

Bridging the gap



London is often looked upon as a mega-metropolis, made up of many towns, villages and neighbourhoods; but there is one major thing that separates with more impact than anything

else: the River Thames. The influence of its geographical formation, which has given the River its characteristic curves, can be perceived in the urban form of the city today and most signifi- >>>

“Seven low level bridges to make the Docklands truly urban with new and expanded linked urban Quarters”

The river is more a divider than attractor; low-level bridges may change this says Terry Farrell

- 1 Westferry Bridge
- 2 Surrey Docks Bridge
- 3 Deptford Bridge
- 4 Greenwich Bridge
- 5 Wood Wharf Bridge
- 6 Royals Bridge
- 7 Bugsby's Bridge

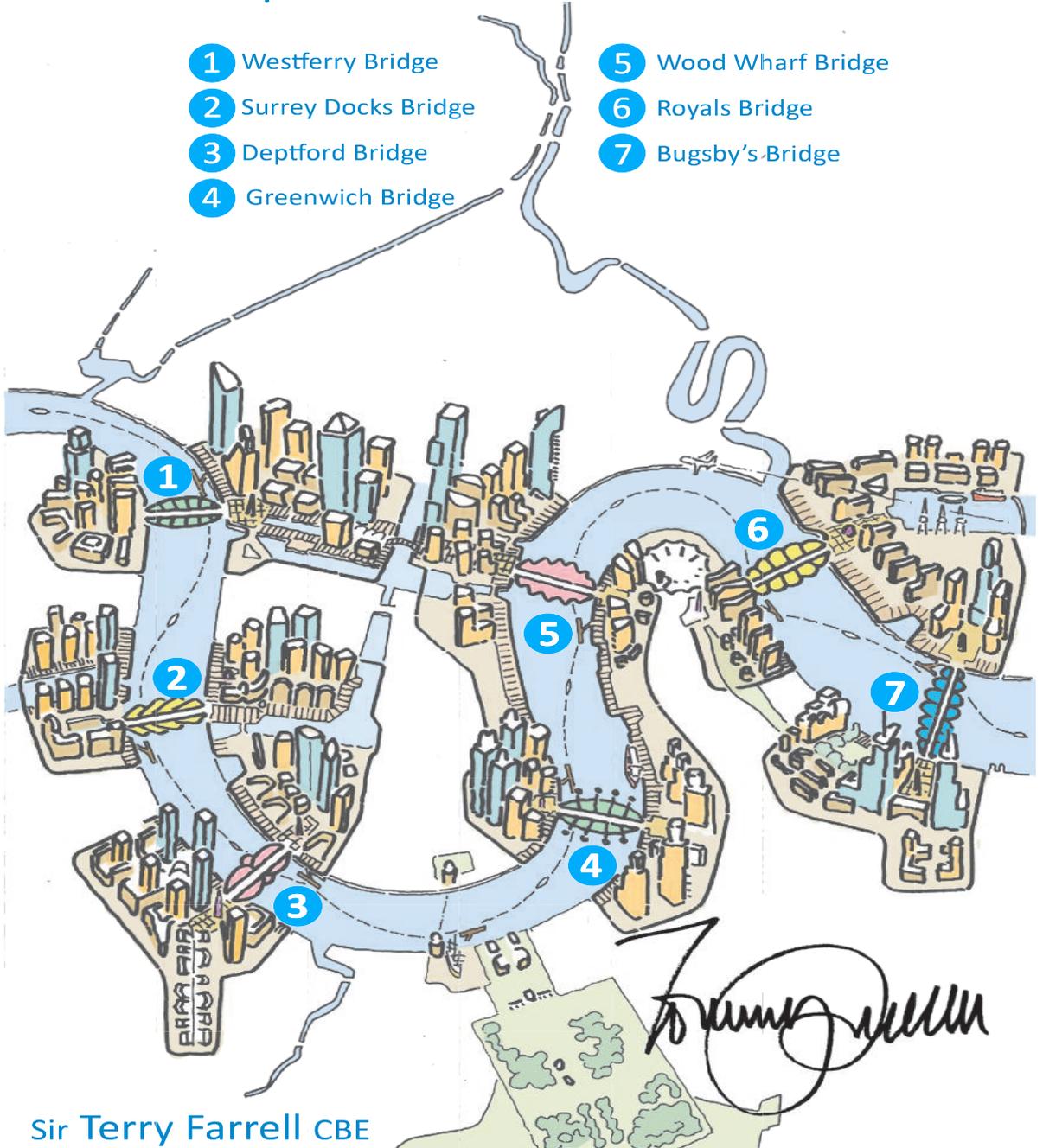


Illustration: Estates Gazette London Investor Guide

Sir Terry Farrell CBE

cantly in London's perception of the north – south divide.

