

# A walk from Tower Hill to Wapping

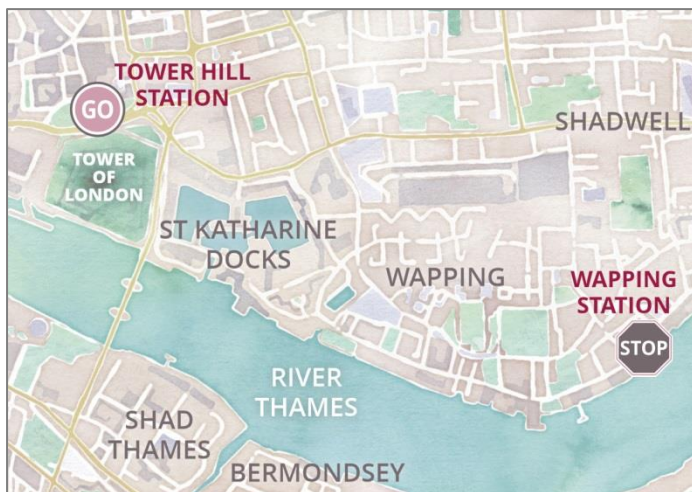
**Updated:** 31 May 2022

**Length:** About 2¼ miles

**Duration:** Around 3 hours

## NOTES

1. This walk can be treated as the first leg of a five-hour walk from Tower Hill through Wapping and Limehouse to Canary Wharf. The introduction below takes in both halves of the full-length walk.
2. Whilst it may be obvious, I must point out that things might have changed since I wrote this walk. This is particularly the case with the Thames Path – access points that were previously open can suddenly close, particularly when building work is taking place. London, and the riverside in the docklands in particular, are continually changing, so buildings and sights described may differ. As always, I appreciate any comments or suggestions from those who do the walk, particularly about any changes that have taken place so I can keep the walk updated.

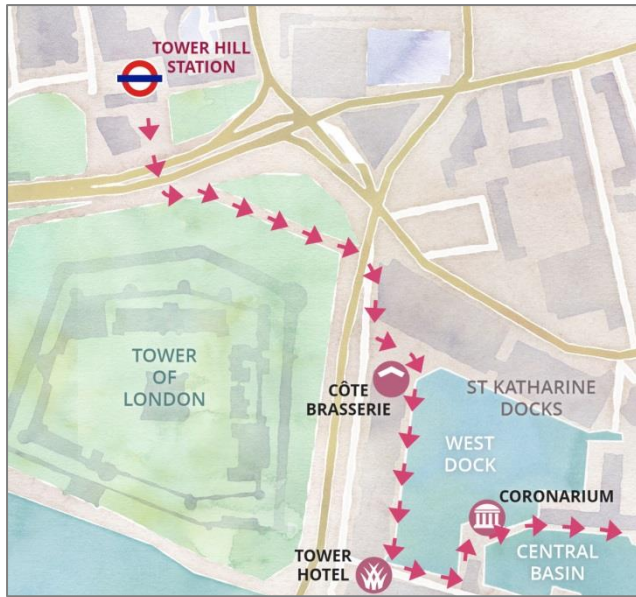


## GETTING HERE

The walk starts at **Tower Hill tube station** – which is on the Circle and District lines.

### Buses

Number 15 stops adjacent to Tower Hill Underground station, opposite the Tower of London. The service runs from Trafalgar Square/Charing Cross station, St Paul's Cathedral, Bank station/Queen Victoria Street and Monument station. (For details of other nearby bus routes check the Transport for London website.)



Route map 1

## STARTING THE WALK

**Upon arriving at the station** exit through the ticket barrier, turn left and walk down the steps on the right, passing the lower entrance to the station, and continue towards the underpass. (However, if you leave the platform via a different exit and emerge from the newer entrance/exit then simply turn right and walk down the steps.)

As you walk down the steps, the statue you pass on your left is believed to be of the Roman emperor Trajan (98–117 AD) and behind it are parts of the original Roman wall that at one time encircled the City of London.

**At the end of the underpass** you pass the remains of the only surviving medieval 'postern' gate, which is thought to date back to the 13th century – a postern being a secondary or hidden gate, its whereabouts known only to occupants of the castle, or in this case the Tower of London.

**Turn left** along a pleasant path, with flowers and shrubs in the raised beds on the left and the grass moat of the Tower of London on your right. **Pass the steps** that lead up to the Tower Bridge Road and walk through the underpass, then turn right, passing the unusual 'glass and scaffolding effect' frontage of the Tower Bridge House office building.

This brings you out into the **St Katharine Docks West Dock**, one of the three original basins. The original warehouses on the left were demolished in the 1960s and it is now lined with restaurants you see in front of you, with offices above.

On your right you'll see the Côte Brasserie – **walk down the ramp** alongside it that leads to the pontoon.

(NB – If for any reason the steps beside the Côte Brasserie and the path along the pontoon is closed, then instead simply walk straight ahead, past the line of other restaurants on the quayside and take the next turning to the right in front of the Ivory House. Pass the home of the

touristy Medieval Banquets venue and at the end of the passage you will see the previously mentioned 'Coronarium' on your right – turn left and pick up the walk from here).

The enormous brick building on your right, with the large pillars is International House. This 1970s office and residential development was built to a similar design and size of the warehouse that it replaced, which gives you an idea of how huge those 19th century quayside warehouses were.

There are usually several traditional Thames sailing barges and as well as Dutch barges moored alongside the pontoon.

**St Katharine Docks** are built on the site of the 'Royal Hospital and Collegiate Church of St Katharine by the Tower' which was built around 1148 by Matilda, the wife of King Stephen, in memory of her two children who had died. It was to provide for a 'Master, brethren, sisters and thirteen poor persons', and built on land in the parish of St Botolph without Aldgate, bought for that purpose from the priory of Holy Trinity, Aldgate. For its maintenance the Queen gave the hospital a mill near the Tower of London and the land belonging to it.

It was later 'endowed' and granted a charter, which reserved its patronage 'to the Queens of England for ever', and our Queen Elizabeth II is still a patron to this day. Its history is fascinating – it's a 'Liberty' and a 'Royal Peculiar' – and has now relocated its 'Mission' to Limehouse.

Anyway, for the next 700 years it was both a religious community and hospital for people described as 'undesirables'. These were people who weren't allowed inside the City of London and so lived as close as possible to it. Despite the great number of people living in and around it, in 1804 the site was chosen for the building of the St Katharine Docks.

As we discover later in the walk, with the rapid increase in the number of ships bringing cargoes into London and the lack of space along the banks of the Thames to unload them, together with the enormous amount of theft taking place, ship owners and merchants had begun to open 'inland' docks. The first were at Wapping and on the Isle of Dogs and were so successful that more were needed, especially closer to the City of London, hence the choice of St Katharine.

This resulted in the church and the hospital, together with around 1,250 houses (or more commonly hovels) being demolished, making over 11,000 people homeless. Sadly, they were given no compensation or help in finding anywhere else to live, putting even greater pressure on the problem of homelessness in London at that time.

The docks were built by Scottish engineer Thomas Telford, whilst the architect Philip Hardwick designed the buildings and warehouses around it. As with the other docks that were being built at the time, it was constructed in such a way that ships would moor directly alongside the quayside, which were adjacent to the warehouses where the cargo was going to be stored. This not only meant unloading and storing was far quicker – not having to unload onto smaller 'lighters' that would then have to bring the cargo ashore where from there it might have to be taken some distance to the warehouses where the goods would be stored. All of that meant that the risk of pilfering was extremely high. Theft from ships waiting to be unloaded and from quaysides and warehouses had reached epidemic proportions – some estimates say that up to a third was sometimes pilfered. As a result, the docks were surrounded by very high, brick walls which gave them an almost 'fortress' appearance, which significantly reduced these losses.

Work on building the docks started in May 1827, and a workforce of two thousand five hundred men completed the entire construction just eighteen months later. Astonishing, when you think how long it takes to build anything these days!

Like other docks built around this time, those at St Katharine were a great success, but as ships became larger it meant they were unable to pass through the entrance lock. For a few years the docks were used only by the lighters that carried cargo in from those bigger ships, but by the 1960s even that was no longer economic, and they closed.

