

Ebb and flow

A self guided walk along the River Thames from Molesey to Kingston



Explore life and leisure along the non-tidal Thames
Discover how its meanders and islands were formed
Find out how the water is managed and maintained
See how the river is used for work, leisure and sport

www.discoveringbritain.org

**the stories of our landscapes
discovered through walks**







Contents

Introduction	4
Route overview	5
Practical information	6
Detailed route maps	8
Commentary	10
Further information	37
Credits	38

© The Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers, London, 2014

Discovering Britain is a project of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)
The digital and print maps used for Discovering Britain are licensed to the RGS-IBG from Ordnance Survey

Cover image: Rowing boats and steamer by Hampton Court Bridge © Rory Walsh

Ebb and flow

Explore the River Thames between Molesey and Kingston

Rivers are a vital resource for human life on Earth. Most of the world's biggest cities are located by large rivers. These waterways are so important that they are respected, venerated, even worshipped.

While the River Ganges in India is deified as Mother Ganges, a life-giving nurturing goddess, in London the river is personified as Old Father Thames.



This walk between Molesey and Kingston explores a short section of the non-tidal river to find out about its physical characteristics – its flow and floods, its islands and meanders. The walk also tells the story of the river's many roles - as a place to live, a place to work and a place to play.

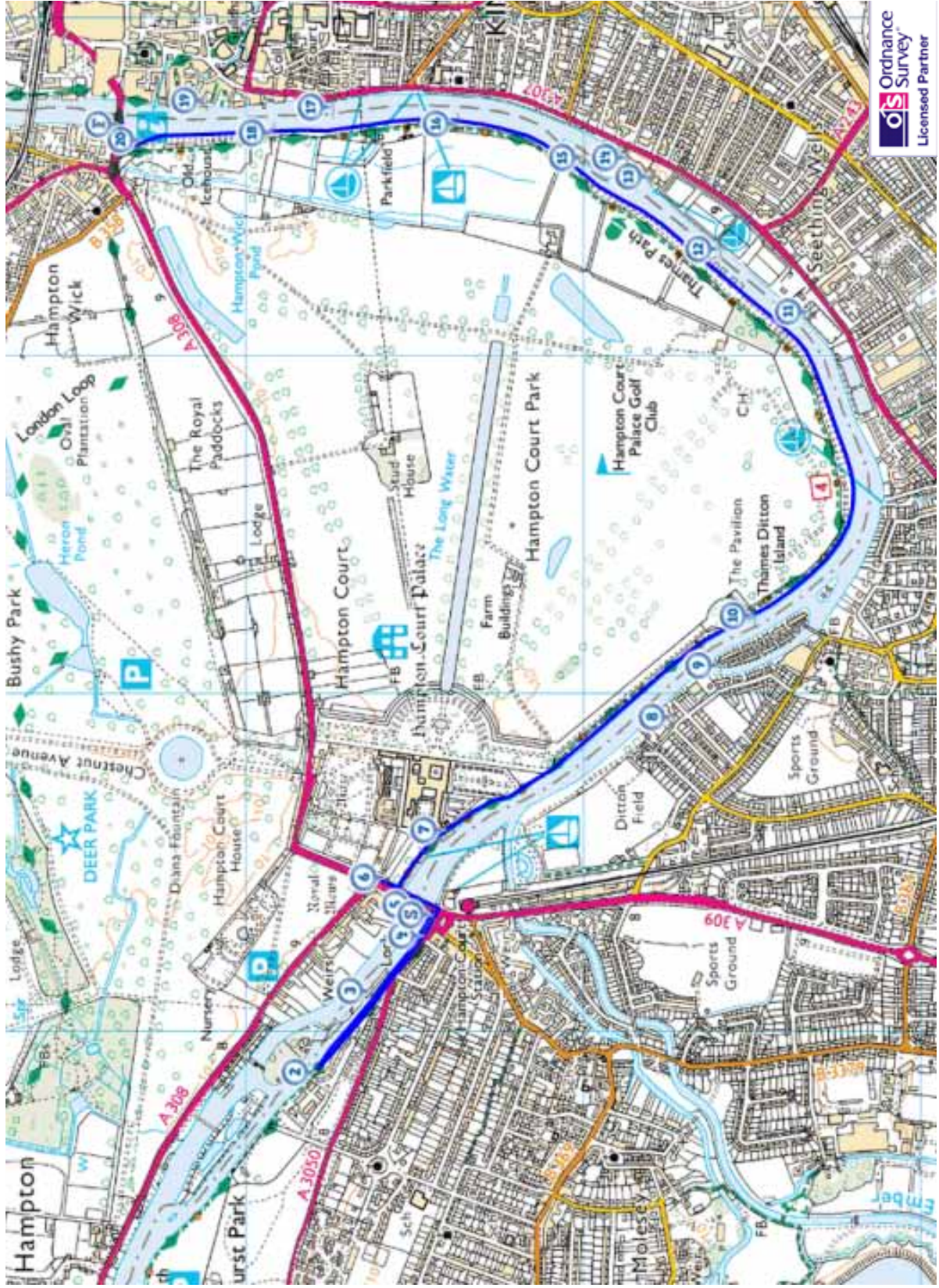


Find out how the River Thames has shaped people's lives and led to their deaths. See royal palaces and former squats. Discover how the river became a source of food and drink, and a site of trade and sport.

Also find out how the Thames is managed and discover the physical and political battles to keep the water flowing.

