

# A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

Words by Claire Nelson

To the source of the Thames.

All rivers have to start somewhere. This occurred to me one cool London afternoon, leaning on the wall beside Tower Bridge as it raised its arms to let a tall ship pass through. I was familiar with the Thames River and its beeline for the sea but realised, in that moment, that I didn't actually know where this waterway began.

So I decided to follow it - which, it turns out, is easy enough to do. There is a dedicated National Trail, the Thames Path, that follows the course of the river, all 184 miles of it. It takes two weeks to walk the entire thing but for me it became a project to dip in and out of, walking it in segments over a year or so, travelling from station to station and through all seasons.

It was summer when I set off, heading west through London, past the gilded spires of Westminster, picking my way through the merry throngs outside Richmond's riverside pubs and around the leafy border of Kew Gardens. Shortly I passed Eel Pie Island, the bohemian home of a small population of artists as well as the setting for both Rolling Stones gigs and Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*. Once past Teddington's weir and footbridge, the Thames ceases to be tidal; it simply, in the English way, keeps calm and carries on. A supermarket trolley half-submerged in the water welcomed the urban section through Staines, a concrete wonderland of shops and traffic, the Thames slipping past largely unnoticed.

I returned to the trail in autumn, from Windsor, the castle silhouetted against a hazy sky. The name Windsor comes from the Anglo Saxon for 'winding shore', a tribute to

the twisting, turning river. Here it was high, swollen along its banks. I suppose this must have once been a top place for swimming, as I spotted an old, weather-worn Etonian sign: 'Boys who are undressed must either get into the water or behind screens when boats containing ladies come in sight'.

In Berkshire I passed Boulter's Lock; at 200 metres it is the longest lock on the Thames. A little further along the path veers away from the river into Cookham, where Kenneth Grahame lived while writing *The Wind in the Willows* - Toad Hall was inspired by the nearby Lullebrook Manor, whose owner famously possessed what was then the only motor car in the village. The evening was spent bunked down in a local bed and breakfast run by a retired crime novelist and his wife, where a cup of tea revived the senses and socks and shoes dried beside the radiator.

The weather hadn't let up the following day. From Marlow, flooding had drowned the path completely and there was little option but to wade through it, mocked by the presence of swans gliding by unperturbed. The river had swelled so far beyond its borders that it was impossible to differentiate between riverbank and field. But once socks and shoes are wet one might as well plough on and by the time the river came to my knees I was resigned to being soaked - and much like the swans I rather enjoyed myself.

I picked the May Bank Holiday weekend to walk from Reading, a town which has hosted Jane Austen and Oscar Wilde; in a boarding school and prison respectively. The Thames Path took me into Pangbourne, where Kenneth Grahame lived out his final years -

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for his funeral, the local church was decorated with willows collected from the edge of the Thames. Today the sunshine had drawn people to the water and in Goring the wide river was busy with narrowboats and bordered by cafes bursting with weekenders brunching under the shade of patio umbrellas. The path wound through meadows, sometimes veering away from the river for a while, but always returning. I camped overnight in Wallingford and woke in the morning to torrential rain. I slogged past the roaring white water of Benson Lock's mighty weir, followed by the crumbling remains of Wallingford Castle - sister to Windsor and the site of much Royal infighting, it was destroyed in a four month siege in 1652. There is no sign of drama here now. Unless you count the weather.

Winter was in full swing when I tackled a day's walking from Shillingford; the air was crisp, the landscape pale and frosty. Once again the river had flooded its banks, drowning fields, sheets of ice shimmering in the early morning sunshine. A horse stamped on an ice-bound pond, shattering it to take a drink. It was too cold for wading but thankfully a raised wooden walkway had been installed to rescue Thames Path ramblers. Shillingford's Grade II-listed stone bridge looked a picture surrounded by fields of frost while, further down the trail, the thatched-roofs of Dorchester village made the whole place seem frozen in time.

Conditions were better once I tackled the Oxfordshire section. It was early summer and the Thames Path weaved through bucolic scenes - fuzzy grey cygnets trailing mother swans and lush green fields heavy with seeding dandelions. After a while I reached Godstow Abbey, built in 1133 and eventually ruined in the English Civil War. In its heyday it was the home of Rosamund Clifford, King Henry II's beautiful mistress, who died here

at only 30 years old (legend has it the Queen poisoned her, though that's most likely folklore scandal).

Newbridge, despite its name, boasts the second oldest bridge on the river and waymarks the vine-draped Rose Revived pub, which flaunts an expansive riverside beer garden that was too inviting to resist on such a warm afternoon. That night I camped at Shifford Lock, by prearrangement with the lock-keeper, and the morning arrived bright and beautiful. The trail ventured through grassy, wooded countryside to the chocolate-box village of Kelmscott where Arts and Crafts artist William Morris lived for the last 25 years of his life, collecting reeds and plants along the riverbanks to use in his pattern work.

It was autumn when my boots hit the path for the final stretch. This was Gloucestershire, and the Thames was now a muddy stream, no more than five metres wide and interrupted with patchy islands of grass. At St John's Lock, near Lechlade, I was met by a statue of a reclining Father Thames, a bearded, god-like figure harking back to the bygone age of river worship. As I carried on, the river became smaller and smaller, until it was nothing more than a trickling stream passing the overgrown gardens of rural residences.

In a quiet, grassy field at Trewsbury Mead stands a gnarled old ash tree, one branch reaching toward a weathered stone, marking the source of the Thames. When I reached it, the ground was dry. The infant Thames was somewhere just below the surface, mere groundwater, working its way quietly towards London, growing in stature and strength until mighty enough to carry tall ships to sea. I like the idea that even in the smallest, quietest things there is potential for greatness. It's good to remember we've all got to start somewhere.

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