For a few years they lay deserted until becoming a marina and leisure complex.

I've put a little more information about St Katharine Docks in the **appendix**.

**At the end of the pontoon turn left along Cloister Walk**, passing the colourful murals on the rear wall of the 15-storey, 800-room **Tower Hotel**. It was built in the 1980s and I find it ugly (and that's not just my view – it has twice been voted the 'second ugliest building in London'.)

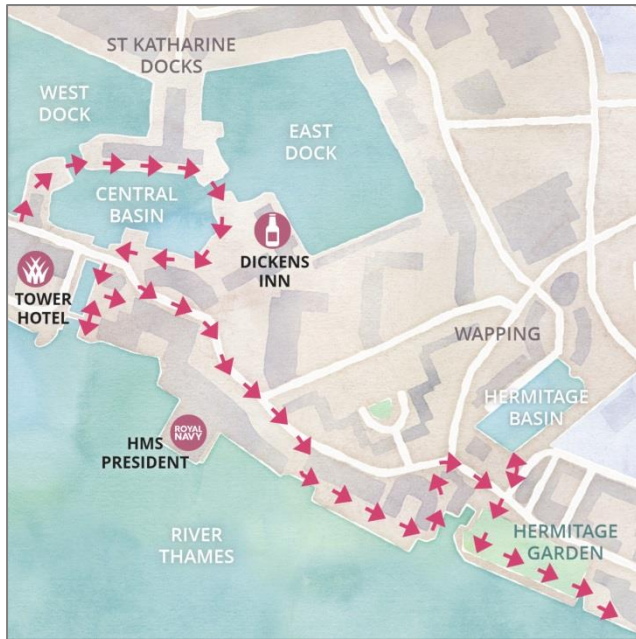
Don't walk through the 'arch' under the building ahead, but **turn left**, (keeping the basin on your left, with a good view back across the West Dock).

Immediately in front of you is a most unusual building – for some years a Starbucks coffee shop, then a noodle restaurant. It's been Azimut Café London since 2021. The building was known as a **Coronarium** and despite its 'classically inspired design' it was only erected in 1977. Designed as an open-sided 'chapel' to celebrate the Queen's Silver Jubilee, its eight Doric columns were salvaged from one of the warehouses that were demolished during the docks' redevelopment. Interestingly, it's said to be on the site of the original Church of St Katharine that was demolished when the docks were built.

**However, don't walk on yet.** Turn around and look at the wall of the building behind you, where above the cash machine you can see the 'translucent block' that was the original monolith created for Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film '2001 – A Space Odyssey'. It had been carved out of a solid block of a type of acrylic, but when Kubrick saw it he felt that its transparency didn't "add to the film's mystery", so he asked for another one to be made and this was carved from black basalt that came from Scandinavia. However, the original was never destroyed and was eventually discovered in Elstree Studios. A London-based Bratislavan sculptor bought it and when he was later commissioned to make a sculpture for the 1977 Queen's Silver Jubilee celebrations, he carved a crown into the block.

Following its unveiling by Her Majesty the Queen on 5th June 1977, it was put on display here in the Coronarium and was moved to its current position in 2000. The plaque on it reads –

The Silver Jubilee Crystal Crown was sculpted on this site by Arthur Fleischmann KCSG, FRBS, MD, who pioneered carving in Perspex. The block measures 10'9" by 5'9" by 8" thick and weighs two tons. It is the largest solid block of Acrylic in the world. It was originally made in 1968 for Stanley Kubrick's film "2001 – A Space Odyssey", but was rejected by the director in favour of the now famous black basalt monolith.



Route map 2

After the Coronarium, **walk across the lift bridge** and continue on past the row of cafes and restaurants. Half way along there's a passageway that leads to public toilets and back to the Commodity Quay, the alternative route if the 'pontoon pathway' is closed.

**Cross the footbridge** over the entrance to the East Dock – notice on the left Thomas Telford's original 1828 footbridge, whilst on your right the large anchor was salvaged from a Dutch ship called the 'Amsterdam', which sank off the coast of Hastings some 200 years ago.

Before you walk on, take a look back at the building you've just walked past. Called the **Ivory House** because this is where vast quantities of ivory were unloaded and stored, it's the only original warehouse left in St Katharine Docks, most being badly damaged or destroyed in the Second World War. And quite amazingly, it still has its original rooftop clock.

**Walk on now passing the Dickens Inn**, a highly popular tourist destination that in summer is festooned with floral displays. The inn is a 'reconstructed warehouse building' that was once a brewery. Originally a Dutch-designed timber-framed gabled building, it predates the docks, having been built around 1780. When the docks were built it was encased in a brick shell and converted into a warehouse to store tea and wool. Although it survived the World War II bombing raids it was planned to be demolished in the 1970s when the area was being redeveloped. Fortunately, though, the builders discovered that within the boring brick exterior walls was the original timber frame that we see today.

However, the site it was on was earmarked for re-development so the entire 120-ton timber shell was 'jacked up' on wheels and moved 230 feet to its present position. It was then redesigned to look like a traditional three-storey 18th century inn, which is what we see today. Although named the Dickens Inn, the author would never have visited it; however, his great grandson was invited to the formal opening in 1976 and apparently said that Dickens "would have loved this inn."

On your right you may see a 'golden boat' moored – this is the 'Gloriana', the Queen's Row Barge which was built for her to sail down the Thames in as part of her Golden Jubilee Celebrations in

2012. It celebrates the Commonwealth by having the crests of sixteen Commonwealth countries along its sides.

After the large Indian restaurant is an unusual cream coloured 'crescent-shaped' three-storey building with pillars – we see the other side of it shortly and I'll mention more about it then.

Continue alongside the basin to the end of the path and ahead is another view of the Tower Hotel. Built in 1973, the hotel steps down from 15 storeys in each direction around what I have heard described as a 'staggered cruciform' plan, whatever that means. Whether or not it's because of its 1970s design and (despite its stunning location) surprisingly small bedroom windows, it has now become more of a 'package tour hotel', rather than the prestigious establishment it once was.

**Walk towards the hotel**, but don't cross the bridge – instead **turn left** down to the right of the Dock Office and walk alongside the entrance lock that leads in from the Thames. You can see how narrow it is – as I've already explained this was partly responsible for the decline of these docks as the ever-increasing size of ships could no longer enter.

On the left of the lock is the old Dockmaster's House, now a private residence. (And just in case this path is closed then use the road bridge to cross over the lock.)

The view from here is simply iconic, and for an even better look at Tower Bridge, cross over the bottom gate of the lock. Behind the bridge, on the other bank, you can see the unusually-shaped glass City Hall, the head offices of the Greater London Authority and base for its elected Mayor. Directly across the river from where you are standing is the enormous 'Butlers Wharf' building, once again previously warehouses but now very trendy apartments and with some excellent (and again expensive) restaurants on the river's edge in front. But that's the South Bank and another walk for another day.

Just to your left downstream is a Royal Naval base called HMS President (more on which shortly) and from its pier the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh 'took the salute' as the flotilla of ships passed by during her Golden Jubilee Thames Pageant.

**Retrace your footsteps but halfway along the side of the lock** walk up the steps alongside the Dockmaster's House and at the end of the passageway **turn right**. On the other side of the road you can see the other side of the crescent-shaped building we saw just now. This unusual and perhaps classical-looking three-storey building is actually a row of private houses called Tower Walk. The architects took the inspiration for it from a terrace in extremely upmarket Regent's Park and, although a nice building, I feel it is somewhat out of place here.

You are now **in St Katharine's Way**. **Turn right past Devon House**, built on the site of a bomb-damaged warehouse in 1987 and recently refurbished, whilst next to it is the 'shore-based' **HMS President**, named after a First World War ship. (Naval land establishments like this are also known as 'Stone Frigates'.) It is the largest Royal Naval Reserve unit in the country and provides a permanent Royal Naval presence in London, as well being the base of the Naval Regional Command Centre for Eastern England, the University of London Royal Naval Unit and the London Sea Cadets. It has its own quayside and jetty and was previously used as the London terminal of P&O's jetfoil service.

