



**Docklands
Light Railway**

Teachers' Resource Pack

Section 2 – Background Notes

Background notes

Canary Wharf, at the heart of the London Docklands regeneration scheme, is situated to the east of the City of London, in a district known as the Isle of Dogs.

Although referred to by locals as “the island”, it is actually a peninsula bounded by the Thames reaches of Limehouse to the west, Greenwich to the south and Blackwall to the east. Its distinctive horseshoe shape was created by the river over millions of years on its course to the sea.

Beginnings

Originally known as Stepney Marsh, Poplar Marsh or Wet Marsh, the first reference to the area as the Isle of Dogs is on a late 16th century map. One theory is that the name originated because Henry VIII kept his hunting dogs here, out of earshot from his Royal Palace at Greenwich across the river. Another possibility is that “dogs” is a corruption of the word “dykes”, after the drainage ditches built to drain the marshes during the reign of Elizabeth I.

For many centuries, as its early names suggest, the island was primarily marshland. During the Middle Ages it was used for growing crops, including corn, but in the mid-15th century the old embankment wall, used to keep the Thames out, fell into disrepair. The river broke through and much of the area returned to marshland.

During the 17th and 18th centuries cattle were fattened on the fields for the London meat markets. Maps from this period also show the first evidence of industrialisation: seven corn mills standing on the wall built as a flood defence on the west side. This distinctive feature gave the district its name of Mill Wall. However, the rapid growth of London as a trading centre was to change land use on the Isle of Dogs irreversibly.

The creation of the docks

By the late 18th century, the Legal Quays at the Pool of London were completely unable to cope with the volume of sea trade. This led to ships having to queue for entry for up to a month, bow to stern, along the Thames. Apart from the loss to the merchant traders on account of the delays, corruption and theft was rife.

In 1799, responding to pressure for reform, parliament granted permission for two parallel docks to be built across the Isle of Dogs. The site was chosen primarily because the amount of land required for the docks, basins and warehouses meant that they could not be accommodated in a built up area. Banks, ditches, meadows and lanes were torn up to accommodate the docks; roads and streets had to be hurriedly built.

In 1799, responding to pressure for reform, parliament granted permission for two parallel docks to be built across the Isle of Dogs. The site was chosen primarily because the amount of land required for the docks, basins and warehouses meant that they could not be accommodated in a built up area. Banks, ditches, meadows and lanes were torn up to accommodate the docks; roads and streets had to be hurriedly built.



Photo 1 - Casks of sugar and molasses at North Quay, West India Docks, c.1925

The West India Dock Company (WIDC) was established and granted a twenty-one year monopoly to handle all the lucrative West India trade, which included sugar, rum and cotton. The north, or import dock, opened in 1802, followed by the export dock to the south in 1806. Both were half a mile in length, connected to the Thames by basins and locks at either end. For the first time in its history, the Isle of Dogs was really an island.

Dock and rail expansion

In 1805, the City Canal opened to the south of the West India docks. However, it was never a success so in 1829 was sold to the WIDC. In 1870 the Company widened it and re-named it South Dock, thus creating three parallel docks. From the 1920s, the middle of the three docks was known as Canary Wharf, after the trade in fruit and vegetables from the Canary Islands, brought back by ships on their return voyage from the West Indies.

In 1868 the docks on the Isle of Dogs were further expanded with the opening of the L-shaped Millwall Docks, with an entrance on the west side of the island. It included a dry dock, the first to be built by a dock company in London. The company's plan, however, for a wider entrance on the east side was never approved; not until 1928 were the docks joined to the West India system by the Millwall Cut, effectively creating an eastern entrance.

As the West India Docks had been since 1840, Millwall Docks was served by a branch of the London and Blackwall Railway which was extended in 1871. Built to relieve passenger and freight transport congestion on the roads between the City and the docks, the trains on the line had originally been hauled by steel cables but were converted to steam locomotives in 1849.

