



Surrey Docks Farm History Trail

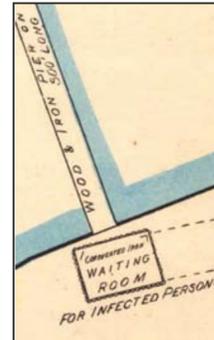
4. South Wharf Receiving Station



For nearly 50 years, this small site, wedged in amongst timber wharves and warehouses, had a surprising role as a River Ambulance Receiving Station. From here, infectious smallpox (and later, fever) patients were transferred speedily and safely by boat to isolation hospitals in the Thames Estuary.

The Metropolitan Asylums Board (M.A.B.) took over the wharf here in 1883 for their River Ambulance Service. They purchased paddle steamers to use as river ambulances, built a long floating pier, and started receiving and transporting patients from here the following year. Initially the set-up was quite rudimentary; arriving patients were examined in what was little more than a corrugated iron room by the pier, while staff accommodation even included an old barge hulk for the 'subordinate male staff'.

Over the decades, this grew into a highly-organised operation, and this site became the main wharf and headquarters of the River Ambulance Service. All of the service's ambulance steamers were moored here and their stores were kept here. Dozens of new buildings were constructed, including a substantial three-storey block for female staff accommodation, and family cottages for the married male staff. Isolation shelters were built, allowing up to 24 patients to stay overnight or longer if awaiting diagnosis or unfit to travel. The extensive facilities also included a boat shed, greenhouse, smith's shop, and a regularly-tuned piano in the nurses' quarters.



Above: The basic receiving room on the wharf's riverside as it was in 1887. Detail of Goad Insurance Plan, reproduced with kind permission of Southwark Local History Library & Archive



These aerial photos from 1926 show how developed South Wharf Receiving Station was at its height. In the photograph on the left, the yellow line shows the boundaries of the site. The orange outline marks the structure which is now the forge. The pier extended 300 feet into the river, so that it could be used at any state of the tide.

Details of aerial photos courtesy of the Southwark Local History Library & Archive



South Wharf

The M.A.B. renamed this site South Wharf in 1885, as it was their South London receiving station; they set up two other wharves to transfer patients from other parts of London, which they named accordingly – North Wharf, at Blackwall on the north side of the Thames, and West Wharf, in Fulham. The Farm's address is still South Wharf today.

Smallpox to fever, and river to road

During smallpox epidemics, thousands of patients came through here each year, with road ambulances arriving and the steamers departing almost non-stop. In quieter years however, no more than a few hundred cases would come through South Wharf annually.

With the decline in smallpox, from 1913 the River Ambulance Service started being used also for receiving and transporting fever cases, such as diphtheria, scarlet and typhoid fevers. The river ambulances started to be phased out in favour of road transport, which was becoming more convenient due to motorised vehicles and improved roads. The ambulance steamers were regularly damaged in river collisions and constantly required repair – these problems contributed to their demise, and in 1930 they transported their last patients. In the same year, the London County Council took over the service from the abolished M.A.B. They continued to use South Wharf for the rest of the 1930s as a smallpox receiving station, mainly to keep suspected smallpox cases for observation and diagnosis.

Below: these stumps of wooden piling that can be seen on the foreshore would have been part of one of the pier supports.

Illustration by Sandra Doyle



The impenetrable wall

The brick wall in front of you is one of the remaining sections of the River Ambulance Receiving Station's front wall. Have a look at the row of dark bricks about two-thirds of the way up. The fifth-to-last brick from the end has the brickmaker's name, Joseph Hamblet, and the date of manufacture, 1896. The opposite side of the wall is also worth a look; its outward-curving cornice is not only ornamental, but a deterrent to climbing. What most locals remember about this site was its forbidding walls, and the mystery of what went on behind.

Opposition, ignorance and curiosity

From the start there was huge local opposition to the proposal of a smallpox receiving station here – nobody wanted this dreaded disease in their neighbourhood. According to a newspaper, 1,700 Rotherhithe residents petitioned against it, without success.

The Receiving Station remained a hidden, carefully-guarded world. As ambulances with new smallpox cases approached the street entrance, the driver would blow a whistle, signalling to the gatekeeper to open the gates, which would be hurriedly closed behind. As most staff had to live and stay on site because of the infection risk and public hostility, there was little mixing with local residents or services.

Few locals were fully aware of what went on here, and ignorance bred suspicion – as well as an occasionally dangerous curiosity. There are reports of children chasing and trying to peer into ambulances, and adults sometimes guilty of the same; a few unvaccinated individuals actually contracted smallpox through this over-inquisitiveness.

One local resident, Eileen Smith, has a nicer memory of the site. As a young child in the 1930s she would stand on the opposite side of Rotherhithe Street and wave at the people in the big brick building on the other side of the wall – who returned her greeting.



Staff and crew of the Geneva Cross, one of the ambulance steamers, c. 1902. Many of these staff would have lived here on the site; it was often difficult for them to find accommodation outside, due to the public fear of smallpox. A clerk working here was evicted from his lodgings when the landlord found out about his place of work.

Photo courtesy of Francine Payne – www.dartfordhospitalhistories.org.uk

What is – or was – smallpox?

Smallpox was a highly contagious viral disease, known for the red spots or pustules which would appear all over the face and skin. During epidemics of the most virulent form, up to 25% of those infected died. Survivors were often left scarred for life with pockmarked skin, and some were left blind or with limb deformities. Vaccination was available and had been compulsory from 1853, but many opposed compulsory vaccination or ignored it, especially the poor. There was no effective medication for smallpox; patients were simply given supportive treatment to relieve the symptoms. International vaccination campaigns eventually succeeded, with smallpox declared eradicated worldwide in 1980.

A famous local victim of smallpox was Prince Lee Boo, the Pacific Island prince who was brought to London in 1784, where he stayed in Rotherhithe. His successful introduction to London life was cut cruelly short by smallpox, to which he succumbed just five months after his arrival. His tomb can be seen in the churchyard of St Mary's, Rotherhithe.

Now return to the river and walk towards the bronze animals at the end – just before these on your right is a path alongside the wildlife garden. Look for panel no. 5 on the wooden lattice, to learn how WWII changed everything.

This history trail was created from the research and contributions of dozens of volunteers and local people, and the findings of investigations with the Thames Discovery Programme, as part of a Heritage Lottery Fund project in 2013/14. This panel is dedicated to Barry Mason, former manager of this Farm, who brought attention to the above-mentioned brick, and inspired interest in the site's history. All of the photographed objects above were found by project participants on the Rotherhithe foreshore, many alongside the Farm itself. For further information on the site's history, see www.surreydocksfarm.org.uk.