Like many of the streets along the riverside, St Katharine's Way was once lined with warehouses, but many were damaged or destroyed during the Second World War and subsequently rebuilt as offices or apartments. Unfortunately, as I mention again later in the walk, for many years town

planners often appeared to turn a blind eye when it came to the rebuilding or renovation of many of these old warehouses, but an exception is certainly Millers Wharf that adjoins HMS President. Originally built in 1865 and restored in 1989, its frontage has been cleverly designed to look more like the warehouse it replaced.

Between Millers Wharf and the adjacent building is a small passage, which as the sign says is **Alderman 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 and 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.

I've put an account in the **appendix** that was originally in the *Illustrated London News* on 23rd December 1843 and which I saw more recently on the excellent 'London Inheritance' website.

**Next to Alderman Stairs turn immediately right between the buildings.** It's signposted 'Thames Path' and leads to a broad raised terrace (with steps up a little further down, so no need to climb the wall!) From here there is a wonderful view looking back up the Thames to Tower Bridge and across to the huge Butlers Wharf. As previously mentioned, these were once enormous warehouses but now trendy apartments. The small white building between the two Butler's Wharf buildings was once a banana warehouse before becoming Sir Terence Conran's Design Museum, which he opened in the late 1980s. The museum has now moved to Kensington. Just a little further to the left you will see the narrow outlet where the Neckinger River flows into the Thames; it was once the site of the small St Saviour's Dock. The Neckinger is one of the Thames' many tributaries – this one rises in nearby Southwark. Immediately beside and behind it was once one of London's notorious slums, known as Jacob's Island. It was immortalised in Charles Dickens' book 'Oliver Twist' as the place where Bill Sykes, the principal villain, came to a horrible end in the mud of Folly Ditch.

The building behind you, now apartments called Tower Bridge Wharf, was once a six-storey warehouse that stored cargoes including wine and tea. On the quayside here fruit and vegetables were unloaded, to then be taken by road to the Covent Garden Market.

Walk to the end of the terrace and follow it around to the left – but first look over the wall and you can see where one of the original lock entrances used to be. (I explain more shortly.) On the other side the large Dove sculpture is in the Peace Park, which we see shortly.

The path brings you out at the end of St Katharine's Way – and **we turn right into Wapping High Street**.

However, the road running straight ahead is Thomas More Street, which used to divide St Katharine Docks from London Docks. The street now leads up to a massive new 15-acre housing, retail and leisure complex called 'London Dock', not surprisingly built on the filled-in London Dock. It will have over 1,500 homes, shops, restaurants and even its own secondary school. It was on this reclaimed dock where in 1986 Murdoch built his controversial headquarters and print works for his newspapers – The Sun, News of the World, Times, etc. Nicknamed 'Fortress Wapping' because of how securely it was constructed – Murdoch knew that when he moved his newspaper operations out of Fleet Street there would be an almighty battle with the trade unions – and he was right of course. This was the scene of some of the ugliest battles in modern

time between picketing strikers and those who chose to work. Those wanting to work were bussed in with police escorts and the bitter and violent demonstrations continued on a daily basis for many months. That was in the 1980s, and Murdoch has since moved the printing presses again, hence the new developments on the site.

As you **turn right**, you see the old single-storey brick building, which was once the hydraulic pumping and impounding station that kept the water levels in the docks at a constant level.

The road crosses a 'bridge' over the disused lock entrance we saw just now, which led into the **Hermitage Basin**, providing one of the two entrances into London's Western Docks that was built in 1805 – we see the other one shortly. This entrance closed back in 1910.

Having crossed the bridge we're going to make a short diversion – **turn to the immediate left**, between the original brick pillars that were once the entrance for the dock workers. Once inside you can appreciate the effort that has gone into preserving part of this basin. Walk to the top, where on the left you'll see a fascinating 'rope sculpture'.

The end of the basin is a stepped terraced garden that leads down to what is now known as the 'ornamental canal' – cross over the road for a better look. Notice how much lower the canal is than the basin; this is because the basin was once 30 feet deep, but to make it safer it was partially filled in and the water is now less than two feet deep.

The original canal was once a broad waterway channel that allowed ships access through to Tobacco Docks and the Shadwell Basin that we see more of this later in the walk. I do think that the architects and planners have done an excellent job of redeveloping this part of the docks without completely losing any connection to what it once looked like. Even the modern housing developments on either side don't look too out of keeping.

And the reason for the name 'Hermitage'? Several hundred years ago there was actually a solitary dwelling (or hermitage) here.

**You now need to turn around and head back to Wapping High Street** and then cross over into the small riverside park.

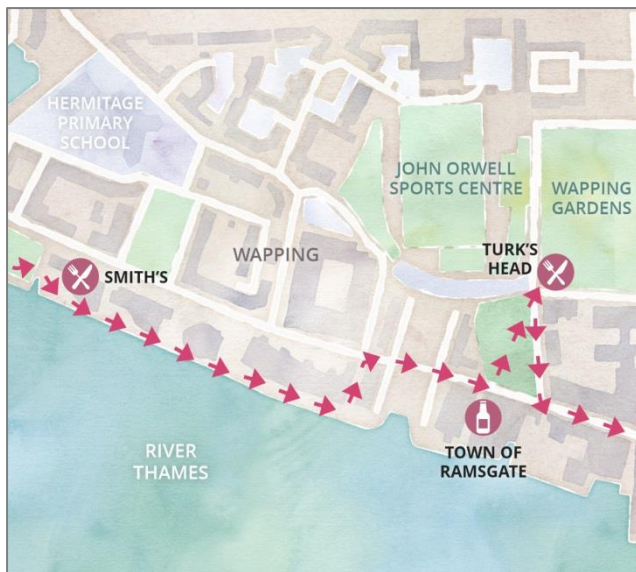
This is the Hermitage Riverside Memorial Garden, built on the site of the Hermitage Wharf that was destroyed by massive firebombs on 29th December 1940. The park is a memorial to the terrible loss of life suffered by the people of London's docklands and East End; they experienced the fiercest bombing of anywhere in Britain in the Second World War. Raids took place virtually every day for nine months in what was known as the Blitz. The Germans realised the importance of the docks to London – and of course to the rest of the country – so it became their number one target. (The word 'Blitz' comes from the German word Blitzkrieg, meaning 'lightning war' – the Germans believed that such intensive bombing on London's docks and its East End would quickly bring about Britain's surrender. However, they clearly underestimated the spirit of London's East Enders as despite the Blitz lasting for nine long months – from September 1940 until May 1941 – there was never any thought of surrender. (And to put it into perspective, I have read that over 25,000 bombs exploded in this small area of London alone.)

The Dove sculpture was designed by Wendy Taylor CBE, the dove signifying hope and peace, whilst the empty space in the centre commemorates those who died.

The view up and down river from the garden is lovely. It is a great place to pause and imagine what life must have been like for people living and working here during that horrendous period.



The garden itself is a testament to people power – developers wanted to build yet more apartment blocks, but the local people campaigned for years for a park to be built instead. What was eventually created was much smaller than they had wanted, but at least there is a garden.



Route map 3

**Walk through the garden** alongside the river, passing the boats and sailing ships in the Hermitage Community Moorings. Keep on the riverside path as it continues along a broad promenade, passing the large Smith's Fish Restaurant on the ground floor of the first apartment building. With its floor to ceiling windows it always looks an attractive place to eat, but whilst the menu looks excellent, I still haven't tried it.

Three huge apartment blocks follow – West, Central and East Tower – fairly bland buildings but with interesting sloping roofs and balconies, which do appear to vaguely resemble those of a cruise liner – or am I being too optimistic?

At one time each section of the quayside's wharves and warehouses specialised in specific cargoes and this stretch was predominantly spices. On the other side of the adjacent Wapping High Street many of the apartment buildings were built on the site of those spice warehouses and have been named after the islands where the spices came from – Sumatra Court, Java Court and Zanzibar Court, for example. And until only a few years ago you could sometimes still smell various spices in the air when you walked past.

