

A walk from Wapping to Canary Wharf

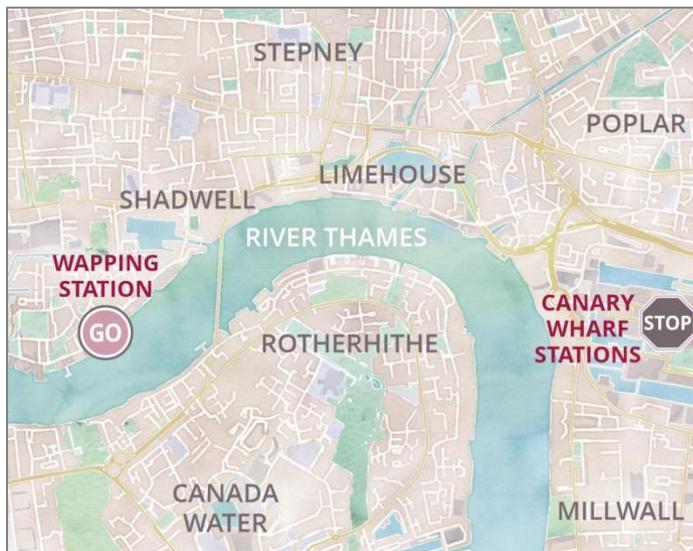
Updated: 9 September 2019

Length: About 3½ miles

Duration: Around 3 hours

NOTE

This walk can also be done as a continuation of the Tower Hill to Wapping walk, in which case you can pick up the walk from Tobacco Dock and continue down the ornamental canal to Shadwell Basin.



GETTING HERE

The walk starts at Wapping station.

If you are travelling from central London, then you'll probably find it easiest to take the Hammersmith & City line or the District line to Whitechapel – and change there on to a southbound Overground train. From there it's just two stops to Wapping.

When you arrive at the station, turn left and follow the walk as below.

By bus

The only two bus routes that pass Wapping station are the 100 and the D3, neither of which will take you back to central London without changing.

However, for many people staying in central London the most convenient bus is likely to be the 100, which you can pick up at either St Paul's (the stop is in King Edward Street) or Aldgate

station or in Mansell Street, close to Tower Gateway station and just a couple of hundred yards from the Tower Hill tube station.

You then need to alight at Stop D in Wapping High Street. Walk up the street for a couple of hundred yards until you reach Brewhouse Lane – then pick up the walk from there.

For details of the Overground, Underground and buses, please consult the Transport for London website.

INTRODUCTION TO WAPPING

Originally Wapping was marshy land onto which the Thames would regularly overflow, but it was eventually drained. It had always been an isolated place but this was made worse when the docks were built as they were surrounded by very high walls to prevent theft. Huge numbers of people were moved out of their homes, ripping the heart out of the community and creating further deprivation. The area had always been very poor, and this remained the case even after the docks had been built as the dockers' wages were at little more than subsistence levels and when work was short they could go for weeks without any money. Never being able to put anything aside meant hunger was sometimes a serious problem.

The area was badly hit by bombing during the Second World War, and many of the warehouses were damaged, some beyond repair. The result was that for many years the area became a very neglected and forgotten part of London. However, in the 1970s and 80s developers began to restore and renovate the damaged warehouses and build on the derelict bombsites, resulting in the many new apartment buildings that are here today, which have made the area a very popular place to live, attracting an eclectic mix of new residents.



Route map 1

STARTING THE WALK

Having turned left out of the station, continue straight ahead as the road becomes Wapping High Street, passing **Wapping Dock Street** and **Wapping Lane** on your right, and then the enormous King Henry's Wharves and Gun Wharves on your left. They were so named because this was where Henry VIII built a foundry to make cannons for his navy. Although now converted into luxury apartments, the exterior of these huge warehouses appears to have retained their original facades.

Turn right into the narrow **Brewhouse Lane** (also known as Brewhouse Place) when you reach it. It runs up the side of the New Tower Building. For years there's been a plot of waste ground on this corner, one of the few undeveloped sites in Wapping, but that's about to change as permission to develop it has been granted. If for any reason the lane is closed to pedestrians, then retrace your footsteps back to Wapping Lane and walk up as far as **Watts Street** and pick up the walk again as below.

A point of interest – before you leave Wapping High Street and turn up Brewhouse Lane, ahead of you on the left you will be able to see the Captain Kidd pub and the original Metropolitan River Police Headquarters. Details of both are in the Tower Hill to Wapping walk.

As you walk up Brewhouse Lane notice the Tower Building, another very early apartment block built by the Improved Industrial Dwellings Company in 1864.

The company was formed in 1863 by Sir Sidney Waterlow. He was a printer and philanthropist who later became a Lord Mayor of London. The company was a 'model dwelling company' – one of a group of private companies set up to improve the housing conditions of the working class by building homes specifically for them. They were not charities and had to ensure that investments in them received a competitive rate of interest. The homes they built were of a higher standard than would normally be built for working men and women, with better sanitation and less overcrowding. The Improved Industrial Dwellings Company was one of the largest and most successful of such enterprises and by 1900 housed 30,000 people.

Follow Brewhouse Lane around to the right. Chimney Court, the building facing you, is a good example of a 1990s conversion into apartments; it was originally a soap factory. The court's name no doubt derives from the prominent smokestack located on Green Bank.

At the end of the road **turn left into Wapping Lane**, a street that's at the heart of the Wapping community and still has shops such as a traditional butcher (a rare sight these days), a fishmonger, greengrocer, general grocery store, newsagent, pub – and even a Pizza Express restaurant.

Cross Green Bank then **take the next left into Watts Street**, alongside the little triangle of 'green'. Notice on the left the carefully renovated blocks of flats (I love the large windows) built originally by an early housing association in co-operation with the local authority.

Directly ahead, on the corner of **Meeting House Alley**, is the **Turner's Old Star** public house, (with the rather unusual view of the Shard beyond, which to me seems strangely out of place here.)

The artist J.M.W. Turner converted two cottages that he had inherited in 1830 into a tavern to be run by Sophia Booth, a widowed landlady from Margate, who was one of his mistresses. He spent much of his time here, particularly as he was fascinated by the River Thames, the source of many of his paintings. However, he tried to keep it a secret, no doubt partly because he was said to have had several other mistresses at the time, so rather than use his own name when he stayed here, he used a pseudonym of Sophia Booth's name. As a result of his short height and 'portly physique' he was soon simply nicknamed 'Puggy'. Amazingly, the pub is still going strong today, having been renovated in the 1980s.

Walk up Meeting House Alley, which runs up the right-hand side of the pub, then **turn right into Chandler Street** and then **turn left back into Wapping Lane**.

On the other side of the road is **St Peter's**, the parish church of Wapping. The entrance is not obvious – it's through an unusual arched entrance into a tiny courtyard. If the church is open, (it is most days) then it is worth going in to take a look. Whilst it might appear to be a Catholic church, it is actually Church of England, although run by the Society of Holy Cross, an Anglo-Catholic International Society.

Continue on up Wapping Lane for several minutes until you reach the bridge that crosses the Ornamental Canal – the same one you saw back in Hermitage Basin – and directly in front of you is the imposing brick-built **Tobacco Dock**.

In a dry dock between the 'canal' and Tobacco Dock are two sailing ships that are replicas named and designed after real ships. One was the 330-ton Three Sisters, which was built in the dockland's Blackwall Yard in 1788 and used to sail to the East and West Indies to bring back tobacco and spices. The other was the Sea Lark, an American merchant schooner that was captured by the British navy in 1811. They were installed as part of the plan to create a major shopping and leisure complex here, which I explain shortly.

Tobacco Dock was designed by the London Docks' architect Daniel Alexander and opened in 1814 as a safe and secure warehouse to store valuable cargoes, such as tobacco, wines and spirits, as well as furs and skins. To me it still looks more like a fortress than a conventional warehouse, which was probably how it was intended to look.

By the mid-1830s over 45,000 tons a year of tobacco were being imported from all over the world, which obviously needed somewhere safe, secure and dry to be stored. Inside, huge cast iron pillars were used to support the two storeys and roof as this allowed more space for storage.

Despite its size it survived the war time bombing, but as the docks began to close it became disused and laid empty for a number of years and was going to be demolished. However, in the 1980s it began to be converted into the 'Covent Garden of the East', and over £47 million was spent on the refurbishment, which had upmarket shops on two levels. It opened in 1989, sadly just at the 90s recession was beginning and it never took off and was soon closed down.

Fortunately, it is a Grade I listed building, so there are limitations on what redevelopment can be undertaken; English Heritage have said, "We see Tobacco Dock as a future priority because it is too large and important a site to be left standing empty. It is one of the most important buildings in London and if brought back into use it would reinvigorate the whole area."

Once again there is talk of it again becoming the 'Covent Garden of the East End', but this time with hotels and apartments as well as shops. In the meantime, its four acres of space are used

for exhibitions – such as the popular gin and craft beer festivals, for conferences and other events and by film companies.



Route map 2

At this point we leave Wapping Lane and follow the ornamental canal a little further east, towards Shadwell Basin.

To do so, **go down the steps on the north side of the bridge** (in front of Tobacco Dock – as though you were going to walk towards the sailing ships) but **at the bottom turn left and walk under the bridge**. (It is signposted 'to Shadwell Basin'.) On your left you pass the Tobacco Dock car park whilst on the right is a large new apartment building.

After 150 yards or so the canal ends where a park (known as Wapping Woods) has been built over it but **walk straight ahead through the park (veering slightly to the left)** and after just another 100 yards or so the path picks up the canal again. And as a point of interest – if you then look at the wall on the left where the path drops down to the canal you can see the mooring posts of the canal's original wall and appreciate just how wide it once was.

Pass under the iron bridge that would have once lifted to allow ships to pass through and you will then be standing at the west end of the **Shadwell Basin**.

Shadwell Basin has seen considerable housing development on the left side, but fortunately much of the rest has been left in a more natural state. At the far end was the lock where ships would have entered from the Thames, and we will be exploring around there shortly.

However, first **turn right** and walk along this 'top end' of the basin for 50 yards or so, towards the line of houses, and then **go down the steep steps on the right**. These take you down to Milk Yard – **turn left and follow it to the right** as it becomes Monza Street. This brings us into Wapping Wall.

Wapping Wall was so named because in 1536 an Act of Parliament, encouraged by Henry VIII, was passed that gave Cornelius Vanderdelf, (a Dutchman who had previously helped drain part of the Fens in Norfolk), permission to drain over 100 acres of marshland in the Wapping area, in return for which he was given half the land he managed to reclaim. A wall, extending from close to where Tower Bridge now is, to Shadwell in the east, was built to keep the river out of the newly drained land. However, after being breached on several occasions over the next few years,

it was decided that the best way to strengthen and protect the wall was to build upon it and a number of houses were erected.

Wapping gradually became a damp, lonely and isolated settlement that was extremely poor. John Stow, the great chronicler of life in London in the 16th century, described the road through it as "a continual street or filthy passage with alleys and small tenements or cottages inhabited by sailors' victuallers".

At the end of Monza Street **turn left along Wapping Wall** – but first notice the **Metropolitan Wharf** on the other side of the street. It is a Grade II listed Victorian building that consists of five warehouses that were built between 1862 and 1868 and were used for storing coffee, cocoa, spices, oils, dried fruits, seeds, and coconut matting.



Route map 3

They were among the first warehouses in the area to be given a new lease of life, used initially, I understand, by artists. They've more recently been renovated into offices and studios, and a nice new restaurant (and café by day) has been created on the ground floor called Bottega Wharf. I love the spacious ground floor lobby area of the building – it has an original 'warehouse feel' to it and there's also a riverside terrace at the rear, which at one time had public access, but that may have now changed. And if you've watched the television series called the Great British Sewing Bee then you will probably recognise the building, as this is where the 2014–15 shows were filmed.

A hundred yards on is the famous **Prospect of Whitby**, but before you call in to take a look (it's a must to do so!), walk down the side of the pub where you'll find a set of stairs – these are the **Pelican Stairs**.

There are many such sets of 'stairs', as they've always been known, along the length of the Thames as it passes through London. They were built from the 14th century onwards to provide access to the river; with either non-existent or at best poorly maintained tracks, lanes or roads, many local people used the river to get about. Hundreds of 'watermen' would provide what were elementary water taxis or ferry services, picking up people from differing sets of stairs. In addition to that, as the Thames became busier and ships had to moor away from the quaysides

and out in the river, getting a boat from Stairs such as these was the only way sailors could return to their ships after a (drunken) night ashore.

You can walk down these stairs at low tide; at the bottom is a small sandy beach but be very careful – the steps are very steep and nearly always very slippery. If you are able to go down, then notice the hangman's noose at the rear of the pub.

