

At long last

After a long, complicated and sometimes troubled history, the Museum in Docklands finally opened to the public as part of the Museum of London Group on 24 May 2003. I was invited to a preview on 22 May, and my first impressions are recorded here. Finding the museum was no problem – a short walk from West India Quay (DLR) or a slightly longer one from Canary Wharf (Jubilee Line). Finding the entrance was more difficult; the museum has a ‘front’ (facing south onto the dock) and a ‘back’ (facing onto the road), and I chose the wrong one.

The building is an exhibit in its own right: an original (1802) warehouse built for the West India trade, and beautifully and sympathetically restored. On arrival, visitors takes the lift to the top (3rd) floor, and works their way down through the twelve galleries of a very large display area back to the ground floor. It was reassuring to know that the museum has a coffee shop to revive the flagging visitor. The display is arranged chronologically, from the Romans to the post-closure period. The ‘Roman’ section was disappointing, with several inaccuracies (such as a very odd map of Roman Britain, with some towns misplaced or mis-spelt), which made me wonder what the standard of the rest would be. It felt as if it had been added almost as an after-thought. However, things improved after that, and as I moved into periods with diverse sources of information – documentary and artistic as well as artefacts – I became more and more engrossed. A whole world was exposed, which has vanished

within a life time (it brought back memories of listening to ships’ hooters on the Thames from my bedroom window), and which is crucial to the understanding of London past and present.

I can do no more than mention a few highlights. *Sailortown* is a recreation of a series of mid-19th-century alleyways with exotic shops and mysterious blind corners, capturing the claustrophobic and slightly sinister atmosphere of the period. In another gallery, I passed a party of schoolchildren listening enthralled as a Lascar sailor told them his story. *Docklands at War* illustrates the impact of the Blitz through film (including captured Nazi footage) and oral testimonies. On the ground floor is *Mudlarks*, an interactive gallery for children, which looked like a painless way of absorbing basic physics as well as having fun. The benefit of the gallery may be reduced by the need to accompany children at all times, so parents hoping to see other galleries at their own pace may be disappointed.

The ambience of the museum is impressive; the lighting is not too subdued, and the routing through the building is unobtrusive but offers firm guidance – I kept being pleasantly surprised that I was not ‘lost’. The displays are enhanced by a programme of events – docklands walks as well as gallery tours – and Gallery Actors will be present every weekend. Whether Londoner or visitor, one’s experience of London is incomplete without a visit to the Museum in Docklands.

The museum is open 10 am to 6 pm every day. Admission (valid for one year) is £5 (adults), £3 (concessions), children free.

Annual Lecture and Meeting

The thirty-fourth AGM of the **London Archaeologist** was held on Tuesday 20 May at the Institute of Archaeology, 31-34 Gordon Square. The following officers were elected: Editor, Clive Orton; Assistant Editor, Marit Gaimster; Secretary, Monica Kendall; Advertising and Promotions, Roy Stephenson; Subscriptions, Shiela Broomfield; Managing

Editor, David Gaimster. Stephen Miller was re-elected as Auditor. No new members were elected to the Publication Committee, as no current members had completed their term of office. The accounts showed a small surplus for the year. After the close of business, Jonathan Cotton of the Museum of London spoke on ‘London before London’.