

**CONCEPT PAPER:  
SAYES COURT GARDENS AND THE LENOX  
Heritage projects and their place on the Convoys Wharf  
development**

by Richard Katona

**SUMMARY**

Deptford's heritage has frequently been ignored but the Convoy's Wharf development raises the interesting opportunity of creating a 'heritage vicinity' that includes the sites of the Lenox and the Sayes Court Garden projects as assets of World historical importance linked and surrounded by a buffer zone along the lines recommended by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee.

(NB: Superscript numbers in the text relate to endnotes)

**INTRODUCTION**

Deptford has been ill-served by the concept of heritage. Perhaps it reveals a truth that we do not care to acknowledge: that heritage is not a socially neutral concept; that those communities that preserve their heritage best are those with higher-status populations, those with the lower-status populations being more likely to find their valued heritage assets figuratively, and sometimes literally, bulldozed overnight.

The town of Deptford entered the modern era with four sites of world historical importance:

1. King Henry VIII's Royal Dockyard (1513);
2. The Royal Victoria Victualling Yard (circa 1650);
3. The Sayes Court Manor of writer, thinker, horticulturist and diarist John Evelyn (1620-1706);
4. Sebastian de Ferranti's 'Deptford Light' – the world's first central high-voltage power station (1889)

In their differing ways these were all potential World heritage assets, noted as sites of innovation in their respective fields, yet all were to be lost, whether through neglect or demolition.<sup>i</sup>

Neighbouring, higher-status Greenwich enjoyed better outcomes.<sup>ii</sup>

## **THE CONCEPT**

The concept is the establishment of a public realm vicinity at the western end of the Convoys Wharf development as a heritage site of world historical significance whether that be through local, national or international zoning/listing. This vicinity is already earmarked for two not-for-profit, heritage projects: 'Build the Lenox' and 'Sayes Court Garden'.

I suggest that this concept also include the establishment of a heritage site buffer zone<sup>iii</sup> between and around these two projects.

We are apt to forget that this Dockyard and Garden are of global heritage concern; there are enthusiasts on the other side of the World who probably know as much, or more, about them as we do and developments can be of wider concern than locals often realise.

## **THE HERITAGE PROJECTS**

### **The Lenox Project**

Founded in 2011, the Lenox Project 'is a charity that intends to build and launch a full-size replica of the Lenox, a state-of-the-art, naval ship that was built in 1678 in Deptford'.<sup>iv</sup> The aim is to re-build HMS Lenox at Convoys Wharf, the modern site of the historic Naval Dockyard in which the original was built.

The charity sees this project as having wider, heritage-led objectives that would include awareness-raising of the site's history, the promotion of educational, employment and apprenticeship opportunities, the establishment of a centre of excellence for historic shipbuilding and restoration and the launching and sailing of 'the Lenox to support a future programme of sail training'.<sup>v</sup>

## **Sayes Court Garden Project**

The Convoys Wharf site also occupies the larger part of an important, experimental 17<sup>th</sup> Century garden, famous in its day, laid out by the diarist and horticulturalist, John Evelyn FRS (1620-1706). A fragment of this garden still exists as a public park adjacent to Convoys Wharf. <sup>vi</sup>

In the late Nineteenth Century John Evelyn's descendants wished to avert the loss of the Garden (threatened as it was by urban settlement) by gifting it to the nation. This directly inspired the setting up of the National Trust but too late to protect Sayes Court Garden itself. <sup>vii</sup>

Rather than reconstructing the 17<sup>th</sup> Century garden, the project aims to re-imagine it. The project believes that the development of the site brings 'the opportunity to reclaim this land for the public, to create an experimental 21st Century garden and a cutting edge building to act as a centre of research, education and enterprise.

'This project has the power to help integrate the proposed new development into the local community as a place for everyone - bringing education, jobs and training as well as a place. <sup>viii</sup>

## **The Convoys Wharf Context**

Both the above projects have already been 'pencilled in' (as it were) to the western side of the Convoys Wharf site.

Their locations are not contiguous but are closely neighbouring and share the following, common features:

Both projects conceive of themselves as being not-for-profit, community-led and heritage-focused endeavours.

Both projects relate to an important historical period in national development, namely the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, one being horticultural and the other industrial, yet within the same heritage 'footprint'.

Both projects articulate a specific uniqueness: Evelyn's work at Sayes Court and his publications in horticulture, woodland management and urban air quality were not being replicated elsewhere at the time and are recognised as classics to this day; when the Grand Embassy of Tsar Peter the Great visited Deptford in 1698 it was because the Dockyard was

already an acknowledged, worldwide leader in the scientific theory and practice of shipbuilding.

It is true that little evidence of all this remains above ground.<sup>ix</sup> Nevertheless these are both important heritage sites in the fullest meaning of that term.

## **HISTORY AND THE HERITAGE CYCLE**

History and heritage may be related concepts but the words are not synonyms. One would hope that the study of history would, at all times, be both forensic and evidence-led. Heritage, on the other hand, is usually celebratory in some sense or other.

We may say that history is about the past; heritage is about the present and the future.<sup>x</sup>

In unpublished work that I undertook with Deptford Neighbourhood Action (DNA) as part of developing a Neighbourhood Plan, I conceived of there being a 'Heritage Cycle' as follows:<sup>xi</sup>

Heritage [...] refers to any meaningful cultural activity or entity that is: a. inherited from the past, b. re-imagined and re-fashioned in the present, and c. bequeathed to the future.

