

THE HISTORY OF CODY DOCK

Paul Ferris

Chapter 1

A background

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Anybody visiting Cody Dock, and arriving via the main gate off South Crescent, near Star Lane DLR station, will see that the 2.5-acre site is situated within a mix of modern business park and light industry. As you walk through the gates and down the approach road the vista opens out to a view across the River Lea – with a background complex of run-down looking industrial premises, 60's high-rise and maisonettes and beyond that the towering financial institutions clustered around Canary Wharf.

It is the river itself that has given rise to Cody Dock, and it would be worth looking at something of the history of the Lea and the company that built the dock to begin to appreciate its place and potential now and in the future. This is the first of a series of articles which will explain why the dock is here and what it was used for, why it closed down and became lost, how it was rediscovered and cleaned up, what it is used for now, and by whom, and what the plans are for the future. We will also be looking at the status of the wildlife around the dock, and what might be done to enhance this for its own benefit and for the benefit of people too.

The River Lea is one of the major tributary rivers of the Thames, and stretches for something like 40 miles from its source at Leagrave, near Luton, to the Thames at Bow Creek. Like many place names – and perhaps particularly those of rivers – the origins of the name “Lea” (or Lee) is uncertain. A suggestion is that it might be from a Celtic root “Lug” - meaning bright - and this might also refer to the name of a deity “Lugh”. Interesting to think that our river - which may not be quite as bright nowadays - may be named after a god!

The lower part of the Lea – in which Cody Dock sits – is a navigable tidal river and has been much used in the past for shipping, much of this serving the rather more noxious industries that were established towards the east of London.

Water power had been used to power mills in the area for many centuries. Stratford Langthorne Abbey, which was situated just a short distance north of Cody Dock, had three mills during the 13th century. These mills were grinding flour for the bakers at Stratford-atte-Bow, who supplied the City of London market. However, in 1588, one of the mills was described as a "gunpowder mill".

In 1872 one of the mills was purchased by gin distiller J&W Nicholson & Co of Clerkenwell and although production ceased in 1941, the premises were used for bottling and warehousing by Bass Charrington and Hedges & Butler until the early 1990s.

Other industries included dyeing and the production of calico during the 17th and 18th centuries, and being downwind of the more affluent area of London, in the 19th century the Lower Lea became an important area for the manufacture of chemicals. The value of the area for the latter was in part based on the supply of by-products such as sulphur and ammonia from the Gas Light and Coke Company's works at Bow Common.

With the coming of the railways both industry and population in the area grew rapidly. Stratford had become a junction on the Eastern Counties Railway in 1839-40, and the Eastern Counties and Thames Junction Railway from Stratford to North Woolwich opened in 1846-7. Just a mile or two downriver the Thames Ironworks shipyards had been established in 1837 and in 1855 Victoria Dock was opened, shortly followed by the Albert Dock. The use of gas for industry, for lighting and in the home was becoming increasingly common.

11th June 1918.
Women workers
mixing Prussian
blue at the Gas
Light and Coke
Company,
Bromley-by-
Bow, London.
Photo by A. R.
Coster/Topical
Press Agency/
Getty Images



To serve the increasing industry and population in the area, in 1870-73 the Imperial Gas Light and Coke Company built a new gasworks at Bromley-by-Bow, on the site of a former explosives factory. It was at this site that Sir William Congreve is thought to have done experimental works on rockets which were used during the Napoleonic Wars and during the American War of Independence. Indeed, Congreve's early work with gas production may have paved the way for the Imperial Gas Company's Bromley-by-Bow works which were later taken over by the larger and more successful Beckton based Gas Light and Coke Company.

The company had a large and diverse transport fleet including ships, barges, railway wagons, locomotives and road vehicles to bring coal into their gasworks, and to take coke and by-products out. As the new gasworks was conveniently situated by the River Lea, it would have been sensible to take advantage of transportation by water as a major factor. Thus, at the same time that the new gasworks was built, a dock was built for the company to allow lighters to unload cargoes of coal for their gas works. This may have originally been known as St Leonard's Dock and is the dock we now know as Cody Dock.

Between the early 1870s and for something like a hundred years afterwards, the dock would have been a busy site. The company's fleet of sea-going colliers – bringing coal from Newcastle - would have been too large to enter the dock, so cargoes would have been loaded onto lighters and manoeuvred by tugs to and from the dock, from either nearby in the Thames or perhaps wharfs on the Lea itself.



Bromley-by-Bow
Gas Works, Lea
River and
Canning Town,
1924. Reproduced
with permission
from The English
Heritage Archive



The dock, with horizontal retort houses in the background.
Coal is unloaded by hydraulic–electric cranes, 1955.

After the Second World War, ever increasing cost of coal forced the industry to begin looking for alternative gas supplies. Britain did not have a plentiful local supply of natural gas, so the British gas industry was already looking elsewhere for new sources of gas. Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) was first imported from the Gulf of Mexico in 1959 to a facility at Canvey Island. From 1964, regular trips started between Algeria and Canvey Island, importing up to 700,000 tonnes of LNG per year.

