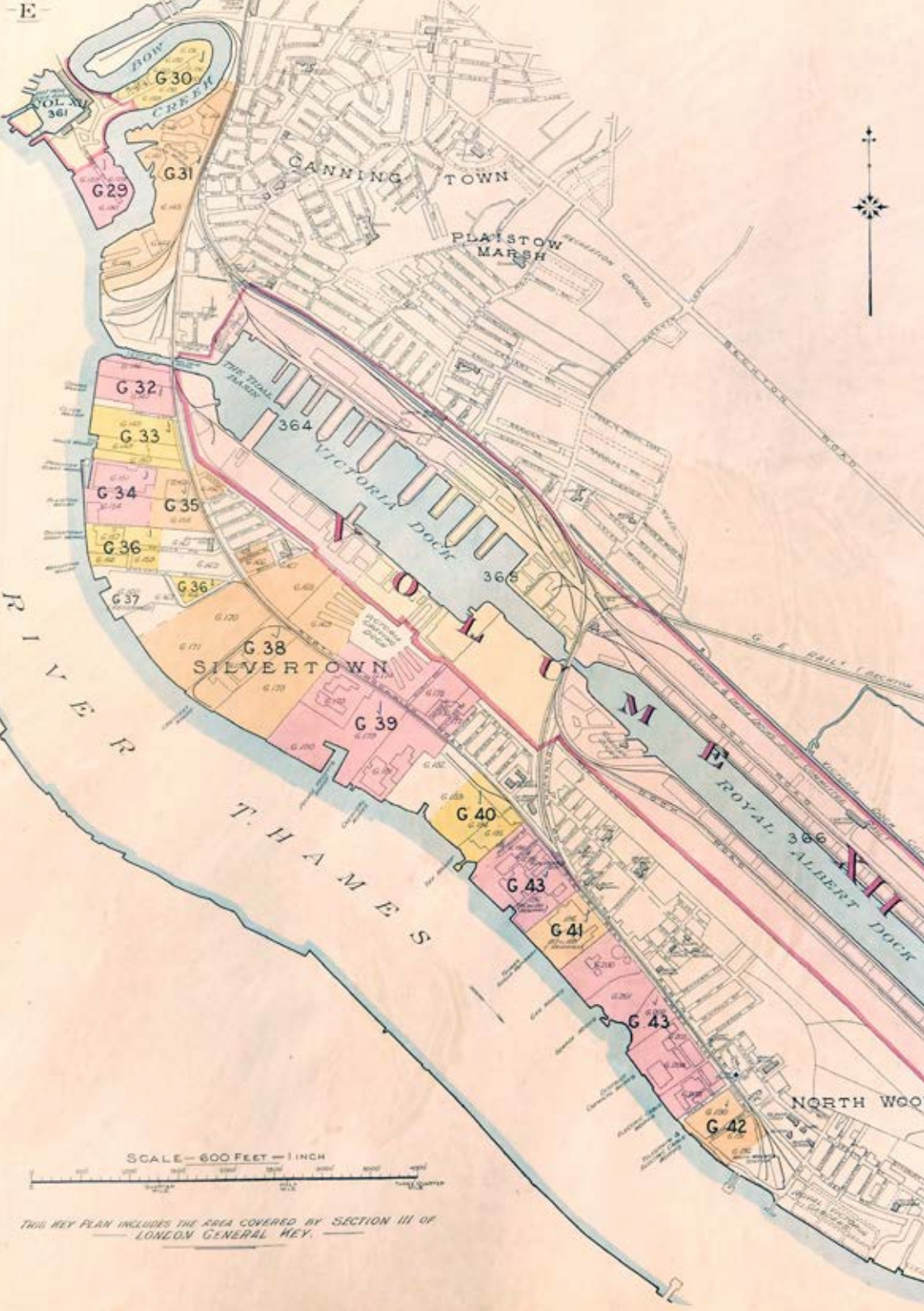


The **ISLANDERS**

The industrial and community heritage
of Silvertown and North Woolwich



**Thames
Festival
Trust**



Introduction

The Islanders is a project that aims to preserve the industrial and community heritage of Silvertown and North Woolwich. It is supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Royal Docks Team. Volunteers and local participants have contributed significantly to the project. Thames Festival Trust thanks Newham Archives (*The Islanders'* Heritage Partner), London Metropolitan Archives and Eastside Community Heritage.

