

tax incentives and, more controversially, the removal of planning restrictions. It was asserted that private “entrepreneurs” knew better than public sector planners where and how they place their scarce investments. Planning was seen by the government of the day as negative and culturally weighted in favor of traditional public sector values.

The LDDC was seen by some observers as having abandoned town planning. In fact it did not produce an overall Master Plan but rather a series of local plans, including a comprehensive conservation plan (London Docklands Development Corporation, 1987). These were considered more flexible and succeeded in achieving rapid and extensive development. More critically major investment in public infrastructure came late, with the new underground railway Jubilee Line extension opening nearly twenty years after the project was set up and just as the LDDC was closing down. One of the paradoxes of this debate was that what emerged was the highly “planned” Canary Wharf development, the largest of its type in Europe.

Conservation was planned, and strongly supported, for most of the life of the Corporation and was instrumental in establishing the new image of the Docklands. The 1970s in London had seen a major conservation success with the battle to save Covent Garden, but also significant failures – especially the destruction of the Telford warehouses at St Katharine’s Dock and many Victorian warehouses at the London Docks. The London Docks had been drained and filled, as had much of the Surrey Docks. The local authorities were ambivalent about the Docklands heritage and there were no large-scale examples of successful conservation of nineteenth-century industrial structures on the scale of London Docklands.

The Docklands was not a homogeneous area with a single type of development. Conservation policies had to be developed for an area extending over some eight square miles with an enormous diversity of building types and periods. For nearly 2,000 years London had owed its commercial pre-eminence to the Thames that allowed a major port to develop some forty miles inland, and intensive waterfront development had left an unusually rich heritage, although what remained visible represented only the last two centuries. Extensive Roman and medieval quays had been excavated in the city beyond the LDDC boundary of operation. Within the Docklands area one of the oldest remaining large structures, although altered beyond recognition, was the enclosed dock at Howland Quay dating from 1699, and later expanded and renamed Greenland Dock. Much more complete were the West India Docks (1799–1806), the London Docks (1800–1805), and the East India Docks (1803–1806) as well as St Katharine’s Dock (1825–1828).

The development of railways and steamships toward the latter part of the nineteenth century had brought about a new form of dock at a much larger scale, and correspondingly further out from the city in what became known as the Royal Docks, built between 1850 (Royal Victoria Dock) to 1921 with the completion of the King George V Docks. The dates refer to the main building projects; a study of maps of London shows that the whole Docklands area underwent more or less continuous development up until the end of the Second World War. Most of the early docks closed in the 1960s, with the Royal group finally closing in 1981. Severe damage during the Second World War, and extensive demolition in the postwar period, left a scattered pattern of historical structures.