

PADDLE THE THAMES

A GUIDE FOR CANOES, KAYAKS AND SUPS

MARK RAINSLEY



SOURCE OF THE RIVER THAMES



Thames Source

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Finish & alternative finish

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A GUIDE FOR CANOES, KAYAKS AND SUPS

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Foreword

An adventure in our own backyard is what we set off to find. With a passion for the outdoors and the water, we realised we didn't need to travel far. Just over an hour out of London, you find yourself standing at the source of the River Thames: a 215 mile-long river which starts from a spring and is marked by a stone in a field. The adventure we set ourselves was to stand up paddleboard the entire length of the Thames, from source to Southend-on-Sea.

We would be asked by many "Isn't the Thames dirty and polluted?". Spending eleven days and an average of nine hours a day on the river, and camping on the river banks ... our answer is "No", for the most part. We discovered it to be a river rich with wildlife, surrounded by beautiful countryside and the warmth of its communities, history and people. We encountered many interesting and friendly people, from those living on canal boats to kind lock keepers, children learning to kayak, fishermen perched on the riverbanks and ramblers walking at the same pace as we paddled; each of us talking about our journeys and our love of the river.

It was a privilege to be able to follow the transition of the river and its landscape and to do so in a unique way. What we discovered is how ordinary people can take part in the protection of such a beautiful resource. With many charities working hard to improve the quality of our river and the recreational use of it, there are many ways that we can all get involved. For us, this translated into becoming citizen scientists with Thames21 (www.thames21.org.uk), where we were trained to quickly and easily test the water quality for the Thames River Watch and to understand the issues surrounding plastic pollution.

How can you create your own river journey – for a day, a weekend or, as we did, along the entire length of the Thames? This guidebook is a perfect resource in helping you plan your route, providing you with all the details you need to know to have a fun, safe and adventurous paddle.

It really is a special river, one that we keep returning to time and again.

Michelle Ellison and Melanie Joe travelled the length of the River Thames by paddleboard in 2015, and in 2016 organised the first Thames River Relay www.thamesriverrelay.com.



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Introduction

*"Glide gently, thus forever glide,
O Thames! that other bards may see,
As lovely visions by thy side
As now, fair river! come to me."*

Lines written near Richmond, upon the Thames, at Evening,
William Wordsworth, 1790

The River Thames is simply a fantastic place to paddle your canoe, kayak or paddleboard, whether touring, training, racing, expeditioning or just 'bimbling'. From its early reaches in the Cotswold Hills, through the Home Counties into London and far out beyond into the estuary, the river's surroundings are remarkably varied and diverse, yet always attractive and engaging. If your mental image of the Thames depicts an urban sewer, be prepared to be amazed; the water is clean, the banks are invariably green and naturalists describe the river's ecosystems as a 'wildlife superhighway'. This natural beauty is equalled by the human story which the Thames narrates; from locks, gardens and parks to mansions, abbeys, castles and palaces, the paddler is continuously immersed in what MP John Burns famously called "liquid history". The riverine Arcadia of willow-draped banks, back channels and islands celebrated in *Three Men in a Boat* and *The Wind in the Willows* was not a myth, and it still exists.

Is a paddler's guidebook to the Thames needed? Britain's best-known river might actually be the least-known by paddlers. The huge paddling population and numerous canoe clubs based along it belie a surprising fact; many of these paddlers aren't sure what is found up-and down-stream from their patch. In a river stretching 347km, this is both understandable and forgivable. However, there are other reasons for the relatively low numbers of paddlers encountered while enjoying the Thames. Information about where and how to launch is hard to come by, existing guides and media give the impression that the Thames is the preserve of powerboats and rowers, and finally, the perception often lingers that it isn't actually very attractive or interesting. This book sets out to redress these major omissions and misconceptions, and to reclaim John 'Rob Roy' MacGregor's river for paddlers. I hope that it helps you to enjoy many adventures on Britain's greatest river.