The promenade now narrows and looks as though it comes to a dead-end, but it doesn't, and it takes you back onto **Wapping High Street**. Where the passage turns to the left is another set of stairs – these are blocked off now, but were called the 'Union Stairs', and once gave access to the original Turk's Head Inn, which as I explain later was where pirates and mutineers who had been condemned to be hanged at the nearby Execution Dock were allowed to stop for their 'last quart of ale'.

**Turn right back down Wapping High Street** – which must surely be the only High Street in Britain without any shops. It did once have thirty-six pubs – but now there's only three left. The street was built in the 1500s to link the riverside quays with the City of London and was described in the 16th century as a 'filthy passage, with alleys of small tenements and cottages ...

whose many inhabitants were victuallers who supplied sailors with maritime equipment and just as importantly cheap alcohol and women’.

Originally the Wapping area was marshy land into which the Thames would regularly overflow, but it was eventually drained. It had always been an isolated place, but this was exacerbated when the docks were built as they were surrounded by very high walls to prevent theft. As with the building of the docks at St Katharine, huge numbers of people living in Wapping 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 always at little more than subsistence levels and when work was short, they could go for weeks without any money, and never being able to put anything aside meant hunger was sometimes a serious problem.

As I’ve already explained, 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, from wealthy Canary Wharf bankers to celebrities such as TV chat show host Graham Norton.

This next stretch is one of my favourite parts of the walk. Ahead you see what looks as though it might have been a bridge, which indeed it was. Known as the **Wapping Pier Head**, this was the second entrance lock through which ships entered the London Docks complex. Once again, the lock is now filled in and been turned into a delightful garden for the private use of the residents of the lovely Georgian terraced houses on either side.

These were designed in 1812 by D.A. Alexander, the surveyor and architect of the docks, as homes for the managers of the London Dock Company. Take a walk for a couple of yards up the paved access road in front of the terrace facing you (it’s marked to ‘Pier Head 4½-10’), which enables you to fully appreciate just how beautiful these old Grade II listed houses are. These were among the first riverside buildings in the area to be turned into luxurious homes and I recently saw an advert for a two-bedroom apartment in one of the houses for one and three-quarter million pounds!

Immediately after the Pier Head is the **Town of Ramsgate**, a very old inn that’s one of the few survivors of the 36 that were once along this street and which catered for the dockworkers and warehousemen as well, of course, as the sailors.

It’s definitely worth taking a look inside – (they are used to people popping in to do so) – and as you’ll see it’s small and narrow with lots of wood panelling that gives it an even more ‘historic’ feel. There’s a little terrace at the rear where you can enjoy views across the river.

Originally called the Red Cow (apparently after the distinctive hair colour of one of the early barmaids) the name was changed to the ‘Town of Ramsgate’, the name of a ship that used to sail here from Ramsgate in Kent to unload its cargo of fish, dairy produce and grain. It was always a popular inn for sailors – Captain Bligh and Fletcher Christian enjoyed a drink here before their last ever voyage. The pub’s cellars have had a gruesome history; convicted criminals were kept here before they were hanged, whilst a little later those same cellars were used to hold convicts before they were loaded on to ships for transportation to Australia.

But before or after you go inside the pub, take a look down the tiny alley next to it. These are the renowned **Wapping Old Stairs**. If the tide is out, then you can walk down to the pebble beach beneath the pub – but be careful – the steps are deceptively slippery and can be treacherous thanks to a mixture of slimy mud and algae. If you do gingerly make your way down, then notice the noose hanging from the rear of the pub.

Another notable event in the long life of the pub was the capture here of the infamous ‘Hanging’ Judge Jeffreys, much hated due to his habit of giving extremely harsh sentences to those he tried in court. He was said to have been responsible for the hanging of many men here. He had also presided over the courts in a number of towns in south-west England during the ‘Monmouth Rebellion’, when loyal Protestants tried to overthrow the Catholic King James II. (It was called the Monmouth Rebellion because it was led by the Duke of Monmouth, an illegitimate son of Charles II.) Jeffreys sentenced hundreds of men to death and many others were sentenced to transportation.

However, he had his comeuppance here when he was caught trying to escape retribution following the 1688 ‘Glorious Revolution’ when James II himself was overthrown. Unfortunately for him, Judge Jeffreys had ‘backed the wrong side’ and was attempting to board a collier en route for Germany in an attempt to escape from his own death sentence when, arrogantly and stupidly, he went into the pub for one last glass of ale. Despite being in disguise he was soon recognised, captured and taken to the dungeons of the Tower of London.

There is an excellent account of Jeffreys’ capture in the Walter Thornbury’s fascinating book ‘Old and New London’, which was published in 1897 and I have put it in the **appendix**.

Someone else captured here whilst trying to escape by ship was Thomas ‘Captain’ Blood, the Irishman who in May 1671 was found in possession of the Crown Jewels he had stolen earlier from the Tower.

Immediately opposite the pub is a gate leading into a small garden cemetery that once belonged to St John’s Church in the adjacent Scandrett Street. Walk through it across into Scandrett Street and just to the left you’ll see the **Turk’s Head**.

The Turk’s Head has had an interesting history. We saw its original site just now and I explained that it used to have a licence to serve the ‘quart of ale’ that was the custom to serve to condemned men on route from Newgate Prison to their execution close by.

During the Second World War the landlady was ‘Mog Murphy’, and she kept the pub open all hours of the day and night for those returning on leave from fighting in the war and who were trying to find information about families and friends who lived in the area.

The pub closed in the late 1950s, but a few years later a group known as the ‘Wild Women of Wapping’ set up a charity called the Turk’s Head Company and set up a campaign to persuade the council to allow them to buy what was then a derelict building and restore it as an amenity for local people. These days the income from rent of the café and the studios above pay for the women’s charitable activities. The café is still a community affair and serves very good and reasonably priced food. There is a little garden outside where you can enjoy your coffee or lunch.

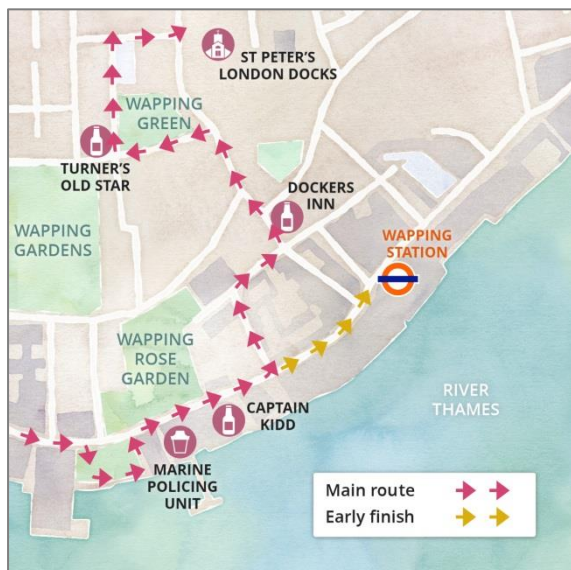
Finally and some years later, the ‘Wild Women’ were heavily involved in the protests against the proposed East-West Expressway that would have been built through the middle of Wapping, destroying much of the locality, including the Turk’s Head. We have them to thank for the successful outcome of their protests, otherwise we wouldn’t be doing this walk today!

**Leave the Turk's Head** and start walking back up towards Wapping High Street, passing the **St John the Baptist Church**. Now no longer a church and converted into apartments, it was built in 1617 as a 'chapel of ease' to St Mary's Whitechapel. (A chapel of ease is a building that's not actually a church, but where people can worship, and which is under the jurisdiction of a parish church). However, in 1694 Wapping became a separate Parish and therefore required its own Parish Church so in 1756 St John's was rebuilt and enlarged. It was badly damaged in the Second World War, with only its tower and the shell of the church left standing and was never rebuilt. Interestingly, the tower was built of an unusual combination of coloured stone and brick, carefully chosen to be visible by ships sailing up the Thames in foggy weather to aid their navigation. It was clearly well-enough constructed to have survived the bombing that destroyed the rest of the church.

Next to it is an 18th century charity school building that has also been converted into apartments. Founded in 1704 for fifty boys and forty girls, there are two lovely Coade stone statues, one of a boy and one of a girl, both in colourful uniforms, above the entrance – and in case there's any doubt as to which should be used, the words 'Boys' or 'Girls' are carved above. The adjacent building has the words 'infants' above one door and 'boys' above the other, so presumably it was built before education for girls was properly accepted.

