

Who designed the Dolphin Lights on the Thames Embankment? - Philip Young – 8 July 2026

In July we were joined by Philip Young from Felixstowe who talked about three generations of his family who had been model makers and sculptors in Victorian London.

Three generations of the Mabey family, James, his son Charles Henry (senior) and grandson Charles Henry (junior) had been involved with notable buildings and sculptures in London and around the world. Philip explained that before the advent of computers and computer generated models and plans of buildings that architects use today the Mabey family had made the architectural models that had been relied upon.

In 1834 following a fire in the Houses of Parliament, caused by old “tally” sticks being burnt in the furnace, most of the old rooms had been destroyed, James Maby had worked for Sir Charles Barry to produce a model of his plans for the rebuild. Philip advised that two of the Mabey models still exist but are now unfortunately no longer on display but are in archive storage. Most of the internal work of the rebuild was carried out by Pugin and the clock tower “Big Ben, now known as the Elizabeth Tower was modelled by the Mabey’s. The model made by the Mabey’s was restored by Timothy Richards 3 years ago and Philip told us that he and members of his family were due to visit to see the restored model.

Following the “great stink” of 1858 a sewage plan was developed by Joseph Bazalgette which involved the creation of the embankment. A competition was held in the late 1860s to design the lighting for the new embankment along the Thames, several possible designs were published in the contemporary illustrated press and George John Vulliamy’s design of two stylised dolphins, although some say they are sturgeons, writhing around the base of the lamp standard design was chosen as the most popular for the embankment and were modelled by Charles Henry Mabey. The lamp standards were erected in 1870 as electric lights but by 1884 had been replaced by gas but were then changed back to electric in 1900. Many of the original lamps are now listed, although further Dolphin lamp post were added on the north and south banks of the Thames in 1977 to commemorate the Silver Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II.

Philip explained that the Mabey firm had been involved in many projects over the years on public buildings and church buildings including the altar in St Paul’s and gave examples of their work both in this country and further afield. Charles Henry Mabey worked with the architect John

Gibson and sculpted the intricate Shipbuilding relief at the Gibson Hall in Bishopsgate, London and the family were also involved with the construction of the two bronze sphinxes that lie on either side of Cleopatra's Needle on the Embankment and the lions on Horse Guards Parade. Wider afield the Mabey's were also involved in the statue of Britannia in Cape Town, South Africa. As might be expected James Mabey's tombstone was made by the family firm for his grave in West Norwood cemetery.

The Mabey firm had produced a brochure of their work, which Philip showed us, in which they advertised the wide range of services they could provide describing themselves as sculptors and medallists working in stone, brass and other materials. The firm was obviously very successful over the years, however, Charles Henry Mabey was involved in a notable dispute with John Vulliamy regarding the Temple Bar Memorial, Vulliamy having criticised the standards of the work carried out by Mabey, which showed the tensions that could exist between sculptors and architects. The model had remained in their workshop for 5 years until the dispute was resolved.

Philip was thanked for having given us a very interesting and informative talk about the Mabey family firm and their role in the buildings and structures of London and the wider world, especially the iconic Dolphin lamp standards.

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