The building of Canada Dock and a dry dock for the repair of lighters – Surrey Commercial Docks

by R. J. M. Carr

An account is given of the building of Canada Dock, Surrey Commercial Docks (May 1874 to November 1876). A small dry dock for the maintenance and repair of lighters was constructed from an abandoned entrance to a timber pond – an example of nineteenth century adaptive re-use. This dry dock was one of the last surviving features on the Northern part of the Surrey Commercial Docks site. It was photographed and measured by GLIAS on 9 June 1979.

The building of Canada Dock

By 1864 the various dock companies on the Rotherhithe peninsula had merged to form the Surrey Commercial Dock Company (SCDC).[1] Fig. 1 shows the location of these docks in relation to the other up river docks and Figs. 1 & 2 the western part of the Surrey Docks estate, the area which we are particularly concerned with. Ponds such as Albion and Canada ponds, which were quite shallow, only about five feet deep, were used for the seasoning and storage of timber – floated in rafts which could be poled about as required. Plate 1 depicts this operation in Lady Dock as late as 1954.

Soon after the amalgamation it was felt that further deep water accommodation was required in the western part of the Surrey Docks. On the 21st August 1873 the Board of the SCDC directed that:[2]

> The Engineer report on the cost of excavating for deep water in front of the East London Railway Wharf Wall.

and on 18th September 1873:

> The consideration of the question as to works at Albion and Canada Ponds was deferred.

and:

> Referred to the Docks Committee to report on the cost of channels across the Albion and Canada Ponds and laybyes in front of the Railway Wharf Wall which would enable loaded barges to be taken there at any state of the tide.

On the 26th March 1874, under the consideration of the Canada Pond Excavation Works, channel widening from 50 to 70 feet and deepening from 5 to 15 feet at a cost of £550 was resolved upon. At a later Board meeting, 14th May 1874, under the

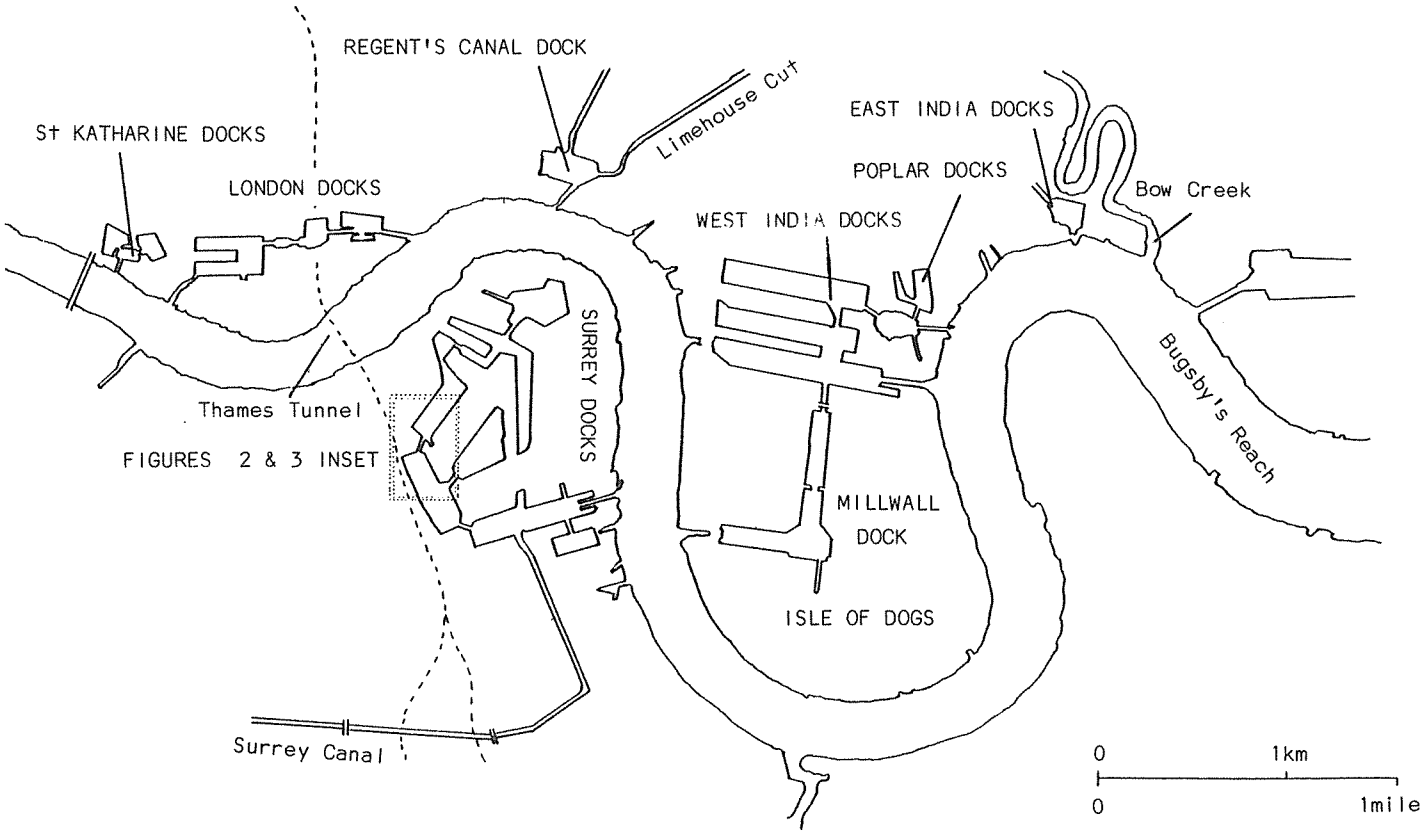

Fig. 1. *London's up-river docklands c1970 showing the position of Surrey Commercial Docks. Box shows the area covered by figures 2 and 3.*

