

The Greenwich Riverside: from Deptford Creek to Ballast Quay

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In London's Industrial Archaeology 19 I described the industrial riverside from the Lewisham border at Upper Watergate to the banks of Deptford Creek.¹ In the present article, I continue along the Thames returning to the Creek to look at Creekside industry at a later date. These articles have been developed from a series of pieces written for a local weekly, Greenwich Weekender, and attempt to summarise the industries of the Greenwich Riverside in a more structured context with references to other works where available.

These days, in the 2020s, you can cross Deptford Creek by a new swing foot bridge near its confluence with the Thames² and once on the Greenwich bank find an area with many blocks of identikit flats and a large upmarket supermarket.³ This whole area was marshland until the 1820s and a plan of 1777 shows a 'sea wall' topped by footpath, to the south of which is 'Brooks Marsh' but beyond it is an area of land tumbling into the river and marked as 'osiers'.⁴ In the 1820s, this area was stabilised by contractor David Mackintosh for the Phoenix Gas Company which went on to build a gas works there.⁵

This gas works had been preceded by a small gas works a few yards to the south in Norway Street⁶ which had been taken over by the Phoenix as part of a local political scandal.⁷ Very little seems to have been written about this works – the main supplier of gas in Greenwich until the 1890s.⁸ It was closed for public gas supply just before the Great War but produced charcoal for the Government throughout the war and was later closed. Exploring the area in the late 1980s I found what was clearly the tank of an old gas holder being used for aggregate storage. The site remained in gas company ownership until the 1940s and was used by their lighterage department. It was then sold and became a road stone depot for British Quarrying Co and later ARC Roadstone, known as Granophast Wharf.⁹ The area is now all new flats.

Thames Street runs parallel to the river from the gas works gate to what is now Cutty Sark Gardens. Between Thames Street and the river was a series of wharves, many of them used by small river related industries including barge repairers and builders, work places about which we know very little. If we are lucky we might know their names.

The first wharf after the gasworks was Dreadnought Wharf. It is often assumed that this had some connection to the Dreadnought hospital ship which lay in the river nearby. However there appears to be no connection other than that the wharf was near the ship.¹⁰ The wharf was used up to the 1840s by the Greenwich fishing fleet after which it was used by William Joyce, the ship and engine builder, whose original works had been to the south on the old gasworks site in Norway Street; his move to Dreadnought, on the Thames, indicating his prosperity. Joyce died at the age of 42¹¹ and the business was then owned by Thomas Meacham.¹² In 1859 the wharf was taken over by John and George Rennie who had previously had an engineering and shipbuilding works further down in Deptford Creek. They remained there for the next 56 years building a huge range of vessels and eventually moved to Wivenhoe.¹³ The wharf was next taken over by the Tilbury Contracting and Dredging Co. moving from Providence Wharf in East Greenwich where they had been known as Hughes.¹⁴ They remained there until 1963 and have continued as part of a large multinational, Interserve.¹⁵ Like everywhere else all maritime industry was swept away in the early 2000s and the wharf is now flats and offices.

Next after Dreadnought was Norway Wharf, also used by William Joyce in the 1850s. It was later taken over by another engineering firm T.W. Cowan who made heavy steam equipment for agriculture here and at Kent Iron Works in Creek Road.¹⁶ It was also used by Harvey's whose later huge factory in Woolwich Road made boilers, fractionating towers and metal items with perforations – in fact they produced catalogues with many designs and sizes of holes.¹⁷ This wharf too is now all flats.



