

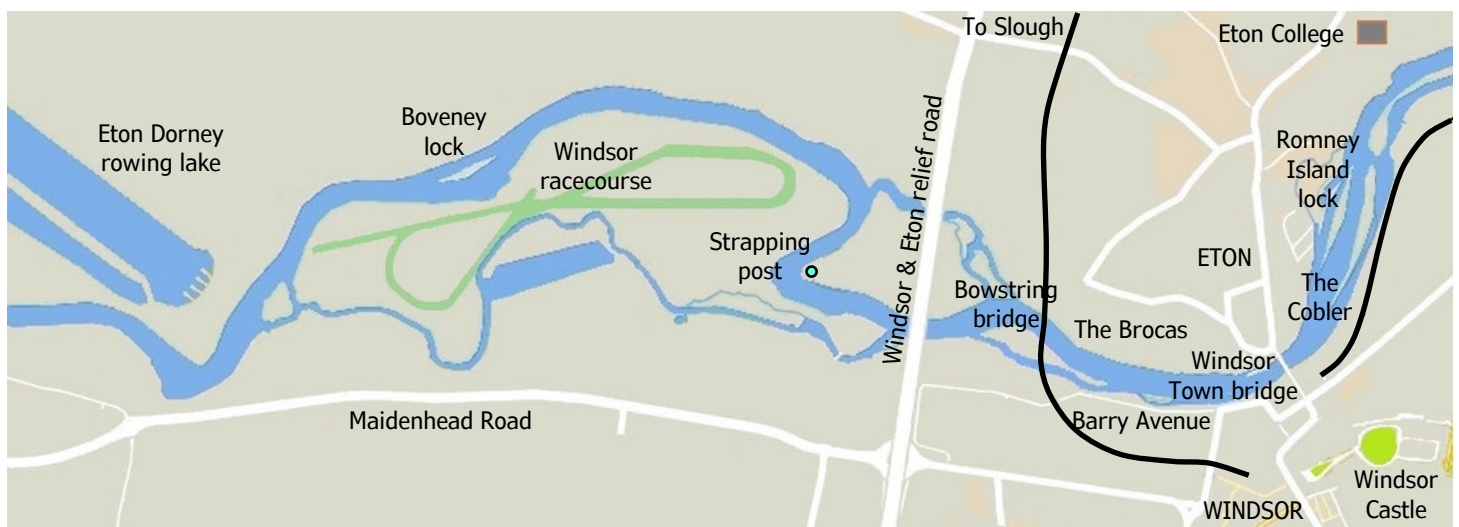
Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - January 2025

The River Thames - liquid history - Graham Horn

Wargrave Local History Society's January meeting was a return visit by Graham Horn, who this time spoke about the River Thames. As a Blue Badge tour guide, he had been involved with events put on in recent years as part of the Windsor Festival. Looking to offer something different for that, he had developed a guided walk along the bank of the River Thames between Windsor and Eton, and this formed the basis of his presentation.

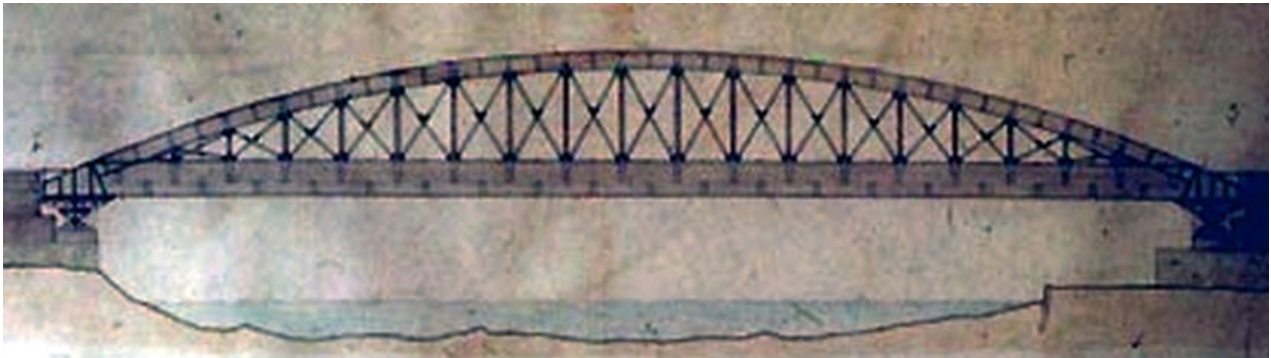
It was in the late 1920s that John Burns, the MP for Battersea, responded to a disparaging comment comparing the Thames with the Mississippi by saying "The St Lawrence is water, the Mississippi is muddy water, but the Thames is liquid history". Graham focused on the section of the river from the Dorney rowing lake to the Albert Bridge as it runs between Windsor and Eton, and its locks and bridges, boats and ferries, and people to be found in and around the water.