The Prospect is said to be the oldest of London's riverside pubs and dates back to 1520, when Henry VIII was on the throne. It was originally called the Pelican Inn, though most people called it the Devil's Tavern because of some of the 'wicked activities' said to have taken place here; it was infamous for its bareknuckle fighting, cock fighting and other even less attractive activities. It was renamed the 'Prospect of Whitby', which was the name of a collier that used to sail down from the Yorkshire port of Whitby and moor alongside to unload coal for the hydraulic pumping station opposite.

The Prospect is Grade II listed; the flagstone floor is said to be original and over 400 years old, whilst the pewter bar counter that rests on old barrels, once common in inns, is said to be the longest example still surviving in Britain.

The inn has hosted many famous – and infamous – people over the years. Hanging Judge Jeffreys used to enjoy his lunch on the balcony whilst watching the hanging of pirates who he had condemned in his court. Samuel Pepys and Charles Dickens have both been customers, and artists such as Turner and Whistler painted views of the River Thames from here.

In the more recent past other well-known people who have enjoyed drinking or eating here have included Richard Burton, Mohamed Ali, Paul Newman, Judy Garland, Frank Sinatra, Rob Steiger and Dennis Waterman – and many now have their photographs on the walls of the pub. Even royalty have met here – Princess Margaret and Lord Snowden used to have 'illicit rendezvous' here, and Prince Rainier of Monaco has also paid a visit.

Finally, there is a good range of beers and wines as well as excellent and reasonably priced food.

I have put a little more information in the **appendix**.

Across the road from the Prospect, the large brick building behind big double gates and high walls was the Wapping Hydraulic Pumping Station. From the 1850s onwards, hydraulic power was used to operate swing bridges, lock-gates and cranes in the docks. Later they began providing the power to operate machines in factories, work the early lifts in places such as the Bank of England, posh shops in London's West End and even the stage and curtains in the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane and the Royal Opera House.

A few years ago the building was saved from being demolished, having been bought by a group of women artists to use as rehearsal space for their theatre group. They hired out some of the rooms for use as exhibition space, whilst the main hall, still retaining much of the original industrial machinery, was cleaned up and turned into a very unusual bar and restaurant where diners would sit at tables surrounded by the old pumps, etc. Sadly, the woman behind the venture decided she couldn't run it anymore and so it was sold to a local developer for £3.2 million. He had been behind the renovation of the Metropolitan Wharf I mentioned just now and, according to press reports at the time, had bought the pumping station because he loved the building and wanted to preserve it. He had architectural surveys carried out and reassured locals that it will not be turned into yet more apartments, but will be sympathetically renovated, with as much as possible preserved very much as it is.

The latest update I have (July 2019) is that planning permission has been submitted for a three-storey office building to be constructed in the courtyard, whilst still retaining the restaurant, which sadly wouldn't be open to the public but used only for private functions. Meanwhile, whenever I have been past, I've noticed it being used for filming purposes.

The pumping station and its history are fascinating, and I have put a few more details in the **appendix**.

Continuing our walk, directly ahead is a large and unusual looking 'lift-bridge', which we will cross shortly, but first turn right immediately after the Prospect of Whitby and walk through the access way of the Trafalgar Court apartment building. (It is open to the public, despite the confusing signs). The path takes you back to the river, where there are some excellent views – facing you across the Thames you can see a circular brick building, which is the south bank ventilation tower for the Thames Tunnel, more on which shortly. To the left of it, looking as though it's on the other side of the river, but it's because of a bend, are the towering buildings of Canary Wharf.

Carry on along this promenade and follow the path around and to the left – on your right you pass the entrance lock to the **Shadwell Basin** (you were standing at the far end earlier), the largest and most easterly entrance into the London Docks from the Thames.

By the end of the 19th century, ships had been getting larger and found it increasingly difficult to enter the docks at the original Wapping and Hermitage entrances that we saw earlier, so this larger entrance gave access to the Shadwell Basin that we saw earlier, and are about to see again.

The Basin is now the only part of the London Dock complex that hasn't been filled in and built upon; instead it's been preserved as a public recreational space and used for sailing and canoeing training, as well as fishing.

The housing complexes around the basin were built in the 1980s (supposedly in a style that reflects the warehouses in St Katharine's Dock, which I personally fail to see) and it seems to have something of a 'desolate' feel to it at present, though I know there are plans to improve this.

The large steel **Shadwell Bascule Bridge** that gave access to the docks wasn't actually built until the 1930s, and the hydraulic power to raise and lower it, together with the lock gates, came from the adjacent London Hydraulic Power Company.

The name Shadwell comes from two springs or wells, one now buried under a pillar near the southwest corner of the nearby St Paul's churchyard and the other in nearby Sun Tavern Fields, now the Glamis housing estate. The spring was famous for its 'health-giving water' and, as with Bath and Cheltenham, though on a much smaller scale, people would travel to Shadwell to 'take the waters'.

Similar to neighbouring Wapping, much of Shadwell was originally marsh, with drainage first taking place in the 14th century. Originally a hamlet belonging to Stepney, its population increased throughout the 17th century and in 1656 Thomas Neale erected the first church and four years later an Act of Parliament created Shadwell into a distinct parish in its own right.

Looking across the basin to the right you can see the spire of St Paul's Church of Shadwell. It dates back to 1657 and is known as the 'Church of Sea Captains' as over seventy sea captains are buried in its graveyard. Previous church members have included Captain James Cook, who was baptised here, and the mother of US President Thomas Jefferson. Another claim to fame of St Paul's Shadwell is that John Wesley preached here on a number of occasions and actually gave his last sermon in the church – he died less than a week later.

The original church fell into a very poor state of repair and was rebuilt in 1820, partly funded by a grant given by parliament to celebrate Wellington's victory at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 (Wellington was a senior officer in the East India Company's army, whose headquarters were close by.) Part of Shadwell Dock Basin was dug out of a large area of the church grounds.

Cross over the Shadwell Bridge and on the right you will see a sign for the Thames Path that runs down a lane alongside a sports ground which takes you into the **King Edward Memorial Park**. Don't go through the first entrance that's immediately alongside the lock, as it just leads into the Shadwell Basin Outdoor Activity Centre, but the one after it.

The park was established in 1922 to provide East Enders with much needed recreational space, as well as the opportunity of enjoying views of the Thames. Complete with a bandstand and park benches, it was a huge success.

King Edward Memorial Park was created on the site of the Shadwell Fish Market, which had been established here to compete with Billingsgate. However, the Corporation of London, who owned the Billingsgate Market, weren't too happy about having a rival, so they purchased it and quickly ran it down until it eventually closed.

The park was opened by King George V and Queen Mary in memory of the king's father, Edward VII. (Rather like our present queen and the Prince of Wales, Victoria, who was Edward VII's mother, reigned for a very long time and as a consequence he was prince for sixty years and king for only nine, from 1901 to 1910.)

The park's dedication reads: "In grateful memory of King Edward VII ... this park is dedicated to the use and enjoyment of the people of East London forever".

As you enter the park you see an unusual, drum-shaped, redbrick building. This is the air ventilation shaft and emergency stairway for the Rotherhithe Road Tunnel that crosses under Thames from here (you saw the other one on the south bank at Rotherhithe from the promenade after the Prospect of Whitby).

I find it fascinating that because the tunnel was built at the very beginning of the 20th century these ventilation shafts were not designed to remove traffic exhaust fumes – there weren't any then – but to aid the breathing of the men whose job it was to shovel up the manure deposited by horses – the normal mode of transport through the tunnel at that time.

The tunnel opened in 1908 and formed a much-needed link between the two sides of the Thames. Although it's a road tunnel, it has a very narrow footpath running alongside the two lanes of traffic. The path wouldn't have been too much of a problem in the days of horse and carriages, but surprisingly it is open to the public to walk through. I have done this and can confirm that despite the air vents the traffic fumes are terrible – and it is further to walk than you think. It is not to be recommended for the 'faint at heart' (or those with asthma).

On the other side of the 'drum' is the Willoughby Memorial. It was placed here in memory of Sir Hugh Willoughby, Martin Frobisher and other navigators who in the latter half of the sixteenth century set sail from near here 'to explore the 'Northern Seas' and discover a north-west passage to Cathay and India'. I have put a little more information about this in the **appendix**.

Please note – currently large areas of the park are closed off, due to it being a major access point for tunnelling equipment for the Thames Tideway Tunnel. However, they have kept open the access through the park to continue a Thames walk. Whilst construction is underway, you will need to follow the possible diversion signs, but it's best to remember that if there is a choice in paths, then always take the right hand one, which should be closest to the river.

The Tideway tunnel, otherwise known as London's 'Super Sewer' is a huge project, rivalling in size the building of the Channel Tunnel and the Crossrail project.

Indeed, it will be nearly as long and wide as the Channel Tunnel and will cost over four billion pounds. When completed, which is estimated to be in 2023, it will carry millions of tons of raw sewage away from much of London to Beckton in the east, where it will be treated before being allowed to flow back into the River Thames. Here in King Edward Park is one of the principle tunnelling sites, and enormous 80ft shafts have been dug down to a depth of around 190ft, allowing giant tunnelling machines to bore this particular stage of the 23ft wide tunnel (sufficient to drive two London double-decker buses along, side by side).

More information on the Tideway Tunnel in the **appendix**.



Route map 4

Walk through the park but keeping to the path closest to the river – it leads out through a gate and you continue back along the riverside path. Pass a rather old wooden quay/jetty (despite my research, I still don't know its history). However, it is now closed because of 'health and safety' concerns.

On the left are two enormous apartment blocks, part of a complex built on the site of **Free Trade Wharf**. Initially I thought they were unquestionably ugly, but each time I walk past I warm to them a little more. I have heard them referred to as the 'Lego development', because of their shape. They were built in the 1980s on the site of wharves that were originally owned by the East India Company, and though the site was purchased in 1977 by the Inner London Education

Authority for a new London Polytechnic, it never happened, and the apartments were built here instead.

This was the site of a devastating fire in 1794 when many of the quayside warehouses were destroyed. It was the worst fire the docks had experienced between the Great Fire of London in 1666 and the German bombing raids in the Second World War. It was caused by an unattended kettle of pitch in a nearby barge builder's yard boiling over. This then ignited a barge full of saltpetre, a major import in those days as it was used to make gunpowder as well as a meat preservative (hmmm). This set off a series of explosions that sent showers of burning saltpetre over a vast area.

The fire rapidly spread, consuming and destroying timber yards, ropeyards, numerous commercial buildings including inflammable sugar warehouses, ships as well as five hundred homes. To house the huge numbers of people made homeless, local churches erected over a hundred tents in nearby fields that were donated by the East India Company, Lloyds, the shipping insurer and the City of London Corporation. Some donations were even made by people who had simply come to see the devastation caused by the fire.

Next to the Free Trade Wharf is **Atlantic Wharf** and through a pair of iron gates set into one of the buildings you will see a couple of yards of railway track and a goods wagon, once used for taking goods from the wharf to the carts waiting to transport them along the Ratcliff Highway that runs behind and into London.

Another hundred yards or so further on is a little wooden bridge over another flight of 'Thames Stairs'. Continue on along the 'boulevard' – it may look as though it is a 'dead end' as a block of apartments has been built out to the river's edge, but keep going and follow it round – it may seem as though you are walking through the private rear terrace of the apartments – but it is a public right of way. The site was originally called Lendrum's Wharf but later renamed **Keepier Wharf** because this was where the colliers from the Kepier mining area in County Durham unloaded coal.

You are now at the start of Limehouse's historic Narrow Street.

Running parallel to you on your left is **The Highway** – a depressing looking 'expressway' that carries an enormous amount of traffic out of London and through the Limehouse Link Tunnel into Canary Wharf and beyond towards Essex. Its name came about because originally it simply was a 'high way' - a built up bank or causeway that allowed travellers to pass through even when the river was in flood. For many years it was known as the Ratcliff Highway and had a terrible reputation, partly due to the notorious 'Ratcliff Murders'.

Ratcliff was originally called Redeclyf, which meant the 'red cliff', though it was hardly a cliff – just a slight rise in the ground. However, because much of the surrounding land was very flat it was easily noticed as a landmark by sailors travelling up the river. Indeed, the sighting of 'Ratcliff' was memorable to sailors returning from long voyages in the 16th century with several references in the logs of ships to 'praising God at the sight of the Ratcliff'.

