**Thames Path – Abbey Wood to Westminster, Sunday 19th December 2010**

8 walkers, 20 miles – leader Mike Ratcliff

Well, despite the freezing weather conditions over the previous few days and the terrible disruption to our regional rail network and very icy roads, eight of us determined and maybe slightly stubborn walkers persevered hard enough to make our way to Abbey Wood railway station at the eastern fringe of London on this snowy Sunday morning. Just a couple of days before the shortest day of the year, we met with a shimmering winter sun just beginning to inject a rare warmth into our cold limbs as we began our walk north on the Green Chain Walk up through Thamesmead and the Erith Marshes to skirt round the attractive urban lake of South Mere, with the water topped with a frozen powdery matt coating and the occasional darkened thinner patch of ice allowing us a glimpse into the icy depths of the lake. There were several horses chained up around the housing estates near the periphery of the lake who seemed so happy to see us, as they probably anticipated a welcome feeding, with the occasional sprinkle of their early breakfast hay laying scattered along our route. After crossing the A2016 we made our final push through the 'inland' section of our walk to at last reach the spectacular sight of the Thames spanning the panorama before us at Barking Reach. After a peaceful pause in the snow on the waterside path, we began our journey west towards the inner city along this ancient artery that winds its way through the heart of the capital. We very soon reached Tripcock Ness opposite Creekmouth on the Essex shoreline. At this point our path swung southwards for a while until reaching the famous Royal Arsenal at Woolwich with its lovely old mottled brick workshops and riverside canons on permanent display guarding the city. After passing several seemingly ancient piers on the south bank of the river near the currently disused Woolwich foot tunnel, we continued on a stretch of the Thames Path that was common with the Capital Ring that took us briefly away from the river and into the northern reaches of Charlton. When we eventually rejoined the riverside we were immediately confronted with one of the highlights of our day’s scenery – the unmistakable silhouette of the Thames Barrier, looking cold and grey under the now darkening, murky winter sky. We continued our way to meet the Greenwich Peninsular at Bugsby's Reach and pushed on around the deceptively lengthy path that hugs the circumference of this ancient finger of industrial land. It was at this stage of the walk that we were greeted by the famous iconic crown of the O2 Arena with its white coating looking somewhat gloomier than usual as it reflected the mood of the threatening winter sky above it with the occasional flake of snow now floating to earth around us. To reach our long awaited lunch stop, we burrowed our way through the quaint alleyways and cobbled back streets through the old wharves near the Cutty Sark and The National Maritime Museum to finally reach the entrance to the Greenwich Foot Tunnel and a shock by the hum and bustling energy of the local city life and colour all around in the immediate vicinity. After a warm and relaxing hour at the local Wetherspoons pub and plenty of soup and coffee to combat the persistent cold outside, we set off to tackle the remainder of our route, immediately crossing underneath The Thames via the old foot tunnel that's spanned the river, allowing countless pedestrians a free crossing for the last hundred and eight years. Arriving on the north bank at The Isle of Dogs for the first time that day, we continued our way upstream past Millwall and West India Dock with the tremendous towers of the financial and business buildings in this area soaring upwards around us. Fantastic! Reaching Limehouse, the river swings due west then south slightly to Bermondsey and Wapping. By this stage we could feel the surrounding culture of the city changing markedly. We were now in the heart of Docklands and fast approaching St Katherine Docks. Shortly after passing by the oldest pub in London, 'The Prospect of Whitby', we soon had one of the most iconic skylines in the world dropped upon us like a weight in the form of the awe inspiring pinnacles of Tower Bridge spanning the freezing winter flow of the Thames in Central London. The OXO Tower, HMS Belfast, Custom House, The Tower of London and the mighty rising presence of 'The Shard', all helped add to the colourful, pulsing glow of the city at this stage of the rivers' route. Our penultimate crossing of The Thames was by using the Millennium Footbridge between Blackfriars and Southwark Bridge that took us from St Pauls over the waves to the Tate Modern Gallery on the south bank. By this stage of our walk we were amongst so many other people, just enjoying the life and energy of the evening city. Some people commuting, some tourists and many like ourselves just going about their daily business adding to the unique human character of London. After our last stretch of river walking along the south bank past The National Theatre and The Royal Festival Hall, we made our last traverse of the river back over the footbridge just south of the Charing Cross rail bridge with such spectacular night views of The London Eye and The Houses of Parliament immediately to the south. All glowing a myriad of colours in the cold night sky. We eventually found ourselves at Embankment Station where we climbed our way up to The Strand and Charing Cross Station to end a happy and satisfying midwinter walk.