Mark Rainsley

About the Author

Mark Rainsley

Mark has spent three decades using paddlesport as a means of avoiding adulthood and responsibility. He is a fanatical paddler who has descended challenging whitewater rivers worldwide, and who is dedicated to exploring every nook and cranny of the UK's coast by sea kayak. He created the UK Rivers and UK Sea Kayak websites and is a prolific contributor to paddlesport magazines and other media. Mark authored the Pesda Press guidebooks *South West Sea Kayaking* and *River Wye Canoe and Kayak Guide* and has contributed to Pesda titles such as *English Whitewater* and *South East England & Channel Islands Sea Kayaking*.



📷 The author. Photo | Eurion Brown.

Thames Whitewater?

The whitewater training and playing possibilities offered by the Thames' weirs have been researched by Chris Wheeler and Andy Jackson and are shared in *English Whitewater*, Pesda Press, 2014, ISBN 9781906095451.

Acknowledgements

In summer, pipe in hand, grandad would steer his canal barge *Comus* from Coventry down the canal to Oxford, downstream to London on the River Thames, and then all the way back again. Before wartime service, he had bought a German folding kayak from Harrods and explored the Thames with it. He was adamant that the Thames was the finest of all waterways; I have his stories to thank for my interest in the river.

Researching the Thames, dozens of friends paddled along; I told them they were only there to give me something to point the camera at, but in truth, paddling (and writing guide-books) is just an excuse to hang out with them. I also loved paddling with my lovely wife Heather, my gorgeous daughter Ellen, and my dad, who may eventually forgive me for subjecting him to Central London in an open canoe.

The following folk provided expert input. Melanie Joe and Michelle Ellison were kind enough to write the Foreword. Russell Robson of the Environment Agency (Operational Waterways Team Leader) and Darren Knight of the Port of London Authority (Assistant Harbour Master Recreation) helpfully checked the advice to paddlers. Ian Holmes described his expeditions, and Andy Jackson of Thames Canoes contributed hire industry perspective. Steve Newton's students at Abingdon School gave feedback on their Duke of Edinburgh Award expeditions. Dr Lizzie Garnett supplied expertise for the Geology section.

Finally, thanks to Franco Ferrero at Pesda Press, Vicky Barlow for her great design work, Heather Hall and Ros Morley for their meticulous proofreading, and Don Williams of Bute Cartographic for the stunning maps.

Photographs

All photographs by Mark Rainsley, except where acknowledged in the captions.



 *Launching at Aston.*

Important notice – disclaimer

Canoeing, kayaking and other paddlesports, whether in a river or sea environment, have their inherent risks, as do all adventurous activities. This guidebook highlights some considerations to take into account when planning your own river journey.

While we have included a range of factors to consider, you will need to plan your own journey and within that ensure there is scope to be adaptable to local conditions; for example tides, weather and ever-changing river hazards. This requires knowing your own abilities, then applying your own risk assessment to the conditions that you may encounter. The varying environmental conditions along the River Thames mean that good judgement is required to decide whether to paddle or not.

The information within this book has been well researched. However, neither the author nor Pesda Press can be held responsible for any decision of whether to paddle or not and any consequences arising from that decision. A guidebook is no substitute for personal inspection at the time of paddling, and your own risk assessment and judgement. Your decision to paddle or not, and any consequences arising from that decision, is your responsibility.





Section 10

Aston to Cookham

Distance 14.8km

Start ▲ Aston SU 787 845 / RG9 3DH

Finish ● Cookham Bridge SU 898 855 / SL6 9SW

Introduction

If there is such a thing as quintessentially Thames, this section is it. The river is the common thread tying together this attractive landscape's appealing history and culture.

Launch points

Aston SU 787 845 / RG9 3DH – parking area on river right at end of Ferry Lane. Also possible on the opposite bank, limited parking however.
Medmenham SU 806 837 / SL7 2ER – river left from small parking area at end of Ferry Lane.
Marlow SU 852 862 / SL7 1NQ – slipway on river left at end of St Peter Street. Limited parking nearby.

