



Surrey Docks Farm History Trail

2. The Timber Wharf



With the end of shipbuilding on this site, it became a timber wharf. For over 60 years, timber was imported, stored, treated and traded here. The two occupants, Isaac Solly and then Peter Rolt, were more than simply timber merchants; both were highly influential and accomplished men of their day.

Isaac Solly's Yard

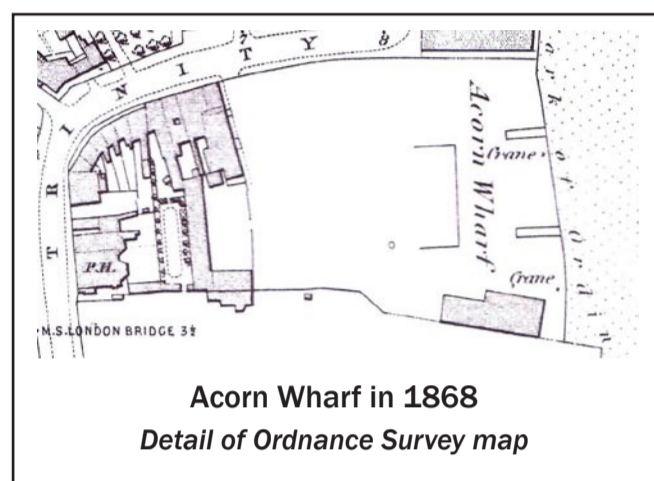
From at least 1818 until 1837, this site was 'Solly's Yard' – the timber wharf of Isaac Solly. A very public-spirited man, he was widely involved in society, acting as Chairman of numerous enterprises including the London Dock Company, various railway, steam and assurance companies, and was actively involved in many charitable institutions.

For several generations the Sollys had been in the Baltic timber trade, and made a large fortune through supplying government dockyards with timber and hemp. Such was the scale of their operations that at one point they sent orders 'to buy up the whole of the oak plank to be found in Prussia and Poland'. However, with heavy duties on Baltic timber having taken their toll, and large sums spent on bailing out relatives in financial difficulty, the business ended in bankruptcy during the banking crisis of 1837.

Peter Rolt and Acorn Wharf

The wharf was next occupied by Deptford timber merchant Peter Rolt, from the early 1840s until his death in 1882.

The site was called Acorn Wharf at this time; like many other local features, it was named after the Acorn public house which stood for centuries at the inland end of this site until it was destroyed in WWII. It can be seen at the left of the map opposite, marked as 'P.H.'.



Peter Rolt rose high in politics and business, becoming the Conservative MP for Greenwich in 1852, and in 1857 took over a shipbuilding company at Blackwall to form the Thames Ironworks, which became the largest and most important shipbuilding business on the Thames in the second half of the 19th Century.

All this time, he maintained his timber yard here. Newspapers tell us that Acorn Wharf was trading in 'prepared timbers and floorings for public establishments' and 'oak, mahogany, deals and things used in shipbuilding'. See the story on the right for the unfortunate reason why this stock was being reported in the press.

Henry Solly and the experimental chemical laboratory



Henry, a son of Isaac Solly, was a Victorian social reformer, instrumental in founding working men's clubs, the garden city movement and the Charity Organisation Society. A Unitarian Minister for many years, he supported many radical causes of the day such as universal suffrage, free education, co-operatives and anti-slavery.

A little-known but fascinating period of his youth was spent on his father's wharf on this site in 1836-37, conducting chemical experiments, discovering – and losing – a potentially lucrative new blue dye.

In his autobiography Henry describes how in his early twenties he was taken on by an 'inventive chemical genius' who trained him in practical chemistry and set him to work carrying out experiments to develop new products and processes for patents.

He took to this task with gusto, having a laboratory erected here on his father's wharf. He described this as a 'queer little room on the edge of the river ... a wooden structure, which was reached by an ascent more like a step-ladder than flight of stairs ... and had a fine view of the river, with all its moving stream of barges, boats and shipping'. He lived and worked in this room during the week, returning home on weekends via rowing-boat over to Limehouse Stairs.



One of these experiments was the development of a 'silica soap' out of flint. In the process, Henry accidentally created a beautiful blue powder, raising the hope that this could be a fortune-making new dye. However, attempts to recreate it failed, and only after months of work did he rediscover it, though never quite the same perfect colour of his original discovery. Nevertheless, he approached a lawyer to secure a patent.



The entire enterprise however became a succession of misfortunes, foul play and failings. The lawyer, accused of malpractice, fled the country. Henry's master, the 'chemical genius', turned out to be an erratic, inattentive heavy drinker, who drank himself to death after these disappointments. Later, Henry found out that two years after he had discovered his blue powder, a highly successful new blue dye had come onto the market from Germany. The ingredients were almost identical to his, and he strongly suspected that the lawyer had stolen and sold his patent specification. If so, Henry missed out on a fortune for want of 'a sober chemist and an honest lawyer'.

