

Surrey Docks Farm History Trail

6. The Urban Farm



This procession of bronze animals commemorates the Farm's relocation to this site in 1986, when the animals were herded and led, with much ceremony, through the streets and along the river to their new home. (The fox, however, would probably have followed on its own later...!)

Surrey Docks Farm actually began at Greenland Dock, a short distance downriver from here in the Deptford direction, in 1975. Surrey Commercial Docks had closed by 1970, leaving the landscape derelict, dockers redundant and neighbourhoods neglected. This unused land came to the attention of an enterprising gardener who was looking for somewhere to graze her goats and grow vegetables. She obtained permission to use various sites around the former docks, and interest soon grew, with local people getting involved in keeping hens, and ex-dockers keen to cultivate allotments.

They were then offered temporary use of a vandalised and deserted site alongside the Thames at Greenland Dock – this was to become Surrey Docks Farm. Here they kept a growing herd of goats, hens, bees, cats, rabbits, dogs, ducks, donkeys and more.



These photos show how different the landscape of Surrey Docks was in the Farm's early years at Greenland Dock, after the closure of the docks but before any new building or landscaping had begun. In the photo below, by the open door you can see the familiar green Surrey Docks Farm sign. All photos from Surrey Docks Farm archive.



The growing farm

Initially the Farm was an improvised, do-it-yourself arrangement, with no real facilities. They made productive use of Docklands waste – using spare materials donated by locals, collecting waste food to feed the animals, harvesting hay from the derelict land, putting empty buildings to use, and channelling wasted human talents and energies. With these resources they cultivated vegetables, produced eggs and honey, and made cheese and yoghurt from the goats' milk.

The Farm found itself not only popular with local children, but filling a real need in a deprived environment. Within a few years the Farm was offering play schemes, school visits, work experience and community service, as well as attracting visitors from further afield eager to learn about this early experiment in urban farming.

The staff worked voluntarily, learning and experimenting as they went along – not only how to farm, but how to negotiate the complexities of both the local community and the institutions that they needed support from. By 1978, efforts to gain financial support started to reap success, with funding received for a teacher and temporary classroom, and more to follow.

The beginnings of the Farm, its first few years, and fascinating observations on goat behaviour and personalities, are described by Hilary Peters in her book *Docklandscape*, published in 1979.

The lock-keeper's office

The Farm used the former lock-keeper's office as a milking parlour, dairy, office and accommodation. At the time the building was larger than it is now – the photo lower left shows how it appeared then; today just the original long rectangular block with the pitched roof remains.

On the wall of this building that faces the lock, you can see names scratched into the brickwork. These are some of the Farm staff and volunteers of the time – and even a couple of donkeys, Rene and Tammy. One of the names is that of a young volunteer, who is still working with the Farm today nearly 30 years later, and Tammy the donkey went on to have a long and happy life here at the Farm until 2010.



The move to South Wharf

By the mid-1980s, Greenland Dock was due to be redeveloped as housing, and the Farm had to move on. It took a great campaign to save the Farm and for it to be relocated to a riverside rather than inland site. Eventually South Wharf was agreed upon and money provided through the London Docklands Development Corporation to prepare the land and construct the first buildings – the tower and classroom, stables and barns. The historical remains such as the old walls and the former ambulance shelter were retained and incorporated into the new landscaping.



Above: trainees working on the construction of the Segal building.

The Segal Building

In 1991 the grass-roofed block which now houses the café, Farm Shop etc, was completed. This was constructed using the Segal self-build system, using largely voluntary and unskilled workers, including the Southwark Womens Manual Trades Workshop and volunteers from all around Europe.

Walter Segal was an architect who devised and promoted a new approach to building, showing how environmentally-friendly timber-framed dwellings could be built cheaply and quickly, with participation of people of all abilities. This system required only minimal foundations, and eliminated the need for concreting, bricklaying and plastering.



Above: Prince Charles at the Farm in 2002, during a visit in his role as Patron of the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens.

From simple beginnings in the mid-1970s, Surrey Docks Farm has become an essential local educational and community facility, and one of south-east London's treasures. It is one of the oldest city farms, and is unique in being the only one in London to have a Thames-side setting. It is this riverside location which has been responsible for much of the site's eventful history, and the Farm and its foreshore preserve much of the physical evidence of this for us to appreciate today.

To follow the history trail from the beginning, go to the first panel which is just outside the gate at the opposite end of the Farm's riverside path.

This history trail was created from the research and contributions of dozens of volunteers and local people, and the findings of investigations with the Thames Discovery Programme, as part of a Heritage Lottery Fund project at the Farm in 2013/14. All of the photographed objects on this panel were found by project participants on the Rotherhithe foreshore, many alongside the Farm itself. Further information and resources on the site's history are available - see www.surreydocksfarm.org.uk.

