

*manuscript for DISP 'CITY TOUR'*

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## ***London***

Queuing to see the crown jewels in the Tower of London; glimpsing the Prime Minister at 10 Downing Street; watching the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace; window-shopping in Burlington Arcade; feeding the ducks in Regent's Park.; evensong in St. Paul's Cathedral; and then to a Fleet Street pub for pint of bitter and a steak and kidney pie before a West End theatre show. Much of a typical London tourist itinerary would have been familiar to visitors a century or more ago, pursuing the immemorial attractions that stretch upstream along the north bank of the River Thames from Tower Bridge to Westminster, and then onwards to Chelsea, Kew, Richmond and Windsor. As the Danish architectural historian Steen Eiler Rasmussen observed in *London the Unique City* (1934) the westward distribution of London's most famous sites follows a thousand-year-old path. In the years before the Norman invasion of 1066 the last Anglo-Saxon monarchs planted Westminster Abbey in the river meadows a mile upstream of the city walls. Over the centuries this abbey gave rise to a palace, a parliament, a seat of government, a court, aristocratic town houses, shops, theatres and parks. By degrees the Roman walled city and port of London acquired an *alter ego* in the nexus of power and pleasure we know of as the West End.

The city's physical setting accentuated the contrast between west and east. The prevailing wind blows from the Atlantic Ocean, carrying the urban smoke-plume and atmospheric pollution toward the other side, which became known as the East End. Maritime trade enters the Thames Estuary from the North Sea, causing shipping, goods-handling, warehousing, and the casual labour of the dock economy to cluster down-river in the industrial, proletarian east. Natural ventilation of the slopes to north and south of the Thames Valley brought their own reputation for salubrity and desirability, but altitude alone could never match the status value of proximity to the royal seat where upper class neighbourhoods extended street by street westward across the gravel terraces of the river valley through the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Here were concentrated the city's attractions, and consequently its tourists.



FIGURE 1

Seen from the sky, or cartographically, London was expanding outwards in all directions along the radial web of its roads and railway lines. The silk handkerchief printed as tourist souvenir in 1847 (figure 1) revealed the city as a

more or less symmetrical circle. Yet the itineraries of most visitors were limited to a single slice of this rich metropolitan cake. Only the serious-minded would venture to the right-hand side of the handkerchief, east of the Tower of London. Karl Baedeker's magnificently serious *Guide to London and its Environs* did offer a detailed and informative coverage of the entire city. From the first edition in 1867 up until the First World War Baedeker accorded equal status to west and east, with detailed map coverage and separate chapters on the East End and the Port of London. Baedeker's account included a good deal of statistical information about goods tonnage and commercial flows. Abundant superlatives emphasized the scale and variety of the dock economy, the vastness of the warehouses and their systems of cellars, the sophistication of goods-handling apparatus, and the absolute dominance of the Port of London within world trade. Visitors were urged to go and admire for themselves. 'The scenery of the Thames below London contrasts very unfavourably with the smiling beauties of the same river higher up; yet the trip down to Gravesend has attractions of its own and may be recommended as affording a good survey of the vast commercial traffic of London' (1900 p389).

A browse through subsequent editions of the *Guide to London and its Environs* (conveniently accessible in the library of the Bishopsgate Institute, close to Liverpool Street Station) reveals the uncertain status of the eastern sector in tourist itineraries. Baedeker's eighteenth revised edition of 1923 squeezed the East End, port and docks into a subsection of a chapter on 'The Suburbs', allocating them just eight pages in a volume of five hundred. Damning with faint praise, the guide-book observed that 'the vast industrial activity of the East End

and the foreign and 'marine' elements in its population are not without their attraction' (1923 p.367). The nineteenth revised edition of 1930 reverted to earlier policy, reinstating separate chapters on the East End and port, and encouraging visitors to explore a trading universe little known to many indigenous residents. 'This enormous business is spread over such a large area, and the various docks are so remote, that there is no one spot where an adequate idea of the maritime commerce of London can be obtained. Many Londoners have never seen a dock or even a ship. A visit to any of the docks is profoundly interesting . . .' (1930 p.407). But all this vanished after the Second World War. In the twenty first edition of Baedeker's *Guide to London and its Environs* (1955) the map coverage extended only as far as the Tower of London. The East End and docks got a mere six pages of text which dwindled to zero in subsequent editions of the guide. By the 1980s *Baedeker's London*, published by the Automobile Association, offered nothing more than a standard inventory of central and West End tourist sites. For the purpose of city tours, the east had ceased to exist.