In the nineteenth century, London's eastern boundary was at Bow Creek, where its noxious industries began to congregate. From shipbuilding, to silver, iron, oils, soap, rubber and manure, London's industry was developing on the fringes of the city.

By the completion of the Albert Dock in 1880, Silvertown and North Woolwich had effectively become an 'island'. It was bordered by the Thames to the south, and by the Royal Docks and its lock entrances to the north, east and west, the only way in or out was by bridge, ferry or tunnel.

Learn more:



To find out more, scan the QR codes on your smart phone to follow the growth and hear the stories of this 'island' community through the generations.

September 2021

Left: Goad Fire Insurance Plan, May 1900 (The British Library)

The origins

Prior to the nineteenth century, Silvertown and North Woolwich was an uninhabited marshland called Plaistow Level used for grazing cattle, and frequented by smugglers, prize fighters, and high tide flooding, sat between Bow Creek and Gallions Reach.

In the 1840s, the area was sold cheaply at an 'agricultural price' to a consortium of developers. The sale concluded as the 1844 Metropolitan Building Act was passed, which banned toxic industries from operating in London. Many industries migrated east of the city's boundary, which in those days was Bow Creek.

The area's notable feature was a ferry, established prior to the fourteenth century to transport people to and from Woolwich on the river's southern side. In 1847, a steam ferry replaced the horse powered vessel, traffic increased, and North Woolwich railway station was built.

Plaistow Level became an attractive area for investment. Factories and residential communities started to emerge. In 1852, SW Silver & Co's factory was one of the largest. The products it manufactured were transported via a fleet of ships on the Thames to the wider world. Silver's inspired the area's name: Silvertown.

Learn more:



Top: Construction of the Victoria Dock, from *The Illustrated London News*, 9 Sept 1854 (Newham Archives)



Bottom: The Woolwich ferry crossing the river, c. 1960 (Eastside Community Heritage)

“ Dockers didn’t have any allegiance to a particular company. To get work, they would go to a certain area in Connaught Road outside the dock gates in the morning between seven and eight and wait to be called on. That was called “on the stones.” ”

Alan

“ At school we used to sing lots of songs about the sea and we used to get presents from the ship. ”

Pat



Top: Royal Albert and King George V Docks, c. 1970 (Eastside Community Heritage)

Bottom: Cases of New Zealand apples being unloaded at the Royal Docks, 1949 (Newham Archives)



The docks

With British imperialism at its most expansionist, and London’s docks already over congested, the need for new facilities to accommodate the latest, ocean-going steam vessels was overwhelming.

The state-of-the-art Victoria Dock opened in 1855, Albert Dock followed in 1880. King George V Dock opened in 1921. Known collectively as the ‘Royal Docks’, they were the largest enclosed docks in the world. They provided thousands of jobs and were a conduit to London for both goods and people.

The introduction of shipping containers benefitted docks with excellent road and rail links. Containers allowed bigger ships to be built and suddenly, the Royal Docks were not fit for purpose. Their decline was rapid, all closed by 1981.

Learn more:

