

TOUR NOTES VISIT L: LOWER LEA VALLEY

Introduction

The Lower Lea Valley has been an industrial site since Medieval times, when industry was required to be sited to the east of London, or south of the Thames. In addition to the mills, distilleries, sewerage and other industries discussed in more detail below, other industries included the famous Bow Porcelain; perfume; Congreve's rocket factory and early gasworks.

Abbey Mills Pumping Station

Abbey Mills is on the site of the tidal mills of Stratford Langthorne Abbey. London's main drainage system was constructed by the Metropolitan Board of Works, under Sir Joseph Bazalgette, after the Great Stink nudged Parliament into action. As part of that scheme, Abbey Mills pumping station was built to lift sewage from the interceptor sewers into the Northern Outfall Sewer, which took it to the River Thames at Beckton. This great building in the Venetian Gothic style, dubbed a "temple to sewage" and designated Station A, was built 1865-8 to the designs of Bazalgette and Cooper. It is cruciform in plan with decorative ironwork by Rothwell & Co of Bolton. The eight beam engines were replaced by electrically-driven centrifugal pumps in 1931-3. The two monumental chimneys were demolished during World War II, reputedly as undesirable landmarks for the Luftwaffe. Station B, was built 1891-6, followed by Station C in 1910-14, the latter currently housing diesel-driven centrifugal pumps used for pumping stormwater. Station D, by Ove Arup & Partners as engineers, was built 1970-71 to provide for storm overflows. The latest pumping station was built in 1995-7 to replace Stations A to C, with Allies & Morrison as architects..

The Northern Outfall Sewer

After the visit to Abbey Mills Pumping Station, the party will walk along the Greenway, on top of the Northern Outfall Sewer, and along part of the Bow Back Rivers (which are British Waterways' 'remainder waterway') to Three Mills. The coach will be available for anyone who does not wish to walk.

Station A was part of Bazalgette's main drainage scheme for the Metropolitan Board of Works, the Northern Outfall Sewer runs in a 5-mile long embankment from Old Ford to Beckton. Originally constructed 1859-61, with two parallel bores from Old Ford (Wick Lane) and a third east of Abbey Mills. Two more bores were added on the north side in the 1900s, reflecting the growth of the built-up area and greater concern over discharges in storms. Plate-girder bridges carry the sewer in pipes over river channels, roads and railways. The road built on top is now a public footpath, known as 'The Greenway'.

THREE MILLS

A buffet lunch will be provided at the Miller's House Visitor and Education Centre.

Milling

Three Mills stands at the head of Bow Creek, on the tidal Lea. It has been the site of milling since at least the 11th century, when the Domesday Book recorded 8 [water]mills in the manor of West Ham on the Lea in 1086. While the sites were not listed, Three Mills and Abbey Mills (see below) were almost certainly two of them. It is not known whether they were then tide mills. The area had already acquired the name '*Three Mills*' by early medieval times, when they belonged to Stratford Langthorne Abbey - though, as Jennifer Tann has shown, a '*mill*' may only have been a pair of millstones at that time. At the Dissolution of the Monasteries, the mills were sold into private hands. Stowe's *Survey of London*, published in 1598, records that the '*Bakers of Stratford*' (ie modern Bow) were allowed to take their carts into the city of London and sell their bread at three markets – provided they baked the penny loaf two ounces heavier than those baked in the City.

The site was bought in 1727 by a consortium led by Peter Lefevre, whose father was a Huguenot refugee, to set up a distillery (see below); two other members of the consortium were also of Huguenot extraction, including Daniel Bisson, who built the House Mill between two houses, hence its name. He lived in a house to the west of the mill and his son, Daniel, lived in a new house built in 1763, which was to the east of the Mill – hence the name '*House Mill*'. Both died in 1727 and the site was acquired by an MP, Philip Metcalf, who rebuilt the Clock Mill on the site of a previous mill in 1817. Until about 1840, the third mill was a windmill. In the late 19th century mills and distillery passed into the hands of J & W Nicholson, gin distillers of Clerkenwell.

Of the two mills there today, the House Mill was built in 1776 for Daniel Bisson; it was rebuilt after a fire burned it to a shell in 1802. It has a brick façade but behind is a timber structure, the rear being weatherboarded. The House Mill contains the remains of four undershot waterwheels, installed in the 19th century. Those on the east side are, at the back, 18ft 8in diameter by 2ft 11³/₄in wide and, at the front, 19ft 10¹/₂in diameter by 2ft 11in wide. Those on the west side were installed in the 1890s and are, at the back, 19ft 9in diameter by 7ft 10in wide and, at the front, 19ft 10¹/₂in diameter by 3ft 3³/₄in wide. They drove stones fitted with Fairbairn-type silent millstone machinery, of which there are some remains.

The Clock Mill was rebuilt, in stock brick, in 1817, and has a wooden clock turret with a clock of 1753 and a bell cast in 1750. At the west end, next to the turret, there are two conical drying kilns. There is a weatherboarded lucam and a wrought-iron wallcrane above barge beds in the creek. The mill contains the remains of three Poncelet waterwheels, two 20ft diameter by 4ft wide and one, between them, 19ft diameter by 2ft 7in wide.