

A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

Words by Claire Nelson

To the source of the Thames

It seems hard to start somewhere. This occurred to me one cool London afternoon, leaning on the wall beside Tower Bridge as it rained its arms to let a tall ship pass through. I was familiar with the Thames River and its headline 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 borders 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 *Nickolas Nickleby*. Once past Twickenham's weir and footbridge, the Thames comes to be tided; it simply, in the English way, keeps calm and carries on. A supermarket trolley half-submerged in the water welcomed the urban section through Slough, 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 'winning shore', a willow or

the twisting, turning river. Here it was high, swollen along its banks. I suppose this must have once been a top place for swimming, so 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 Maiden's Lock, at 200 metres it is the longest lock on the Thames. A little further along the path overs away from the river into Cookham, where Kenneth Grahame lived while writing *The Wind in the Willows*. Tred Hall was inspired by the nearby Luffenbrook Manor, whose owner famously possessed what was then the only motor car in the village. The evening was spent looking 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 unperceived. The river had settled 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 beaming with weekenders leaning 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 seasonal rain. I strolled past the mooring white ware of Benson Lock's mighty weir, followed by the crumbling remains of Wallingford Castle - stone to Windsor and the site of much Royal fighting, it was destroyed in a fire month after in 1052. 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, dozens of its disappearing in the early morning sunshine. A horse stamped on an ice-bound pond, splashing it to raise a drink. It was too cold for walking but thankfully a mixed wooden walkway had been installed to cross Thames Path remains. Shillingford's Grade II listed stone bridge looked a picture surrounded by fields of frost white, further down the trail, the thatched-roofs of Ditchborne 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 beautiful scenes - fuzzy grey cypresses trailing moorish oases and lush green fields heavy with seedling dandelions. After a while I reached Godstone Abbey, built in 1150 and eventually ruined in the English Civil War. In its heyday it was the home of Rosamund Clifford, King Henry III's beautiful mistress, who died here

at only 30 years old (legend has it the Queen poisoned her, though that's more likely fiction than fact).

Newbridge, despite its name, boasts the second oldest bridge on the river and reworks the vine-draped Rose Revived pub, which flouts an expansive riverside beer garden that was too inviting to resist on such a warm afternoon. That night I camped at Millford Lock, in partnership with the lock-keeper, and the morning arrived bright and beautiful. The trail veered through grassy, wooded countryside to the chocolate-village of Kilmarnock where Arts and Crafts artist William Morris lived for the last 20 years of his life, collecting seeds 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 stones wide and interspersed with patchy islands of grass. At St John's Lock, near Lockhalls, I was met by a statue of a reclining Fisher Thames, a hooded, gull-like figure barking back to the bygone age of river workaholics. So I carried on, the river became smaller and smaller, until it was nothing more than a trickling stream passing the overgrown gardens of rural cottages.

In a quiet, grassy field at Trevelary 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, near groundwater, working its way quietly towards London, growing in meadows and streams until mighty enough to carry tall ships to sea. I like the idea that even in the swiftest, quietest things there is potential for greatness. It's good to remember we're all got to start somewhere.

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