Route overview



Start: King George V DLR station

Finish: Cyprus DLR station

Practical information

Location	North Woolwich, Greater London
Getting there	<p>DLR - North Woolwich is on the Woolwich Arsenal branch. Trains run every 10 minutes from central London.</p> <p>Bus - served by local bus routes 473 (Stratford to North Woolwich) and 474 (Canning Town to Manor Park). Alight on Albert Road at the stop for Pier Road and King George V DLR station.</p> <p>Car - North Woolwich is easily accessible from the A13, A406 (North Circular) and A205 (South Circular). If using the Woolwich Free Ferry, queues are common on both sides of the river especially at peak times. There is limited parking available around the residential areas.</p> <p>Bicycle - National Cycle Route 1 passes along the south bank of the Thames at Woolwich. National Cycle Route 13 (London to Norfolk) passes to the north side of the Royal Docks.</p> <p>Ferry - The Woolwich Free Ferry operates from 6am to 8pm Mondays to Saturdays and from 11.30am to 7.30pm on Sundays.</p> <p>River Bus - North Woolwich is on River Bus route RB5 (Woolwich Shuttle) between London Eye Pier and Royal Arsenal Woolwich Pier. For timetables see www.thamesclippers.com</p>
Start point	King George V DLR station, Pier Road E16 2LH
Finish point	Cyprus DLR station, Strait Road E6 5PH
Walk distance	2 ½ miles
Level	Gentle – A mostly flat route following the Thames Path

Terrain Urban pavements, paved riverside and dockside paths. There are short flights of steps on the approach to the Royal Docks.

Conditions Some busy roads to cross and follow. Take care of children by the water's edge, especially by the lock entrance to the Royal Docks (Stop 10). It can be breezy along the dockside so take warm clothing.

Suitable for **Families** – plenty to enjoy including the ferry, foot tunnel and plane spotting at London City Airport. Royal Victoria Gardens (Stop 5) has a children's play park and paddling pool.

Dogs – must be kept on a lead; take special care by busy roads

Refreshments

- Various shops on Pier Road (after Stop 1)
- Café (summer only) and picnic tables at Royal Victoria Gardens by the bowling green
- There is a restaurant at Gallions Hotel (Stop 15) plus a small café in the gym

Toilets Please note there are no public toilets on the walk route

Places to visit **Museum of London Docklands** tells the story of the Thames and London's docks. Open daily 10am-6pm, free entry. No.1 Warehouse, West India Quay, E14 4AL. www.museumoflondon.org.uk/docklands

The Emirates Air Line cable car runs between nearby Royal Docks and North Greenwich DLR stations for spectacular views over Docklands. Open daily, various prices. www.emiratesairline.co.uk

Tourist information Nearest is **Greenwich Tourist Information Centre** beside the Cutty Sark in Pepys House, 2 Cutty Sark Gardens, SE10 9LW. Tel: 0870 608 2000 tic@royalgreenwich.gov.uk www.visitgreenwich.org.uk

First part of the route



Stopping points

- 1.** King George V DLR station
- 2.** Former North Woolwich railway station, Pier Road
- 3.** North entrance to Woolwich foot tunnel, Pier Road
- 4.** Woolwich Free Ferry
- 5.** Royal Victoria Gardens
- 6.** Bargehouse Road slipway
- 7.** Gallions Point estate, Gallions Reach
- 8.** Gallions Point estate, Gallions Reach



Second part of the route



Stopping points

9. Gallions Point estate, Gallions Reach
 10. King George V Dock entrance lock
 11. View of the Royal Docks from Woolwich Manor Way
 12. View of London City Airport from Sir Steve Redgrave Bridge
 13. View of Royal Albert Dock from Sir Steve Redgrave Bridge
 14. Gallions Hotel, Gallions Road
 15. View of Gallions Reach DLR station from Atlantis Avenue
 16. University of East London campus
- F.** Cyprus DLR station

1. Welcome to North Woolwich

King George V DLR station

For many years this area of East London was a vast open marsh officially in Kent. But after London's economy and population grew in the nineteenth century, the 'Great Marsh' became one of London's busiest and most important districts.

The area became known as North Woolwich to distinguish it from the main town of Woolwich on the opposite (south) bank of the River Thames.

North Woolwich was an industrial and manufacturing hub, home to some of the country's most notable companies. At the heart of North Woolwich was a new set of docks built to handle London's ever-growing volume of commercial shipping.



The Royal Docks (1950)

Courtesy of www.britainfromabove.org.uk © English Heritage

But it wasn't to last. Industrial decline from the 1960s led to the gradual closure of heavy industry, manufacturing and finally the docks - with devastating knock-on effects for local communities.



Left: A ship enters King George V Dock (1955) / Right: The same entrance lock now lined with housing developments
© Ben Brooksbank, Geograph (CCL) / © Rory Walsh

From the 1980s, however, a series of government regeneration programmes were introduced to attract investment, jobs and people to former industrial and dockland sites in East London, including North Woolwich.