**Walk back up to Wapping High Street and turn left.** On the other side of the road at Number 64 is Oliver's, a former tea store and one of the first warehouses to be converted into luxury apartments. (American singer Cher was an early resident.) The building next door was built for social housing, something much needed within the area, but I can't help wondering whether more thought have gone into its design and construction to make it a little more attractive and in keeping.

Pierhead Wharf was built in 1996–7 in place of a Victorian warehouse and in the style of the surrounding survivors. An extra floor with four penthouses was added in 2003. The St John's Wharves warehouses on either side of the street have been well preserved, and a notable feature are the overhead gangways that once enabled porters to transport goods from one warehouse to the other.



Route map 4

Then comes a most unusual 1970s building with weird fibreglass shapes that I've heard some call a 'monstrosity', whilst others 'a wonderfully creative abstract concrete building' – but I have to say to my mind it's just ugly and totally out of place. (Having said that, the estate agent's office opposite could easily win an award for inappropriate design in an historic street.) Somewhat surprisingly, it is the **maintenance yard of the Metropolitan River Police**, where their patrol boats are repaired and stored. The actual river police station is just a few hundred yards further on.

**Turn right into the Waterside Gardens.** This was the site of the notorious **Execution Dock** that I mentioned earlier, where for more than four hundred years pirates, smugglers and mutineers who had been sentenced by Admiralty Courts were hanged. (The Admiralty Court was responsible for trying and convicting those who had committed offences at sea and had been brought back to London to face justice.) The 'dock' consisted of a scaffold – and in order for the condemned man to suffer as much as possible there was no 'trapdoor', so death was often by slow strangulation. It was then the custom for the bodies to be left hanging here until three tides had washed over them, making them clearly visible for all to see, so as to act as a deterrent to other potential pirates or smugglers. Not that it seemed to have much effect though!

'Hanging events' were a great attraction for locals – the condemned man would arrive in a cart, accompanied by senior officers from the Admiralty. Custom had it that he would be allowed to stop for a last quart of ale and, as already mentioned, that often took place at the Turk's Head Inn just a few hundred yards up river.

The last execution was said to have taken place here in 1830, but one of the most infamous of all pirates to be hanged here was Captain Kidd, which took place in 1701, and his name lives on in the pub that we come to shortly. (Captain Kidd was said to have provided the inspiration for Robert Louis Stevenson's adventure novel *Treasure Island*.)

Alongside the Gardens are the Wapping New Stairs, but it's not advisable to attempt to go down, as the steps suddenly end in a vertical metal ladder!

From the Waterside Gardens you can look downstream and see the pier used by the River Police – and if you look carefully you can see the blue lamp still hanging nearly half way along – at one time these were hung outside all police stations. Next to the pier is the actual **Metropolitan River Police station**. Now called the Marine Policing Unit, it was built in 1909 on the site of the very original station. The station is now closed to the public, but if you walk up the little passage to the right you can see another original blue lamp still over the door.

To the right on the opposite bank of the river you can see a little group of trees in a short stretch 'green area' known as Cherry Gardens. For several hundred years this was a popular place to take a stroll and admire the river views and, in his diary, Samuel Pepys recorded visiting the gardens to buy cherries for his wife. And it was from here that J.M.W. Turner got the inspiration for one of his most popular paintings – *The Fighting Temeraire*, (the famous ship that took part in the Battle of Trafalgar) being towed by steam tug to the breakers yard in Rotherhithe. Nowadays the Cherry Garden Pier is the base for the City Cruise pleasure boats. Just to the left of it is the historic Angel pub, and to the left of that the old 'leaning' building was once the base of the last company of lightermen to operate on the Thames. To the left of that was once Edward III's manor house, whilst further to the left you can see the spire of St Mary's Church, Rotherhithe.

The **Thames River Police** was set up in 1798 to deal with the massive amount of theft that was taking place from the hundreds of ships that were constantly moored in the river waiting to be unloaded, many with holds full of valuable cargos. It was said that you could walk from one side

of the river to the other by stepping across the decks of the ships moored there. Thieving was rife – I have read that up to 30% of all cargo was pilfered, either from the ships themselves or from the quaysides and warehouses, resulting in losses of half a million pounds a year – a staggering amount of money in those days. In addition, many cargoes were being unloaded without the required duty being paid and this seriously affected Government revenues.

The situation eventually become so bad that three men took on the job of persuading the West India Company to set up a private 'police force', said to be the first organised police force in Britain and probably the world. I have written more about it in the **appendix**.

Within the police station there is a small museum dedicated to the history of the River Police. It's run by two former officers and open only by prior arrangement. There is a collection of memorabilia, artefacts, photographs, etc. going right back to the very earliest days of the River Police. It took me a while to arrange an appointment to visit, but it was certainly fascinating and very enjoyable.

Next to the police station are the Aberdeen and St John's Wharfs, two more well-restored buildings with plenty of authentic (looking!) features, whilst on the other side of the road is another park, the Wapping Rose Garden.

The **Captain Kidd pub** may look very 'olde worlde', but it certainly isn't. It's named after the infamous Scottish privateer, William Kidd, a onetime naval officer who after being sent to catch pirates turned to piracy himself. As I mentioned before, he was hanged at Execution Dock in 1701 having been convicted of piracy and murder.

Whilst the actual building dates back to the 18th century, it was originally a warehouse that stored coffee, dried fruits and bales of wood from Australia, and was only converted into a pub in the 1980s. It is a fascinating place all the same. I love the narrow courtyard entrance – notice the noose hanging over the entrance door – and besides the spacious bar on the ground floor there is also the Galleons Reach restaurant upstairs. Best of all though is its terrace that overlooks the river, arguably the biggest along this stretch of the Thames. So even if you don't fancy having a drink it is worth a quick visit. Looking from the terrace of the Captain Kidd to the other side of the river, you can see the sign saying 'Thames Tunnel Mill' on a former 19th century flour mill that until the 1970s was producing flaked rice and tapioca (which brings back horrid memories of the puddings served for school dinners).

Behind it is the historic Church of St Mary's in Rotherhithe, famous for its connections with the Pilgrims' 'Mayflower' sailing to America.

Continuing on, next to the Captain Kidd is **Phoenix Wharf**, one of the few warehouses that actually appears to be original and not modernised, and still with the 'hauling' doors on each level where goods would be hoisted up on pulleys for storage. Rather unusually, not many of the buildings on this short stretch appear to have been so badly damaged or destroyed in the war – photographs taken pre-1940 show very little difference to the structures you see today.

Alongside it are the **King Henry Stairs** and a narrow walkway leading to 'Wapping Pier'. The gate leading to it is locked and is the base of the Silver Fleet Thames Cruisers.

Almost opposite is the architecturally interesting **New Tower Building**. Built in 1886 by the Improved Industrial Dwellings Company, it's adjacent to a small piece of land that for some reason until now hasn't been built on, although it seems that's about to change as planning

permission has been granted for the site to be developed, so building work may be underway when you visit.

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### **A SHORTENED VERSION OF THE WALK**

There are two places where the walk can be finished – this is the first, so if you're out of time (or energy) then **you can end your walk here**.

**To do so, simply carry on walking down Wapping High Street for five minutes**, passing the enormous restored King Henry's Wharves and Gun Wharves. These were so named because this was where Henry VIII built a foundry to make cannons for his navy. Although now converted into luxury apartments, once again the exterior of these huge warehouses appear to have retained their original facades.

Continue on, passing Wapping Lane on your left and after a couple of hundred yards you'll see **Wapping station** on your right.

### **Getting back to central London**

Wapping station is on the London Overground network (although it is underground at this point).

- To connect with the DLR service to Bank and Tower Gateway take the train from Platform 1 for one stop north to Shadwell, or
- To connect with the underground network then continue on one more stop to Whitechapel and change onto either the District or Hammersmith & City Line.

Trains from here will take you to many parts of central London.

**Bus route 100** will take you from Wapping station back into London. Stops include St Katharine Docks, Tower Gateway station, Bishopsgate, Moorgate station, London Wall/Museum of London, St Paul's station.