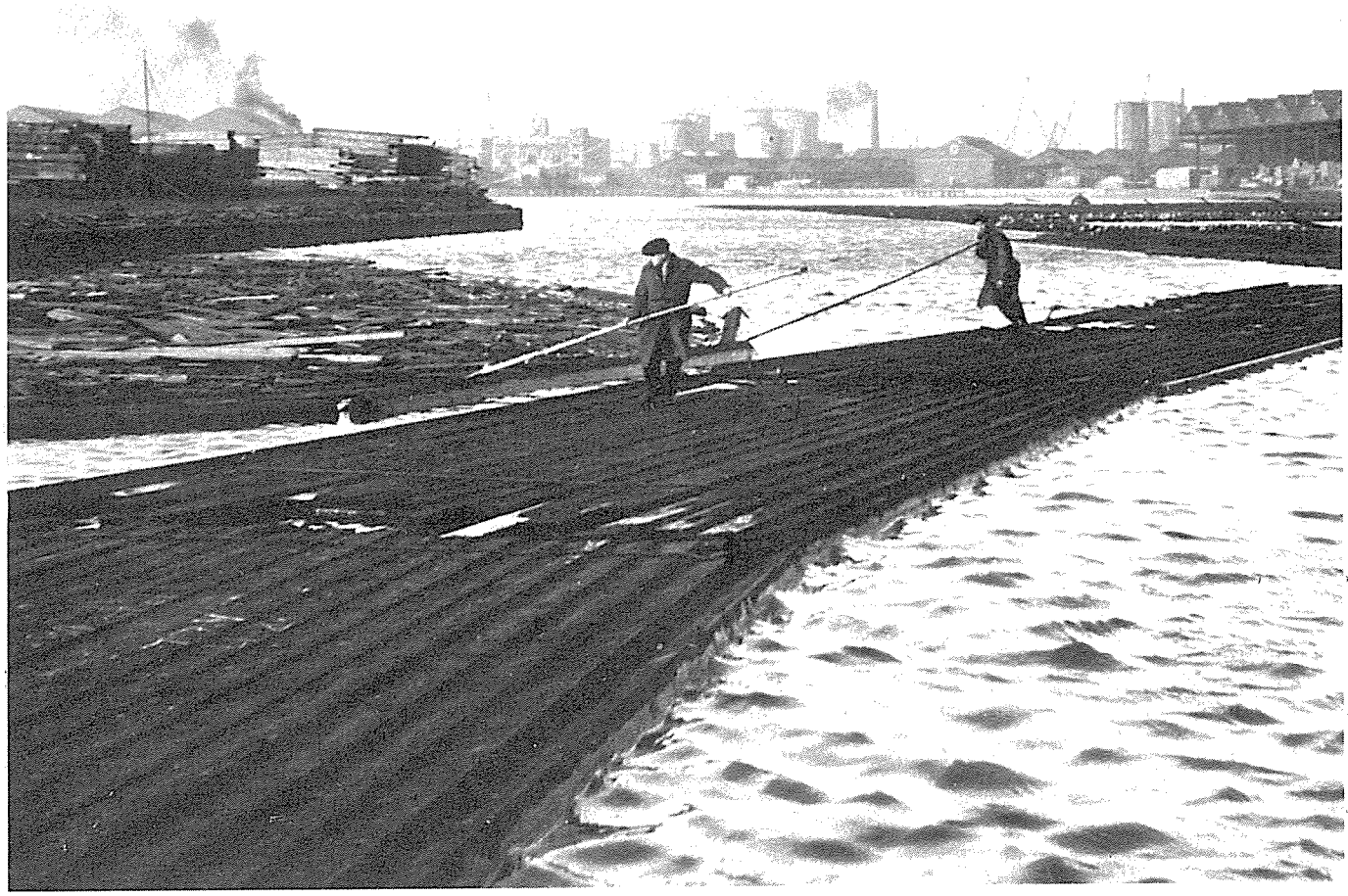

Plate 1. *Floating timber in Surrey Commercial Docks, Lady Dock 1954, looking north. PLA Collection, Museum of London.*

consideration of the Canada Pond extension, it was noted that the filling up of ground at the back of the dock wall at Albion Pond would involve 40,000 cubic yards of material and cost £2,700. However, two weeks later a much more radical programme was introduced.

At a Board meeting on 28th May 1874 it was proposed to construct a dock at Canada Pond to accommodate both the growing traffic and the increasingly large ships which were being used in the timber trade. It was estimated that the annual saving would be £2550 and the cost £45,041 (sic). At the same meeting it was resolved to proceed with the work. On the 18th June 1874 it was decided to issue debentures to the value of £40,000 to cover costs. The Engineer submitted plans to the Board on 25th June 1874 and a dock 500 ft wide was decided upon. It was resolved to call the new dock *Canada Dock* at a board meeting on 26th November 1874, and at a later meeting, 11th May 1876,[3] the names *Station Yard*, *Canada Yard* and *Canada Pond* were bestowed and Main Dock was renamed *Albion Dock*.

The Dock Committee considered tenders for a lift bridge for the new dock on 19th January 1875[4] and on 1st June 1875 that of Westwood Bailey & Co., at a cost of £2,570 was accepted. A decision to have five open jetties for Canada Dock was made at a Committee meeting on 8th June of the same year. It was reported to the Committee on 21st September 1875 that water was now admitted to Canada Pond.

The question of jetties for the new Dock was brought up at the Dock Committee again on 23rd May 1876 and their construction postponed. On the 31st August 1876 work had progressed sufficiently for the Board to discuss the entertainments to be provided for the opening of Canada Dock. The entertainment was also discussed by the Board on 14th September. At the Committee, on 3rd October 1876,[5] it was noted that Messrs. Abernethy & Fowler, Civil Engineers, would "inspect the new Dock before the water is let in." On the 12th October 1876 the Board received the "Engineer's report of the 11th inst." Plate 2 shows Canada Dock under construction and Plate 3 a length of dock wall before the water was admitted.

On 17th October 1876 it was reported to the Committee that "the water was let in to the Canada Dock at 8.50 this morning". At the Board meeting of 9th November 1876 it was announced that the Canada Dock had been opened on November 7th. The Dock was 1500 feet long by 500 feet wide giving an area of 16½ acres, the depth being 27 feet. The walls, mostly of concrete, were constructed to the designs of the Company's engineer, James A. McConnochie, C.E. and the contractors for the work were Messrs. Thomas Docwra & Sons of Balls Pond, Islington. The first ship to enter the dock was the *S.S. Argyle* of Messrs.