Top: Cruising along the Thames Bottom: © Houseboats at Tagg's Island

Route overview

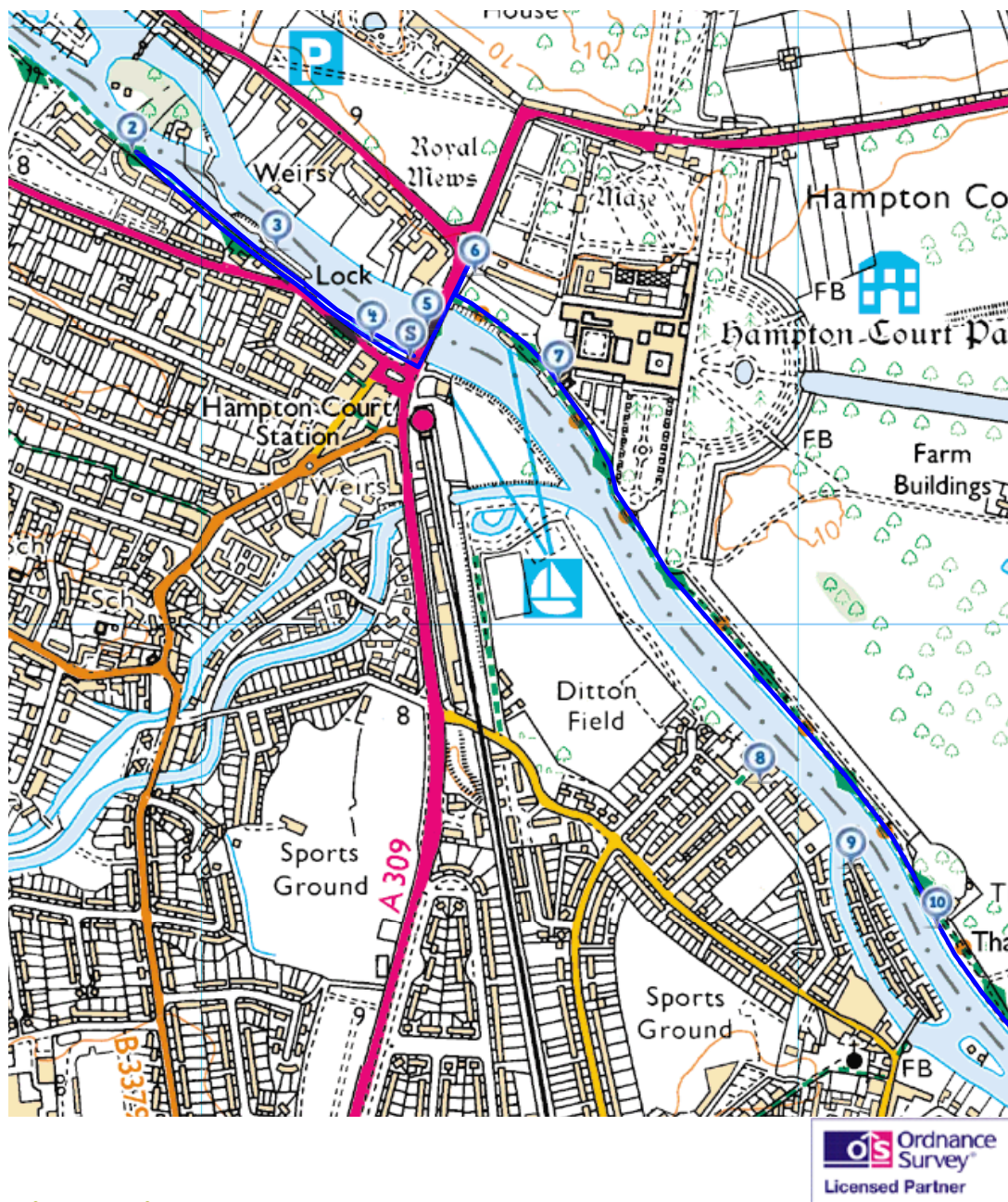


Practical information

Location	Hampton and Kingston-upon-Thames, Greater London
Start point	Molesey Riverbank information board, Hampton Court Bridge (southern end), KT8 9BH
Finish point	Kingston Bridge, KT1 4BJ
Distance	3 ½ miles
Getting there	<p>Train - The nearest station is Hampton Court on the south bank of Hampton Court Bridge. Half-hourly South West Trains services run to and from London Waterloo, Clapham Junction and Wimbledon.</p> <p>Bus - Hampton is served by several buses from Kingston and Richmond including routes 111, 216, 267, 411, 461, 513 and R68. Alight at Hampton Court Bridge or Hampton Court railway station.</p> <p>Car - The south bank of the Thames at Hampton is alongside the A3050. Access is from the A308, A3 or the M25 Junctions 10 or 12. There is limited parking at the walk start. Charges apply to park at Hampton Court Palace.</p> <p>Bicycle - The route follows National Cycle Route 4 (Thames Path).</p> <p>Boat - In summer, riverboats stop at Hampton Pier from Kingston, Richmond and Westminster. Private moorings are available at Hampton Court Palace Privy Gardens and Kingston Bridge.</p>
Onward journey	To return to Hampton from Kingston you can take a local bus (routes 111, 216 or 411) from Cromwell Road bus station or try a river cruise from Turks Pier (Stop 17) or Parris Pier.
Level	Gentle - A flat route along the riverbank following the Thames Path.

Terrain	The walk is on urban pavements and riverside paths. The towpath can be uneven in places and muddy after rain. Note that the riverside path is shared with anglers and cyclists.
Suitable for	<p>Families - Plenty for children to spot along the river including boats, birds and other wildlife.</p> <p>Wheelchairs / Pushchairs – Step free though some sections of the towpath are uneven</p> <p>Dogs - Must be kept on a lead</p>
Refreshments	There are plenty of shops and cafés at the start and end of the route including a café at Molesey Lock (Stop 4). You may like to prepare a picnic to enjoy beside the river.
Toilets	Toilets are available at Molesey Lock (Stop 4) and in Kingston town centre at the end of the route.
Places to visit	Hampton Court Palace, maze and gardens are open daily from 10am. Closing times vary seasonally. Admission charges apply. Tel: 020 3166 6000 Email: hamptoncourt@hrp.org.uk
Things to do	<p>Turks River Cruises operate from March to September between Hampton, Kingston and Richmond. Tel: 020 8546 2434</p> <p>Rowing and motor boat hire is available at many places along the river (charges and conditions vary), including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - J Martin Boat Hire (Stop 3) Tel: 020 8979 5515 - Parr Boat Hire (by Stop 5) Tel: 020 8977 8850 - Ditton Cruisers and Harts Cruisers (by Stops 9 and 13) Tel: 020 8398 2119
Visitor information	Kingston Visitor Information Kiosk is located opposite Kingston railway station, Wood Street, Kingston-upon-Thames KT1 1UJ.

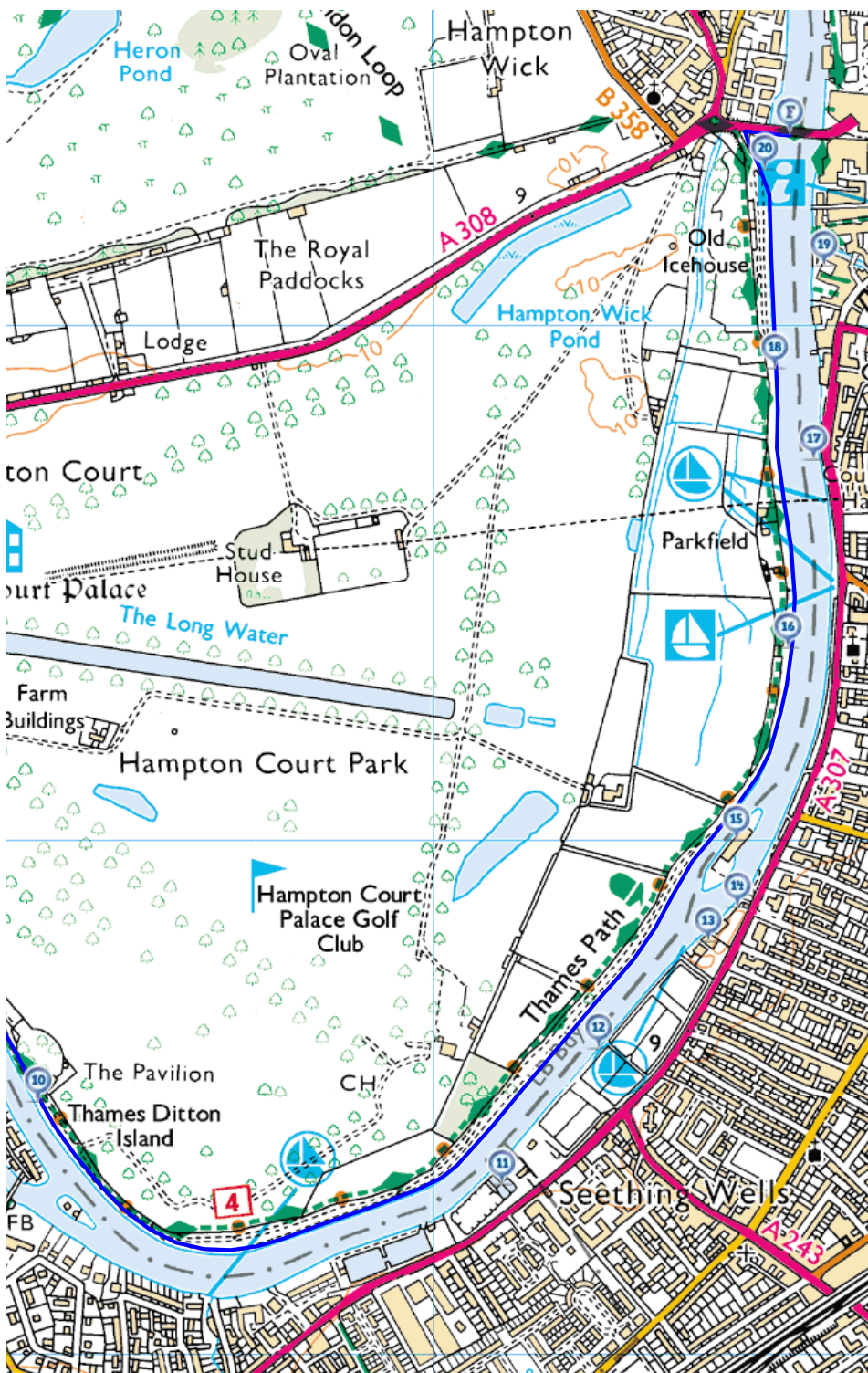
First half of the route



Stopping points

- Start.** Molesey Riverbank information board, southern end of Hampton Court Bridge
2. View of Ash Island and Tagg's Island
 3. Molesey Lock
 4. J Martin Boat Hire and opposite Thames Motor Yacht Club
 5. Hampton Court Bridge
 6. Trophy Gate, Hampton Court Palace
 7. Flood marker, wall of Hampton Court Palace Banqueting House
 8. Opposite Dittons Skiff and Punting Club
 9. Opposite Thames Ditton Island
 10. Angling notices, entrance to Barge Walk

Second half of the route



Ordnance Survey
Licensed Partner

Stopping points

- 11.** Opposite Seething Wells water works
 - 12.** Opposite British Waterways barge and broken boat
 - 13.** Opposite Harts Boatyard
 - 14.** Opposite Thames Sailing Club
 - 15.** Opposite Raven's Ait
 - 16.** Bench opposite St Raphael's Church
 - 17.** Opposite Town End Pier
 - 18.** Decking by small boatyard
 - 19.** Opposite Charter Quay
 - 20.** View towards Kingston Bridge
- Finish.** View from Kingston Bridge

1. A great waterway

Molesey Riverbank information board, southern end of Hampton Court Bridge

At 215 miles, the Thames is the longest river entirely in England and the second longest in the United Kingdom. It flows through seven counties besides London and around 40 smaller rivers flow into it. The river's catchment area is over 8,000 square miles. It's no wonder the Thames has been a very significant waterway throughout its history.