The river is more a divider than attractor, because it separates two banks and disconnects one side of London from the other. In a new land-based urban realm, the importance of the crossing points, the bridges, is intensified. Regional bridges that cross the Docklands and Estuary Thames are built at high-level, connecting motorway to motorway, sitting high over a river that few ships now travel along. Their impact is huge and divisive; they do little to connect locally, pedestrians and cycles are banned from using them and the long ramps necessary to access them further divide communities on both sides of the river. I challenge the need for high level bridges that deal with a few tall ships per year, and argue in favour of low level bridges that connect community to community.

Throughout London's history, we have crossed the water to connect one side to the other, yet still there are areas of the city that seem worlds apart, even though they sit opposite each other and are only separated by a relatively narrow stretch of water.

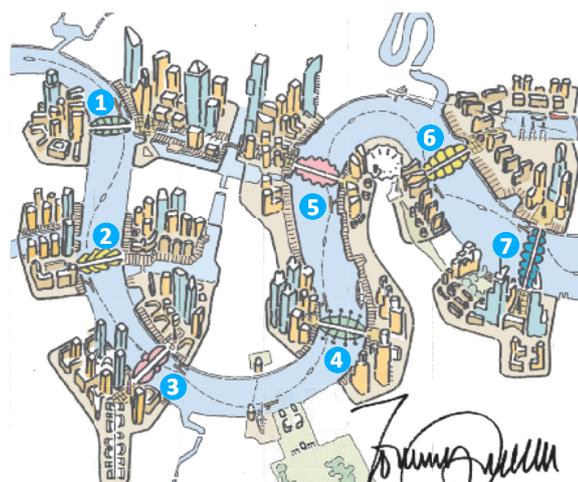
We work hard to build communities across roads, park and housing estates, so why, if River Thames really is 'puny' as one American visitor said to MP Richard Burns in 1929, is it difficult to build communities across the water?

London has evolved over time, and the building of its bridges happened over a long period of time. The nature of the River, and the way it has evolved over time, has created patterns in its curves and bends and different characters along each bank of the river. Due to the shallow and marshy bank on the convex side of the river bends, mooring of ships or clearing of goods was not possible and so development along the river always took place on the deep water channel side.

Starting and moving westwards from the original London Bridge, the river crossings across the Thames have slowly appeared, increasing to about 25 bridges between Tower Bridge and Kew Bridge. Looking to the East of Tower Bridge however, the bridges are non-existent and are replaced within London instead by tunnels, ferry crossings and a high level cable car, spaced ever more widely apart.

Historically the docklands was the trading heart of the capital, and ships would come into London delivering goods and cargo. The river needed to be travelled along, not across. However over time, as cargo handling methods changed and ships got much bigger, trade came to rely on road networks and docks much further seaward, so the use of the docks upstream of Tilbury declined and has effectively stopped altogether.

The regeneration of the docklands is now being addressed and significant development is happening in the Royal Docks, but the urbanisation of the area has still not been taken to its logical conclusion, which is that urbanity is most deeply enriched by communities that can spontaneously connect from



one side of the river to the other. Historically this has applied to all great cities, and has been an essential dynamic of central London upstream of Tower Bridge and the Pool of London. Yet the logical conclusion of this bank-to bank connectivity has not been implemented because authorities that run the trading aspect of the river still dictate its usage as though the big ships were still filling the docks. However the docks are empty so, by connecting the banks with a new generation of lifting bridges, the new urban order would be enabled and completed. Finally, docklands would join all of London and enable the centre of the metropolis to expand eastwards at least as far as the Thames Barrier at Woolwich. They would primarily link communities and be local in scale, as opposed to regional transport links such as tunnels or high, inaccessible bridges designed solely for through traffic. They would make it possible for people to walk or cycle from side to side, or to take short public transport connections from bank to bank, rather than from inland motorway to inland motorway.

The current campaign for a Garden Bridge by Thomas Heatherwick brings to light the importance of low-level bridges that can act as more than just a connecting road, but a place to encourage communities to interact and engage from bank to bank.

At an estimated £175million pounds, you could get downstream 4 smaller bridges that would have a far greater benefit for London. I would encourage these connections in areas that need them the most. At the proposed location between Temple Station and the South Bank, the bridge will be flanked by 6 bridges – 3 on either side. In a recent article about the Garden Bridge, Rowan Moore questions whether this bridge is the '...vital link' patron Joanna Lumley claims it is, when it is planned for an 'area already well served by bridges'. He reiterates the point that '...Other crossings, both in Battersea and down river, are more obviously needed.'

However, I am encouraged that proposals for low-level bridges are being put forward, and that people are starting to see this as a viable and realistic option. I recently saw a presentation by the sustainable transport experts Sustrans, who showed that it was possible to make significant changes through small community-based initiatives. I was inspired by their innovative but simple solutions for integrating cycle routes into the urban realm, and it occurred to me that we could learn a lot from this approach to connectivity and apply this to how we create low-level bridges. ■