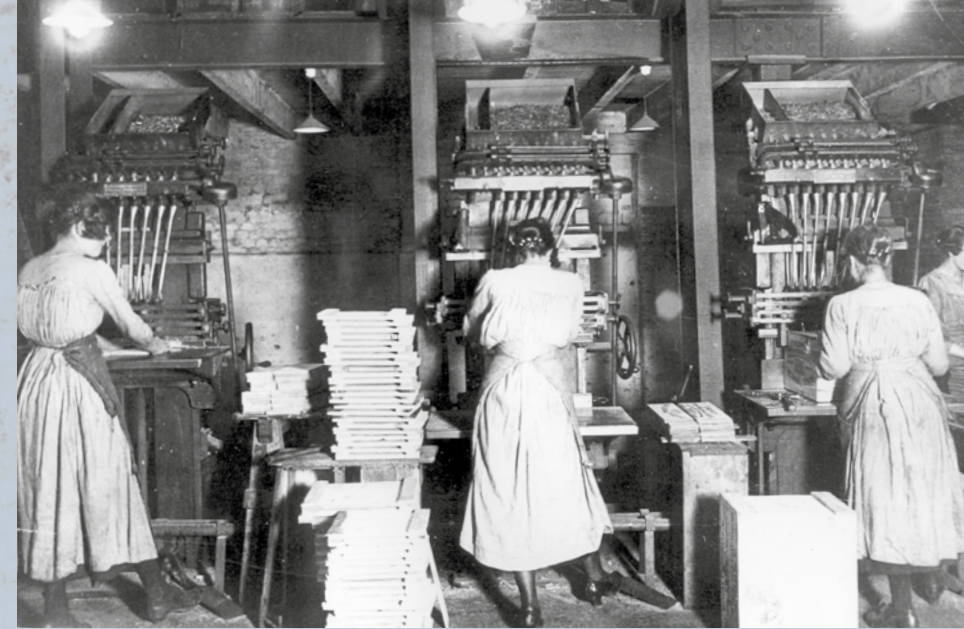


The factories

The 1850s saw dozens of firms locate in Silvertown and North Woolwich, taking advantage of loose regulation and geographic location. For employers, there was little incentive to provide fair and safe working conditions, causing multiple strike actions. The loose regulations caused many accidents. Most notable was the explosion of TNT at Brunner Mond in 1917, killing 73 and injuring at least 400.

Toxic pollution was a danger too. The Times reported in 1902 that: 'The atmosphere is blackened with smoke and poisoned with the noxious fumes of chemicals, and the stench of bone manure and soap works, and the only sounds to be heard are the shriek of railway engines and the mournful foghorn hoots of the steamboats.'

Learn more:



“ You got used to the smells. We had so many factories making all sorts of things and the smells were quite awful really. ”

Colleen

“ When the gasworks was operating at night you saw great, big flames coming up and smoke and red and yellow colours coming out of the furnaces, it was like *Dante's Inferno*. ”

Alan

Top: Box making at John Knight's, Silvertown, c. 1920 (Newham Archives)

Bottom: Aftermath of Brunner Mond explosion, including the destroyed Silvertown Fire Station, 1917 (Newham Archives)





“ Tate & Lyle were very good at community. People could go and have drinks and there were dances at the weekend, and they all looked after the children at Christmas. ”

Colleen

Top: Tate & Lyle's Thames Refinery, Silvertown, 1967 (Newham Archives)

Bottom: Tate & Lyle Tea Room, c. 1950 (Newham Archives)



Tate & Lyle

One of the most enduring symbols of Silvertown's industrial legacy is the sugar refinery Tate & Lyle.

Henry Tate & Sons had set up shop at Tay Wharf in Silvertown in 1877, producing its patented sugar cube. Abram Lyle & Sons opened a refinery at Plaistow Wharf in 1881, known for producing 'Golden Syrup'. The two companies continued in competition before merging in 1921.

The philanthropic nature of the company aided the development of Silvertown and North Woolwich. Henry Tate opened a community centre known as the Tate Institute in 1887, while Lyle Park opened in 1924. The Tate & Lyle Christmas parties are the stuff of local legend.

Learn more:



“ They were a very good firm to work for, there was a very good social life. They were also very good payers. ”

Richard

“ My family originally came from Ireland in the 1880s, it was either emigrate or starve to death. My great-great grandfather decided to move to industrial East London. Eventually they gravitated to Silvertown in a street called Andrew Street. ”

Dave



Making a home

The opening of the Victoria Dock and the building of factories increased the area's population massively. By 1897, approximately 14,000 people resided in Silvertown and North Woolwich. The hope of a new life in the rapidly urbanising industrial centre encouraged migration and immigration from across Britain and abroad.

