

“LFA2022: Key Actors in the Royal Docks” Podcast Transcript – LFA Building Sounds

0:07 - Introduction

Eliza: Hello and welcome back to Building Sounds, the podcast exploring the stories behind some of the key buildings and projects in our city. Brought to you by the London Festival of Architecture, I'm your host Eliza Grosvenor.

In this episode we're kicking off our Key Actors series exploring the key people and projects shaping the Royal Docks. The Royal Docks is a truly interesting part of London. Nowhere else in London can you watch aeroplanes come in and take off from such a close distance, witness influential decisions taken about our city, or swim in the docks themselves.

So in the next few episodes we'll be diving deeper into the docks, please excuse the pun there. Following on from the success of our Power Podcast series in 2020, this series explores the key actors who have shaped or are shaping the Royal Docks, whether this is a person, a project, or a place.

For our first conversation, I'm joined by Marieta, co-founder of the Royal Docks History Club.

Who is Marieta Evans

Eliza: So Marieta I've just done a little introduction there, but could you introduce yourself and tell us about your connection to the Royal Docks.

Marieta: My name is Marieta Evans, I'm a freelance TV journalist. I do have a degree and two master's in media journalism and communications but not history, I'm not a historian. I'm actually specialised in motorsports, but my other passions besides motor racing are cooking, I love cooking and eating, and history.

So something that was a bit like a hobby doing history and research and participating, at first just as a volunteer in history and heritage projects, eventually led to a kind of side job as history and heritage content creator and broadcaster and events organiser.

My connection with the Royal Docks is I lived in the Royal Docks for about five years, the only time I've lived in London I was living in the Royal Docks, and and I think if I would ever lived in London again I would live in the Royal Docks obviously for as long as I could afford it.

I used to run, well I still run a project called the History Club. The History Club was a project that myself, my husband Gareth Evans, we started it as volunteers with two beautiful friends from the neighbourhood who sadly are no longer with us, Rose Guinea and Valerie

Alliez, and the idea was very very simple, we love history and the idea was that we wanted to meet once a month to learn about history and talk about history.

So what the History Club was said to do was to organise once a month an evening of history talks followed by a discussion, food, refreshments, we cook food with the help of the community cafe at a community venue in the Royal Docks, we even invite people to bring their own drinks. We are open to everybody and anybody can attend, we are called the History Club, but it's not like a membership closed thing, anyone can come to just one event all of the events, to events.

Yes, it's like a project for people who love history, meet once a month, learn something new, make friends, socialise. But yeah, that's who I am and how I got involved from that with a lot of heritage and history projects in the area.

Why is history so important

Eliza: Amazing, so I guess why is history so important to the area and why is it so important to you that you've founded this History Club?

Marieta: To me as a person, it has to do a lot about my journalism vocation being a storyteller. There is actually a direct link between history and journalism because today's news are going to be tomorrow's history books.

There is a quote, and I think I actually found who said it. Yeah, so it's a quote from Philip Graham who was working in the Washington Post in the 1960s and it says "news is the first draft of history", and it's not I agree with that is that it's a fact, what we have on the news today eventually will become part of tomorrow's History Club.

But if we are talking specifically about the Royal Docks, we have to go back to the history of London. London has for centuries been a port city since the Roman times. You can't understand London history without understanding the history of the connections between London and the Thames and London's maritime history and heritage through centuries.

And then in the 19th century, the Royal Docks became the most vibrant, most important, biggest system of enclosed man-built docks in the world. And in a way, the Royal Docks became the centre of the universe because things from all around the world would arrive to the Royal Docks, and then from the Royal Docks, people would travel all around the world.

And that of course created millions of ramifications and millions of sub-stories and millions of microcosmos in the areas and the communities around the Royal Docks.

So it's not, to me, it's not that history is important for for the area. I say is the other way around. I would say the most important thing about the Royal Docks is it's history.

Eliza: I think that's really interesting and I guess how can we then take what we've learned and this history of the Docks and use it to shape the Royal Docks of the future and the present I guess as well?