Figure 1. Looking west along Creek Road, Deptford. March 1981. *Robert Carr*

Parallel to Thames Street and the River was another road called Wood Wharf.¹⁸ Ron Richards has recorded many of the small firms and river related industries which were in this area. One of these, on Wood Wharf itself, was the Anglo Swedish Electric Welding Co. who had pioneered a new type of electric welding. Ron had worked for Pope and Bond who moved to the wharf in 1967. They survived into the 1990s but lost a major contract and were forced to close – ironically the Government's new safeguarding legislation for working wharves had failed to include boat repair businesses. Another later industry on the wharf was as a recording studio for the Lewisham musician Billy Jenkins and his Voice of God Collective.¹⁹

Horseferry Road runs down the river from Creek Road. A horse ferry was not one worked with horses but one on which horses could be carried and on this site was a ferry terminus. There is a long and fairly acrimonious history of ferry companies on the river and there were various schemes and disputes here about who owned what and who was allowed to operate.²⁰ In 1888 a steam ferry took over the site with a scheme said to be 'ambitious and mechanically daring'. In addition to steam boats, a concrete slip on the foreshore included a 270 ton landing stage and rails with a large chamber below the road housing steam engines and a 20 ton weight. It ran for only 10 years.²¹ Relics of the rails remain on the foreshore and it is probable the underground chamber also remains having been investigated by diving into them in the late 1990s, by the late Clive Chambers.²² All of this is ignored by the pub and housing which replaced the wharf.

Continuing along the river and nearing Cutty Sark Gardens we pass the flats of the Meridian Estate built by the London County Council in the 1930s. Ron Richards mentions the occupants of several of these wharfs; for example Orient Lighterage, a firm in the tea trade. A cannon on the riverside may mark Cannon Wharf and I was once told that this small site was privately owned and that campaigners for a traditional Riverside were trying to buy it to prevent it being taken over by developers.²³

Arriving at Greenwich Church Street the walk to the river is now through Cutty Sark Gardens. It is however possible to work out the routes of previous lanes which ran down to the river by the position of walls and ground markings. Such a walk would probably have been down Billingsgate Street to Billingsgate Dock which lies alongside Greenwich Pier. There is no known connection between this dock and Billingsgate in the City of London except that both dealt with fish and both were owned by the same Saxon princess.



Figure 2. Inauguration of information plaque on Greenwich Foot Tunnel, 5 July 2016. *R. B. Greenwich*

Greenwich was an important fishing port up to the mid-19th century, and it was centred on this area. References to Greenwich fisherman go back to the Middle Ages. Greenwich fishermen worked in the North Sea and up to the Arctic but in the 1860s many of them moved to Grimsby where rail links meant that fish caught off Iceland and elsewhere could be got to London faster.²⁴

Many of the wharves used by the fishing industry were later operated by coal transshipment companies and local papers listed the arrival of collier ships on a daily basis. There was Dodd's Wharf and works as well as Huntley's coal yard where an overhead rail system ran to the Riverside.²⁵ Noakes supplied hay and straw for horses and one family member invented the Noakesoscope.²⁶ Another firm in the area was Coneybeare, marine engineers and boilermakers, who made all sorts of metal components.²⁷ A side road here was Brewery Lane with the Nags Head brewery and – one of many pubs – Fubb's Yacht. All of this area was cleared in the 1940s following World War II bombing and the installation of the Cutty Sark.²⁸

Alongside Billingsgate Dock stands the Greenwich Foot Tunnel. This was opened by the London County Council in 1902 as part of a package of six free river crossings built so that east Londoners could enjoy the same travel freedoms as people in west London whose bridges had been freed of toll. It was designed by Sir Alexander Binnie and cost £127,000 with a major refurbishment in 2009–2014. This vital crossing continues to be heavily used.²⁹

We are now in, what is now, tourist Greenwich. Although it was a working area until the Second World War, it had attracted a tripper trade since at least the early 19th Century. There is a set of watermen's stairs near the foot tunnel – Garden Stairs – which are very ancient and at the top were two pubs. Drawings from 1795 by Thomas Rowlandson show people arriving in Greenwich and walking from the boat to the pub – one version shows a respectable queue of people, the other shows them – well – behaving rather differently!³⁰

