

The oldest areas were the riverside wharves that stretched from Blackfriars, north of the Thames, to Limehouse; Rotherhithe on the south bank had also declined badly. By 1981 they were all in a poor state of repair. Significant clusters of mostly nineteenth-century brick warehouses remained in Wapping, Rotherhithe, and along a stretch running from Clink Street to St Saviours Dock and Shad Thames. Around these wharves there remained working communities, housed for the most part in public housing built in the 1920s, 1930s, 1950s and 1960s. Within these areas was a different heritage, most significant of which were the churches dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The Local Government Land and Planning Act 1980 defined the powers of the LDDC as follows. "The object of an Urban Development Corporation shall be to secure . . . regeneration . . . by bringing land and buildings into effective use . . ." Thus regeneration was explicitly to involve bringing into use obsolete buildings, including those of historic importance, and the protection and enhancement of conservation areas. The Docklands developed an approach that was activity led. Rather than wait to draw up formal strategies the LDDC assembled a development planning team with strong landscaping and conservation skills. The most important conservation decision was to retain all the remaining water areas that distinguished the area from other parts of East London. The remaining docks were repaired. Large areas of filled dock were re-excavated in Wapping, Surrey and Greenland Docks. Where it was impracticable to restore large areas of water new canals were created to preserve the character of the remaining structures. These new water features provided continuity of hard landscaping and water flow, but also a substantial link with the Docklands heritage. They were at a scale large enough to have an impact over a big area and designed to utilize remaining features, such as locks and fragments of quayside, and extensively finished with reclaimed materials.

Only a small proportion of the buildings and structures of the Docklands were listed, but they were among the most distinctive and valued. The incorporation of buildings in the Statutory List made it unlawful to demolish or alter without Listed Building Consent. The criteria for listing covered four groups of building type:

- 1 all buildings built before 1700 which survive in anything like their original condition;
- 2 most buildings of between 1700 and 1840 (though selection is necessary);
- 3 buildings of definite quality and character built between 1840 and 1914; and
- 4 a limited number of buildings of high quality designed between 1914 and 1939.

It was recognized early on that the opening up of the dock areas would bring to light many buildings and structures worthy of listing. The Corporation successfully made a case for the listing of an additional 116 buildings as being of special historic interest and followed this initial move with further listings as more buildings were rediscovered. It inherited ten conservation areas in 1981, two of which it extended and a further seven