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Alternatively, the walk continues a little further (approx. 45 minutes) and visits other parts of Wapping and several particularly interesting features, including Tobacco Dock and the Shadwell Basin. However, it also ends back at Wapping station.

If you wish to carry on, then **we're going to turn left up Brewhouse Lane** along the side of the New Tower Building. But before you do, first look ahead down Wapping High Street and you'll see the enormous King Henry's Wharves and Gun Wharves, so named because this was where Henry VIII built a foundry to make cannons for his navy. Although now converted into luxury apartments, once again the exterior of these huge warehouses to have retained their original facades.

(Should Brewhouse Lane be closed as a result of the building works, simply continue on down Wapping High Street for a few hundred yards and turn left up Wapping Lane.)

However, if you are able to walk up Brewhouse Lane, then on the left at the top is Tower Building, another block of flats built by the Improved Industrial Dwellings Company.

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 that runs up the right-hand side of the pub, then **turn right into Chandler Street** and then **turn left back into Wapping Lane**.





Route map 5

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.

In the plan drawing shown below, Tobacco Dock is the large, almost-square building marked 'Tobacco Warehouse'. Most of the docks have since been filled in.

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.

I've written a little more about Tobacco Dock in the **appendix**.

From Tobacco Dock you now need to **turn around** and walk back down Wapping Lane to the very bottom, then turn left and 200 yards along on the right-hand side you'll see Wapping station.

### **Getting back to central London**

Wapping station is on the London Overground network (although it is underground at this point).

- To connect with the DLR service to Bank and Tower Gateway take the train from Platform 1 for one stop north to Shadwell, or
- To connect with the underground network then continue on one more stop to Whitechapel and change onto either the District or Hammersmith & City Line.

Trains from here will take you to many parts of central London.

**Bus route 100** will take you from Wapping station back into London. Stops include St Katharine Docks, Tower Gateway station, Bishopsgate, Moorgate station, London Wall/Museum of London, St Paul's station.

**Please note – there's a separate walk that carries on from here to Limehouse and Canary Wharf.** If you like to continue further and do this walk now, then you'll need to refer to the separate '**Wapping to Canary Wharf walk**'.

## APPENDIX TO THE WAPPING WALK

### ST KATHARINE HOSPITAL, CHURCH AND DOCKS

As can probably be ascertained by the amount I have written, I find this a fascinating area! Its amazing history can be traced back to the 10th century when King Edgar gave thirteen acres of land to thirteen knights to enable them to trade in foreign goods.

The dock was built on the site of 'St Katharine by the Tower' – or to give its even earlier full name – The 'Royal Hospital and Collegiate Church of St Katharine by the Tower'. (And in case you are wondering who Saint Katharine was ... she was also known as Catherine of Alexandria, lived in the 4th century, was brutally tortured and eventually murdered for her faith. According to the Catholic Encyclopaedia, written in 1908, she is one of the most important saints in heaven.)

The Hospital of St Katharine was here built here around 1148 by Matilda, the wife of King Stephen, in memory of her two children who had died and been buried in the nearby Holy Trinity Priory at Aldgate.

It was to provide for a 'Master, brethren, sisters and thirteen poor persons', and built on land in the parish of St. Botolph without Aldgate, bought for that purpose from the priory of Holy Trinity, Aldgate. For its maintenance the Queen gave the hospital a mill near the Tower of London and the land belonging to it.

Around a hundred years later a dispute over the ownership of the land resulted in Queen Eleanor of Castile further endowing the Hospital and granting a charter 'reserving the Foundation's patronage to the Queens of England for ever.'

In 1442 it was granted a Charter of Privileges, so creating a 'Liberty', which meant that it was outside the control of the City of London, so could have its own court, officers and prison. It was also a 'Royal Peculiar' – meaning a church that is directly under the control of a monarch and not a bishop (Westminster Abbey is another – as is the Queen's Chapel of the Savoy, still situated in the gardens of the Savoy Hotel). So, every reigning monarch since 1400 has been Patron of St Katharine's and responsible for appointing the Master, as its head is officially known – and that is still the case today.

Primarily a religious community as well as a hospital for the poor, it continued its work for nearly 700 years. A sizeable community grew up around it and a very mixed bag it was too. One account written at the time said that the area was 'inhabited by foreigners, vagabonds and prostitutes, crammed along narrow lanes ...', whilst in John Stow's 1598 Survey of London he said it was '... inhabited by strangers [meaning foreigners] more in number than some cities in England.'

The reason this 'sprawling labyrinth of little houses, taverns, narrow lanes' grew up here was because St Katharine's was outside the control of the City of London so foreigners were free to carry on trades, crafts and professions that they would not have been allowed to do within the City itself. Other people were known as 'undesirables', again those who weren't allowed inside the City and so lived as close as possible to it.

Throughout the 18th century, the district continued to grow 'offering sanctuary to both immigrants and the poor'. Transient sailors, including Lascar seamen who crewed East India Company ships, as well as Irish, Jewish and Scandinavian immigrants and ex-slaves from the Caribbean joined the local population. The result was a vibrant and often volatile community. It

was also a popular place for 'foreign' ships that might not have been allowed to unload their cargo any closer to the City, particularly at times of 'plague and pestilence', for fear of bringing in disease.

By the early part of the 19th century London's trade with the rest of the world had grown so much there simply wasn't the space to unload ships on the Thames and a ship could wait for weeks before it could be unloaded. This obviously cost the shipowners – and their crews – a lot of money. The only answer was to build 'inland docks' away from the river and a group of men comprised of ship owners, merchants and bankers got together to form the London Dock Company.

It wasn't long before those docks, which were on the Isle of Dogs and in Wapping, were struggling to cope with the ever-increasing demand, and more were needed. St Katharine's was felt to be the ideal choice, being nearer to the City where the merchants were based, so a newly formed Docks Company paid just £125,000 to purchase the land where St Katharine Hospital and Church stood. These were both then demolished, together with over a thousand houses, slums and hovels that had grown up around them, which meant that thousands of people lost their homes, and none received any compensation or help – they were simply made homeless. And as overcrowding and poverty were already a huge problem in London, this just caused further misery. However, after much controversy, they spent a further £30,000 buying land and building a new St Katharine's Hospital – actually almshouses – in Regent's Park of all places! So much for its mission to help the poor and sick of the East End of London.

There it stayed for just over 100 years until in 1948 new premises were found on the site of the bombed St James's Church in Limehouse for St Katharine's, back in the East End, and those in Regent's Park closed. The Royal Foundation of St Katharine offers facilities to both the local community as well as the wider church, with meeting rooms, a retreat, conference centre and hotel – a simple but unusual and pleasant place to stay – and fairly reasonably priced too.

### **St Katharine Docks**

The new docks were designed by Thomas Telford and covered an area of 24 acres. There were three basins with six-storey warehouses built around them with an entrance lock into the Thames. Building began on 3rd May 1827 and work was completed less than two years later. Incredible when you think how much digging and construction was needed.

Each of the three basins specialised in specific imports, which included ivory, silks, spices, tea, perfumes, rubber, marble, indigo, cigars, wines and carpets – a wide variety of goods, but they all had one thing in common – they were valuable and needed secure storage; hence the stone-built warehouses that surrounded them. This was the pattern for other docks that were built both before and later. The most valuable cargoes had their own quay and adjoining warehouses, and those names are still in use today, such as Marble Quay and Ivory Quay. Indeed, ivory was one of the most valuable commodities and the Ivory House, with its prominent clock tower, is at the centre of the three basins. Over 200 tons of ivory arrived here each year (somebody once worked out that's the equivalent of over 4,000 elephants) as well as hippopotamus and walrus teeth and mammoth tusks from Russia. A major reason for the demand for ivory at that time was the huge number of pianos being made – ivory was used for the keys as well as for jewellery and ornaments.

Unfortunately, St Katharine's was only financially viable for a few years; the docks had been built to accommodate the size of ships around at that time, but those were rapidly becoming longer and wider and it wasn't long before it became difficult for them to navigate the entrance lock,

which affected its profitability. So by 1864 St Katharine Docks had merged with the neighbouring and much larger London Dock Company.

