



Surrey Docks Farm History Trail

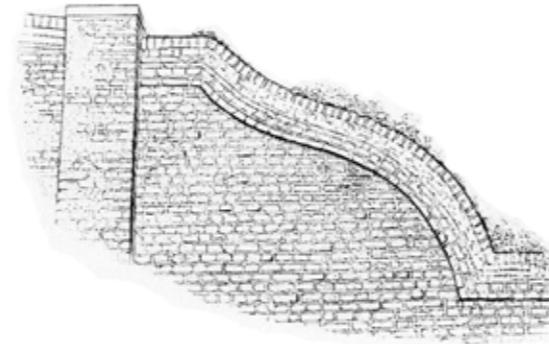
1. The Shipyard



The site now occupied by Surrey Docks Farm was once part of one of the largest shipyards in Rotherhithe, with naval and merchant ships being built here from at least the 1740s until around 1820. The shipyard's river frontage extended from here all the way down to Commercial Pier Wharf, which is where the low-rise housing ends and high-rise blocks begin, if you follow the river to your left.

Part of the shipyard's northern boundary wall remains, and can be seen if you go out of the Farm gate to your right, turn immediately left and follow the wall; halfway down the path, you'll be beside an original red brick section of the wall, which is thought to date to between 1750 - 1800. This path alongside the wall is Acorn Passage, which has long been used as a public access way leading to the Thames for those working on the river or needing to cross it.

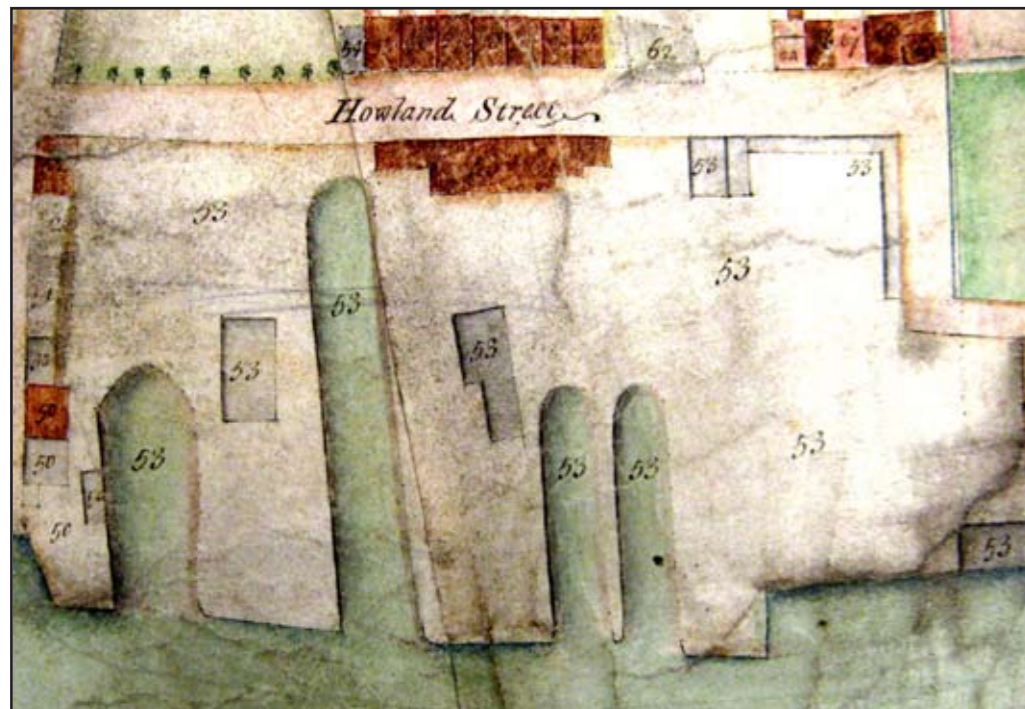
The map below shows the shipyard in 1743. The area which is now the Farm is the right-hand part of the shipyard; the dry dock and most of the slipways were where the red brick housing now is, on the opposite side of the Farm.



Above: detail of old shipyard wall
Illustration by Sandra Doyle

The shipbuilders: Stanton, Wells and the Barnards

Wells and Stanton are listed as the occupiers of this shipyard in 1743. Thomas Stanton built several ships here under his own name, as well as some larger ships in partnership with the long-established Wells shipbuilding family, who had their own yard in Deptford. The painting on the right is thought to depict the shipyard in 1762, around the time that Stanton was building his last ship here.