In 1965, the first offshore discovery of gas in Britain was made 40 miles off Grimsby, followed by other finds in the North and Irish seas. With this apparently plentiful local supply, in 1966 the Chairman of the Gas Council, Sir Henry Jones, formally announced that Britain would be switching to natural gas, and production at Bromley-by-Bow gasworks closed shortly after.

With the closure of the gasworks, the dock became redundant. Years of neglect followed; part of the dock was in-filled and the whole site was used both legally and illegally for the tipping of rubbish. It was in this state, with thousands of tons of waste – some even toxic, that the dock was first discovered by the charity's founder in the summer of 2004, and the process of regaining the site for its historical value, and its potential for the local community and as a valuable wildlife habitat began.

In the next newsletter we will share something of the story of this discovery, some of the people involved, the work that has been done to make Cody Dock what it is today and what the plans are for its future. If you have any personal stories about the dock, the gasworks, or the industries and communities around here, we would love to hear from you.

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Chapter 2

The rediscovery

The previous article looked at how and why Cody Dock was founded, and its history up until it became redundant after the closure of Bromley-by-Bow gasworks in 1966. Here we look at how I came across Cody Dock and, more importantly, how the dock was re-discovered and the events that have lead up to the formation of our charity, Gasworks Dock Partnership.

It has been a source of annoyance that although it was possible to walk the Lee Navigation from as far away as Hertford, from Bow Lock the only river or canal-side route to the Thames was by way of the Limehouse Cut. Then, from the vantage point of the tow-path bridge over the lock, I spotted a tree-and-lamp-post lined pathway on the Newham bank of the river that I hadn't realised was there and determined to find out how accessible it was and how far Thames-ward it went. Access to the pathway from Bow Lock proved to be by means of a circuitous route adjacent to the Blackwall Tunnel Northern Approach road, past a somewhat daunting security gate, then across Twelvetreets Crescent bridge. It was somewhat late in the afternoon on a quiet Sunday early in 2012 and there was nobody else using this wide and new-looking path. Set between a business park and the river, the path looked promising, heading south towards the Thames and pleasant enough with trees and shrubs on the Newham bank and some very interesting businesses on the Tower Hamlets side. Oh, and a few barking guard dogs that side, too.

The Lea is a tidal river here, and the expanse of exposed mud on either side showed a considerable tidal range. I passed, or was passed by, a variety of duck species, a few herons, an occasional cormorant and a sandpiper or two. There were increasing reed-beds as well, complete with reed-warblers. A maritime feel was becoming more evident, with gulls even feeding on flat-fish they'd found.

Then I reached a fence. A fence, that is, across the path rather than beside it. The business-park aspect was being left behind, and a more industrial aspect was beginning to creep towards the river on this bank. The reason for the fence was evident – there was the mouth of a dock, with no apparent way to cross but with the lovely new path continuing in the distance beyond.



Leaway and Cody Wilds footpath to Cody Dock, 2013

That was a bit of a nuisance, as it meant re-tracing my route back towards Bromley-by-Bow, it getting increasingly more twilit and the prospect of a wide, lonely path back the way I had come. I enjoy trying to find walking-routes through otherwise built-up areas. These routes may involve streets and alleyways, but it is always nice to use parks and gardens, and canal and river-sides. Canal tow-paths make excellent walking routes and riversides should too, but so often industrial sites – and even when these are no longer used the subsequent housing development – make access to our town rivers at the very least ‘bitty’. Fences, and lack of bridges, make it even more difficult.

This new path, I learned, had been built to help complete a pedestrian and cycle route along the Lea from its source in Luton to its mouth at the Thames. It was later – somewhat sadly, and quite badly – called the Fat Walk, and the path just hadn’t been completed. I decided to lead a walk for members of the Epping Forest Outdoor Group (EFOG) from Pudding Mill Lane, via Three Mills and Bow Locks, to the mouth of the Lea at Trinity Buoy Wharf. Part of my purpose was to demonstrate that some town footpaths are just as nonsensical as those unnecessarily obstructed in the countryside.

On a sunny Sunday in May 2012, thirteen of us walked across Twelvetreets Crescent Bridge and onto the Fat Walk. I was somewhat apprehensive of what the group would say – or at least think – when we reached the barrier-fence and would have to turn back.

We reached the fence at the entrance to the dock and I'd just started to relate to the group something of the history of the general area, and this ridiculous access situation, when a gate in the fence opened and we were approached by a friendly-looking person from within, whom I guessed would know more about the place than I did. Thus, I met Simon Myers for the first time. He gave us a concise history of the area, of Cody Dock and the Gasworks Dock Partnership, and what the plans were for it and the missing bridge. He'd arranged to meet another group who were just arriving but allowed us to cross the temporary private bridge within the dock itself and leave by way of the main gate, saving us having to retrace our steps.

On subsequent visits, I had the opportunity to talk with Simon and his wife Julia and began to learn more about the dock and the project. It seemed to me that the dock's history, and particularly its more recent rediscovery, warranted documenting. I did some initial research into the history for the first Cody Dock Newsletter article (September 2016), and spoke to Simon and Julia to find out more about how it was rediscovered. Their story, I found, was a most interesting one in itself.