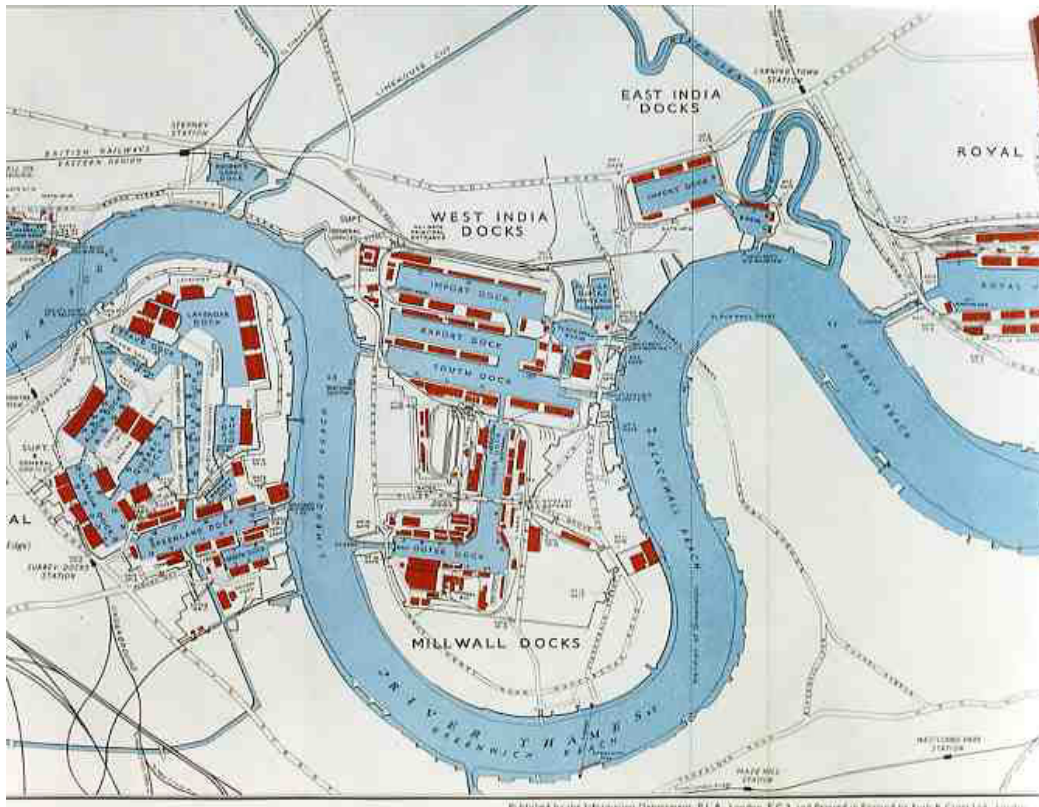


Photo 2 – Port of London Authority Plan of Docks, c.1960

Related industries

The dock system and its good transport links, meant that the Isle of Dogs became an attractive site for investors, manufacturers and developers. One of these, the civil engineer William Cubitt, gave his name to Cubitt Town in the south east of the island. His company built numerous houses, warehouses and workshops to house the growing dock population and related industries.

Various large scale industries, including ship building and engine-making, were established on the Isle. Between 1853 and 1858, Isambard Kingdom Brunel's immense iron ship, *The Great Eastern*, was built at Burrell's Wharf, the first site in the country laid out for large scale iron ship building. The docks themselves supported a host of smaller industries including rope, sack and nail makers, blacksmiths, coopers and shipwrights.