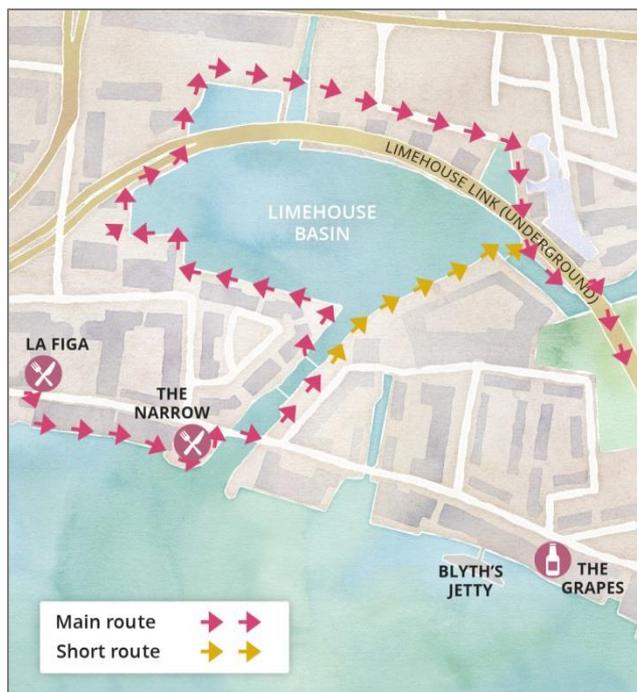
A small settlement had grown here many centuries before, partly because unlike Wapping the slightly higher ground meant it wasn't marshy and also being on a bend meant the banks of the river tended not to silt up. This meant it was ideal for ships to moor and by the 14th century wharves had been built and it was an important place for unloading ships. Its situation some distance outside the city of London made it even more important whenever there were 'plagues

and other pestilences' as that meant ships were not allowed any further up the Thames for fear of bringing disease into the city.

However, under Elizabeth I things changed; ship owners and merchants who had been unloading their ships here, and so avoided paying duty on their imported cargo, were banned from doing so and instead could only unload in the Pool of London, the stretch of the Thames between the present-day Tower Bridge and London Bridge. So Ratcliff, together with Limehouse and Wapping, began to diversify into shipbuilding and other maritime trades.

Walk straight ahead down Narrow Street, but before you do, take a look at the renowned **Ratcliff Cross Stairs**. They are adjacent to the Keeper Wharf building you have just walked around. There's no sign – just a worn metal gate with blue railings, but if the tide is out it's worth taking a look. It might not look much today, but this is a very historic and onetime very busy place. Many people have walked down these old stone steps – their last dry land for sometimes up to a year or even more. Some were setting off by sailing ship to explore, whilst others to start a new life in Australia, America or other 'far off parts of the Empire'. Boatmen would pick up both the passengers and crew and row them out to their ships that would be moored close by.

Another warning though – as with all these old Thames stairs, be careful – the steps are always very slippery, even when they appear dry. At low tide there is a little sandy beach where you can get an unusual view of the river.



Route map 5

The first building in Narrow Street after the Ratcliff Cross Stairs is Phoenix Wharf (Number 14–16), a modern and plain apartment building, but next to it at No. 18 – 22 are the Ratcliff Wharf Apartments. These were built in the late 1950s on the site of bombed warehouses and unless you are an architect or builder, I doubt you'll be interested to know that the one on the left was the first building in London to be constructed on piles rather than traditional foundations.

I do find it fascinating to discover the various uses that some of these wharves have had over the years – for example, at the end of the 19th century Phoenix Wharf was once a sail-maker's; it

then became a biscuit bakery and finally a tea chest maker. And I have to say at this point I am grateful for some of this information, which I couldn't find anywhere else, that I found in a book called London's Changing Riverscape – a collection of 'then and now' photographs and commentary. The book is still in print and well worth buying.

Commercial Wharf, at No. 24, the building with the 'greenery' on the outside, is original and I understand that for many years it housed the Corporation of Trinity House's Ballast Office, where ship captains paid the toll for taking on board the ballast that was needed when sailing out of London without cargo. London imported considerably more than it exported and without the ballast, ships would be very unstable.

Look to the left up Spert Street – the unusual modern structure is the entrance to the Limehouse Link Tunnel that opened in 1993, part of the Docklands Regeneration Scheme to improve transport links with Canary Wharf.

The huge brick-built **Sun Wharf** at No. 28 is another original building – still with the hoists and hauling way doors on each floor.

Follow the Thames Path sign* and turn to the right, between Sun Wharf and Old Sun Wharf – (why is it called that when it is obviously a more modern development?). This was at one time the home of film director David Lean, famous for classic films such as Brief Encounter and Bridge over the River Kwai, who was one of the earliest people to recognise the attraction of living in Limehouse, long before it became trendy.

** Note – before you turn down the path, on the opposite side of the road is Mosaic Square. Here you will find La Figa Italian restaurant (noticeable by the pedestrian ramp leading up to it as well as steps).*

Once you are alongside the Thames, look across the river and you can now see just how close you are to Canary Wharf.

As you approach the end of the short path you pass a semi-circular building that was originally the Dockmaster's House. It's situated alongside the entrance lock into the **Limehouse Basin**, but after the lock and basin were closed to commercial traffic it became a pub and is now a Gordon Ramsay restaurant called 'The Narrow'. Its rounded shape and large windows mean the restaurant has excellent views of the river.

Follow the path around the restaurant and up the steps to rejoin Narrow Street. **Turn right, cross over the road and turn left walk down the right-hand side of the lock** – the signpost helpfully tells you that it's just a 28 mile walk to Hertford, where the Limehouse Cut / River Lee Navigation terminates. But that's not for today.

I'll just mention here that if you cross the bridge and turn to the right through the gate that leads back to the river (it is a public access way, despite what the sign may indicate) and walk for 50 yards or so, you come to what was the original entrance into the Limehouse Basin. It was built in 1770, but as you can probably appreciate it became too narrow for larger boats to access the basin and closed in 1968. Incidentally the house on the corner of the inlet (Number 48 Narrow Street) was a pub until 1914, and owned by a formidable woman known as 'Tug Boat Tessie'. Besides being a landlady she owned her own fleet of boats, and it was hardly surprising that she had quite some reputation.

The **Limehouse Basin** (originally called the Regent's Canal Dock) is the starting point for both the Regent's Canal and the Limehouse Cut. The former provided a link for boats to travel between

the Thames and the rest of Britain's canal network via the Grand Union Canal branch at Little Venice, just quarter of a mile from Paddington station in London. The Limehouse Cut links the Thames with the River Lea, which runs from Hertfordshire down the eastern side of London and joins the Thames at a place called Trinity Buoy Wharf, almost opposite the O2.

Limehouse Basin was once a very busy place – in just 1865 alone around 1,500 ships and over 15,000 barges are said to have used it. This success resulted in it being enlarged several times. As ships grew bigger, the original lock entrance that I've just mentioned became too small and the present larger 'ship lock' where you stand today was built. The basin finally closed to commercial traffic in 1969 and became a marina in 2001.

Three of the basin's major imports were coal, timber and ice.

Coal from Northumberland and Durham would arrive on 'collier brigs' to supply the factories and gas works that had been deliberately built along both the river and the canal for that reason. Gangs of 'coal whippers' would shovel it into baskets – tough work for the men and it could take up to a week to unload just one barge. This was considerably speeded up when hydraulic cranes were introduced in the 1850's.

Timber came from Finland and Norway and was stored on the Bergen and Medland Wharves on the left side of the basin.

Ice came from Scandinavia and there were around fifteen shiploads a year. It was unloaded here and taken by barge to the ice stores on the Regent's Canal near King's Cross. It was expensive, but a valuable asset to fishmongers, butchers and of course ice-cream makers. The ice stores were often below ground, with thick stone walls and lined with straw. The King's Cross ice store is now the home of the London Canal Museum, with some very interesting exhibits on all aspects of the trade on the waterway.

Carry on walking alongside the lock – and **here you have two options**. One is to simply walk along the right-hand side of the basin, whilst the other is to walk around the basin in a clockwise direction. If you have the time and energy then you do see a little more on the latter and it only takes an additional ten minutes.

The shorter route

Walk past the lock and follow the path around to the right. Cut into the wall by the second set of iron steps on your right, you might be able to make out the inscription that says, "This stone was set 20th June 1899 by James Staats, Chairman" – though chairman of what it doesn't say. However, I discovered he was an engineer and director of many railway companies as well as the Regent's Canal. (Although the Regent's Canal starts just across the basin from where you are now, it's difficult to make out from here.)

At the end of the walkway go up the steps – the sign says 'Limehouse Cut' – cross over it via the pedestrian bridge and here the walk continues to the right. **This is where the slightly longer 'option 2' walk around the basin joins, so please pick it up again after that.**

For the second option that goes around the basin, cross the bridge over the lock and walk to the right. The route is self-explanatory – you more or less keep to the edge of the basin – so pass the Dockmaster's/Marina office then turn right at the estate agent's office.

On the other side of the basin you walk alongside the viaduct that carries the DLR trains (Docklands Light Railway), from Bank and Tower Gateway stations to Canary Wharf, Greenwich, Stratford, etc. However, it was built to carry one of the earliest railways in London – the London and Blackwall Railway (and I've put more information in the **appendix**).

Cross over the little bridge – this is the start of the **Regent's Canal** and the lock is the canal's official 'Number 1 Lock' – called the Commercial Road Lock – and the first of twelve on the 8½ mile length of the canal from here to Paddington. It has a tow path for most of its length and passes through Mile End, King's Cross, Camden, Regent's Park, Little Venice and then Paddington. (The section from Paddington to Camden Market is particularly interesting and it is covered in a separate walk.)

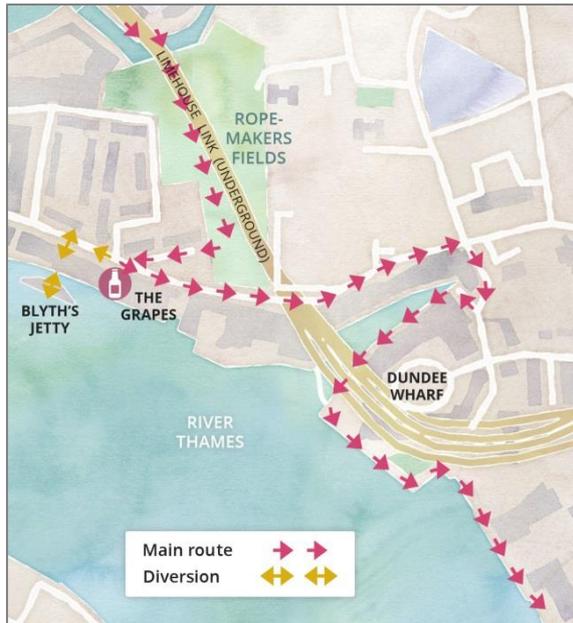
I have put more information about the Regent's Canal in the **appendix**.

Walk up the steps, still keeping the viaduct on your left – notice the white mooring bollards that show how much wider the basin was before the apartments were built.

Notice also the unusual brick-built hexagonal tower and chimney on the other side of the viaduct. This is the **Limehouse Dock Tower** that was built in the 1860s to provide the hydraulic power to operate the original 'ship lock'.

The process involved a steam engine pumping water up into a huge tank on the top of the tower, which was called an accumulator. It needed quite some force to do this, because on top of the tank was a 100-ton weight. When a lock gate or swing bridge needed opening, or a crane operated, then it was this extremely high-pressure water that would operate it. Some of the building was damaged in the Second World War and has since been demolished, but what remains has been preserved and listed, and this includes the boiler's chimney and the 'accumulator tower'. A spiral staircase now goes up through the 'weight case and chimney' to a viewing platform on the roof which opens on selected days of the year.

Following the path around to the right, passing the Limehouse Gallery and a dental practice and within 50 yards or so, you reach the top of a flight of steps leading back down to the basin. **This is where we join the shorter walk.**



Route map 6

Continue straight ahead, alongside the Limehouse Cut and after 50 yards or so, cross back over the canal at the next bridge and continue straight ahead. A sign says, 'historic pubs' – however, it's a bit behind the times as unfortunately there is now only one.

The Limehouse Cut opened in 1770 and was actually the first canal to be opened in London and one of the oldest in England. It's only two miles long and runs from Bromley Lock, where it leaves the River Lea to connect with the dock here at Limehouse. It was built because the last mile or so of the River Lea, just before it flows into the Thames, is particularly difficult to navigate due to a number of very tight bends, a stretch known as Bow Creek. The Cut also avoided the journey around the Isle of Dogs for barges heading for London.

The Lea, which rises in the Chiltern Hills then flows on down through Hertfordshire, was always a busy waterway, particularly with barges bringing grain and malt to London and then returning with raw materials for the many factories and mills that over time had been built close to the river.

The Lea flows into the Thames a mile or two further to the east at a place called Trinity Buoy Wharf, on the opposite side of the river from the O2 Stadium (Millennium Dome).

You are now in a park called **Ropemakers Fields**, so named as this was the site of the George Magget's Ropeworks, and the ropes would have been laid out here to be twisted whilst being made.

Ahead is a small bandstand that was built using columns reclaimed from a 19th century St Katharine's Docks warehouse and here **we take the path to the right into a little street also called Ropemakers Fields**. The first house on your right (Number 27) used to be a pub called 'The House They Left Behind' and until recently you could see where the old pub sign once hung, but all references to it have now been removed. And the reason for the unusual name? A light-hearted reference to the fact that all the other houses in the street were damaged or destroyed by bombing in the Second World War and later demolished, leaving just the pub still standing.