Much of the land on the north side of the river belongs to Eton College, and that includes the Eton-Dorney rowing lake. The project to build it began in the 1990s, and it was completed in 2002., the design of it being to international competition standards. As such it was used for rowing and canoeing events that took place as part of the London Olympics and Paralympics in 2012 (for the London based Olympics in 1908 and 1948, such events had taken place at Henley). Ironically, despite there being a clear sign alongside the water saying 'No swimming', the triathlon, where competitors first swam before cycling and then taking part in a run, also took place there.

Moving downstream, on the opposite side of the river is Windsor racecourse, (which is sometimes confused with Royal Ascot). A mill stream runs on the south side of the river, and in 1865 the racecourse was set out on the island that lies between the two, and it is possible to travel to there by using French Brothers' boat service. For many years it hosted fixtures on the flat and National Hunt racing over the jumps, but Windsor became a flat racing only venue in the late 20th century, taking up National Hunt races again last year. The course is unusual, as it is laid out as a figure-of-8 (the only other such in this country being Fontwell Park, in Sussex). It is often used for filming – the course layout can make it appear that there is a loss of continuity in the shots!

Boveney Lock is situated on the main stream of this section of the river, and then at the eastern end of the island is the Racecourse Bend, which is very sharp. Boats passing along this stretch need to make sure that they do not try and cut the corner here, as the river is quite shallow on the inside of the bend. In the days when boats and barges were pulled by horses on the towpath there was a risk that the tow-rope would bring the vessel too close to the inside of the bend. To solve this problem, a strapping post was provided on that side, so that the rope would be disconnected from the horse and would around the post, so that the barge would swing round the bend under its own momentum at a distance set by the length of rope – the horse then taking up the rope again once safely round the bend.



Brunel's design for the bowspring bridge over the River Thames at Windsor

The Thames then passes beneath 2 bridges – firstly that carrying the Windsor and Eton by-pass road, built in 1966, and then the bowstring bridge that Brunel provided to carry the railway branch from Slough over the river. The arch itself is not fixed to the piers, allowing up to 3” movement due to expansion. Graham commented that as it had been there since 1849, it must be alright! Two railway companies had wanted to serve the town of Windsor – the Great Western from Paddington and the London & South Western from Waterloo. However, both routes would have needed to cross land belonging to Eton College, and the latter were very much against the railway, fearing that the boys might get on trains to go and visit the ‘fleshpots of London’. Eton College boys were also allowed at that time to swim naked in the river, and it was feared that they would be seen by the ladies of Windsor travelling by train. The GWR opened their line in October 1849, followed by that from Waterloo in the December – it had looked likely to ‘win the race’, but problems with its bridge over the Thames had delayed it slightly. Once over the Thames, the route of the GWR line was over low lying ground, so Brunel had it carried over a series of brick arches, alongside what is now the Alexandra Gardens. A promenade was constructed along the side of the river – now Barry Avenue – but if there was severe flooding the water could get trapped here.

Downstream of the bowstring bridge, on the Berkshire bank, is a small island where people had begun to go swimming in the 1830s. However, Queen Victoria objected to this practice, as if she was travelling by train, she might see them – apparently it was alright if the swimmers were female, but not if there were males in the water.

A little further along on the same side a plane can be seen, fixed on top of a supporting pole (*right*). It is a wartime Hurricane (twice as many of which were built than the better known Spitfire), the designer of which, Sydney Camm, had been a pupil at Windsor Grammar School. Whilst a pupil there, he had made balsa wood model planes – which he then sold to Eton boys. This one carries the plane registration letters GNJ, which had been the markings for Squadron Leader John Grandy, who was later a Governor of Windsor Castle.



On the other side of the river hereabouts is the area known as The Brocas – again land owned by Eton College. This large water meadow is named after John de Brocas, who was an early 14th century knight who owned it about 100 years before Eton College was founded. On the eastern side there is a clear boundary between it and the built-up part of the town of Eton, at the north end of its High Street being the chapel and other college buildings around it.

On the river, the Corporation Ait is a further island, and Jacob's boatbuilding yard had been here from the early 1900s – some of the earliest boats still being in use. In 1923 they constructed the New Windsor Castle, and needed to get a heavy anvil onto the island. The captain of another boat – Clifford Davey – was very strong, and picked it up to carry it on his shoulder. Once the work was done, he was asked if he could remove it, but said, no, somebody else could do that. As the two people who tried to do so could not move it at all, it remained there!

