

## Then and Now 8 - Greenland Dock



*Top Picture - Greenland Dock - 1820  
© British Library*

*The drawing of the Greenland Commercial docks was made in 1820. Artist is unknown.*

Look at both pictures and find these comparative details:

## Greenland Dock - 1820

1: This dock opened in Rotherhythe in 1699 as Howland Great Wet Dock. This was the first wet dock purpose built in London for ships to be repaired without being affected by the rise and fall of the tide as lock gates protected the level of water. It could hold 120 ships at a time. When built this dock was about 5 miles downstream from central London. It was in the Kent countryside. In the top picture you can see the dome of St Paul's and the City of London. Trees were built around the edge of the dock as a wind break as it was not expected to unload goods. The later picture, from 1720, show the trees have gone to be replaced with warehouses to unload goods.

2: From about 1720 the dock was used to unload whales and walrus which had been caught in the North Atlantic Ocean near Greenland. One of the first buildings built on the side of the Dock was a Blubber House used to melt down the body of a whale to extract the oil, which was popular for fuelling oil lamps and making soap. This is not something we find acceptable today and shows how feelings about things have changed over time. The dock was renamed Greenland Dock in 1763. By about 1806 the whaling trade had almost stopped.



*"Howland Great Wet Dock 1717". Licensed under Public Domain via Commons - artist unknown*

3: From 1806 the dock merged with Surrey dock next door to become Surrey Commercial Docks and made even bigger. For the next 160 years it was the main dock used to import timber (wood from trees) into the UK, to be used for building houses and furniture. The Surrey Commercial docks were badly damaged in 1940 in the London Blitz by German bombers. It was rebuilt but bigger ships and the use of containers, rather than loose cargo, meant that the docks closed in 1970. The shipping trade had moved downstream to Tilbury in Essex.

## Greenland Dock - 2014

4: After the docks closed in 1970 about 90% were filled in and the warehouses demolished. Some of the docks, such as the old Greenland Dock, were left to be used as a water sports centre for sailing and canoeing. South Dock is used today as a marina for mooring leisure boats. The area around the docks was rebuilt as houses and flats. You can still visit the dock and can see where the dock gates stood next to the narrow entrance and compare it to the entrance in the two drawings shown above. There is an excellent view across to all the tall office buildings on Canary Wharf from the dock entrance. It is hard to image today some of the large ships coming in through this entrance having sailed all the way from the North Atlantic. The area of the docks is now in the London Borough of Southwark and very much part of London, not leafy Kent.

