

**u3a Bike Rides
Greenwich and Bermondsey
Friday 24th October 2025**

The group of riders assembled at Peckham Library and we started by welcoming Keitha to her first ride with us. Welcome Keitha!

Group photo taken, we proceeded in two groups via Burgess Park, Folkestone Gardens and Deptford Creek to Greenwich, then met up for coffee at The Old Brewery, arriving at 11 o'clock, the opening time.



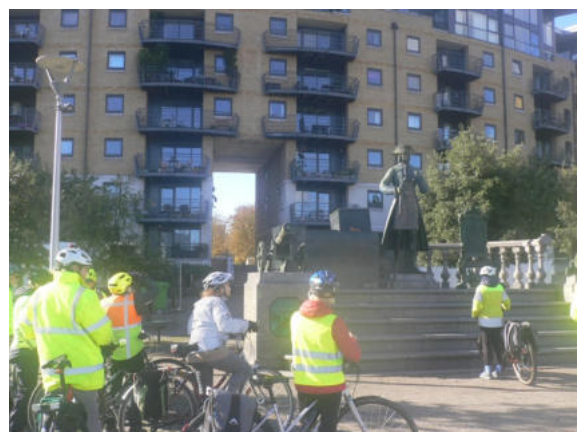
As we set out we saw a huge naval vessel, Dutch, according to its ensign flying from the stern. It appeared to be flat-bottomed – some sort of landing craft? There was a helicopter on the aft deck.

Heading up-river, Alex drew our attention to the site of the Greenwich Steam Ferry, with the large ramps visible on both banks of the river, and there was an information board.

Our next point of interest was the statue of Peter the Great.

Leaving Russia in 1696, with the so-called Grand Embassy (a large Russian delegation whose purpose was to find allies for the war with Turkey), Peter visited Prussia and Holland and arrived in England in 1698 where he studied the latest advances in shipbuilding and industry.

He stayed at Sayes Court, a large, elegantly furnished house provided for him by King William III; this was demolished in 1728.



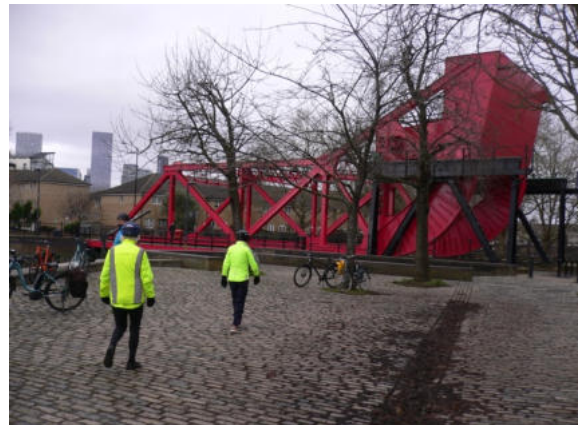


Continuing the ride, we passed the Dog and Bell Pub, with its colourful floral wall.

At Sayes Court Park, we stopped to look at an old mulberry tree that is said to have been planted by Peter the Great in 1698.

Then on to Foreshore and to the Thames path leading us to South Dock and the river lock; this lock provides the only passage from the docks into the river. We continued on to Greenland Dock and the Tide Gauge House, formerly used to check the river level before opening the lock gates, which are now not functional.

Further on we pass the Surrey Docks Farm, then left the river and continued on along Rotherhithe Street. This brought us to Surrey Water and the Rotherhithe Street bridge, built in the 1930s to replace an earlier bridge. This spans the original entrance to the Grand Surrey Canal and the Commercial Docks. To our left is Surrey Basin Lock and Surrey Basin.



This design of bridge is described as a "Scherzer rolling bascule lift bridges" after the American engineer William Donald Scherzer who refined the bascule design into the rolling lift bridge.

The original Bascule design (for example, Tower Bridge) used a single large axle, whereas the rolling lift bridge has a weighted counterbalance that rolls back on a hinge, with a rack and pinion to prevent slippage. There is a video showing the bridge opening at:

<https://www.mfoot.com/blog/2016/06/26/historic-remnants-1-the-bascule-bridges-of-rotherhithe-and-surrey-quays/>

Beneath our feet is the Thames Tunnel, some 75 feet below. Given its length (1.5 km), ventilation is essential. There are four ventilation shafts: two topped by cupolas and two plain ventilators set back from the river.



The cupolas have staircases which once allowed pedestrian access to the tunnel, but they were closed due to damage in the Second World War and have never reopened.