Bourne End SU 884 873 / SL8 5PS – river left, car park with height barrier 200m away across railway, on Coldmoorholme Lane.

Cookham Bridge SU 898 855 / SL6 9SW – slipway on river right after bridge, beside Ferry Inn. Limited parking spaces. End of Ferry Lane.

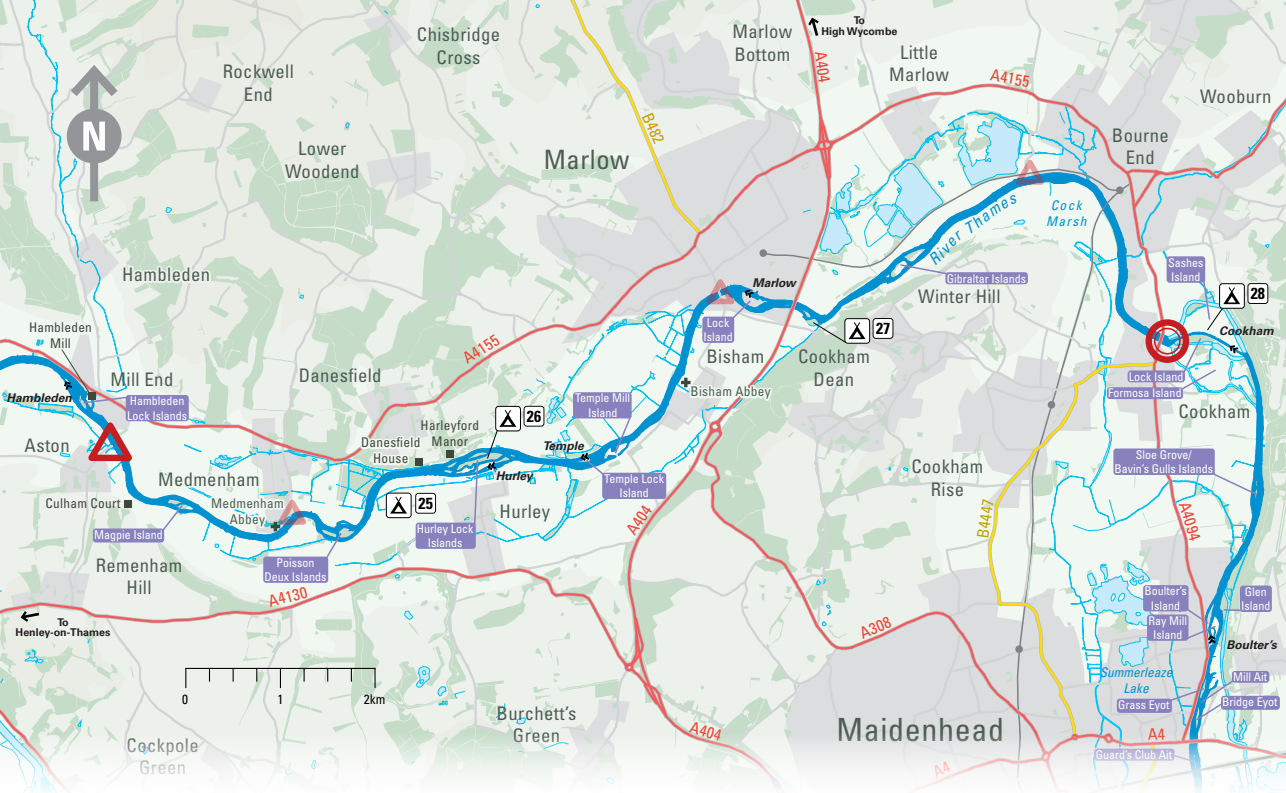
Description

“From Medmenham to sweet Hambledon Lock the river is full of peaceful beauty.”

Jerome K. Jerome,

Three Men in a Boat 1889

In the eight kilometres to the town of Marlow, the Thames wiggles through lovely countryside, with constant interest along the banks.



