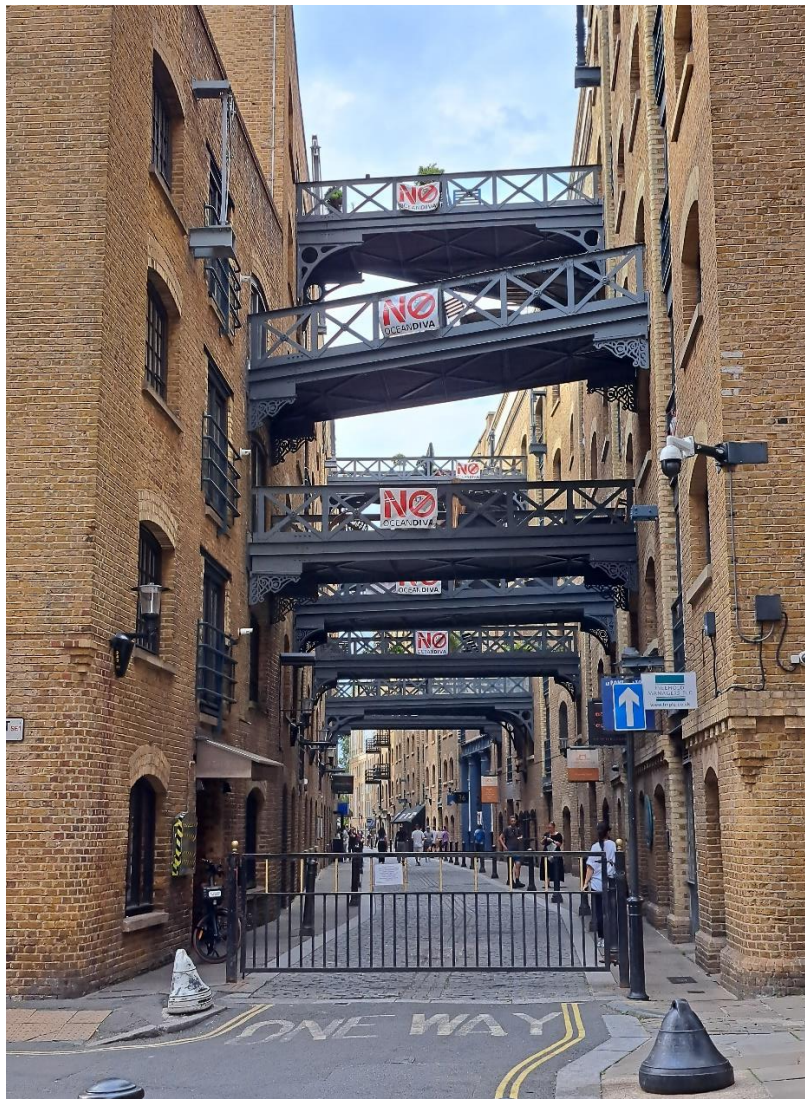


## Thinking about the environment

We enjoy visiting different areas of London with “Open House” and every year are amazed at the diversity of places where people live and work and how these have changed in the relatively short space of my lifetime. As a child looking out from the train window to the east when going up to London we could see a jungle of cranes along the river serving the Surrey Docks. There were often fogs in those days and we could hear the mournful sound of foghorns on the Thames. The port of London was very much a working port with cargoes from all over the world back in the 1940 -50’s. That is why we were intrigued by the possibility of visiting the “Floating Gardens at Tideway” near Tower Bridge.

We took the train to Victoria and tube to Tower Bridge admiring the wafting grasses and wild flowers now gracing the Tower of London moat. A far cry from the bloody history of the Tower. A sunny day had brought crowds of tourists and we joined the throng crossing the famous bridge, down to river level and walking eastwards to an area I had never previously visited, Shad Thames, Bermondsey. The narrow streets feel almost canyon like between the former warehouses with overhead walkways between the wharves of the old port. One could imagine the noise of iron wheels on the cobbles, the carts and stevedores carrying or wheeling huge loads. The evocative names giving a clue to the former life of the area, Jamaica Road, Java, Spices, Grain etc. Now the warehouses have become exceedingly expensive apartments with some new developments in the same style. No trees here.