Just a little further down on the same side there used to be a brewery owned by Taylor Walker, whose speciality from 1830 onwards was the brewing of Pale India Ale. This used to be exported to satisfy the needs of Londoners living and working in Australia and India. Although badly damaged in the war, it continued brewing until 1960 when it finally closed down and houses built on the site.

This short street takes you **back into Narrow Street**. On the corner is a statue of a herring gull standing on a pile of coiled rope. It was created in 1994 by sculptor Jane Ackroyd, who specialises in working with metal.

You are now back on Narrow Street and facing you on the other side is a particularly splendid row of Georgian terraced houses. Many houses and buildings along the street were either badly damaged or destroyed in the Second World War, but fortunately these were left standing. However, with the exception of the Grapes, this was left abandoned for many years, but writer and film maker Andrew Sinclair bought and set about renovating and preserving one of them, and then persuaded friends to do the same.

The Grapes, on the end of the terrace, is definitely one of my favourite London pubs. As probably befits a pub in Narrow Street, it's very narrow! And very old – over five hundred years in fact. Even if you don't fancy a drink you must at least put your head around the door and take a look. There are a few seats and tables just inside the entrance, and several more at the back, with the bar in between, whilst an equally small terrace at the back overlooks the river. It's one of the few old pubs that hasn't been modernised and still has a lovely 'olde-worlde' feel about it. It serves a good selection of real ales and bar meals and, up a very narrow steep staircase, is a small restaurant with just six tables.

From the terrace you can see a carved figure of a man standing on top of a wooden pillar in the river; and if you can't make out who it looks like then I'll help ... it's of Sir Ian McKellen, carved by the award-winning sculptor Antony Gormley who is a friend of Ian's. Amongst many famous pieces of art Gormley has created is the 'Angel of the North'.

(If there's no room on the terrace, then I explain shortly another way of viewing the rear of the pub and the river.)

Originally called the Bunch of Grapes, the pub has a fascinating history.

Sir Walter Raleigh set sail from here on his third voyage to the New World in 1661. Charles Dickens knew the Grapes well – he used to visit his Godfather Christopher Huffam who lived nearby (the house still stands). The Grapes appears in Dickens' novel *Our Mutual Friend*, where he writes, "A tavern of dropsical appearance ... long settled down into a state of hale infirmity. It had outlasted many a spruce public house, indeed the whole house impended over the water, but seemed to have got into the condition of a faint-hearted diver, who has paused so long on the brink that he will never go in at all".

He also described it well when he added, "the available space in it was not much larger than a hackney-coach". And as you can see, it still isn't.

In those days the Grapes was renowned for serving an excellent 'Dog's Nose'. This was a mixture of gin, beer and purl (purl was an even older drink, an ale spiced with wormwood, horseradish or other bigger herbs, strained and heated and served as a breakfast drink.) Samuel Pepys was said to enjoy a midmorning pint of purl as part of his breakfast.

Fortunately, the pub survived the intensive bombing of this dockside area during the Second World War, but when in 2012 it was heading for closure, several regulars who lived close by stepped in to save it. They were Sir Ian McKellen and his theatre director partner Sean Mathias, together with Evgeny Lebedev, the Russian born multi-millionaire owner of the Evening Standard and the Independent newspapers.

They have made very little change to the pub, other than upgrading the kitchen. Ian won't allow a television or gaming machines in the bar – he says that a pub should be for a drink and good conversation.

On the walls of the Grapes are several paintings by reputable artists, including one of the Thames by marine artist Napier Hemy; a watercolour of Limehouse Reach by Louise Hardy and 'Dickens at the Grapes' by the New Zealand artist Nick Cuthell, a friend of Sir Ian McKellen. There's a small statuette of McKellen as Gandalf in Lord of the Rings, alongside bound copies of Dickens in the snug and a 'faux-Victorian' portrait of the three owners with Charles Dickens, also painted by Nicholas Cutell.

Finally, it is said to be quite a good pub for 'spotting celebrities', as people as diverse as Boris Johnson, Francis Bacon, Rupert Everett, Patrick Stewart, Sting and Kristin Scott Thomas are said to have been seen enjoying a drink here.

Optional 50 yards' diversion

On leaving the Grapes continue to walk to back up Narrow Street – or if you are outside facing the Grapes then turn right – walk past the modern Blyth's Wharf apartment building on your left and you will see a sign saying 'Access to jetty'. The gate might look locked, but it isn't; simply lift the drop handle. The next gate will be closed but set in the wall is the button to open it. You then step out onto a wooden jetty and have more fabulous views up and down the river – and a good view of the river frontage of the Grapes pub and the statue of Ian McKellen. (I'm not sure how the people who have presumably paid huge amounts of money to live in these trendy riverside apartments feel about people being able to peer into their windows.) The little wharf was built in the early 1900s to enable colliers to unload their freight for a power station that used to be along Narrow Street. It's since been demolished, with apartments built in its place.

I think it is nice to pause here and ponder on the fact that this was another place where early explorers set off to discover far off lands, often not returning for many years – if ever of course. And just on a tiny wooden sailing ship with hardly any navigation aids, limited food and water ... but presumably just lots of optimism!

Leave the jetty and turn right back down Narrow Street, passing the Grapes and the row of early Georgian houses – (I've discovered you can tell they are 'early' Georgian because the windows are flush with the front of the house, whereas in late Georgian houses they are recessed).

At Number 92 there was once another illustrious old pub – Booty's Riverside Bar, which finally closed in 2012 and the house has since been restored. Booty's was originally called the Waterman's Arms and for a long time was run by a legendary East End character known as Tugboat Annie. Her real name was Annie Fisher, and she ran a fleet of over twenty Thames barges. She must have been one hell of a tough character to be doing this in what then was even more of a "man's world".

Next is the **Duke Shore Wharf** – follow the Thames Path sign (opposite the main entrance into Ropemakers Fields Park), through a gated ‘archway’ back to the Thames Path.

(This is currently closed for building works, so if that’s still the case then simply continue ahead and pick up the walk further down.)

However, if it is open then from the rear you can see back up to the wooden jetty at the rear of the Grapes pub. Looking further back up the Thames are the skyscrapers of the City; the Gherkin in the foreground and just to the left the Cheese Grater and Walkie Talkie buildings, whilst higher than them all is the Shard. On the other side of the river you can see the well-preserved Columbus Wharf.

You are now on what was once the extensive Dunbar Wharf, owned by Duncan Dunbar & Sons, who ran a fleet of fast sailing ships that operated to Australia, India and the Americas. The first voluntary (i.e. not convict) emigrants to Australia sailed from here.

Pass through the next gate (again unlocked during daylight hours) and you come to one of the oldest and best preserved parts of the district – **Limehouse Wharf**, which we see again shortly when I give more information about it.

Don’t cross the bridge, but instead turn left and follow the path under the arch and back onto Narrow Street then turn right.

- If access to the Thames Path I mentioned above is still closed when you do the walk, continue on down Narrow Street and pick up the walk again here.

This is a fascinating short stretch as many of the frontages of the early 19th century warehouses along here have been well preserved. Some have been rebuilt in a more modern style, though others – like my favourite, the ‘Sailmakers House’ at Number 136 – still look like the warehouse it once was. (And notice the number of the ‘house’ next door – 136½.)

An elderly resident who I once chatted with told me that the original Gordon’s gin distillery was based here but I can’t find any reference to that – everything I have read about Gordon’s talks about its original distillery being in Clerkenwell. However, I have a feeling the story may have more to do with the fact that juniper berries were once stored at the adjacent St Dunstan’s Wharf – juniper is of course used to make the famous London gin.

I asked about the doors of the buildings here all being painted green, and whether correct or not I was told that this was a planning requirement. Apparently, the particular shade of green should be ‘Buckingham Green’ – but it would appear that this isn’t strictly enforced.

A couple of doors down, at Number 148, is another favourite of mine – the lovely old brick building with the ‘hauling doors’ on first and second floors and a sign on it saying, ‘J & R Wilson’. We see the waterside of it shortly, where a sign on it says ‘Ship Stores Merchants’. I looked it up in a 1921 street index and it was still that then.

We will turn right down Three Colt Street (here Narrow Street becomes the Limehouse Causeway), but before you do, look to the left and you can see the lovely **St Anne’s Church**, the parish church of Limehouse.

St Anne’s Church was built in 1725 by Nicholas Hawksmoor (who also built several others in the area). Queen Anne, the monarch at the time, said that as it was so close to the river it would be a

good place for ships' captains to register important events that were taking place at sea. As a result, it was given the right to display the White Ensign at all times (the second most senior ensign of the Royal Navy, which can normally only be flown at special times). It is still flown on the church tower and the maritime connection continues to exist as its current rector is honorary Chaplain to the Royal Navy. And notice the church clock – it was designed to be seen by ships on the river and as a result is one of the highest in Britain. The face of its clock is particularly large and clear in order for it to be seen by ships on the river and it was made by the company who built the clock faces for Big Ben.

Although the church is not strictly a part of the walk, it is very interesting, so I have put more information in the **appendix**.

We turn right now down Three Colt Street and in fifty yards or so, just after the bend and the Poplar Children's Centre, on the right-hand side you'll see a double-gated entrance into what appears to be a private courtyard between the buildings. However, it is not private and to the left of the double gates is a smaller gate with a keypad – press the button marked 'Trades' to enter. (There's a sign beside the gate that explains this is the correct way to enter.)

Walk through and you find yourself on the other side of the **Limekiln Dock** and the rear of the row of converted warehouses you passed just now. The one we saw the front of just now, 'J & R Wilson & Co (London) Ltd, ship stores' – has been particularly well restored, as was its frontage.

Boats would sail in from the Thames and unload their cargo straight into the rear of the warehouses. And if you wonder whether the inlet floods, then just look at the height of the water marks on the wall opposite! When there is a high tide – especially one of the monthly 'spring tides' linked to a strong easterly wind blowing up the Thames, then it can become a problem.

According to old maps, a stream that rose in Stepney in London's East End flowed into the Thames here. Like most of London's small rivers that did this, over the years it became an 'open sewer' and this one was known locally as the Black Ditch. Then in the mid-18th century, this was the site of limekilns and Britain's first soft paste porcelain factory – hence the name 'Limehouse'.

Follow the path around the side of the dock – there's another gate and you just need to press the green button on the left of it and **pull the gate towards you** to pass through.

Continue around to the left, passing under the 'legs' of the unusual apartment building whose iron gantries and walkways provide residents with access to its terraces. Built in 1997 on the site of the Dundee Wharf, the unusual design gives it a sort of 'dockside feel'. Having said that, it also reminds me of something out of HG Wells' novel 'War of the Worlds'.

Dundee Wharf used to be owned by the Dundee, Perth and London Shipping Company. I have an old photograph that shows an enormous warehouse on the site with a sign saying, 'Dundee Wharf – Dundee, Perth & London Shipping Company – Steamers Twice Weekly'. The company owned a number of wharves all along here called the Dundee; Aberdeen; Caledonia; and Dunbar Wharves – and in the 1800s they had two paddle steamers – the SS London and SS Perth – which operated a twice-weekly service carrying passengers and freight from here to Dundee and Edinburgh's Leith Docks. Apparently, the last ship to use Dundee Wharf on a regular basis was the Lockett Wilson, which ran a service to Paris via the River Seine.

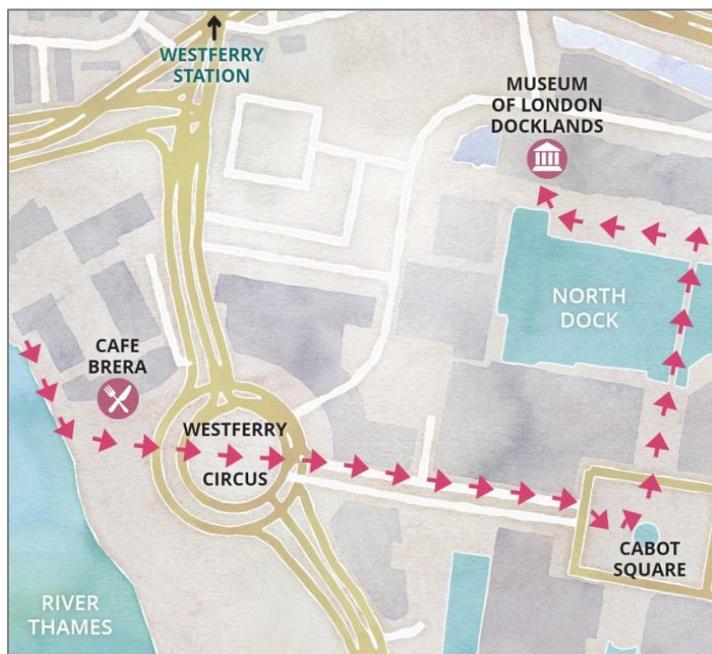
Follow the broad riverside path around to the left that becomes more of a promenade as it gets closer to Canary Wharf. Wharves and warehouses ran all the way along this stretch – one was for unloading and storing bananas, whilst next to that was the 'River Plate Wharf', the

departure point for ships to South America. Some of these wharves were upgraded in the 1930s, but then badly damaged during the Second World War and although partly rebuilt afterwards, most had finally closed by the late 1960s. One of the last that we pass – and there is a stone plaque to commemorate it – is the site of Aberdeen Wharf. This was once used for shipbuilding and then from the 1820s until 1948 was the base for the Aberdeen and London Steam Navigation Company's regular weekly or twice weekly services to Aberdeen. It carried livestock for the London markets and general cargo whilst in the summer months, passengers travelling to and from Scotland.