A good place to start exploring the Thames is its name. This may come from the Sanskrit word 'tamas' meaning dark as the water is often cloudy. Another possible origin is the Roman words 'tam' and 'isis' meaning 'wide water'.



Cruise boats beside Hampton Court Palace
© Rory Walsh



The Thames at Hampton
© Rory Walsh

The river's physical origin meanwhile is Thames Head in Gloucestershire. From here it flows through most of South East England and exits near Southend into the North Sea.

For 160 miles - from the source to Teddington Lock four miles downstream from here - the river is non-tidal. The remaining 55 miles are tidal and the water level rises and falls twice daily by around seven metres.

Although the Thames was formed over 30 million years ago this walk concentrates on the last 3,000 years when the river developed its current route and people settled along its banks. Since then Thames has been a source of food and drink, a boundary and a gateway, a trade route and a leisure facility.

Directions 1

With the information board behind you turn right (keeping the river on your right). Follow the Thames Path signpost down to the river bank. Take care as the path is uneven and can be muddy. Continue along the path past Moseley Lock and weir. Stop just before a metal barrier and look across the river to the opposite bank.

2. Island life

View of Ash Island and Tagg's Island

Look across the water at the dense line of trees. They are not on the opposite river bank but on an island. There are over 80 natural islands in the Thames ranging from large marshlands in the Essex estuary to small tree-covered islets.

This one, Ash Island, is just over 200 metres long and 100 metres wide. Look on the map to appreciate its layout. Ash Island is privately-owned and houseboats have been moored on it for at least half a century. Access is by boat or a footbridge at Molesey Lock.

Immediately upstream is the larger Tagg's Island. Over the decades it has had many uses including boatyards, an opulent hotel and an invalid car factory. Many Edwardian celebrities lived on it or visited, including theatre impresario Fred Karno, actress Sarah Bernhardt and writer JM Barrie. Tagg's Island became wholly residential in the 1960s and today has 62 bungalows and houseboats.



Top: Houseboats at Ash Island

Above: The Thames Riviera Hotel on Tagg's Island (1928)

© Rory Walsh / www.britainfromabove.org.uk © English Heritage

All kinds of people choose to live on Thames islands and for a range of reasons. Each island has a strong sense of community and living on them is quite different from life on the mainland. Besides islands, people live on the Thames at bankside moorings, in former industrial docks, and in marinas. A waterborne Thames home can cost anything from £20,000 to £1 million.

Across Britain, about 15,000 people are thought to live afloat on canals, rivers, estuaries and harbours. Some cruise continuously while others are permanently moored; many people do both. Does a houseboat appeal to you? Or would you rather live in one of the riverside flats opposite?

Directions 2

Retrace your steps back along the path (with the river now on your left) and stop beside Moseley Lock.

3. Controlling the flow

Molesey Lock

This is Molesey Lock, one of 45 locks along the Thames. On the way to it we passed the accompanying weir. Locks and weirs are used to control a river's flow and gradient.

On its journey from source to sea, the River Thames drops 110 metres in elevation. A river's natural course includes some steeper and some gentler sections, with rapids in places and lazy meanders in others.

Like many metropolitan rivers however, the course of the Thames has been altered and managed over time.

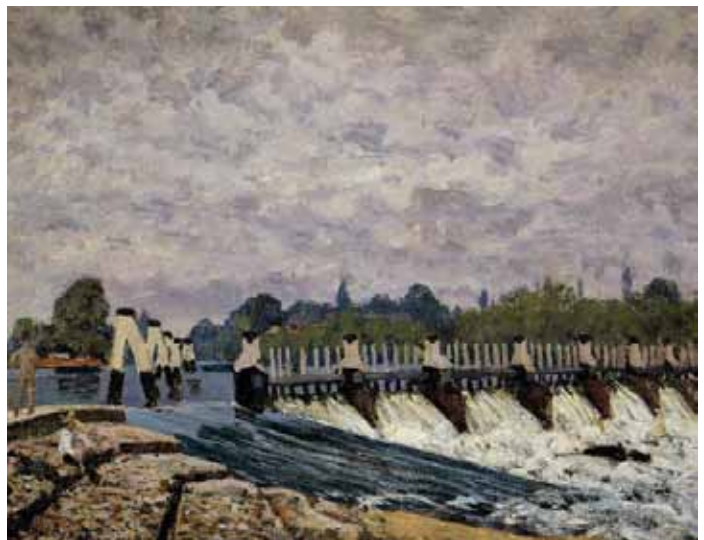


Molesey Lock and weir (1928)
Courtesy of www.britainfromabove.org.uk © English Heritage

The major reason is that for centuries the Thames was a trade route. Before the advent of railways, barges carried goods up and down the river. Navigating vessels in fast-flowing water was difficult, while those carrying heavy loads could run aground in shallower sections. So weirs were installed to control the water level, making the river deep and safe enough for vessels.



Molesey Weir
© Rory Walsh



Molesey Weir by Alfred Sisley (1874)
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)



A motor boat passing through Molesey Lock
© Rory Walsh



Skiffs going over the rollers beside the lock-keeper's cottage
© Hugh Venables, Geograph (CCL)

The role of locks is to raise and lower vessels at weirs where the water level changes. At 'pound locks' like Molesey the level is adjusted in a 'pound' between two sets of gates. A boat enters the lock through one gate which is then closed behind it. The second gate is then partly opened so that the water in the pound reaches the same level as the next stretch of the river. The boat can then continue safely on its journey.



Tea time at the lock
© Rory Walsh

Molesey Lock opened in 1815 and was rebuilt in 1906. A lock was built here because waters upstream were often too shallow for barges carrying coal, bricks and timber.

At 82 metres Molesey is the second-longest lock on the Thames. It is manned by a lock-keeper who operates the gates and monitors and maintains the water flow. Small vessels, such as canoes and rowing boats, can bypass the lock by going over a set of rollers on the other side of the lock-keeper's cottage.

Besides maintaining the water level, locks in the Thames have helped to manage the tides. The tidal section of the river begins four miles downstream from here at the next lock, Teddington. Before Teddington Lock was installed the Thames was tidal as far as Staines, about 16 miles further upstream.

Directions 3

Continue along the riverside path. Stop before the bridge next to the sign for Martin's Boat Hire.