Arthur Jacobs was a strong swimmer, and did not like to see anybody in difficulty in the river. When the river froze over in 1894, a lady fell into the Thames, so Arthur swam out under the ice to rescue her. In thanks, local people collected £21 (a valuable sum then) to reward him for his efforts. In all, it is thought he saved over 60 people from drowning, and received 3 Humane Society medals for his efforts.

Fireworks Ait is another island just east of here, and so called as it is where pyrotechnic displays are set off for big celebrations, and - whilst a pupil at Eton - the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley is reported to have crossed the old Windsor Town Bridge to watch them. Nearby is the landing from which French Brothers, who were founded in 1978, run boat trips – at one time the round trip time to Boveney Lock took 35 minutes, but is now scheduled to take 40. Nearby is where the swans gather, as they know it where they are most likely to get fed. Graham explained that – these days – the annual swan upping is to check on their health. Traditionally, those belonging to the monarchy did not have a nick on the beak, whereas those belonging to the Dyers Company had one, and those of the Vintners Company had two, (giving rise to the inn name of The Swan with Two Necks), but now the birds are fitted with a ring as a means of identification.



Opposite here are Eton College boathouses - which although on College land the access to them is not, so in theory 'out of bounds', to the boys. These are close to the Windsor Town Bridge (*left*). The present bridge, designed by Charles Hollis (who also designed Windsor Parish church), was built between 1822 and 1824, replacing a wooden structure, and before that a ferry was the means to cross the river here, when most of the goods coming by road needed at Windsor Castle would

be brought down to this point to be carried across the water. The horses would remain on the Eton side – as recalled by King's Stables Street a short distance from the river bank. Until the 1890s, those wishing to cross over the bridge had to pay a toll – as did those passing beneath it. By 1970, the structure was in need of repair, and so it was closed to traffic (the Windsor and Eton by-pass having provided an alternative route a few years earlier), and for safety reasons even pedestrians were initially restricted to a narrow path across the bridge.

Near here is a pumping house, there having been one here since the 1600s, with the present one being installed in the early 19th century, pumping water up 130 feet to provide a supply for the castle.

Further downstream of the bridge is Romney Lock Island, where boats wishing to avoid the lock could pass alongside (there being no weir there) – but they had to pay the same toll whichever way they went. In the days of horse-drawn barges. There was a long wooden jetty (known as The Cobler) at the western of the island (*right*), and when the horse reached the end, it would be detached from the boat, which would be left to drift whilst the horse would swim across to the tow-path.



Like all 44 of the present day locks on the Thames, this is a pound lock. These have two sets of gates, with a boat chamber in-between, whereas in earlier times flash locks were provided. These had just one barrier across the waterway – going downstream was fairly easy, but in the other direction involved much work by horses and people to pull the boat up against the flow. Although the river may appear to be level between locks, there is a gradual fall lock to lock (about 2 feet from Boveney to Romney). The lock-keeper's houses were built by the Thames Conservancy in the 1920s, with a plaque recording this on the wall, and most also record the levels of the notable floods such as 1894 and 1947.

The northwards bend of the river here affords good views of Eton College, before the Thames swings back southwards again, to pass under the Black Potts bridge. This carries the railway from line Waterloo over the river between Datchet and Windsor, and because of problems building it in the 1840s, originally a temporary wooden structure was provided so that the railway could open, being replaced by the present bridge a year or so later. Just beyond here is the confluence with the Jubilee River. This was created to keep the flood waters away from both Maidenhead and Windsor, and opened in 2002 – although helping those towns, it has created flooding issues downstream around Wraysbury.

The course of the Thames then skirts the area of the Home Park to Windsor Castle. In earlier times, there had been a bridge across from Datchet High Street across the Home Park up to the castle. Traditionally, the county boundaries (here Buckinghamshire and Berkshire) were along the middle of the river, and so the responsibility for bridges was shared between the two authorities. As Buckinghamshire and Berkshire could not agree about this at this point, each built the half on their side – Berkshire's of iron, Buckinghamshire's of wood – and there was a gap between the two!

As Queen Victoria did not like the route followed from the Datchet Bridge across the Home Park, two new bridges were created in the 1840s, one at either end of the Home Park, and the Datchet Bridge was demolished in 1848. These are named the Victoria Bridge and the Albert Bridge, the latter leading past the Royal Windsor Farmshop to Old Windsor.

For more information about the society, visit our website at <https://www.wargravehistory.org.uk>