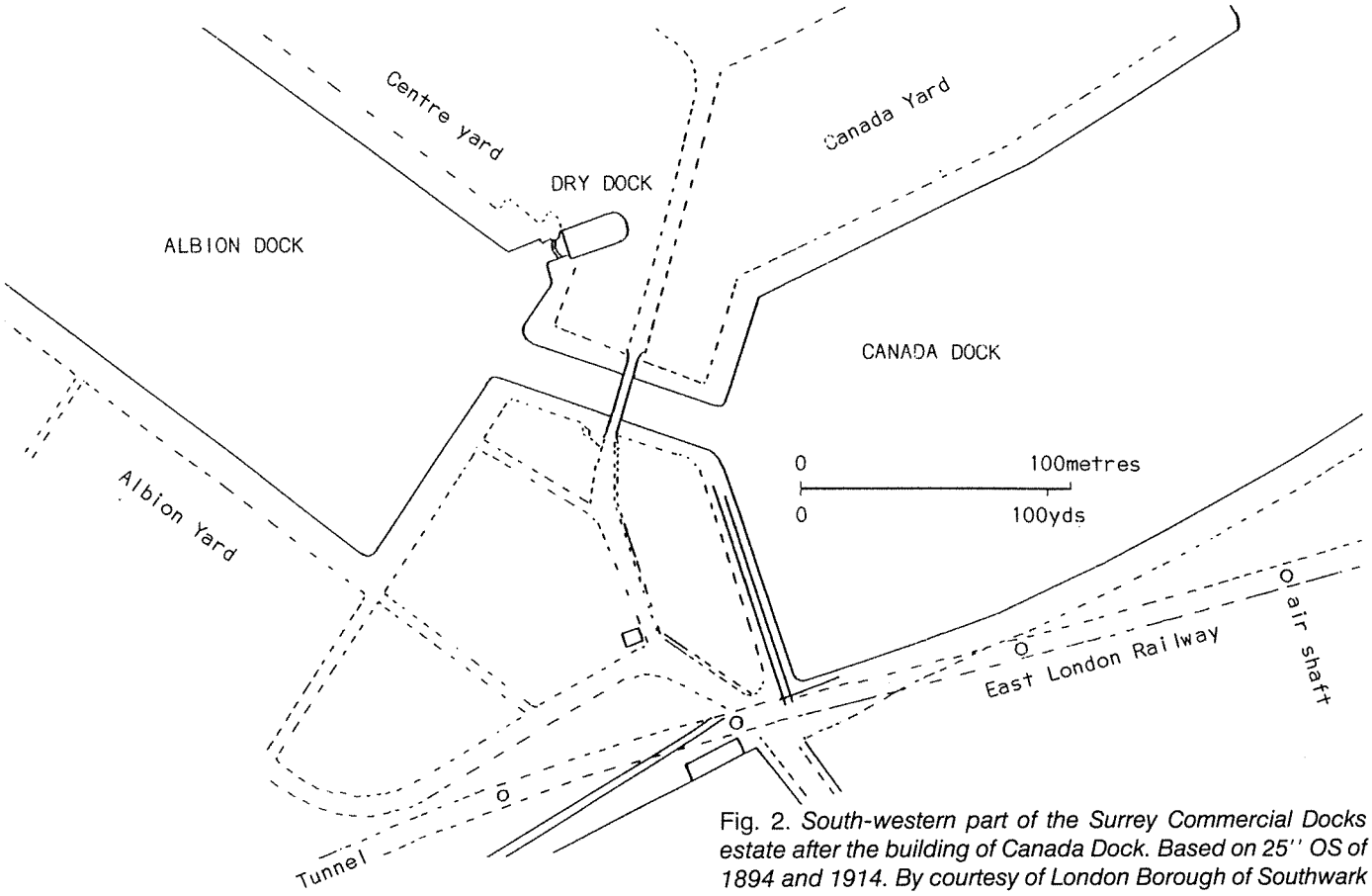

Fig. 2. *South-western part of the Surrey Commercial Docks estate after the building of Canada Dock. Based on 25'' OS of 1894 and 1914. By courtesy of London Borough of Southwark John Harvard Library.*

