



Silvertown and Docklands

Thames Barrier Park, Cable Car, O2 Arena

Distance: 4 km=2½ miles * easy walking with many stairs
(* including 1 km=¾ mile in the cable car)

Region: London

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Refreshments: O2 Arena

Map: London A-Z *but the map in this guide should be sufficient*

Problems, changes? We depend on your feedback: feedback@fancyfreewalks.org

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Flood barrier, urban landscapes, dockland developments, cable car entertainment and restaurant venues

In Brief

This is a “walk” where a significant part is spent relaxing in the cable car* high over the Thames. (And, needless to say, for this you need a head for heights.) You will feel at the end that this was no ordinary walk as you eat in one of the thirty restaurants and ten bars of the O2 Arena. Your route today gives you a view of the Thames Flood Barrier and of the Royal Victoria Dock as you walk high above it. (* Moderate one-way fare chargeable for the cable car.)



Any kind of clothing and footwear are fine on this London walk. Your dog would be a problem as he would have to be carried in the cable car.



The walk begins at **Pontoon Dock** DLR (Docklands Light Railway) station.

This is on the Woolwich Arsenal branch of the DLR (the same line as for London City Airport). You can catch the DLR train at **Bank** Underground



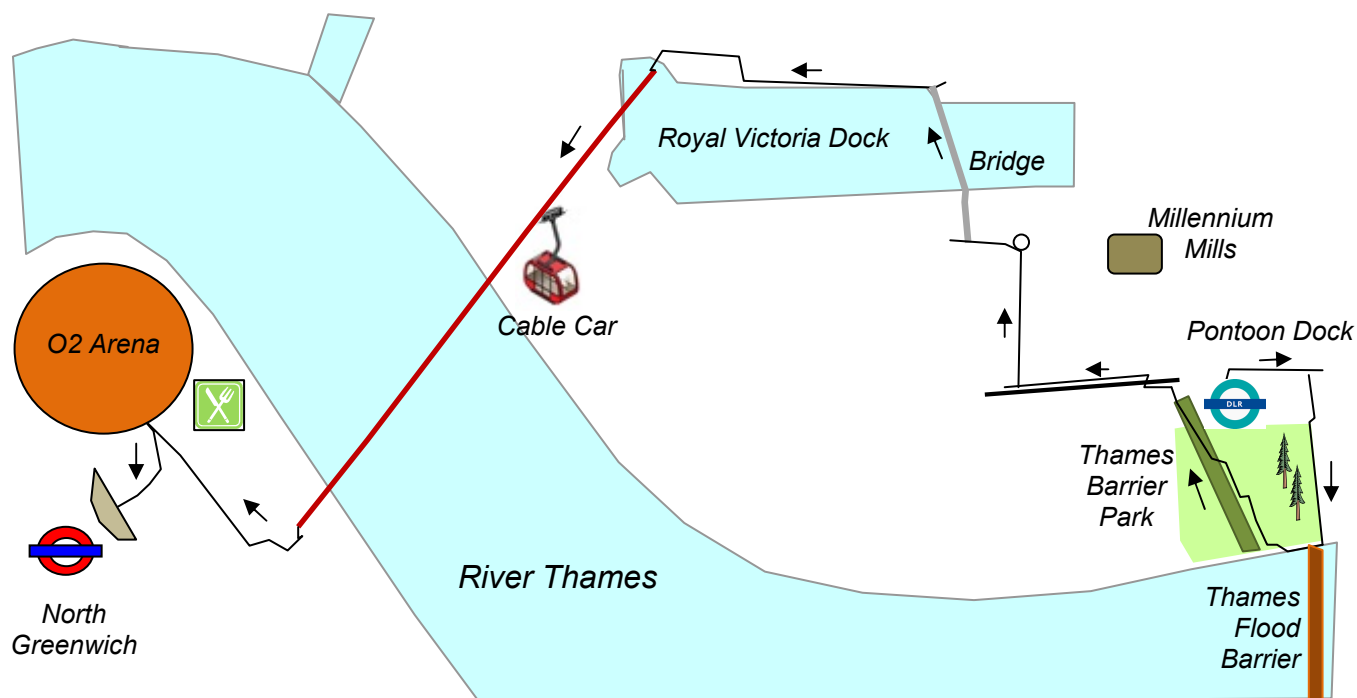
Station or at **Canning Town** Underground (Jubilee Line). You can also arrive by air, from the nearby London City Airport! The walk ends at North Greenwich Underground station.



