

## CHAPTER 8

# The River Thames: London's Riparian Highway

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### Introduction

*'Kingdoms may come, kingdoms may go; whatever the end may be, Old Father Thames keeps rolling along; down to the mighty sea'* (Wallace and O'Hogan 1933).

London's famous river has long been the subject of reverence and worship and the deified figure of Old Father Thames symbolises the spiritual hold which this great river has on the city's culture and people. The Thames articulates the city; it is its artery and lifeblood and its most definitive geographical feature. Crossed by 33 bridges, connecting the north and south banks of London, the river offers a lens into over 2,000 years of human occupation. A voyage along the river is a remarkable experience enjoyed by tens of thousands of visitors and Londoners every day, the most evocative symbol of London's stunning heritage and its post-1990 renaissance, re-establishing

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**Figure 8.1:** The View of the River Thames from Switch House, part of Tate Modern (Photo: Tristan Luker).

itself, in the eyes of many global commentators, as the world's greatest city (Pricewaterhouse Coopers 2016).

The River Thames is effectively London's largest open space, despite the presence of the city's numerous Royal Parks. Its sinuous path offers intriguing vistas at each gentle turn. It has featured in some of the great works of Shakespeare and Dickens, the poetry of Wordsworth and Blake and the paintings of Turner, Whistler and Canaletto. More recently, musicians have found inspiration in the river, with The Kinks romanticising the view from Waterloo Bridge: '... as long as I gaze on Waterloo sunset, I am in paradise' (Davies 1967).

The Thames is relatively short for such a famous river, running for just 220 miles from source to mouth (Fathers 2015). It is not even the longest river in England: that particular honour belongs to the River Severn. This chapter concerns itself not with the eastern flowing river which passes through the bucolic landscape of the Cotswolds and Berkshire, but rather with the tidal river reaching from the North Sea and the vast Thames estuary in the east to Teddington Lock in the western extremity of London, some 95 miles upriver.

For centuries, river traffic was dominated by the needs of trade, defence of the realm and ferry crossings, but the waters are now busy with river buses, cruise boats and pleasure craft carrying commuters, sightseers and adrenaline seekers. After several decades of under-use between the 1960s and 1980s, the river is once again becoming a busy highway. This chapter describes the changing role of the river over time, over the last 50 years in particular, and outlines how tourism has become a dominant influence; bringing visitors to the riverside, to the bridges of the Thames and onto the river itself. The chapter outlines the river's pivotal position in London's booming tourist economy and the different ways the river is experienced by visitors.

## History and Symbolism

The story of the Thames' impact on the development of tourism in London needs to be set in the context of the river's historical and geographical evolution. Over the centuries, the river has shaped the city but Londoners have also shaped the river.

The early centuries of London's development were dominated by the need to establish and protect the emerging settlement (now largely where the financial district – 'the City' – is located). The Romans built a city wall, a fort (the beginnings of what became the Tower of London) and the first bridge across the river (approximately where London Bridge now stands), which was then considerably wider than the river we know today. The River Thames formed part of the defensive alignment of the city and was the link to the sea and the maritime trade which grew to supply the growing city. Travel and trade by river and sea was much easier than by land for many centuries. The river was thus the key to London's birth and the lifeblood of its development.

As London became established as the seat of royalty for the emerging nation, successive monarchs chose to build their palaces alongside the river, which enabled easy access when travelling but meant they also benefited from the riverside defence structures built to protect the city. Several palaces emerged in the centre of the city near London Bridge (Westminster, Whitehall, the Tower itself) and later outlying palaces were built, flourishing in the Tudor period (the expansion of Windsor and the building of Fulham, Greenwich, Richmond and Hampton Court). Some of these sites have largely disappeared and others have been adapted to new uses, but most survive in wonderful condition and provide the main historical attractions for the increasing number of river cruisers.

Royal pageants were common in the later medieval and Tudor eras, as the river was the perfect stage to display the power and extravagance of the monarchy. The royal court was also keen to pay tribute to the river; Old Father Thames was the water god for the rich and powerful as much as the humble Londoner.

Remarkably, London Bridge remained the only bridge crossing of the river for 1,700 years (Port of London Authority, 2018). There was a succession of structures at this crossing point, most notably the great stone medieval bridge which itself lasted for over 600 years. London Bridge connected the fortified City on the north bank to the notorious medieval settlement of Southwark on the south bank, a den of furtive smuggling, drinking, prostitution and crime. The later medieval period was also the era of the 'watermen', the workers who ferried people and goods across the river in small skiffs.

In addition to defence and royal residences, the main historical role of the river has been to aid London's gradual trading and industrial development from the early medieval period through to the mid-twentieth century, when power stations were still being built on the Thames' banks. The Thames was

always a river of commerce, from the ship-chandlers of Wapping to the ropemakers of Limehouse and the myriad boatmen: chalkmen, eelmen, lightermen and water bailiffs (Ackroyd, 2001). Industrial development has left some remarkable buildings along the riverside, but it also signified a long period when London abused, and indeed turned its back on, its river. The Thames was effectively the city's sewer for centuries and the banks became dominated by factories, furnaces and mills, all dispensing their foul waste and chemical pollutants into the river.