St Katharine Docks continued to be used by the smaller 'lighters', which could pass through the lock, until 1968 when it became the first of the London Docks to close. Redevelopment commenced in the 1970s, beginning with the construction of the Tower Hotel. That was followed by the various apartment and office buildings that surround it to this day. These apartments soon became very popular (and expensive) and notable residents have included ex-politicians David Mellor and Ruth Kelly and actor David Suchet. The docks themselves have been converted into a marina capable of holding up to 180 luxury yachts.

## **ALDERMAN STAIRS**

I've put an interesting account that was originally in the Illustrated London News on the 23rd December 1843 and which I saw on the excellent 'London Inheritance' website that was taken from the Illustrated London News, dated 23rd December 1843.

"CHRISTMAS FARE – On Sunday night the Dublin Steam Navigation Company's steam-packet Royal William, Captain Swainson, arrived at her moorings off the Alderman-stairs, Lower East Smithfield from Dublin, Falmouth and Plymouth. She brought a miscellaneous cargo, part of which consisted of a large quantity of geese, turkeys, and other Christmas fare, for the metropolitan markets. In the course of Saturday and Sunday a number of steam-packets arrived in the river with large quantities of geese, turkeys, and other kinds of poultry, for Christmas cheer. Last week, several vessels arrived at Fresh-wharf, London-bridge with cargoes of varied fruits. Most of the stage-coaches which arrived in the metropolis on Tuesday and during the week brought very large quantities of geese, turkeys, hares, &c."

Alderman Stairs were also a departure point for regular shipping routes for both passengers and parcels. Departures and routes were regularly advertised in the newspapers, for example, in the Shipping and Mercantile Gazette on the 18th April 1838, the St. George Steam Packet Company was advertising that:

"Vessels sail regularly from off Alderman-stairs, below the Tower for:

PLYMOUTH, FALMOUTH and CORK, and taking goods and passengers for Liverpool, every Saturday morning at 8 o'clock.

EXETER, calling off Deal, Ryde and Cowes (weather permitting), every Wednesday morning, at 8 o'clock.

BOSTON – The SCOTIA, on Tuesday morning, the 10th April, at 4 o'clock, and every succeeding Tuesday at the same hour.

STOCKTON (at reduced fares), calling off Scarborough and Whitby, weather permitting – The EMERALD ISLE, every Saturday night at 12 o'clock, returning every Wednesday.

Goods to be sent to the St. George Steam-wharf, Lower East Smithfield."

The London Inheritance website goes on to say, "Passengers arriving off Alderman Stairs ran the risk of being overcharged for their transport between ship and shore, as an article in the Morning Post on the 29th September 1847 reports: A report in the Evening Chronicle on the 30th October 1840 also highlights the risk to travellers arriving in London by Alderman Stairs."

The report was about another waterman, a certain William Vallance, who was a member of the 'Jacob-street gang of steam boat rangers'. In the reported case, Vallance had been directed to

meet the Dublin steam-ships when they arrived off Alderman Stairs, however the members of the Jacobs Street gang would persuade their passengers to be taken to another landing point where they could be charged significantly more. The Jacob Street gang would also “on arrival of a steam ship the Jacob-street gang managed to board the vessel while the crew were busily engaged in mooring the vessel, and seized any luggage they could lay their hands on, which they lowered into a boat, generally having a fellow of very questionable character ready to receive it and stow it away”.

Theft of goods from the ships moored on the Thames and from the warehouses that lined the river was a continuous problem, and had led to the formation of the Thames River Police.

The Thames River Police would frequently question people carrying goods along the river, on land, or at the river stairs. If they could not give a satisfactory explanation for why they were in possession of the goods, they would be arrested for theft. Newspapers often carried long lists of those arrested, and the goods they were found with. On the 3rd September 1821, the Public Ledger and Daily Advertiser included an “E. Bateman who was found with 1lb of sugar at Alderman Stairs” without being able to give any satisfactory explanation of why he was in possession of the sugar.

Thanks to the excellent London Inheritance website for providing me with this information. It’s certainly fascinating to stand at the top of these stairs and imagine the countless thousands of people who have used them as their gateway to the river and then beyond.

## **WAPPING AND ITS HIGH STREET**

A few words here about Wapping and its High Street – which must surely be the only High Street in Britain with no shops! However, at one time it had over thirty pubs – of which only three are now left. The street was built in the 1500s to link the riverside quays down river with the City of London. The 16th century London historian John Stow described it as a “filthy passage, with alleys of small tenements and cottages ...” He went on to say that many inhabitants were “victuallers who supplied sailors with maritime equipment and just as importantly cheap alcohol and women” – and this maritime connection existed for many years.

In ‘A New View and Observations on the Ancient and Present State of London and Westminster in 1730’, it says Wapping was “formerly of one great wash, covered with the waters of the Thames. Afterwards it was by pains and art, gained from the river and made a meadow ground, commonly now called Wapping Marsh, and was defended from the interruption of the Thames by Walls”. Indeed, this whole region was so rural – just marshes and forests – that in 1629 King Charles I, having hunted a stag in Wanstead in Essex, killed it in a garden in Nightingale Lane in Wapping.

The name Wapping is said to have originated from an Anglo Saxon called Waeppa who started a community here. It was then mainly marsh land over which the Thames would regularly flow when in flood, with just a few higher ‘dry spots’ where people must have settled. Indeed, it was many hundreds of years later before the work of draining the area actually started.

Like many communities along this part of the Thames, Wapping was an isolated place, but this was made worse when the docks were built. Surrounded by warehouses and high walls to prevent theft, Wapping became cut off from the rest of the East End. In addition, the construction of the docks resulted in thousands of local people being moved out of their homes, ripping the heart out of the community and adding to further deprivation. As with Limehouse, the area continued to suffer from terrible poverty. Dockers could go for weeks without work –

and therefore without any money and, remembering that their wages generally provided little more than subsistence in the first place, there was slim chance of them having anything put aside to help during those bad times.

The area was particularly devastated by bombing during World War II, with many of the warehouses being destroyed beyond repair. For years it was a very neglected and forgotten part of London, but then in the 1980s developers began restoring and renovating the warehouses that had been damaged, and building on the bombsites, and the resulting trendy apartments have made the area very popular, attracting an eclectic mix of new residents, from wealthy Canary Wharf bankers to celebrities such as TV chat show host Graham Norton.

### **'Hanging Judge Jeffreys'**

I have mentioned Judge Jeffreys in several places in the walk, particularly when we visit the Town of Ramsgate pub, where he was finally arrested.

There's further information in a book put together by Walter Thornbury in 1897 called 'Old and New London', when he quotes from W.M. Thackeray's account of Judge George Jeffreys arrest. Although nicknamed the 'Hanging Judge' for his enthusiasm to put to death by hanging of many of those who appeared in court before him, (often regardless of the severity of their offence), his official title was a Baron. He had been a Welsh Judge, but during the reign of King James II rose to the position of Lord Chancellor. Unfortunately, he backed the 'wrong King', and was himself arrested. The following piece, written by Thackeray, gives us more of an insight to the event.

"A scrivener who lived at Wapping, and whose trade was to furnish the sea faring men there with money at high interest, had some time before lent a sum on bottomry. The debtor applied to equity for relief against his own bond and the case came up before Jeffreys. The counsel, for the borrower, having little else to say, said that the lender was a trimmer. The chancellor instantly fired, 'A trimmer! Where is he? Let me see him. I have heard of that kind of monster. What is he made like?' The unfortunate creditor was forced to stand forth. The chancellor glared fiercely on him, stormed at him, and sent him away half dead with fright. 'While I live' the poor man said as he tottered out of court, 'I shall never forget that terrible countenance.'

"And now the day of retribution had arrived. The 'trimmer' was walking through Wapping when he saw a well-known face looking out the window of an ale-house. He could not be deceived. The eyebrows had indeed been shaved away. The dress was that of a common sailor from Newcastle and was black with coal-dust; but there was no mistaking the savage eye and mouth of Jeffreys. The alarm was given. In a moment the house was surrounded by hundreds of people, shaking bludgeons and bellowing curses. The fugitive's life was saved by a company of the Trainbands; and he was carried before the Lord Mayor.