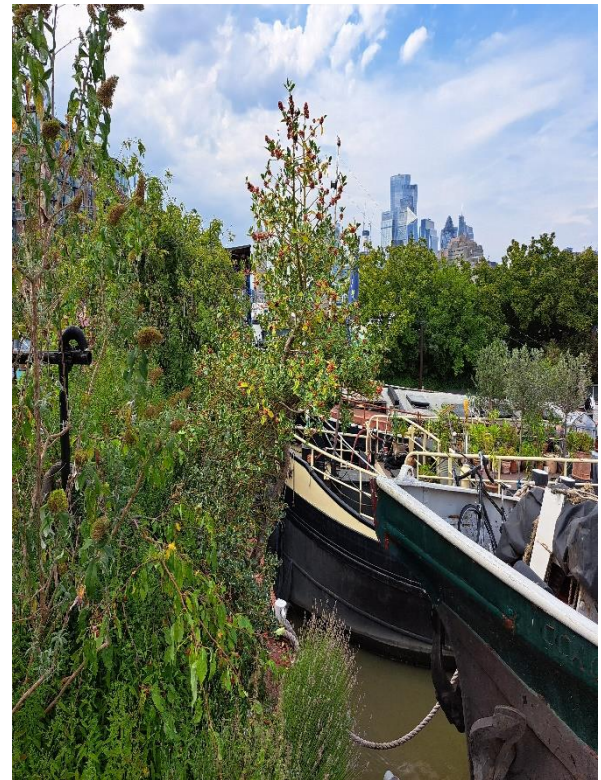
There were also few cars as the roads were designed for carts and very narrow with no parking. We found Mill Street and Reeds Wharf, then through the entrance to another world.



The wharf abuts the Thames with a view of Tower Bridge and shiny new developments on both sides of the river. However, this community of boat dwellers seemed quite unique. Firstly, we were welcomed then crossed a gangplank with bikes attached, then passed the communal bins until finally across a pontoon to reach a walkway of ancient oak beams between the boats with lots of foliage. There were flowers but also shrubs and some fairly short but well grown trees with berries and apples. It seemed incredible to see such abundance of growth where there could be little soil. Apparently, there is depth of about a foot of earth and then space for roots to spread horizontally. Seemingly the hold of the boat below is occupied, as there were windows along the side and looking down one could see comfortable living quarters. Many boats had pots of plants, tables and chairs on deck and one a hammock with young mother and new born baby. The boats were roped closely together for some stability but still rocked with the wash of passing river traffic.

The majority of the boats were converted Dutch barges but also some similar East Anglian vessels designed for shallow creeks like Thames barges. A couple still had masts and rigging and were capable of sea faring. There was information about the history of the boats, most had begun life as working vessels carrying cargo. The owners clearly valued the peaceful haven they have created and many lived there for many years. We met one young woman born on a boat and the next generation is coming along. We could see evidence of a sculptor and the information told of another musician/composer owner. We were encouraged to sample the home-made cakes and drinks in the





communal barge with seating round the edge and space for dancing in the centre. Profits to RNLI appropriately.



The atmosphere here was so friendly and welcoming. They are a group of people who have formed a real community, literally bound together by ancient but strong ropes that moor them to the shore. Interestingly too when I asked about utilities (one does wonder how things are managed). They have a connection to mains electricity on shore. Regarding water and sewage, each boat has its own tanks to store and in the case of sewage, pump out to shore when full. This certainly makes everyone very

aware and careful of usage. Similarly, the living space is quite capacious but does not allow for excess consumer goods. This group have found a way to live harmoniously in very close quarters in the shadow of Tower Bridge. Probably because they are a relatively small group who know each other well, human values and quality of life are most important and allow the residents to thrive.

Our U3A group is particularly interested in the environment and very concerned about the climate crisis. So, thinking about what environment means – ie the physical conditions for life be it plants, animals or humans we were fascinated to encounter such a happy and successful environment in an unlikely place. In fact in stark contrast to the overpriced warehouse conversion apartments and the shiny developments across the Thames which have very little if any green outside space..

Sheila Kemble Sept 2023