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## London Calling

Seasoned voyagers discover the magic of the historic St. Katharine Docks and England's vibrant capital.

By Steve and Linda Dashew / Published: July 14, 2009

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St. Katharine Docks in London was an experience not to be missed, a longtime goal of ours has been to visit this historic marina on our own yacht.

A first-time visitor to this part of the world might find the charts, traffic separation schemes, and tides intimidating. Wind Horse, our FPB 83 motoryacht, is over 20 meters in length, and is therefore required to stay with commercial shipping in designated traffic separation channels. Heading up the Thames, we also need to maintain a radio watch and communicate with London Vessel Traffic Services on VHF Channel 14. Once we begin to thread our way through the approaches, we find the transit is simpler than the guides and charts suggest, and London VTS is very helpful.

There are substantial tides here that run to 20 feet during full and new moons, so marinas along the Thames are equipped with either tidal gates or sills. Since these are accessible only within an hour or two of high tide, we plan on picking up three to four knots of favorable current as we ride a rising tide up the River Thames.

Four hours and 56 miles later, we are waiting with two sailboats at the Tower Bridge, adjacent to St. Katharine Docks, for the lockmaster to open the gates. Clearing customs into the U.K. has required only a simple phone call. But as we hold station against the current, we are hailed by a Metropolitan Police launch. Two officers step aboard and politely but thoroughly question us. When they're through, they help us with the lines in the lock, and then say goodbye. The lockmaster closes the outer gate, adjusts the water level, and then opens the inner lock and two hydraulically operated footbridges invite us to proceed to this ancient enclave.

The River Thames in the area of the Tower Bridge has been used for shipping since Roman times. King Edgar issued the first formal charter for dockage in the tenth century when he gave 13 acres to 13 knights. By the beginning of the 19th century, shipping traffic on the Thames had bottlenecked. Parliament passed the St. Katharine Docks Bill and eventually one of the largest construction projects in London history began. More than 2,500 men worked for two years on a revolutionary dock plan with three interconnected basins, and significantly more wharfage per water acre than was traditional. Now ships could moor directly alongside as small jib cranes offloaded cargo from their holds directly to the upper stories of dockside warehouses. The offloading process that formerly required a week was now done in half a day, with valuable cargoes stored in secure warehouses.

By the 1880s, London's docks were losing out to larger facilities closer to the North Sea, and St. Katharine Docks had begun a slow decline. In the 1960s, it had become a wasteland of derelict, rat-infested buildings. Enter development company Taylor Woodrow. They offered a plan to redevelop the docks and warehouses into a mix of office, apartment, retail, and marina space. The plan took 25 years to mature, but it set the tone for similar waterfront redevelopments around the world.

It is to the west of the original three basins that Wind Horse is now headed. Despite the history of these docks, large, modern buildings surround us, sounding a distinctly urban note. A hotel to our south is an ideal place for our daughter and son-in-law to stay while we hang out with the grandkids aboard Wind Horse. An office complex is adjacent to our dock and another office building abuts the north side of our basin. To the east is Ivory House, one of the few original structures not bombed during World War II. It's been converted to groundfloor retail spaces with condos above.



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