

u3a Bike Rides

The route of the Grand Surrey Canal

Friday 14th February 2025

From Peckham Library, to Burgess Park, Greenland Dock, the Russia Dock Woodlands and on to Salt Quay and the River Thames, the Grand Surrey Canal runs for four miles.

Although the canal no longer exists, its imprint on the landscape is still evident in places and we set out to find these.

The canal construction started in 1801 from Salt Quay and opened as far as the Old Kent Road in 1807, to Camberwell in 1810, and then via Glengall Wharf to Peckham in 1826. Its main purpose was to transport imported cargo, primarily timber (“deal”) from the Surrey Commercial Docks.

The starting point for our ride was Peckham Square where 200 years ago work was in progress to build Peckham Dock to link via Glengall Wharf to the Camberwell branch (1810), on to the Old Kent Road (1807), to the Surrey Commercial Docks. and then to Salt Quay on the Thames (1801)

Setting out from Peckham along the much-used Surrey Linear Canal Path there was plenty of evidence of the canal, including parts of the stone canal wharf and the two fine bridges (1860).

At the site of Glengall Wharf we turned into Burgess Park along the route of the Camberwell branch and on to the “bridge to nowhere” within the park itself. Noting its size, it is clear that this canal is much wider than, for example, the Regents Canal.

This is because the boats used on this canal were the Thames sailing barges, large spritsail rigged boats, drawing under 3 feet, used with the main mast lowered. They were capable of carrying large loads, 80 to 120 tons or more.

We returned to the site of Glengall Dock. From here, the route of the canal is lost as it passes beneath the Shugard Storage facility, and other buildings and across the Old Kent Road. We rejoined the route by Millwall Stadium, on the Surrey Canal Road.

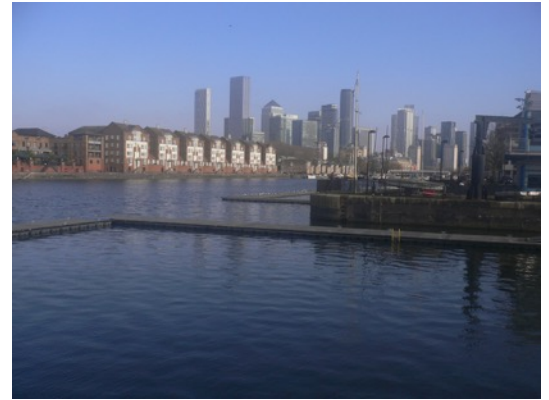


A short detour for coffee at Sylva's café in Folkestone Park, a very pleasant venue and then a return to Surrey Canal Road, under the rail bridge and into Deptford Park; the canal would have run diagonally across the park, before turning north. Other clues are two road bridges that at one time crossed the canal, but now serve no purpose.



We picked up the route again when we crossed the bridge (on Oxestall Road) which would have crossed the canal; a left turn took us down to the Platinum Jubilee Gardens where the original path of the canal is very evident.

At the end of the gardens is Plough Way and the passage that took us through to Greenland Dock at the Water Sports Centre, at the point that the canal entered the dock. Directly opposite is the canal continuation, heading into the Russia Dock Woodlands.



We circled **Greenland Dock** which is the oldest of London's riverside docks, and on past the Moby Dick pub that led to the Russia Dock; the remains of one side of the dock are very evident here.



A short ride through Russia Dock Woodlands and on to man-made Stave Hill for a view of the dockland area, and to look at the bronze relief of the layout of docks

Continuing on through Russia Dock Woodland we came to Globe Pond, once larger but now a wonderful nature reserve. And so we arrived at Salt Quay which was the original entrance to the canal.



Here is one of the four Scherzer rolling bascule bridges to be found along the River Thames. From there we follow the route past Surrey Water to Canada Water and on to Southwark Park, and the Pavilion Café our final destination and our solitary sighting of a heron.

Time: about 4½ hours **Distance:** about 16 miles

Riders: Alex Murdock. Gerry Gavigan, Jan Rae. Jane Antos. Joe Antos. John Clements. John Davies. Mary Burke, Patrick Mulher,. Penny Bateman, Peter J LeVair.

Ride leader: John Clements

Report and photos by John; . 15th February 2025

Acknowledgement: source material from Rotherhithe Blog and Wikipedia



Notes: **Greenland Dock** is the oldest of London's riverside docks. It was part of the Surrey Commercial Docks, most of which have by now been filled in. Greenland Dock is now used purely for recreational purposes; it is one of only two functioning enclosed docks on the south bank of the river.

The dock was originally laid out between 1695 and 1699 on land owned by the aristocratic Russell family, the 1st Duke of Bedford, who was given the land by a wealthy landowner, John Howland, as part of a wedding dowry for his daughter Elizabeth.

They immediately set about "improving" the rural property, low marshy ground surrounded by fields, and obtained parliamentary permission to build a large dock capable of accommodating around 120 ships. It was named the Howland Great Wet Dock in honour of John Howland and designed to refit East India ships, and a haven for ship in stormy weather.

South Dock is the other surviving dock in the former Surrey Commercial Docks. It was built in 1807–1811 just south of the larger Greenland Dock, to which it is connected by a channel now known as the Greenland Cut; South Dock has a lock giving access to the River Thames. Originally named the *East Country Dock*, it was renamed in 1850 when the Surrey Commercial Dock Company purchased and enlarged it. Timber and grain were the main products imported and exported in the dock.

The dock was seriously damaged by German attacks in World War II when the area was heavily bombed by the Luftwaffe.

Due to bomb damage in Greenland Dock, South Dock became the only exit from that dock. In 1944 it was emptied of shipping, drained and used for the construction of concrete sections for the Mulberry Harbours used on D-Day.

Here is a map of the Surrey Commercial Docks as they were in the 1930s, and as shown on the bronze relief on Stave Hill. Only Greenland Dock and South Dock remain unchanged. Others are much reduced in size or have disappeared completely but their footprint can still be seen.