This walk tells the story of the economic boom, decline and revival that has shaped this area. We will discover how the area's location and geography affected its fortunes. In particular we will look at industry, regeneration and transport – and how each has left an imprint on the landscape.

King George V DLR station is a good starting point as it encapsulates all three themes of this walk: it is named after King George V Dock, the construction of the Docklands Light Railway was part of the regeneration process, and it has provided a vital transport link connecting local communities with the wider London Transport network.

This walk was suggested by Dr Toby Butler, history lecturer at the University of East London and inspired by Phil Cohen and Mark Hunter, who worked on an oral history based version of this trail as part of the Ports of Call project. You can find out more about this audio trail in the links at the back of this booklet



Inside the Woolwich foot tunnel
© Rory Walsh



University of East London dockside buildings
© Rory Walsh

Directions 1

With your back to the DLR station entrance go along the road ahead (Pier Road). At the crossroads with Albert Road use the pedestrian crossing on the left and continue straight along Pier Road keeping to the left pavement. After a short distance the road bears right. On the corner is a set of steps. Stop here and look across the road at the red-brick building opposite. (For a good view go up the steps onto the platform.)

2. The end of the line

Former North Woolwich railway station, Pier Road

This was once North Woolwich's railway station. The Italianate architecture shows that it was a rather grand and impressive building. The railway came here in 1847 and the name of the station, North Woolwich, was soon applied to the whole area. This station was the southern terminus of the Eastern Counties and Thames Junction Railway that came from nearby Stratford. This railway carried wealthy passengers to steam boats. From the platform you can see the now rather dilapidated pier by the river.



Passenger and goods trains at North Woolwich station (c.1910)
© John Alsop Collection

As well as passengers, the railway carried freight to and from factories that lined the banks of the Thames. Some of these factories were world famous. At the end of Pier Road was WT Henley Cable works which opened in 1859 and made waterproof submarine telegraph cables. Cable ships docked a stone's throw from here to load their cargo. Thousands of miles of cables were laid under the sea to join up the British Empire and beyond. The cables allowed telegrams to be sent around the world; it was here that the Victorian internet was built.

In 1979 the railway was refurbished and a new North Woolwich station was built just around the corner. The old building was given to a Trust and turned into a railway museum. After King George V DLR station opened, the railway line and the new station closed completely. Sadly the museum closed too in 2008. The station is now Grade II listed and the interior has been nicely restored; one idea is that it could become a station once again for a small heritage steam railway.

Much of the old railway line will become part of London's newest transport scheme, Crossrail, the £15 billion project creating an east-west railway line. This will be on a branch off the main line that serves Canary Wharf and Woolwich. There won't be a station here though. The line will cross the Thames through a new tunnel that will run pretty much beneath your feet.

Directions 2

With the steps behind you use the traffic island to carefully cross the road towards the station. Take care as the traffic can be fast. With the station on your right continue for about 100 metres to a red-brick circular building. It is on a central island between two roadways used by ferry traffic. Take great care crossing the roads here as traffic can arrive suddenly.

3. Walking under water

North entrance to Woolwich foot tunnel, Pier Road

This round red-brick tower is one of the entrances to the Woolwich foot tunnel. The tunnel under the river is just over 500 metres long and allows pedestrians to cross the Thames for free without having to board a train or ferry. Look across the river and see if you can spot its sister tower on the other side.

There's a similar foot tunnel a little further upstream connecting Greenwich with the Isle of Dogs. The two tunnels were constructed thanks to the efforts of a local politician, Will Crooks. He worked in the docks and campaigned to improve living conditions for working-class people. The tunnels meant that thousands of workers could cross the river at any time of day without having to wait for the ferry. He later became the MP for Woolwich.



The north entrance of the Woolwich foot tunnel
© Jeff Van Campen, Flickr (CCL)

The Greenwich foot tunnel opened in 1902 and the Woolwich one here opened in 1912. They may not be modern transport connections like the DLR or Crossrail but they are nonetheless very useful. They are classed as a public highway and therefore kept open 24 hours a day by law. Today an estimated 1½ million people use the two tunnels each year.

We highly recommend a walk through the tunnel to appreciate this vital transport connection, plus get a sense of the river's width. You can return on the free ferry for some great views of the river.

Directions 3

To cross the river using the foot tunnel use the steps or lift inside the tower to go down to the tunnel. It will take about 12 minutes to walk the full length. Use the steps or lift at the other end to go back up to street level. You can return using the tunnel or free ferry.

To cross the river using the Woolwich ferry (either direction) from the foot tunnel carefully cross the access road by the waiting area for vehicles. Take the pedestrian path and keep the traffic on your right. You may need to wait at the barrier before being allowed on board. The crossing takes about 5 minutes each way.

If you do not want to experience the tunnel and ferry continue past the foot tunnel tower and follow the pavement between the two sections of Pier Road. At the end use the pedestrian crossing to cross the ferry waiting lanes on the left. Go up the ramp and stop at the top for a good view of the ferry.

4. Free for all

Woolwich Free Ferry

The ferries that you can see crossing the river are part of a long history of river services here at Woolwich. A medieval ferry operated nearby and we will see its possible location a little later.