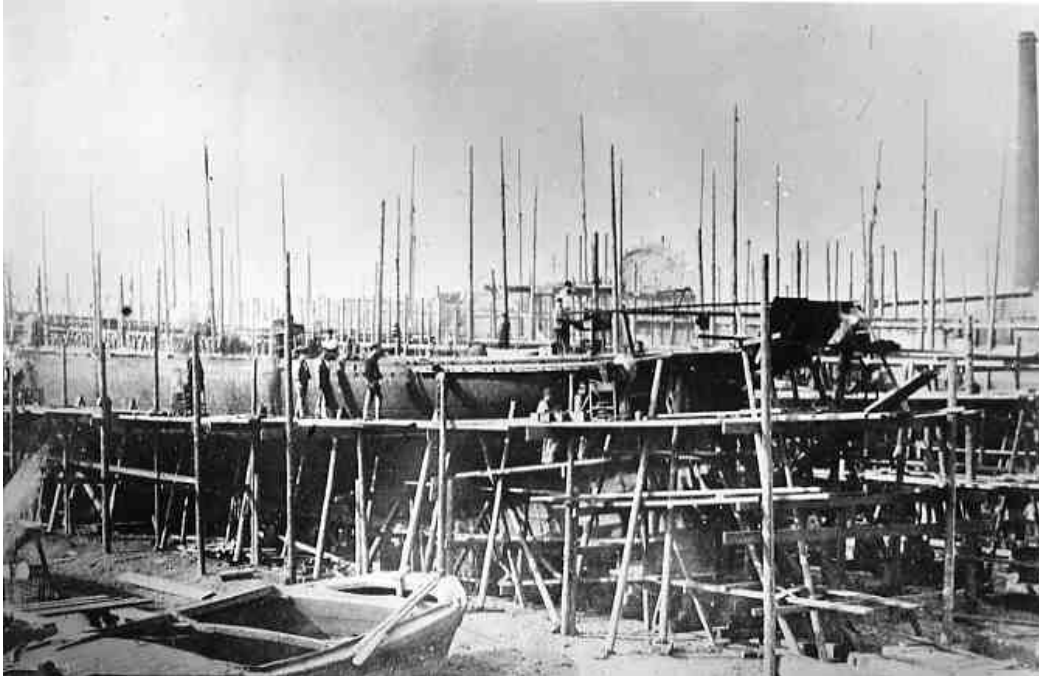


Photo 3 - James Ash's Shipyard, Cubitt Town, 1863

By the 20th century, there were factories on the Isle of Dogs manufacturing everything from car oil to babies' prams, including household names such as Price's candles and MacDougall's flour.

Population growth

The Normans are the first recorded settlers on the Isle of Dogs; for 700 years the residents would have consisted of a few, mainly agricultural, workers. In the early 19th century, when the West India docks opened, these were replaced by a mixture of skilled artisans, dockworkers, managers and shopkeepers. The population, numbering 200 in 1800, had grown to 1,400 by 1830.

From the outset, the population of docklands was culturally diverse. African and Caribbean seamen and freed slaves had lived in Limehouse and Wapping since the 18th century. Labourers from Ireland, Scotland and the north of England, employed on the construction of the docks, stayed on afterwards to work on them.

Many Chinese seamen settled around the docks, leading to the development of Limehouse as the first Chinatown in the 1880s. In addition, the docks saw the arrival of Indian sailors, or lascars, and, from the 1840s, thousands of Irish immigrants, escaping from the potato famine. As the 19th century and industrialisation progressed, so did the drift from rural to urban settlements; the residents of the Isle of Dogs were joined by migrants from all over Britain and Europe, desperate for work that did not involve training or experience.

The resulting overcrowding meant that many of the higher waged workers left the island, preferring to commute in from the suburbs or find work elsewhere. By 1901 the population numbered 21,000 and largely consisted of dockers, stevedores and other manual, low waged workers.



Photo 4 - Ferry Road, Millwall, 1928

Decline and closure

During World War II (1939-1945), London's docklands were heavily targeted by German bombers using the Thames as a flight path. The docks, warehouses, factories and closely packed residential housing suffered extensive damage; large numbers of civilians were killed or injured.

After the war, many of the factories and dock storage facilities were rebuilt and trade and industry prospered again for a short period. However, modern technology, such as cranes and fork lift trucks, began to reduce the labour force needed at the docks. More significantly, containerisation was revolutionising cargo handling. The opening of the new container berths, down-river at Tilbury in 1968, signalled the end for the rest of London's docks which were too small to deal with the large container ships.



Photo 5 - Fork lift truck in action in a new post-war warehouse

By 1981, the whole vast network of up-river docks had closed. Related industries had collapsed; other factories and businesses had closed down or moved away. The Isle of Dogs showed all the signs of urban dereliction: 60% of the water and land area lay empty; public transport systems had declined; social, retail and leisure facilities were poor or non-existent.

The island had lost 10,000 jobs between 1978 and 1981; 9,000 people had left the area during the same period. Council, or social, housing represented a disproportionately high percentage of the housing stock compared to other parts of London; 20% of it was deemed poor or uninhabitable.

The London Docklands Development Corporation

In July 1981 the LDDC was created, charged with securing the lasting physical, economic and social regeneration of the 8.5 square miles which were designated a UDA (Urban Development Area). Their specific brief was to:

- bring land and buildings back into effective use
- encourage the development of existing and new industry and commerce
- ensure that housing and social facilities were available to encourage people to live and work in the area
- create an attractive environment.

The LDDC was funded directly by central government but was also expected to attract private investment. It had powers to acquire land by compulsory purchase and to by-pass local authority planning procedures. In 1982, 482 acres of land on the Isle of Dogs, predominantly around the old docks, were designated an Enterprise Zone. This offered various incentives to developers and businesses, including simplified planning procedures and exemption from paying rates charges on land and commercial properties for 10 years.

By 1983, 84 projects to improve the infrastructure of Docklands were underway. These included land reclamation, road building, new sewage pipes and improvements to gas and electricity conduits.

The Docklands Light Railway

Although the government initially rejected extending the underground as too costly, the LDDC recognised that the construction of new transport links were essential. In 1984, construction began on the new Docklands Light Railway to link the Isle of Dogs with Tower Hill in the west; the following year, an additional line was begun out to Stratford in the north east.

