

London ahoy

Tigers, elephants, spices and tea from far-flung places have all journeyed up the River Thames, but it's the naval veterans, merchants and seamen for whom this area was home who made the London docklands what they were, finds Carla Passino

Illustrated by Fred van Deelen

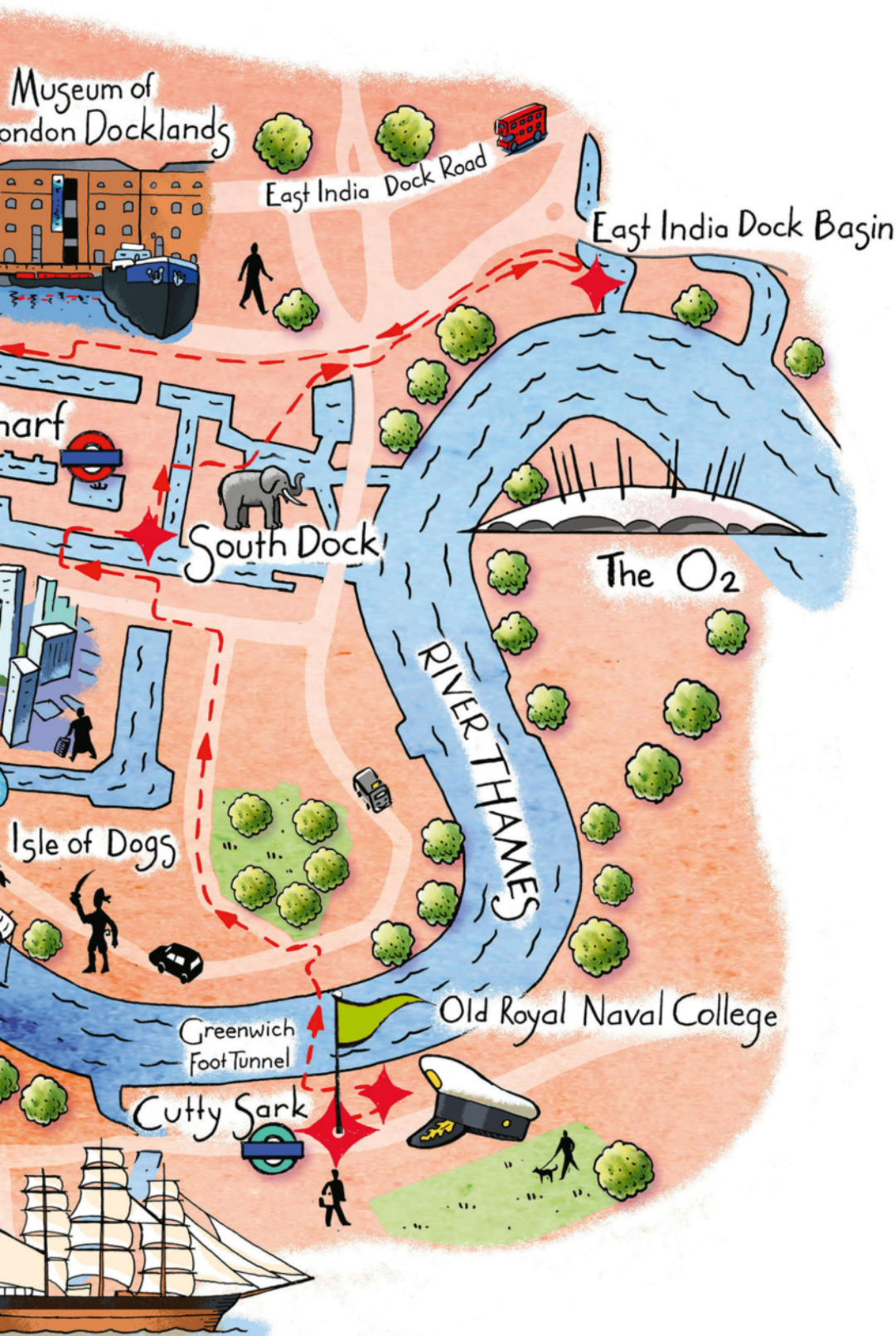
AS dawn broke on September 5, 1866, two clippers raced up the Channel, sea foam dancing against their graceful hulls as the wind filled their sails and pushed them towards London at a jaw-dropping 15 knots. Fierce betting on what *The Daily Telegraph* called 'the Derby of all our seaports'—a 16,000-mile contest for the crown of fastest ship to bring home the new season's tea from China—favoured the mighty *Ariel* and there she was, the first to reach Deal, in Kent. But tide neither waits nor hurries for anyone: held back by the Thames itself outside the East India Docks, *Ariel* saw the lighter *Taeping* sail towards the London Docks and victory. The real winner, however, was London itself:

