

# **WAYS TO WALK IN LONDON**

TEXT AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
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# SHADWELL BASIN

FROM  
WHITECHAPEL  
TO  
LONDON BRIDGE  
VIA  
SHADWELL BASIN AND WAPPING

We meet at Whitechapel station. A man is playing saxophone and his Staffie is barking along to the music. It's charming but headache inducing, and seems wholly appropriate to this neighbourhood. Whitechapel High Street teams with market stalls selling cheap fabric and halal meat. To escape the crowds Alma and I head south, past the shining blue oblongs of the Royal London, down a functional street lined with car parks. There is a bright green ironwork hospital fence in which naïve shapes of birds and sea creatures have been cut.

We wind down Cavell Street, heading south-east. Buildings are impossible to place in their period. We pass two terraced houses with elements of both Arts and Crafts and Georgian features, with blue and turquoise tiled doors reminding us of tenement entrances in Berlin or Scandinavia. Contradictions

are rife in all parts of the city but perhaps no more so than in this part of London. We are in the heart of the East End, historically one of the most impoverished parts of London, notorious for its horrifying slums in the eighteenth century. For centuries new waves of immigrants have found their home here and in 1936 residents raged against Mosley in the Battle of Cable Street.

It's quieter down here today, walking around Jubilee Street. It's harder to define than the brightly coloured multiculturalism of Brick Lane. Not entirely gentrified, it's clean and quiet, giving it a certain shabby respectability. We weave under stairwells through council estates. Bleak edges are softened by the abundance of late spring greenery. We pass an abandoned yard filled with junk and a sea of yellow flowering weeds.











On Commercial Road, in Shadwell now, I am struck by the abundance of elegant Georgian architecture. Yet this part of town feels forgotten. The George Tavern stands proud. An ancient pub in which Dickens and Samuel Pepys allegedly drank. Rebuilt in the Victorian era, it is now a performance art venue. The unvarnished wooden window frames are beautiful against the faded brickwork.

The Highway heads east, a grey concrete council estate on our left. The owners have customised their homes to extremes, one flat has brown timber panelling and panes of bullseye glass. Another has stained glass and extensive flowering balconies. We stroll across King Edward VII Memorial Park to a bend in the Thames. Omnipresent Canary Wharf gleams in the distance and across the river the modern wharf buildings of Rotherhithe stand on wooden stilts.

Back inland, we head towards Shadwell Basin and discover one of the most strangely beautiful London sites I have seen so far. The basin is one of the few London docks not to have been filled in. Barriers to the water are just rope, and seem delicate in the evening light. It's surrounded by trees, and the spire of St Paul's Shadwell rises up behind them. A solitary swan rests peacefully out on a jetty. Postmodern warehouse constructions reflect blue,

red and gold, making geometric patterns that remind me of African textiles.

A 'red metal', an industrial bridge, leads us over to the Prospect of Whitby for a quick drink. It's London's oldest riverside pub and, as we sip white wine, we imagine it being full of pirates and smugglers instead of tourists and respectable families. The red-brick, Victorian industrial splendour of the former Wapping Hydraulic Power Station towers above us, further enriching the skyline. After closure in 1977 it became the Wapping Project, a fertile arts space. Then in 2013, after thirty-five years, it was sold to property developers. It is now more executive loft apartments. We wonder if all the interesting parts of London will become exclusive to the very wealthy, not for the ordinary city dweller.

Narrow pebbled streets take us towards Wapping High Street. We weave between high street and river; this was once all dockland too. The warehouses are so distinctive. I notice bold graphic shapes – typography, big yellow lanterns on the river. A red piece of wood poking over the wall like a shark fin.

Later, when it's dark, we walk over Tower Bridge, and it seems as if the world is in inverse, bright lights on black. As we walk along the river path towards London Bridge, sections of HMS *Belfast* look like a series of glowing, abstract shapes, separated by darkness.