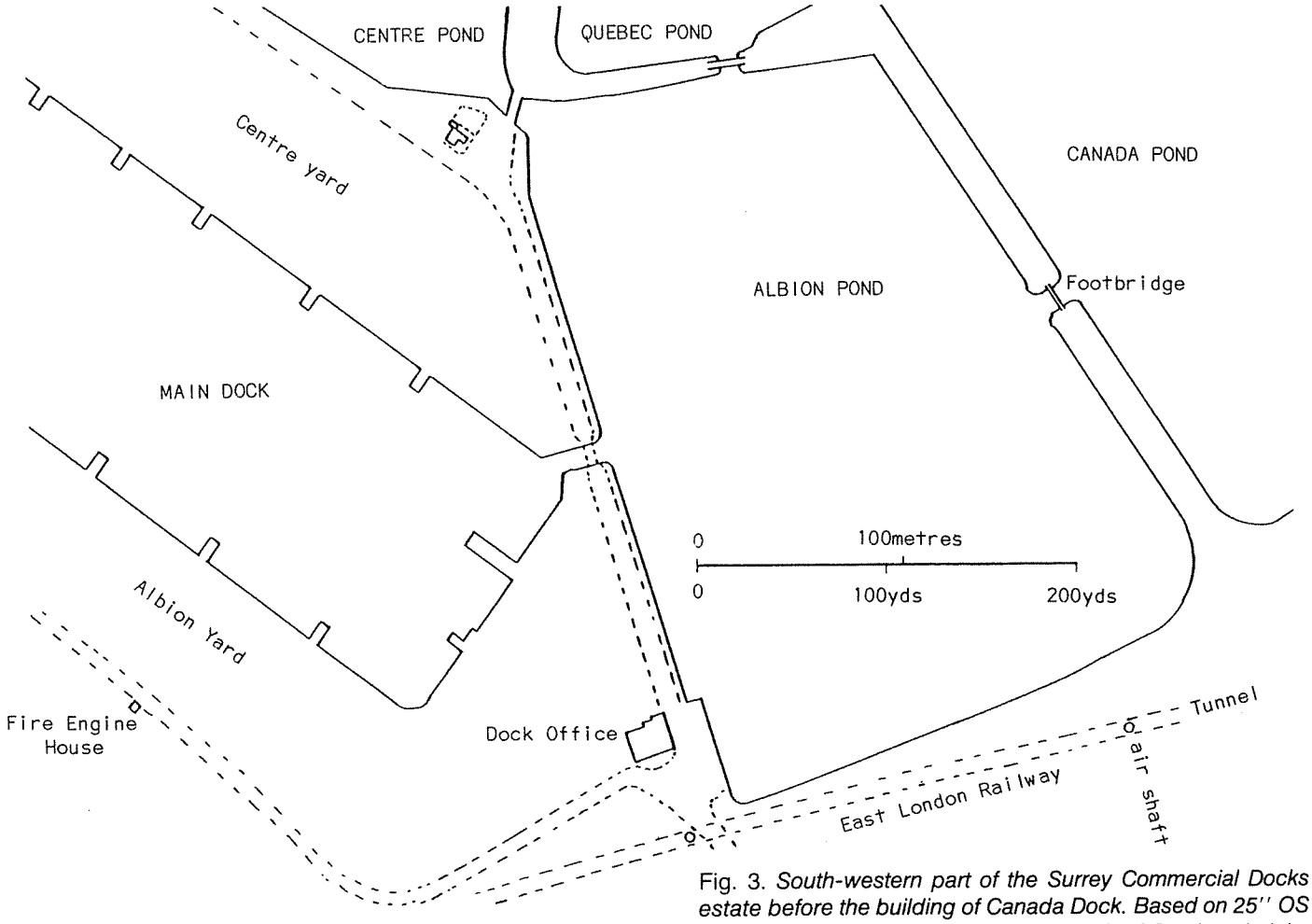

Fig. 3. *South-western part of the Surrey Commercial Docks estate before the building of Canada Dock. Based on 25'' OS of 1868. By courtesy of London Borough of Southwark John Harvard Library.*

Plate 2. *Canada Dock under construction c1876 with contractors' train. Reproduced by courtesy of the Port of London Authority from a photograph in their possession.*

Plate 3. *Canada Dock under construction. Dock wall before the admission of water. Reproduced by courtesy of the Port of London Authority from a photograph in their possession.*

Bailey & Lentham, followed by the sailing ship *Greyhound*. A press account of the new dock entitled "Extension of Surrey Commercial Docks" appeared in the Daily News of 8th November 1876. At the Board meeting of 14th December 1876 a celebratory dinner for 42 persons at the "Albion" was noted. Also 95 persons had eaten at the "Ship", Greenwich, on the 7th inst and 130 had had supper at the Drill Hall, Lower Road, on the 9th. However, the question of jetties for Canada Dock seemed to require further thought. At the Dock Committee meeting of 3rd April 1877 it was decided to have 7 jetties each 30 feet wide.

As originally constructed Canada Dock had no exit at the southern end. The connecting passage to Greenland Dock was not made until roughly 25 years later when the latter dock was enlarged, 1893 – 1904. The Surrey Commercial Docks passed to the Port of London Authority in 1908 and were closed in 1970.

the trans-shipment of goods from ocean-going vessels to up-river warehouses (Plate 5). The Port of London was exceptional in using large numbers of them, and some are still in use today. They were an important feature of the Surrey Commercial Docks timber trade; some of the timber imported through the Surrey Docks was carried by lighter to yards along the River Lea Navigation.

The lighter repair dock was 90 feet long overall, the width of the entrance was 22¼ feet and the width inside the dock was 31½ feet, giving a working space at least 4½ feet wide either side of the largest vessel that the dock could accommodate (Fig. 4). The lighters used in the Port of London varied in size but a common dimension would be about 80 feet in length with a beam of 20 feet. As the dry dock was full of water and heavily silted on 9th June 1979 it was not possible to ascertain the depth

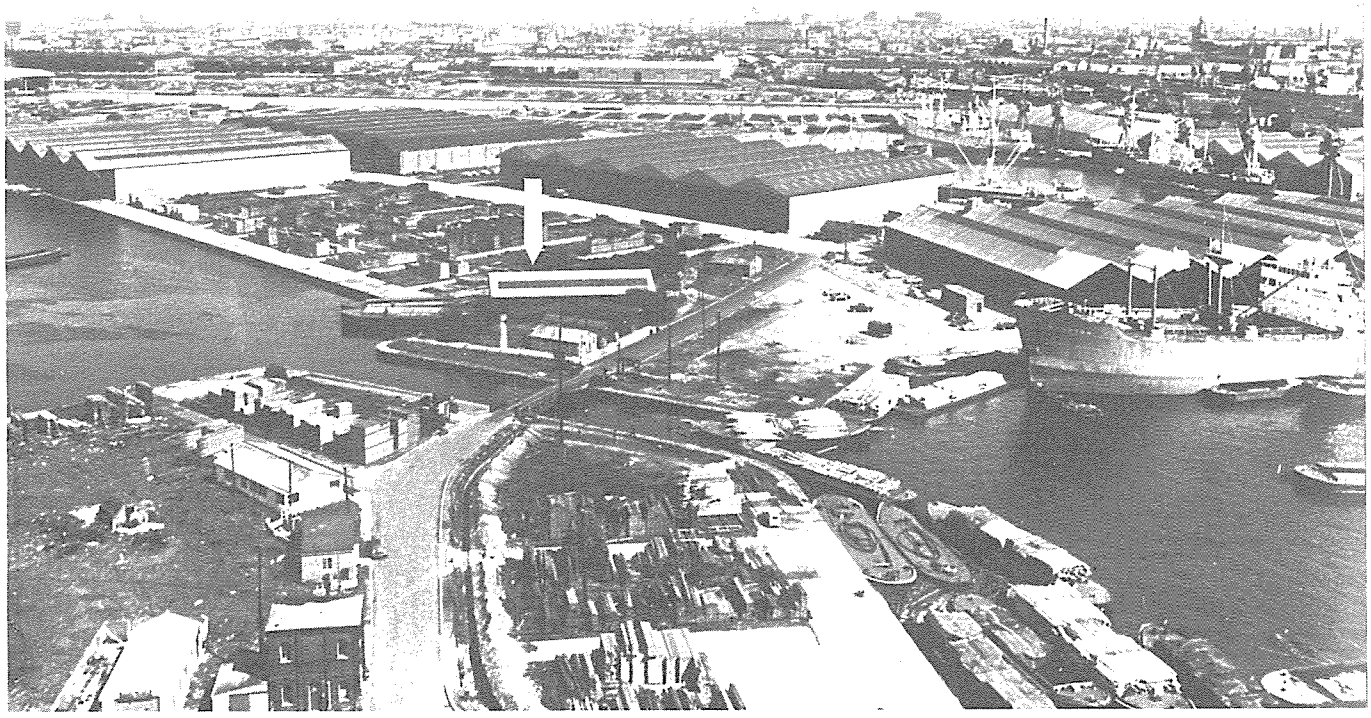

Plate 4. *Cutting between Albion and Canada Docks, 1964, looking east. The lighter repair dock is under the roof in the centre of the picture (arrowed). Note the lighters in Albion Dock waiting at the entrance. Surrey Commercial Docks at this date were quite busy; there are lighters piled with timber and a number of ships. PLA Collection, Museum of London.*

