

Wargrave Local History Society

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Touring the Victorian Thames

The Thames in the 19th century was still a working river, with an industrial feel to it. There remained osier beds, still working cornmills, and heavy barges to carry the freight. This was to change with the coming of the railway to the area, with most transport being provided by the new system. The river could have died at this point, but the railway brought a new kind of traffic - tourists. Sue Read reminded us these might actually visit the Thames or be of the armchair variety, travelling by means of books. Some of these pre-dated the railway, but from the mid to late 19th century several such appeared. One remarked that some barges were still carrying on 'that they were ornamental is a matter of opinion ... that they are a nuisance ... there is no doubt.'

Three such books formed the basis for the 'tour' that followed:- one by Mr & Mrs Hall from the 1850's, illustrated with engravings; Henry Taunt's book of the 1870s and Dickens *Dictionary of the Thames* of the 1890's (Dickens was the son of Charles Dickens). Taunt had been born in Oxford in 1842, and interested in the Thames since childhood, and became a photographer, taking many topographical views of the river. Many of these were taken with a camera fixed onto the roof of a small barge, and his photographs - of which there were thousands - could be purchased in his Oxford shop. Henry, however, wanted to make them more available, and in 1871 published his *New Map of the Thames*, a book of maps, photographs and notes to help the oarsman, angler etc.

Our 'journey' was one of the longer variety, rather than mere 'day-trippers', and we started in Oxford. Many different styles and sizes of craft could be found, for day or camping trips. We 'joined Joseph and Elizabeth Pennel as they set off towards London in 1891. The rain was pouring in torrents as they made their way to Salter's boathouse. Salters were surprised to see them, for the boat was not ready! It had three hoops with a canvas on top, that could be rolled back - an umbrella by day and a hotel by night. Passing the College barges at Folly Bridge, they set off for Nuneham - where the Halls noted a cottage that existed 'for the comfort and convenience of pleasure seekers.'

Progressing through Abingdon, a 'town seated on the river that is best seen from the river itself' they reached Clifton Hampden, where one of many picturesque inns was found - the Barley Mow. Here were found 'real' (i.e. Canadian) canoes. By the Barley Mow there always seemed to be a boat with three chairs, carrying three men fishing, who only moved to pass a large jug of ale from one to the other. Henry Taunt records the main types of fish to be found at each point - here perch and gudgeon. Further on we reached the 'Beetle and Wedge' at Cholsey 'a quaint 3-gabled place, with a brick floored parlour ... where a villager in a long smock frock (would) greet a stranger'. Several mills survived, that at Streatley being large and thriving at the time. Nearby was the 'Swan' - 'the dreaminess of the place cast a spell over them all'. For those who did not wish to camp out there were also substantial hotels near the river, such as the Elephant at Pangbourne. Reading was not known for its beauty from the river (as noted by Jerome K Jerome), but the

Pennels write that the 'stream of the Thames makes glad the city .. (which is) .. not as picturesque as the villages and little market towns'.

Taunt was conscious of the need to record social sights, such as a water carrier at Shiplake. Here there was a large area set aside for those who were camping out. Wargrave was noted as a pretty and long village, envired by meadows. The Church, record several guidebooks, included a memorial to Thomas Day, the author of *Sandford and Merton*. Here the fish are noted as pike and barbel. Our journey continues to Henley, where 'in the week before the regatta (it) wakes up from its usual apathy' wrote one author. Apart from the very many small boats, here were found great house boats and steam launches. From here we proceeded through Marlow and Cookham to Maidenhead - very popular with those coming by train for a day trip, either on the river or just to stand and watch.