Fisher Lane ran parallel to the river before Greenwich Pier was built but now the area is completely open. It contained the usual small firms involved in riverside activities and a number of pubs. The pier itself dates from 1836 having been built with what appears to have been the involvement of officers from the Royal Hospital, which was, and remains, the landowner. There was considerable opposition to it from watermen and for a while a rival 'floating' pier was built and operated alongside. The pier has been used both for tripper and commuter services and in 1905 it was taken over by the London County Council who ran a regular service from it. It has been rebuilt and repaired on a number of occasions since, including in the early 1950s to allow entry for the Cutty Sark.³¹ It remains very busy.

At the eastern end of the pier was Ship Dock which was a draw dock associated with the Ship Hotel, where the famous ministerial whitebait dinners were said to be held.³² It was destroyed in Second World War bombing.³³

Leaving Cutty Sark Gardens the riverside walk continues along the Five Foot Walk and we are in Royal Greenwich. There is a vast amount of written material about this area and professional historians in post both here and at the Maritime Museum. The buildings we see are those of the Royal Hospital, currently in use mainly by the University of Greenwich. It is worth noting the work of archaeologists on the foreshore here and the numerous on-site investigations.³⁴ However this article is about the industrial use of the riverside, although I would agree that the service areas and the palace itself were clearly workplaces, as was the Royal Hospital.³⁵ I was with industrial archaeologists when we visited the remains of the Royal Hospital Brewery³⁶ and again, when the buildings were the Royal Naval College, and we saw Jason, their nuclear reactor.³⁷

Perhaps one thing industrial historians should keep in mind about Henry VIII's palace is that it was from here that he built up Deptford and Woolwich Dockyards. The Royal Armoury and subsequent work on explosives connected to the Palace led in later centuries to the foundation of a vast network of armaments manufacture which included the Royal Arsenal and much more.³⁸

At the end of the Five Foot Walk is the Trafalgar Tavern. We are just on the edge of tourist Greenwich and the buildings for which the town is known. The Italian artist Canaletto's famous paintings from the 1750s show a crane on the riverside here together with a set of watermen's stairs.³⁹ The crane belonged to the Royal Hospital and was used to unload supplies arriving by water. The set of watermen's stairs alongside it are still there - now called Royal Naval College Stairs and hardly ever used. In the 18th century this was an important landing place and embarkation point for the Royal Hospital.

The Trafalgar Tavern stands on the riverside at the end of the Five Foot Walk in Park Row. It dates from the 1836, replacing an older pub. It has had a variety of uses including as a working men's club and as an unemployed worker's centre.⁴⁰

The riverside walk turns into Crane Street down the side of the Trafalgar Tavern where there is another pub, The Yacht, previously called the Barley Mow. Like several other riverside buildings in Crane Street it has links with sporting organisations – it was, for example, an early base for Greenwich Yacht Club.⁴¹ What industry there was in Crane Street seems to have been on a small scale. There appears to have been the clay pipe manufacturing business⁴² and a corset maker.⁴³ There were probably others.

Numbers 11 to 13 were previously known as Crane Wharf used by R Moss who described himself as a paper stock merchant and who paid money for old rope.⁴⁴ In the 1960s it was sold to Greenwich Council who let it to local rowing clubs.⁴⁵ River based sporting activities could also be found at the draw dock which is at the end of Crane Street at the junction with Eastney Street. This was the site of Corbett's boat hire business.⁴⁶

From Eastney Street the riverside path continues as 'Highbridge' which was the name given to a structure which was a pier or a jetty into the River and probably dated from the late Middle Ages.⁴⁷ Until the 1930s the first building on the Riverside adjacent to the draw dock was The Three Crowns pub which from the 1790s was used as the Harbour Masters office⁴⁸ before it was replaced by the better known building in Ballast Quay.