The Walk

Silvertown is the most extraordinary district of London. Historically, there was only a single road in or out. And it was often blocked by dock gates and delivery vessels. Men and women here all worked either in the docks or in the vast Tate and Lyle sugar refinery which you may have seen from the DLR train. (For this reason, it was sometimes nicknamed “Sugartown”.) People would be born, married and buried without ever leaving the district: indeed many did not know about the rest of London. The district was named after S.W. Silver who built a rubber factory in 1852. There followed the building of the great docks: (Royal) Victoria and Royal Albert. (The King George V dock came much later.) A huge

flour mill was built alongside the docks. In 1889 a strike at Silver's factory paralysed the area for three months. In 1917 a massive explosion shook the munitions factory with many deaths. The area was devastated by bombing in the last war. The painter Graham Sutherland wrote of "the shells of long terraces of houses, great ... perspectives of destruction seeming to recede into infinity. The windowless blocks were like sightless eyes." In 1988, the new London City Airport began service, built over the land between the eastern docks. In 2015 a huge investment of £3.5 billion was approved by Newnham Council and, even as you walk, new constructions seem to be rising skywards.



- 1 Come out of Pontoon Dock DLR station to the main road and turn **right**. | The huge construction project that started in 2017 is now (2021) complete and you now have a new route to the riverside park. (Please send feedback!) In 150m (about 2 minutes), you will see an info tablet about the recent Waterside Park development. Turn **right** here up some steps, under the DLR overhead, and keep straight on between the residential blocks. Go through a metal gate [2021: locked? there will be another route into the park: please send feedback; meantime, continue straight on to the riverside] on your right into a large riverside park and keep your direction along the left-hand side. Continue to the river bank. Here you see the Thames Barrier. Turn **right** along the riverside to obtain a better view.

The Thames Barrier was completed in 1984 as a defence for London against tidal surges. Its design is most unusual and the essential part is hidden under the water in normal times. It was (Reginald) Charles Draper who built a working model in 1969, inspired by the taps on his gas cooker. The barrier is closed on average six times a year. There is a visitor's centre on the other side of the river (in Charlton).

- 2 You quickly reach a sheltered pavilion on tall columns. Turn **right** beneath it on a downward path leading into a sunken garden with undulating topiary.

The Thames Barrier Park was opened in 2000, the first riverside park to be built in London for over fifty years. The unusual design, with a lattice of trees, a "green trench" and "waves" of hedges, was by French landscape architect

Allain Provost. The sunken part provides a microclimate for a “rainbow garden” - strips of coloured plants.

As you proceed along the length of the sunken garden, shift in stages to the left-hand side (exploring the green paths which run parallel). Finally, after enjoying the garden, exit in the corner out to the main road again. (As before, this part of the park will be greatly improved when the new construction is complete.) Turn **left** on the main road, crossing it by the pedestrian lights and continuing in the same direction on a nicely landscaped footway. Over on your left is another nearly-complete superior housing development, Riverside Village. On your right, as you may have seen through the large blue gates, is a vast derelict (in 2017) site, once part of the Millennium Mills and Rank Hovis complex. In 250m, turn **right** on the first side road, Mill Road. As you walk past rows of semis and terraces, you will catch a glimpse on the right of the white grain silo, known as “Silo D”, now a listed building, part of the Millennium Mills complex. Soon, as you approach a tall chimney, you have an open vista on your right with a good view of the existing large Millennium Mills building, acquired, as you can see, for Spillers flour.

Now derelict, the Millennium Mills used to be a vast complex of mills built at the turn of the 1900s adjoining the Royal Victoria Dock. Due to its good rail and water links, it became a vital transport hub for industrial Britain. The original Millennium Mills building was designed and built in 1905 by William Vernon & Sons, and could produce 100 sacks of flour an hour. The old building was badly damaged by the Silvertown explosion in 1917. In 1933, Millennium Mills was rebuilt as the 10-storey art deco concrete building you see today. The whole site is now mothballed for a huge redevelopment project.

