



# Surrey Docks Farm History Trail

## 3. The River Ambulance Service



### The ambulance shelter

This building, now the forge, was originally part of South Wharf Receiving Station. From here, the Metropolitan Asylums Board conveyed thousands of smallpox and fever patients by river ambulance to isolation hospitals down the Thames between 1884 - 1930.

When this structure was built, it wasn't actually a solid building - it was simply an open-sided shelter, at which ambulances would arrive to deliver their patients, who would be taken into the adjacent examination room.



Photo: Wellcome Library

This photograph shows a horse-drawn ambulance at the shelter, viewed from the bottom on the slope, in the same direction you are facing now. The shelter and adjacent receiving rooms were built in early 1902, and this scene dates from around that time. Initially the shelter was open on all sides, but the screen on this side was added after residents complained that they were able to see into it from their houses, and that people, especially children, were congregating in the street to watch patients being removed from the ambulances.



Photo: Wellcome Library

This shows a later scene in the 1920s, with a motorised ambulance under the shelter itself - where the ambulance stands is inside what is now the forge. The paving of square bricks can still be seen on the floor of the forge. Note also the cast iron columns, set into square granite blocks on the ground, which can also still be seen on the corners of the building. The illustration below left shows the decorative shaping of the tops of these columns. The roof trusses are also original, as are the steel I-beams, one of which can be seen on this side of the forge linking the tops of the corner columns.

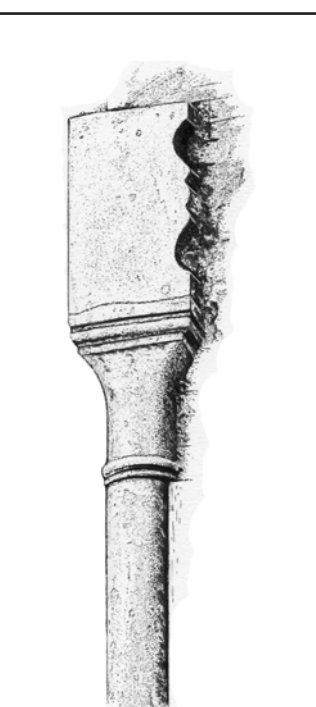
### The surprising survival of a humble structure

The original shelter in the above photographs is almost unrecognisable now, with the sides having been later filled in with brickwork and the roof replaced with corrugated iron. These changes would almost certainly have been made after the WWII bombing which destroyed the adjacent buildings but left this shelter's structure intact.

Again it was spared in the 1950s, when all the remaining buildings on the site were demolished, but for some reason this simple structure was left untouched. It is likely that the Fire Service made use of it while they occupied South Wharf in the 1940s and early 1950s, and it was no doubt useful over the next decades as a store shed and shelter.

However it was given a new purpose when master blacksmith Kevin Boys set up his forge here in 1991, from where he has been creating and teaching sculptural blacksmithing ever since.

Blacksmithing has always been part of this site's history - there would have been a forge here as part of the shipyard, and even the River Ambulance Receiving Station had its own smith's shop, just alongside the brick boundary wall behind the current forge.



Above: top of corner column of forge.  
Illustration: Sandra Doyle

### The ambulance steamers

On arrival here, the patients would be examined to confirm the diagnosis of smallpox (or from 1913, fevers such as scarlet fever, diphtheria etc). Confirmed cases would be taken along the pier to the waiting ambulance steamers, which transported them down the Thames to the isolation hospitals. There were up to five of these modified paddle steamers, which conveyed not only patients, but also staff, visitors, parcels, stores and laundry.



Photo courtesy of Francine Payne - www.dartfordhospitalhistories.org.uk

This photo shows the interior of one of these steamers, the Geneva Cross, around 1902.

Marjorie Irvine, who lived in Deptford as a child, came through South Wharf in 1922 aged 10 when suffering with diphtheria, and travelled from here in an ambulance steamer, like the children in this photo.

She remembers:

*'They came in an ambulance, wrapped me up like a mummy; I was taken to a dreadful place at Surrey Docks. All I remember is I lay on this bed wrapped up like a mummy for what seemed the best part of a day. Then they came and shoved me on a stretcher and I was put on the ship and taken down the river to Gravesend. I remember being shoved onto a shelf, or a bunk I suppose it would be...'*

### The isolation hospitals

Initially, these isolation hospitals were ships moored at Long Reach, then an uninhabited stretch of the Thames near Dartford in Kent. A former warship, the *Atlas*, was used for the male patients, and the *Castalia*, a former ferry which had five ward blocks constructed on its deck, accommodated the female patients. Moored between them was a former frigate, the *Endymion*, used for staff quarters, administration and stores. In 1902 these ships were replaced by purpose-built hospitals on the land adjacent.

Smallpox and fever patients stayed at the isolation hospitals for weeks or months. Some died, but most recovered, returning to London on the ambulance steamers and passing again through this site as they did so.

Here on the Farm's foreshore, as well as many crockery fragments from the Metropolitan Asylums Board (M.A.B.), pieces of china plates from the *Castalia* have been found. Although the *Castalia* was moored about 15 miles downriver, perhaps after the hospital ships were decommissioned, the crockery was re-used at the receiving station here.



The hospital ships moored offshore at Long Reach - the *Castalia* is on the right.

Photo courtesy of Francine Payne - www.dartfordhospitalhistories.org.uk

Left: part of a plate from the *Castalia*, and a jug from the M.A.B. - just some of the many pieces found on the foreshore here.

**To learn more about the smallpox and fever receiving station, continue down the slope to the Farm's main entrance gate. From there, follow the path on the left between the orchard and the vegetable plots. Pass the beekeeping shed and look for panel no. 4 alongside the brick wall on the right.**

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](http://www.surreydocksfarm.org.uk).



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