once again, it had asserted its dominance as the world's greatest port—despite being about 30 miles inland.

Seafaring heritage has shaped the city and nowhere more so than in the Docklands and Greenwich. On a dry dock off Greenwich Pier, the sleek hull and slender masts of another tea clipper, *Cutty Sark*, emerge from the embrace of a sinuous glass canopy, rising like a phoenix from the ashes of the fire that engulfed her during a 2007 renovation. The blaze was the latest of several blows that had dogged the clipper since her early days. Built in 1869 to part the waves at more than 17 knots, she had looked set to beat rival *Thermopylae* in the tea race of 1872—until she lost her rudder in a storm. Capt George

Moodie had the carpenter fashion a new rudder from what he could find on board and *Cutty Sark* eventually reached London seven days behind *Thermopylae*—still a feat, but not quite the record she had been designed for. Worse, her tea-trading days were numbered: with the Suez Canal open, steam ships promised a quicker service than any sailboat.

Cutty Sark had to carry coal, jute and even mail before she hit on the wool trade and the inspired captainship of Richard Woodget. Racing her from Australia to London, he established her reputation as the world's fastest clipper: together, they braved raging storms and wove their way through icebergs, taking their revenge on *Thermopylae*



and even managing to overtake a steam ship (*Britannia*) in July 1889.

The year in which *Cutty Sark* was built also witnessed another dramatic change in London's maritime history: the closure of Sir Christopher Wren's Royal Hospital for Seamen in Greenwich (now the Old Royal Naval College). At its busiest, the hospital had hosted more than 2,700 veterans with

strict rules to keep everyone in line—those who misbehaved had to wear their uniforms inside out. For a time, the pensioners dined in style under Britain's own 'Sistine Chapel', a fanciful homage to monarchs, scientific advancements and naval triumphs completed by Sir James Thornhill in 1727. Story has it Thornhill was so taken by his Painted Hall that he nearly broke his neck by stepping

back to admire it; he was saved, according to Edward Walford's *Old and New London*, 'by some person defacing a portion of his work, thus causing the painter to rush forward'. Surprisingly, funding for the Hall—which later turned into the country's first Naval Art Gallery, a precursor to Greenwich's National Maritime Museum—came from the pockets of a pirate, William Kidd. He was hanged in 1701 at Wapping's Execution Dock and the proceeds from the sale of his possessions (more than £6,400) were gifted to the hospital.

'The Royal Hospital for Seamen in Greenwich had strict rules to keep everyone in line—those who misbehaved had to wear their uniforms inside out'

If naval veterans were taken care of, the country showed less love to common seamen, many of whom piled into London's Sailortown, the knot of lanes around Ratcliff Highway (now The Highway). Walking past the crop of modern buildings that flank the north bank of the Thames, it's hard to imagine the lodging houses, taverns and brothels, as well as the sellers of ropes, sails and nautical instruments, that lined these streets. Prejudice and the shadow of the Ratcliff Highway murders—which saw two households killed in December 1811, the only suspect dying by suicide and the authorities all too happy to pin the misdeeds on him—painted the area as a den of iniquity. 'For fully a century,' wrote Cicely Fox Smith in her 1923 *Sailor Town Days*, Ratcliff Highway 'enjoyed the reputation of being one of the toughest streets in the world'. However, it was also a vibrant, multicultural place, 'the Regent Street of London sailors,' according to Walford, who was much taken with the local wild-beast shops: 'The yards in the neighbourhood are crammed with lions, hyenas, pelicans, tigers, and other animals in demand among the proprietors of menageries.' Cohabitation wasn't always smooth: in 1857, a tiger escaped from Charles Jamrach's emporium, seizing a child in its jaws. Jamrach rescued the boy, but the ungrateful parents sued him, prompting him to say: 'There was a lawyer, as well as a tiger, inside the tiger's skin.'