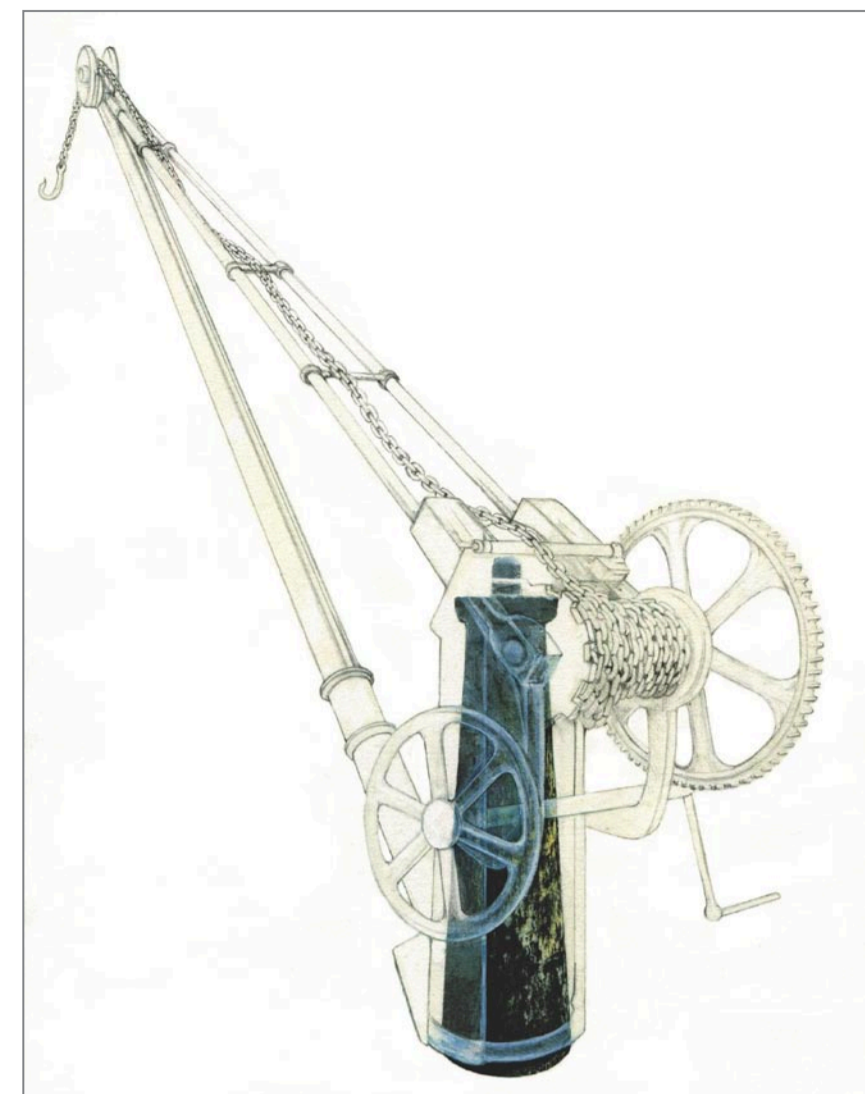
The crane

The black column in the middle of the riverside path here to the left is what remains of a hand-operated crane.

Originally there were two of these along the wharf's river frontage, and they would have been used by the timber wharf for loading and unloading from boats and barges. These cranes can be seen marked on the map on the left, and may also have been in use here earlier when this was a shipyard.

This illustration shows how it is likely to have appeared, and how the rest of the structure would have fitted on the base column that remains.

Illustration by Sandra Doyle



Mooring anchors

There are two anchors along the Farm's riverside path – one by the lamp-post near this pillar, and one by the bronze animals. Note that they both have a single fluke (the curved blade at the end which hooks into the ground). This type of anchor was designed to be laid permanently on the riverbed to moor vessels to. More single-fluke anchors remain on the foreshore, as well as other heavy objects placed there for the same purpose; these remind us that there would have been barges and boats moored all along the river here.

A fierce fire, a stupendous sturgeon, and raided rope

Newspapers and court reports of the time tell us of the following dramatic or curious events at Peter Rolt's timber wharf:

In 1858 a devastating fire occurred here, destroying two acres of wood stacked 70-80 feet high, all the buildings on site, six barges moored at the wharf (each loaded high with deal), and several houses and large buildings along the street. The flames, fanned by high winds, blew embers across the Thames, spreading fire to a ropemaker's in Millwall and apparently even setting light to a ship at Limehouse. The Morning Chronicle reported:

'Stables, lofty piles of deals, and other timbers of great value, became encircled in flames, and the noise occasioned by the cracking of the wood and the toppling over of the various stacks was such as could only be described like the discharge of several hundred muskets ... The flames kept rising higher than any of the church steeples near, and the heat was so great, that the firemen in their endeavours to subdue the conflagration had their helmets shrivelled on their heads, and they were repeatedly obliged to run out of the way of the falling piles of timber.'

The origin of the fire was found to be a 'foul flue', i.e. a sooty chimney, which caught fire on a nearby property, the sparks being blown by the gale into the timber yard. Incredibly, there were no casualties; apparently even the wharf's 14 horses, let out of their stables and galloping off in sundry directions, were all recovered uninjured.



In 1864 Acorn Wharf made the news again when a huge sturgeon was caught here. A foreman at the wharf, on sighting a large dorsal fin, used a boat hook, rope, and the wharf's crane – perhaps the one right here – to land it. This remarkable fish of over seven feet in length was presented to the Lord Mayor.

The object on the left is the 'head' of a boat hook, one of many found on the foreshore here. Boat hooks, or hitchers, were used for docking, undocking, and pulling things from the water; inevitably, many of these would have fallen in while trying to pull other things out ...

In 1870 a poor local man, 24-year-old Charles Turner, was convicted at the Old Bailey of stealing rope from a boat at Acorn Wharf, which he tried to sell to earn money. His sad statement to the court reads: 'I only took it twice. The children were crying round me for bread.' Despite a report received of his good character, and his obvious need, he was imprisoned for 12 months.



Now go to your right, passing between the tower and the blacksmith's forge. Then turn right, and at the side of the forge you'll find panel no. 3, describing the next surprising use of this site.

