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Woolwich Ferry

Years ago I used to live in South London and the borough of Woolwich was our regular shopping area. Woolwich is located on the south bank of the River Thames just east of Greenwich and sometimes we persuaded our Mum to take us on the ferry for a treat. The vessels were steam powered and I remember that as our boat made its way across, we would pass another one returning, and this kept the service continuous. A ferry trip was quite an adventure, out of the safety of dry land and onto the swaying world of the water surface. Being quite young, the slow walk down the pontoon as the queue moved along was just a little scary, as the floor moved back and forth sideways with the waves. Fortunately the ferry landing stage was fairly solid looking, although it was floating, and the line of calm passengers moving along the walkway gave me confidence that it was probably quite safe after all to be walking onto the Thames. But seeing the gap between the walkway and the fixed pier edge open and close with every wave was still somewhat unnerving. The steamer itself, being so enormous, did however inspire complete confidence.

Once on board we rushed to the edge of the open-air deck, where there were long wooden seats. We waited eagerly for the moment when the boat would start to manoeuvre away from the pier, churning and foaming the water into a green and white froth. Once this excitement had abated and there was some distance between us and the land, we then made our way to the entrance to a passageway where we could watch the operation of the steam engine. We had to stand on tiptoes on the slight ledge, with fingers gripping the top, and just about got our eyes over the edge, looking down to the engine room. The smooth thumping of the giant steel pistons was accompanied by hisses and rumbles coming from the

shafts that they were turning, and the other equipment in the further parts of the interior where we could not quite see. We felt the vibrations through our feet, and the smell rising from the room was warm and oily. I found it especially interesting when the pistons went into reverse, as they gradually slowed to nothing and then sped up again, with the shafts having changed their direction of rotation. I think this must have coincided with the boat turning and manoeuvring. We could stand on our toes only so long, and the oily aroma eventually sent us back outside into the fresh air.

Having passed the middle of the river, we felt we had left our home shores behind and were entering the unknown parallel world of North Woolwich on the other side of the Thames. It seemed to me rather strange that it had the same name, although ours was just Woolwich without the appellation of "South". I do not remember ever getting off on the other side, we just sat around and waited for the boat to return, as it was a pleasure trip for us. I was sure that there could be nothing of interest on the shore that would be better than being on the Thames, watching the water, waves and foam, and looking back across the murky expanse to our now minuscule home town, which we would never otherwise have seen from such a distance. The return journey was just as enjoyable, although by then we would have been getting tired of the chilly breezes. Somewhere between starting down the walkway and stepping onto shore, we always came up with the request to come back another day, and this was generally agreed to, mainly because "another day" could be any time at all, not necessarily quite soon! Although we did not want our adventure to end too soon, we were glad to get back into the warmer atmosphere of the shops and buildings, and the welcoming and cosy bus journey home.

Woolwich Ferry

A ferry service has existed at Woolwich since the thirteen hundreds but this particular service was started in 1889. It was often called the Woolwich Free Ferry. Our trips on it were in the late 1950's, and in 1963 the old paddle steamers were scrapped and diesel vessels introduced. A week ago we revisited the Woolwich Ferry. We went to North Woolwich via the foot tunnel, which is identical to the one at Greenwich, but with very few users - we only passed one person on our way through. We returned on the ferry but the experience was nothing like the old paddle steamer. Below decks are lots of open rooms lined with wooden benches, so that hundreds

of people could be accommodated, but most of it is unused as few people use the ferry nowadays. Vehicle traffic is its main purpose, parked on the top deck, so the drivers have the best view of the open river, as long as they are not parked between a pair of lorries. The passengers' view is restricted to a few openings at each side. However, its departure felt the same as our childhood trips, with the usual growling of the engines and the churning and foaming of the water. This time I had a camera with me to record it all, and I will have to rely on memory for the breezes and smells, until I go back for another trip over the river. (912 words)