



Surrey Docks Farm History Trail

5. World War II and the River Fire Station

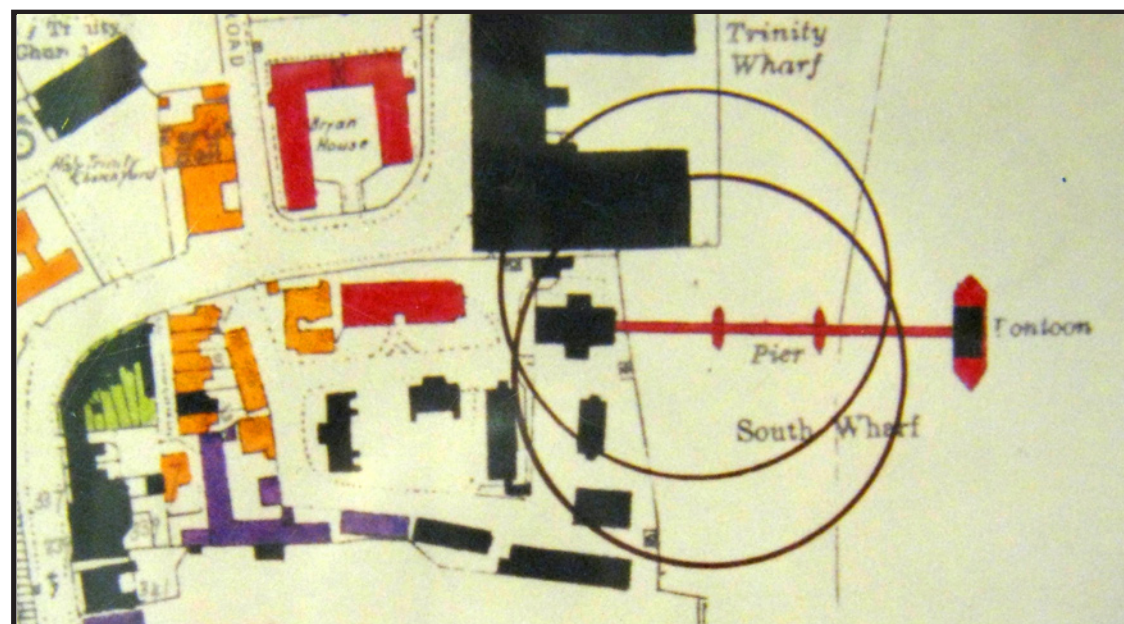


The war changed everything on this site: it brought a sudden end to the smallpox receiving station, and led to this wharf becoming a river fire station for the duration of WWII and beyond.

In 1939, the Farm's site, known as South Wharf, was still a smallpox receiving station. But with no smallpox cases for five years and the river ambulances sold off years earlier, the remaining staff were simply on standby.

With war imminent, new bases were urgently needed for the Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS), which had been set up to support the professional fire brigades during wartime. The receiving station was forced to give the AFS use of the pier and pontoon, as well as a small building leading to the pier called the Receiving Rooms; this was where the new toilet block is now, adjacent to the forge.

But everything came to a sudden end on the first night of the Blitz on September 7, 1940. (See the Blitz information panel for the full story of the dramatic events here.) The map below shows the damage to the wharf from the fires; several buildings were destroyed and many more were seriously damaged. The pier was badly burnt but remained structurally intact, and proved repairable. The Receiving Rooms, which the firemen had been using as their base, were completely destroyed – except for the entrance shelter, whose walls were bricked-in shortly after to become a shed. Today we know it as the forge.



Key to bomb damage map:

- Black = total destruction
- Purple = damage beyond repair
- Red = seriously damaged
- Orange = general blast damage; minor in nature
- Circle = V-1 flying bomb impact area

Detail from London County Council 1939-45 Bomb Damage Maps, reproduced with permission of the London Metropolitan Archives

A long-range rocket attack

During the 'Second Blitz' of 1944-45, the wharf was struck again – this time by a doodlebug (V-1 flying bomb). It landed on the wharf's foreshore on 31 July 1944. The pier and pontoon and several boats alongside were seriously damaged, and up to 15 people who had been working nearby were injured, three of whom were staff from the river fire station. Luckily they suffered only minor wounds, sprains and bruising. The area affected by the doodlebug's blast is shown by the circles on the above map.