By this time I was living in the East End and pursuing the research that resulted in my book *London, More by Fortune than Design* (1997). The maritime activity chronicled by Baedeker had disappeared into shipping containers and bulk handling facilities, relocating downstream to the mouth of the Thames Estuary. London's vast dock complexes were empty and desolate, and most related manufacturing had moved away or closed down. It was an area of sustained out-migration and high unemployment. Despite its geographical proximity to the high land values of central London, the East End was blighted by void properties, empty land and high levels of dereliction. My local borough of Tower Hamlets

was said to have fifty kilometres of corrugated iron sheeting along the frontage of its vacant sites. In 1980 Thames Television published a powerful documentary - *Wasteland* - on the ownership and condition of these sites. Authored by Rupert Nabarro, David Richards and Honor Chapman. the research highlighted the prevalence of ownership by local authorities and nationalised industries. Site-by-site analysis revealed how public bodies and private actors were equally lacking in incentive to bring surplus land holdings into active use. The printed report carried on its cover a shocking but not untypical image of mounds of rubble in the London Docks, immediately to the east of Tower Bridge (figure 2). It was hardly surprising that this part of town was little visited in the later twentieth century. I found remarkable evidence of its marginalisation in the Blue Book, a pocket-size list of hundreds of London-wide origins and destinations issued by the Public Carriage Office of the Metropolitan Police as a basis for testing 'The Knowledge' - i.e. how well trainee cab-drivers knew their way round the labyrinthine street map in a six mile radius of Charing Cross. So few taxi-cab rides went east that the famously exhaustive Knowledge included hardly any destinations beyond the Tower of London.

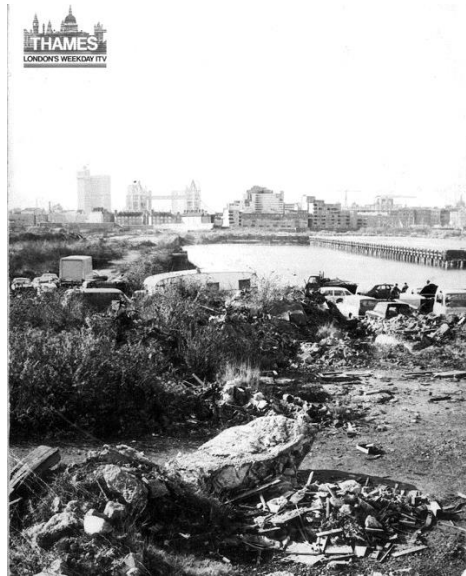


FIGURE 2

In recent decades the geography of London has shifted fundamentally. The transformation began in the era of Mrs Thatcher with a market-oriented London Docklands Development corporation and was continued by the planning policies of governments of right and left, at national and local levels. The revised London Plan of Mayor Sadiq Khan, under consultation in the autumn of 2018, is just the latest in a series of policy frameworks that has used the East End as London's expansion slot, allowing the city to grow demographically and economically without physically enlarging its footprint. The public sector has promoted regeneration through key projects such as the redevelopment of the Greenwich Peninsula for the Millennium celebrations of 2000, the transformation of the Lower Lea Valley for the Olympic Games in 2012, and a momentous sequence of transport infrastructures including the Limehouse Link highway, the Docklands Light Railway, the Jubilee Line Extension to Stratford, the London Overground, and Crossrail (to be known as the Elizabeth Line). The private sector has responded both with mega-projects such as the Canary Wharf Estate and the

Westfield shopping mall, and with localised investments that have almost completely absorbed the previously intractable problem of void sites and buildings.



