

The industries of Deptford Creek

Mary Mills completes her series of articles on the borough riverside, started in LIA19 and LIA20, with an article on Deptford Creek

Two years ago, as part of a continuing series of articles on the industrial history of Greenwich, in *Greenwich & Lewisham Weekender*, I undertook a site-by-site study of Deptford Creek, later published as a book, *The Industries of Deptford Creek*.¹ At the same time I have published two overviews in *London's Industrial Archaeology*: the first covering the riverside from the Lewisham border to the banks of Deptford Creek (LIA19) and the second from Deptford Creek to Ballast Quay (LIA20).

The Creek is a fairly unprepossessing waterway which goes upstream from the Thames to a crossing called Deptford Bridge, which is the tidal limit and then becomes the River Ravensbourne, flowing down from Bromley. This was a major industrial area from the seventeenth century but one which has barely been noticed, let alone recorded. Very little has been written about it, apart from my own recent book. The best work on the Creek remains the late Christopher Philpotts's unpublished study of its archaeology.²

The Creek itself appears to have been considerably altered and rebuilt over the centuries, and it is unclear what the original waterway was like. It also has a very dramatic tidal range and at low tide it is possible to walk on the bed of the river: the local Creekside Discovery Centre organises such walks on a regular basis. At high tide quite substantial vessels can negotiate the waterway and once did so as far as Deptford Bridge.

These alterations to the waterway may relate to the needs of corn mills. The Domesday Book's entry for Lewisham, which covers this area, includes 11 mills,³ some of which were tide mills. One of these, on a site just downstream from Deptford Bridge, was the Olde Floode Mill which lasted into the 20th century and was a tide mill with a history going back before the Normans.⁴

There are three major crossings of the creek. In addition, there are a number of modern



Fig 1 Deptford Creek 1898, from the Ordnance Survey: source: National Library of Scotland



footbridges and the site of a former rail crossing near Lewisham. The Docklands Light Railway also crosses and recrosses between the Greenwich railway and Lewisham.

The oldest crossing and by far the most important is Deptford Bridge itself. It carries the Dover Road, which means that most travellers going to and from Kent, Canterbury, Dover, Europe and the world would have had to cross the Ravensbourne here. It is known as Roman but undoubtedly predates the Romans by many millennia. The Romans improved it with a proper foundation but over many centuries the area around the road going up Blackheath Hill was quarried for its chalk – which led to its collapse in 2002.⁵ The chalk would have been used to make lime – and there were lime kilns in the area from the 18th century, using the Creek to ship the lime out.



I was, and still am, curious about the stretch of river between Deptford Bridge and Lewisham. It is straight and looks artificial – even more so now, since it was rebuilt for the Docklands Light Railway in the 1990s. Until relatively recently a meandering stream ran east from Deptford Bridge curling round to the south and rejoining the main river near the current Elverson Road DLR station. Its line still carries the boundary between Greenwich and Lewisham and it also once formed the western boundary of the vast and Penn’s world-famous engineering works, and its later car factory.⁶ It had been suggested to me that the stretch of what is now the main river was built as some sort of mill pond.⁷ Any such works must be pre mid-17th century since its present layout is on the Travers plan.⁸ If any archaeological work or study of it was done in connection with the construction of the Docklands Light Railway it has never been made public – it may have been subject to a non-disclosure agreement.



Top to bottom: Deptford Creek in November 1971, March 1981 and July 2021. All pictures © RJM Carr

To return to the Creek’s major crossings, in addition to Deptford Bridge there are two other important crossings: Creek Road – the “lower road” between Deptford and Greenwich – runs across a lifting bridge near the River Thames. The road, rebuilt several times, dates from around 1800, when it replaced a ferry. The steps to the ferry still exist on the Deptford bank. Further upstream is the bridge carrying what was built as the London and Greenwich Railway, the first suburban railway in the world. The first bridge here, and Greenwich station itself, were delayed for two years after Deptford station opened in 1836. A “sail before rail” agreement meant that commuters had to wait while a lengthy opening procedure allowed a vessel to pass upstream.⁹ Today some remains of the original bridge are listed and the towering lifting mechanism of 1963 stands unused.

We can assume that the Dover Road was always busy and that from the earliest times various facilities were provided for travellers. The riverside too would have been busy as Greenwich developed as an important fishing centre: by the 19th century Greenwich fishing was deep sea in northern waters.¹⁰ Things changed in the late 15th century as the monarchy began to move from Eltham to an estate on the Greenwich riverside. The Greenwich tourist office is full of stories of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, but their presence will have involved an enormous number of people working to service the court as well as hundreds of soldiers, and visitors of many kinds with their entourages.

