

Table of Contents

The Thames Gateway: here be monsters 1

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By Jonathan Glancey

Bit dated now but still pertinent to TG monstrosity-in-the-offing (as Joseph Conrad would say)
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The Thames Gateway: here be monsters

John Prescott and Tony Blair see it as the perfect solution - release the pressure on a rapidly growing London by expanding eastwards. But, as Jonathan Glancey discovered travelling down the Thames from the capital, there are few reasons to relocate to this cockney Siberia. And what will happen to all the eels and yellowhammers?

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The following correction was printed in the Guardian's Corrections and Clarifications column, Monday November 3 2003

In the piece below we said that Great Expectations was published in 1841. That was roughly the end of the period Dickens was writing about, but the serialised book actually came out in 1860-61.

Scrap metal. Dredged aggregates. Woodpulp. Granulated slag. Bitumen. Fertilisers. Crude oil. This unlovely litany of raw, stinking stuff is loaded and unloaded each working day at the 56 landing stages of the Port of London stretched along the river Thames from Cringle Wharf to Canvey Island. Ships of the Deutsche Afrika and Hamsa Star lines, ferries bringing Fords from Zeebrugge, barges brimming with London's prodigious waste, 50,000-tonne tankers crewed by Filipinos and registered in improbable Pacific rim ports, are just part of the roll-call of the 14,000 vessels bearing 50m tonnes of cargo that will have plied their muscular trade along the Thames by the end of the year. The Thames has never been busier.

This, though, is not the river most Londoners or visitors to the capital know, nor one that many would choose to live along. East of Tower Bridge and the mayor of London's Norman Foster-designed eyrie, the Thames is neither sweet, nor does it flow softly even though you can fish for salmon in its brown, tidal waters, catch whelks and, at Canvey Island, disturb one of the breeding grounds of Dover sole. The ships that ply these wind-whipped waters rarely sail west of Woolwich. Oil tankers are turned at Barking Creek. Cruise ships moor alongside the listed terminal at Tilbury.

East of the Thames Barrier, between the south shores of Essex and the north coast of Kent, lies an all but foreign land. A tract of marshes, mists, rip tides, rubbish tips, freighters, sinking buildings, the world's largest sugarcane refinery, reeking sewage and rotting hulks left over from the Napoleonic wars and D-Day, interspersed, like some hastily edited film, with sporadic tower blocks, remote pubs, and hippy encampments. Here, if anywhere on the map of England, be monsters. This nether world is the unlikely setting for John Prescott and Tony Blair's multi-billion pound Thames Gateway, a brave new world of 200,000 or so homes designed to provide "affordable housing" to "key workers" in

"sustainable communities". It is very probably the biggest building development Britain has ever known. There are great plans for it. And yet, as I discovered on long day's trekking on foot, by bike, car, bus, boat and train, no plan in action. While the government and its ambitious quangos bark and bray about this promised land, housebuilders and developers are drowning the area in a tide of gimcrack housing, banal shopping malls and US-style business parks. This is where the huge number of economic migrants to London and the south east, as well as indigenous teachers, nurses, and ambulance, bus and tube drivers are meant to live.

History, though, tells us that few people have settled here. Neither ancient Brits nor Romans. Precious few Elizabethans. A smattering of retired 18th-century sea captains. A sprinkling of paddle-steaming Victorians who developed Thameside villages such as Gravesend into Sunday resorts for airless Londoners. An outfall during the 20th century of the working classes who decamped from the slums of east London and complained of loneliness and the quiet. Thamesmead, 70s Thameside estate strewn alongside the Crossness sewage works was never going to rival St Tropez, or even Letchworth. This cockney Siberia remains the all but out-of-bounds landscape framed forever by Charles Dickens: "Ours was the marsh country ... the low leaden line beyond, was the river ... the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea ... the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip." The opening of *Great Expectations*, published in 1841, when the eastern Thames was home to prison hulks where prisoners held in chains died in droves of "marsh fever".

The bricks and mortar of Thames Gateway are being put down on every virgin marsh, new arterial roads and bridges have been built. All this is premised on the belief that by 2016 the population of greater London will have risen from 7.4 million to 8.1 million. An incoming population the size of Leeds will need to be housed somewhere in the south east. "The germ of it," says Sir Peter Hall, professor of planning at the Bartlett School of Architecture, "was an article by Martin Simmons, a planner with the GLC, in *The Planner* in 1987. It was all about the impact of the Channel Tunnel. The high-speed railway, calling at Ebbsfleet and Stratford in Kent and Essex, could act a generator along its length for new housing, employment and so on. Here was an opportunity to reverse the development of London from west to east. On March 25 1991, Michael Heseltine, then at the Department of the Environment, held a press conference to announce the birth of the East Thames Corridor. I was appointed special adviser on strategic planning." Hall, one of the Thames Gateway's founding fathers, is keenly aware of the dangers of building so much so quickly along the river today. "It's true," he says, "that few people have ever lived here, the winds are cold, there are floodplains and polluted land. And, there have been devastating floods." As at Canvey Island on January 31 1953, when heavy rain combined with a surge tide caused the Thames to crash over inadequate sea walls. Fifty nine people died. Half a million cubic yards of clay, 350,000 concrete blocks, 2,000 tons of sheet steel and five miles of old London tram tracks were needed to raise the level of the

sea wall. Fifty years on, water levels are rising.