Marieta: Well going to the generals of why it's important to learn from history, there's a famous saying again that says, "those who forget history are doomed to repeat it", so as a society as a community we always need to look back to better understand our present and to find in the past the clues to build a better future and inspired by the past we have to protect the good legacy of the past and learn from the bad things in the past.

But that's very general, that's why history is so important but when it comes to the Royal Docks, I want to be very careful because there are two separate things.

One thing is that from the 19th century to the 1980s when the Royal Docks were operating, that's a part of the history that to me as a historian I can detach myself from this history is very contained, like 19th century to the 1980s when the Docks closed, I can go back to that part of the history, research, talk about it and kind of see it without perspective.

But then there's another part of the history of the Royal Docks and it's everything that happened since the Docks and the factories closed up until today and that's an ongoing process. Those last decades have been, and are still very complicated and a very challenging period, it involves a process of regeneration that has not always been smooth, that sometimes some people have seen it as gentrification, there's some politics involved.

So for the people who lived and worked in the area when the Docks were operating, and then when the Docks closed in the '80s and the '90s, for that community, when everything closed, that was a really really really difficult and hard period and even now, for those arriving to the area in the last years, there are still a lot of challenges ahead and a community that is still rebuilding itself and it's a very delicate situation because regeneration can be very exciting but it is very challenging and I know it's a very very bad answer I'm giving you but I'm giving you the reasons why I think we need to be very careful.

The history of the Royal Docks

Eliza: You've touched on some really good points there and I wonder just thinking about this series, so we're exploring key actors so whether that be people or projects who are shaped in the past or are currently shaping the Royal Docks, I wonder if you could expand a little bit on the history of the Royal Docks in relation to that at all?

Marieta: I think there's two things, first of all, one thing is when we talk about, I think when you and I are talking about the Royal Docks now we're talking about the area, so you have the area called the Royal Docks which goes from Canning Town, more or less, until Gallions Reach and all the areas around it, and then you have the Royal Docks, the three Docks where ships arrived.

So for me, the Royal Docks area, what it has become, that was shaped by the very fact that the three Royal Docks were built there and turned the area into the biggest and more important port in the world at the time.

So it was the fact that this was a thriving port that made the place what it is and what it was. So yeah because I have been saying so many times on this podcast how important is the history of the Royal Docks, yes can I please please please as brief as possible tell you about the history of the Docks? So everybody listening, relax and put your feet up and I'm going to entertain you with a very brief history of the Royal Docks.

One thing that is worth mentioning, because nowadays it is very very difficult to imagine, is that all of the land where we now have the Royal Docks and all the developments, their big flats, the towers, the cranes, the city hall, the community venues, shops the restaurants, the water, all of that, City Airport, that once upon a time, up until the 19th century, that was all marshland, there was nothing, just marshes.

So why were the Royal Docks built in that big empty area of Plaistow Marshes. Going back to that period of time, by the first half of the 19th century, the port of London was already thriving even before the Royal Docks opened. But all of the other docks upriver, St Katharine Docks, the Pool of London near Tower Bridge and some of the docks near what is now Canary Wharf, they had been built for sailing ships and they were becoming too small to accommodate the new bigger steam ships.

And the other big issue is that all of the other docks upstream had been built before the arrival of the railway and were surrounded by urban areas in the City of London and it was obviously very difficult and expensive to add the railway around them, and this is where the magic happens.

The connection between the history of railway dreamers and the Docks, because where the other docks have been built by ship owners, it was actually a group of railway engineers who got together to develop and build Royal Victoria Dock. At the same time, a railway line was arriving in the area with the opening of North Woolwich station in 1847. So it was the perfect coup to build new bigger docks at a place where you could connect them to the railway system in an area where many other factories were opening in the 19th century.

So when the Royal Victoria Dock opened for business in 1855, it was the first dock in the world to be built especially for steamers while still accepting sailing ships, so a win-win situation a very smart move. It was also the first to have, for example, hydraulically operated lock gates, one of the first or the first in Britain to have direct links to the railway system network, it was huge for its time - three miles of quayside enclosing nearly 10,000 acres of water - and it became the gateway of the empire, the Royal Victoria Dock became well known for specialised trade, meat, fruit, tobacco arriving from all of the corners of the old empire.

