

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - November 2022

The Thames from Oxford to Windsor - Peter Halman

The Thames from Oxford to Windsor: - shaping history through the centuries - was the subject of chairman Peter Halman's presentation to the November meeting of Wargrave Local History Society. Peter began at Day's Lock, site of one of the earliest locks to be built on the river. This is a historic area, for a short walk away is Dorchester, where the river Thame joins the River Thames, and ancient earthworks nearby. At one time, Dorchester was a stronghold for Christianity, as in Saxon times there had been a cathedral there, and later the Abbey was built. The Abbey church survived the dissolution, and has a plain beauty of its own, which survived the plans of the Victorians who wanted to improve – fortunately they ran out of money!

The Benedictine monk, Birinus, was at the Great Council between the Saxon King Cynegils and the Northumbrian King Oswald, following which Cynegils made Birinus Bishop of Dorchester. He was later made St Birinus, and a shrine survives in the Abbey. Peter added that the adjacent Abbey Guest House offers delicious cream teas!

There were, however, settlements in the area long before the 7th century. Aerial photographs show that there had been Bronze Age and Iron Age round houses. The task of a Celtic chieftain was to look after the needs of the people he led, so a settlement needed to be a defensible site, safe from flooding, and able to provide food, water, pasture and raw materials such as timber, clay and materials for smelting the metals. Between the Abbey and Day's Lock are the Dyke Hills – an Iron Age double row earthwork that could be breached if needed to create a defensible island. When the local landowner wanted to flatten them, in the 19th century, the public uproar ensured their survival.



The river has long been a dominant feature for the lives of the local people. At 215 miles from source to the sea, it is small compared to rivers such as the Amazon, the Nile, or the great American rivers, but as MP John Burns said “the St Lawrence is crystal water, the Mississippi is muddy water, but the Thames is liquid history”. It was the Romans who named it the Thames, and it has influenced people's lives for generations.

It has formed a political and social boundary since the 9th century, when Alfred the Great was King. The Vikings had invaded East Anglia, and moved westwards to Reading, where Alfred defeated them. Subsequent negotiations established the area of Dane Law, controlled by Vikings, and the areas of Mercia and of Wessex – and the boundary between these was the Thames. It was a good boundary, but difficult to cross – fords (as recalled at Oxford, Wallingford or Twyford) could be hazardous. The Romans built a lot of bridges, but the early medieval timber bridges could be rickety and swept away by the water. Many of the sites, however, were later used for stone bridges, such as that at Shillingford.

The river could also form a social barrier – Shiplake seems a long way from Wargrave, apart from Regatta time, whilst in London, even with its many bridges and tunnels, there is a psychological difference between being north or south of the Thames.

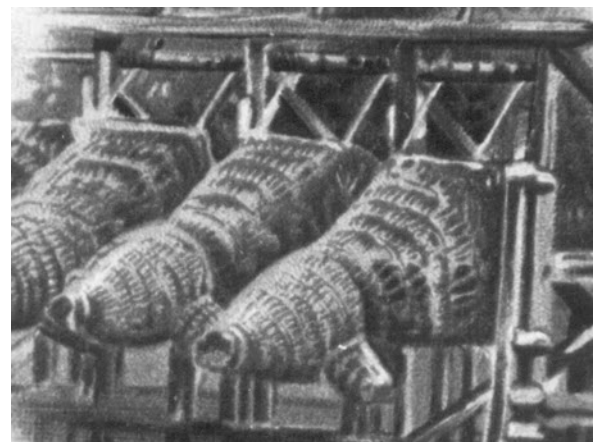
Peter then looked at the town of Abingdon, where an island in the river made bridging the river an easier task, the first being built in 1416. In the town centre still stands the County Hall, dating from about 1670, where the assizes were regularly held in the upper room for many years, whilst the market still takes place below. Abingdon Abbey was one of the richest in England until the dissolution in 1538. It then belonged to the king, until he lost it to Parliamentarians during the Civil War. In the 18th century, transport to the south west was made easier by the construction of the Wilts and Berks Canal, which joined the Thames at Abingdon.

Further downstream, at Wallingford a 900ft long 19 arch stone bridge takes the road over the Thames. This has long been a favourite crossing point, Julius Caesar being known to have crossed here, whilst 1,000 years later when William I found it difficult to cross the Thames at London he moved west to do so here, whilst this location meant that Wallingford's became an important fortified Saxon town.