"And, of course," says Hall, "the land is sinking. In fact, the whole of south-east England is sinking. But, the East Thames Corridor or Thames Gateway has long seemed to be a case of 'win-win' in planning terms. It allows London to expand without stirring up nimby sensitivities in the affluent west."

Few west Londoners would sail east to set up home. And who could blame them? At Barking Reach, one of the first of the new Thames Gateway estates, endorsed by the office of the deputy prime minister, gabled cul-de-sac houses are set, unhappily, under a triumphal march of electricity pylons. Ugly new buses lurk at an unceremonial estate entrance strewn with supermarket litter. Recently arrived East African immigrants wait patiently in the damp and cold. No tube train for these Gateway people. No Docklands Light Railway station. Not a hint of a tram. No river bus. None of these for some years yet. Not even a view of the river.

The smell of sewage wafts across the estate. "Bound to," says captain Gordon Dickins, harbourmaster (lower) of the Port of London Authority, Gravesend, as we churn along Barking Reach on board the launch Benfleet. "The prevailing wind along the Thames is westerly, carrying the smell of sewage, oil, sugar and so on away to the sea. But, when an easterly blows, the stink from the Crossness sewage plant blows across Barking Reach."

When Prescott and Blair ventured east along the Thames in blazing August (the temperature peaking out at a record 38.1C at Gravesend), they did so by helicopter. Roads here are exceptionally busy, while public transport is sparse, and will continue to be so while the government expects private enterprise to build costly schemes such as Crossrail - the proposed mainline connecting east and west London and the home counties - without help from the Treasury.

"Barking Reach ... oh, it's a disaster, all right," says Hall, "so not what should happen, so very depressing." Disastrous Barking Reach is just the tip of a slag heap of grim new housing. Without a glint of imagination, and nothing like a plan, thousands of asinine new homes are being built at breakneck speed in every direction. Cabe - the government's commission for architecture and the built environment - refers to award-winning developments such as Lacuna in West Malling, Kent and Abode in Harlow, Essex, but although better than the average executive estate, these are only "good" because the others are so bad. Seen from a helicopter on a sunny day, Thames Gateway might well look like some dream-like prairie manifestly destined to be built on to improve the lot of hard-pressed south-easterners. Down on the ground, it looks a lot different. I am advised against walking across Rainham Marshes. These badlands have been turned into a range of artificial hills. Complete rubbish. Literally. Their composition is hundreds of thousands of tons of London refuse. Methane flames from burners dug into these artificial hills; the gas is released to stop the marshes from blowing up. Because so much of the river is unfit for human habitation, it is a haven for the rest of creation. Eels. Water voles. Dragonflies. Birds as diverse as wigeon, cormorant, little grebe, merlin, corn

bunting and yellowhammer. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds says there are something like 120 species of bird for whom this marsh and meadowland is home.

This is also where proposals have been made to build a new London airport. This would generate jobs, shops and homes, while, presumably, disaffected locals could sell their homes to developers. But are these new developments in Essex and Kent really the "sustainable communities" promised by government?

At the River Cafe, Barking, I leaf through *Housing for a Compact City*, a document from the mayor of London's architecture and urbanism unit, chaired by Richard Rogers. "Even in central London," says Rogers, "we are still building at an average density of 78 dwellings per hectare," which is not very dense at all, he argues, when compared to the handsome and much sought after areas of Notting Hill, Belgravia, Bloomsbury and Bayswater, where densities are in the region of 200. It is this kind of density, coupled with good design, well planted and tended streets, parks and city gardens that allows central and much of west London to be coveted. It is also this density that encourages an efficient use of public transport. And saves old, outlying meadows and marshes from being devoured by the kind of subtopian sprawl the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas calls "Junkspace".

Junkspace, he says, spells the end of the Enlightenment, and its rebirth as a low-grade purgatory. Junkspace "substitutes accumulation for hierarchy, addition for composition. It is overripe and undernourishing at the same time... Junkspace is like being condemned to a perpetual jacuzzi with millions of your best friends." Only by confronting this absurdity, Koolhaas believes, might we overcome it.

Will we? Government, GLA and quangos all talk of the need to plan ahead. "If delivering [housing] fast becomes our only goal," says Ken Livingstone, "we risk repeating past errors and building unpopular and alienating estates, rather than sustainable urban communities."