In 1810 the Army built a ferry to carry troops and equipment from their barracks at the Royal Arsenal on the south side of the river. The following year an Act of Parliament established a commercial ferry company but this was eventually dissolved in 1844. Then came the railway company ferry connecting North Woolwich station with Woolwich.



One of the Woolwich ferries leaves the north terminal
© Rory Walsh

By the 1880s this service was inadequate. Thousands of people needed to cross the river every day to get to work in the rapidly expanding Royal Docks. When the Woolwich Free Ferry opened in 1889 the streets were lined with flags and bunting while 25,000 people enjoyed trips across the river in the first weekend.



The earlier ferries were steam powered (pictured 1963) - note the many dock cranes in the background
© Roger Kidd, Geograph (CCL)

Over one hundred years later the ferry is still running. Around 2½ million people and one million vehicles use the service every year. It is particularly well-used by drivers as it is where London's inner ring road – the North Circular and South Circular – connect.

In the absence of a road tunnel or bridge, traffic must queue for the ferry or face a long diversion to other river crossing points. The ferry is relatively slow and the traffic can create congestion and pollution. There have been many plans for a local bridge over the years but none has yet come to fruition.



Drivers queue for the ferry on Pier Road (1955)
© Ben Brooksbank, Geograph (CCL)

On the other hand drivers who use the ferry can take a break for a few minutes and watch the Thames slide majestically by on their journey to the opposite bank.

The other side of the Thames is also where the River Bus to London runs from Woolwich Arsenal Pier. These regular boat services up and down the river have become an integral part of the London Transport network and are well-used by some commuters. It takes just half an hour to reach Canary Wharf and one hour to reach Westminster.



A trip on the ferry is well worth trying
© Rory Walsh

Directions 4

If you have come back across the river on the ferry follow the access road then carefully cross over Pier Road. Turn right and head back towards the foot tunnel. **If you remained on the ramp** go back down from the viewpoint, then carefully cross over Pier Road towards the foot tunnel.

From the foot tunnel entrance retrace your steps back to the old station building. Follow the road round to the left then carefully cross over at the entrance to a park. Pass the sports courts and take the first path on the right. At the end turn left then continue up to the walkway with the river on your right. Stop part way along the walkway.

5. Pleasant gardens

Royal Victoria Gardens

We are soon going to visit the docks and find out about the various industries of this area. The docks employed many thousands of people who spent most of their lives working in manual jobs that were often backbreaking and dirty. However, this park is a reminder that there was some time for leisure too.

It was established by William Holland, a showman and owner of the Pavilion Hotel, and opened in 1851 as the Royal Pavilion Pleasure Gardens. 'Pleasure gardens' were public spaces that hosted entertainment shows including hot air balloons, acrobats and firework displays. Many also had concerts and fairgrounds. Such gardens became very fashionable in eighteenth and nineteenth century London, especially beside the River Thames.



Spring flowers in Royal Victoria Gardens
© Rory Walsh

An 1859 advert in *The Times* describes how the Royal Pavilion Pleasure Gardens were "open every day and night, wet or dry, for a succession of extraordinary grand galas and fetes, on a scale of splendour never before attempted at any place of al fresco amusements." Attractions included a rose garden, a bowling green, a maze and open air music and theatre shows.



Engraving of Ranelagh Pleasure Gardens, Chelsea (1764)
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Though popular the costs of these entertainments meant that the gardens started making a loss. By 1890 they were sold to the council who redeveloped the site as the Royal Victoria Gardens.

During the Second World War the docks and companies based at North Woolwich became a bomb target. The gardens were badly damaged and today the only Victorian remains are the central walkway and the riverside path.

Directions 5

Continue along the walkway to the far end of the park. Go through the gate and follow the signs for the Thames Path which will take you around a slipway. Continue along the next section of riverside walkway. Stop at the top of the next slipway which is at the end of Bargehouse Road.

6. Water ways

Bargehouse Road slipway

This ramp down to the river is a slipway, a launch for boats. This slipway is thought to be the site of one of Woolwich's earliest ferry crossings. Historical records show a ferry operated here in 1308. The name of the street at the top of the ramp – Bargehouse Road – is another clue. It is named after the ferryman's house that stood nearby.

Ferries ran between Woolwich and here until the free ferry opened in 1889. However, human travel on this part of the Thames dates back even further. When the docks were excavated Bronze Age and Roman artefacts were found including a Roman urn, a millstone and a 27-foot long canoe.



Bargehouse Road slipway
© Rory Walsh



Look for 'Gallions' and 'Galleons'
© Rory Walsh

The downstream section of river here is known as Gallion's Reach after a fourteenth-century landowner named Galyon. In the eighteenth century prison ships docked here and transported cargoes of convicts to Australia. You may notice that maps and signs feature varied spellings of 'Gallions' and 'Galleons'.

This stretch of river was the site of a terrible disaster. In the twilight of 3rd September 1878 a coal ship called the Bywell Castle collided with the SS Princess Alice, a paddle steamer that took families on pleasure trips to the seaside. At least 550 people died, including 158 children. The accident remains the worst boating disaster on a British waterway.