View of the tidal Lea river from Cody Dock, 2015

They and their family live on a Dutch barge that is presently moored on the Lea by Cody Dock. They met in 1996 and lived in Hackney, and the idea of living on a narrow-boat appealed to them, but narrow-boats have their limitations. Narrowness is one, and although whole families would have lived in a tiny part of their boats back in the heydays of the canals, it isn't really a feasible option for them. Simon's job at the time required the use of a workshop – again not very practical on a narrow-boat. What was required was something wider, and indeed larger as a whole.



*Julia and Tom the first day they arrived at
Cody Dock on board the Alain on the 18th of November 2011*

A Dutch-barge or something similar looked a possibility, and in 2002 they took a week-long holiday driving around the Netherlands looking for a suitable boat. Just before they were due to return to England they got a call from a ship-handler (a broker) who said that he had got them a ship. They drove from Amsterdam down to Roermond in the south of Holland to take a look. The one that they were shown was the kind of boat that normally would be kept in the family, but the skipper had retired and didn't have children. He really wanted it to go to a family that would look after it rather than it end up in a scrap yard. The boat – *Alain* – had been built in 1954, his father had bought it in 1964, he had inherited it in 1974. It suited their needs and when Simon and Julia bought it in 2002 they were the third family to have it.

To begin with *Alain* was moored at Trinity Buoy Wharf at the mouth of the River Lea, but they had been looking for other possible moorings in the London area and Simon had spotted – on Google Maps – what looked like a dock on the Lea, just upstream at Canning Town. In September 2005, he and a friend took a small boat and peered into the dock entrance, to find that in there were vehicles, shipping containers and, most of all, was piled high with rubbish. They discovered – as I had done – that you could come along the path from Bow Locks as far as the dock entrance for a different view. They peered through the fence but couldn't get in, and there were guard-dogs living in there as well. Few people, it seemed, even knew about this site, but despite the atrocious conditions there, Simon saw a potential to this site. His visionary idea was to open up the dock for public benefit, to give public access so that local communities could enjoy the river again, and to use the area for community activities with studios, moorings and a dry dock.

Research showed that the main land owner was Thames Water, with some being owned by the London Borough of Newham. However initial approaches to both of these organisations to discuss possibilities indicated that there were a lot of difficulties that would need to be overcome, not least that the site seemed to be used – although nominally by a particular company – as an unofficial dumping ground. There were a huge variety of materials – amounting to thousands of tons – already dumped there. Even if the present occupiers were to be moved out, clearing that material would probably take years. However, it is evident that Simon was prepared to contemplate proceeding with the idea, and in 2008 he again made approaches to Thames Water and to Newham Council, and in both cases this time there was a more positive attitude to his requests. The occupiers of the site for the past eleven and a half years had been moved out, and the site obviously needed to be cleared and used in some more appropriate way. Simon's plan for the area, and his belief that he could find the means to succeed in this, convinced both of the land-owners that they should allow this to happen and in 2009 a not-for-profit limited company was formed, together with a board of trustees. Gasworks Dock Partnership then went on to become a charitable company in 2011.

Following the removal of the occupiers, Newham Council gave them the keys to the gated entrance to the site. The vehicles and many of the containers on the site had been removed and some resurfacing had been done, but most of the waste material still remained, and in their spare time they began the immense task of dealing with this. This involved sifting through what had been left, working out what had to be disposed of, what could be sold and what could be re-used. This included pallets, bricks, marble and glass, some of which has been used to make Cody Dock what it is today.



A guided tour in Cody Dock

With a gradual understanding by local people, interested people, authorities, businesses and local companies of what was going on and what was hoped to be achieved, help and assistance in the form of labour and finances started to come in. As the site became more accessible and useable it became possible to encourage artists and performers to put on exhibits and shows from time to time. There was still the problem of the dock entrance being a missing link in the Lea Valley Walk, as it was now being called, but the temporary bridge was there and was useable. As long as the Cody Dock site was open, people could now walk or cycle from Bow Locks and pass through the dock and out into the public roads near Star Lane DLR station.

When I reached the dock with members of the Outdoor Group, the site wasn't yet open to the public on a regular basis. Since May 2015 it has been, during the day. There is a cafe there now, and always a warm welcome. You can walk or cycle the riverside path from Bromley-by-Bow, then through Cody Dock and out onto Cody Road for Star Lane Station or on to Canning Town. There still isn't access to the riverside path leading south from Cody Dock – that remains stubbornly out-of-bounds for complex reasons which Gasworks Dock Partnership are optimistic will be resolved soon. There are plans for a lovely new-design of swing bridge to be installed at the dock entrance to connect with that path, so that one of the few remaining breaks in the Lea Valley Walk will at last be bridged. In the meantime, the immense amount of work and effort by Simon, Julia and many others have rewarded us all with a lovely place to visit, whether just to walk around looking at the plants and birds hereabouts, to sit by the river, to think on the history or to have a drink or snack at Nadia's Cody Dock Cafe.