Rotherhithe was famous for its shipbuilding, ship-repair and ship-breaking businesses. There was a large dry dock operating near here by 1739-46, the John Beatson yard, which was Rotherhithe's best known shipbreaker. In 1838 "HMS Temeraire", immortalised in the painting by JMW Turner, was broken up here.

Further on we arrived at Cumberland Wharf, the approximate site from which the "Mayflower" set sail to America in 1620. On its return, the ship was left to rot in the river.

Nearby stands a curious life-sized statue, "Sunshine Weekly and the Pilgrim's Pocket". It depicts a boy reading a 1930's comic and an astonished 17th century Pilgrim listening to him. In the pilgrim's pocket is an A-Z, dated 1620! A frisky Staffordshire Bull terrier clamours for attention. The statue reflects the area's past connection to the Pilgrims and was erected by the Mayflower Tenants Association in 1991.



The next stop was at the Brunel Museum, Alongside are the Rotherhithe Engine House and the boiler house, designed by Sir Marc Isambard Brunel (father of Isambard Kingdom Brunel). These were part of the infrastructure of the Thames Tunnel and were used to power a pump required to keep the Thames Tunnel free of water.



This was the first tunnel to be built under a navigable river. During the 18 years it took to complete (in 1843); ten workers died and Isambard Brunel nearly died when the river broke through the tunnel roof and flooded the tunnel.

We pondered on the thought that - had he drowned - very many great structures he subsequently built would probably not have been built!

The tunnel was designed for use by horse-drawn carriages, accessed by a spiral slope but this proved to be impracticable. It was then used as a pedestrian route. In 1869 it was converted into a railway tunnel for the East London line which, since 2010, has been part of the London Overground railway network, so we've all travelled through it at some time.



Nearby, the Mayflower pub claims to be the oldest pub on the Thames. There is a notice inside which reads as follows: "UNATTENDED CHILDREN WILL BE SOLD TO THE LOCAL WORKHOUSE". It's the only pub in the UK where you can buy U.S. stamps!

There is also a book that records the names of all American visitors who are descendants of the 100 Pilgrim Fathers, the Puritans who left because they felt that the country was in an ungodly state.

By chance, we stopped to chat with two ladies from the U.S. and learned that they were on their way to the pub, with their documentation, to enter their names in the book!! Now, what were the chances of that then???



Across the road is the 18th-century St Mary's Church, the local C. of E. parish church in Rotherhithe which is particularly proud of its connections with the Pilgrim Fathers. Christopher Jones (captain of the Mayflower) is buried in an unmarked grave in the graveyard.

In 1838, when the Temeraire was broken up, some of her timbers were used to build a communion table and two bishop's chairs for the church.



Continuing on down-river we came to St Marychurch Street and the 3-storey building of St Mary Rotherhithe free school, a charity school founded in 1613 for the education of the sons of seafarers and supported by voluntary contributions. The statues of two scholars stand on plinths.



It is thought to be the first elementary school in London. Originally located next to the church of St Mary the Virgin, it was moved to its current location in 1797.

Nearby is a tiny building (1821), the Rotherhithe Watch House. This was established as a base for constables of St Mary's Parish in 1821 and was provided with a beadle (a parish constable associated with the church), a constable and 14 watchmen.

They operated in shifts during the day and night, to guard against body snatchers visiting the graveyard. There is a cell in the basement beneath the building, where suspects could be held.





From here we headed upriver on the Thames Path along Bermondsey Wall to Kings Stairs Gardens, and the Angel Pub; here Alex explained why the pub acquired this name. And from upstairs, apparently, there is the best view of the Thames, with views in both directions.



“Dr Salter's Daydream” is here, installed in 1991, and which commemorates the Salter family. An elderly Dr Salter sits on a granite bench looking towards his daughter, Joyce. Nearby, a cat sits on the wall; Ada stands with her spade in hand.

This is a “daydream” because Dr Salter in old age is remembering his young daughter when she was still alive (Joyce died age 8 from scarlet fever). Ada is shown holding a spade because she was very active in the “beautification” of Bermondsey through tree planting schemes. In 1920, Alfred was the local MP, Ada was Mayor of Bermondsey.

In 2011 the sculpture was stolen. In 2014 the local community campaigned and raised funds to replace it. This time the new Dr Salter's Daydream included a sculpture of his wife Ada (omitted from the original), to celebrate the work of this couple who dedicated their lives to helping to improve living conditions for the local community.

Directly opposite are the excavated foundations of King Edward III Manor House dating from the 14th century. At that time the house was surrounded by a moat on three sides and the River Thames on the remaining side.

We then turned away from the river and after a short ride arrived at Southwark Park, our lunch stop.

By way of Burgess Park we made our respective ways back to Brockwell or Peckham.