Much further down is Marlow, where there had been a bridge since 1300. The current bridge dates from 1300, and was a prototype for the larger similar one that links Buda with Pest in Hungary – Marlow being 'bridged with Budapest' according to a bronze plaque on the bridge, rather than the more common 'twinned'.

Oxford is another location where an island helped where Folly Bridge crosses the river. There was an important transfer station here, as the larger barges could not get any further upstream, and so it was known as 'head of the river' – the public house of that name alongside being popular with members of the rowing community. At Sonning, an earlier timber bridge was replaced by a brick one in 1775., and a channel across the bend in the river to power the mill there. A few years later, the first bridge was built from Whitchurch to Pangbourne. The present wrought iron bridge constructed by the Cleveland Bridge Co is the third on the site, and one of only two toll bridges on the non-tidal Thames. The toll board records that the charge used to

Another important aspect of the river was food supply. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles records a variety of crops being grown and livestock kept, close to the river. For several centuries, salmon could be found in the river until over fishing and downstream pollution caused their demise. Eels were an important food source as well, caught in their millions in wicker baskets known as eel traps set into the flow of the river in autumn each year as the eels set off to their spawning grounds in the Sargasso Sea. Swans were also a delicacy at banquets, the marking of cygnets to indicate their ownership being the 5-week swan-upping each year (done whilst the swans are moulting, so easier to deal with).



The river provided places for people to live – including in houseboats, some of which were large and ornate. There were also opportunities for employment – from rush cutters to watermen, or in maintaining the structures along the river. The spectacle of workmen in diving suits circa 1900 ready to examine the foundations of Henley Bridge had attracted many gongoozlers! There would also be travelling entertainers



-strolling players who visited the riverside villages Pollarding willows enabled the production of osiers for basket making, and of course there was also boatbuilding and there were many mills. A mill had been recorded at Mapledurham in the Domesday survey of 1086, and the present mill dating from about 1400 is still working (although one of its water wheels has been replaced by a hydro-electric generator. With the old flash locks, boats wishing to pass the weir at a mill would have to pay a toll, and wait until the miller was ready. Going upstream it would be haled past the weir by a capstan – one survives at Hurley – and down stream would rush through the gap in the weir paddles – a hazardous

process. It was not unusual for boats to have to wait 2 or 3 days for the miller to allow them through. This gave rise to difficulties between the bargemen and the millers -and argy-bargy. The development of the pound locks, as now used, alleviated this problem.

One of the major uses of the Thames was for transport. In the 18th century it was the most efficient method,

a survey showing that a single pack horse could move $\frac{1}{8}$ ton of goods; pulling a stage wagon they could move $\frac{5}{8}$ ton; on a smooth road 2 tons, on an iron rail 8 tons, but on a river 30 tons (and on a canal, without the ‘flow’) 50 tons. It was therefore natural that a great investment in canals ensued – with long flights of locks to get the canal over a hill. At that time, 90% of Reading’s trade was carried by water. This would include materials such as coal being brought up-river, and produce taken down to London – as well as barges full of hay to meet the needs of the horses they plying the streets there. Not only were goods carried, but Salter’s steamers provided a passenger service down as far as Kingston.



River transport fell into a deep decline with the coming of the railway. At Maidenhead, Brunel’s Great Western Railway crossed the river by means of two 128ft wide brick arches – still the largest and flattest brick arches in the world. The parallel road crossed on what was still a toll bridge until 1903 – by then the stage coach traffic had also succumbed to the railway competition.

The railway also created opportunities for people to reach the Thames for leisure and social activities. This was the era of houseboats moored along the river bank, where parties might be held, whilst regattas, such as the pre-eminent event at Henley with its straight mile course, would bring many spectators as well as competitors to the river. In the winter, if the river froze over, ice yachting and similar activities were popular.

The Thames also has its place in literature – from Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) who having had a picnic with Alice wrote of her adventures, or Jerome K Jerome writing of Three Men in a Boat (intended to be a serious account, but his editor altered it to have more light-hearted content), or The Wind in the Willows – as Ratty said to Mole, “there is nothing absolutely nothing half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats”.