Directions 6

With the slipway directly behind you go up the slope. Go through the metal gate in the fence to the right to enter a modern housing estate. With the housing blocks on your left go towards the river and continue along the path. Stop past the first block of houses.

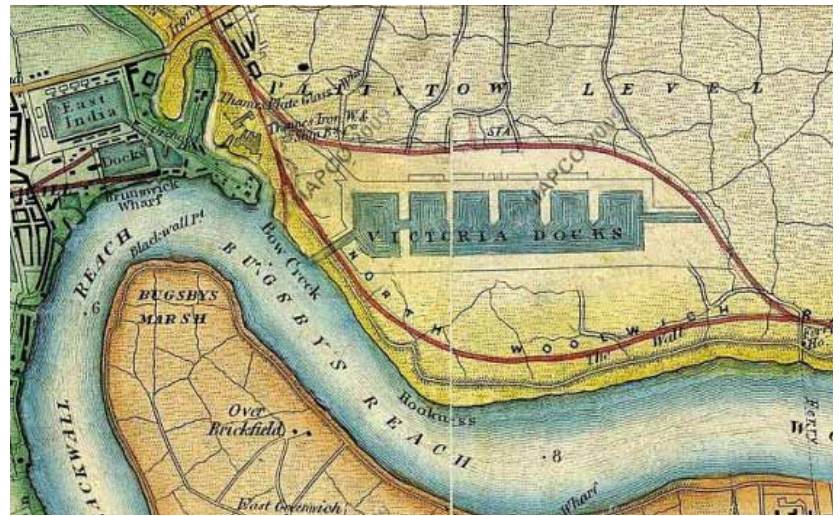
If the gate is locked continue up the slope and along Bargehouse Road. Turn right at the end and follow the path up to a large roundabout. Turn right into Fishguard Way. Follow the road round to the right into the estate. Continue ahead through two sets of bollards until you reach the riverside path.

7. Reclaiming the marsh

Galleons Point estate, Gallions Reach

For centuries, this low-lying area by the river east of central London was open marshland. By 1700 it was known as Plaistow Marsh and was still very rural. That all changed from the 1840s.

A building act of 1844 banned 'harmful trades' in London, so new factories had to be built outside the city. Meanwhile the River Thames was a convenient way to transport raw materials and a place to dump waste. Sites such as Plaistow Marsh were ideal for development.



Early map of Royal Victoria Dock showing the Plaistow marshland (1872)
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)



The Harland and Wolff shipyard at Gallions Reach (1928)
Courtesy of www.britainfromabove.org.uk © English Heritage

This particular stretch of the river bank became the site of a shipyard. The company Harland and Wolff was founded in Belfast in 1861 and subsequently made some of the world's most famous vessels including RMS Titanic, HMS Belfast and the SS Canberra ocean liner. They established a shipyard here in 1924.

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. Harland and Wolff also built narrow boats for the Army canal at Woolwich Arsenal and the Grand Union Canal Carrying Company.

The Harland and Wolff shipyard gates can be found in Lyle Park, Silvertown. This stretch of riverside is now a quiet residential area and it's difficult to imagine what a noisy and busy place it once was.

Directions 7

Continue along the riverside path past the second block of houses. Then stop beside the riverside wall.

8. Regenerating the riverside

Galleons Point estate, Gallions Reach

Harland and Wolff's ship repair yard here closed in 1971. It was one of many companies to go into decline and close as the docks in London closed - we will find why a little later in the walk.

The effect on the local area was devastating, leading to high levels of unemployment and social deprivation. In addition to the social impact, the derelict docks and industrial sites became an eyesore.

From the 1980s regeneration plans were put in place to revitalise the former docks by attracting new industries and different types of jobs.



Gallions Point housing
© Rory Walsh

Development schemes brought new landmarks to East London including the high rise offices at Canary Wharf, the major exhibition and international convention centre now known as ExCeL, and the Millennium Dome (now the O2 Arena).

Regeneration was not only about flagship commercial premises though. New public transport routes and housing were created. The Docklands Light Railway and the modern blocks of Galleons Point built here on the site of the Harland and Wolff shipyard are good examples.



Regeneratiing the river: the O2 and Canary Wharf (left), signs of seafaring at Gallions Point (right)
© Rory Walsh

Regeneration is an on-going and long-term process as it takes time to develop new infrastructure, attract investment and create jobs. To date North Woolwich has been quite successful in attracting new residents with housing developments such as this one due to its proximity to the water and transport links.

A less successful attempt at regeneration can be seen across the river. Look on the opposite bank of the Thames to the distinctive tower blocks of an area known as Thamesmead. This 1,000 acre housing development stands on the site of the Woolwich Royal Arsenal artillery works. Billed as 'a town for the twenty first century' Thamesmead became famous when its brutalist tower blocks featured in Stanley Kubrick's film 'A Clockwork Orange'.

When it was first built in 1968 Thamesmead struggled with design problems, notably a lack of shops and public transport. Today many of Thamesmead's problems have been addressed and the new Crossrail link will make the area more attractive to commuters.



