Thames Path Walk
Section 3 north bank
Tower Bridge to Island Gardens

Version 1 : March 2011

Start: Tower Bridge (TQ336801)
Station: Clippers (St Katharine’s Pier), many bus stops, or Tower Hill or Tower Gateway tube
Finish: Island Gardens (TQ383782)
Station: Island Gardens DLR
Distance: 5 miles (8 km)

Introduction: This 5-mile section of the Thames Path National Trail follows the river eastwards on the North Bank below Tower Bridge to the Isle of Dogs, in the distinctive bend of the river that features on many London maps. Tower Bridge is the last bridge crossing before the QE2 Bridge at Dartford, but the river can be crossed under by the Greenwich Foot Tunnel on the Isle of Dogs, where the Thames Path National Trail officially ends (but see Section 4 for the extension as far as East India Dock).

The riverside along this stretch has changed from predominantly industrial to mainly residential, with a mix of converted warehouses and new apartment blocks. The sense of history is still palpable and the views are superb. Pass the places where pirates hung in chains; where Turner painted and Dickens set many of his scenes; where Brunel tasted his first success and most bitter failure; and where dockers once grafted.

The walk traces the rise, decline and regeneration of London’s great docks, which bore the brunt of the Blitz in the Second World War. Warehouses have since been converted to apartments, and cafés and new housing now line once-busy wharves. Contemporary life has also made its mark in the striking form of Canary Wharf, the Thames Barrier and the Millennium Dome.

Directions: If starting this section from the nearest station then use Tower Hill on the District & Circle line, or Tower Gateway on the DLR.

On exiting the station the Tower of London is opposite, on the other side of the main road. Unless a visit to the Tower is planned, or to enjoy the views from the aerial walkway of Tower Bridge, use the underpass to navigate this busy junction. Turn left out of Tower Hill Station and then right down the steps into the subway (note: section of the old city wall on the left). Turn left along the side of the Tower moat and follow the signs to St Katharine Docks and Tower Bridge.

Pick up the Thames Path at St Katharine’s Pier, at the foot of the Tower Bridge on the NE side of the Thames. Passing the water sculpture of Girl with a Dolphin, cross the footbridge at the entry to St. Katharine Docks.

A hospital, medieval church and many houses were demolished to make way for the docks, built in 1828. Goods as various as, tea, rubber, wool, marble, sugar, tallow, and ivory were imported here and stored in the tall warehouses. Note the narrow entrance; not able to accommodate very large ships which contributed to the dock’s decline. Abandoned after World War II, the docks were revived in the 1970s to house offices and apartments, restaurants and shops, set around a lively marina. It is still home to traditional Thames sailing barges.

Bear right after the footbridge along the pedestrianised edge of the dock, and then right (before the Dickens Inn!) to exit into St.Katharine’s Way. Walking down this road, look out on the right for a sign pointing between buildings to reach the Thames again for a short stretch. Make a small detour round the inlet, back to the road at the small roundabout junction with Kennet St. Carry on to the right along what is now Wapping High Street, a quiet cobbled street with some fine traditional riverside pubs.

The Thames can be joined again immediately after the inlet, by walking through Hermitage Gardens. Soon, near Wapping Old Stairs, make another small detour back to Wapping High Street and there turn right. Wapping Dock first appears on a map made around the time of the Great Fire of London in 1666.
Take a short detour away from the Thames, by turning right into Narrow Street. Then to reach the river again, turn right just after Sun Wharf. Carry on along the riverside to the panoramic viewpoint of the Narrow Street pub, at the entrance to Limehouse Basin. The pub was the old Dockmaster’s House as Limehouse Basin is a link to England’s canal network.

Cross the bridge at Limehouse Marina and immediately turn right to reach the Thames again. After one block make a detour back to Narrow Street and carry on, past 18th century merchants’ houses to The Grapes pub: named as ‘The Six Jolly Fellowship Porters’ in the Dickens’ novel ‘Our Mutual Friend’. It still has a wonderfully Dickensian feel.

From Narrow Street, follow signs through the arched entry to the waterfront at Duke Shore Wharf. Follow the Thames Path as it heads south along the distinctive bend of the river that defines the Isle of Dogs; an influx of lunch-time joggers announces the approach of Canary Wharf, one of London’s financial centres. There is a pier here regularly served by clipper boat trips. The tower is called “One Canada Square” and is the tallest habitable building in Britain at 244m high.

Curve around Westferry Circus. Because of construction work, take the steps up and then bear right downhill towards the roundabout. Go straight down Westferry Road and turn right after about 40 yards to rejoin the riverside path. Continue south beside the Thames, passing apartment blocks and through Sir John McDougal Gardens. At Arnhem Place make a detour, past Anrhem Wharf Primary School and turn right on to Westferry Road. Pass the Docklands Sailing and Watersport Centre on the left in the old Millwall Dock, and continue along Westferry Road. Ignore a slipway round to the river at Millwall Dock as the route isn’t open there yet. Go past a church which is now called ‘The Space’ and used for performing arts.

Just after another primary school on the left and before Spindrift Avenue, look out for a Thames Path sign to turn right down Masthouse Terrace.
The history of this area is ship building. Masthouse Terrace was where Brunel’s ‘Great Eastern’ was launched sideways in 1858 - the ship was twice the length and five times the weight of any previous ship. It was intended to take passengers non-stop to India and Australia but instead laid the first transatlantic telegraph cable.

Walking along the waterfront again, pass a mix of old and new housing. Just past Maritime Quay there is a new pier at the end of Napier Avenue. Carry on along Blasker Walk all the way to a Thai restaurant called Elephant Royale at Locke’s Wharf.

Turn left inland through the car park here to face the Ferry House pub (there was once a ferry crossing here). Turn right along Ferry Street, until reaching Island Gardens with its distinctive domed entrance to the Greenwich Foot Tunnel, and small café.

Admire the classic view of Greenwich World Heritage site, which hasn’t changed very much since Canaletto painted it. Cross under the river via the foot tunnel to see the painting in the Maritime Museum, and enjoy Greenwich’s village atmosphere. Alternatively turn back out of the Gardens and walk down the passage ahead to reach Island Gardens DLR station.

The Thames Path National Trail officially ends here, but see section 4 to continue along the Thames waterfront to the River Lea on the extension route.