Looking further down river you can see the more recent developments along the west side of the Isle of Dogs (this will be the basis of a separate walk that starts at Canary Wharf and takes you right around the 'island').

You will shortly see a path on the left with a sign saying Westferry DLR station. If you are prepared to miss Canary Wharf then you can catch a DLR train from there back to central London.

On your left is the Four Seasons Hotel, with restaurants and a gym on the ground floor, whilst on your right is the **Canary Wharf Thames Clipper Pier**. If you haven't used the Clipper service before and you are heading back to London after the walk, then it's a great way to return. Stops include the Tower of London, London Bridge, Blackfriars, Embankment and Westminster. They accept Oyster cards as well as credit cards and cash. (There's also a shuttle service that operates just across the river to the Doubletree Hilton Hotel opposite.)



Route map 7

Ahead of you is a wide flight of steps, which we climb to reach Canary Wharf – but notice first the ultra-thin 130-ft high carbon fibre sculpture called 'Windward', which despite its height is not spotted by most people.

To the right of the steps are four excellent (but rather pricey) restaurants, however if you are in need of a drink or sandwich then on the left at the top of the steps is the Cafe Brera, and with outside seating it is a lovely spot to enjoy a coffee whilst looking back over the river. (Across on the other side of the river is Columbus Wharf and the Doubletree Hilton Docklands Hotel.)

To reach the centre of Canary Wharf, climb the wide flight of steps that lead up to Westferry Circus. (If you're feeling a little weary by now, then there's a lift in the right-hand corner.)

At the top of the steps, cross the road and walk straight ahead through the attractive circular gardens (there are nice toilets on the left-hand side) and carry on into **West India Avenue.**

And I'll just mention here that as you look ahead and see the various skyscrapers, still the tallest of them all is the 770-ft high, 50-storey **One Canada Square.** It was built as the centrepiece for the new Canary Wharf development that actually opened as far back as 1991. The architect Cesar Pelli chose the particularly striking stainless-steel cladding as he wanted a material that could be seen through the London mists and fogs. The building cost £624 million.

Continue on down the left-hand side of **West India Avenue** and when you reach **Cabot Square** walk across and up into it.

You can't miss the fountain in the centre. This can be quite a windy spot, so to avoid people getting soaked when it's gusty the height of the water is controlled by a tiny wind monitor – or to use the correct term, an anemometer – which you can see on the top of one of the high lampposts in the road alongside.

The cast lead semi-circle crystal glass panels in each corner of the square are rather attractive. They form the cladding for the four ventilation shafts for the car park below and turn different shades of light and colour.

Leave the square on the left-hand side, cross over the road and walk through the wide gap between the buildings – it's called Wren Landing – and walk down the wide steps.

Further steps take you down to the **North Dock bridge**, (actually constructed on pontoons), that leads across the **West India Dock.**

The West India Docks were London's first purpose-built cargo handling docks. They were the largest structure of their kind in the world at that time, putting London at the forefront of world trade.

The docks were built in response to overcrowding of merchant ships in the River Thames. By the late 1700s around 13,500 ships arrived in London each year from all over the world. They moored in the river, while hundreds of small boats, called 'lighters', ferried cargoes between ships and the shore. Theft was widespread and well organised. Black market trade in local public houses was a steady business.

Outraged at these losses, West India merchants, headed by Robert Milligan, a prominent and wealthy ship owner, pressed for the construction of a purpose-built secure dock.

Engineers William Jessop, John Rennie and Ralph Walker were set the challenge to provide facilities that would reduce cargo handling times from four weeks to four days. A row of nine 'state of the art' brick warehouses were constructed along the northern quayside where goods could be stored, checked and repackaged under lock and key.

Only two of the original warehouses survived wartime bombs, one of which is now the home to the Museum of London Docklands.

The buildings on the other side – you'll see a sign on them saying 'Port East' – are the dock's original warehouses and at one time stored sugar, rum and other imports from the West Indies. They have been refurbished but without losing much of the original features. The ground floors of most of these have mostly been converted into bars and restaurants, with large terraces for al fresco drinking and dining in front. The exception is a building on the left side which is the home of the Museum of London Docklands, which is well worth a visit, perhaps on another occasion when you have more time.

You have two options here – depending on how much time and energy you have.

If you are now ready to return to central London, then follow the details below.

However, if you would like to see more, then move on to the section entitled 'Seeing more of Canary Wharf'.

HEADING BACK TO CENTRAL LONDON

By bus

If you are planning on going back to central London by bus, then the relevant bus stops are on the opposite side of West India Avenue, where you walked along just now.

The bus services include –

- 135 to Old Street via Liverpool Street
- 277 to Dalston via Victoria Park and Hackney
- D3 to Bethnal Green via Wapping
- D7 to Mile End

By the DLR or Jubilee line

To make your way now to either the DLR station or the tube station then walk back up to fountain in the square and turn left – go down the steps and cross over into the clearly marked entrance to Cabot Place.

Walk to the left of the escalator – and you are in the concourse beneath the DLR station and take the escalator up to whichever platform you require. (Platforms 4 & 5 are for trains to Bank or Tower Gateway – for the latter you need to change at Shadwell.)

However, for the Canary Wharf Jubilee line station – continue straight ahead from this concourse until you come to the circular atrium/plaza with shops around the sides and escalators leading up or down to the huge shopping levels. Walk straight through the next set of doors and you enter the spacious and prestigious reception of One Canada Square.

Start walking around to the right and go down the escalator/staircase and turn right through the doors next to Starbucks. This takes you into Reuters Plaza. Pass the restaurants and you will see the Canary Wharf Jubilee line station straight ahead on the left.

The left-hand platform will take you east to Stratford whilst the right-hand platform is for westbound trains to central London.

SEEING MORE OF CANARY WHARF

I've explained above how the West India Docks came about, and how they enabled ships to unload, reload and sail again within days rather than weeks or even months as had been the case when they had to moor in the Thames. In addition, due to high walls around them and the secure dockside warehouses, they drastically reduced the amount of theft. This pioneered the way for the building of a number of other docks, both on the Isle of Dogs and elsewhere along the Thames.

However, over time, ships began to get larger, making it difficult to gain access to the docks from the river, and then came the advent of containerisation for which these docks were ill-equipped.

As a result, docks on the Isle of Dogs and elsewhere on the Thames began to close in the 1960s and 70s, as ships switched to the new, deep-water container ports of Tilbury, Felixstowe, etc. This not only affected the docks themselves, but the many industries that had grown up around them. Eventually, large areas of the Isle of Dogs became almost derelict.

In 1981 the Conservative government established the London Docklands Development Corporation with the aim of regenerating some 8½ square miles of not just the docklands, but other parts of the surrounding east end of London, which had struggled economically since the end of the Second World War. The LDDC was a great success and was responsible for the amazing achievement of turning Canary Wharf into a world centre for financial trade, with over 110,000 people commuting there every day.

In addition, its bars, restaurants and enormous subterranean shopping centres attract a further 40 million visitors a year.

Canary Wharf's already excellent transport infrastructure will be improved still further when the Elizabeth Line opens shortly. This will provide fast 'no-change' links from as far west as Reading and Heathrow Airport, and a number of newly enlarged stations across London itself.

And the name 'Canary Wharf'? It didn't come about until around 1937 and was at first just a nickname for the wharf within the docks where fruit from the Canary Islands was unloaded. It simply 'stuck' and 'Canary Wharf Estate' is now the official name for the whole of 97-acre area.

While you're here you might want to see a little more of Canary Wharf before you leave. If so, I suggest that you **continue across the North Dock bridge** to West India Dock quayside.

Once across, if you wanted to take a look inside the Museum of London's Docklands then turn to the left – it's almost at the end of the line of warehouses. Be warned – there's a lot to see!

You'll notice a couple of boats moored to the left – one of these is actually a church. It's run by **St Peter's Docklands Church**, which we saw in Wapping Lane at the beginning of the walk.

Canary Wharf lies within the parish of St Anne's Church in Limehouse. As more and more businesses relocated to Canary Wharf, the church began running lunchtime meetings and mini-services in pubs and wine bars in the area for those working there, supported by St Helen's Church in Bishopsgate. Land and property prices were simply too high to consider building a new church, so the result was the setting up of the St Peter's Canary Wharf Trust and in 2003 the purchase of a Dutch barge. This barge now has a permanent mooring here in West India Quay. A full-time Church of England minister was appointed to head the clergy and the 'floating church' now has regular lunchtime meetings and services for local Christians.

If you still have time, then after crossing the North Dock bridge, I suggest you turn to the right, and walk past the restored cranes and the huge Marriott hotel.

Ahead you'll see the bridge that carries the DLR line across the dock – and what you see on the bridge is actually the **West India Dock station**. So if you need to head back to central London on the DLR then simply go up the steps and onto the platform.

However, if you still want to carry on or if you're going back by the Jubilee line, then walk under the bridge – we're heading for the unusual structure you can see in the dock on the other side of the bridge. The large, strange looking grilles where it says 'Big Easy' are actually the ventilation units for a station underneath.

This is Crossrail Place, a quite remarkable building. When I saw it being built, with a strange almost 'bubble-wrap' looking roof going on top, I had no idea what it could possibly be. It turned out to be the **Canary Wharf station** on the new Elizabeth line, which was due to have opened in 2019, but has unfortunately been delayed for another year or two (or three). Also known as Crossrail, the line will link Reading, Heathrow and other stations to the west of London through to stations in both Essex and Kent. It passes beneath central London, with new stations linked to existing stations including Paddington, Tottenham Court Road, Liverpool Street and Whitechapel, where the line splits. The branch passing through Canary Wharf travels on through to Abbey Wood. During busy times the Elizabeth line will run twelve trains an hour in each direction through Canary Wharf station.

The actual station was 'sunk' down into the dock in yet another of the many clever engineering feats that has made the construction of the Elizabeth line so amazing. If you have seen one of the television documentaries about the building of Crossrail, then you'll know what I mean.

But the Crossrail Place complex is far more than just a station; there are five storeys above the water level, offering shops, restaurants, a cinema and much more. It was designed by the world-famous architects Foster + Partners, who also designed the Kai Tak cruise terminal in Hong Kong that's also situated in a 'dock' and said to have similar features. They also designed the Jubilee line's imposing Canary Wharf station, the HSBC Tower, whilst away from Canary Wharf some of their other spectacular buildings in London include the Gherkin and City Hall.

However, it's the roof that I find particularly spectacular, which is where we are headed now.

To enter Crossrail Place walk up the steps or ramp (at the time of writing the main entrance to it is still under construction and so a temporary one is being used). Depending on the level on which you enter, you'll see a very modern looking covered passageway that connects through into Canary Wharf – we shall be passing through this when we leave, but first, take the escalator or stairs to the floor above, where you'll be in for a very pleasant surprise.

The roof of the complex has been turned into an amazing garden, with flowers, shrubs and trees from all over the world. In addition, at each end are two large bar/restaurants – the 'Big Easy' and the 'Giant Robot'. There's even a sixty-seat performance area that's used for a wide variety of events.

The garden is situated almost exactly on the Greenwich Meridian Line, which from 1884 has served as the reference point for Greenwich Mean Time. Everywhere on Earth is measured in terms of its angle east or west from this line. This was adopted by international agreement as the 'Prime Meridian' in 1884, much to the annoyance of the French, who wanted the line to be in the centre of Paris.

The garden is split into the two hemispheres, with flowers, plants and trees that are native to each being in the respective gardens. The shrubs and trees come from many parts of the world, particularly from those countries that had shipping links with the West India Dock.

Throughout the garden there are numerous information boards with colourful diagrams and pictures giving detailed information about many of the plants and trees that you see, which include Japanese maples, Chinese bamboo, American sweetgums, ferns, sugar, bananas, magnolia, silk, tea, and numerous spices. The boards also give information that explain how expeditions across the world by 'plant hunters' were sponsored by scientific establishments such as Kew Gardens and the Royal Horticultural Society, whilst others were simply doing it for hopeful commercial reasons. And there are plenty of fascinating pieces of information, such as explaining that the banana plant is not a tree, but the world's largest herb. Bet you didn't know that!