4. Saucy hats and silken rugs

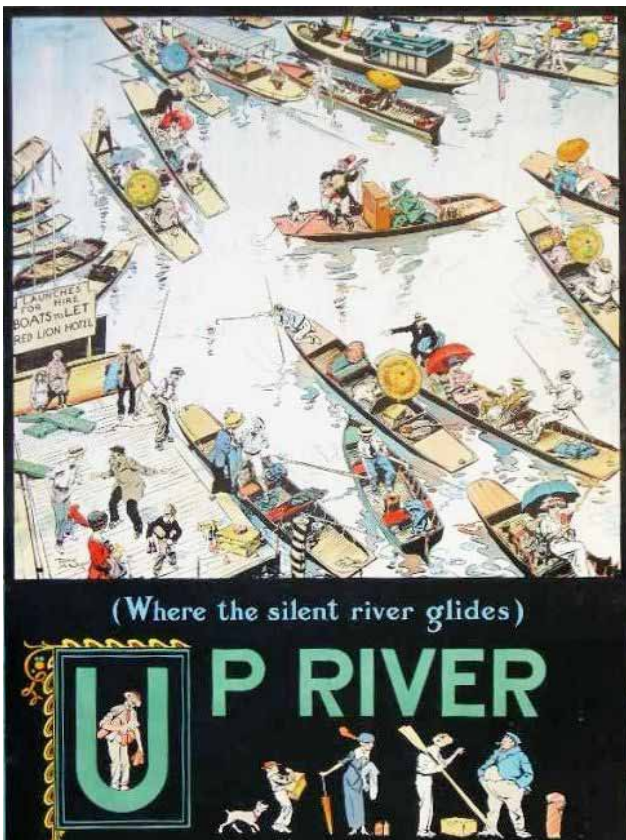
Martin's Boat Hire and Thames Motor Yacht Club

During the Victorian era railways began to replace canal boats and barges as the main method to transport goods. As a result many rivers and canals became popular for leisure uses. Just past Molesey Lock we can see examples on both banks.

On this side, J Martin & Son is one of several places where you can hire rowing boats. The Thames has been popular with leisure boaters for many years. In fact during the Victorian and Edwardian eras Molesey Lock was the busiest on the river with queues of boats waiting to go through it.



J Martin rowing boats opposite Thames Motor Yacht Club
© Rory Walsh



Detail from 'Up River' - a London Underground poster by Tony Sarg (1913)
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

A colourful account appears in Jerome K Jerome's book *Three Men In A Boat*, written in 1889. It tells the story of a group of friends taking a Thames boating holiday and includes a description of passing through Molesey:

"Sometimes, you could not see any water at all, but only a brilliant tangle of bright blazers, and gay caps, and saucy hats, and many-coloured parasols, and silken rugs, and cloaks, and streaming ribbons, and dainty whites [...]"

Altogether, what with the caps and jackets of the men, the pretty coloured dresses of the women, the excited dogs, the moving boats, the white sails, the pleasant landscape, and the sparkling water, it is one of the gayest sights I know of near this dull old London town."

While some people enjoy wielding oars others prefer cruising along the river in motor boats. On the opposite bank is the Thames Motor Yacht Club. Established in 1930 it is one of the oldest motor boat clubs on the river. The club was an immediate success with 153 members within its first year. Many were Navy servicemen and in 1940 boats from the club participated in the evacuation of British troops from Dunkirk.

The costs of motor boating mean that the number of craft using the Thames has been in decline since the late 1980s. However, the Thames Motor Yacht Club has around 300 members, including generations of families, and you will still see motor boats cruising on the water.



Messing about in boats - rowing and cruising along the river in a variety of craft
© Rory Walsh

Directions 4

Continue along the riverside path and turn left onto the nearest side of the bridge (facing upstream). Stop when you are about halfway across and look back towards Molesey Lock.

5. An historic crossing

Hampton Court Bridge



The original Hampton Court Bridge (1753) from an engraving by Charles Grignion the Elder
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

This is Hampton Court Bridge, one of over 200 bridges across the River Thames. There are also 27 tunnels beneath it as well as six ferries and a cable car! Many of these crossings are on the site of earlier fords, ferries and wooden bridges.

The bridge that you are on today is actually the fourth one built on this site. The current bridge opened in 1933. It was carefully designed to carry increased amounts of road traffic and to reflect the buildings of nearby Hampton Court Palace. Sir Edwyn Lutyens was one of the architects and it is now Grade II listed.

Before bridges and tunnels were built, the main way to cross the Thames was by ferry. Besides helping passengers across the river some ferries transported goods from one riverbank to the other. Before engines were developed boats were towed by horses. Ferries transported the tow horse and its driver across the water at places where the towpath swapped sides. We will find out why towpaths swapped sides later in the walk.

The next crossing upstream from Hampton Court Bridge is the Hampton Ferry. It was established so fishermen could cross over to the seasonally-marshy and reed-laden Moulsey Hurst. The Hampton Ferry has been operating since 1514 - making it one of the ten oldest established companies in the UK and among the 150 oldest companies in Europe!

Directions 5

Continue over the bridge. At the end use the traffic lights to cross the road. Stop by the ornate gates that lead into Hampton Court Palace. Look through the gates for a view of the palace entrance courtyard.

6. A royal trophy

Trophy Gate, Hampton Court Palace

In the Tudor and Stuart periods the Thames was the centrepiece of royal life. Successive kings and queens loved the river and enjoyed spending time in their riverside palaces; Greenwich, Whitehall, Kew, Richmond and Hampton Court.

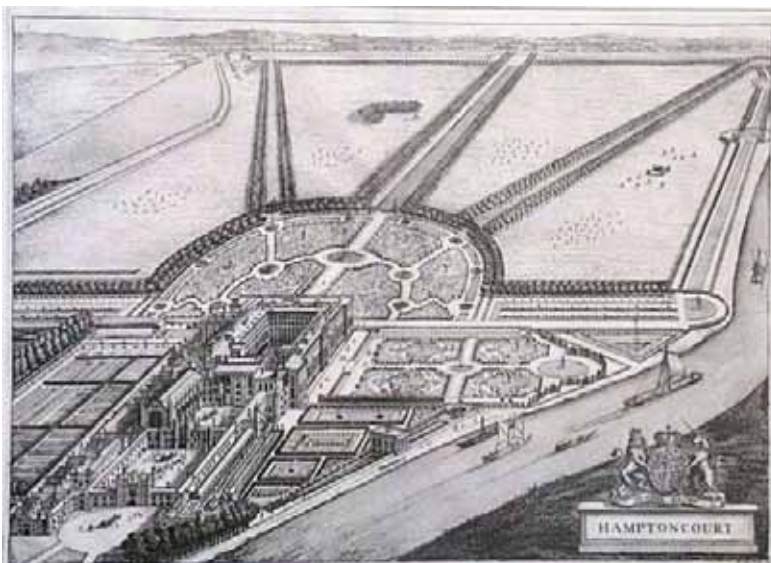
Hampton Court was built around 1514 for Cardinal Wolsey, initially a friend of King Henry VIII. When the two men fell out Henry 'persuaded' Wolsey to 'give' him the palace.



Hampton Court Palace entrance courtyard
© Rory Walsh

Henry and his successor, Queen Elizabeth I, both enjoyed staying at Hampton Court Palace. Sir Walter Raleigh, one of Elizabeth's courtiers, wrote "There are two things scarce matched in the Universe – the sun in heaven and the Thames on earth!"

Many of the palace buildings we can see today date from the Stuart kings of the seventeenth century. King William III and Queen Mary particularly enjoyed the view of the Thames from the palace. They had the great formal gardens laid out to maintain the view while famous architects, including Sir Christopher Wren, were employed to embellish the buildings. You will be able to see into the gardens and the palace further along the riverside path.



The gardens of Hampton Court Palace, Britannia Illustrata (1708)
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)



A detail from the Palace riverside gates
© Rory Walsh

The river itself was a royal thoroughfare from the Tudor era until the mid-nineteenth century. Monarchs travelled between their riverside palaces in elaborate barges. Henry VIII and Elizabeth I were even carried along the Thames by barge after death on the way to their state funerals.

The Thames is still used for royal transport and ceremonies. A notable occasion this century was the pageant held in June 2012 as part of Queen Elizabeth II's Diamond Jubilee celebrations.



A flotilla including royal barges, detail from 'London the Thames on Lord Mayor's Day' (1752) by Canaletto
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

The pageant was inspired by the large royal flotillas that used to journey along the river. During the event some 670 boats of all shapes and sizes travelled between Wandsworth and Tower Bridge. The royal family travelled in a specially-built barge named *Gloriana*, designed to recall the royal barges used by previous monarchs.



Gloriana carries the Olympic flame past the Tower of London
© Ogoco, Flickr (CCL)

Gloriana travelled along this non-tidal stretch of the Thames the following month. The royal barge set off at dawn from Hampton Court Palace to carry the Olympic flame during the final day of the London 2012 Olympic Games torch relay.