The first landmark is Culham Court on river right, a 1770 mansion amidst landscaped parkland where white deer roam. The Swiss billionaire who bought this in 2007 also bought Hambleden village at the same time, presumably with the leftover change. The estate overlooks Magpie Island, a large wooded nature reserve with various channels to delve into. The white building with a tower which appears rather suddenly on river left is twelfth-century Medmenham Abbey.

"... it acquired great notoriety as the meeting place of the club of debauches ... of their doings it would be unwise to speak, but the motto over the doorway sufficiently shows the class of men."

Henry Taunt,

A New Map of the River Thames 1871

The motto which Taunt recoiled from is *Fay ce que voudras* – 'do whatever you want'.

This former monastery was leased in 1751 by Chancellor of the Exchequer Sir Francis Dashwood, for his Hellfire Club meetings. These were drunken pagan orgies, not a phrase you hear much in canoeing guidebooks. Among other unorthodox practices, club members released a baboon dressed as Satan into a service at Medmenham's Church, causing the congregation to flee in terror.

The Poisson Deux Islands take their name from a medieval fish weir, but are also known as the Frogmill or Black Boy Islands, the latter apparently a reference to the dark complexion of Charles II. Landing to explore and picnic is possible, however avoid disturbing nesting wildfowl. Shortly after, beside Frogmill Farm on river right, the ice cream barge is often moored; it's exactly what it sounds like!

Uphill on river left, the white mansion is



 Hurley Lock.

Danesfield House (a hotel since 1991), overlooking Hurley Weir. The weir arcs in several stages around the seven Hurley Lock Islands, a rewarding area to explore.

"I could stay a month without having sufficient time to drink in all the beauty of the scene."

Jerome K. Jerome,

Three Men in a Boat 1889

In spring, the islands are covered with Loddon lilies. Camping is possible by the lock, and also Camping Island has fixed tents, the original campers having arrived for respite from the London Blitz. Hurley Lock was a flash lock known as Newlock in the sixteenth century; a timber winch used to haul boats through still survives. The pound lock was first built in 1773, in conjunction with pound locks at Temple and Marlow. There is a café just below the lock, opposite Freebody's Boatyard;

this family have been involved in Thames boats since the thirteenth century and their boatbuilding company is over three hundred years old. On the far river left shore behind the islands is red-brick Harleyford Manor (1755), nowadays a marina and holiday resort. Adjacent is Charger's Paddock, so named as a former resident fought at Waterloo and kept his regiment's horses here.

"No house on the river has a sweeter situation; here are cannonballs and fortifications (against whom intended I do not know), neatly kept landing places, the usual trespassers' boards, and some lovely backwaters."

George D Leslie, *Our River* 1888

Hurley village is reached by a path from the river right lock channel. The village is on the site of a priory and later mansion where in 1688, nobles plotted the so-called Glorious Revolution.



📷 Marlow Weir.

The next lock is less than a kilometre downstream. Wooden Temple Footbridge spans the river above Temple Lock. The name comes from the Templar Knights who ran a mill hereabouts. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, three children of lock keepers tragically drowned here.

The river flows through the estate of the former Bisham Abbey; the surviving buildings on river right are now the National Sports Centre. You will see elite athletes training in the gardens, possibly also the England football team whose HQ this is. After the Dissolution of the Monasteries, Bisham was given by Henry VIII to Anne of Cleves, who passed it to the Hoby family. Elizabeth I visited as a youngster. Her acquaintance Lady Elizabeth Hoby beat or starved her son to death, allegedly for blotting

his copybook; this appalling lady's tomb is in adjacent Bisham Church. This lovely building's twelfth-century pointed tower opens directly onto the river front.

Opposite the church on river left is Bondig Bank, a small River Thames Society reserve where alder and willow branches drape across the river.