Although the DLR was able to use some of the existing, redundant railway infrastructure on the Isle of Dogs, considerable new works were necessary in order to accommodate it. A reinforced concrete viaduct was constructed south of Limehouse Station in order to link into the western end of a brick viaduct, built by the earlier London and Blackwall railway in 1839. This then links into a steel and concrete structure just to the north of West India Quay, south of which the Docks Crossing begins: specially fabricated 65 metre spans erected over each of the three parallel docks.



Photo 6 - DLR track under construction over West India Docks Millwall Cut, mid-1980s

South of the West India dock system the DLR curves east on another elevated section, following the line of the old Marsh Wall. A further specially fabricated section was necessary in order to cross the Millwall Cut, the narrow stretch of water which had connected the two dock systems.

South of Crossharbour, the line used an earth embankment before being carried on a new viaduct containing Mudchute Station to rejoin an 1872 built viaduct to Manchester Road. In 1999, this final section of the DLR was removed when the Lewisham extension was constructed; after Mudchute the track now enters a cut-and-cover tunnel to Island Gardens which then links to an under-river bored tunnel to Greenwich.

The Canary Wharf development

Initially the LDDC set out to attract small businesses and investors. This resulted in a number of electronics and service industries re-locating to the area, and the construction of several low-rise industrial parks and suburban style housing.

However, the Bank of England's announcement in 1985 that the financial industry could operate outside the "square mile" of the city, followed by the deregulation of the stock markets a year later, led to a second phase of development.

The financial industry needed high quality office buildings, with sufficient space to accommodate vast dealing floors. In addition, new technology in areas such as newspaper printing, led to other companies seeking larger premises. Market confidence in the docklands regeneration scheme was boosted by rumours of plans to develop Canary Wharf as a business district and by 1987 1.5 million square feet of office space had been built.



Photo 7 - DLR train passing over South Dock, c.1990

The initial proposals for the development of Canary Wharf had been generated by the bankers Credit Suisse First Boston but collapsed as the American developers were unable to secure sufficient finances.

In 1987, the LDDC approached the Canadian developers, Olympia and York (O&Y) to rescue the project. Led by the Reichmann brothers, the company had a reputation for turning lost-cost sites into high quality locations.

In May 1988, work started on a £3 billion financial centre. Materials for the 12 million square feet of office space were constructed off site and barged up river for assembly.

Much of the old dock was lost to view as the estate was extended out over the water on steel piles up to 25 metres deep. Work began on a landmark tower, One Canada Square, clad in stainless steel, which would become the tallest office building in Europe.

Final phase

By September 1989 the LDDC had attracted £6.85 billion in private investment, compared to £706 million raised from land sales and government grants. But in 1992 economic recession caught up with the scheme and the Canary Wharf development looked close to collapse. To avoid this, a consortium of banks took the project into their administration until the following year when a rescue package was secured and the assets transferred to a successor company, Sylvester Investments.

With the construction of the Jubilee line extension from Green Park underway (1993) business confidence grew. By September 1995, 75% of existing office space in Canary Wharf was leased; over the next 5 years the working population on the estate grew from 7, 500 to 42,000. Further phases of commercial and retail development began, including the HSBC and Citibank buildings in 1997.

In March 1998 the LDDC ended, having spent £1.86 billion of public money and attracted £7.7 billion of private investment.

Success or failure?

The Canary Wharf development has transformed the skyline of east London. It has attracted multi-national companies, provided jobs for almost 100,000 workers and high quality office space, retail outlets and landscaped gardens. Development and expansion is still on-going. Elsewhere on the Isle of Dogs there are luxury apartments, housed in converted former warehouses or state-of-the-art high rise developments. There are improved leisure facilities including a water sports centre at Millwall, a multi-screen cinema near West India Quay and numerous bars and restaurants.

The infrastructure of the Isle of Dogs has improved enormously, particularly with the construction of new roads, the DLR and the Jubilee line extension. The latest DLR extension, opened in December 2005, links the island with London City Airport.

Initial concerns that the regeneration was not providing enough work for local people, have largely been allayed due to increased opportunities in industries such as transport and retail. However, not all residents of the island live in luxury apartments. Some of the social housing is in poor condition and Tower Hamlets is one of the most impoverished boroughs in London. The LDDC would argue, however, that the provision of social housing, education and hospitals was not part of its remit.

Today, two worlds exist side by side on the Isle of Dogs: one of old streets, churches and pubs, of post-war flats and maisonettes, and one of modern offices, fashionable bars and luxury apartments. A visit to Canary Wharf alone is not a sufficient basis upon which to judge both the successes and failures of the regeneration of the London Docklands.