FIGURE 3

The regeneration of London's East End has attracted an extensive critical literature, much of it framed within a critique of privatisation and gentrification. The politics of neoliberalism and social class certainly do provide the key to many changes that have occurred, but so does cultural analysis, and an understanding of the way X, Y and Millennial generations perceive the city and use urban space. The life-style of urban hipsters is a global phenomenon, as evident in small towns as in big cities. Territory avoided for its stigma of low-status is reimagined as cool: and in London that means the east of town (figure 3). Our city has offered a fertile medium for this cultural shift because of its loose structure and multi-ethnic composition and - as I suggested in *London More by Fortune than Design* - a distinctive geographical form that has preserved a linear frontage of small retail and commercial premises strung along radial

routes. Fifty years ago they were grocery stores, newsagents, butchers, and greengrocers meeting the daily shopping needs of their residential catchments. Today they provide hipsters and young urban professionals with their essential infrastructure of barbers, cafés, bars, tattoo parlours, sourdough bakers and bicycle shops alongside the halal butchers and eight-till -late stores of ethnic communities.

So the city tour I propose for *disP* readers heads in the opposite direction from Buckingham Palace, Burlington Arcade and the familiar attractions of the West End. It is not just that the East has new sights to offer, but the pathways to reach them are also more or less new, that is to say only one of them existed in their present form when I first arrived in London forty years ago. Taking them in order of technological complexity, let us consider seven transport options for the city tourist: on foot, by bicycle, bus, river-boat, light rail, metro and national rail.

The first way to explore the east is on foot. Walking down-river was difficult when the working Thames was screened from view by an impenetrable wall of warehouses and industrial installations. Back in the 1970s, the only places to see the river downstream of the Tower were the back rooms of riverside pubs, Shadwell's King Edward Memorial Park and - across from Greenwich - Island Gardens. As sites have come up for redevelopment over the past forty years a riverside walkway has been inserted piece by piece. The route is discontinuous, with frequent deviations onto parallel back-streets, but is well used by walkers and runners, and affords fine views towards the growing cluster of towers at Canary Wharf and back from there to the historic heart of London. Twice daily



the tidal Thames floods in and ebbs out. The level of fast-moving water at spring tides offers an uncomfortable reminder of London's dependence upon the flood-defence barrier at Woolwich, operational since 1984 and used with increasing frequency to protect the city against storm surges. At low ebb the Thames reveals a beach-like foreshore that's accessible by ladder or stone steps and often yields some treasure, whether a Roman marble, an eighteenth century clay pipe or a modern plastic dolls-head. Mudlarking on the foreshore is an excursion into London's history.

The Thames-side walking route can be combined with an excursion along the towpaths of lesser navigations such as the River Lea, the Limehouse Cut, the Hertford Union and the Regent's Canal. These East End waterways are surprisingly busy thanks to recent increases in the numbers of Londoners who live on the motley fleet of boats moored along the towpath. Some are expensive newly-built houseboats or traditional British narrowboats two metres wide and 22 metres long, others - in varying degrees of dilapidation - include cabin cruisers, demasted yachts, or windowless lifeboats from decommissioned oil-rigs (figure 4). The fortunate few possess permanent residential moorings, legally licensed and serviced with power, water and waste disposal. The majority of residential boaters are moored under the terms of touring licences - intended for leisure cruising - which obliges them to move continually around the waterway network. from one mooring area to the next. Like any nomadic population they have a camaraderie amongst themselves but relations with the locals can be fractious.



FIGURE 4

A walk up the canal may involve encounters with lycra-clad cyclists who use the towpath as a race-track through the East End. Cycling is the fastest-growing mode of transport in London though - at only 2% of total trips within the metropolitan area - its share remains low by European standards, partly because it is perceived in terms of helmeted men in lycra pedalling athletically, and has yet to make its breakthrough as the everyday urban transport mode for men, women and children of all ages. For City Tour purposes please wear normal clothes, pick up one of the many share-bikes - either from the OfO or Mobike app-based fleets or the publicly-funded system, which carries the sponsorship logo of Santander Bank and is based on a network of 11,000 bikes and 800 docking stations. Over the past ten years there has been substantial reallocation of road-space to created segregated cycle routes with their own blue-painted