The Lighter Repair Dock

Comparing Figs. 2 and 3 which depict the situation after and before the construction of Canada Dock it will be noticed that on the abandonment of the entrance to Albion Pond the old work was not obliterated but with the addition of new brickwork at the southern end the entrance was converted to a small dry dock Plate 4). The making of a dry dock in this manner is not particularly remarkable – adaptive re-use has been normal throughout most of history. This small dry dock was ideal for the repair and maintenance of lighters – unpowered barges used principally in

of the dock when recorded but it appeared to be at least five feet deep. Unloaded, a lighter would have a draught of 1-2 feet, the total height of the side being about six feet. The cross section of the original entrance to Albion Pond was probably chosen so that a lighter would just go through with a moderate clearance so it is not surprising that lighters should fit the dry dock closely. In order to save water the length of the adapted dry dock would be chosen so that lighters just fitted. It appears that the dock was emptied simply by pumping. Situated as it was amid impounded basins and away from the River it is unlikely that use was ever made of the tide. Presumably the actual business of lighter

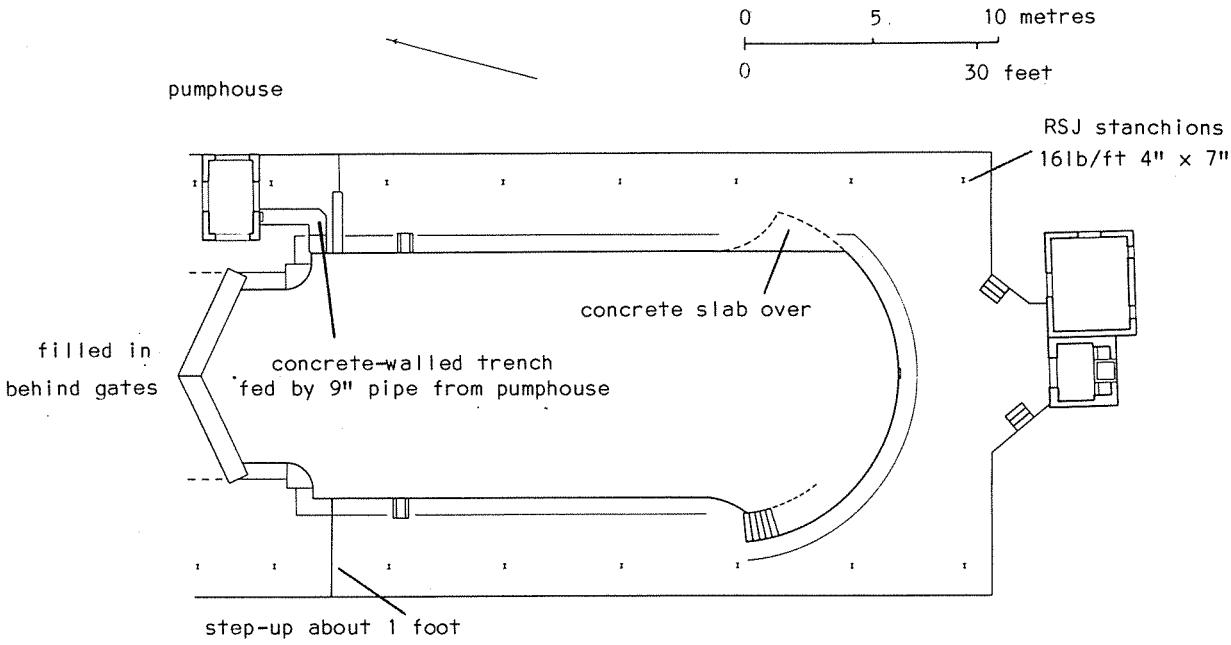

Fig. 4. *Plan of Lighter Repair Dock as measured 9/6/79.*

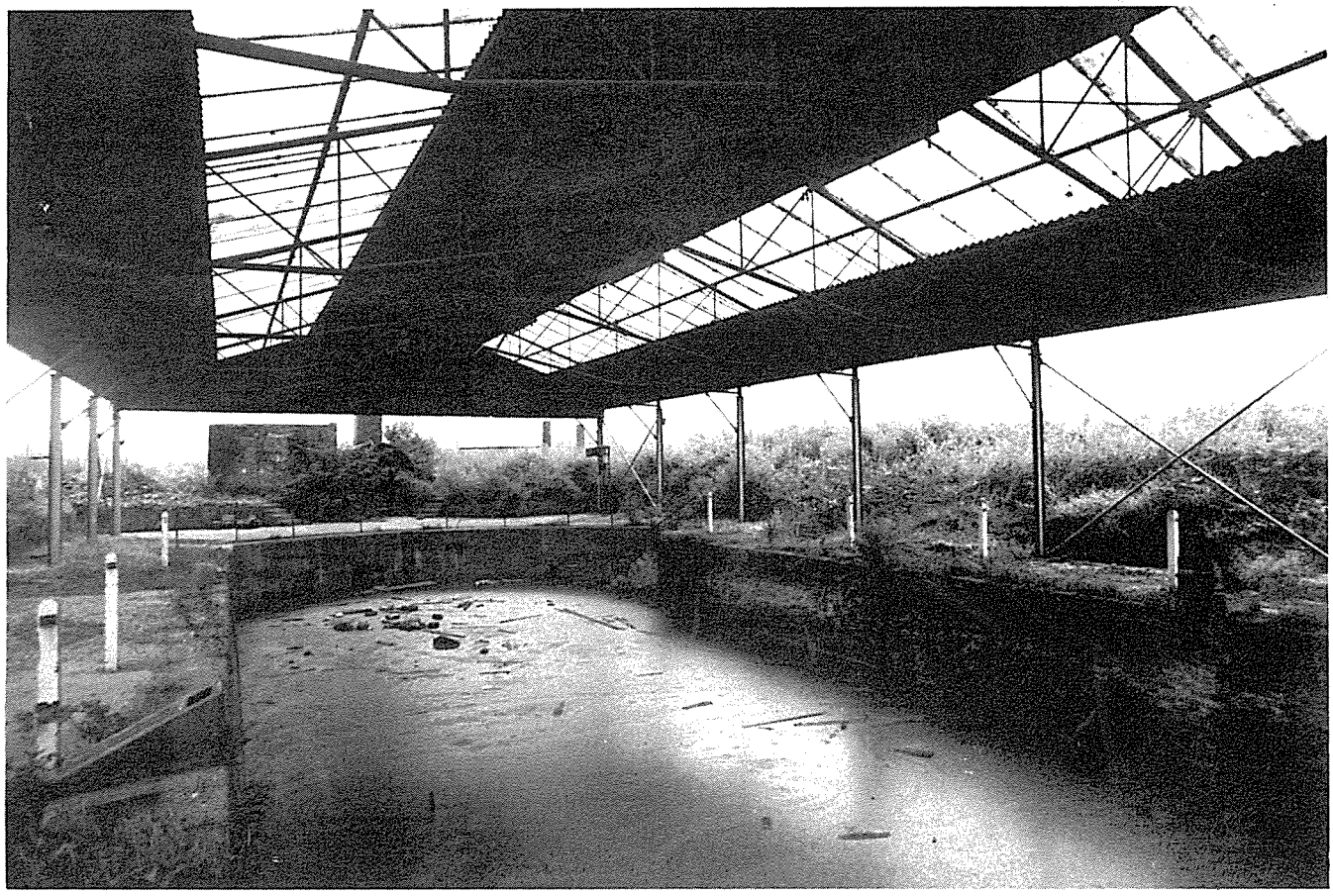

Plate 5. *Dry dock looking south. (Photo Marcus Hind, 1979).*

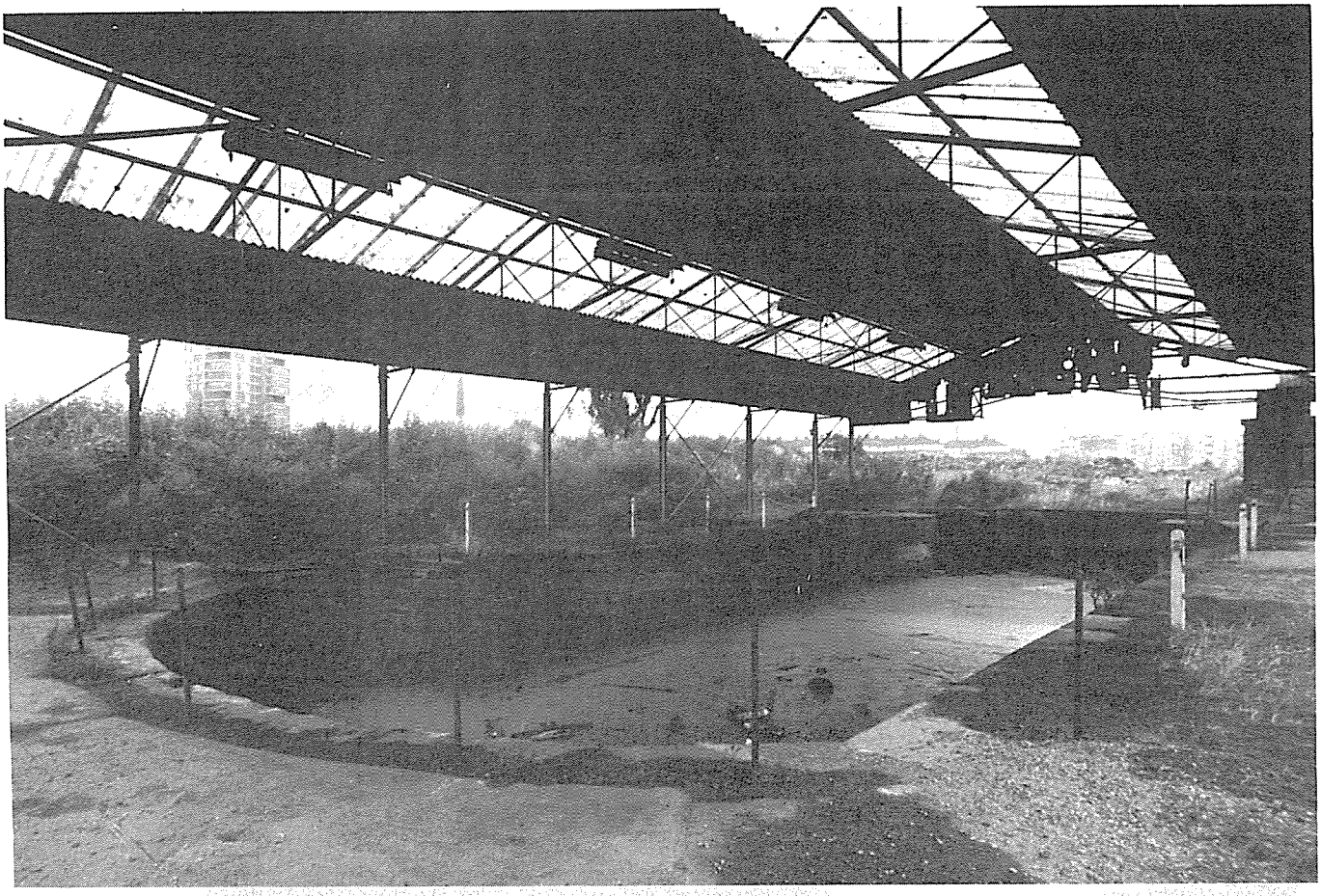

Plate 6. *General view of dry dock under roof, looking north west. (Photo Marcus Hind, 1979).*