All of these people had to be fed, to have somewhere to sleep and to be kept warm. There must have been laundries, clerical support, maintenance workers, stables and much more. We know there was a royal slaughterhouse on what became Harold Wharf, 6 Creekside¹¹ – but we know little else about a complex of work places that must have covered the whole area.

There is one site associated with the palace. The site of the Armoury Mill was on the Greenwich bank close to Lewisham. Greenwich armour, encouraged by Henry VIII, had a smart workshop at the palace where courtiers could be fitted for their staggeringly expensive armour but the actual work of preparing the metal – with all the noise and pollution – was at the Armoury Mill. It served the Tudors and the Stuarts and, as the demand for fancy armour died, the mill continued to work, usually in the making of armaments with a variety of owners, public and private. In the early 19th century a report by John Rennie said that the fall of water in the Ravensbourne would not support a new government mill. It was closed and the staff, together with their families and their skills, were taken by barge to Enfield where the fall of water could support a new Royal Small Arms factory. The Deptford site became a silk mill, and in the 20th century has been credited with the invention of tinsel.¹² Inevitably it is now the site of new flats and it is a shame that these modern buildings are named for the silk mill rather than its distinguished predecessor.

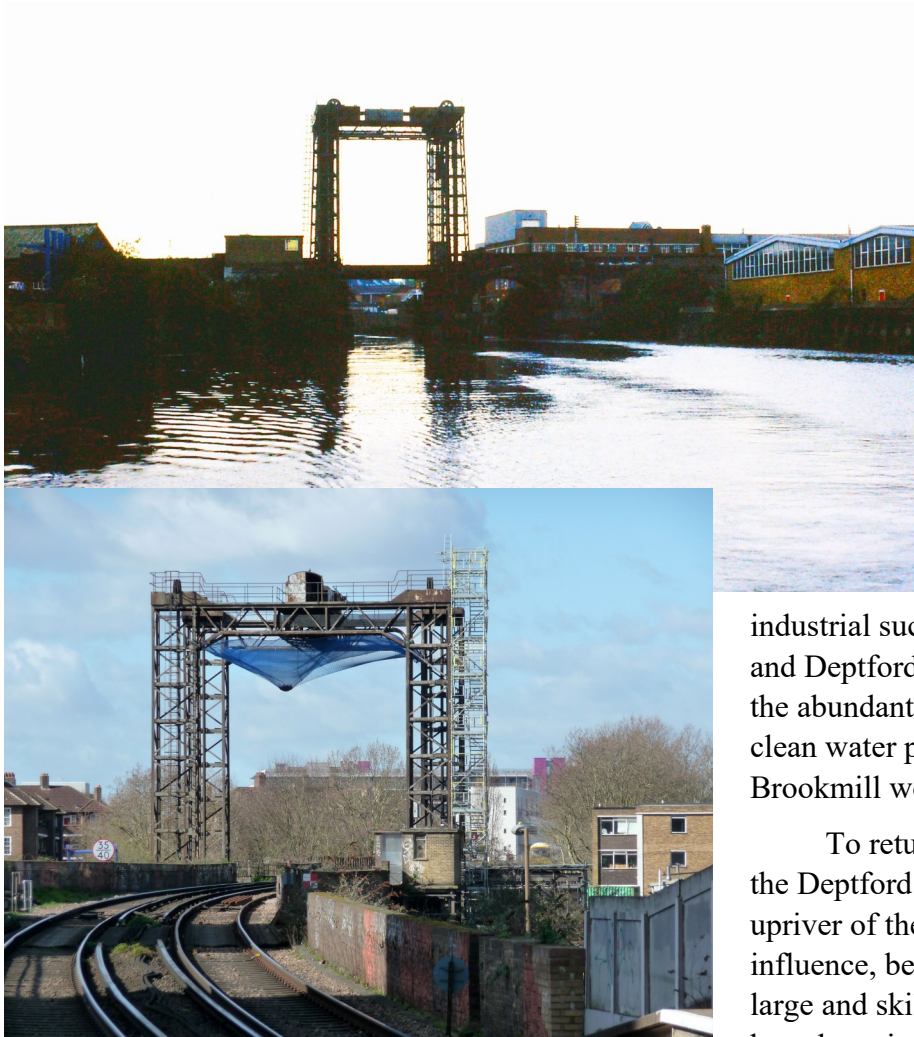
In the 20th century across the river from the Armoury Mill was the factory of Elliott Automation – one of the earliest and most successful of the high-tech electronics factories of the 1950s and 1960s.