asphalt paths and light-controlled intersection phases. The East End is served by three such routes: Cycle Super-Highway One (CSH1) runs in parallel with the Roman route northward out of Londinium through Dalston and Stoke Newington - urban hipster territory - to Tottenham; CSH2 runs for seven kilometres straight as a die along the Roman road to Colchester, from Aldgate and Britain's largest Bangladeshi street market at Whitechapel, then across the Lea Valley to Stratford, a historic transport node given fresh importance since its selection as the site of the 2012 Olympic Games and the arrival of the gigantic Westfield shopping mall ; CSH3 lies closest to river, running along Cable Street from the Tower of London to Canary Wharf and onward through Canning Town to Barking. The route has recently been extended upstream along the Thames embankment to Westminster, Buckingham Palace and across Hyde Park to Lancaster Gate, making it the first dedicated East-West crossing for cyclists.

The next mode of penetration is the oldest. Front upstairs seats on London double-decker buses have given many generations of tourists a privileged vantage point. East End bus routes such as the Number 15 (Trafalgar Square to Barking), 25 (Oxford Circus to Ilford) and 38 (Victoria Station to Clapton) were already running before the First World War and feature in the encyclopaedic Baedeker guides of the day. They follow the ancient radial roads with their linear frontage of shops and small businesses that Modernist town planners tried and failed to destroy, as recounted in my book *London More By Fortune than Design*. Bus travel is cheap but slow. As the son of a bus-driver, the Mayor does what he can to promote bus priority, but the reallocation of roadscape to cyclists limits his scope. No matter. The leisurely progress of a bus offers all the more

opportunity for *disP* readers to observe everyday life on the street pavements below, and tune in to the different languages being spoken on the top deck of a London bus, a linguistic mix that alters as passengers alight and board the bus along its route.

In pre-industrial London the Thames provided the main artery for east-west public transport. Canaletto's mid-eighteenth century views of London show the river teeming with rowing-boats, skiffs, wherries and barges. Since the London County Council was established in 1888 there have been several unsuccessful attempts to revive river transport through public piers and subsidised water-buses. None have managed to sustain a regular and reliable service until the arrival of the Thames Clipper system in 1999. Privately owned, its ticketing is integrated with Transport for London's Oystercard system and its piers and services are fully part of the public transport system. The fleet consists of sixteen catamarans with powerful acceleration and high cruising speeds of up to 50 kph. *disP* readers are highly recommended to board the riverbus at a central London pier and experience the brief voyage through Tower Bridge down to the Isle of Dogs, landing at Canary Wharf pier. Broad steps lead up to West Ferry circus, cunningly landscaped by Laurie Olin to provide both a broad viewing terrace for the panorama of London's skyline to the west, and an enclosed park with a visual axis towards Cesar Pelli's obelisk-like office tower to the east. Sadly the tower's original public viewing gallery was closed because of security concerns, but visits can still be arranged through the Canary Wharf Group. It is well worth seeing from on high how the river encloses the peninsula of the Isle of Dogs in a great loop from Limehouse down to the historic sites of Greenwich, back up to Poplar,

and then south again in a second loop that defines the Greenwich peninsula. The shallow dome and yellow pylons of the O2 Arena - formerly the Millenium Dome - give this fast-growing new district an instantly recognisable landmark. All these points are served by the Thames Clippers. Evening crowds of up to 20,000 converging on the O2, and a daily workforce of more than 100,000 people at Canary Wharf help to explain why today's riverbus has succeeded where earlier experiments failed.

Back in the 1980s transport planners faced deep scepticism about the ability of London's derelict docks to attract new investment. In an area so profoundly deficient in public transport infrastructure, basic schemes failed to meet the minimum standard for cost-benefit ratios. So provision has come incrementally, with each successive stage justified by rising levels of activity and enhanced expectations of growth. The first step used historic infrastructure, the London and Blackwall Railway viaduct built by Robert Stephenson at the dawn of the railway age in 1836, reviving this derelict asset with a contemporary technology of driverless trains. The immediate success of the Docklands Light Railway soon led to enlargement of its trains and stations, and extension of its lines in all directions, west to Bank, north to Stratford, east to Beckton and Woolwich and south to Lewisham.. Most of these routes run along elevated viaducts and offer fine views of the changing urban scene (figure 5).



