

# The River Thames

By Blondel Cluff

When compared to its competitors on the world stage, the Yangtze spanning over 3,500 miles, or the Amazon, or the mighty Mississippi, each stretching over 4,000 miles in length, the 215 miles covered by the Thames renders it a mere minnow. Yet England's longest river ranks among the most famous waterways in the world, one that gave birth to a capital. Passing through the counties of Wiltshire, Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire, and Surrey, skimming the border of Buckinghamshire en route to London, the Thames meanders through Kent and Essex before it reaches the sea, absorbing the waters of dozens of rivers, streams and brooks as it journeys along. This has been its route for over ten thousand years. Today, almost one and a quarter million gallons of water are transported along this waterway each day, moving at a pace of up to two and a half miles an hour.

The Thames is a tidal river, rising from fifteen to twenty-two feet at high tide at London Bridge. The iconic Thames Barrier, completed in 1982, is therefore essential to the very life of London, as a suitably high tide, combined with a storm surge from the English Channel, would prove catastrophic for central London. That is not to say that the river has not claimed its victims over the years, something of which the Thames River Police have always been very aware. The spring tides of the Thames are notorious for their vigour, which engendered the awe and wonder of ancient man, and the personification of the River as a being, known to us today as Old Father Thames. The miles of submerged forests that lie beside its shores from Blackwall into Essex are a testament to the powers of the river to reap and sow fertility and life. It is clear that London would not exist without the Thames. The river not only provided drinking water – essential to any human settlement, but also defence, and trade routes, each necessary for settlements to survive and thrive. The city evolved around one of the shallowest points on the river that could be forded easily by primitive transport. The tribes that lived there would eventually give way to the Romans who respected their name for the waters, Tamesa or Tamesas, modifying it to the Latin, Tamesis.



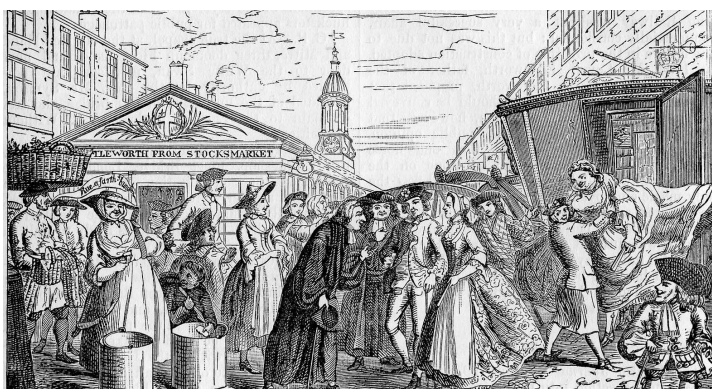
Father Thames

As the Roman metropolis evolved within its city walls, so the river's importance as a trade route became more significant, extending beyond domestic to international trade. Progressively the trading vessels grew, as did their draft, placing the point of embarkation firmly in the hands of Old Father Thames. The deepest, most secure expanse of the river lay beside the Tower of London and became known as the Pool of London due to its basin like nature.

The Great Fire of London in 1666 went some way to alleviating the congestion of medieval London, clearing huge swathes of the wooden city that had long burst out of the Roman walls that encompassed much of what is now the City of London, and spilt along the northern river bank, almost embracing the seat of government at Westminster, London's second city. The London that rose from the ashes was a cleaner city with broader streets and brick buildings, yet the Thames still called the

shots. Faced with the successive disasters of the Plague and the Fire of London, trade and best of all, international trade, was essential to the recovery of Britain and its capital. This meant the Thames had to work harder than ever to bring coffers into the Exchequer from the trading routes that had been forged in the slipstreams of the great explorers and which included the circuitous and infamous Triangle of Trade.

But the Thames was so much more. It was London's biggest open sewer into which the excrement of the city's many thousand inhabitants was discharged both directly and indirectly. It was also the recipient of animal waste, and the by-products of the fledgling industries that began to appear as the industrial revolution took hold. The mournful state of the once majestic river was no more apparent than at low tide when London's wholesale butchers, stationed at Smithfield as they are today, would take the waste from their abattoirs to piers along the river banks to be dumped midstream, filling its waters with the rotting remains. The situation was made worse by the fact that several rivers entered the Thames in London, not least of all the Fleet which appeared little more than a wide, filthy choking flow, earning the nickname the 'Ditch'.



A Caricature of a Fleet Marriage

The squalor of the Thames was nonetheless magnetic, not only because of its vital role as a trading link, but because of the very nature of London's society, and the peculiarities that dominated it. The 'Ditch' attracted a myriad of illicit activity along its own river bank due to the legal peculiarities that were originally attributed to Fleet Prison and then spilled out into the nearby area, such as the right to marry without banns or parental consent, making the Fleet the Las Vegas of its day. These clandestine marriages only stopped after the Marriage Act

1753. Along with the less than law abiding, the Fleet attracted so much debris that it became known as a drain. Over time it was enclosed to become the Fleet Sewer and one of London's subterranean rivers.

A myriad of characters abounded around the river in search of opportunity. Of these the more legitimate were the licenced carters run by the Guildhall that collected goods along a one-way system beside the Thames. The wagons and carts were carefully monitored and regulated, leaving little scope for adventurers. The position on the river was different. Here the ordered minds of the City of London had less influence. The lure of London was immense, offering a fast track from rural servitude to the independence of self-employment. With such high stakes at play, there was little room for morals nor sentiment. Pilfering and theft soon became a sophisticated business that engendered its own specialities and hierarchy. Nothing was beyond the grasp of London's light fingered, including men themselves, it taking until 1772 for a slave to be recognised as free on British soil due to the Somerset ruling; until then those Africans that had completed the three points of the triangle or creoles born in the Caribbean were not safe, presenting a tidy commodity by virtue of the bounties offered for their capture.

Thereafter black Londoners became a common sight, as did their mixed race progeny, as integration took hold among the lower classes, many becoming successful businessmen in their own right, whilst others were lauded for their literary and musical talent. One individual, Wilson, a former slave from Boston became one of the most famous life models of the Royal Academy due to his "*perfect antique figure*"! It is unlikely that they would have frequented the river, as the risk of kidnap and re-enslavement remained real, until the atrocious practice was finally exorcised in the mid 1800s. Instead the men that ruled the river were indigenous. Men of various origins that had forged together since the very beginning of the city to create the archetypal Londoner and they came in various guises from the bankers and aldermen of the City to the dwellers of the riverbank.