

INTRODUCTION

For many people their first view of the Thames is a milestone in life, never to be forgotten. Whether we lean over the Embankment wall in London or sit on its grassy banks in its higher reaches the river holds our attention with its magical and timeless qualities. Here is the great river we all heard about during our school days, the river often seen as a background in films and television programmes and the central ribbon of sporting events such as the London Marathon. It is a favourite backdrop to news reports and makes the news itself with everything from dramatic riverside buildings to stranded whales.

The term 'liquid history' is often applied to the Thames. Its great highway has prompted the building of fortresses, palaces, religious institutions, places of government and commercial enterprises, and crossing points have sown the seeds of town development. The Thames has formed the boundary between kingdoms; it has provided protection for communities and a livelihood for many thousands. From records we know about the high notes of English history, such as the lives of kings and the battles that were fought along its banks, but much of its past is shrouded in mystery. It is impossible to walk along the river without feeling a sense of history – locks, warehouses and docks are features of the recent past whilst remains of abbeys and castles give a glimpse of life in earlier times.

Sporting events are held on the river, providing colourful spectacles. Henley heads the list of regattas, whilst barge races are held in the estuary from Southend Pier. One of the sporting highlights is the annual boat race between Oxford and Cambridge Universities. There are interesting customs, some with an historic foundation, such as Swan Upping, and others that are quite bizarre, like the football match played on the muddy foreshore at Leigh-on-Sea. The Thames is a superb leisure facility enjoyed by a growing number of people with

different interests, boating, pleasure cruising, yachting, fishing, walking along the Thames path or simply sitting and enjoying the view.

The Thames provides a rich corridor along which wildlife can spread and flourish – the river is a nature reserve in its own right. The wildlife has become used to people and it is easy to get close – a great benefit for photographers and artists. Thanks to the work of environmental agencies and tighter legislation the Thames is now the cleanest major river in Europe with a resulting benefit to wildlife and mankind.

From an artistic point of view it is not the river itself that provides a satisfying composition but its associated landscape, building, bridges, boats, sky etc. The river is the vehicle that unites these elements, reflects their features and forges a composition of line, balance and harmony. The Thames provides a huge range of artistic opportunities as it grows in stature from source to sea. Its origin could not be more modest where it rises from a tiny spring in the middle of a Gloucestershire meadow a few miles from Cirencester. Almost 230 miles later where it meets the North Sea it is five miles wide.

For most of its length the Thames path hugs the riverside and is an excellent way of exploring the river. This well-marked route of 184 miles starts at the source and continues to the Thames Barrier, splitting into separate routes on both banks of the river in west London. Occasionally the path takes an inevitable but frustrating diversion from the river around residential and commercial properties and private estates. An alternative way of exploring the river is by boat; there are regular passenger services in many areas and boats are for hire which offer different views of the river.

London owes its status as one of the world's greatest cities and its pre-eminence as the English capital to one key factor – the river. The Thames waterfront in London is a great showpiece having some of the best known buildings and bridges in the world. The section from Westminster to Tower Bridge

is the greatest prime site in Britain and any new building proposed for this waterfront carries a great responsibility and is seen in an international spotlight. New schemes are on the drawing board and the future skyline looks exciting. London's riverside is constantly evolving particularly with new residential developments to the east and west of central London. River commuter buses and water taxis provide services for these growing communities and this boat traffic is a revival of one of the old ways of travelling around London.

Over the centuries the Thames has been a magnet for some of the greatest landscape painters. As a Londoner, Turner was a prolific painter of the Thames, Constable was drawn from his beloved East Anglia to paint the river and even the French impressionists left their mark in their magnificent paintings. For example, Monet's views of the Houses of Parliament are some of the most stunning examples of his work. Their paintings are seemingly beyond the abilities of mere mortals but they are an inspiration to other artists. The work of earlier painters provides fascinating historical information about the Thames before the age of photography.

My own association with the river started with school trips to London, and I became

familiar with sections of it with visits to friends in Staines, Whitchurch and various London suburbs. Whilst working in London over a period of twelve years my interest in the river grew, and later as an artist, I had the opportunity to produce this book. My objective was to put together a collection of paintings from source to sea which incorporated the broad spectrum of the river; its beautiful scenery, its interesting buildings and towns, its wildlife, some of its customs and sporting events and a reference to its absorbing history and dynamic present. The paintings were completed over a period of six years, from 2000-2006. Inevitably, the choice of subjects and viewpoints was a personal one and every artist would have made a different selection. I have tried to keep the text fairly brief – it is impossible to compete with so many well-researched and written books on the river so I have restricted the text to subjects that have interested me, and hopefully the reader.

This book, though an epic task, has given me great pleasure to produce, to walk the banks with friends, to enjoy its peaceful and timeless qualities, learn some of its secrets and meet many interesting people. When I look back over the paintings each one is part of a special memory.