FIGURE 5

Though the DLR's ridership exceeded all expectations, it was clearly underscaled in relation to growth of population and employment along its route. Denigrators referred to it as the 'toytown railway'. So its enlargement in the 1990s was complemented by an extension of the main London Underground network. The Jubilee Line, coloured grey on Underground maps, comes south from Stanmore to Waterloo, then runs east to Canary Wharf and North Greenwich before curving northward up to Stratford. The extended section opened in 1999 and its cavernous architect-designed stations are essential viewing on a London city tour, with Michael Hopkins's Westminster and Norman Foster's Canary Wharf especially memorable. It is said that Pelli's central tower at One Canada Square could be laid on its side within the cathedral-scaled ticket hall of Canary Wharf. Although the space was scaled with future growth in mind, it is already astonishingly busy at the start and close of the working day, with dense throngs of commuters streaming across the the concourse and long queues forming on the platforms for trains in either direction. Peak congestion is certain to increase

as a result of new development already under construction or in the pipeline at Canary Wharf and adjacent sites. It brings us to the final transport link for the *disP* city tourist, not yet completed at the time of writing, but a definitive symbol of the shifting relationship between east and west London: Crossrail.



FIGURE 6

Having written at length elsewhere about Crossrail (2012, 2014) I shall just recall that the concept of national rail lines running through London and out the other side is at least a hundred and fifty years old, and has taken shape in many abortive projects. While Paris achieved its Réseau Express Régional (RER) four decades ago, London's first Crossrail Bill was not considered by Parliament until 1994 and then rejected. The project took another fourteen years to secure Parliamentary approval and a further twenty or more years to construct. Originally due to come into operation late in 2018, its opening has been postponed indefinitely at the time of writing. But when this railway does open its impact will be immediate, with nine-carriage train-loads of up to 1,500 passengers arriving at two-minute frequencies. Crossrail's route (figure 6) runs from Reading and Heathrow Airport to a deep section under central London, with interchanges at Paddington, Bond Street, Tottenham Court Road,

Farringdon and Liverpool Street. After Whitechapel it splits to provide connections to London's easterly suburbs both north and south of the Thames. One of the busiest stations is expected to be Canary Wharf, where the connectivity and capacity of the Elizabeth Line will give further stimulus to the development boom on the Isle of Dogs.

Mayor Sadiq Khan's draft London Plan, under public examination in the autumn of 2018, envisages a construction rate of 66,000 new homes annually and the creation of 6.9 million new jobs over the time period 2016-2041. Though the Mayor designates Opportunity Areas throughout the metropolis, by far the largest contribution of development opportunity is sought from the east. For example, in Figure 2.3 of the Mayor's *Draft London Plan* of July 2018 we find indicative guidelines for the Isle of Dogs, Poplar, the Lea Valley and the Royal Docks that combine to a total of 89,000 new homes and 167,500 new jobs, an astonishing scale of intensification. Whether for good or bad, it seems that London's East End can expect to provide interesting material for *disP* city tours in the decades ahead.

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## *Figure Captions*

fig 1 Silk handkerchief printed with map of London, 1847. Source: '*Not To Be Sneezed At*' exhibition flier, 11 May to 31 August 1995, Guildhall Library, City of London

fig 2 London Dock, Wapping : *Wasteland* cover image. Source: Nabarro & Richards, 1980

fig 3 Tube train advertisement for Kabbee minicab app, 2013. Source: Kabbee, by kind permission

fig 4 Moorings on Regent's Canal north of Mile End Road, September 2018.

Source: Pablo Sendra, with thanks.

fig 5 Docklands Light Railway crossing South Dock, Spring 2001. Source:

author

fig 6 London Crossrail regional route map. Source: [www.crossrail.co.uk](http://www.crossrail.co.uk),

retrieved September 29th 2018