The buildings which are now on the river side of Highbridge are small and unpretentious and were mainly used as offices for river related service industries – tug and barge operators, lighterage, dredging and so on. They have more recently been let to charities and small workshops – although the developers are moving in. On the landward side of the road are new houses built on a site once called Creed's Yard which appears to have included a 17th century pin making workshop.⁴⁹

Eventually Highbridge widens into an open space with some planting in front of Trinity College. The road opens out at what was once the site of the Crown and Sceptre pub, which included a bridge section running above the street and a 'tap' on the landward side. The Crown and Sceptre had considerable pretensions and for a while used a West End catering service. It is yet another pub which claimed to have originated the whitebait dinners. It eventually became the Conservative club but was demolished in the 1930s.⁵⁰

Trinity Hospital stands back from the road and is one of the oldest buildings in Greenwich – its ‘Strawberry Hill Gothic’ appearance being the result of a later renovation. It is an almshouse opened in 1617 founded by the Earl of Northampton.⁵¹ The building and the organisation is of great interest, but beyond the scope of this article. On the river wall opposite Trinity Hospital is a plaque about exceptional high tides.⁵²

From the late Middle Ages Highbridge was the site of upmarket housing for courtiers and senior staff at the palace. One of these was the house of John Gunthorpe, Dean of Wells Cathedral and a monk, while being a career civil servant, diplomat and academic.⁵³ Gunthorpe’s house was demolished and in 1647 another palatial building was built here.⁵⁴ In the early 18th century it was taken over by ironmaster Ambrose Crowley and became known as Crowley House. The Crowley business came to dominate this area and Anchor Iron Wharf.⁵⁵ Family members continued to live in Crowley House as later did the family of Isaiah Millington who took the business over in the late 1780s. It was eventually demolished in 1856 and the site then became a depot and stable for horse trams.

The horse tram depot was set up initially by the Pimlico, Peckham and Greenwich Street Tramways Company, later the London Tramways Company and opened in 1871.⁵⁶ It is thought to have been the largest of London horse tram depots and is said to have housed a thousand horses. It was taken over by the London County Council in 1899. They converted it to service conduit based electric trams in 1904.⁵⁷

The County Council wanted to provide electricity for the trams. After taking over other properties in the area on the site of Crowley House they built a generating station large enough to supply the entire tram network. It was then one of the largest power stations in the country, designed by the London County Council’s in-house architects while overall in charge was chief officer A.L.C. Fell.⁵⁸ A dispute arose over the height of the chimneys – popularly ascribed to the Astronomer Royal.⁵⁹

There have been many changes to the power station since 1904. In 1930 ownership passed to the London Passenger Transport Board and it was modernised in the early 1970s when it was converted to fuelling by oil and gas. It became a backup station to Lots Road generating station in Chelsea – but that closed in 1998. Greenwich Power Station is now the emergency backup station for London Underground. It is a very fine building although sometimes disliked for its function rather than its looks. Much of its internal space is now unused as is its huge jetty which remains. A very large coal bunker was built in the 1920s on its western wall – also unused, it apparently improves the acoustics of musical events in the Trinity Hospital garden.

This fine building may be the oldest generating station in Europe – or possibly the world – still in use. Greenwich should be proud of it.

The whole riverside area continuing from the power station, with a few breaks, to the very tip of the Greenwich peninsula was the bequest of King Alfred’s daughter, Aelfrida, to St. Peter’s Abbey in Ghent and subsequently became the Manor of Old Court.⁶⁰ Where the power station now stands was probably the site of the Old Court House – used as an administrative centre and guest house described in 1286. It had its own water supply via a conduit from springs to the north. In 1532 it was converted into a home for Anne Boleyn.⁶¹ There was also a tithe barn here and a church – turning it into a riverside community far older than the area to the west we now think of as Greenwich. The lands were confiscated from Ghent in 1414 under Henry V and were purchased by Sir John Morden in 1699. There is a Morden College property mark on a house in Ballast Quay but most of the area remains with them. As this account proceeds along the riverside and onto the peninsula there will be many references to the effect of the ownership both of Ghent and Morden College on the area.⁶²

