

A Talk by Edward Sargent titled “*The Millwall Ironworks: An important but almost forgotten nineteenth-century shipyard on the Thames*”

Brief synopsis of the talk:

The Millwall Ironworks, although only in operation for about 30 years, played a major part in the history of shipbuilding. It was the first yard set up specifically for building iron ships. Although not been used for shipbuilding for over 150 years, it has the best currently surviving collection of historic structures of all the shipbuilding sites on the River Thames.

The yard was originally set up by the famous ironworker, millwright and engineer Sir William Fairbairn in 1835. The yard expanded rapidly. Fairbairn built ten warships there. Surviving from this period, albeit in truncated form, is the large chimney that carried away the smoke from the forges. Unfortunately the yard was not profitable and, in 1849, it was sold. Robinson & Co who brought in John Scott Russell and shortly afterwards passed ownership over to him. He was an important ship-designer and he built many interesting and important ships there including six Royal Navy warships as well as others for foreign navies including three for Prussia although these latter were taken over by the Royal Navy for service in the Crimean War. He is of course best known for the building of the *Great Eastern* and played a major part in the design of the ship. Sadly, due to his having taken on the contract at a fixed price and costs having risen greatly due to the Crimean War he was forced into financial difficulties and the yard was taken over by his bankers. The *Great Eastern* was completed by the owners of the ship although he was brought back into carry out the fitting out. Important

structures surviving from the Scott Russell period are a large engineering-works building and his offices, which still have his name cut into the frieze, and a significant part of one of the large slipways built for the *Great Eastern*. The yard was then sold to another important nineteenth century shipbuilder, C J Mare who had previously, initially in partnership with Thomas Ditchburn who had started his career as a shipwright under Sir William Seppings at Chatham, set up a large shipyard in Blackwall that had too failed during the Crimean War under similar circumstances. Nevertheless, this yard survived and went on to become the Thames Ironworks. Mare also expanded the facilities at the Millwall yard building a large forge which still survives. However, he too was unsuccessful and he sold the yard to some of the partners of the Overend and Gurney Bank. Mare had started building the large ironclad HMS *Northumberland* and the new owners of the yard continued with building this. Unfortunately during the launch it came off the ways. After much hard work she was righted and eventually successfully launched. Some of the workforce from Chatham Dockyard helped with this. Due to a massive downturn in shipbuilding orders after 1865 due to the ending of the American Civil War and the end of the initial batch of orders for ironclad warships for the Navy the yards on the Thames became almost silent and the Millwall Ironworks was closed down about 1868.