Then Albert Dock, the second of the royals, was the second to open in 1880, it was also used a lot for passenger ships and ocean liners, so not only for cargo you had people going to Royal Albert Dock, and from there taking ships to go all around the world.

And then the last to open, and it was the 100-year anniversary last summer, in July 1921 it was King George V Dock, which is where now now we have London City Airport.

And this one should have actually opened earlier, but it was delayed because of the first world war, so 1921 was the completion of the Royal Docks so that's why we celebrated 100 years last year. The Royal Docks had all the latest technologies, I think it's very fitting that we talk about the Royal Docks at the London Festival of Architecture because it was like the big place, the big art of engineering of the 19th and 20th century, it had all the electric cranes, principal cargos were fruit, vegetables, frozen meat and grain, with ships arriving from all around the globe which meant a lot of factories and warehouses were built around it and a lot of activity completely changed the landscape of the area.

All of the warehouses were connected to the railway system, it was like a masterpiece of engineering and having gone from marshland to that, what an amazing and marvellous achievement.

And when they open, sorry when the last of them opened - the King George V - King George V, Albert Dock and Royal Victoria Dock together formed the biggest enclosed Dock system in the world. Just imagine, it's mind blowing, 250 acres of water for the time, nothing like that had ever been built in the world before.

14:52 - City Hall moving to Newham

Eliza: This is absolutely amazing listening. There's a lot of people who know the Royal Docks as part of London but maybe don't know, well I definitely didn't know part of this history as well, so it's really exciting to hear that and you speaking about it so passionately as well and I wonder just thinking about the histories you've taught, over the next few episodes we'll be looking at a few different projects and I wonder if you've, I mean we've shared the list with you already, if you've got any particular thoughts or anything you're quite keen to learn from some of those conversations well?

Marieta: I'm very excited, I think everybody is, I'm very excited about City Hall moving to Newham. As somebody who loves history, I love the idea of City Hall moving to Newham, specifically to the Royal Victoria Dock because if you connect it to what I just explained, it makes so much sense from a history point of view, the Royal Victoria Dock had once been the place to be, a mecca for trade and business, the heart of the port of London.

London is what it is, we said it at the beginning, because it was a port city, so to move City Hall, the brains of the city, to the place that once upon a time was the heart of the port of London, makes so much sense it's such a beautiful historical metaphor and and actually it

also reminds me of something I read. Three or four years ago I went for a run along the river at the other side of the river in Woolwich, and I remember, I had this photographic memory, I was running and I was running along a site where they were building new flats and they had a big banner on the building-side and it said, "London is moving east" and I thought 'yeah it is', I mean if you look at all the things happening in east London, it is so true, so if London is moving east, it makes so much sense that the capital of the city is moving to the east too.

So all of the projects and events celebrating and reflecting on what what it means for City Hall to move to Newham, what does it mean for Newham to just to be kind of put a bit more on the map, I'm very excited about this, it's thrilling, and yeah I think I it's like fair that is happening.

Eliza: Amazing, I think it's going to be a really exciting few months and years I think, obviously it's still very new, the move, and I think seeing how that's going to impact and shape the Royal Docks and then the Royal Docks shaping City Hall, a sort of two-way street, I it's think going to be really interesting. Again, in the conversation we've been talking about the Docks being such an area of change and development and people, I think it's going to be a really interesting move that we've not seen for a while in the city and I guess there's a few things connected to that as well, so we'll be looking at things like the renaming of the road that it sits on as well. I don't know if you're involved in that process at all while you were in the Docks?

Marieta: Yeah, so again that that was a very interesting process because the renaming of Siemens Way took place through a public consultation exercise, which led to a public vote. I don't know all the the ins and outs of the process, but long story short what I know and how I was involved is there were three public events, I was invited to host the first one which was about the history of the area - I gave a presentation of the history of the Royal Docks followed by a community discussion - it was a really interesting event, I think we had around 30 to 40 people.

Half of the attendees were people who were working in the area or involved in the process and then we had about 20 or more community members, like people who lived in the area very since very recently and wanted to hear more about the history of the area to get inspired about looking at the past, what would be a good tribute as a name.