Detail of 1743 plan of the Duke of Bedford's Redriff Estate, showing the full shipyard. This is described as 'a large dock yard with 3 launces and one repairing dock, a large brick house, saw pitt house, storehouses etc'.
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The Wells family then took over the yard in the mid-1760s. They had over 30 productive years here, building large numbers of ships for the East India Company and the Royal Navy. The shipyard had a double dry dock which allowed two vessels to be worked on at the same time.

The next occupants, from around 1798-99, were the Barnards, another established shipbuilding family, who took on this site in addition to their Deptford shipyard. At this time the business was headed by Frances Barnard, who took over management with her sons after her husband William died. Frances was one of the few women to be a senior partner in a Thames shipbuilding firm.

Part of the shipyard was used for making masts and spars; a tall mast house stood on the site of Barnards House, the modern red brick block on the other side of the Farm. But orders for the wooden sailing ships that the Barnards specialised in were declining, and shipbuilding was changing and moving out of Rotherhithe. By 1818 they were no longer using the part of the site which is now the Farm, and they probably abandoned the rest of the shipyard by the 1840s.

The ships: Augusta, America, Amazon, Exeter, Terrible, Invincible, Hunter, Thunderer ...

These are the names of just a few of the ships that were built here; there were probably well over 100 in total. Perhaps the most famous was *HMS Carcass*, built by Stanton in 1759 as a bomb vessel. Because of its strength it was converted for use in an Arctic exploratory expedition. This turned out to be an eventful voyage that is remembered today thanks to its 14-year-old midshipman,

Horatio Nelson. An incident in which Nelson confronted a polar bear in an attempt to obtain a bear skin was later made famous in the painting shown right. The *Carcass* can be seen in the background of the scene, firing a cannon in an attempt to scare off the bear.

A more typical example of one of the ships built here was the *Exeter*, completed by Wells in 1792. This was an East Indiaman, designed for the long but lucrative journeys to Asia and the Orient. In her productive but fairly short life of around 20 years, the *Exeter* not only made eight voyages to Bombay and China, but also captured a French frigate and was later involved in a minor battle of the Napoleonic wars that succeeded in chasing off a French squadron.

Right: *Nelson and the Bear* by Richard Westall
© National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London



Signs of shipbuilding

The shape of the Farm's site, and the position of the road around it, is due to its history as a shipyard. Initially, the site was smaller and bounded by Howland Street, as the map on the left shows. The shipyard expanded inland, diverting the road further to the west, and this explains the sharp bend in Rotherhithe Street around the Farm. (This road changed name several times - becoming Queen Street and then Trinity Street, before becoming Rotherhithe Street). The old route of Howland Street now runs right through the middle of the Farm. Another reminder of the shipyard that was here is the naming of local buildings after the shipbuilders, such as Barnards House next door and Stanton House just along Rotherhithe Street.

While there is little to see on the land to tell us that shipbuilding once went on here, the foreshore is still littered with evidence of this industry. At low tide you can see scatterings of handmade ship nails, horseshoe-shaped ship staples, bolts and other ironware, all left behind from when ships were built - and probably also broken up here.

... and of shipbreaking

Most shipbuilders of this time also became, by necessity, shipbreakers. By 1800 fresh timber was becoming scarce, so old ships were broken up on the foreshores of shipyards, with their valuable timbers re-used in new ships, for furniture or in buildings. This is very likely to have happened here. Areas where this may have been carried out can be seen just to the left and right of the Farm's foreshore, where piles of bricks, chalk, broken pottery, and even the floor planking and timbers from Thames sailing barges, are all compacted together in the mud. All these materials would have been deliberately dumped on the foreshore to create a solid working surface for breaking up ships, as well as loading and unloading barges. On the foreshore just to the south of the Farm's site, some re-used ship timbers can be seen, forming part of what may have been a series of slipways.

Now walk to your left along the Farm's river frontage to panel no. 2, on the brick pillar just to the right of the path, to find out what happened here next.



Detail of *A Shipyard on the Thames* by John Cleveley the Elder, 1762. This painting is thought to depict the shipyard here. The site which is now the Farm is to the right of the ship being built, where a few buildings and stacks of timber can be seen. To the far left, the row of trees with ship masts behind probably represents Howland Great Wet Dock, now Greenland Dock.

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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 at the Farm in 2013/14. All of the photographed objects on this panel were found by project participants on the Rotherhithe foreshore, many alongside the Farm itself. Further information and resources on the site's history are available - see www.surreydocksfarm.org.uk.

