

u3a Bike Rides
Surrey Commercial Docks
Friday 13th March 2026

The riders assembled at the Clock Café in Dulwich Park for this ride on a cold but dry morning.

We welcomed Josie for her first ride with us and got lined up for the group photo by an obliging dog walker headed for the café.

Leaving the park we headed up to Dulwich Library and down the “Spine” to Peckham Library. From there we followed the canal path to Burgess Park and Glengall Road.

On a familiar route past Millwall Stadium, through Folkestone Garden, with a brief stop along the way to look at some of the 878 railway arches that carry the Southeastern trains from London Bridge to Greenwich.

And then on to Deptford, with coffee at the Old Brewery Café in Greenwich Park. It was just warm enough to sit outside, sheltered from quite a cold westerly wind. It’s worth looking inside to see the copper and stainless steel cylinders that were used in the brewing process.

Pausing at the impressive statue of Peter the Great, we followed the Thames Path upstream to the Ahoy! Centre. This is a centre where youngsters learn to sail on the tricky tidal waters of the river.



Through Pepys Park and past the ancient mulberry tree, perhaps planted by Peter the Great.

The first of the two Rotherhithe docks is the South Dock which still has a working lock and accommodates mainly small pleasure craft.

At the lock, there is a digital display that shows the difference in height between the dock and the River Thames, important when opening the hydraulic lock gates at the entrance to South Dock.



The second dock is the much larger Greenland Dock which has no direct access to the river. Ships enter and leave through the Greenland Cut that links to the South Dock. Greenland Dock is the oldest of all London's riverside docks.

We head for the Russia Dock Woodland and climb Stave Hill for a view of the dockland area.

We found that water from overnight rain had filled the river, the docks and the ponds on the bronze relief map, very effectively revealing the extent of the Commercial Docks as they would have appeared from the 1860's until 1969 when they were closed.



Passing the wildlife area of the much-diminished Globe Pond we continued on to Salt Quay, the original entrance from the river to the Grand Surrey Canal.

Cumberland Wharf was the point of departure of the Mayflower, and also the location of the breakers yard where the "*Fighting Temeraire*", shown in JMW Turner's famous painting, ended its journey.

On past the Brunel Tunnel and Museum, the Mayflower pub, St Mary's Church and the Old Watchhouse, we arrived at Kings' Stairs Gardens, King Edward III's Manor House and the Salter statues.

We picked up the C4 Cycleway along Jamaica Road to arrive at Barton's Café, the lunch stop which has space inside and out. Those who chose to explore the café found it had a number of curious and quirky objects, and in the basement a cosy snug library with an eclectic selection of books.



Our onward route took us along Tanner Street and past Leathermarket, Trinity Square to Blackfriars Bridge Road, St George's Circus and then to Kennington and Loughborough Junction, and so home.

A big "thank you" to Jane Andrew for leading the ride, and our back markers Mary and Andrew.

Time: about 5 hours

Distance: about 18 miles

Route:

https://www.outdooractive.com/en/r/335288026?share=%7E33y9ttfg%244ossIsf3&utm_source=unknown&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=user-shared-social-content

Riders:

Alex Murdock, Andrew Burke, Caroline Strallen, Jane Andrew, Jeremy Burke, John Clements, Josie Ralph, Joyce Webb, Julia Carter, Julie Stent, Mark Stones, Martin Dale, Mary Burke, Patrick Mulhern, Peter J LeVair.

Report: John, 15th March 2026

Acknowledgements: source material from Rotherhithe Blog, the Thames & Dockland History Group and Wikipedia

Notes

South Dock is one of two surviving docks 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. It was emptied of shipping in 1944, drained and used for the construction of concrete sections for the Mulberry Harbours used on D-Day.



The Howland Great Wet Dock, late 17th century

Greenland Dock is the oldest of London's riverside wet docks and developed from a much older dock, the Howland Great Wet Dock. 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, as shown in the pen and ink sketch above.

In more recent times, Greenland Dock was an important dock in the Surrey Commercial Dock complex, most of which have by now been filled in. Greenland Dock is now used purely for commercial vessels and for recreational purposes at the Water Sports Centre.

If you are interested to learn more, I suggest the "Short history of the Surrey Commercial Docks" by Stuart Rankin, to be found at:

<https://www.docklandshistorygroup.org.uk/RankinSurreyDocks.pdf>