While immigration was a key aspect of Silvertown and North Woolwich throughout its formative decades, it ceased to be so after WWII as its population declined. While most of Newham saw a large increase in its immigrant population, south of the docks this wasn't the case until the area started to become redeveloped in the 1980s.

Learn more:



Top left: Children at Drew Road School, c. 1960 (Eastside Community Heritage)

Top right: A family portrait in Silvertown, c. 1910 (Eastside Community Heritage)

Bottom: Construction works on Albert Road outside Silvertown Methodist Church, 1901 (Newham Archives)



“ My gran was born in Silvertown. Her parents were Lithuanian, and they came over in the early 1880s. Grandad came over in about 1904 and allegedly it was to escape the army. ”

Angela

“ You had a ration book, and you could only have so much on that ration book. You couldn't get many sweets, so we used to buy carrots and things like that. ”

June

Air raid over the Royal Docks, 1940 (Newham Archives)



Second World War

Silvertown and North Woolwich felt the impact of the Second World War harder than most. Its high density of heavy industries and close proximity to the docks made the area a key target for German bombs.

Remembered as 'Black Saturday', September 7, 1940, marked the beginning of the Blitz. Over the coming months thousands would be killed across London's East End, many in Silvertown and North Woolwich.

Learn more:



The war had a devastating impact on the area, with many children born during and immediately after the war spending much of their time playing in the bombsites scattered around the area, while many houses and buildings had to be rebuilt.

“ My dad would certainly recount the stories where he was going to go around a road and suddenly somebody just grabbed him back and said, “Don't go near there, there's an unexploded bomb.” ”

Geoff

Living with the river

Silvertown and North Woolwich have always been at the mercy of the River Thames. The Great Flood of 1953 saw factories and more brought to a standstill. Water flooded in from the docks, roads filled with water, sewers were blocked, and pumping stations broke down. There were also significant floods in 1957.

Learn more:



The river also provided joy and pride for locals – some remember playing on the shore as children, while many recall days spent going back and forth across the river on board the Woolwich Ferry.

Left: Storm flood at Tate & Lyle, Thames Refinery, 1957 (Newham Archives)

Right: Storm flood at Tate & Lyle, Silvertown, 1948 (Newham Archives)