This may helpfully be thought of as the Heritage Cycle:

The idea of this was to demonstrate that heritage is something we contribute to, as much as receive.

The relevance of this concept to the Convoys Wharf heritage projects is that the lack of continuity and above-ground buildings and artefacts does not imply a loss of heritage status. Rather, it means that what we have inherited may be sparse and all but lost, but that we can breathe some significance back into it before it is gone for ever. Heritage sites may (and often do) require some repair.

## **FURTHER OBSERVATIONS**

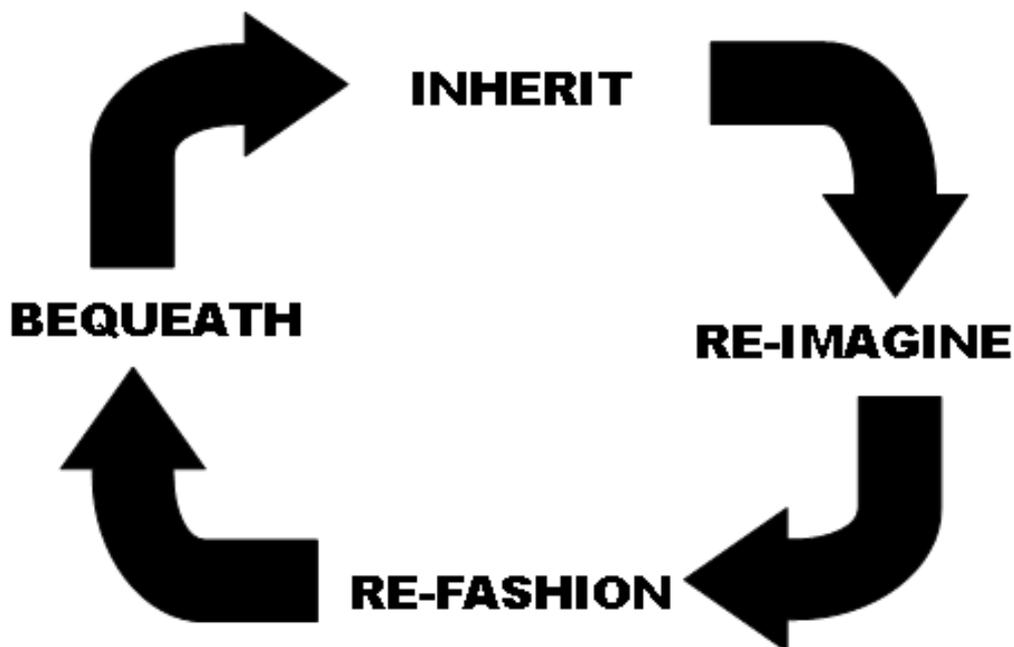
This is a concept paper not a blueprint, but I would add some further observations.

In a recent meeting with representatives from the developers<sup>xii</sup> I did press them about the maintenance of aesthetic and architectural coherence across the site, with different architects and organisations responsible for different aspects. I was assured this process had been undertaken.

Yet I later found that the two not-for-profit projects, Sayes Court and Lenox, have not been included in the process, even though they are most certainly organisations<sup>xiii</sup> potentially operational on the site, as much as any architectural practice, and bring to the table highly challenging design considerations.

Just one simple point: any design that ignores aesthetic and architectural coherence with the masts of the Lenox is surely a non-starter.

Since the developer already recognises that aesthetic and architectural coherence as a priority, I do not think it would be too much of a stretch to insist there be a buffer zone (in the manner of UNESCO world heritage sites) between the two heritage-led projects. This seems wholly appropriate in order to ensure an experiential relationship one with the other and a coherence that makes sense to the visitor.



Perhaps a wider buffer zone could also be considered to ensure that the inner heritage zone not be hemmed in by isolating baffles, urban cliffs and blockages.

I accept that this could cause architectural challenges, but architectural challenges, surely, are what architects are supposed to meet, especially when confronting difficult, historic sites; and it surely was been recognised, from the very beginning, that this is a difficult, historic site.

## **STAKEHOLDERS**

I have begun to identify the more obvious interested parties in this concept if it is to be taken forward. Obviously, these would include local community groups that have an interest in heritage and heritage planning (for example, such a list might be the Lenox Project, the Sayes Court Garden project, Deptford Folk, Deptford Neighbourhood Action, Voice for Deptford, The Deptford Society, Friends of Sayes Court Park), as well as the Local Authority the Developers themselves.

If an ultimate aim were to create a World Heritage site, we would need to involve and seek guidance from the UNESCO World Heritage

Committee.<sup>xiv</sup> We would not be able to nominate to them directly; only nation states can do that, and nominations need to be taken from a nation's 'tentative list'. The UK 'tentative list' comes under the aegis of the Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport (specifically, the Parliamentary Under Secretary for the Arts, Heritage and Tourism) and seem to have been updated last in 2015.<sup>xv</sup>

Interested official parties would be Historic England, English Heritage (a charity) and Lewisham Borough heritage people.

We could begin contacting all these parties and should be seeking the best intermediaries for making contact with them. I have could immediately go out to consultation with the Lenox and Sayes Court projects as well as DNA (where I am heritage-lead on the Steering Group) and possibly Deptford Folk. I have no contacts in any of the other bodies listed above although we may know of people who are better connected with them.