Exotic animals passed through the Port of London as late as the 1960s—a 1968 →

photograph captures the moment elephants Sally, Leila, Mary and Camella returned from South Africa to the West India Docks. They were a marginally more unusual cargo in a place that handled almost every conceivable manner of merchandise, from wine and spirits (eight million gallons in 1923 alone) to ostrich feathers and bales of spices ‘scented like some caravan winding across the deserts,’ according to Fox Smith.

London’s first properly regulated quays were established in 1559, but when maritime trade exploded in the 18th century, they proved inadequate: such was the traffic that water jams were common and ships took months to offload their cargo, much to the joy of the thieves—or, as Fox Smith called them, ‘river pirates’—that plied their pilfering trade along the Thames. Furious merchants called for new docks and eventually got them: first came the West India Docks in 1802, flush with sugar, coffee and rum, with most of the rest following by 1880.

The docks were a world apart, where the sky was a jigsaw puzzle of blue among a forest of masts, a mosaic of flags and ‘tall chimneys

vomiting clouds of black smoke,’ as Henry Mayhew wrote in *London Labour and the London Poor* (in 1889, the West India dockers, wising up to their condition, would go on a massive strike). It’s a far cry from today’s tumble of flowerbeds, tree-lined canals, towering Canary Wharf skyscrapers and quiet basins. But there’s the odd boat in the water

‘The Docklands has found a new lease of life as office, shopping and residential areas’

(or, at 21, Wapping Lane, a building reminiscent of one), plus converted warehouses, the ghost of Tobacco Dock, now an event space, and, by the Hermitage Basin, Wendy Taylor’s *Rope Circle* sculpture to fly the flag for the maritime past and the Museum of London Docklands to keep the stories alive.

For Walford, ‘in no single spot of London, not even at the Bank, could so vivid an impression of the vast wealth of England be obtained

as at the Docks. Here roll casks of Burgundy... there by their side are chests of tea, marked all over with turnpike-gate characters... and near them bales of exquisite silk from Yokohama’. Alas, it was not to last. By the time Camella and her fellow elephants alighted at the West India Docks in 1968, container shipping had become popular and the docks soon closed one by one, turning the area into a derelict collection of dilapidated warehouses. There was one last bang: in 1970, activists campaigning for better living conditions declared the Isle of Dogs’ independence from the UK. It was a *boutade*, but it worked: with huge international interest (their leader, Ted Johns, was interviewed by Walter Cronkite, who in 1963 had broken the news of John F. Kennedy’s assassination), the borough of Tower Hamlets undertook some much needed improvements.

Much has changed since then, with the Docklands finding a new lease of life as a combination of office, shopping and residential areas. But look carefully and you’ll see that, even today, many of the buildings turn their back to London, facing towards the Thames to catch a whisper of the sea. 🌊

At home in maritime London



Wapping, £1.25 million

Set in a converted gunpowder warehouse, this 1,450sq ft apartment takes in glorious views of the Thames from its floor-to-ceiling windows. The living area is open plan and one of the two bedrooms has a concealed work-from-home area. *Knight Frank* (020-7480 4475; www.knightfrank.com)



Greenwich, £3 million

Built in 1791, this Grade II-listed townhouse has it all: more than 3,000sq ft of accommodation, original features and Juliet balconies offering views of Greenwich Park, plus a landscaped garden at the rear. *Hamptons* (020-3151 7294; www.hamptons.co.uk)



Greenwich, £2 million

This Grade II-listed house close to the Royal Park is perfect for someone in search of a project. With 3,281sq ft of accommodation, six bedrooms and a private garden, it has plenty of potential, but requires complete renovation. *JLL* (020-3763 4716; <https://residential.jll.co.uk>)