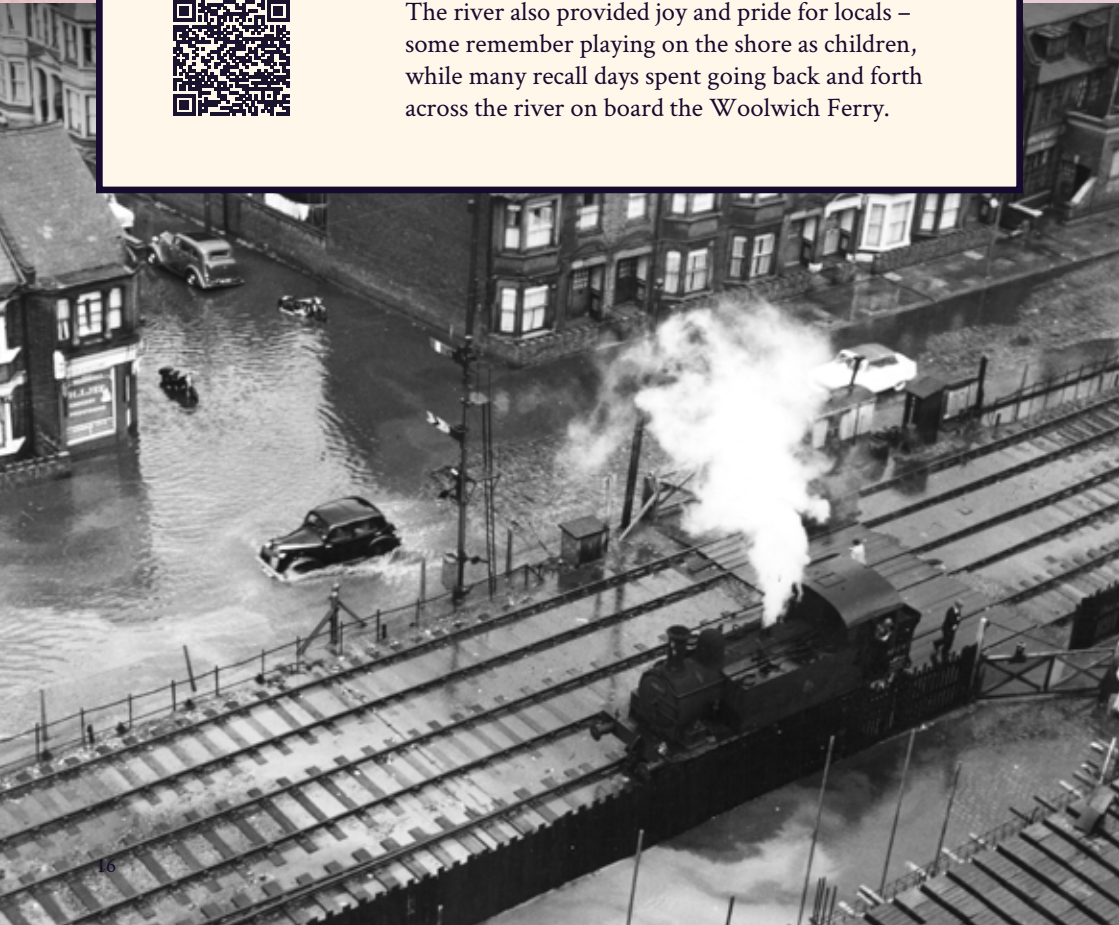


“ I remember going for a game of snooker in Tate Institute. When we came down two hours later it was flooded up to our knees. Everyone was stepping on and off chairs to move about. But they were still serving drinks and people just sat on tables and carried on as normal! ”

David

“ Well, there was one big flood, I remember that well – it came down Pier Road. I remember there was some floods prior to that when I was a kiddie. We thought it was great paddling in it! ”

June



“ There was a delightful putting green in Lyle Park... I think it was sixpence and you got about half an hour or an hour just putting balls in holes. It was different, it wasn't the kind of thing that you normally found in that area. ”

Dave



Parks and recreation

For generations, the community in Silvertown and North Woolwich have benefited from two beautiful parks.

Opening in 1851, Royal Pavilion Gardens drew crowds of visitors with a variety of attractions, described by *The Kentish Independent* as 'the most tasteful and delightful gardens it is possible to conceive of.' It was London's last Pleasure Garden.

By the early 1880s it began to dwindle. It was taken into public ownership, redesigned and reopened as Royal Victoria Gardens in 1890.

Donated in 1924 by Sir Leonard Lyle, Lyle Park in West Silvertown is a hidden gem. For the thousands living crammed around factories it was a magical piece of greenery.

Learn more:



Top: Lyle Park, October 1986
(Newham Archives)

Bottom: Royal Victoria Gardens,
c. 1900 (Newham Archives)



Left: A street party at Ferry Festival, 1977 (Eastside Community Heritage)

Right: Street parade at Ferry Festival, 1978 (Eastside Community Heritage)



Ferry Festival

The decline of the docks in the seventies hit Silvertown and North Woolwich hard. To reignite community spirit, the Ferry Festival ran annually for 12 years.

After seeing a video of a community event in Poplar, locals Fred Bowyer and Mickey Rutter mentioned the idea during a trip to the Henley Arms pub. The idea flourished, and a committee was formed. Royal Victoria Gardens was the location and firms like Tate & Lyle aided in the planning.

Activities such as sports tournaments, tug-of-war, and a bouncy castle were popular features. The area had 13 pubs, so a 'superpub' competition was launched between boozers. Darts, pool, and cribbage contests got hundreds of people involved. The idea of a procession and a pram race between pubs sparked massive interest.

Learn more:



“ There used to be the artistes with their poles and singing and people on stilts. All the children on the rides, beautiful baby competition... The Miss Woolwich Ferry Festival beauty queen. ”

June

“ It really did lift people at a time when they needed it. ”

Colleen



Who were the Islanders?

