

Thames Embankment

London, UK

Photographs by Alan Ward 2000-2005, 2016, 2023

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

The Thames Embankment was one of the most significant infrastructure projects of the nineteenth century. Begun in 1863, and extending over five miles on the north bank from the western borough of Chelsea to Blackfriars Bridge near St. Pauls' Cathedral, the Embankment was a comprehensive vision, designed and engineered to:

- Make a new interceptor sewer to relieve the horrid contamination of the river and improve public health
- Alleviate east-west traffic on the Strand with a new boulevard
- Extend the underground railway system with a new line along the river
- Improve navigation and docking on the river for ferry passengers
- Make a riverfront tree-lined promenade, along with parks and gardens on fifty-two acres of reclaimed land

Christopher Wren's vision for rebuilding London in 1667 after the Great Fire included an embanked way from the Tower of London, extending about one mile to the west, that was not implemented. By 1825, London was the largest city in the world with the busiest port. Following cholera outbreaks in the 1830s, and again in the 1840s that killed 18,000 persons, citizens were urged to eliminate cesspools and connect drains to sewers which further polluted the river. Finally, in 1858, after a third cholera outbreak and a particularly bad summer which left sewage on the banks of the river, Parliament authorized the Metropolitan Board of Works to build the London Main Drainage System. The new Metropolitan Commission of Sewers

appointed a chief engineer, Joseph Bazalgette, to design and engineer the Embankment (32). There are three significant sections on the north shore of the river in Bazalgette's all-inclusive plan from the 1860s: the Victoria, Albert and Chelsea. A cross section of the Victoria Embankment, the most elaborate of the three, shows the significant depth required for the sewer lines, which are still in use today. A granite-clad brick wall extends thirty-two feet below high water. There are intervals of solid granite blocks with cast iron lamps and bronze lion faces on the river side (3, 20,21,25,26). Plane trees, spaced at twenty feet, follow the footway (14,15). The continuous curving retaining walls are modified at key locations with statues, monuments, stairs into the river, along with piers and gangways for landing boats. Bazalgette's design incorporated existing retaining walls; later additions adhered to the original design character to make a consistent waterfront. Further embankments were extended along the river in the ensuing decades, including on the south side, following World War II (25,26,29). More recently, older London docks have been rehabilitated with buildings reused and new development added along the river, including St. Katharine Docks in 1985 (27,28).*

The photographs are an overview of over one hundred years of modifying the river and building embankments. The intent is to reflect on the past, and consider what was accomplished building a comprehensive infrastructure project designed to address multiple needs.

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31. Monument to Joseph Bazelgette near Charing Cross, 2023









BEARING THE PATRIOTIC SEAL OF
FRANKLIN WILSON F.R.S.
THIS ABOLISH
WAS BROUGHT FROM ALEXANDRIA
IT WAS ABANDONED DURING A STORM
IN THE BAY OF BISCAY
RECOVERED AND ERECTED
ON THIS SPOT BY
JOHN DIXON C.E.
IN THE 42ND YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
QUEEN VICTORIA
1878























































Notes

Selected Publication of the Photographs:

Ward, Alan, "Photographing the Layers: Landscape Designs of Britain"
Land Forum 01, May/June 1999

* See *The Thames Embankment: Environment, Technology and Society in Victorian London* by Dale H. Porter for a well-researched history of the Embankment based on original historical documents, including records of the Metropolitan Board of Works, Metropolitan Commission of Sewers, and other sources