From the power station it is just a few steps on to Anchor Iron Wharf which was the site of Ambrose Crowley’s warehouses. Quaker Crowley was born in 1599, and with his son (also Ambrose) supplied iron to small Black Country workshops and then sold the nails, hinges, rivets and locks which they made to the Navy Board and the Royal Dockyards. They set up a works on the outskirts of Newcastle as ‘the largest iron manufactory in Europe’ and the next generation opened warehouses in London. In the early 18th century they expanded to Greenwich, bought Crowley House, and built warehouses which could supply all four of the Royal Dockyards



Figure 3. Ballast Quay looking north-east, March 1981. *Robert Carr*

–Deptford, Woolwich, Portsmouth and Chatham. They also supplied commercial shipping – and, sorry to say, the slave trade. The family became extremely wealthy trading within the emerging British Empire.

Anchor Iron Wharf extends in an ‘apron’ jutting out into the river. Recent archaeology uncovered an anvil on the riverside here which implied a smithy.⁶³ A map of 1739 mentions ‘Anchor Wharf & Forge’. Crowley’s was said to be the largest iron business in Europe employing 900 men.⁶⁴

Isaac Millington was the Greenwich Manager, and gradually the business passed to him and his family and the company became Crowley Millington and Co. In 1849 it was inherited by a Millington great granddaughter and the great warehouses were sold. By 1895 the wharf was being used for trading iron and other metals by C.A. Robinson and Co. A commemorative plaque on the wharf says that Charles Robinson moved his scrap business here in 1953 – it remained there until 1985.⁶⁵ In 2002, flats were built on the landward side of the wharf, covering a large area which including the demolished British Sailor pub in Hoskins Street. The area in front of the flats was cleared giving a wide river frontage. There is an artwork by Wendy Taylor with a plaque giving some of the history of the wharf.

Crossing the junction with Hoskins Street⁶⁶ the riverside path reaches Ballast Quay where there are houses and a pub – now called The Cutty Sark but originally ‘Union Tavern’.⁶⁷ They date from the early 19th century and were built by Morden College having been designed by their then surveyor, Mr. Biggs.⁶⁸ The wharf was probably used for transhipment of ballast from pits owned by Morden College and the whole area has a diverse history from the Ghent ownership to the present day.⁶⁹

The Harbour Master’s House replaced the earlier regulatory offices at Three Crowns in the 1850s. It was designed by local architect and Morden College surveyor George Smith. It belonged to the Thames Conservancy who leased both it and Union Wharf. All collier ships had to report there and provide papers.⁷⁰ When the system was abolished around 1900 the house was sold and let into flats.

In the mid-1840s the East Greenwich Steamboat Pier was built opposite the site of the Harbour Master’s House and a path leads from the road to what was once the entrance to the office for the pier, which is now used as a building in the Ballast Quay garden. This may have been a ‘floating pier’ but there is now no sign of it on the foreshore or river wall.

The Ballast Quay Garden covers what was Union Wharf. When the Port of London Authority was established in 1908 it had become the Port of London Wharf and had been surrounded by a high wall, although it was later railed and some rails remain around the house and the approach to the wharf. A steam crane ran on rails along the wharf. In the mid-1960s it was transformed into a garden by Hillary Peters. Art exhibitions are sometimes held in the 'potting sheds' which are actually the old ticket office for the short lived pier. In the garden is a sculpture made of waste materials taken from the river by Kevin Herlihy as a memorial to the millions of animals killed during the foot-and-mouth crisis of 2001.⁷¹

At the end of Ballast Quay is the junction with Pelton Road. Until the mid-19th century to continue down the riverside path would have meant going through a gate on to a unique and partly private area then called Greenwich Marsh, but in the past 30 years this has become Greenwich Peninsula.

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