

The Barge of Invisible Memories

2006

Galvanised mild steel
6000x3500x180mm

Built with the assistance of Arkadiusz Zykin and Ed Goolden

Commissioned by Old Ford Housing Association and Circle Anglia Ltd

The Barge of Invisible Memories is rooted in the history of the Hertford Union Canal, the Old Ford neighbourhood and the Lea River. The ford across the Lea River and the network of canals were a vital link between inland Britain and the rest of the world. It made Old Ford a cosmopolitan and industrious area over several thousand years. The most striking aspect of the sculpture is the three sectioned 'wave' of filigree. This combines two bits of history: firstly the story of a barge exploding on the Regents Canal in 1874. It was travelling the regular route from the gunpowder works at Waltham Abbey along the Hertford Union Canal to the Regent's Canal. Added to this is my interest in The English Wallpaper Company that moved to Old Ford in 1846, employing many local people. So I imagined rolls of wallpaper exploding out of the barge, like scrolls of history.

Many of the images within the filigree are taken from wallpaper designs. These include designs that were made for India depicting Hindu Gods – you will be able to find Hanuman and Krishna amongst others. Some of the Christian printers refused to work on these papers deeming them pagan.

The painting traditionally applied to narrow boats inspires some of the patterns and decoration. But other parts of the design represent Old Ford history more directly. You will find in the central section a depiction of the remains of King John's Palace, which used to sit adjacent to the ford but was destroyed by fire in 1863.

There are many items within the filigree that refer to the businesses that occupied the Montieth and Lefevre sites. These include chairs from the Dependable Furniture Empire Works that replaced the small arms factory that occupied the ground to the East of Gunmakers Lane. Lee Enfield rifles from this factory thread through the filigree.

On the upper right section there is a steam train manufactured just across the Lea River at the Great Eastern Railway Works. You will also find a J.A.P motorcycle built up the river in Tottenham that would have rattled windows along the Old Ford Road.

The base of the sculpture is part of a beached narrow boat. Narrow boats at one time would have thronged the Hertford Union Canal. The bargees worked tirelessly to keep trade flowing. There are various representations of bargees in the sculpture.

The figurehead at the front of the barge is from H.M.S. Warrior, which was built at the mouth of the Lea River by the Thames Ironworks and Shipbuilding Company. H.M.S. Warrior rendered all previous battleships obsolete. She was the first iron-hulled armour-plated frigate, by far the longest and largest warship built at that time. The connection between this iron ship and the sculpture, also a kind of iron boat, seems fitting

The bargee's horse, which would have towed the narrow boat has been replaced by a Roman warhorse. It was across the Old Ford that Boudica's army entered London to raze the city and it was back across the Old Ford that the Roman army sent its punitive mission to quell Boudica's revolt.

The sculpture reminds us of the ever-changing flow of communities, ideas, and activities through the heart of this trade, transport and manufacturing hub, to which the most inventive minds have always been drawn. There is a wonderful sense of inventiveness, energy and the promotion of new ideas, of successions of people trying to make a go of it and succeeding.