In the build-up to the Games' opening ceremony *Gloriana* also carried the flame along sections of the Thames up to the Olympic Park in Stratford.

Directions 6

With the gates behind you turn left towards the bridge. Continue a short way to a bus stop then immediately turn left to re-join the riverside path beside Hampton Court Palace. Pass the sign for the Landing Stage then stop by the Banqueting House, a square building that edges the path. Find a pale stone in the bottom corner of the wall marked 'Flood 1894'.

7. Floods and droughts

Flood marker, Hampton Court Palace Banqueting House

This marker on the wall of the Banqueting House indicates where the water levels rose to during a flood in 1894. It is natural for a river to flood periodically and throughout the centuries the Thames has burst its banks many times. In a flood of 1816 people reportedly rowed through the Great Hall of the Palace of Westminster and the floor was covered in fish!

The non-tidal Thames is at risk from flooding after heavy rain when the volume of water in the river rises. Meanwhile, the tidal Thames is prone to flooding when high tides and strong winds coincide to push sea water up the funnel of the estuary and towards the city.



Hampton Court Palace flood marker
© Rory Walsh

Over time a range of flood protection measures have been put in place. The most well-known are the Embankment through central London, which was built in the Victorian era, and the Thames Barrier near Greenwich, constructed in the early 1980s. Elsewhere stretches of floodplain, low-lying land either side of the river, soak up excess water. Each town along the Thames also has its own local flood alleviation schemes to divert water or protect land and property.



Left: Flooding at Molesey and Ash Island (1947) Right: Flooded Thames Ditton Island (1951)
Courtesy of www.britainfromabove.org.uk © English Heritage

Planners try to prepare for 'once in 100 years' flood events but the frequency of severe flooding on the Thames has risen dramatically in the twenty-first century. In 2000 the river rose to one of the highest levels in living memory; 2003 and 2007 were also bad years and the floods of January/February 2014 also brought widespread destruction. Later we will see areas that were particularly badly affected.



This section of the Thames was badly affected by flooding in early 2014
© Jim Linwood / BigDai100, Flickr (CCL)

While extreme flood events have become more frequent in recent years, so too have droughts. In 2006 British swimmer and environmental campaigner Lewis Pugh became the first person to swim the full length of the Thames from Gloucestershire to Southend-on-Sea. He did it to draw attention to the severe drought in England, which saw record temperatures indicate a degree of global warming. In fact, drought meant that the official headwater of the Thames had stopped flowing so Pugh had to run the first 26 miles. The remaining 202-mile swim took him 21 days to complete.

Directions 7

Continue past the palace grounds. Take time to look through the elaborate railings into the gardens. Beyond the palace the riverside path forks. The higher left fork is a shared path for pedestrians and cyclists. For the rest of the walk we recommend taking the lower right fork closer to the riverbank. Take care as the path can be uneven in places. Stop when you can see Dittons Skiff and Punting Club on the opposite bank.

8. Worth a punt

Opposite Dittons Skiff and Punting Club

We heard earlier about people who enjoy rowing on the Thames for pleasure. Rowing is also a serious sport. In fact, the Thames is the historic heart of UK competitive rowing.

There are over 200 rowing clubs along the river that host many races and long distance events, including the famous Boat Race between Oxford and Cambridge universities (started 1829) and Henley Royal Regatta (established 1839). Across the river here is Dittons Skiff and Punting Club. Founded in 1923, 'Dittons' is one of six skiffing clubs on the river.



Skiffs outside Dittons Skiff and Punting Club
© Rory Walsh

Skiffing is a kind of racing particular to the Thames. Skiffs are traditional wooden rowing boats used for racing and leisure. Over the years 'Dittons' club members have competed at the Olympic Games and set Guinness World Records, including the first crew to row the length of the Thames. The club also offers a competitive form of punting slightly different from the pleasure punting made famous at Oxford and Cambridge.

Beginning each April boat clubs of all types take part in regattas – events where boats race side-by-side. 'Dittons' hosts the annual Hampton Court and Dittons Regatta. Outside the regatta season the club runs Bridge to Bridge skiff races from Hampton Court to Kingston.

Besides rowers on the Thames, look out for kayakers and canoeists. The Royal Canoe Club at Teddington, founded in 1866, is said to be the world's oldest. Canoeists use sheltered water in non-tidal sections of the river for training and racing. Sea kayakers use the tidal stretches of the river for touring. Meanwhile playboaters and slalom paddlers use the white water created at weirs.

Directions 8

Continue along the riverside path. Notice the varied chalets and bungalows on the opposite side of the river. Soon the river forks around an island. Stop when the end of the island comes into view.

9. Pieces of ait

Opposite Thames Ditton Island

We began the walk near two islands and here we can see another. Look at the map and you will see that Thames Ditton Island, Ash Island and Tagg's Island are all long and narrow. The term for such islands in the Thames and its tributaries is 'ait' (also spelled 'eyot' and pronounced the same as 'eight').

Aits are formed when the river transports and deposits fine sediment downstream. Over time the sediment may accumulate enough to break the surface of the water. Some of these islands are eroded away again but others become permanent features and develop vegetation.



Thames Ditton Island (1923)
Reproduced by kind permission of Thames Ditton Island

In the early 1600s Thames Ditton Island (then known as Colly's Eite) was recorded as little more than a muddy hump. By Victorian times, when leisure boating had taken off, boats from Kingston moored on it so people could enjoy a riverside picnic. In the early twentieth century a trend developed for riverside bungalows which were often used for weekend getaways. By 1930 the whole perimeter of Thames Ditton Island was covered in wooden holiday chalets. Owners would moor their boats at the bottom of their gardens.



Early bungalows on Thames Ditton Island
Reproduced by kind permission of Thames Ditton Island

In 1939 a footbridge was built which opened the island up as a place for permanent occupation. Although Thames Ditton Island is just 320 metres long there are now 47 homes on it. Nearly all of them are on stilts in an attempt to prevent flood damage.

Recent floods, however, have inundated the island - most recently in 2014 when the ait was covered in several feet of water.

Directions 9

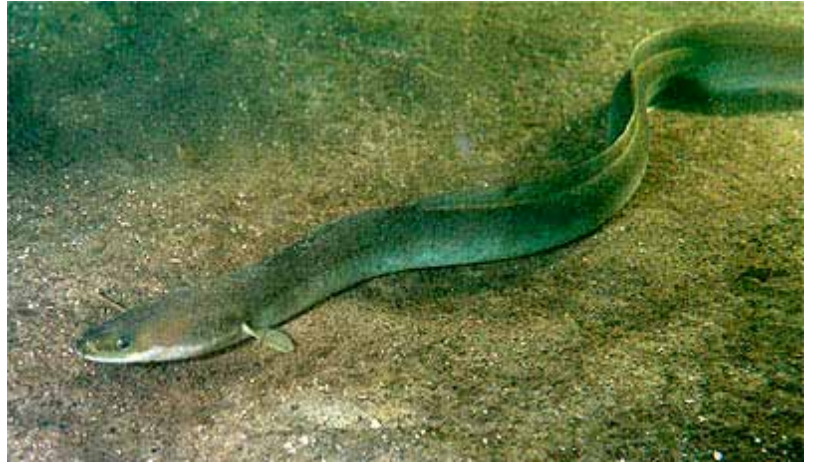
Continue along the riverside path. Stop when you reach a gate and set of small bollards across the path. There is a signpost for Barge Walk and a notice for anglers.

10. Water life

Angling notices, entrance to Barge Walk

These angling notices are a reminder of another way that people have used the Thames. Today anglers catch fish for leisure, returning their catches into the water. Historically, though, Thames fish were part of the human diet.

Until around 1800 the Thames supported a large fishing industry with eels, lobsters and salmon caught and sold in great numbers. Eels became a cheap and nutritious staple food, especially in East London.



European eels were once very common in the Thames
© Ron Offermans, Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

After the Industrial Revolution and London's subsequent population increase the river became highly polluted. The effects were terrible - for people and wildlife. Fish suffered especially. Water quality declined so much that a report in the 1950s stated that there was no fish life at all between Kew and Gravesend.