The paths meander through the gardens, and there are benches where you can sit and enjoy the views (and rest weary feet).

The partly covered lattice roof of the garden is particularly spectacular. For the technically minded, between the timber beams are triangular panels made of inflated ETFE membrane. This, besides being extremely light-weight (100 times lighter than glass) actually allows more sunlight through. However, there are gaps with some panels left empty to allow both natural light and rain to fall upon the garden beneath.

It's all particularly impressive at night, when the light shines on the waters of the dock.

To take a look around the garden I suggest you start by walking to the right; follow the right-hand path to the end where you'll find The Giant Robot, a large, open-plan bar and restaurant. Looking out from the open terrace at the rear of the Giant Robot you can see how much land is still waiting to be developed here. And the long building that runs adjacent is currently the **Billingsgate Fish Market**. It moved out from its centuries old position on the bank of the Thames, close to the Tower of London, to here in 1982, but it looks like it's on the move once again, this time to a new market development area further out of London to the east. It's currently on a thirteen-acre site that's now extremely valuable, so I'm sure developers will be fighting to get their hands on it once the market has gone.

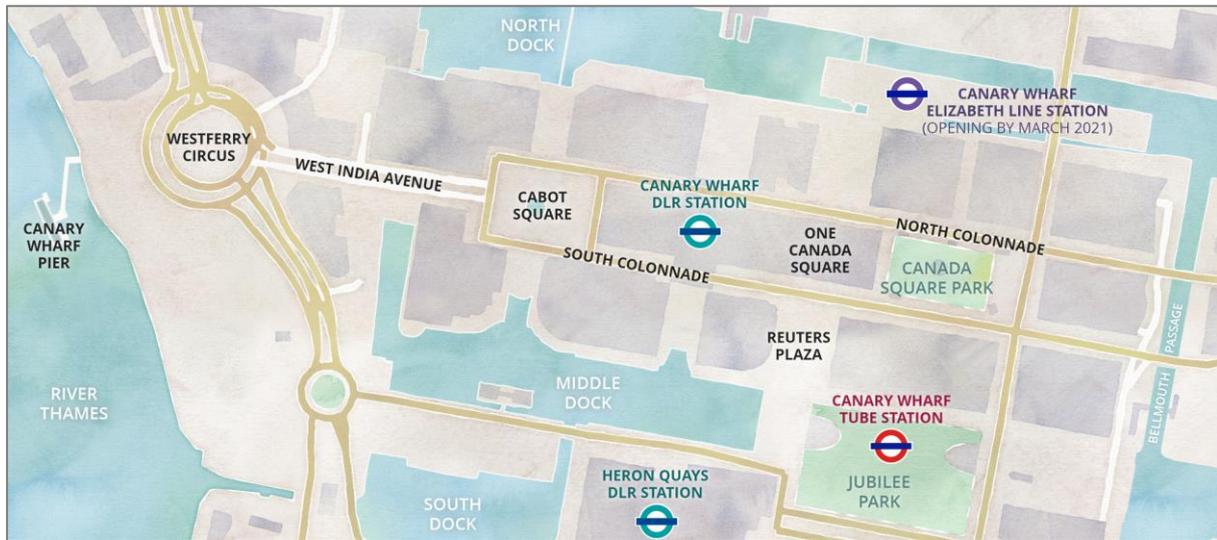
Walk back down on the other (right-hand side) and when you reach the far end, you'll find the 'Big Chill' - an enormous restaurant, with a small bar.

When you're ready to leave, take the escalator or stairs back down to the floor below and turn left, walking through the interestingly designed covered **Adams Plaza Bridge** that brings you out on the opposite side of the road where **One Canada Square**, Canary Wharf's principal building, soars 770 feet above you.

Cross over the road and walk to the left and then walk up the short flight of steps or ramp and you are in **Canada Square Park**. This large open space has a multitude of uses throughout the year. In the winter it's a huge ice rink; in summer they erect giant cinema screens and show many sporting events such as Wimbledon, as well as live concerts and much more.

As you can see, there are plenty of bars and restaurants to satisfy the needs of local office workers and on a summer evening you'd be amazed at how busy it all is. In the building overlooking the square on the far side is a Waitrose store, said to be their largest in Britain, whilst on the higher floors is the Plateau Restaurant; its floor to ceiling windows give diners some

great views of what's going on below, particularly when events such as the ice skating rink are taking place in the square below.



The stations of Canary Wharf

If you're planning on catching a tube train, then head for the Canary Wharf Jubilee line station – walk across to the other side of the square from where you came in and turn right down **South Colonnade** and you shortly come to a flight of steps on your left.

Go down the steps into **Reuters Plaza** (so named because the building on the right is their head office – and you can't miss the illuminated rolling news board above you.) Pass the restaurants on the left and bars on the right and just after the 'Middle Dock' you will see the **Canary Wharf Jubilee line station** on the left.

The left-hand platform will take you to east to Stratford whilst the right-hand platform is for westbound trains heading into central London. And just an aside – you can't fail to notice the brutalist architecture, similar to several other Jubilee line stations.

If you are planning on returning by bus, then simply carry on walking down South Colonnade which eventually runs into West Ferry Avenue, where we saw the bus stops earlier. Equally, the DLR station is only a short distance away.

A final point: as you may have already realised, the lower levels of Canada Square and Cabot Square contain scores of shops. All the high street brands are here – together with numerous restaurants, bars and coffee shops. So if you're in no hurry to head back, then there's plenty to entertain and interest.

APPENDIX TO THE WAPPING WALK

THE THAMES TIDEWAY TUNNEL (otherwise known as the 'Super Sewer')

Like many old cities around the world, most of London is served by a 'combined' sewerage system, which collects not just the sewage from loos, sinks, showers and washing machines, but also the rainwater run-off from roads, gutters and pavements – hence, 'combined'.

The magnificent system we rely on today was designed by Victorian engineer Sir Joseph Bazalgette after London was hit by periods of horrendous smells, culminating in the 'Great Stink' of 1858, when for weeks on end the smell from the River Thames was so bad that people couldn't bear to be anywhere near it and even Parliament had to be closed.

Sir Joseph Bazalgette's design used London's natural drainage system of 'lost rivers' – including the Fleet and the Tyburn which had been built over before Victorian times, to flow into his new sewers and on to balancing tanks in east London. However, during severe storms and times of heavy rainfall, the system was designed to overflow into the River Thames, rather than flooding streets and homes. In Bazalgette's day, this happened once or twice a year. Now, this happens on average most weeks.

Thanks to Bazalgette's insistence on the highest possible standards in building the 1,100 miles of underground sewers, they are still in excellent condition, but now simply lack the capacity to meet the demands of modern-day living. In the mid-nineteenth century, more than two million people lived in London. Bazalgette had the foresight to design his system to serve four million, but today the city's population is nearing nine million – and continues to grow. (for which over 318 million bricks were used during construction.

Not only were there fewer people living in London in the 1850s, but they also used less water per person and there was considerably more green space available to soak up rainfall. This meant that overflows occurred only very occasionally. Now it can happen almost every week, and as a result, millions of tonnes of raw, untreated sewage overflows the system and spills into the Thames each year. Needless to say, the effect on the river's fish, birds and aquatic mammals is quite profound.

The Tideway Tunnel ranks in size of project with the building of the original London Underground system, the Channel tunnel and the currently under construction Crossrail (Elizabeth line) and it is said it will solve the problem of pollution in the Thames for the next 100 years. At the moment, 39 million tonnes of sewage enter the Thames every year and this tunnel will take around 95% of it. It won't replace Joseph Bazalgette's amazing original 160-year-old sewage system, but will support it.

Three huge 80ft-wide shafts have been sunk some 190ft deep below the Thames to enable some of the biggest tunnelling equipment in the world to bore a 23ft-wide tunnel that will travel for more than 20 miles under the Thames and its foreshore.

The tunnel will begin in Acton in west London and travel under London at depths of between 100 and 300 feet, using just gravity to move the waste material to Beckton in the east.

It will be nearly as long and wide as the Channel tunnel, cost around £4.2 billion and when it is finished in 2023, will carry millions of tons of raw sewage away from much of London to Beckton in the east, where it will be treated before being allowed to flow back into the River Thames.

Along the way, five million tonnes of chalk, gravel and clay will have to be removed, and the main tunnel will connect to 22 other new tunnels that need to be built to carry the sewage from various points along the river. Ventilation shafts, maintenance buildings and other works will all be needed.

Thanks to Tideway (Bazalgette Tunnel Limited), who are constructing the tunnel, for some of this information.

LIMEHOUSE

Like neighbouring Wapping, I find the history of Limehouse to be fascinating. So I make no apology for the amount I have written here about the district.

To make it easier to read, I have broken into sections – the history; the story of Chinatown; literary and artistic Limehouse; the Limehouse Basin and the Limehouse Cut.

History of Limehouse

Limehouse was one of the few healthy areas of dry land along the riverside marshes and it is believed there has been a settlement here since Saxon times

The name comes from the lime kilns (or oasts to use their original old English name) that were established here in what became known as Limekiln Dock. They were built in the 14th century to burn chalk and limestone in what was then a rather desolate place on the bank of the Thames. The chalk, which was brought by boat from Kent, was used to produce quick lime, originally for plastering wooden buildings and then for building mortar. Later, pottery was made here and in 1660 Samuel Pepys recorded in his diary a visit to the porcelain factory. In 1740 the first 'soft paste' porcelain factory was established on what is now called Limekiln Wharf. (Soft paste was a way of making high-grade porcelain).

Due to a combination of tides and currents at this point on the Thames, Limehouse became a natural 'landfall' for ships and from the 13th century onwards ships began to moor here to unload. By the time of Queen Elizabeth I, its position on the Thames had resulted in it becoming a significant port, with extensive docks and wharves and industries such as shipbuilding, ship chandlery and rope making being established there. By early in the reign of James I about half of the 2,000 population were mariners. It became a vital part in Britain's exploration of the world with a number of sea captains and explorers living in the area. Sir Humphrey Gilbert, the Queen Elizabeth I's favourite explorer, sailed from Limehouse whilst from directly below the Grapes Inn Sir Walter Raleigh set sail on his third voyage to the New World.

As Britain's maritime industry grew, so Limehouse became known as a centre for ship building, but as ships became too large to be built here, they developed a reputation for building lifeboats, with Forrest's Yard producing over one hundred of them for the RNLI alone. This began to decline in the late 19th Century when the demand for space for unloading ships became more important than actually building them and the shipbuilding moved elsewhere.

It was always an isolated place ...

To me one of the attractions of the part of Limehouse that we walk through is its relative peacefulness – The Highway, a fast 'Expressway,' out of London runs into the Limehouse Link Tunnel just a couple of hundred yards north of Narrow Street. This means that the southside of Limehouse is not actually a through route to anywhere, yet just a few hundred yards away is one of London's busiest areas.

With marshes on one side and the river on the other, Limehouse had always been a somewhat isolated place and for a long time a boat was the only practical method of travel. Eventually the marshes were drained and a road – now known as the Highway, which we have previously mentioned, was built on the top of the banks, linking it with London. However, it was the building of Commercial Road in around 1810, together with the opening of the London to Blackwall Railway in 1840 that led to further growth. It meant that rather than cargo having to be transferred into small boats to be taken to London, it could now be taken by road, although of course these were still generally in a very poor condition.

A predominantly working-class area –

Like much of the east of London, Limehouse was a predominantly poor working-class area, but due to the maritime industry it had a surprisingly large population – some 2,000 by 1610 and by the 1700s over 7,000. Besides those working in the area there were always huge numbers of sailors living in Limehouse, many for just short periods whilst they were waiting for work. At first, they mostly lived in terrible ‘slum’ accommodation, often ten or more to a room, but by the end of the 19th century many hostels had opened, one of the biggest being the Empire Memorial Hostel that had beds for 300. Although it didn’t open until just after the First World War, by the 1930s it is said that over 200,000 seamen had stayed there. With a café, library, concert hall and even a mini ‘seamen’s job centre’ its facilities were very good. However, many hostels weren’t so good – in fact many were disgusting and some literally existed just to ‘rip off’ vulnerable foreign sailors who rarely spoke the language. Sailors had often been at sea for weeks or maybe months so when they left their ship, with their unspent wages for the voyage ‘burning a hole in their pocket’ they often headed for the nearest pub – and brothel – or both. Needless to say they were an easy target for local villains, of which there were plenty, and they often did lose everything – and some even their lives – that first night ashore.

