

# The CRaFT project: recording Thames Causeways, River Stairs and Ferry Terminals

*A new community project, CRaFT, has been studying over 200 causeways, river stairs and ferry terminals between Vauxhall and Greenwich. The background to this project and its first results are summarised here by CRaFT Co-ordinator and COLAS member, Angela Broomfield.*



**ABOVE:** Passengers board wherries near a wooden river stair (possibly Horn Stairs, Rotherhithe) from 'A Morning, with a View of Cuckold's Point', c. 1750–60 by Samuel Scott (Photo © Tate)

## Accessing the river

For centuries, river stairs were an integral part of everyday life. Londoners went to the Thames to collect water, wash, do their laundry, water horses, or dispose of rubbish; while workers required safe access to the river at low tide to carry out trades such as shipbuilding, ship repair and ship breaking.

Free and unimpeded access to the river was both a necessity and a public right. However, during the medieval period there were frequent complaints that public access to the river had been blocked, or that fees were being levied illegally. London's sheriffs made regular inquiries into these allegations and the detailed record of the 1343 inquiry provides a remarkable picture of the waterfront when the City's population was at its medieval maximum, on the eve of the Black Death.<sup>1</sup> The 1343 inquiry confirmed that

out of more than 50 river stairs and jetties between the Fleet River and the Tower, only 13 still provided free, unobstructed access.

Among the sources of complaints were the fact that a cookhouse had been built over a jetty at the riverside end of Armentes Lane in Dowgate Ward, and that the jetty at the foot of Three Cranes Lane, an important ferry terminal, had been damaged by building works on an adjacent site. Salt Wharf Lane had been so constricted by new developments that carts could no longer pass each other to reach the water. Even worse problems were reported at Ebbsgate, where overhanging privies had been built over the inlet, so that the waste 'fell upon the heads of people passing along'.

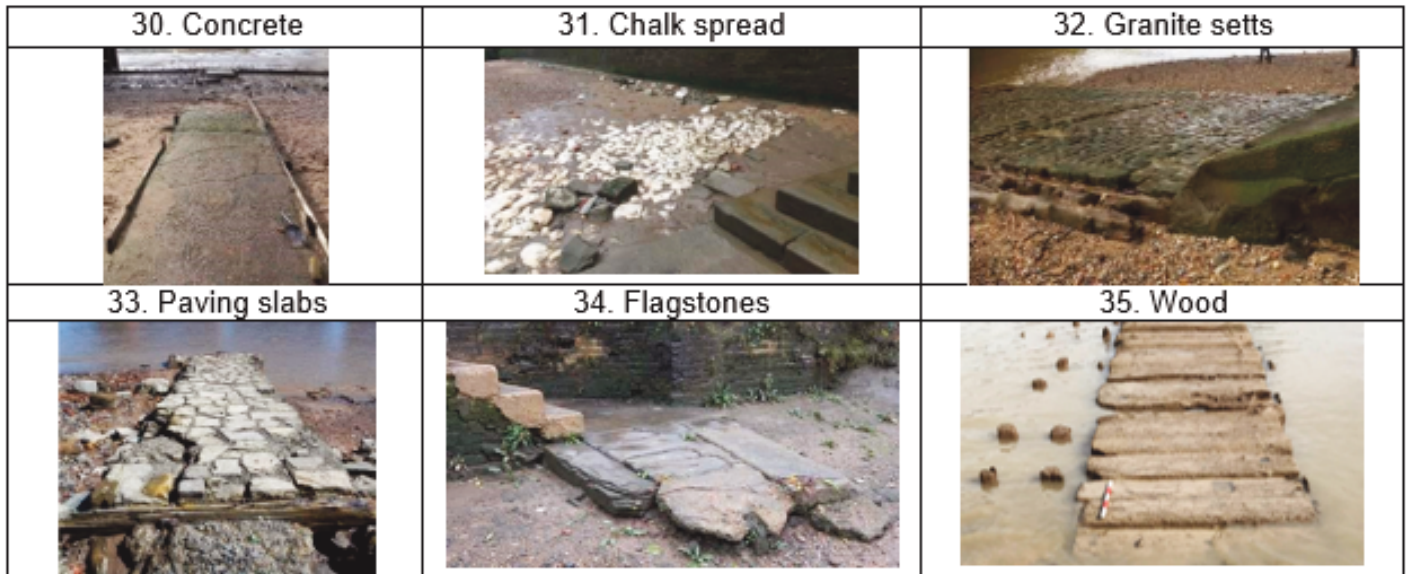
In addition to these physical impediments, the public were also being asked to pay dues. Such fees were supposedly put towards rebuilding the river stair, maintaining the wharf, or paving the lane, but at both St Stephen's Lane and Botolph Wharf, the public routes had been diverted on to neighbouring private quays where tolls were extracted from the hapless public. At the 'Laundresbrigge', the public jetty where men and women came to wash clothes or draw water, they were being unscrupulously charged a fee by local landowner Ralph de Berners.

