

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - January 2011

The Secret Thames

In January, Duncan Mackay gave a fascinating illustrated presentation to the Wargrave Local History Society about The Secret Thames. As part of his work with the Countryside Commission in the 1980s he had to designate the Thames Path National Trail, and subsequently had been commissioned to write a book on aspects of the Thames that 'nobody had ever written about before'.

The Thames Path - designated as such in 1989 - runs for 180 miles from its source to the Thames Barrier. Duncan showed how the illustrations had been obtained - with 3 or more remotely controlled cameras suspended from a helium filled 'barrage' balloon. Hundreds of pictures had been taken, the aim being to show remote places or find different angles of familiar places. An example of the photography (by the firm Skyscan) can be seen on the page about Penton Hook (near Thorpe Park) <http://thames.me.uk/s00470.htm>

We were then shown a selection of these images, starting in the Cotswolds and working downstream. The source itself is often dry in summer, but wet in winter, and used to have a statue of 'Old Father Thames' close by. This had been made by Raffaele Monti in concrete (then a new material) for the 1851 Great Exhibition. The statue was moved to St Johns Lock after it had been vandalised. Near Ewen is the Lyd Well - several artesian springs that feed the Thames from water forced to the surface due to a geological fault. The springs can be heard - hence the name 'loud well' - and were written about as early as an Anglo-Saxon charter of 931. In this area the river is what Matthew Arnold called the 'stripling Thames', and not much more than a ditch. However, from Cricklade downwards, the Thames is navigable. Near here is Nar Mead - now a national nature reserve, as being an old common which had not been ploughed, rare bulbs have survived such as the snakeshead fritillary - quite a sight when the 7 million purple and white flowers are in bloom. Beyond here is Kelmscott - the home of William Morris from 1871 - 1896. He had started the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877 - in order to preserve Inglesham church. At Inglesham is the junction with the Thames and Severn canal - an important transport link in time gone by - which has 43 locks in its 25 miles. Lechlade was also a transport interchange. In Roman times the 'saltways' from the Cheshire mines across the Cotswolds brought salt for loading to barges onward to London, whilst in later times Double Gloucester cheese, wool and stone were all carried down river from here.

Through Oxfordshire, the Thames passes the Port Meadow - a large unspoilt area of flood plain, before reaching Wolvercote, and The Trout public house beloved of Inspector Morse. Beyond Oxford (for which there was little 'unknown' to reveal), the river passes Wittenham Clump, otherwise called 'Berkshire Bubs' - the oldest continuously planted tree clump in the UK, and the iron age hill fort Sinodun.

The Thames then reaches the Chilterns, and another transport junction where it meets the Ridgeway. The area is one of outstanding natural beauty - to the extent that the main electricity cables through the Goring Gap put underground at some expense, rather than on pylons. Passing Mapledurham, with its still working mill and the large house dating from 1588 (the location for the film *The Eagle Has Landed*), Duncan brought us into the Berkshire stretch of the river at Sonning. Here the theatre is - unusually - powered by hydro-electricity. The old picturesque bridge over the river was saved from demolition by the efforts of Edwin Lutyens, William Holman Hunt and Edward Hudson. James Sadler, one time Sonning lock-keeper, was also a poet - who wrote:-

From hence the town of Reading
Is just one field across,
'Mongst other things so widely known
For biscuits, seeds, and sauce.
(It rhymes if spoken in a Berkshire accent!)

Reaching Wargrave, the aerial view of the river below the railway bridge in the snow, with the reflected light on the water's surface being a golden glow was quite 'different' to the usual views. There had been legal complications in getting the Thames Path route agreed - though Shiplake, the apparent alignment was in fact a fence. To find a 'different view' of Henley - ie not the Regatta!) had one looking downstream from above Marsh Lock, showing the town at the junction of river and Chilterns. 'Little known' aspects of the Thames at Marlow included the Scouts national boat centre, at Longridge, and that the suspension bridge designed by William Tierney Clarke was a small version of the one between Buda and Pest.

We now reach the 'Royal Thames'. At Cliveden, Rule Britannia was first performed, in 1740. Ironically, in the time the house was owned by the Astor family, the 'Cliveden set' advocated appeasement with Hitler in 1936. Cliveden also came to public notice in the Profumo Affair of the 1960s. Windsor Castle had - of course - to be included in a journey down the Thames. Apparently, the fire of 1992 was watched by the traffic control team using the M4 cameras turned and zoomed in on the castle - and the recordings later used for training by the fire brigade. The Town Hall in Windsor is the subject of a 'joke' by Sir Christopher Wren. He had designed the building with columns at each corner, but the town burgers feared the building would fall down, so insisted that extra columns be added. That was done - but Wren made them 2 inches short of supporting the area above! Further down at Hampton Court, it was said that Verrio painted the ceilings using the faces of the chambermaids he had slept with during his commission there !

Although now Teddington Lock is the upper limit of the tidal Thames, in Celtic times the tidal area was as far as Ankerwycke, opposite Runnymede, but from 1280 the tidal limit was marked by Ye City Stone at Staines. Within London itself, Thames had become a large open sewer in the mid 19th century - largely due to the adoption of water closets. When the Great Stink of 1858 caused problems at the Houses of Parliament, something 'had to be done' about it, and so Sir Joseph Bazalgette arranged for diverting sewers to below the new Victoria Embankment. Within the City itself stands the Monument - 222 feet high, and 222 feet from the start of the Great Fire of London in Pudding Lane. The column is the tallest unsupported hollow stone column in the world, and commemorates the loss of 13000 houses in the fire - surprisingly, only 11 people died as a result. The metal cage around its top was added in Victorian times - to protect those passing below from suicide leaps from the top. Duncan ended our 'journey' down the Thames at the Thames Barrier, built in 1976 - 1982 at a cost of £535 million. It was built in response to the great storm of 1953, when 300 people died in the North Sea tidal surge. It takes 30 minutes to raise the bascules, each of which weighs 3700 tons.

Our next meeting is on Tuesday, March 8th, when the Society will hold its Annual General Meeting, and details of the forthcoming year's programme will be given.

All are welcome to our meetings, which begin at 8 pm in the Hannen Room, Mill Green. For more information about the Society, visit www.wargravehistory.org.uk