In between this area and Deptford Bridge lies Brookmill Park. It covers the site of much of the 19th century waterworks, of which there are many relics to see.¹³ At the northern end, the new Stephen Lawrence Centre covers the site of the corn mill which was joined by a water supply pumping device from the 17th century. It became the head office of the Kent



Above: Creek Road bridge October 1992. Below: Creek Road, March 1981. Pictures © RJM Carr





Railway lift bridge in October 1992 (left) and (below) March 2019

Pictures © RJM Carr

Water Company and pumping from the Ravensbourne was replaced with extraction from deep wells from the 1860s,¹⁴ which continues. It could be argued that some of the

industrial success in Greenwich and Deptford can be attributed to the abundant supply of high-quality clean water provided by the Brookmill works.

To return to the 15th century, the Deptford Royal Dockyard was upriver of the Creek but its influence, because of its need for a large and skilled workforce, must have been immense. I recall many

meetings where we would hear a talk about a local works and its early role in the industrial revolution. From the audience Professor Ray Riley would rise up to say that the speaker clearly knew nothing about the Royal Dockyards.¹⁵ However he never mentioned their industrial relations¹⁶ – but the radicalism of the shipwrights persists in Deptford to this day.

The 17th century brought many new initiatives – some by those, such as John Evelyn, who had spent time away from Britain under the Commonwealth. One of the new industries on Creekside was the manufacture of copperas – hydrated ferrous sulphate, a chemical used to make dyes and sulphuric acid. There were several copperas works around the estuary but the Deptford works had the advantage of being described in a paper to the Royal Society.¹⁷ It was not alone and eventually there were copperas works on both Deptford and Greenwich banks.¹⁸

The major import throughout the centuries was coal, mainly coming from Durham coalfields and some from the Tyne. Wharf after wharf in the lower parts of the Creek dealt with coal at some stage. Among all the new flats there is just one road name, Dowells Street, to refer to the past of unloading and distributing coal.¹⁹

At the mouth of the Creek, where it meets the Thames, there were works for power generation on both banks. On the Greenwich side was a gas works built in 1826 by the Bankside-based Phoenix Gas Company. A small, slightly earlier, works was nearby in Norway Street.²⁰ There was another gas works further down on the opposite bank and adjacent to the London and Greenwich railway. This was built originally for the railway but



Left above: James engine house at Brookmill, now in Beck Close, SE13 and still operational

Left below: Bazalgette's Greenwich pumping station, Norman Road, SE10, taken from the Creek

Pictures © RJM Carr

was taken over as an independent gas company covering Deptford.²¹ It is now the site of the Creekside Centre. There was also a holder station for the Phoenix works on the south bank next to the railway.²²

On the other side of the Creek mouth, although not actually on Creekside, was Sebastian de Ferranti's Deptford power station.²³ It was the first centralised power station in the world – but it has now gone and is totally ignored in the housing estate now on the site. There is however one relic – and one that remains in use. Further up the Creek and fronting on to Greenwich High Road is a transformer station with a sign on the frontage for the LESC – the London Electricity Supply Company.²⁴



station, built to lift the sewage from the low level and pump it on down to Crossness. It was the earliest facility in the scheme to be opened. For some years much of the site has been in use for construction of the Tideway Tunnel; the fate of the historic – and listed – buildings on site is still not clear.²⁵

There were many manufacturing industries on the Creek in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Works crowded together on small sites. Some works were lone representatives of particular industries – like, for example, an early 19th century tannery or When's busy and productive soap works.

One of the largest and best known works on the Creek was Merryweather's, specialising in fire-fighting pumps and other equipment. It was however effectively a large, general



Priors Wharf/Brewery Wharf looking north-east, 11 October 1992 © RJM Carr

engineers making many other devices including tramcars. Penn's, also a major engineering company, was not really on the Creek.²⁶ It specialised in world-class marine steam engines, but like Merryweather's made much else including, in the early 20th century, road vehicles. Firms of this size, leaders in their field, were unusual.

As in most industrial areas there were breweries and corn mills. Almost the only remaining wharf not turned into housing is Brewery Wharf, just off Creek Road, which is still in use by the concrete distribution industry.²⁷ It was until recently in use by Prior's, bringing aggregate from Fingringhoe in Essex to Greenwich in a fleet of small ships²⁸

On site here in the 1990s was an old crane – said to be the oldest in London. It was dismantled and taken to be preserved at Fingringhoe, but its fate now is unclear.²⁹