## Wherries and the watermen

Before buses, cars or railways, when just one bridge crossed the river between the Thames estuary and Kingston, the Thames was a major transport artery. The public river stairs were the recognised landing-places from which to board a wherry: a river taxi rowed by watermen. They were used for short journeys across and along the river, or for longer trips, such as to Gravesend in the east, or Windsor in the west.

In the late 16th century, according to Stow's *A Survey of London*, there were 2,000 wherries and other small boats, which were worked by around 3,000 watermen in the City, Westminster and Southwark.<sup>2</sup> Wherries and their passengers were such a common sight on the river that they featured





in contemporary songs, plays, paintings and maps for several centuries. Samuel Pepys, in his 17th-century diaries, refers to his good, and bad, experiences of travelling by wherry along the Thames.

The 19th century heralded an era of great change. Paddle steamers appeared on the river from the 1830s and took over routes previously served by the watermen. New piers replaced the old stairs and enabled large numbers of passengers to board the paddle steamers. The wherries still had a role in carrying passengers to the steamers moored offshore in the river. Thirty years later the building of the Thames Embankments led to the removal of many river stairs, or restricted their access.

By the late 19th century, there were still approximately 1,600 licensed watermen, but most were operating in the area below London Bridge where they conveyed workers to the docks, wharves and industries located on either side of the Thames, or to the large ships that lay at anchor in the river.<sup>3</sup> In 1861, Henry Mayhew, in his study *London Labour and the London Poor*, listed 75 stairs (or 'plying places') between Hammersmith and Greenwich and noted that 48 were below London Bridge.<sup>4</sup>

However, the numbers of watermen declined rapidly in the succeeding years. In 1906, the annual report of the Stepney Borough engineer revealed that although the river stairs were repaired by Stepney Borough Council and the causeways were maintained by the Thames Conservancy, they were unusable due to large accumulations of mud. The report stated that the duty of keeping the causeways clean devolved upon the watermen, in accordance with bye-law 72 of the Watermen and Lightermen's Company, but there were no longer enough licensed watermen stationed at each river stair to keep them clean.<sup>5</sup>

In January 1928, after the dreadful flood that inundated large areas of low-lying London, the *Sunday Mirror*, while reporting on efforts to prevent further flooding in Rotherhithe, referred to the alleys and stairs leading to the Thames as 'old-time passages formerly used by watermen' – signalling that,

by the early 20th century, the river stairs were already consigned to history.<sup>6</sup>

**The CRaFT project**

City of London Archaeological Society (COLAS) members and Thames Discovery Programme (TDP) volunteers came together in June 2019 to launch the project. COLAS was founded in 1966 to encourage an active appreciation of archaeology, particularly within the City of London and its environs.

Today, because so few causeways, river stairs and ferry terminals have survived, we fail to appreciate how important they once were. The CRaFT project aims to uncover the history of the river stairs and to investigate broader themes, such as the use of river stairs by medieval women, or the far-reaching impact of new forms of transport.

Using maps and panoramas, the project has listed every known river stair between Vauxhall and Greenwich. Each river stair is assigned a unique CRaFT number and investigated by COLAS and

**ABOVE: Part of the Observational Survey guide, in this case identifying causeway materials, to aid recording**  
**OPPOSITE TOP: Volunteers recording a river stair**

**BELOW: The York Watergate: built in 1626 as the riverside entrance to York House and now located 150m from the Thames in the Victoria Embankment gardens**





**ABOVE:** The steep Alderman Stairs running down to the causeway on the foreshore

Thames Discovery Programme volunteers through four stages which consist of:

**1: Historical Research:** for example, cartography and panoramas, place name analysis, map regression, the study of representations of river stairs in art, or references in literature, and analysis of past and present fieldwork.

The other three stages involve fieldwork on the foreshore:

**2: Observational Survey:** volunteers record the type of stair, causeway or jetty, the materials used and the probable phasing. Photos are taken of each feature.