From 1960 a determined effort was made to help fish return to the Thames with a series of measures to protect water life. For example, anglers cannot use the Thames in spawning season which is when fish swim upstream to breed. Weirs have been fitted with 'fish ladders', channels designed to help fish go over them to spawn.

From being biologically dead only a few decades ago, the Thames is now home to 120 fish species including bass, flounder and salmon. In turn, their increased numbers support other wildlife. Birds such as herons and cormorants have thrived while otters have been sighted between Lechlade and Oxford. Meanwhile, the river's floodplains of woodland, water meadows and grassland are home to many other species. Former industrial sites have become wildlife havens too and we will see an example at the next stop.

Directions 10

Continue along the path as it bends round to the left. After the path becomes lined with a hedge, look on the opposite bank for Thames Marina (a white building with a petrol pump outside). A little further along the bank is a large yellowbrick building set back from the river. Stop when you have a good view of it.

11. Cleaning up

Opposite Seething Wells water works

By 1805 London's population had grown to one million and the Thames was the main source of drinking water. Despite this there was no system for keeping the river clean. Sewage, industrial effluent, human waste and even dead animals filled the water. It was little surprise that in 1832 there was an outbreak of disease - cholera.

The state of the Thames became a well-publicised scandal. In 1849 another cholera outbreak killed an estimated 2,000 people a week. To stem the disease the Government introduced the Metropolis Water Act of 1852. This Act banned extracting water for household use from the tidal Thames beyond Teddington.



Part of the Seething Wells works
© Rory Walsh

In the same year engineer James Simpson built the Seething Wells water works we can see on the opposite riverbank. Most works of the time pumped water straight out of the Thames for human consumption but at Seething Wells water was filtered. It was stored in large reservoirs for six hours and refined through sand, shells and gravel. A little further along the towpath you might be able to see the reservoir walls. The filtering process used at Seething Wells cleaned up the water and ultimately helped to fight cholera.



The water works filter beds (1858)
Reproduced by kind permission of The Friends of Seething Wells

For many years cholera was thought to be an airborne disease. A London doctor, John Snow, was convinced it was waterborne instead and began to investigate.

During his investigations Snow compared the contraction rates near Seething Wells to those close to other London works. Cholera cases were 14 times lower at Seething Wells. Snow published his findings in 1855 and they helped to transform perceptions of the disease.



Two Victorian cartoons highlighting the filthy state of the Thames.

Left: 'Monster Soup, commonly called Thames Water' (William Heath, 1820s) suggested what could be found in cups of tea
 Right: 'Father Thames introducing his offspring [diphtheria, scrofula and cholera] to the fair city of London' (John Leech, 1858)
 Wellcome Library / Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

As London's population and water demand grew, Seething Wells expanded. The Chelsea Water Company joined the original Lambeth Water Company at the site and by the 1880s there were at least 20 filters, 16 engines and 600 miles of pipe. Seething Wells supplied 7,500,000 gallons a day - 30 gallons per person - across south London.

The works remained a significant operation until the 1970s. Since then some of the buildings have become Kingston University student halls. The reservoirs meanwhile are an important wildlife refuge. The large expanses of open water and network of underground pipes support many species, including rare bats and over 75 types of bird.

Though the pumping station is no longer operational, this stretch of the Thames is still a source of drinking water. Hampton is on the Thames Water Ring Main, a 50 mile-long tunnel which circles London. Constructed in the 1990s it provides a fast and efficient way to transfer drinking water supplies across the capital.

The water may look murky but the Thames is now the cleanest metropolitan river in the world. A sign of its advance from the Victorian era came in 2007 when a blind taste test saw Thames tap water rated above 20 bottled brands.

Directions 11

Continue along the riverside path, now lined with trees on both sides. Look out on the opposite bank of the river for the walls of the filtering reservoir. When you are past the water works look for a group of boats tied together. They include a barge with a broken boat in the back and narrowboat with a British Waterways sign on the side.

12. Managing the river

Opposite British Waterways barge and broken boat

As we have seen, a lot of people use the river for different purposes and have land, property and infrastructure along its banks. But you might wonder who actually owns the river and has responsibility for managing it. Local councils or the Government? Land owners or river users?

In the Middle Ages the Crown had general jurisdiction over all of the Thames. Then in 1751 the Thames Navigation Commission was formed to manage the non-tidal river above Staines. The City of London claimed responsibility for the tidal river.



Broken boat past Seething Wells
© Rory Walsh

However, a dispute between the City and the Crown over ownership of the tidal river was not settled until 1857 when the Thames Conservancy was formed. In 1866 the functions of the Thames Navigation Commission were transferred to the Thames Conservancy, which therefore became responsible for the whole river.

In 1909 control divided again. Management of the tidal river (now below Teddington after the lock was built there) transferred to the Port of London Authority. Administration of the non-tidal part passed through various hands. In 1974 the Thames Conservancy became part of the new Thames Water Authority. When Thames Water was privatised its river management functions were transferred to the National Rivers Authority, which eventually became part of the Environment Agency.

Although there are designated bodies for managing the two parts of the river, a lot of individuals and collectives play a role in how the Thames is accessed and used. Later on we will discover how this can lead to disputes.

Directions 12

Follow the path and a row of narrowboats will appear on the opposite bank. Continue until you can see Harts Boatyard, a pale building with balconies outside.

13. Staying afloat

Opposite Harts Boatyard

Much of this stretch of the river has shifted use from a working waterway to a place of leisure. In 2001 the Environment Agency started the 'Thames Ahead' initiative to rejuvenate river industries. Working with the marine trade and local authorities, the marketing work resulted in increased boat registrations and business investment.

One example of a thriving riverside business is Harts Boatyard opposite. Established in 1853 it is the oldest boatyard in Surrey. The yard undertakes boat repairs and engineering work while the sales section offers all types of vessels - from canal boats and racing dinghies to floating offices and pied-à-terre houseboats.



Visitors enjoying the sun at Harts Boatyard
© Rory Walsh

The boatyard has recently been refurbished complete with state-of-the-art floating pontoons for the popular canal boat market. They also advertise residential moorings aimed at foreign investors. A boat moored here offers reasonably-priced living accommodation close to central London and Heathrow Airport. Owners' boats are fully serviced and maintained while they are abroad and made ready for use at very short notice on their return.



Some of the yard's canal boat pontoons
© Rory Walsh

The boatyard has also diversified with a pub and restaurant. These serve the boating community and local residents - who can hire a boat from a selection of electric and motor launches.

Directions 13

Look to the left of Harts Boatyard for the Thames Sailing Club. There should be a banner outside and several boats with tall masts.

14. River racers

Opposite the Thames Sailing Club

We have already discovered how the Thames is used for motor cruising, rowing and skiffing. Another popular activity is sailing. Sailing is practiced at many clubs along the length of the Thames using different types of boats, such as Lasers, GP14s and Wayfarers.

On the opposite bank is the Thames Sailing Club. Founded in 1870 it is the oldest river sailing club in the UK. The club is also home to a unique type of sailing boat – the Thames A-Rater. They are used for racing on this particular stretch of the non-tidal river.



A Thames Sailing Club boat at Raven's Ait
© Rory Walsh

A-Raters have a 27-foot long body, a flat hull and a 45-foot tall mast. These very tall masts are designed to collect as much wind as possible, including above the level of the riverside trees and buildings. Some A-Raters are over a hundred years old but even now these Edwardian gentlemen's yachts are the fastest boats on the river, offering exciting sailing for their three-person crews.



Thames A-Raters in action
© Melanie Hardman, Flickr (CCL)

Each June, A-Raters from the Thames Sailing Club are towed along the river to take part in 'Bourne End Week'. This is a regatta based at the Upper Thames Sailing Club in Bourne End, Buckinghamshire.

On the last day of the regatta the two clubs compete for the Queen's Cup, the most prestigious race in their calendar. This cup was originally presented by Queen Victoria herself in 1893.

Directions 14

Continue along the riverside path as the two tracks merge beside Raven's Ait. Take care for cyclists on the path from this point. Stop opposite the largest building on Raven's Ait and look at the island.

