

Enderby Wharf London – At risk

On the south bank of the Thames in Greenwich northeast of the historic town centre, the Enderby Wharf site is the cradle of the world's communication revolution, on a par with the Ironbridge Gorge, cradle of the industrial revolution, and comparable with Bletchley Park.

Robert Carr

In the eighteenth century there was a gunpowder store here and later a depot for a major whaling company whose ships also undertook exploration. From 1857 submarine telegraph cables were manufactured on the site, these being laid on routes such as Corsica–Sardinia, Lowestoft–Zandvoort, Malta–Alexandria and Sicily–Algeria. In the mid 1860s the successful transatlantic cables laid by the *SS Great Eastern* were made here and many more followed. Up to at least the 1960s, cable ships would lay at Enderby dolphins while submarine cable was made, fed onboard, scrutinized and carefully coiled into their cable tanks in one continuous operation. The manufacture of submarine cable at the wharf ceased about 1979. Some of the cable loading gear survives on the riverside.

The telegraph revolution of the mid-Victorian period radically changed stock market speculation, business in general, the way the Empire was administered and international politics. For a time it was even hoped that war itself would become a thing of the past. Governments could now communicate so rapidly, misunderstandings and difficulties would be resolved by negotiation before more drastic action was undertaken; cannon would only be seen in museums as relics of a barbarous past. It

is further claimed by Tom Standage in his thought-provoking book *The Victorian Internet* that compared with the present-day Internet the electric telegraph was the more significant, since the ability to communicate globally at all in real-time was a qualitative shift, while the change brought about by the modern Internet was merely a quantitative shift.

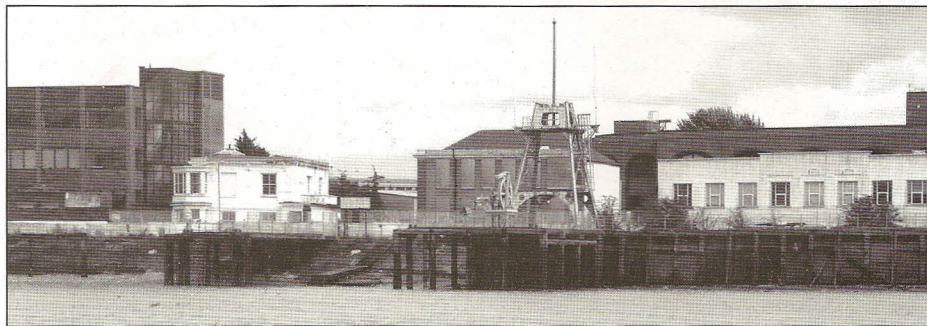
Even now after 157 years, as part of Alcatel-Lucent, innovative submarine communication work is still undertaken at Enderby Wharf and the advanced opto-electronic equipment that is fitted at regular intervals along submarine cables to boost the signal is made here. Nowadays submarine cables are made of Charles Kao's optical fibre. Kao, a Nobel prizewinner, studied electronic engineering at Woolwich Polytechnic. Contrary to popular belief, most trans-ocean communication does not take place via satellite but along submarine fibre-optic cables.

As a heritage asset Enderby Wharf is as important to Greenwich as the Royal Observatory, and as important to industrial history as Stephenson's Rocket.

The western part of the wharf by the riverside is now being redeveloped. Here we have Enderby House built in the 1830s, listed grade II but in a decrepit state following vandalism. The wharf

was first developed by Samuel Enderby & Sons, who were pioneers, engaged in whaling and also exploration. The photograph, taken from the steam tug *Portwey*, shows a view the riverfront from the west in September 2010 before recent demolition work. Enderby House is the small white building with the bay window to the left and the cable loading gear can be seen to the right, surmounted by a flagpole. The late Victorian office building, boarded up, to the right of Enderby House, which had interesting cable decorations around the windows and doorway, has now been demolished. There was a boiler house and chimney further to the south, out of view; these have been demolished quite recently.

The whole Enderby Wharf site is quite large, stretching back from the riverside as far east as Blackwall Lane. The present-day Alcatel-Lucent factory is to the east and they will remain at Enderby's. It is the intention of the developers to retain and restore Enderby House which is on the English Heritage buildings at risk list, but for much of the site, the part not required by Alcatel-Lucent, Barrat housing is to be built with the first residents due to move there in September 2015. As well as the new homes at Enderby Wharf, there is detailed planning permission for a cruise ship terminal, a 250-room hotel and commercial space.



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Photo: Robert Carr