Learn more:



Every community has well-known faces. Silvertown and North Woolwich were no exception.

In the 50s there was a man who woke people up for work in time. Nicknamed the Wake-Up Man, he would ride about on his bike at 5am every morning, tapping on people's windows.

“ There was a lady that used to be in a hut in the swing park that would look after you, so if you fell over or got cut or anything she would clean it with TCP. She was called Lil and her husband Reggie was the park keeper. ”

Colleen

“ We used to have someone that used to come from Malaysia, his name was Rudy Kramer. He used to bring the boats in. He used to invite my husband and myself and all his friends that worked in the dock and we used to go on board the ship and they used to have parties and dancing for us, it was lovely. ”

June

Top: Factory workers in North Woolwich, c. 1960 (Eastside Community Heritage)

Right: Shops in Silvertown, c. 1950 (Eastside Community Heritage)

“ A rag and bone man called Levi Lee used to come round the streets with a horse and cart. You'd give him old rags and he'd give you a piece of crockery or a fish. ”

Pat



Heritage and art project

In 2020, Thames Festival Trust teamed up with artist Shona Watt to deliver workshops at six schools across Newham: Chobham Academy, Kingsford Community School, Little Ilford School, Royal Docks Academy, St Angela's Ursuline School and London Design and Engineering UTC.

The students were introduced to industries that were important to Silvertown and North Woolwich's history, from soap making to sugar refining, to the production of aluminium, munitions and marmalade.

Each school produced a set of artworks linked to one of these industries, learning the history of factories such as John Knight, Tate & Lyle, and Venesta and coming to understand the impact they had on the local community.



Chobham Academy, Newham, with Shona Watt

Chobham Academy learned about the history of soap production, reflecting particularly on John Knight's factory in Silvertown. Each student was asked to photograph themselves using soap, either washing their hands or cleaning up cutlery. Their photographs were then edited together.



Kingsford Community School, Newham, with Shona Watt

Students at Kingsford Community School discovered the story of how two competing Silvertown sugar refiners joined forces to become the largest in the United Kingdom – Tate & Lyle. Each student produced simple illustrations of sweet products containing messages.



Little Ilford School, Newham, with Shona Watt

Students at Little Ilford School imagined their heritage subject through three colours: red, for the area's bloody, animal rendering industries; silver, to symbolise Silvertown, and blue, to represent the Thames and the NHS. Each student photographed objects of each colour, which were edited together into this design.

Left: Students from Royal Docks Academy, Newham



Royal Docks Academy, Newham, with Shona Watt

Students at Royal Docks Academy learned about the history of Venesta – manufacturers of aluminium. Each student took part in metal embossing, creating images of food out of aluminium or tin foil.



St. Angela's Ursuline School, Newham, with Shona Watt

Students at St. Angela's Ursuline school learned about the 'Sugar Girls' – the many women who worked at Tate & Lyle's factories. Each student was asked to create a clear, graphic self-portrait that incorporated a headdress made of sweet food items, becoming a 'Sugar Girl'.



London Design and Engineering UTC, Newham, with Shona Watt

At London Design and Engineering UTC, students learned about the 1917 explosion of TNT at Brunner Mond – known as the 'Silvertown Explosion'. Each student was asked to create an image representative of an explosion.

“ The students produced some incredible work during lockdown. They followed the set briefs and created remarkable images, often working from home. An amazing achievement by both teachers and students under the difficult circumstances. ”

Shona Watt, lead artist, Rivers of the World

For more information on The Islanders and other projects and events, head to thamesfestivaltrust.org



Top: John Knight's Royal Primrose Soap Works, Silvertown, 1937 (Newham Archives)



Bottom: Yard work at Tate & Lyle's Plaistow Refinery, c. 1965 (Eastside Community Heritage)



Front cover: 1953 Floods. Half an hour before high tide at the old Thames Ironworks (Newham Archives)

Above: Construction of a new boiler house and coal bunker at Silvertown, 1921 (Newham Archives)



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