15. A place of debate

Opposite Raven's Ait

This is Raven's Ait, another historic Thames island. In 1217 the Treaty of Kingston may have been signed here. The treaty effectively ended the First Barons' War between England and France when Prince Louis (later King Louis VIII) of France renounced his claim to the English throne.

The island could have been chosen as it had long been a meeting place for negotiations and debate. Since then, Raven's Ait has become a topic for debate in itself. The island's varied history provides an example of the politics of the river, including issues of privacy, accessibility and ownership.



Raven's Ait - meeting place and unique island venue
© Rory Walsh

Raven's Ait is only accessible by boat so it has had several watery uses. From 1858 to 1911 it was the first home of Kingston Rowing Club. It was then leased by The Navy League, the charity responsible for the Sea Cadet Corps and the Girls' Nautical Training Corps. During the 1980s the Inner London Education Centre set up training and watersports facilities on the island.

After Kingston Council bought the site in 1989 it became a conference and wedding venue. Twenty years later the company went bankrupt and the island was occupied by squatters. The group urged people to 'Reclaim Your Raven's Ait' and claimed that it was common land for public use. They wanted to establish a self-sufficient, eco-friendly centre for community and environmental groups.

Following a legal battle the council evicted the squatters and the company that owns Harts Boatyard obtained the lease. They eventually re-opened it as "the unique island venue". At the centre is the refurbished Main House with a ballroom, suites and over 30 rooms for all types of business meetings and ceremonies. In 2013 the lease was sold to a Middle East-based businessman, reputedly for £1.9million.

Directions 15

Continue along the path as it curves to the left. Stop when you reach a bench that faces a church with a square tower on the opposite bank.

16. At great length

Bench opposite St Raphael's Church, Kingston

You will probably have noticed that this path by the river has very few obstacles or diversions. This was not always the case.

Earlier we heard about the Thames Navigation Commission formed to manage the non-tidal river above Staines. Part of their job was to make navigation easier for cargo boats which included improving the towpath. This was a difficult task as there were often natural obstacles in the way.

There were also human obstacles: many landowners refused permission for the path to enter their land and the Commissioners did not have compulsory purchase powers.



The Thames Path at Thames Ditton
© Rory Walsh

As a result the towpath often switched from one river bank to the other, resulting in the ferries that we heard about earlier. One of these ferries still operates between Shepperton and Weybridge. You also followed the path across the river when you went across Hampton Court Bridge.

The Thames Commissioners' efforts to create the working towpath led to the route we have been using today. Since 1996 it has been designated as a long-distance footpath – The Thames Path National Trail. It follows the river for 184 miles from the source to the Thames Barrier. The Thames Path is the only one of the 15 National Trails that runs entirely alongside a river. It is also the longest riverside walk in Europe.

The Thames Path has been made very accessible to suit all ages and abilities. Countless numbers of people use it on a daily basis. For some the Thames Path is on their daily commute; for others it is a place for walking the dog or a leisurely stroll or cycle. There are even challenges and charity events to complete its entire length.

Directions 16

Continue along the Thames Path as it becomes tarmac paved. Pass the Riverside Café on the opposite bank then a group of large houses on the left. Stop at the next riverside bench. Depending on the time of day there may be large white paddle steamers moored by the pier on the opposite bank. If they are not moored there they will be travelling on the river.

17. Cruising along

Opposite Town End Pier and landing stage

We have already discovered that the use of the Thames for leisure developed during the Victorian period. The increasing railway network meant that more people who could afford it could have a day out in riverside towns such as Reading, Oxford and Windsor. To serve these visitors a range of firms emerged offering River Thames cruises.

One such company is Turks. Their various vessels are available for scheduled river cruises, themed cruises (often with a disco or live jazz music), plus private charters for weddings, birthdays and special events.



Turks cruiser at Hampton Court
© Rory Walsh



Turks steamer New Southern Belle
© Rory Walsh

This family-owned company can be traced to 1710 when it was established by Richard Turk - although records of Turk-built boats extend back to the twelfth century. Turks began by building passenger wherries and fishing punts. As their reputation spread, they expanded into making boats for English and foreign royalty. They also exported pleasure craft - especially touring canoes and skiffs - all over the world, often winning prizes at international exhibitions.

Pleasure cruises are still available up and down the Thames. In central London, for example, you may have seen fleets of river cruisers between Westminster and Greenwich. Turks paddle cruisers are a regular and colourful sight on the water between Hampton, Kingston and Richmond.

Directions 17

Continue along the path. Stop by the riverside decking outside a small boatyard. Look along the river towards the bridge and see if you can spot any swans on the water.

18. Swanning up and down

Decking by small boatyard

The Kingston stretch of the Thames is home to a large number of swans. They can often be seen drifting serenely across the river and beside the banks.

Did you know that all the swans in Britain have just three owners? The first is the monarch, a tradition dating back to the twelfth century when swans were a common food source for royalty. Under a Royal Charter of the fifteenth century, two Livery Companies of the City of London – the Vintners' Company and the Dyers' Company – are entitled to share in the Sovereign's ownership.



Swans at Kingston

© Rory Walsh

In the third week of July an ancient practice takes place on the Thames called 'swan upping'. This used to be when swans were caught for food but nowadays it is a kind of census. It happens upstream from here between Sunbury and Oxford.



Illustration of swan upping on the Thames (1875)
from 'Life on the Upper Thames' by Henry Robert Robertson
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

During the ceremony Swan Uppers row the river in skiffs. When they find a family of swans the Uppers give the cry "All-Up" and surround the birds with their boats. Then they catch the swans and take them ashore.

Swans caught by the Queen's Swan Uppers have a ring placed around their leg that is linked to the database of the British Trust for Ornithology. Swans caught by the Dyers and Vintners are identified by a further ring on the other leg. Today, only swans with cygnets are caught and ringed. This gives a yearly snapshot of how well Thames swans are breeding.

Directions 18

Continue along the riverside using the path or the tarmac road. If using the road take care for occasional traffic. Stop when you are across the river from a modern red and white housing block. Look for a quay to the left of the block spanned by a footbridge.

19. Quayside keys

Opposite Charter Quay

Here we can see one of the many modern apartment blocks that are springing up beside the Thames. The Charter Quay development was completed in 2001. It comprises five townhouses, 239 apartments, river moorings, restaurants, bars, shops, a café, a piazza, a waterfowl conservation area and the Rose Theatre.

Thames-side developments like these have become very desirable. An apartment at Charter Quay with a river view can cost more than £800,000 – almost double the average local price.



Charter Quay apartments
© Rory Walsh



The Hogsmill river entering the Thames
© Rory Walsh

Some of the river's most expensive residences are in former working buildings, such as converted Docklands warehouses. Elsewhere specially-built houses line the river, including those we passed earlier before Thames Marina.

Though already expensive such houses can have an added cost. Building beside a river increases the risk of flooding and property damage. When floodplains are reduced excess water cannot drain away. Even so, heightened flood risk doesn't seem to diminish the value of riverside land and property.

Before continuing, look for a gap in the buildings opposite. You should be able to see another waterway emerging from Kingston town centre. This is the Hogsmill River, one of the Thames' many tributaries. The Hogsmill rises six miles away in Ewell and joins the Thames here at Charter Quay.

Directions 19

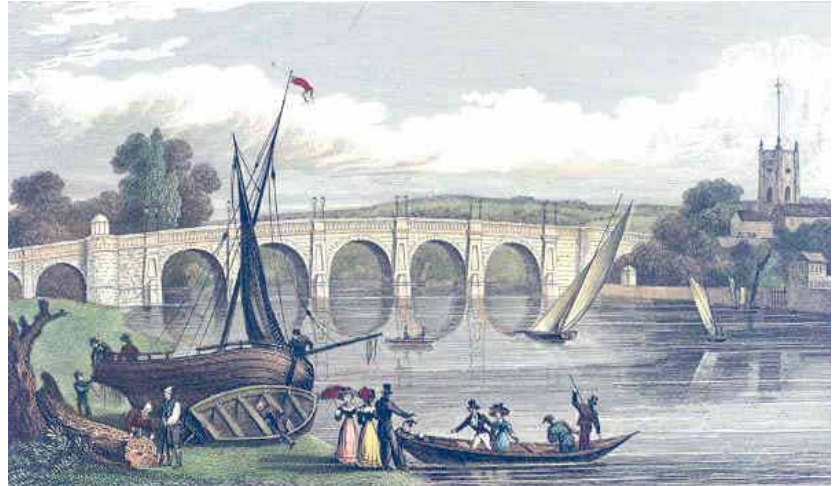
Continue along the tree-lined path. Stop just before it slopes uphill and look towards the bridge.