The river now passes Marlow, unmistakable by its suspension bridge and the tall spire of All Saints Church at the river left end. Marlow Bridge is the only suspension bridge on the non-tidal river. Opened in 1832, it was designed by William Tierney Clark, also responsible for Hammersmith Bridge in London. Jerome K. Jerome wrote *Three Men in a Boat* in Marlow at the Two Brewers Inn, describing it as "One of the pleasantest river centres I

know of ... there is lovely country around it, too". Other notable residents have included Percy and Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein* was written here), poet T.S. Eliot and rower Sir Steve Redgrave. The latter's incredible feat of five gold medals in five successive Olympics is honoured by a statue in the Riverside Gardens on river left above the bridge.

"Who ate puppy-pie under Marlow Bridge?" was a local taunt to passing bargemen; apparently bargemen had helped themselves to a riverside inn's food too often, so the innkeeper baked dog excrement into a pie and left it on the windowsill to be stolen ...

Marlow Lock dates from 1927. It is hemmed in by exclusive-yet-ugly housing, but boasts a great view back upstream to the weir and bridge. An unnamed island leads under the A404 By-pass Bridge, where the river bends sharply left beneath the wooded slopes of Winter Hill. On the right is Longridge Outdoor Activity Centre, with young people usually out on the water in paddlecraft. The river follows the base of the hill, the shore lined by some impressive properties. Behind are the beeches of Quarry Wood, undoubtedly the inspiration for *The Wind in the Willows*' Wild Wood ("We don't go there very much, we river-bankers"); atop Winter Hill is Cookham Dean, where Kenneth Grahame wrote the book.

The Gibraltar Islands are two islands, the first hosting several buildings and adjoined to the shore by a footbridge. Beside this bridge on river right is a truly incredible wooden-framed mansion-cottage, which defies description

but is penned in to be this author's first acquisition following a lottery win (or The Revolution, whichever comes first).

The remaining three kilometres to Cookham Bridge see the Thames follow a wide right bend, with Winter Hill falling back from the river's edge to make space for Cock Marsh. This pasture has been continually grazed since the thirteenth century, and the Bronze Age burial mounds (excavated by an archaeologist named Cock, hence the name) show that it is truly ancient. The rare brown galingale (actually brown-purple in colour) grows here. The National Trust has managed large tracts of Cock Marsh and Winter Hill since 1934.

The outside of the bend (river left) is Bourne End, with its only connection across the river to Cock Marsh (and the popular Bounty pub) being a 1993 footbridge alongside Bourne End Railway Bridge. The unsheltered banks make this stretch popular with sailors, and you pass several clubs. The River Wye joins (almost unnoticed) after the bridge; a Chiltern stream not to be confused with the Welsh/English border river.

The right bank is cowslip-studded Cookham Moor, remaining attractive all the way to Cookham Bridge. This 1867 span of blue-painted iron carries the A4094. The Ferry Inn is on river right directly below, with a slipway alongside. After landing, a short stroll to Cookham's Stanley Spencer Gallery is worthwhile to grasp how the painter dramatically reinterpreted his local landscape.



📖 Front Cover – Below Hannington Bridge, Upper Thames.

📖 Back Cover – Tower Bridge, London.

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A GUIDE FOR CANOES, KAYAKS AND SUPS

The River Thames is undoubtedly Britain's most iconic and historically significant river, and this book will immerse you in a journey along its waters.

Surrounded by beautiful countryside, steeped in history and home to a diverse range of wildlife, the River Thames is a fantastic place to paddle. However, Britain's best-known river might actually be the least-known by paddlers. This guidebook sets out to address this, and to provide all the information needed to plan an afternoon trip or a multi-day expedition.

All 347km of the river from source to sea is described in detail, split into 19 sections including a wealth of information on launch points, distances, local attractions and history. To help you plan your journey there is advice on equipment, safety, launching, camping and locks, along with guidance on paddling the busy Thames Tideway.

The author's engaging descriptions and extensive research will carry you past the idyllic landscapes that inspired artists like J M W Turner and the author of *The Wind in the Willows*, to locations that are embedded in British history, such as Magna Carta Island and Windsor Castle.

MARK RAINSLY

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