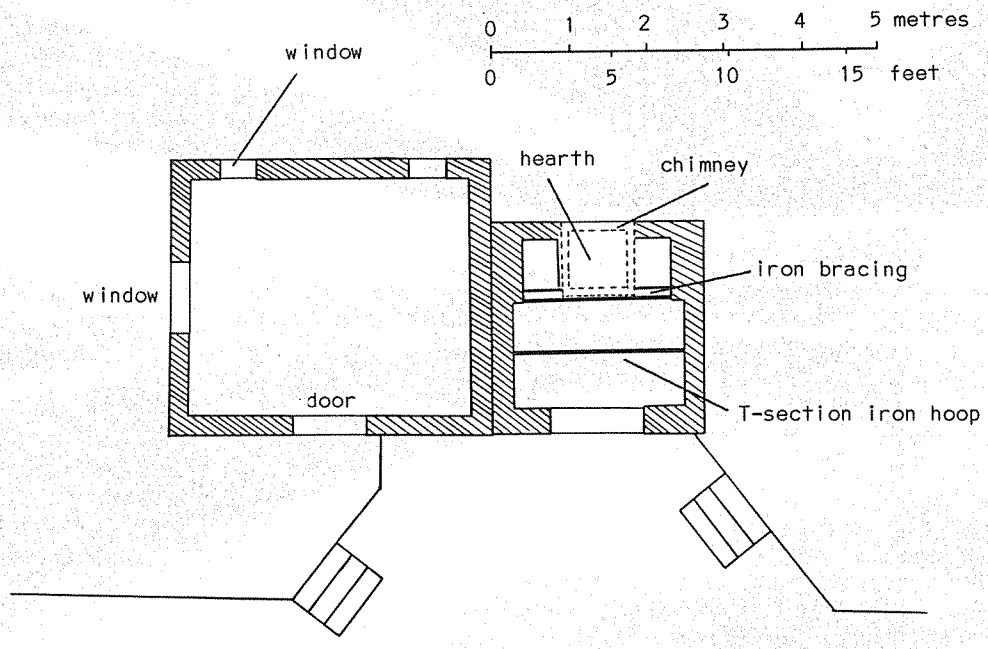

Fig. 5. *Plan of Pitch House.*

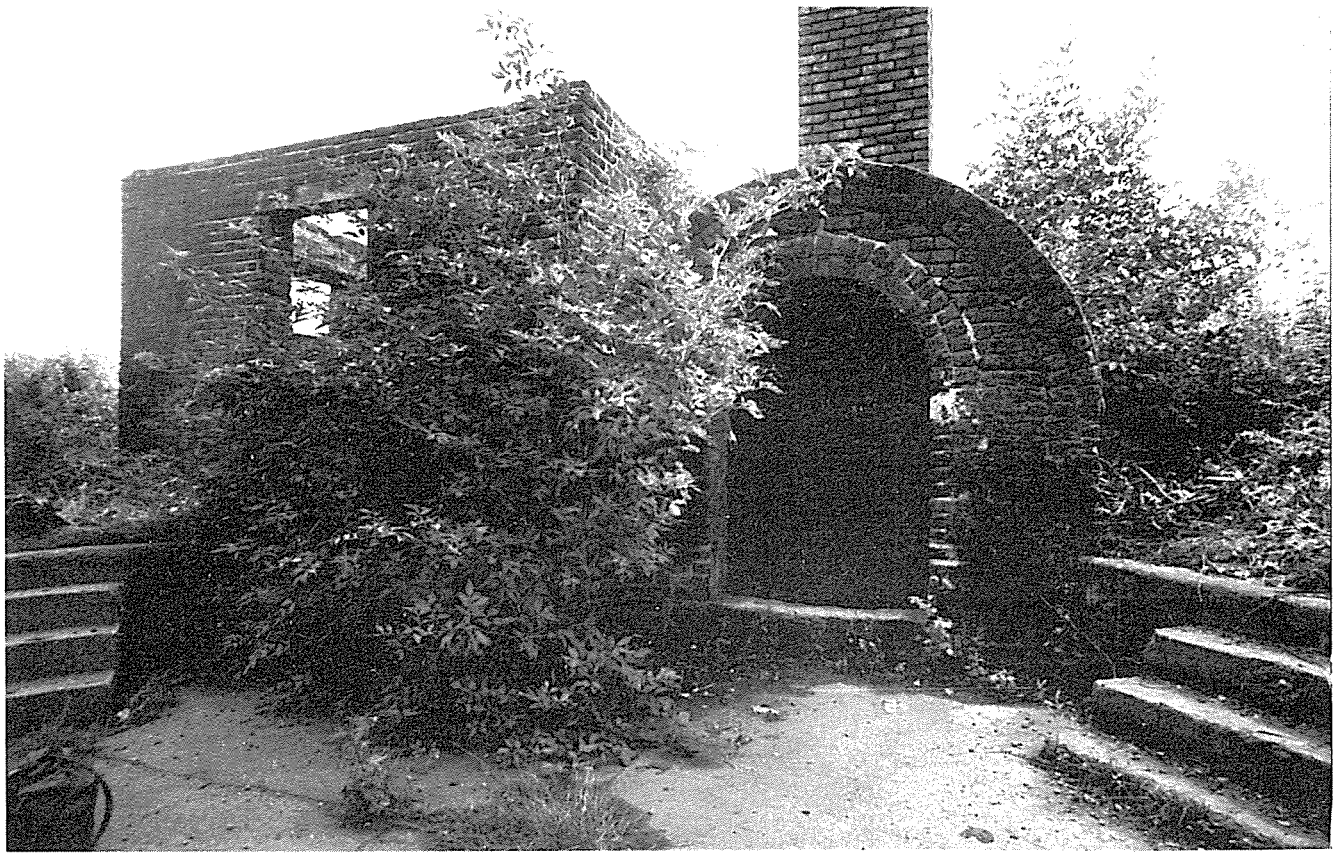

Plate 7. *Pitch house, looking south, showing the "furnace". (Photo Marcus Hind, 1979).*