20. A royal border

View towards Kingston Bridge

Records suggest that there has been a bridge at Kingston since the twelfth century. Until Putney Bridge opened in 1729, Kingston was the only Thames crossing between London Bridge and Staines. The current bridge opened in 1828 though it has been widened several times since.

Kingston's development stems from its location as a Thames crossing. In Saxon times the river here was shallow and marshy and there was probably a ford.



Kingston Bridge (1831)
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

The ford would have created an ideal trade and meeting place, especially as the Thames at Kingston was the boundary between two ancient kingdoms - Wessex and Mercia. The town's name comes from the Old English words 'cyninges' and 'tun' meaning 'king's estate or enclosure'. It is thought that seven Saxon kings were crowned in Kingston from Edward the Elder (circa 900) to Ethelred the Unready (circa 975).



The Coronation Stone
© Rory Walsh

In Kingston town centre is a large greyweather sandstone known as the Coronation Stone. Local lore suggests that the Saxon kings were crowned while sitting on it. Evidence, however, is rather scarce and there are few records of the stone from before the eighteenth century.

What is known is that greyweather sandstones, or sarsens, are unusual in Greater London. Sarsens were often used in ancient monuments, including Stonehenge, and as boundary markers. The stone may have been carried to Kingston in Saxon times and placed by the riverbank to mark the boundary between Wessex and Mercia.

Directions 20

Bear left and follow the path uphill to the end of the bridge. Then turn right and make your way across the right hand side of it. Stop in one of the alcoves on the bridge and look back along the river.

21. Ebb and flow

View of the river from Kingston Bridge

Kingston Bridge is a fitting place to finish this walk. The bridge itself is another example of the way that people have used and shaped the river. Throughout this walk we have seen how features in the natural landscape have been adapted for human settlement, from building bridges and water works to living on islands and boats.

The bridge is also a good place to look back along the Thames and appreciate many of the features explored along the route. From this high position you can get a sense of the width of the river - which led to its use as a barrier, a routeway, and a food and water source.



View along the river from Kingston Bridge

© Rory Walsh

Look along the banks and you will probably see examples of the many leisure activities that now take place by the Thames. The Kingston side is lined with houses, restaurants and bars. The tree-lined Hampton bank is popular with joggers, anglers and cyclists. On the water itself you may be able to see many types of vessels, from canoes and cruisers to sail boats and motor boats.

Towards the horizon you can see how the river meanders around the grounds of Hampton Court Palace, a reminder of how people from many classes and backgrounds have lived and worked by the river. All along the path various individuals and groups have helped to manage, preserve and even restore the Thames.



Riverside life - a grey heron watching the water, houses at Thames Ditton

© Rory Walsh

The route also revealed a little about the wildlife that co-exists alongside these human activities, from fish stocks that came back from the dead, to birds and bats thriving by the riverbanks, and the iconic swans.

Whether you are familiar with this section of the Thames or a first time visitor to this pleasant non-tidal stretch, we hope that you have enjoyed this walk. If so you may like to try some of the other free Discovering Britain walks that explore sections of this great river - including in Oxford, Marlow, the South Bank, Deptford, Greenwich, North Woolwich and Leigh-on-Sea. Each one will allow you to discover some of the stories behind the ebb and flow of the Thames over the centuries.



Relaxing by the riverside
© Rory Walsh

Directions 21

From the bridge you may like to explore the riverside and town at Kingston. You can visit the Coronation Stone and historic market square. To return to Hampton Court you can take a bus from Kingston town centre, retrace your way along the towpath or enjoy one of the many boat cruises to Hampton Court Palace.

Further information

Charter Quay

www.cqra.org/about

Dittons Skiff and Punting Club

dittons.org.uk

Friends of Seething Wells

www.friendsofseethingwells.org

Harts Boatyard / Stewart Marine

www.hartsboats.com

Molesey Local History Society

www.moleseyhistorysociety.org

Raven's Ait

www.ravensait.co.uk

River Thames Society

www.riverthamessociety.org.uk

Tagg's Island

www.taggs-island.com

Thames Ditton Island

www.thamesdittonisland.co.uk

Thames Motor Yacht Club

www.tmyc.co.uk

Thames Sailing Club

www.thamessailingclub.co.uk

Visit Thames

www.visitthames.co.uk

Ditton Cruisers and Harts Cruisers

www.taggsboatyard.co.uk

Drifting (Dr Toby Butler's audio trail)

www.memoryscape.org.uk/Drifting.htm

Hampton Court Palace

www.hrp.org.uk/HamptonCourtPalace

Kingston Regatta

www.kingstonregatta.co.uk

Parr Boat Hire

parrboats.weebly.com

Residential Boat Owners Association

www.rboa.org.uk

Seething Wells Water

www.seethingwellswater.org

Thames Alive

www.thamesalive.org.uk

Thames Ditton Regatta

www.thamesdittonregatta.co.uk

Thames Path National Trail

www.nationaltrail.co.uk/thames-path

Turks Thames River Boat Cruises

www.turks.co.uk

Credits

The RGS-IBG would like to thank the following people and organisations for their assistance in producing this Discovering Britain walk:

- **Dr Toby Butler**, History lecturer at **The University of East London**, for inspiring the walk with his audio trail 'Drifting' - available at www.memoryscape.org.uk/Drifting.htm
- **Rory Walsh** for editing the walk resources, providing photographs and the audio commentary
- **Jenny Lunn** for editing the walk resources
- **Caroline Millar** for editing the audio files
- **Britain From Above** for kind permission to include archive images from their collection
- **Roger and Jenni Haile, Paula Gilder** of **Molesey Local History Society** for useful advice and suggestions on the script
- **Simon Tyrell** from **The Friends of Seething Wells** for his enthusiastic suggestions and kind permission to reproduce the engraving of the Lambeth Water Works
- **Andy Spector** for kind permission to reproduce period images of Thames Ditton Island from the island's community website
- **BigDai100, Nigel Cox, Melanie Hardman, Jim Linwood, Motmit, Ron Offermans, Ogoco, Mark Percy** and **Hugh Venables** for additional photographs reproduced under Creative Commons Licenses



Cruising along the Thames at Hampton
© Rory Walsh

Try other walks in the Discovering Britain series elsewhere along the River Thames

City of streams and spires

Explore Oxford's fascinating network of waterways

<http://www.discoveringbritain.org/walks/region/south-east-england/oxford-waterways.html>



Tales of a riverbank

Livelihood, leisure and literature along the Thames at Marlow

<http://www.discoveringbritain.org/walks/region/south-east-england/marlow.html>



Transforming the riverside

Discover stories behind the redevelopment of the River Thames in central London

<http://www.discoveringbritain.org/walks/region/greater-london/london-south-bank.html>



District 45

Travel back in time to London's Deptford 100 years ago

<http://www.discoveringbritain.org/walks/region/greater-london/london-deptford.html>



Trains and boats and planes

Explore the changing riverside and docks at North Woolwich

<http://www.discoveringbritain.org/walks/region/greater-london/london-woolwich.html>



Neither land nor sea

Discover the tidal creeks and mudflats of the Thames Estuary in Essex

<http://www.discoveringbritain.org/walks/region/east-of-england/essex-estuary.html>





Britain's landscapes are wonderful.

There is a tremendous variety within our shores – whether in the countryside, in towns and cities or at the seaside. And every landscape has a story to tell about our past and present.

Discovering Britain is an exciting series of geographically-themed walks that aim to bring these stories alive and inspire everyone to explore and learn more about Britain. Each walk looks at a particular landscape, finding out about how forces of nature, people, events and the economy have created what you see today.

The self-guided walks are fun, informative and inspiring. Prepare to discover something new, to be surprised and to find the unexpected.

Visit www.discoveringbritain.org to

Send your review of this walk

Search for other walks

Suggest a new walk