

# China investor waits to tie up at quays of empire

Docks seek revival in business cluster  
Low skills and high joblessness persist

By James Pickford and Ed Hammond

Tea and ceramics were among the goods China exported to London in 1880, the year in which the Royal Albert Dock in east London began ushering in the world's biggest ships through its vast steel locks.

Today a new influx of Chinese business is set to arrive on this windswept 35-acre stretch of land beside London City airport, if a £1bn deal to turn the area into an Asian commercial cluster bears fruit.

The plan, by Advanced Business Park, a Chinese developer, and its UK project partner Stanhope, envisages a string of offices for Chinese and other Asian companies as well as shops and homes on the land owned by the Greater London Authority.

Boris Johnson, London's mayor, sees China as a vital source of investment in the capital and is planning an official trip to China this year to boost links with investors, businesses and government officials. Negotiations between the GLA and ABP have been complex and long-running, according to people familiar with the matter.

For the borough of Newham, one of the UK's most deprived, the scheme repre-

sents an opportunity for economic revival. Clive Dutton, executive director for regeneration at the council, said: "This is a game-changing project for the area."

Some of London's most experienced property developers, however, are sceptical of the scheme's viability. Commercial property rents in the area are low and the £1bn development value of the project would suggest an extended payback for the Chinese investor and its partner.

It has been a long journey from thriving Victorian port to putative 21st-century business park. At its completion the Royal Albert was Britain's largest dock, capable of handling a new generation of steamships, and one of its most sophisticated. Ships could be raised into dry dock by hydraulic lifts while the foodstuffs for which the dock became known were kept fresh in cold storage warehouses. It was the first dock in the world to have electric lighting.

Georgina Young, a senior curator at the Museum of London, said: "The Royal Albert Dock opened at the peak of the British empire, when London was at the heart of a phenomenal global trading network and docks were vying to seize the market in goods churning through the city."

Though heavily bombed in the second world war, it remained a thriving part of London's economy until the advent of container ships in the 1960s. London's docks,



1949. Picture: Getty



2006. Picture: Alamy

## Royal Albert Dock then ...

**1880**

Royal Albert Dock, then Britain's biggest dock, opens

**12,000 tonnes**

Weight of ship the dock could accommodate

**3.1 miles**

Total length of quays along 1.75 miles of dock



Emirates Air Line cable car

## ... and now

**£1bn**

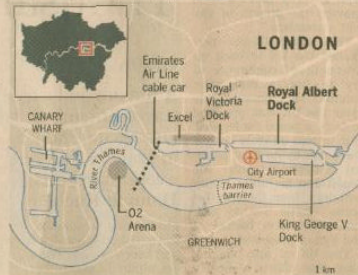
Potential investment in regeneration of Royal Albert Dock by ABP and Stanhope

**45m**

Maximum height of buildings allowed under airport regulations

**2011**

Royal Docks area awarded Enterprise Zone status



which were too shallow to accommodate the larger vessels, fell into rapid decline, leaving the largely low-skilled community with little work and the area with derelict wharves and warehouses.

Several attempts were made to revive Dockland, as it was then, the most successful being Canary Wharf, the financial services centre that last year overtook the City of London in the numbers employed in banking. But many docks remain undeveloped.

The Royal Albert site forms part of the 125-acre Royal Docks, which Mr Johnson nominated as London's only recipient of enterprise zone status in 2011. The aim was to attract investment and jobs to an area that retains high levels of unemployment and low skills.

Sir Edward Lister, deputy mayor for planning at the GLA, said the area would draw "significant development in the next few years", largely driven by London City airport and its planned expansion.

"You have an airport that is so well connected to Europe," he said. "It's a great location for commercial promises and other businesses that need quick communications into Europe."

## INTERACTIVE

Map of the big developments changing the face of London  
[www.ft.com/changing-london](http://www.ft.com/changing-london)