Tower blocks of Thamesmead, 'a town for the twenty first century'
© Rory Walsh

Directions 8

Continue along the riverside path past the Galleons Point estate. Stop when you reach the corner where the Thames Path turns left away from the river.

9. Reaching across

Galleons Point estate, Gallions Reach

At the Woolwich Ferry we discovered how well the service is used by vehicles. This is because there are many bridges over the Thames in central London but far fewer river crossings in the outer parts of the city. The nearest vehicle crossings to the Woolwich Ferry are the Blackwall Tunnel about two miles upstream and the Dartford Crossing of the M25 (a bridge and tunnel) some ten miles downstream.

All of these crossing points in East London suffer from congestion. Since the 1930s there have been suggestions for a bridge over the river here. One recent proposal, submitted in 2004, was the Thames Gateway Bridge to cross the river from Thamesmead to Beckton just downstream from where we are now. The £500 million plans were for six traffic lanes, a cycle lane, a walkway and railway line.



Section of the Blackwall Tunnel (1895)
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Local residents and environmental groups raised concerns over increased traffic, air and noise pollution, and wildlife damage. There were also concerns over costs and that the bridge would bypass North Woolwich instead of regenerating it. As a result the scheme was rejected and in November 2008 the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, scrapped the project.

Yet this wasn't the end of the story. A year later a contract was awarded to investigate the viability of an East London crossing. In October 2014 consultation was announced on plans for a road tunnel under the river to relieve congestion at Blackwall Tunnel. The Silvertown Tunnel would run roughly where the Emirates Air Line cable car crosses the river, between North Greenwich and West Silvertown. Plans for a Gallions Reach crossing have been scaled back as a result though a bridge or tunnel are still possible options. The Woolwich Ferry could move to Galleons Reach where the roads can be better redesigned to take local traffic.

What do you think about plans for a crossing here? Such infrastructure is always a long-term project, often held back more by politics and planning than the actual physical and engineering challenges. Time will tell what solution is found.

Directions 9

Follow the path with the blocks of Gallions Point on your left. The Thames Path continues over the entrance lock to the Royal Docks. Stop by the small redbrick building which is the former lock keeper's cottage. If you prefer, you can stop on the lock itself. **NOTE: the lock is lined with chains but if you do stop over it be very careful, especially with children.**

10. Gateway to the world

King George V Dock entrance lock



Left: Workers extend the dry dock of the Royal Albert Dock (1913) Right: Crowds at the opening King George V Dock (1921)
© PLA / Museum of London

For centuries London's original docks were on the river banks close to the heart of the city. As shipping levels grew, however, there was a severe lack of secure places to load and unload cargo. At times ships had to wait weeks to unload, which led to piracy and theft.

A series of artificial docks were dug beside the river to massively increase the space for servicing shipping. The docks were surrounded by high walls and had their own special police force to protect the cargo. Yet as ships grew in size, deeper river channels and larger berths were needed. Navigating the bends in the Thames also became difficult, particularly around the Isle of Dogs.

So between 1855 and 1921 a series of three connected docks were dug out of Plaistow Marsh. They had railways running up to the quayside and were big enough to accommodate larger ships. They were named after kings and queens – Royal Victoria Dock, Royal Albert Dock and King George V Dock – and became known collectively as the Royal Docks or 'the Royals'.

This lock is now their main entrance. The docks have a constant water level while the River Thames is tidal. By adjusting the water level, this lock allowed ships to pass between the docks and the river. At the next stop we'll see the full extent of the dock area and find out about their activities.

Directions 10

If you stood on the lock return to the path. Continue along the gravel path with more Gallions Point blocks on the left. At the end go up the steps to the road bridge. Carefully cross over the road – the traffic can be very busy here so you are advised to turn left and use the traffic island. Once you are on the other side of the bridge stop halfway across it and look out at the expanses of water.

11. Royal dynasty

View of the Royal Docks from Woolwich Manor Way

From this elevated position on the bridge we can get a sense of the extent of the Royal Docks. They were once the world's largest enclosed docks. They are two miles long and for most of their history they were packed full of vessels from all over the world.

The oldest of the Docks, Royal Victoria opened in 1855. It is furthest away from you on the horizon beyond City Airport. Next came the Royal Albert Dock which joined up with the Victoria Dock and opened in 1880 - you can see this to your right. Next to it on the left hand side is King George V Dock, which opened in 1921.



Royal Albert and King George V Docks (1930)
Courtesy of www.britainfromabove.org.uk © English Heritage

The Royal Docks were a huge success. Within five years of opening Royal Victoria Dock carried 850,000 tons of shipping a year – double the amount of the central London docks.



Spillers Millennium Mills beside Royal Victoria Dock (1934)
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)



RMS Queen Elizabeth in King George V Dock (1966)
© Ian Taylor, Geograph (CCL)

The Royal Docks dealt with a huge array of cargo, particularly food, timber and passengers. Lining the 12 miles of quayside were giant refrigerated warehouses to store meat and fruit while large granaries processed cereals and grains. Much of this dock infrastructure has gone but some industry remains. Look to the left of the docks to see the twin chimneys of the Tate and Lyle sugar refinery, the largest sugar refinery in the world. Nearly all the cane sugar in the European Union is processed here, along with the famous golden syrup.