The brothels –

It is said that in the 1860s there were nearly 3,000 brothels in London’s East End – and that didn’t include the thousands of women who ‘entertained men on a part-time and not a professional basis who were called ‘dolly mops’. It was a rough area; violence, drunken brawls, and even murder were an everyday occurrence and usually not considered worth reporting or being recorded – it was just very day life in docklands

Whilst most of Limehouse was poor, the area around St Anne’s Church once had some rather splendid houses, predominantly owned by local ship owners and ship’s captains. But as time went on this began to change and by the 1860s the rector of St Anne’s said “the parishioners are for the most part poor, comprising a large number of persons employed at the docks, engineering and shop building yards. There is an increase of low lodging houses for sailors and the removal of the more respectable families to other localities.”

The regeneration of Limehouse –

Like Wapping, the area suffered heavily during the Blitz when over half the houses were either very badly damaged or completely destroyed. The clearance of bombsites and the older streets continued throughout the 1950s and 60s and unfortunately little now remains of this historic and previously important part of London. Indeed, by the 1970s most of the docks had closed and the area from Wapping through to Limehouse and on towards what is now known as Canary Wharf, was a rather sad and forlorn area. Unemployment was high, those wharfs and warehouses that were still standing were empty with some in a dangerous condition.

Then in the early 1980s the Conservative government introduced a regeneration scheme and formed the London Docks Development Corporation. I have covered this separately elsewhere

but suffice to say here it had a huge impact on Limehouse, Wapping and of course Canary Wharf and eventually the rest of the Isle of Dogs. The building of the Limehouse Link tunnel had a major – and many would say – fairly negative impact on the area, but a more positive result came from the building of the Docklands Light Railway and the opening of a station at Limehouse.

Indeed, by the 1990s Limehouse was showing signs of becoming ‘trendy’, as more and more of the old warehouses and previously derelict sites were turned into luxury apartment buildings. The ‘yuppies’ had arrived. Many of these new residents were working in offices in Canary Wharf, but it also attracted others who rather liked the ‘off beat’ feel of the area.

Residents now include Evgeny Lebedev, the Russian owner of the Evening Standard and the Independent newspapers, onetime politician Lord David Owen and comedian Lee Hurst. Several well-known actors live in Limehouse, including Sir Ian McKellen, Steven Berkoff and Cleo Rocos. Janet Street Porter lived here until apparently a barge slipped its moorings and crashed through her apartment window! The past relative isolation of Limehouse also proved to be somewhat of an attraction for people looking for somewhere to be out of the limelight, yet with easy access to London. Princess Margaret was said to have conducted her pre-marital affair with Anthony Armstrong-Jones here, as she also did at the Prospect of Whitby. In those days the East End was not as popular with tourists and visitors as it is today, so presumably they felt there was less chance of them being spotted here!

The Story of Chinatown

From the 15th century until the 20th, the majority of ships crews were employed on a casual basis and would be paid off at the end of their voyages.

This resulted in communities of foreign sailors becoming established here, including colonies of Lascars and Africans from the Guinea Coast. From about 1890 onwards, large numbers of Chinese sailors, mainly from Canton and South China, began to settle in both Limehouse and Shadwell. Many of them had been working on ships trading in the opium and tea trades and this resulted in the creation of London’s first and original Chinatown. For one reason or another, many were unable or unwilling to return home and so settled here. Besides the opium, they began to set up gambling dens and both soon attracted a wider clientele than other visiting Chinese sailors.

‘Legendary Chinatown’ actually consisted of little more than two streets, Limehouse Causeway and Pennyfields, which straddled the West India Dock Road. By the early 20th century it had become the focus of rumours and myths about opium dens, gambling and sexual vice. Whilst some of this no doubt existed, in reality it was a fairly peaceful place and became one of London’s earliest multicultural communities.

Authors such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Oscar Wilde luridly described events here and I particularly like this description of an opium den, taken from a book called ‘Oriental London’ written by Count E. Armfelt –

“There are mysterious looking shops in Limehouse with little or nothing in the window, and which have curtains to shut off the street. Now and again a Chinaman or other Asiatic will push the handle and disappear. It is an opium-smoking room. Enter and you will see a counter, a pair of small scales, a few cigars, some tobacco, and other etceteras. The shop has a back parlour with a dingy yellow curtain. It is finished with a settee, chairs and a spacious divan, or wooden structure with one or two mattresses and half a dozen hard pillows or bolsters. It is there that

the Ya'pian Kan – the prepared opium – is smoked, and the majoon, made of hellebore, hemp, and opium, is chewed, eaten and smoked.

(I mention more of the writings about the Chinese in Limehouse in the next section – ‘Literary, artistic and musical Limehouse’.)

Over the years the Chinese began to open eating houses catering for the needs of their own community who wanted to enjoy Oriental cuisine, and this began to attract other Londoners who were interested in trying these ‘foreign foods’. After the end of the First World War there were concerns that the Chinese in Limehouse were taking the jobs of those who had gone away to fight overseas, as well as concerns that some of them were involved in the ‘White Slave Trade’ and this resulted in some small scale ‘anti-Chinese’ riots in 1919.

However, it was following the serious damage done by bombing raids on Limehouse during the Second World War that many Chinese families began moving out and relocated to Soho, eventually opening restaurants. And Chinatown as we know it was born!

Literary and artistic Limehouse

Limehouse has always attracted literary interest – possibly because of the Chinese ‘opium den’ connection. Charles Dickens’ last book, ‘The Mystery of Edwin Drood’, includes an account of a visit to a local opium den. Oscar Wilde featured it in ‘The Picture of Dorian Gray’, where Dorian heads to an opium den. Arthur Conan Doyle sent Sherlock Holmes in search of opium provided by the local Chinese immigrants.

The Chinese connection was featured in Thomas Burke’s Limehouse Nights, a collection of stories set in the area with a Chinese narrator Quong Lee. In Arthur Ward’s books (writing under the pseudonym Sax Rohmer) he tells the story of Fu Manchu, who of course has his hideout in a Limehouse opium den. Indeed, the ten or so books he wrote significantly added to the notoriety of Limehouse!

George Orwell wrote about a lodging house in Limehouse in ‘Down and Out in Paris and London’, whilst more recently Peter Ackroyd includes the area in ‘Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem’.

Dickens was a regular visitor to this area. His godfather lived in Newell Street, just a few hundred yards from Narrow Street, where he was a sailmaker.

In ‘Our Mutual Friend’ Dickens wrote of walking by the river and hearing ‘The turning of steam paddles ... the clinking or iron chains.... the cracking of blocks the measured working of oars ... the occasional violent barking of some passing dog on ship board’.

In Chapter 22 of the ‘Uncommercial Traveller’ he wrote a wonderful description of life ‘down by the docks’ ... “Down by the Docks, they ‘board seamen’ at the eating-houses, the public-houses, the slop-shops, the coffee-shops, the tally-shops, all kinds of shops mentionable and unmentionable – board them, as it were, in the piratical sense, making them bleed terribly, and giving no quarter. Down by the Docks, the seamen roam in mid-street and mid-day, their pockets inside out, and their heads no better. Down by the Docks, the daughters of wave-ruling Britannia also rove, clad in silken attire, with uncovered tresses streaming in the breeze ... Down by the Docks, you may buy polonies, saveloys, and sausage preparations various, if you are not particular what they are made of besides seasoning. Down by the Docks, the children of Israel creep into any gloomy cribs and entries they can hire, and hang slops there – pewter watches, sou’-wester hats, waterproof overalls – ‘firthe rate articleth, Thjack.’ ... Down by the Docks, scraping fiddles go in the public-houses all day long, and, shrill above their din and all the din,

risers the screeching of innumerable parrots brought from foreign parts, who appear to be very much astonished by what they find on these native shores of ours.”

Artists

Narrow Street is also associated with many distinguished painters. One of the most prolific painters of Limehouse and the river was Charles Napier Hemy, who went on to become one of Britain’s most famous marine artists. He was born in 1841 in Newcastle upon Tyne and always remembered the day when at the age of ten, he and his family sailed to Australia, saying, “I can remember it (the open sea), it entered my soul, it was imprinted on my mind, and I never forgot it’.

Several of his paintings were of the picturesque wooden buildings, the barges, wharfs, warehouses and inns of Limehouse, Wapping and Rotherhithe and, together with the barge men and labourers who worked there. One of the most well-known is his 1877 painting of the ‘Limehouse Barge Builders’, which he later said he did ‘from nature, sitting in a barge and talking with the workmen’.

Several other artists have used Narrow Street and the riverside around Limehouse in their paintings, including James Jacques Joseph Tissot and the American born artist James McNeill Whistler. In the 1860s Whistler lived near the docks in Wapping and a painted a number of local scenes, including a major oil painting I particularly like that’s entitled ‘Wapping on Thames’.

And it wasn’t just books and paintings; a popular early 20th century musical hall song tells of ‘Limehouse Liz’, including the (now offensive) verse –

... then she drifted down to China Town
And you all know where that is
Where slitty-eyed Chinks take 40 winks
And she’s known as Limehouse Liz.

Finally – another musical connection – the area inspired the famous jazz number ‘Limehouse Blues’, which was later featured in Fred Astaire and Lucile Bremer’s musical Ziegfeld Follies.

Limehouse Basin

The Limehouse Basin (originally called the Regent’s Canal Dock) opened in 1820 to enable ships to unload cargo and be put on to shallow-draught barges and be taken up the Regent’s Canal, which opened that same year.

It also provided the same facility for barges using the Limehouse Navigation – or Cut, as it is more commonly known. These would have previously just sailed out through a much narrower lock than the new basin had and out into the Thames to load or unload.

(I have written more about both the Regent’s Canal and the ‘Cut’ below).

It was a busy place; around 1,500 ships and over 15,000 barges are said to have used the dock in 1865 alone and this success prompted it to be enlarged several times. As ships grew larger, the original lock entrance was found to be too small and a bigger ‘ship lock’ was built a couple of hundred yards to the west (the site of the present lock).

Three of the basin’s major imports were coal, timber and ice. Coal from Northumberland and Durham would arrive on ‘collier brigs’ to supply the factories and gas works that were built along both the river and the canal and gangs of ‘coal whippers’ would shovel it into baskets – tough

work for the men and it could take up to a week to unload just one barge. This was considerably speeded up when hydraulic cranes were introduced in the 1850s.

Timber came from Finland and Norway and was stored on the Bergen and Medland Wharves on the left side of the basin. Ice came from Scandinavia and there were around fifteen shiploads a year. It was unloaded here and taken by barge to the ice stores on the Regent's Canal near Kings Cross. It was expensive, but a valuable asset to fishmongers, butchers and of course ice-cream makers. The ice stores were often below ground, with thick stone walls and lined with straw. The King's Cross ice store is now the home of the London Canal Museum, with some very interesting exhibits on all aspects of the trade on the waterway.

The basin finally closed to commercial traffic in 1969 and became a marina in 2001.

Limehouse Navigation (or Cut)

The Limehouse Cut, which runs from Limehouse Basin to Bromley Lock, was constructed in 1770 to ease the navigation of barges travelling on the River Lea from Hertfordshire to the Thames. The Lea actually flows into the Thames several miles further east – opposite the O2 – but navigation was difficult because of sharp bends and continual silting. The Cut also avoided the journey around the Isle of Dogs for barges heading for London itself.

It was an important waterway – barges brought grain and malt to London and later raw materials from the docks in London would be taken back up river to the many mills and factories that lined its banks. It was the first canal to be opened in London and one of the oldest in England.

REGENT'S CANAL

The Regent's Canal, which opened in 1820, creates a link between the Thames and Britain's canal network. It runs from Limehouse Basin and around the east and north of central London to Little Venice, close to Paddington. There it links to the Grand Union Canal. It's a journey of about 8½ miles and takes about five hours to walk. Boats, which generally travel at walking pace, would have taken considerably longer as they had to navigate the thirteen locks and, in those days, these would have been very busy and at times boats had to queue.

The canal enabled manufactured goods from the Midlands to be brought down to London and then taken onwards by ships across the world. It also enabled coal that was unloaded on the Thames to be transported from London's docks to factories and later gasworks in north London.

As with most canals in Britain it was badly affected by the growth of the railways, finding it hard to compete with the far speedier service that they offered. Limehouse Dock finally closed to commercial shipping in 1969 and the Regent's Canal is now used for leisure boating, as well as being popular with walkers, cyclists and fishermen.

WILLOUGHBY MEMORIAL

The Willoughby Memorial is positioned on the side of the 'drum' that acts as a ventilation shaft for the Rotherhithe Tunnel. The memorial commemorates this as being the departure point for several famous explorers who sailed from here in the 1600s.

Colourful ceramic tiles depict 17th century sailing ships and the inscription explains is in memory of Sir Hugh Willoughby, Martin Frobisher and other navigators who 'in the latter half of the sixteenth century set sail from this reach of the River Thames near Ratcliffe Cross to explore the Northern Seas and discover a north-west passage to Cathay and India'.