What remains?

Much of the wreckage from the Blitz ended up in the river and can still be seen on the foreshore today: piles of loose bricks, broken building materials and fragments of glass and china.

Several sandbag-shaped lumps of concrete can also be seen at the southern end of the Farm's foreshore. These probably once filled a gap in the riverwall above which had been damaged on the first night of the Blitz, leaving the wharves at risk of flooding. Bags of cement like these were often used to plug holes in riverwalls following bomb damage.

The metal 'FIRE BARGE' sign (photograph top right) was also found on the Farm's foreshore. Fire barges were empty cargo barges equipped with pumping equipment and berthed in docks, canals or rivers to pump water ashore for firefighting. Perhaps this sign came from a fire barge that was stationed here or being fitted out at the workshops.



Above: this photograph from 10 May 1946 shows firemen on a barge moored alongside the river fire station. They are attaching floodlights and water jets to barges for the upcoming Victory Day celebrations. The Thames fire service created a spectacular display for the evening river pageant, with water jets illuminated by coloured floodlights from 20 or more barges.

Image: © Hulton Archive/Stringer via Getty Images

South Wharf River Fire Station

Following the severe fire damage in the Blitz, the smallpox receiving station was permanently abandoned and the entire wharf was handed over to the National Fire Service (NFS) in 1941. By now, the AFS had become part of the NFS, a special wartime arrangement that unified the different fire services so that they could all work efficiently together. The AFS and NFS buttons shown above were both found on the Farm's foreshore, and may have fallen off the uniforms of staff working here.

The wharf became not only a river fire station but also the maintenance workshops of the River Thames Formation – the wartime network of river fire stations all along the Thames. Fire vessels and equipment from all these stations would be brought here whenever they needed any repairs or maintenance.

We know from the V-1 bomb report that women also worked here, because one of the injured was listed as a firewoman. Tens of thousands of women worked for the NFS – not in frontline firefighting, but in support roles such as drivers, despatch riders, fire-watchers, control room staff, telephonists etc. At this station, they may also have worked as mechanics or firehose repairers.

Many wartime fire stations grew vegetables on their land or on nearby bomb sites, and even kept animals such as rabbits, poultry, pigs and goats to help supplement their rations. It's very likely that they grew crops here, and while we can only speculate, they certainly would have had enough space and outbuildings to also keep animals.



Above: the riverfront in 1950. In the foreground you can see the crane base that still stands on the Farm's riverside today. The rest of this was probably destroyed in the Blitz, but further along – still intact – is the other crane which once also stood here. The sheds are probably maintenance workshops. In the far background is the old Scotch derrick crane which was a local landmark until demolished in 2017 to make way for a new housing development.

Image © London Metropolitan Archives (City of London)

Below: the river fire station in 1952. The three-storey building on the site is the Blitz-damaged female staff block from the former smallpox receiving station. Just inshore from the pier is the brick shed that is today the forge. Most of the other riverfront buildings are new workshops added by the fire service; the tall metal structure alongside them is probably the remains of a firehose drying tower. Image © Historic England



This history trail was originally created as part of a Heritage Lottery Fund project at the Farm in 2013/14. This panel was updated in 2022 with thanks to the Showell family. Further information on the site's history is available on the Farm's website: www.surreydocksfarm.org.uk/site-history

After the war

The maintenance workshops closed down at the end of the war but the river fire station itself continued here until the mid-1950s. All the buildings were demolished around 1955-60; the pier was the last to go. Only the shed which is now the forge was left standing.

The empty wharf was used on and off in the 1960s as a timber yard. In the 1970s it became a lorry park and then a storage yard for shipping containers, where instead of guard dogs, geese were kept to warn of intruders. Some local people also remember horses being grazed alongside – so farm animals are nothing new to this site!

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