Thousands of people were employed in the docks, often on a day-by-day basis. Men would gather each morning and were selected for work by foremen. Many of the dock workers were highly skilled. Jobs included crane drivers, stevedores who loaded and unloaded vessels, lightermen who carried goods to and fro on small barges, and deal porters who carried heavy timber. They were strong, acrobatic and needed a head for heights.

Of course all the dock workers and their families needed places to live. The boom years of the docks saw massive growth in the local population. Much of the housing in North Woolwich and the nearby areas of Beckton, Canning Town and Silvertown was built for dock workers.



Working life in the Royal Docks included a range of physically demanding jobs: -
Top left: lock men hauling a ship warp (1930)
Bottom left: discharging timber (1930s)
Above: unloading New Zealand lamb (1959)
© PLA / Museum of London

Directions 11

Continue along the road and on to the Sir Steve Redgrave Bridge. The bridge bends to the left and is lined with curved street lamps. Stop when you reach the bus stop and look towards the airport runway between the docks.

12. Taking off

View of London City Airport from Sir Steve Redgrave Bridge

The Royal Docks remained London's major docks until the 1960s. Then they began to decline due to the containerisation of shipping and competition from other ports in Europe.

Before containers, large teams of men were needed to load and unload each vessel. Containers of a standard size could be handled by cranes, which made it much faster and cheaper to load ships with far fewer workers. Meanwhile rail transport was eclipsed by cheap lorry haulage. Other docks were better able to deal with the huge container shipping and in 1981 the Royal Docks closed.



Container cargoes, Royal Victoria Dock (1964)
© PLA / Museum of London

In the same year the government formed the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) to regenerate 8½ miles of riverside and docks in East London, including the Royal Docks. The LDDC was given the dock land and powers to relax planning controls for market led development.

One of the first and most controversial projects that they supported was London City Airport which we can see from here. The runway was built on the space between King George V Dock and Royal Albert Dock which had once been an area for loading, unloading and storage of goods. The airport terminal and car park were built on parts of King George V Dock quayside. It is a STOL runway, which means 'Short Take Off and Landing', so is only suitable for smaller aircraft. Large jets, helicopters and private flights are not allowed to use it.



Planes taxiing and landing at London City Airport
© Rory Walsh

The airport's development was fiercely resisted by many residents who came up with their own 'people's plan' for the Royal Docks. Opponents argued that this was not an appropriate place for an airport and that the land should be used for housing, childcare, shopping facilities and recreation.

Despite opposition the airport opened in 1987 and has grown into a successful enterprise. In 2012 it welcomed a record three million passengers and there are plans to double its capacity to six million in ten years. Most of the flights serve business people in Europe, many of whom return the same day. Destinations include Berlin and Frankfurt, Milan and Rome, Zurich and Geneva, Paris and Luxembourg. There are also some important domestic routes such as Edinburgh, Aberdeen, the Isle of Man and Channel Islands.



A plane coming in to land
© Rory Walsh

The airport has its own DLR station so passengers can step off a plane and in no time be on a train directly to Canary Wharf or the City. The airport means that North Woolwich is a gateway to the world once more. As you can hear, however, the sound of the planes can be deafening and there are still mixed feelings about its impact on local communities.



Aerial view of London City Airport (2010)
© Frans Zwart, Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Directions 12

Continue along Sir Steve Redgrave Bridge. Stop when you are level with Royal Albert Dock on the other side of the airport runway.

13. Making a splash

View of Royal Albert Dock from Sir Steve Redgrave Bridge

Although the three Royal Docks are no longer used for commercial vessels they still welcome leisure craft. The impounded spaces of water are ideal for many types of sport and leisure activity.

In Royal Victoria Docks there is a Watersports Centre where you can try windsurfing, wakeboarding or stand-up paddleboarding. Royal Albert Dock is home to the London Regatta Centre; the straight section of open water provides an Olympic sized 2,000 metre rowing course, one of only three in Britain. See if you can spot distance markers along the dock edge.



Vessels in Gallions Point Marina
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

George V Dock is reserved for power water sports and here you can try jet-skiing and water-skiing. Occasionally open water swimming events and triathlons are held in the docks too. Just the other side of this bridge in Albert Basin is Gallions Point Marina which provides moorings and various boat services as well as offering yachting courses.

The Royal Docks occasionally host other leisure and commercial craft too. The ExCeL hosts the annual London Boat Show with a display of pleasure craft immediately outside in Royal Victoria Dock. The docks are also home to the SS Robin, a Victorian cargo steamer being restored and due to open as a floating museum near the Emirates Air Line.

During the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, the Royal Docks were the second largest sporting venue after the Olympic Park, with the ExCeL hosting a number of competitions. Meanwhile cruise ships moored in Royal Albert Dock provided accommodation to around 900 Olympic workers. The Mayor of London and the local council hoped to use the Games as a catalyst for further regeneration, once again showing that regeneration is a long-term project. We will hear about some of the proposed projects later in the walk.