Thank you to Mary as co-leader on this ride and to Eunice and Tacey, the back markers, to see us safely on our ride which all agreed took us to a part of the Thames steeped in history.



Riders: *Alex Murdock. Brian Heatley Chris Booth. Daniela Walther. David Rosenfeld. Eunice Zeffertt Irene Skiadopoulou. John Clements. Judy Coutinho. Keitha Wakefield Martin Dale. Mary Burke. Roman Bednarz. Tacey Kobayashi, Valerie Greenfield,*

Distance: 18 miles, 4 hours.

Acknowledgement: source material from Wikipedia

Ride Leader: John Clements

Report: John Clements 25th October 2025

NOTES

Peter the Great set off to Europe in 1696 on the so-called Grand Embassy (a large Russian delegation whose purpose was to find allies for the war with Turkey), Peter travelled incognito under the pseudonym of Pyotr Mikhailov. In Prussia, the Tsar studied artillery and received a certificate as a firearms master, and in Holland he learned the craft of shipbuilding by working at the bustling Dutch docks. Then he set off to England to study the latest advances in shipbuilding and industry. In London, the young Tsar visited the Houses of Parliament, and was quite displeased with what he heard as he listened to a session of the House of Commons; this autocratic Russian monarch could not understand how the common folk would dare to publicly discuss and criticize the policies of their sovereign. As he travelled about Europe, Peter visited factories and libraries, listened to lectures at universities, and caroused with comrades, but this educational and entertaining voyage was cut short after 18 months by news of a revolt in Moscow. For the rest of his life, Peter the Great retained his love of knowledge, new technology, and of learned people, as is evidenced by his personal belongings, library and the interiors of his palaces.

At the Brunel museum you can learn about the **Thames Tunnel**, marked by this small building but now no longer easily visible. This tunnel was the world's first major underwater thoroughfare. The work started in 1825 and was completed as a pedestrian walkway and underwater shopping arcade in 1843. It was sold to the East London Railway in 1865, and the tunnel is now part of the London Underground and inaccessible to pedestrians. If you take a train to Wapping the empty shops are faintly visible through the carriage windows, and Brunel's original portico can be seen at Wapping Station.

Work on the tunnel was supervised by Sir Marc Isambard Brunel with his son Isambard as Chief Engineer: a cylindrical brick shaft 50ft in diameter was constructed above ground to a height of 42ft at a rate of 1000 bricks per bricklayer per day. The shaft, which can be seen next to the engine house, was then sunk at 6 inches per day, and once the correct depth was reached then tunnelling started.

The success of the project was later jeopardised though the inaccuracy of geological data provided, and by corner-cutting against Brunel's protestations by the tunnel's promotion company. The resulting breach of the tunnel walls by the river caused damage and loss of life on three occasions and Isambard came close to losing his life.

In 1828, despite the introduction of a new building material (Portland cement), work was halted and the partially-built tunnel bricked up.

In 1835 the project was revived; conditions were as unpleasant and hazardous as before, with workmen suffering blindness through tunnel sickness and labouring under threat of breaching, or of asphyxiation or explosion through accumulation of marsh gas. These vicissitudes are recalled in the Engine House exhibition. However, the quality of design and workmanship are evident from its continuing use as a working railway.

The tunnel is the oldest structure in what is the oldest underground system in the world. The grand Entrance Hall is now open again after 150 years, with a new shelf suspended above the railway to separate the tunnels from the upper chamber, which is now a gallery and performance space. The walls, once decorated with frescoes, are encrusted with soot from Victorian steam locomotives, but the line of the original wooden staircase is clearly visible.

The steam engines above the Shaft were removed over a hundred years ago.

Marc Brunel's Engine House: <http://www.glias.org.uk/journals/1-c.pdf>

The Mayflower Pub has a close connection with the Pilgrim Fathers, being located on or near the original mooring point of the Mayflower ship, which set sail for America in 1620 under the command of Rotherhithe resident Captain Christopher Jones. Visitors who can prove their descent from one of the Pilgrims are invited to sign the "Descendants' Book".

Although the pub has been rebuilt over the centuries after fire and bomb damage, it has retained its character, with low timber-beamed ceilings and a cozy fireplace. Much of the current traditional interior was added in a 1958 refurbishment.

Reflecting its unique American ties, the Mayflower pub is the only pub in the UK licensed to sell both US and UK postage stamps.

There is a large outdoor decked area sits on stilts directly over the Thames, offering a great spot to enjoy a drink and a meal while giving uninterrupted river views. However, at high tide, sitting at the edge you may get your wet feet!

(Alex's suggestion for an alternative lunch venue: The Servewell Café, Bermondsey)