**3: Measured Survey:** volunteers produce a measured, drawn record of the feature.

**4: Monitoring Survey:** this is the follow-up to the Observational Survey. Volunteers note any changes over time, either through erosion or, more rarely, where stairs are repaired or refurbished.

Volunteers are trained to use specially-created CRaFT recording sheets for the Observational and Monitoring surveys, where a list of options can be rapidly circled when on the foreshore with a space for descriptions, or rough sketches. There is a guide for each recording sheet that includes photo examples of typical features.

Volunteers upload their survey sheets, photos and research to an online space which acts as a knowledge pool where they can also ask questions – after all someone else may have found the missing piece of their CRaFT puzzle. The online space contains research resources, CRaFT guides and survey sheets. Volunteers can subscribe to an email newsletter, which provides updates on progress and suggested areas for investigation. In addition, thanks to the efforts of a keen photogrammetrist, there are now nine 3-D

models of river stairs which are freely available online, providing a fascinating virtual visit for volunteers who are unable to visit the foreshore, and for the public.<sup>7</sup>

### What has the CRaFT project found so far?

To date, volunteers have researched the history of over 60 river stairs and conducted close to 40 foreshore surveys. Research was even able to continue during lockdown, with one volunteer contributing online research from as far away as Spain.

#### *The river stairs*

In the 10th century, access to the river was through the watergates:

breaches in the remains of the Roman riverside wall where an artificial embankment sloped down to the foreshore. Over the centuries, the embankment was replaced by a set of protruding wooden steps at the end of a public north–south lane, often with a jetty, or a causeway on the foreshore, which led down to the low-water mark and enabled Londoners to reach the Thames at any state of the tide.

For the many visitors arriving by boat or ship, London's riverfront was their first encounter with the city, and the river stairs were a fixed point of reference in the city's long riverscape. They took their character from their locality and its history, just as they took their names from local places, buildings or events: Horn Stairs was named after a nearby post surmounted by a pair of horns, which was said to commemorate the starting point of the medieval Horn Fair.

Important waterfront buildings, such as the 19th-century Custom House and the late 17th-century Old Royal Naval College at Greenwich, included prestigious masonry river stairs as part of their architectural design. The owners of private houses also sought to impress visitors by investing in their riverside entrance. In 1626, George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, commissioned a dramatic Italianate stone arch, or watergate, for the Thames-side entrance to York House, one of the palaces built along the Strand. The house was demolished in 1675, but the watergate continued to be used until the construction of the Victoria Embankment gardens, in 1862, left it marooned some 150m from the river. The York Watergate is one of several Thames river stairs that are now far from the river.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, popular ferry crossing points were increasingly replaced by bridges, despite protests by the watermen and even by the local inhabitants. Bridge designs included stairs down to the foreshore 'for the embarking and landing of goods and passengers'. Rennie's London Bridge, opened in 1831, had 'two straight flights of stairs, twenty-two feet wide at each end'.<sup>8</sup> Part of the river stair can still be seen on the north bank, where it is now subsumed beneath the arch of the current bridge and the Thames Path.<sup>8</sup> Volunteers have surveyed another masonry stair, which was constructed in 1819 as part of the first Southwark bridge and was then truncated by an abutment of the replacement bridge, opened in 1921. The robust construction of the granite sett causeway has led volunteers to speculate that it may have been built to facilitate the off-loading of materials used for the 1921 bridge.

By the late 19th century, many river stairs were located at the end of narrow alleys running between tall warehouses that lined the river. Alderman Stairs, not far from St Katherine's Dock, is characteristic of this new phase. Its granite steps, with anti-slip cross-hatching, lead down to a plank and pile causeway of granite setts, stone slabs and what appear to be re-used granite steps. The stair is shown on John Rocque's 1746 map of London and was originally called Parsons Stair, or Lady Parsons Stair, perhaps



**BELOW:** Pelican Stairs in Wapping showing two phases of heightening of the river stair above the wooden steps

after a landowner whose name appears on Greenville Collins' 1684 Thames Survey.

It was not only the names of stairs that could change over time, they could also be relocated. The illegal removal of Kidney Stairs by the Regent's Canal Company in 1870, reveals that the old struggle between private enterprise and public interest continued unabated. The Company 'did not want the nuisance of the public passing over their property' and therefore removed the 15-foot (4.5m) wide stair, replacing it by one that was only 5 feet (1.5m) wide and located further east, above a sewer outlet.<sup>9</sup> In spite of vociferous complaints by the watermen, who maintained that the change for the worse had 'driven away trade', and frequent discussion of the issue at meetings of the Limehouse Board of Works, the stair was never moved back. The new Kidney Stairs were removed in the early 20th century and replaced, like many others, by a ladder – only the infill in the wall now remains to show where the stair once was.