"The mayor was a simple man, who had passed his whole life in obscurity, and was bewildered by finding himself an important actor in a mighty revolution. The events of the last twenty-four hours and the perilous state of the city which was under his charge had disordered his mind and body. When the great man, at whose frown just a few days before, the whole kingdom had trembled, was dragged into the justice room begrimed with ashes, half dead with fright, and followed by a raging multitude, the agitation of the unfortunate mayor rose to the height. He fell into fits, and was carried to his bed, whence he never arose. Meanwhile, the throng was constantly becoming more numerous and more savage. Jeffreys begged to be sent to prison. An order to that effect was procured from the Lords who were sitting at Whitehall; and he was conveyed in a carriage to the Tower.

“Two regiments of militia were drawn out to escort him and found the duty a difficult one. It was repeatedly necessary for them to form, as if for the purpose of repelling a charge of cavalry, and to present a forest of pikes to the mob. The thousands who were disappointed of the revenge pursued the coach, with howls of rage to the gate of the Tower, brandishing cudgels, and holding up halts full in the prisoner’s view. The wretched man meantime was in convulsions of terror. He wrung his hands, he looked wildly out, sometimes at one window, sometimes at the other, and was heard, even above the tumult crying, ‘Keep them off, gentlemen! For God’s sake, keep them off!’ At length having suffered far more than the bitterness of death, he was safely lodged in the fortress, where some of his most illustrious victims had passed their last days, and where his own life was destined to close in unspeakable ignominy and terror.”

Jeffreys was never hanged and died of an illness while being held in the Tower of London in 1689, where he was at first buried. Several years later, and for reasons I don’t know, his remains were taken to the City church of St. Mary Aldermanbury, which I cover in the City of London walk 1.

## **THAMES RIVER POLICE**

The Thames River Police was set up in 1798 to deal with theft from the many hundreds of ships constantly moored in the river whilst waiting to be unloaded, many of which had holds full of valuable cargos. It was said that you could walk from one side of the river to the other by stepping across the decks of the ships moored there. Thieving was rife – up to 30% of all cargo was pilfered, either from the ships themselves or from the quaysides or warehouses, resulting in losses of half a million pounds a year – a staggering amount of money in those days! In addition, many cargoes were unloaded without duty being paid, which seriously affected Government revenues. The situation had become so bad that a local magistrate, Patrick Colquhoun, together with John Harriot, an ex-sailor and Justice of the Peace together with a Unitarian philosopher called Jeremy Bentham, persuaded the West India Company to set up a private ‘police force’, said to be the first organised police force in Britain and probably the world.

At its inception the ‘West India Merchants and Planters Marine Police Institute’ as it was called, had just 50 men – not a lot considering there were over 35,000 men working in the docks and maritime industry in the area and around 11,000 of them were said to have been ‘known criminals’. Needless to say, those ‘criminals’, together with the many others who would have benefitted from the proceeds of all this crime, did not take kindly to having their activities curtailed and, shortly after the police station opened, over 2,000 of these aggrieved men marched on the building and attempted to burn it down. Amazingly only one ‘policeman’ was killed and fortunately their attempts were unsuccessful. By the end of the first year of its activities they were said to be saving the Company ‘vast amounts of money’, as well as being responsible for saving the lives of many drunken people who regularly fell into the Thames.

Its success resulted in an Act of Parliament in 1800 that made it a public and not a private body, with responsibility for all the ships on the Thames and not just those of the West India Company. Twenty-nine years later the Metropolitan Police Force was formed by Robert Peel and ten years later the two forces combined. The Marine Police then became known as the Thames Division, which continued until just a few years ago when it became the ‘Marine Policing Unit’. Besides the original Wapping Station, the Marine Police eventually had two other stations, one at Blackwall and another at Waterloo.

I find the life and career of Patrick Colquhoun fascinating – born in Scotland and orphaned at the age of sixteen, his relatives sent him to Virginia in America to work in the cotton trade. There he became involved in the American Revolution and now aged twenty-one, he returned to Scotland



to help fund a 'Glasgow Regiment' to support the British Government's battle with the Americans. He then built an estate in Glasgow, became Lord Provost of City and founded the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce. He was a brilliant statistician and collected economic data with which to lobby the British Government and whilst doing so met with Prime Minister Pitt. This got him involved in British politics and he moved to London where he eventually became a magistrate in the East End.

As a result of his subsequent involvement in policing as well as social problems, he wrote a number of books on the subjects and his views are said to be the basis of much of British policing, particularly crime prevention, to this day. (Oh ... and he was later appointed Consul General of the German cities of Hamburg and Bremen ... gosh, don't some people just make you feel inadequate!)

One of my favourite books is HV Morton's 'The Spell of London', which was written and published in the 1920's. It's a collection of essays on many different aspects of London life, and I love his description of a night out with the Thames River Police – and I quote this extract –

"Wapping Stairs. A clock struck twelve; and a high, cold moon shone over the river. I stood muffled to the eyes in an ulster as I waited for the patrol boat of the river police, which was to take me out on a night's hunting. There was no sound but the tide ebbing from the Thames mud with lapping, sucking noises. Downstream a melancholy siren gave a banshee wail and was silent. Round me were shadows and lamplight, pale over dreary alleyways; sinister steps led down to the exposed ooze that gleamed like polished silver in the light of the moon. What an eerie spot. I remembered every 'shilling shocker' that I have read. I saw, in imagination, 'the gang' creep from shadow to shadow, I heard the splash of a falling body, the swift sound of pursuit, and then, cutting the darkness, the call of a whistle and ... There it was! A whistle. Out of the night it came. This was no imagination. A dark shape detached itself from the dancing quicksilver of the river, and I heard the soft throbbing of the patrol boat and saw her green bow lights as she swept in towards land. "Good evening Sir". I returned the salute of a dark form in a peaked cap and I stepped aboard. The engine purred, the boat swung around and away we went, into the dark mystery of the downstairs reaches."

Within the police station there is a small museum dedicated to the history of the River Police. It's run by two former officers and is only open only by prior appointment. They have a fascinating collection of memorabilia, artefacts, photographs, etc., going right back to the very earliest days of the River Police.

## **TOBACCO DOCK**

Tobacco Dock was built by Docks Architect Daniel Alexander and opened in 1814 as a safe and secure warehouse to store tobacco, wines and spirits as well as furs and skins. Indeed, to this day it still looks 'fortress like'.

Tobacco was brought to these docks from America, Turkey, Russia and China and by the mid-1930s over 45,000 tons a year were being imported. As a result this area became known as 'Tobacco Road'.

The building survived the war time bombing, though after the docks had begun to be run down it laid empty for a number of years. Then in the 1980s it was bought by London East End entrepreneur and businessman Laurie Cohen who persuaded the newly set up London Docks Development Company not to demolish it, as they had originally planned, but to turn it into what at the time was called the 'Covent Garden of the East'. The LDDC even contributed over £1

million towards the conservation and restoration of the building. The project cost up to £50 million in total but in the 1990s recession the shops began to close and it became uneconomic and was closed down. It is now used only for exhibitions and other special events as well as by film companies.

Fortunately, Tobacco Dock is a listed building and I understand there is now a planning application by the Kuwaiti family who own it for it to be once again turned into a trendy shopping complex – again saying it will be the “Covent Garden of the East End” – but this time besides the ‘trendy boutiques there will be a ‘designer hotel’ and over 800 luxury apartments. Quite how they will manage all of that in a Grade I listed building I really don’t know!

From the outside it’s hard to appreciate its vastness. Huge cast iron pillars support a wooden roof and there are massive underground storerooms.

In front of Tobacco Dock are two sailing ships, the Three Sisters and the Sea Lark. The former is a replica of an American built merchant schooner that was captured by the Admiralty during the Anglo- American War. The other is a replica of the Sea Lark, a 330-ton ship that once bought tobacco and spices to London and which was built at the Blackwall Yard in 1788. Unfortunately, these are not open to the public to look around.

Running along the front is a preserved section of the canal that used to link the Hermitage Basin and the Western Docks with Shadwell Basin further east.