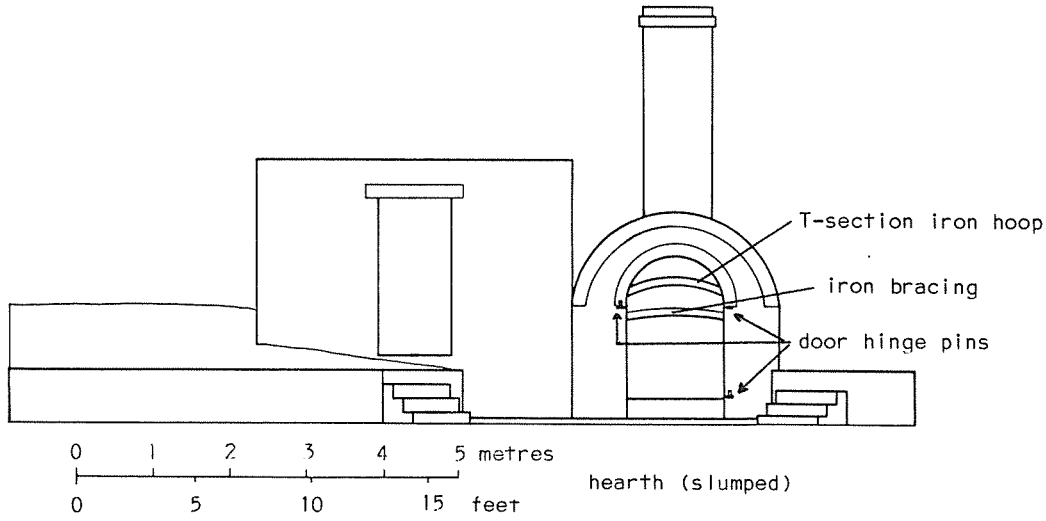

Fig. 6. *Elevation of Pitch House looking south.*

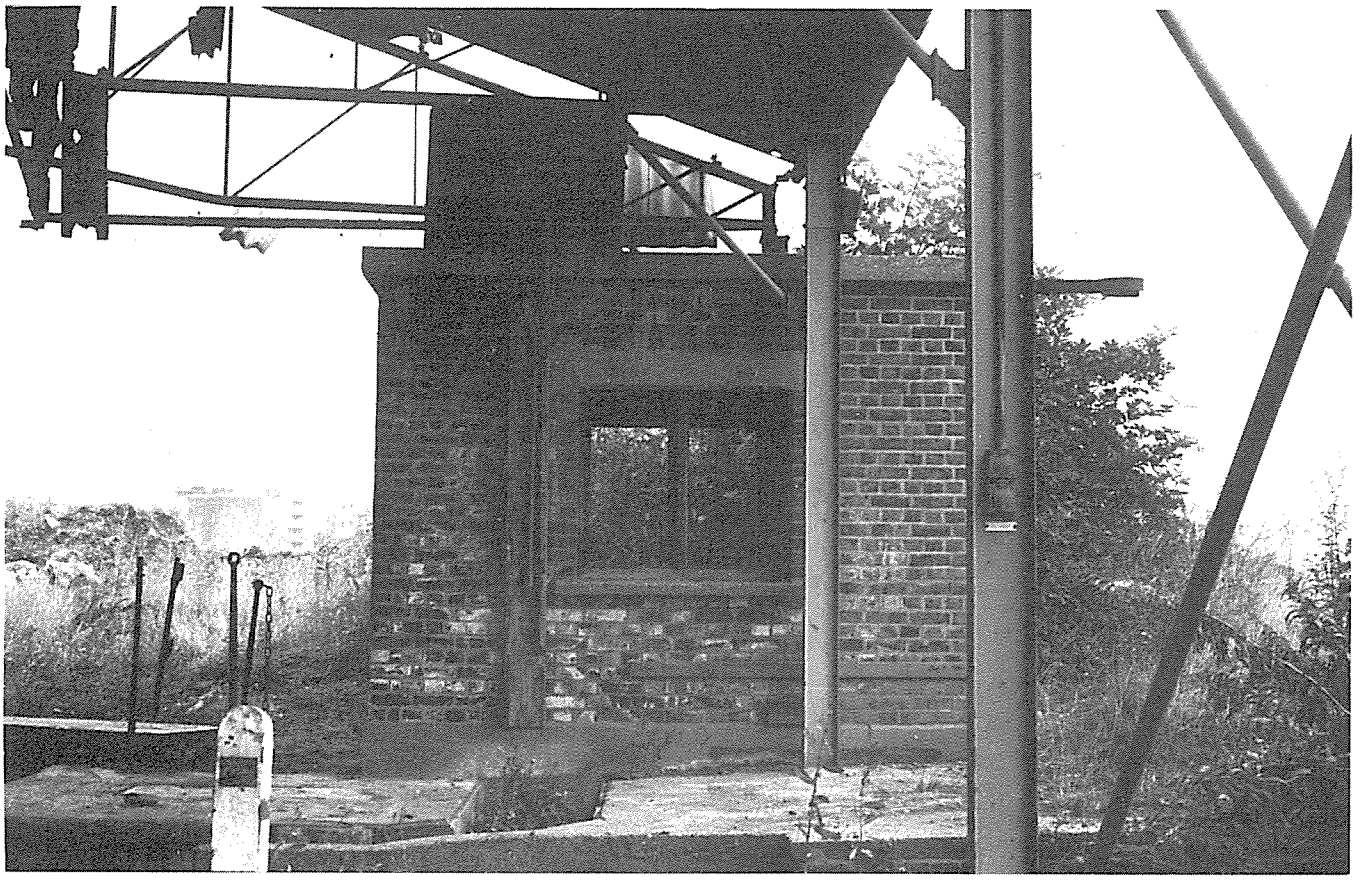

Plate 8. *Pumphouse at north east corner of dry dock, looking north (Photo Marcus Hind, 1979).*

repair was carried out by contractors but no reference has been found. Further research should ameliorate this.

A roof was erected over the dry dock in the 1950s to protect men at work (Plate 6). To the south of the repair dock was a small brick building with an oven or furnace beside it. This was the "pitch house",[6] (Figs. 5 & 6) presumably for the preparation of tar for use in the dry dock, although for many years the standard lighter used throughout the Port of London has been of steel construction (Plate 7). For much of its working life the lighter repair dock would have been emptied by electric pumps. A small brick building at the north east corner of the dock is believed to have been the pump house (Plate 8). This dry dock constructed at the former entrance to Albion Pond was one of the last features of the northern part of the Surrey Commercial Docks site to survive. When it was recorded by GLIAS many of the Surrey Docks had been filled.

Acknowledgements

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Notes and references

1. For a general account of Surrey Commercial Docks' history see Broodbank, Sir Joseph *History of the Port of London* (2 vols.), Daniel O'Connor, London 1921. Broodbank mentions the building of Canada Dock (volume 1, page 220) only briefly.
2. Surrey Commercial Dock Company, Minutes of Board Meetings (3), 5th January 1871 to 31st December 1874.
3. Surrey Commercial Dock Company, Minutes of Board Meetings (4), 7th January 1875 to 12th September 1878.
4. Surrey Commercial Dock Company, Minutes of Dock Committee (3), 16th July 1872 to 19th September 1876.
5. Surrey Commercial Dock Company, Minutes of Dock Committee (4), 26th September 1876 to 4th May 1880.
6. This title was verified by Edward Sargent from a drawing in the Port of London Authority Library, London Dock House.