Environmental change has also impacted the Thames river stairs. In an attempt to protect the city from the floods caused by increasingly high tides, the authorities raised the height of the river wall and stairs. Around 1870, Pelican Stairs in Wapping was heightened by the addition of five stone steps above the wooden stair and a member of the local Board of Works subsequently reported that 'since Pelican Stairs had been raised, he had no water in his cellar'.<sup>10</sup> Pelican Stairs was later heightened again, this time through the addition of four steps in concrete. Both sets of heightening can still be seen today.

#### Causeways

The first causeways were simply a layer of readily-available materials placed directly on to the muddy foreshore where they formed a firm, compact surface, or 'hard', on which to walk. Excavations at Bull Wharf, Queenhithe discovered a structure composed of two large planks laid flat on the foreshore and probably dating to the early 12th century.<sup>11</sup> A generation later, the planks had been replaced by an alignment of wattle hurdles forming a path, or causeway, at least 7m long and 1m wide, which would have run from the base of an embankment or river stair.<sup>12</sup>

At Horn Stairs in Rotherhithe, volunteers have identified a possible 'hard' of hand-made brick fragments, probably dating to the 17th or 18th century. It may have used bricks salvaged from the demolition of nearby structures. Horn Stairs is one

of the few river stairs where multiple phases of causeway and stair are clearly visible.

As investment in riverfront infrastructure increased, so the 'hards' were replaced by more permanent causeways. The brick hard next to Horn Stairs runs under its replacement, a 52m-long causeway whose long life is shown by the remains of multiple phases of planks and the piles driven into the foreshore. Most river stairs would therefore have ended in some form of causeway or hard surface across the foreshore. During the 19th century, when granite setts were used extensively for surfacing London's streets, they were also commonly used for causeways, showing that the river stair and causeway were looked upon as an extension of the street and maintained in a similar way.

#### Preservation by record

The fate of the river stairs bears witness to Londoners' changing relationship with the Thames and its foreshore and the forces that have shaped the city. Without regular maintenance, the river stairs and causeways erode rapidly. Since the 1990s, the Thames Archaeological Survey and Thames Discovery Programme have carried out measured surveys, or kept a photographic record of causeways. CRaFT volunteers are seeking to complete this work for those features which remain unrecorded.

We hope that more volunteers will join us as the project grows and help give voice to the watermen and their passengers, to the water carriers, the ship builders and the thousands of other people whose feet have carried them down to the river's edge.

#### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our wonderful volunteers whose enthusiasm is bringing the river stairs' stories to life, the inspiring team at Thames Discovery Programme and of course Gustav Milne who put forward the idea for the project as a follow-on to TDP's 'London's Lost Waterway'. Site photographs were taken by the author.



ABOVE: A probable 'hard' of hand-made brick fragments observed at Horn Stairs and possibly dating to the 17th or 18th century



BELOW: View of the causeway at Horn Stairs, showing flat stones used for the fill and the multiple phases of posts running from the base of the wooden stair

1. T Riley (ed) *Munimenta Gildhallae Londoniensis*, Vol 2 ii (1860).

2. J Stow (ed H Morley) *A Survey of London: written in the year, 1598* (1994) 33.

3. H Mayhew *London Labour and the London Poor* (Volume 3) (1861) 329.

4. *Ibid.*, 330.

5. *Tower Hamlets Independent and East End Local Advertiser* (22 September 1906).

6. *Sunday Mirror* (22 January 1928). For the flood, see also G Milne 'The Thames at War: foreshore archaeology and the Blitz' in *London Archaeol* 16 (1) (2020).

7. The models can be viewed online: see <https://tinyurl.com/yc3x8sev> [accessed 15 June 2020]. See also <https://tinyurl.com/y7tm6vhg> [accessed 5 July 2020].

8. *Op cit* fn 3, 491.

9. *East London Observer* (4 March 1871).

10. *East London Observer* (12 March 1870).

11. J Ayre and R Wroe-Brown 'The Eleventh- and Twelfth-century waterfront and settlement at Queenhithe: excavations at Bull Wharf' *Archaeol J* 172:2 (2015), 216.

12. *Ibid.*, 223–5.