



Why were London's docks built?

Before the 17th century, London did not really extend eastwards beyond the Tower of London. Ships arrived in the Pool of London, near the Tower, and waited to be unloaded.

The River Thames is tidal so even large ships could travel quite far upstream to deliver their cargoes. Wooden wharves and warehouses were built to receive the goods and to collect duty on them for the City of London and the monarch.

As the river became increasingly overcrowded in the late 18th and early 19th century, the first docks began to be built. The first was the West India Dock. London's docks continued to develop throughout the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries.

Trade on the River Thames before the docks were built

This picture of the Pool of London shows how overcrowded the port had become by the beginning of the 19th century. As trade with the East Indies increased, East India Company ships with their cargoes of spices, tea and cloth had to moor at Deptford and transported their goods on covered barges as there was no room for the large ships upriver. The river was also becoming shallower due to waste material from the city.

In 1558, 20 'Legal Quays' were established along the north bank of the Thames between London Bridge and the Tower of London. Legal Quays were where all foreign goods had to be landed and checked.

These quays were privately owned so organised development of a port for London was difficult. They were also hard to get to as London's medieval streets were narrow and inaccessible to carts. By the 1790s, ships could wait three months to unload. Often goods were left on the wharves where they could be stolen or damaged by the weather.



Thomas Luny, *The Pool of London*, 1801–1810

How did the West Indies trade help build the docks?

During the mid-17th century, 200,000 British people (4% of the population) emigrated to the Caribbean. They acquired large estates called plantations and grew sugar using slave labour. This plantation token is made of tin stamped with an image of James II on one side and a figure on horseback on the other. When the price of tin dropped in England, the metal was used to make coins and tokens for use in the West Indian and American colonies.

By 1800 about a quarter of Britain's income came from imports from the West Indies, mainly from sugar, coffee and rum. Rum had to be cleared through customs within 30 days of arriving in London, so a three month wait for unloading was a problem. Customs officers could seize the rum if it had not been cleared so all the profits from the voyage would be lost.

In 1796 the government set up committees to inquire into the state of London's port. In 1799 the West India Dock Act was passed. The initial plan was for a new dock at Wapping, but this would have meant pulling down over 1,000 houses before the dock could be built.

Further downstream at the north end of the Isle of Dogs the river was deeper and nobody lived on the land. In July 1800 excavations for the new dock began. Huge warehouses were built for produce from the West Indies, and security was provided by the West India Dock Company's own police force. The company was given a 20-year **monopoly** (agreement that no other London company could import goods from the West Indies) on London's West India trade. As a result, the company could be sure of success.

The West India Docks could only be used by ships from the West Indies so the Pool of London remained overcrowded.



Plantation token, 17th century

Were the Port of London's problems over after the West India Docks were built?

This is a model of the *Falmouth* East Indiaman in 1764. It shows the ship as she would have looked on her return voyage from China, loaded with tea, silk, china and spices. The East India Company decided that the Brunswick Dock at Blackwall, where ships like the *Falmouth* were fitted out, was unsuitable for storing **cargo** (the goods that arrived on the ships). So the company built their own docks that opened in 1806.

The company did not need many warehouses at the docks as cargoes were taken straight to their warehouses in the City. Instead, the company built private toll roads like Commercial Road and East India Dock Road to carry traffic to and from the docks.

In 1800 the London Dock Company was formed and the original plan for the docks in Wapping went ahead in 1801. Brandy, wine and tobacco were some of the cargoes stored in their warehouses.



Model of the *Falmouth* East Indiaman

Tea, china and cloth were loaded in the lower part of the ships with casks of water, salted meat, beer, wine and rum for the crew. Bread and biscuits were stored higher up to protect them from damp.

What other docks were built



W Ranwell's watercolour of the building of St Katharine Dock, 1828

This painting shows St Katharine Dock under construction in 1828. The St Katharine Dock Company was formed to build a dock in the small area of land between the Tower of London and London Docks. Around 1,250 houses were pulled down and 11,000 people were made homeless. As they were tenants and did not own their homes, they were not compensated. Over 1,000 labourers, masons, bricklayers, carters and engineers were employed on the workforce. Many of the labourers came from Ireland. The docks were excavated by hand, and the result was two dock basins with warehouses built on cast-iron columns. The dock was opened in October 1828, but it was too small to take the new, larger steam-powered vessels and it was not a success.

In 1824 the West India Company and the London Dock Company's trade monopolies ended. In 1855 they built Millwall Dock, followed by the South West India Dock in 1870 and Tilbury Dock in 1886. The first of the Royal Docks – the Victoria Dock – was built by the St Katharine Dock Company in 1855. It was the first dock to be specifically designed to receive steam ships. It was also the first dock to be connected to the national railway network. The company then built the Royal Albert Dock to the east in 1880.

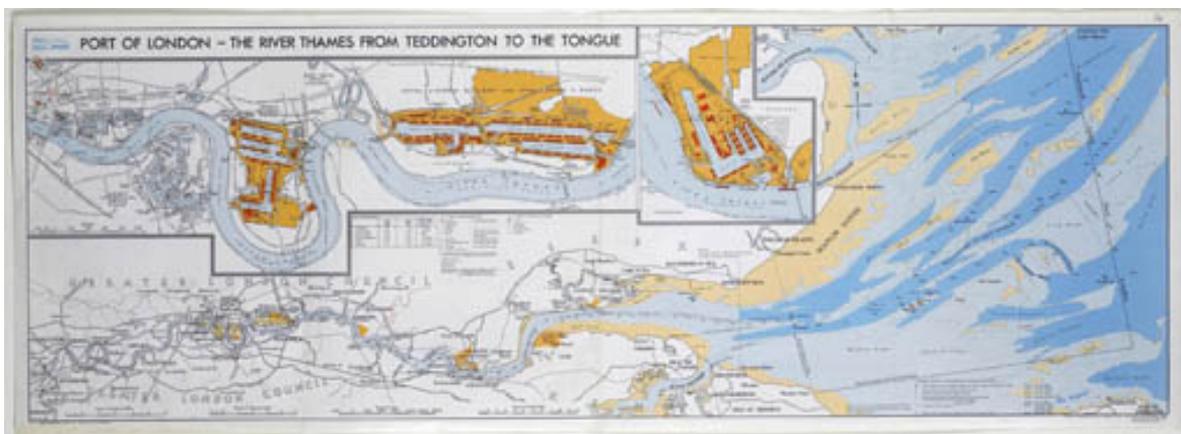
Irish labourers also helped build the canal and railway systems in England and Wales.

London's docks in the early 20th century

The full extent of London's docks can be seen in this 1966 map published by the Port of London Authority (PLA). It shows the Thames from Teddington to the Tongue. From 1909 all London's docks were managed by the PLA.

As fruit, coal, oil and refrigerated food imports increased, better facilities were needed and attention was focused on the Royal Victoria and Albert Docks. The PLA opened their first new dock in 1921 as part of this complex, and called it King George V. An access road, Silvertown Way, was added in 1934. Surrey Commercial Docks were improved in 1925.

By 1939, the PLA had added 80 acres of dock basin and 6 miles (nearly 10km) of quayside to the facilities, and had dredged the Thames channel completely to allow the passage of modern ships. Between 1920 and 1930 the volume of trade had grown from three million to eight million tons, and was increasing by 50% annually.



Map showing the River Thames from Teddington to the Tongue, PLA, 1966

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The plantation token and the model of the *Falmouth* East Indiaman mentioned in this Pocket history are on display at the Museum of London Docklands.

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