Directions 13

Continue to the end of the bridge then turn sharp left to follow the path towards the docks. Turn left at the dockside then go under the bridge. Gallions Point Marina will appear on your right. Follow the dockside path as it bears left behind a modern housing block. Stop at the building with tall chimneys that is set behind the modern dockside blocks.

14. Old and new

Gallions Hotel, Gallions Road

So far we have heard a lot about former dock infrastructure and modern regeneration developments. We are now near a rare survivor from the prosperous years of the Royal Docks.

The ornate Gallions Hotel was completed in 1883. Though dwarfed by modern apartment blocks it is still a grand structure. Take time to look at the domed tower and the moulded figures on the second floor walls.



The restored Gallions Hotel
© Rory Walsh

The hotel was a stopping point for wealthy passengers who travelled on ocean liners from the Royal Albert Dock. It was a luxurious place, with separate floors for First and Second Class passengers. There were underground stables, a foot tunnel to the docks and the hotel even had its own railway station. Originally the front doors opened onto railway platforms, allowing guests to board trains to and from central London.

In the 1940s the hotel became a pub but it shut in 1972 and as the docks fell into decline 'The Gallions' was left isolated on the Albert Basin. Well into the 1990s it was surrounded by wasteland. It survives today because, like North Woolwich station, it is a Grade II listed building. When the £100 million redevelopment of Albert Basin began in the 1990s, the building was carefully renovated and new buildings completed around it.

Today the Gallions Hotel includes a restaurant, gym and café – making it an ideal place to stop for a break.

Directions 14

Take time to look at the details of the Gallions Hotel. You may like to stop here for refreshments from the restaurant, gym café or the nearby shops. When you are ready, pass the playground behind the hotel and continue along the road lined with trees. At the junction with the main road (Atlantis Avenue), turn left towards the large roundabout. Look across the road at the DLR station.

15. Back on track

View of Gallions Reach DLR from Atlantis Avenue

We began the walk at a Docklands Light Railway station and here we can see another section of the network. The DLR's little red trains are now an integral part of London's transport but were created to address a problem of isolation.

The decline of the docks and the axing of trains and buses for those that worked there left some communities rather cut off. When the LDDC was set up one of the first issues they identified in the Docklands was this chronic lack of public transport. Regeneration of derelict sites can't attract people without transport infrastructure.



A DLR train at Gallions Reach station
© Rory Walsh



DLR roundel
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Like London City Airport, the DLR opened in 1987. It made use of disused dock railways and derelict land. Originally 11 trains ran between Tower Gateway, the Isle of Dogs and Stratford. The network has expanded since, especially to the east. The DLR reached North Woolwich and the Royal Docks in 2005 and, as we discovered, replaced the mainline rail service. There are now 13 DLR stations around the former docks and plans to expand the DLR even further east to Dagenham in Essex.

The Docklands Light Railway carries about 80 million people each year. It has helped areas like this to attract new residents who can use the trains to travel to Canary Wharf and the City or connect with the London Underground. This area of East London is now much more accessible largely due to the new transport infrastructure.

Directions 15

Continue to the large roundabout so the DLR line passes overhead. Use the traffic lights to cross over the road. The end of Sir Steve Redgrave Bridge will be on the left. Now follow the dockside path so that the airport runway is over the water on your left. Pass five modern tower blocks on your right. Stop when you reach buildings on the right shaped like cylinders. They are in pairs and brightly coloured.

16. A knowledge dock

University of East London campus



Left: vessels lined up in the Royal Docks (1955) / Right: University of East London campus buildings designed to look like funnels
© Ben Brooksbank, Geograph (CCL) / © Rory Walsh

This is the Docklands campus of the University of East London (UEL) which opened in 2000. There used to be warehouses on this site, along with the Royal Docks police training school. For training purposes the school had a small museum of objects used to smuggle goods through the docks.

Today UEL is one of the most diverse and modern universities in Britain with 28,000 students from over 120 countries. As well as students and academic staff, the campus has created a range of service jobs and has become a major employer for local people. The Docklands campus includes housing for 1,200 students in the brightly-coloured apartment blocks that we have just passed. In term time the dockside library is open 24 hours a day.

Establishing a campus here was a key part of the early regeneration plans and it has been another way of attracting new economic and social activity to this area. The new buildings of the university campus also reflect something of the heritage of the Royal Docks. Take a look at the rounded buildings here on the waterside: they are shaped like ship funnels to recall the vessels that once lined up here on the dockside. Their names also provide echoes of the past. For example, look for signs to the Knowledge Dock and Sports Dock.

Directions 16

Continue along the dock-side path past the cylindrical buildings. This is a good spot for watching planes taking off and landing at the airport. When you reach the North Building of the university (set back from the path) go across the square into the university campus. Follow the underpass to the right of the North Building to reach Cyprus DLR station. Stop by the station entrance.