Why it is called Brewery Wharf is also far from clear. The nearest brewery was Lovibond's whose buildings remain in Greenwich High Road but, like a number of older breweries, they were not on the Creek. Up at Deptford Bridge the Norfolk Brewery had a variety of owners going back to the mid-18th century – and probably before that.³⁰ What remains are the buildings of an associated distillery which had over the door "Established 1779. Holland and Co's Distillery and Bonded Store".³¹ It has been described as having been "one of the great gin factories of London".³² In the 19th century it was owned by a George Wheelhouse, who left his fortune to charities in Scarborough.³³ It was taken over by Hollands and subsequently Seager Evans.³⁴ Even further south was the Anchor Brewery on the site of what is now Tesco's Lewisham supermarket. Some brewery buildings remain on site.³⁵

There was also a brewery on Hope Wharf – now the site of Hope House flats in Greenwich High Road. This brewery was associated with the Corder and Haycraft maltings which were on Hope Wharf – and with the firm's better known maltings in Stockwell Street.³⁶ It was taken over by Baird's Maltings in 1910 and closed in 1960. I was pleased to discover that the company still made Greenwich Crystal Malt at its Witham factory – sadly now discontinued.³⁷

Corn milling remained important on the Creek, and particularly so in the late 19th and early 20th century, with the huge complex of Robinson's mills at Deptford Bridge, eventually destroyed by fire in 1971.³⁸ Still extant, though turned into flats, is the huge and decorative granary of Mumford's Mill – smaller than Robinsons – but with a more important architect in Aston Webb.³⁹

One industry which was long established in Deptford was pottery and there were a group of important potteries largely producing the red ware of drainage and chimneys. One set of Deptford pots was involved in the Mutiny on the Bounty. Some pieces of more recent pots can be found stuck in a wall in a Deptford park.⁴⁰

Deptford Creek was also the site of a number of important chemical works. Predominant was John Bennet Lawes's first superphosphate works – the result of his researches at Rothamsted.⁴¹ It was to be joined by several more manufacturers of artificial fertilisers. Frank Clark Hills, known as "the Deptford Chemist", was prominent on an adjacent site. Frank and numerous brothers kept a low profile and advertisements for

products of the Deptford works are always for manures and simple chemicals.

Frank died worth slightly under £2 million – an unbelievable sum in 1892. He had several other works and several manufactures which he sold ruthlessly. He had managed to patent the oxide process for the purification of town gas and use this to extract large amounts of money from the gas industry for use of the process. At the same time he had cornered markets for the sale of the resulting chemicals.⁴² He was also chair of Thames Ironworks – the premier Thames shipbuilding firm.

Robinson's Mill c1890



Shipping and wharfage were clearly important on the Creek. As everywhere else on the Thames there was barge building and barge repairs. A major shipping company was General Steam Navigation, near the Creek mouth on what had been an East India Company depot. It revolutionised short sea cargo working, being the first company in the world to use sea-going steam vessels. Later its passenger day trips to the Continent were well known and popular.⁴³ Shipbuilding was less important here than in surrounding areas. There was a short-lived shipbuilding and engineering works owned by William Joyce.⁴⁴ Rennie Brothers' engineering works, near the railway bridge, built small boats among other things.⁴⁵ Both Rennie and Joyce built bigger vessels nearby on Dreadnought Wharf with its Thames frontage.

This has been a very quick and concise look at some of the industries of Deptford Creek. Besides these works there were dozens of others. There were some real eccentrics like the Kamptulican works, and works which became famous elsewhere, like Cow Gum. There was the horse feed works with a product which could resist artillery fire. There was a works run by a woman engineer. Products included gas mantles, mineral waters, water softeners and much more.

It is very difficult to come to any conclusion about this densely-crowded waterway. I'm not sure there are any exact comparisons. Clearly the nearest would be the Lea across the Thames, but that was always a serious navigation which will make a difference and it did not have intense early industry close by.

Today site after site is taken up by blocks of high-rise flats: cliff-like structures on each side on the water. The heritage has been ignored although a signage project is still hopeful of success and has supportive funding.

So, what do we have for the industrial archaeologist? Most works are gone too quickly to leave any remains, but there are few traces, all of which are likely to disappear as soon as

the developer can manage to deal with them. Of the two biggest sites, the Deptford pumping station was professionally recorded by Thames Water and English Heritage. Brookmill Park, where there are numerous remains of the waterworks which once occupied it, has also been well mapped and is well known.

Note on pictures

On 11 October 1992 a party of GLIAS members made a somewhat adventurous boat trip up Deptford Creek with Thames waterman John Sargent to take photographs. We reached the limit of navigation, almost running aground in the process. In this article all the pictures of the Creek taken from the water were taken on this day. See also, GLIAS Newsletter 142, October 1992, p1, and Newsletter 143, December 1992, p5. See glias.org.uk for access to old newsletters.

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