- 3 At a roundabout with the chimney in the centre, turn **left** on Wesley Avenue, a leafy retro residential street, with apartment blocks named after notable people, built in the style of the old wharfs. In 100m, turn **right** on a short parking street which passes under a semi-circular building and comes out to the wide expanse of the Royal Victoria Dock. Your route is now straight ahead over the futuristic Royal Victoria Dock Bridge. This is a pedestrian bridge with a long flight of steps at each end, but with lifts (which at the time of writing until 2021 are still out of order). As you cross, you obtain even better views of the dock and the various recent developments that surround it.

The Victoria Dock was opened in 1855 as the first dock to accommodate the new large steamships. It quickly surpassed all the other docks. During the 1960s and 1970s container ports such as Tilbury took over most of the business from the old docks which rapidly fell into disuse. A massive redevelopment project was launched by the London Docklands Development Corporation resulting in smart residential dwellings which retain the character of the old wharfs, including those dark grey derricks.

The Royal Victoria Dock Bridge is a modern stainless steel inverted truss foot-bridge, completed in 1998 by Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands (who also rebuilt the OXO tower). A second stage is planned to provide a motorised cabin to convey passengers along the underside.

- 4 When you reach the other bank, ahead to your right you will see the ExCel Centre, a huge exhibition and convention centre which hosted many of the indoor events of the London Olympics in 2012. Turn **left** along the dock-side, passing several more of those dark grey derricks. The *Sunborn Yacht* is a £780-a-night, five-storey floating hotel with the spacious interior of a cruise liner. The next hotel, as you round a corner, is the Good Hotel, one

of a chain, ingeniously named with Google searching in mind. Shortly after, you reach the rounded entrance to the Air-Line cable car station.

The Emirates Air-Line Cable Car was built by the alpine specialists Doppelmayr in 2010. Unlike the bigger lifts you see in some winter sports resorts, this cable car system uses a single cable which both supports and propels the gondolas (the "guide rope" is also the "haul rope"). It was hoped the lift would be a serious addition to London Transport (TfL). In practise it has turned out to be more of a big tourist attraction. The author paid £3.50 one-way as an oyster card holder. Others paid £4.50.

As you cross the Waterfront, the *Crystal Exhibition* building and the Thames itself, rising higher, you have an all-round view. On this side of the river, on a small promontory at the mouth of the River Lea, is the *Trinity Buoy Wharf* where Michael Faraday (1791-1867) experimented with electricity for light-houses. Further in the distance you can see the *Olympic Park* with Kapoor's distinctive *Orbit Tower* sculpture. As you reach the other side, beneath you is Antony Gormley's sculpture *Quantum Cloud* made from random-walk steel units that conceal his own body shape (taller than the *Angel of the North*).

- 5 Exiting from the cable car, turn **right** in the direction of the great tented dome which is the O2 Arena. You pass a car park and several eateries, but remember: *the O2 Arena is a public space with a vast array of restaurants*. To return to central London, there are the North Greenwich underground station (in the white-topped structure over on your left) and also the Thames Clipper. But it would be unthinkable not to pop into the O2 Arena first, either to eat or to goggle and gaze.

To maintain the exciting theme of this walk, you should try the **Up at The O2** roof walk. This is a carefully supervised climb up the outside of the Arena on a special walkway. You are given overalls and you are attached by a harness. You get terrific views from the top where there is a circular platform. There are several slots throughout the day, depending on the day and season (check their rather complex timetable).

The O2 Arena is the new name for the Millennium Dome which was built by architect Richard Rogers for the rather underwhelming Year 2000 Millennium Experience. It is made from glass fibre supported by twelve yellow towers. After the takeover by sponsor O2 it has hosted sporting events (including the 2012 Olympics), tennis, ice-hockey and boxing and sell-out entertainments such as Prince, Elton John, the Rolling Stones and Lady Gaga to mention but a few.

The O2 Arena is open daily from 9am to 1am. In 2017, the only entrance was the main front entrance, after which you have to turn right on a circular concourse with a huge number of restaurants, some very familiar such as *Garfunkels* and *Wasabi*, some rarer such as *Square Pie* and *Water Margin*. The left-hand half of the catering area is still under construction. When it is complete, the sheer size in prospect is mind-boggling. Presumably there will be another exit and you will be able to go out to the riverside.

A natural completion of this walk would be along the Thames Path to Greenwich. In 2017, there were vast construction projects all along the way and several diversions, including a temporary one along the main road. When these are complete (give it a year or two), you can expect this section to be added as an option. Meanwhile, the 188 bus will take you to Greenwich if you do not want to go home yet.

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