17. Royal restoration

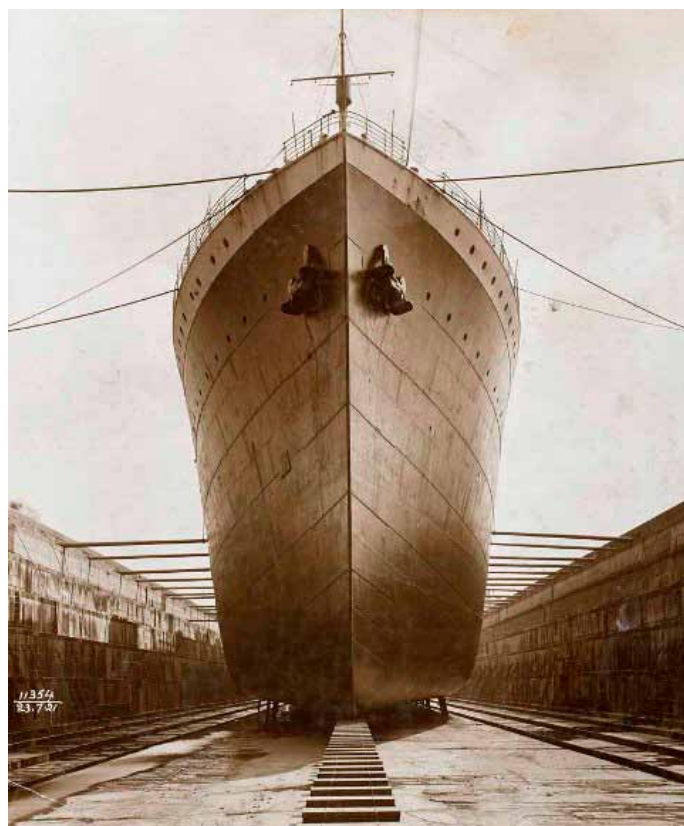
Cyprus DLR station

Cyprus DLR is named after the Cyprus housing estate built for workers at the Royal Albert Dock. Today the station serves their residents and the university. Like King George V station, Cyprus symbolises the story of North Woolwich's changing fortunes.

On this walk we have explored how North Woolwich has been made, unmade and remade by the riverside industries and the Royal Docks. Changes in shipping and volumes of trade transformed empty Plaistow Marsh into the largest enclosed area of water in the world. North Woolwich was a place of heavy industry and manufacturing, ship building and railways, docks and warehouses.



Cyprus DLR station
© Rory Walsh



A ship in dry dock, King George V Dock (1921)
© PLA / Museum of London

Another set of changes in shipping and volumes of trade led to the area's economic decline. As we have seen however recent developments have brought about a remarkable transformation in the economy, society and the physical landscape.

North Woolwich is now a place where European business people jet in, where knowledge is created and where the large water spaces are used for leisure and recreation.

Sometimes the process of change hasn't always been good, or easy. We have seen that there are real tensions between the planning needs of the local community and market-led development.

Interwoven with the story has been transport and connectivity. This area's outlying location helped and hindered its fortunes as it was chosen as the site for the docks then left isolated after the docks closed.

Now there is increasing need for more transport as London's commercial centre of gravity moves east. Examples include Crossrail, the DLR extension and the Thames crossing. Meanwhile a new container port, London Gateway, has opened downstream catering for massive cargo ships.

There are many more sites ready for development and long-term plans are in place to attract further investment. Recently the Royal Docks were granted Enterprise Zone status which gives tax breaks and relaxes planning regulations to further attract capital and developers.

Plans that have been announced for the Royal Docks include a floating residential village, plans for a China Centre business district next to the UEL campus and the regeneration of Silvertown Quays.

Time will tell how these proposals progress. One thing is certain – North Woolwich is changing, and changing fast. These changes are every bit as dramatic as turning the marshland into dockland. Come back soon and see how the area has changed again!



Scenes from changing North Woolwich:
A plane landing at London City Airport,
Gallions Hotel beside modern housing,
© Rory Walsh

Directions 17

To return to King George V DLR station you can walk back along the university dock-side and over the Sir Steve Redgrave Bridge. Alternatively take the DLR from Cyprus and change at Canning Town to transfer to the Woolwich Arsenal branch.

From Cyprus DLR station you may like to visit the ExCel, Emirates Air Line cable car, the O2, Museum of London Docklands or historic Greenwich (including the Cutty Sark, the Royal Naval College and the National Maritime Museum).

Further information

Asian Business Port

abp-london.co.uk

Crossrail

www.crossrail.co.uk

ExCeL London

www.excel-london.co.uk

Friends of Greenwich and Woolwich Foot Tunnels

fogwoft.com

Gallions Point Marina

www.gallionspointmarina.co.uk

London City Airport

www.londoncityairport.com

London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC)

www.lddc-history.org.uk

Museum of London Docklands

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/docklands

Ports of Call

www.portsofcall.org.uk

Royal Docks London Enterprise Zone

www.royaldockslondon.com

Royal Docks Management Authority (RODMA)

www.rodma.co.uk

Royal Docks Trust

www.royaldockstrust.org.uk

The Silvertown

www.silvertownlondon.com

University of East London

www.uel.ac.uk

Credits

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