

History of Change: London Waterway

The design of a waterfront reflects the character of a city. The edge of a city on the water is a complex space that not only portrays the image of the place, but at the same time the edge itself is a reflection of the history of the city and how it has transformed over the years. Waterways have long served the purpose of connecting cities with far away places, and by way of this connection, established trade routes with endpoints at the city's edge. The trade business has flourished in cities with access to water. London is no exception.

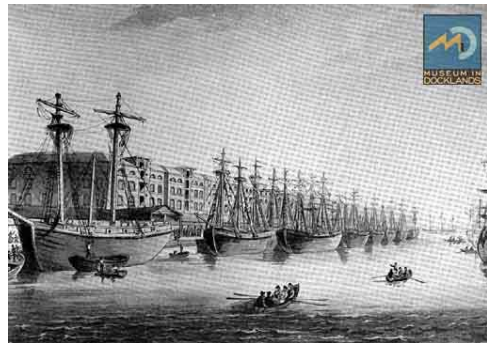


Evolution

The waterways of London have long served the purpose of trade. Companies such as the West India Company began building docks to allow their ships to tie up next to their warehouses. Throughout the nineteenth century, many other companies were also very successful and increased the number of docks being built, such as the London Docks and the East India Docks. With the increased supply of docks there seemed to be increased demand and ships kept coming into London, and making the existing yards too small to handle the volume of trade.



During the industrial revolution, England was producing a wide variety of goods which were built throughout their thriving factories. These goods were sold throughout the world, and this meant the docks of London were being used to their maximum capacity. At the same time, the reach of the empire was also growing, and goods were also coming into London from around the world. This would prove to be an enormous strain on the capacity of the docks, which soon would not be able to cope with the increased volume of trade. The solution was to expand the docks and build more yards downstream. These were the Royal Docks, beginning with the Royal Victoria dock, which opened in 1855. The Royal Albert dock was finished in 1880, and the last was George V, opened in 1921.



The creation of the docks not only meant higher trade volume for the city of London, it also meant the creation of thousands of jobs for Londoners, however, they were not very

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well paid and work was often dangerous. Workers loaded, moved and unloaded large quantities of goods, from boat, to warehouses, loaded onto trains.



It was not until the mid twentieth century that conditions began to change. During the 1960's there were some strikes that allowed workers to demand better pay and working conditions. Allowing these concessions meant that the docks would be more expensive to run. The trade companies were looking to make their operations more efficient at the same time, having to deal with massive quantities of goods. At this time, new inventions started to come about, as referred to by British terminology, the container lorry. Containers, the large metal boxes seen in ports that are lifted by massive cranes,



were becoming a more standard way of packaging goods. The advantages of the containers were that they could be packed at the factory and locked to avoid theft. These can be put on trucks or trains, and moved quicker with less people needed to perform the moving of goods. This obviously meant that there was no longer the need to employ so many people at the docks. The other implication of the widespread use of containers was the ability for ships to carry containers out to sea. However, the ports that were best fitted to accommodate these ships are already on a seaport. Companies began to use other ports such as Tilbury and Felixstowe.

The River Thames and the docks located on the river continued to operate, but the river docks were proving to be difficult and too crowded to accommodate larger ships which carry containers. The seaports were not constrained by poor infrastructure and the crowding of a large city. This led to the gradual obsolescence of the London docks along the river Thames. By 1967, the East India dock had closed followed on each subsequent year by the closing of the London Dock, St. Katherine's Dock and the Surrey Docks in 1970. One decade later, both the West India Docks and the Millwall Dock closed their operations. A year later, in 1981, the Royal docks closed.



New Initiative

The same year that the Royal Docks closed there was a new initiative on the way. In 1981, the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) was created. The entity had quite a daunting task ahead. The River had been used for hundreds of years for trade routes and shipping yards, with all its docks, warehouses, and supporting infrastructure, which in less than twenty years were abandoned due to technological advances in the shipping business and the need for deep water harbours, which rendered the old docks obsolete. The banks of the river were becoming huge expanses of dereliction, polluted land in thousands of acres of wasteland.



The LDDC had ample influence in the area, but its powers were limited. The entity had power to acquire land. In the case of large tracts of land, it was backed by the Secretary of State, and thus ensured a supply of land for new development. It also superseded the London Boroughs in the planning powers. This was an act by the government and rationale was that the Boroughs had been too restrictive in the past in exercising development control, and that their methods were outdated and inappropriate. In addition, it had the power and the resources to provide or refurbish the existing infrastructure.



The docklands had many problems that needed to be addressed. The area experienced a serious amount of job loss in a short period of time, and the job skills of the workers were not a match for the new growth areas of the London economy. The land was mostly held by public bodies who had little resources for redevelopment and little was owned by private holdings. The state of the Docklands was in such dereliction that the costs of redevelopment would be so severe that it proved to be unattractive for private investors. “The Docklands in 1981 presented a rare opportunity for engineers to display their full array of skills on a unique scale within a major urban conurbation.”¹ The infrastructure was so poor that access to and from the sites to the rest of London proved to be a hindrance for redevelopment. All these factors made it difficult for the market forces to act alone and spur a rebirth of the area without external intervention.

¹ Laying The Foundation for Regeneration <http://www.lddc-history.org.uk/engineering/index.html>

Thames Pollution

“As an ecological entity, the river was in the past a wilderness of marshes and reed beds, harboring vast populations of birds.”² The river been exposed to various forms of intensive pollution over the past 200 years. Besides the recent rise and decline of the docklands, one instance in particular contributed to the pollution of the Thames.

First, the “Great Stink” in the mid-19th century, was a buildup of sewage and pollutants that killed essentially all birds and fish in the river. Horribly poor sewage systems that ran throughout the city became overloaded and sewage furiously rushed into the Thames. The House of Commons got involved and a system of sewers was built throughout the city, as well as the first filtration plant in 1869. In a further effort to prevent this type of problem, embankments were built that sped up the river. These improvements provided better quality water and sewer systems, but ultimately deteriorated as the population grew and London changed during the 20th century.

The deterioration culminated in an unavoidable, ever present stench of rotten eggs. The systems built in the 1800’s had become obsolete. In 1950, three criteria were developed in regard to River Thames policy. First, the water must contain fish at all stages of tide. Second, the river must support fauna. Lastly, there cannot be any toxic and non-biodegradable waste in the river.

A major remediation plan went into effect in 1964. Ten years later, when the initiative was complete, there was life in a river that had been devoid of aquatic activity for almost 50 years. Aquatic life thrives today, and the massive radiation efforts at the docklands will contribute to the health of the vitality of the river, and ultimately benefit the people of London.



Northern Drainage tunnelling in progress

Future

The LDDC succeeded in bringing jobs, acquiring land, and creating necessary infrastructure in the THI neighborhoods. However that is only the beginning. A tremendous amount of will, capital, and cooperation will be needed to achieve TGI goals for housing, jobs, and quality of life.

² From the Great Stink to Now <http://www.lbhf.gov.uk/external/la21/articles/stink.htm>