And then we also were joined by a lot of people who worked and lived in the Docks when the Docks were operating, so we had a beautiful community discussion where a lot of ideas and memories were shared.

They were put to a public vote which I think generated more than 1500 responses and yeah it was there was a big buzz about it everybody was tweeting about it on the social media it, it really felt like people were getting involved with and given an opportunity to be part of renaming, not only a street in my neighborhood, I'm going to rename the street

where City Hall will be located so it was like, "wow we have been given this collective, enormous, huge, beautiful responsibility to do this as a community".

It was really nice that Kamal Churchie was the winning option because I'm sure a lot of people didn't know about him before and the fact that now where City Hall is is called Kamal Churchie means that more people will know about him and what he did, and I have to say, not even myself, and I had been running a history club in the area for two years, I didn't know who he was and what he did. I believe you're going to have Asif in one of the upcoming episodes and Asif is a local historian who has done so much research in the history of BAME seafarers in the area and he will be able to properly talk about how much Kamal Churchie did for Royal Docks and how actually his work had such a huge impact all across England.

Going back again with the beginning, I think what I have learned through history and heritage projects is that they can play such a big role in closing the gap between the local community, or those who identify themselves as the local community, and people who arrive to these communities, and if they're interested they might want to feel a way of belonging and there's no better way of acquiring a sense of belonging than understanding where you are better and the more you know about the community where you have moved to the more you're going to love it.

I always loved history but I actually didn't know anything about the Royal Docks until I moved to the area, I knew London had been a port city for centuries, I knew it had a strong rich maritime history, but in my head it was all in the Thames and then Tilbury, I didn't know much about an enclosed system of docks and how they appeared and when they appeared and I didn't know anything about the Royal Docks.

It was a very beautiful name, I had no idea what it had been and I remember I moved to the area because I had just got married and my husband and I were looking for a place we could afford and we arrived and we saw this huge amount of water we loved the flat, we took it, and then the next week I was diving into the local history, reading all the books they had about the history of the place and when I discovered I had actually moved to the heart of what used to be the biggest port of London in the world, and when I realised that around the corner from my house where there's a lot of water, 50 years ago I would have seen big ships coming and leaving from all around the world, like wow, and then I kind of fell in love even more with the area and I wanted to belong to that community and I wanted to know more about the community and I took a step back and I was like, 'okay everybody tell me everything you know about this area'.

And that sort of happened in that history, looking at the past exercise and yeah, so I do believe history and heritage projects can really play a massive role in closing that gap and in places where regeneration can get so critical, like an area like the Royal Docks.

Final thoughts

Eliza: Amazing, so I think we're coming up to the end of our time, we've covered so much already but I wonder is there one final thing that you wanted people to take away about the Royal Docks you just want to stick in everyone's memories as they sort of listen through the upcoming episodes where we explore all the projects and beyond any research that they might do and I think they're inspired by?

Marieta: Yeah, I think for me, I hope people realise, as I have said, that when they are in the Royal Docks, they are in what used to be the heart of the brains of the port of London at the time where the port of London was the biggest port in the world and think about what it meant, think about all the stories of the ships arriving and leaving, for a lot of people that was either the first thing they saw of England or the last thing they saw of England, and think about how many things from all around the world arrived there.

That was like the gateway to the universe for London and the rest of the United Kingdom. I sometimes go there and I see the water, empty water because there's no ships obviously there's a lot of buildings and restaurants and city lights around, but I go for a walk along the Docks when I'm when I'm in the area, I had to move away for personal reasons but I go back a lot for work and other things, and sometimes I feel that if I can close my eyes I can still hear the ships and the people who used to work and be there even if I was not there in the time.

So yeah, think of the Royal Docks as our time traveling machine.

Eliza: What an image to leave the conversation on. Well that's all the time we have today but thank you to our guest Marieta.

As hinted by Marieta, we'll be back with a new episode next week exploring City Hall with Dan Bridge and Andrea Nolan. Until then, if you've enjoyed this episode and would like to hear more of our recent conversations, search for Building Sounds on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or wherever you find your favourite podcasts.