The expedition, which comprised of three ships led by Willoughby, was sponsored by the Company of Merchant Adventurers to discover 'unknown regions' – primarily a northern route to Cathay and India. His log read – "These aforesaid ships being furnished with pinnaces and boats well-appointed with all manner of artillery and other things necessary for their defence, with all the men aforesaid departed from Ratcliffe and sail unto Deptford the 10th day of May 1553"

Due to bad weather they ended up having to spend the winter in the north of Norway, where they became trapped by ice and he and the crew of two of the ships froze to death. Indeed, only one ship returned – and that hadn't got any further than the Russian White Sea. But luck was certainly with Sir Martin Frobisher, the Captain of that ship, as he was rescued by locals, and taken from to Moscow. There he met Tsar Ivan IV, who after I'm sure must have been a little 'haggling', gave him exclusive trading rights between Muscovy (Moscow) and London – primarily importing furs, timber and wax.

As a result the 'Muscovy Company' was set up, (the world's first 'joint-stock' organisation, which in basic layman's terms meant private individuals could invest in it, rather than just rich merchants or other companies which had been the case until then.)

The company became extremely wealthy – there is still a Muscovy Street in the City of London where it once had offices and their Russian headquarters, near to the Kremlin in Moscow, were built during the reign of Ivan IV and known as the 'Old British Yard'.

The Company continued in existence until the Russian Revolution in 1917 and since then it has operated mainly as a charity. There doesn't seem to be much information about it, but I understand it helps support churches and Anglican ministers in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other cities, including the St Andrew's Anglican Church in Moscow. Queen Elizabeth visited the 'Old British Yard' on her visit to Moscow in 1994.

And as for Sir Martin Frobisher ... well, he made a further three voyages to the New World, still searching for the elusive 'Northwest Passage'. On one of these, in 1576, he reached Labrador, but was sadly disappointed when having returned home with a 'booty' of 200 tons of gold, he discovered that what he had brought back thinking his fortune was now secure, turned out to be not gold but iron pyrites (fool's gold)!

But he never gave up. In 1585 he sailed with Drake to the West Indies and then three years later took part in the defeat of the Armada. Quite an amazing man, who certainly deserves to be remembered here.

RATCLIFF

Ratcliff is no longer the recognisable area that is once was, now just being part of Limehouse. It was originally called Redeclyf, meaning the red cliff, though you might find it difficult to believe there could have been a 'cliff' here, and indeed there hardly ever was one, simply just a slight rise in the ground. However, because much of the surrounding land was very flat it was easily recognisable as a landmark by sailors travelling up the river. Indeed, the sighting of Ratcliff was said to be memorable to sailors returning home after long voyages in the 16th and 17th centuries, and there are several references in old sailing logs to "praising God at the sight of Ratcliff".

A small settlement grew up here in very early times, partly because it was slightly higher than the surrounding land which was mainly marshes and also because at this point the river tended not to silt up. Its situation on a bend in the Thames meant it had a flow of water that was free from eddies.

The first wharf was built here in the 14th century and it became an important place for unloading ships, particularly so when there were 'plagues' and other pestilences that meant ships were not allowed further up the Thames and into London for fear of bringing disease into the city. However, as with neighbouring Limehouse, which I have explained elsewhere, there was a big change around the time of Queen Elizabeth I, when it became illegal to unload ships here. The reason for that was the ship owners and merchants had been avoiding paying the duty on imports which had to be paid by all ships being unloaded in the Pool of London, above the present-day Tower Bridge.

LONDON AND BLACKWALL RAILWAY

On the walk we pass the enormous brick viaduct that now carries the Docklands Light Railway. It's the second oldest railway viaduct in the world and was built in 1840 by George Stephenson and his son Robert, to carry the London & Blackwall Railway.

This had been built to take passengers from London to the Brunswick Pier at Blackwall, where they could then transfer onto the ferry to Gravesend across the river in Kent, and the steam ships that operated regular services to a number of countries around the world.

It was a rather unusual railway from the beginning. There was a high risk that sparks from a steam locomotive could set fire to the houses that were so close to the line, so they came up with the solution of having two stationary engines at each end of the line which would pull the train by a very long rope! It was hardly surprisingly that the rope would often break, causing big problems for the railwaymen and considerable discomfort to the passengers.

Within ten years they gave up on this method and reverted to having a standard locomotive to pull the train. The line ceased to be used in the early 1960s, and it wasn't until the Docklands Light Railway came into being that it was brought back into service.

Right from the early days the railway company realised the commercial value of the space in the 'arches'. It meant they were able to rent or sell the space, an additional form of income, as it still is today for Network Rail who own most of the rail tracks in Britain. Due to a drop in demand for travel to Blackwall the line closed, but was reopened in 1987 to be used by the Docklands Light Railway for trains from Tower Gateway and Bank Stations through to Canary Wharf, Greenwich, Poplar etc.

And I will just put here a few lines from one of my favourite authors, John Betjeman, who in his 1952 book 'First and Last Loves', wrote of a journey on the line – "Those frequent and quite empty trains of the Blackwall Railway ran from a special platform at Fenchurch Street. I remember them like stagecoaches; they rumbled past East End chimney pots, wharves and shipping, stopping at empty black stations, until they came to a final halt at Blackwall Station. When one emerged there, there was nothing to see beyond it but a cobbled quay and a vast stretch of wind whipped water ..." He must have written that in his late teens or his very early twenties, as he was born in 1906 and the line closed in 1926.

PROSPECT OF WHITBY

This is one of London's oldest (and my favourite) riverside pubs. Said to be the oldest, it dates back to 1520 – when Henry VIII was on the throne.

Originally called the Pelican Inn, it was usually known as the Devil's Tavern, allegedly because of some of the wicked activities that went on here. Much of the original building burnt down in

1770 and the rebuilt inn was renamed the 'Prospect of Whitby', the name of a collier that used to moor alongside. It would sail from the port of Whitby bringing coals from the mines of Yorkshire for the hydraulic pumping station opposite.

The Prospect is Grade II listed; the flagstone floor is said to be the original and over 400 years old, whilst the pewter bar counter that rests on old barrels, once common in inns, is said to be the longest example still surviving in Britain.

The pub has hosted many famous – and infamous – people over the years, one being the infamous pirate Captain Kidd. Judge Jefferies, who is said to have been responsible for the hanging of several hundred men (as well as sentencing many hundreds more to transportation) – was said to enjoy his lunch on the balcony whilst actually watching pirates being hanged nearby.

Samuel Pepys would visit when he was naval clerk and later Secretary to the Navy (one of the rooms upstairs is named after him); Charles Dickens was another regular. In more recent years Princess Margaret and Lord Snowden used to meet here, and people as diverse as Richard Burton, Mohamed Ali, Paul Newman, Judy Garland, Frank Sinatra, Rob Steiger and Dennis Waterman have all enjoyed drinking or eating here. Indeed, there are photographs of many of these 'celebrities' enjoying the pub's hospitality.

And I can see why they all loved it – I just love the place too! I first visited it in the 1960s, and in nearly 50 years it seems to have hardly changed, though that maybe just my memory! It has fabulous views of the river from the windows – especially from the first floor – as well as from the adjacent terrace. Indeed, the famous artists Turner and Whistler painted some of their finest Thames pictures from here.

One of the rooms upstairs was famous for its boxing matches, and again there are photographs on the wall of those events. Cock fighting also took place in this room.

Throughout the pub there are information boards giving plenty of history about the place, which all adds to its atmosphere and interest. Outside there is a terraced garden that overlooks the river with a plaque that explains that the first fuchsia ever seen in Britain was brought here by a sailor from the West Indies. Apparently, that was in 1696, and the sailor who had brought it back from Santo Domingo traded it for a noggin of rum!

Finally, there is both a good range of beers and wines as well as excellent and reasonably priced food.

WAPPING HYDRAULIC PUMPING STATION

Newcastle engineer William Armstrong introduced hydraulic power into the docks in the 1850s. It used water, pumped under great pressure, to operate swing bridges, lock-gates and cranes. The water was stored in brick towers called accumulators and kept under great pressure by the use of rams operated by steam engines. The water, at seventeen times the pressure of domestic water, was then pumped through specially cast 6" to 10" inch iron pipes that were laid under the streets.

Originally there were a number of small hydraulic pumping stations, but the setting up of the London Hydraulic Power Company in 1883, meant this was uneconomic. They opened the Wapping Hydraulic Pumping Station in 1893. Besides lifting bridges, operating the dockside cranes and providing power to machines in factories, they also provided the power to operate the very first lifts in places such as the Bank of England. Some of the other more fascinating uses

were to provide power to open and close the curtains and raise and lower stages in theatres such as the famous Theatre Royal in Dury Lane and the Royal Opera House in London's West End. Shops, offices, mansion houses ... all benefited by the introduction of hydraulic power in London.

The London Hydraulic Company built five such pumping stations and this one was the last to close, which it did in 1977. It was originally operated by steam engines, but the pumps at Wapping were later converted to electricity.

A surprising amount of the original complex still remains, including the engine house, boiler house, water tanks, accumulator tower, a number of pumps, cranes, the foreman's house and more.

The company had around 180 miles of pipes buried under London streets and the value of this network was quickly recognised when the 'cable communication revolution' began to happen – the company had statutory 'wayleave' rights that entitled them to dig up streets, similar to the rights owned by gas, water and electricity companies, so it was eagerly purchased by Mercury Communications, a subsidiary at the time of Cable and Wireless and now Liberty, the owners of Virgin Media.

ST ANNE'S CHURCH

I mention St Anne's, the magnificent Grade I listed parish church of Limehouse and although we don't visit it on the walk, it's just a ten-minute stroll from the point in Narrow Street where we turn right into Three Colt Street.

It is one of ten London churches built as a result of an Act of Parliament in the 18th century authorising the construction of three hundred more churches across the country (although not all were built) because of concerns that there weren't sufficient churches to meet the needs of the expanding population.

It was named after Queen Anne, who in order to raise the money to build it, had increased the tax on coal brought up the River Thames – which must have been a very unfair additional burden on the many extremely poor people in London.

After it had been completed in 1725, Queen Anne decreed that as it was so close to the river then it would be a good place for ship's captains to register important events that were taking place at sea. As a result, the church was given the right to display the White Ensign – and not just on special occasions, but at all times. This is rare as this flag, which is the second most senior ensign of the Royal Navy, can normally only be flown at special occasions. The ensign is still flown on the church tower and the maritime connection still exists as its current rector is honorary chaplain to the Royal Navy.

The church was one of six built in London by the famous architect Nicholas Hawksmoor, a pupil of Sir Christopher Wren and at one time his assistant. He also built the nearby church of St George in the East at Shadwell and Christ Church in London's Spitalfields, another particular favourite of mine.

It is shaped like a Greek cross, with Corinthian columns and an elongated nave. All his churches were remarkable, especially their towers and St Anne's was no exception. At 200 feet high it's the tallest in London and the second highest Gothic-style clock tower in Britain – only Big Ben is higher – and it's topped by a very distinctive, highly decorated 'golden ball' and octagonal lantern, which I explain more about in the next section.

The church was badly damaged by fire in 1850 and rebuilt several years later, again in the Portland Stone that helps give it such a striking appearance. St Anne's is also famous for its very historic organ, which won first prize at the 1851 Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace, and to this day is still very popular with organists. More recently the church has been used in a number of TV programmes, including the recent 'Call the Midwife'.

Finally, after the opening of Canary Wharf as a major business area, the congregation of St Anne's considered building a sister church there, but land became so expensive it was impossible. However, they found a unique way to do their outreach work and bought a Dutch freight vessel over from Holland. Called St Peter's Barge they converted it into a floating church that is now moored in Canary Wharf. And interestingly it also has permission to also fly a naval flag – in this case the blue ensign. You can see it if you visit West India Quay in Canary Wharf.

St Anne's Church tower

It was vital for ship's navigators to know the exact time as this was how they determined a ship's position at sea. To assist ships on the Thames to set the accurate time, the Royal Greenwich Observatory, which is situated on a hill on the other side and a little further down river, would 'drop' a weight, in the form of a large red ball, from the top of its tower at exactly 1pm each day.

St Anne's Church tower is in direct line of sight from the observatory and as soon as they saw its red ball drop, they would release their golden ball, enabling ships that couldn't see Greenwich to set their timepieces. The golden ball was deliberately made a different colour from the Greenwich time ball to avoid any confusion.

As I've already said, it is the highest church clock in London and had the first illuminated clock face in Britain. Its height meant it could be seen by the many hundreds of ships moored or sailing up or down the river. However, in case of misty days, which of course being so close to the river were common, the clock also used to chime – four times an hour! (Probably because of complaints from the people living in the new, trendy apartments nearby, it no longer does.)

Until recently the golden ball on the flagpole above the tower, which also acts as part of a weather vane, was an official Trinity House 'sea mark' on navigation charts. And again as I've already said, the Queen's Regulations still allow St. Anne's Limehouse to display the White Ensign 24 hours a day.

(And interestingly, Hawksmoor's original design for the tower had a pyramid on its top. The pyramid was built but was put in to the church garden, where it still is today.)