**Thames Path Walk**  
Section 4 south bank  
Thames Barrier to River Darent

**Start:** Thames Barrier (TQ418793)  
**Station:** Charlton Station or clipper boats  
**Finish:** River Darent (TQ540778)  
**Station:** Slade Green  
**Distance:** 11 miles (17.5 km)

**Introduction:** Beyond the Thames Barrier, the route is waymarked with the Thames Barge symbol rather than the National Trail acorn. This is because the Thames Path National Trail officially ends at the Thames Barrier but it is possible to continue the walk as far as the boundary with Kent.

There is a continuous riverside path all the way along the Thames as far as the River Darent on the Bexley boundary with Dartford. There are plans to extend further through the Kent side of the Thames Gateway. Eventually the ‘Source to Sea’ Path will materialise on both sides of the Thames.

The working river displays all the muscularity of its ancient history, built up by hard graft since Henry VIII’s royal dockyard at Woolwich was established to build a new generation of naval warships. Woolwich Arsenal grew up alongside to supply munitions, and Thamesmead was built on a vast network of ‘tumps’ to contain explosions, some of which can still be seen.

Across the river, equally vast operations are visible where giant cranes move and shape the last landfill into new hillsides and Ford at Dagenham’s wind turbines symbolise the post-industrial end of oil. The cargo ships now come only as far as Tilbury and the vast sea container ports on the north side of the river; whereas Erith with its pier, once a Victorian pleasure resort, retains a seaside feel.

**Directions:** The hull-shaped cowls of the Thames Barrier make an awesome introduction to this section of the Thames Path, reaching out across the river towards Thames Barrier Park on the north bank.

This feat of modern engineering is the defence that protects 1.25 million Londoners, 26 tube stations and over 4,000 properties from the increasing risk of flooding due to rising water levels and ‘surge tides’. Conceived after 300 people died in the flood of 1953, it finally opened in 1982. The Barrier will serve until at least 2030 – by which time, it may close some 30 times a year. The round-the-clock control room receives up to 36 hour’s warning of surge tides from satellites and other sources, and the Barrier closes four hours before high tide. Full closure takes 30 minutes, raising six gates and lowering four.

From the barrier, the first part of the walk is slightly away from the river, shared with the Green Chain Walk. Follow signs with the barge symbol marked ‘Thames Path extension - Woolwich Dockyard via Interim Route’ through the park. Turn left at Woolwich Road, leaving the Green Chain Walk.

At the roundabout, cross over Warspite Road then turn left down Ruston Road. Look for a left into Harlinger Street. At the T-junction turn right and pick up the riverside route. The walk leads through the former Woolwich Dockyard, then the next landmark is the Woolwich Free Ferry.

The ferry links North Woolwich with the vast Royal Albert Dock and King George V Dock, the space in between used by London City Airport. This free service for vehicles and foot passengers dates from 1889, but there has been a ferry across the river here for many centuries.

Cross over the Ferry Approach Road at the pedestrian crossing and take the access road down a slope and round the back of the Waterfront Leisure Centre to reach the river again. Here find the rotunda which houses the lift and stairs to the Woolwich Foot Tunnel. Built in 1912, as an alternative to the Free Ferry, the tunnel was used by thousands of workers who had previously lost wages whenever the ferry was delayed by fog. This is also the starting point for the Capital Ring walk.
Engines, which used to pump London’s sewage into a reservoir and from there out into the Thames on the ebb tide.

Turning its back on the Crossness Beam Engines, the walk now skirts the sewage works and the jetty, where waste was loaded onto sludge boats to be dumped at sea. Crossness Incinerator, the futuristic building with the curved chimney, changed all that. The plant burns waste, generating power to drive the sewage works, and producing 40% as a by-product for soil fertilizer.

On the opposite bank, beyond the reedy fringes of the river, there’s more hi-tech activity at Ford’s Dagenham Plant. Car production ended here in 2002 but of course this was where the Ford sewing machinists’ strike of 1968 took place, as depicted in the film, ‘Made in Dagenham’.

On the far side of the sewage works is Crossness Nature Reserve, a real birdwatcher’s paradise. This urban wilderness on the Erith flood plain is one of the last surviving open areas of grazing marsh in Greater London. In recent years, over 130 species of birds have been recorded on the 20-hectare site. Viewing facilities include a bird hide, sand martin wall, bat cave, and artificial nesting cliff.

On towards Erith, past a spidery network of cranes, chutes and the sort of working wharves that served all shipping before the advent of enclosed docks. Snaking up and down past mill and silos, the walk opens to views of Erith’s curving waterfront, with modern housing, old church towers and...
dramatic vistas of the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge. It was opened in 1991 as vital link in the M25 London Orbital Motorway spanning the River Thames between Dartford and Thurrock. At the time it was one of the world’s longest cable-stayed spans.

Follow Thames Path extension signage all the way along William Cory Promenade to Erith's Riverside Gardens. Here there are viewing platforms, looking out over a glorious sweep of the Thames to Coldharbour Point lighthouse, which marks the tip of Rainham Marshes.

The walk now shares its way with the London LOOP. For a while the route leaves the waterfront, follow signage heading right into Wheatley Terrace Road and Appold Street, then left onto Manor Road.

East of Slade Green Road the Cray River Way starts and all routes then follow the signed footpath left off the road towards the river and Erith Yacht Club.

The route continues on the raised causeway across the ancient landscape of the Crayford and Dartford Marshes; more good bird-watching areas. The landscape here has a wild feel. To the left lie Erith Saltings – the last remaining fragment of salt marshes on London's inner Thames. At low tide, remnants of a ghostly forest are sometimes visible on the foreshore.

The Thames Path extension finishes with a flourish at Crayford Ness by the River Darent Flood Barrier, built to protect Crayford and Darenth from flooding at high tides. From here, the Cray River Way and London LOOP head southward along the bank of the River Darent. To reach the station and buses at Slade Green, stay with the LOOP a bit further around the embankment and follow the station link signs.