

Walking the Canals in London's East End

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Waterways: Hertford Union Canal, Limehouse Cut, Regent's Canal, River Lee

Distance: 5 miles

Duration: 2 hours

Difficulty: Easy

Suitable for: Everyone

Walking along East London's historic canal network unlocks a tranquil world only yards from the bustle of commercial life. Suitable for all ability levels, this five mile walk captures parts of the Regent's Canal, Hertford Union Canal, Limehouse Cut and River Lee Navigation.

For those with limited time there are many points where you can start or finish your walk. Those wishing to explore further can continue along the Regent's Canal to Islington and beyond, explore the Bow Back Rivers or visit the vibrant West India Quay and the architectural splendour of Canary Wharf.

History

With over 200 years of history, London's canals were originally built to connect the great docks on the River Thames to Birmingham and the industrial Midlands. Limehouse Basin (formerly the Regent's Canal Dock), was the hub of the canal system nationwide. During the early 19th Century these docks were places of intense activity as exotic foreign cargoes were unloaded onto narrowboats to pass through London's waterways before continuing their journey onwards. Why not visit the Museum in Docklands at West India Quay to discover more.

Nowadays the canal banks are worlds apart from their hectic past, instead providing a peaceful haven for all. Colourful narrow boats linger as a fascinating reminder of our industrial and maritime heritage and our waterways today provide a beautiful environment in which to enjoy wildlife, watersports, angling, boat trips, historic buildings and many waterside bars and restaurants.

FROM LIMEHOUSE BASIN TO BOW LOCKS

Limehouse Basin has been transformed from a working dock to a charming marina, once again attracting boats from all over the world. This is the gateway, from the River Thames, to over 200 miles of canals. It is now home to a wide variety of modern and classic craft, which moor at the centre of this unique London environment.

Take your time to explore this area and appreciate its rich historical architecture. St Anne's Church, just off Newell Street, is now in the best condition of all Hawksmoor's churches following an intensive restoration project. The Accumulator Tower, next to the viaduct, dates back to 1869 and represents one of the earliest attempts to harness hydraulic power to work the wharves of the Regent's Canal Dock. This is opened in September as part of the London Open House weekend and the fantastic views from the 55ft viewing platform are not to be missed.

Start your walk going roughly north east along the Limehouse Cut towpath where many of the historic buildings are being converted for residential use. After about one mile you will pass under the DLR line which joins Stratford with Canary Wharf. Continue under the busy A12 and you will encounter the award winning floating towpath. Opened in July 2003, it provides a delightful and continuous route under the busy Blackwall Tunnel Approach road.

Innovative in design, the towpath is colourful and brightens up the area with its unique lighting.

You have now arrived at Bow Locks. Look out for Herons and Terns, they're often found perched on top of the lock gear.

FROM BOW LOCK TO THREE MILLS AND OLD FORD LOCKS

Walking North from Bow Locks you will arrive at Three Mills Island. Three Mills boasts hundreds of years of industrial heritage and is mentioned in the Domesday book. Built in 1776, the House Mill is Britain's oldest standing mill and together with the Clock Mill, re-built in 1817, they remain two of the most elegant waterside buildings in London. Tours of the House Mill are held every Sunday between May to September. This is a good place to stop and have a rest, why not have a picnic or explore further into the Bow Back Rivers.

The Bow Back Rivers are a three and a half mile system of tidal and semi tidal waterways which feed the River Lee Navigation. Their fascinating history dates back to Alfred the Great and the invasion of the Danes and records show that they were used to ferry food and fresh water into the city from the 12th Century.

While in the area, it's worth making a detour to The Abbey Mills Pumping Station which is a mid Victorian listed building. Designed by Joseph Bazalgette to overcome the 'Great Stink' of 1858, the pumping station was built in an elaborate Byzantine style that earned it the nickname 'Cathedral of Sewage'. The original Moorish chimneys were demolished in WWII to prevent detection from German bombers.

Back on the towpath heading north you will cross the A11 - following the walkway signs in the footpath - and rejoin at the other side. Continue to walk northwards, crossing paths with the Greenway, a six mile green corridor linking Hackney and Beckton. Just ahead to your left is the old Bryant and May match factory, built in 1911 it has now been converted into luxury flats. You have now arrived in Old Ford Locks, once home to the Big Breakfast TV show.

FROM OLD FORD LOCKS TO BOW WHARF

Just beyond the locks at Old Ford, a footbridge crosses the junction of the River Lee Navigation and the Hertford Union Canal. Cross the bridge and join the towpath along the Hertford Union Canal. This stretch follows the perimeter of Victoria Park, designed by James Pennethorne in 1842 making it London's oldest municipal park.

This is an ideal place for a rest and refreshment stop. You could either stop for a picnic in the 290 acres of parkland or try the many pubs and cafés just off Grove Road.

At the junction of the Regent's Canal and Hertford Union Canal you'll find Bow Wharf which was originally a glue factory. Today the warehouses are home to Jongleurs Comedy Club, a gym, restaurants, bars and shops. This is a lively and fun place to detour and have a look around.

FROM BOW WHARF TO LIMEHOUSE BASIN

The area around Bow Wharf is rich with museums, art, history and shopping. The Museum of Childhood, Chisenhale Gallery and Roman Road Market are all worthy of a detour.

From Bow Wharf you can turn northwards onto the Regent's Canal for Islington, Camden, Little Venice and the Grand Union Canal but we are turning southwards back to Limehouse Basin.

For most of this final stretch, the towpath follows Mile End Park. This newly re-vitalised open space now features an ecology park, terraced garden, adventure playground, sports stadium and climbing wall. On your journey southwards you can cross the unique Green Bridge which is covered with trees and shrubs and essentially takes the park over Mile End road.

Continuing in the same direction, you will encounter Jonson's Lock, named after the Elizabethan playwright Ben Jonson who was a resident of the East End and was famously imprisoned for his part in writing 'The Isle of Dogs' a satire featuring a "very seditious and slanderous matter".

Next to Jonson's Lock on Copperfield Road is the Ragged School Museum, formerly used by Doctor Barnardo to house the largest ragged school in London. In 1876, the school was open to poor local children between the ages of 5 and 10. They received food, an education and help finding their first job. Today, the Ragged School Museum offers an amazing insight into the life of the ragged children and the local area. It also allows today's school children the chance to experience a Victorian classroom.

Continuing southwards along the canal, you will walk past four locks and under Commercial Road before you reach the final point of major significance, the Viaduct. Built at the start of Queen Victoria's reign in 1838, the viaduct was originally built to carry the London and Blackwall Railway and was the first railway in the world to be completely controlled by electronic telegraph.

The Grade 2 listed viaduct now carries the Docklands Light Railway. You have arrived back at the starting point of Limehouse Basin. For those with energy to spare, the Thames path can take you eastwards to Canary Wharf about a mile away or westwards about 2 miles to St. Katherine's Dock and Tower Bridge.

Public transport: There are lots of different ways of arriving in the East End. London Underground, DLR and many bus services operate in this area. The map shows the appropriate station for where you wish to start your walk. Transport for London 020 7941 4500 www.transportforlondon.gov.uk

Disabled access: Parts of the walk are unsuitable for wheelchairs due to uneven surfaces and narrow towpaths