William Blake wrote in the late eighteenth century about the 'dark satanic mills' of the Thames riverside, a poem thought to be based on the Albion Flour Mills in Southwark, long since destroyed (Exploring Southwark, 2018). His poem 'London' echoed the brutality of life in that period, dominated by the smog and stench of the river.

I wander thro' each charter'd street  
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow  
And mark in every face I meet  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe (Blake, 1794)

50 years later, things had barely improved, as can be noted from Dickens' *David Copperfield*:

The clash and glare of sundry fiery Works upon the river-side, arose by night to disturb everything except the heavy and unbroken smoke that poured out of their chimneys. Slimy gaps and causeways, winding among old wooden piles, with a sickly substance clinging to the latter, like green hair, and the rags of last year's handbills offering rewards for drowned men fluttering above high-water mark, led down through the ooze and slush to the ebb-tide. (Dickens, 1849)

This was the era of the hellish convict ships anchored in the mud of the Thames estuary; a period that famously ended with 'The Great Stink' in the summer of 1858, when the stench from the river and a serious cholera outbreak prompted the government to commission a vast new sewage infrastructure for the city, achieved some 15 years later and overseen by the great Victorian engineer Joseph Bazalgette.

Bazalgette's transformation of London's sewage system involved substantial bank extension and infill, reducing the width of the river in the central part of the city. Gradually, industrial development and dock activity moved to the eastern 'marshes' of the Thames. This was the era of the 'taming' of the marshes and of the Thames' numerous feeding tributaries and inlets. Many tributaries (such as the Fleet, the Tyburn and the Walbrook) were culverted and covered and large docks were built in Rotherhithe, Blackwall and on the Isle of Dogs and beyond. These areas became the new industrial heartland for a century, while the river flowing

through Westminster gradually returned to a more serene quality – though it remained a place of commerce rather than recreation in this period.

In the late 1950s, despite the improvements to London's sewage system, the Thames was considered to be biologically dead due to the industrial waste and noxious effluents which continued to be dumped in its waters by riverside factories. Over the last 60 years, the de-industrialisation of inner London, together with legislation and pro-active river management, has meant that the Thames is now acknowledged as one of the cleanest metropolitan rivers in the world (Erfurt-Cooper 2009).

By the late 1970s London's docklands had effectively become abandoned by commercial shipping, yet they have adapted to less obtrusive commercial, leisure and residential uses in the last 30 years, helped by the foresight of Michael Heseltine who, when Secretary of State for the Environment in the early 1980s, created the London Docklands Development Corporation (Schneer 2005). Shortly after this, the inner London boroughs began to view the tourism sector as a potential economic catalyst and planning policy towards the riverside became more focused on recreation and culture, with co-operative initiatives such as the Cross River Partnership.

Gradually, the river began to move away from its industrial past, and in the twenty-first century, the Thames rediscovered its identity as a place of recreation and relaxation. London's rich history and historical structures have become the main ingredient of a thriving tourist industry and the river is less of a trading route and more of a tourist highway, and a visitor attraction in its own right.

### A Highway of Attractions

London is a difficult city to navigate for the first-time visitor. With a fairly flat topography, there are few elevated vistas in central districts and, other than the Royal Parks, relatively few large public open spaces and squares. Other great European cities such as Paris, Barcelona or Rome have long straight avenues, higher ground and connected monuments which provide the visitor with navigational aids. London defies logic at street level and also tends to funnel people below ground on the Underground network. The parks offer respite (see Chapter 10) but it is only the river and its bridges that afford wide vistas, views and a sense of how the city fits together. In fact, the river is often so captivating that those riverside areas which are traffic free (most notably the South Bank) are a magnet for visitors.

A remarkable number of London's major tourist attractions are either on or just beyond the river. The list of the ten most visited UK attractions in 2017, produced by the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions (all of which are in London) reveals that five are located on the city's river banks (indicated in Table 8.1 in italics). Two further riverside attractions (Kew Gardens, Tate Britain) were the 14th and 15th most visited in the UK in 2017.

Attraction	Visitor Numbers (2017)
British Museum	5.91m
<i>Tate Modern</i>	<i>5.66m</i>
National Gallery	5.23m
Natural History Museum	4.43m
V & A Museum	3.79m
Science Museum	3.25m
<i>Southbank Centre</i>	<i>3.23m</i>
<i>Somerset House</i>	<i>3.22m</i>
<i>Tower of London</i>	<i>2.84m</i>
<i>Royal Museums Greenwich</i>	<i>2.61m</i>

**Table 8.1:** The UK's Ten Leading Visitor Attractions. Source: ALVA, 2018.



**Figure 8.2:** The River Thames Foreshore looking North towards St Paul's Cathedral (Photo: Tristan Luker).

London's riverside is strewn with major visitor draws from the west (Hampton Court Palace, Richmond riverside) to the east (Historic Greenwich, O2 Arena) with a particularly high concentration of visitor sights between Vauxhall Bridge and Tower Bridge. Palaces, great churches and monumental buildings jostle for superiority here – the Palaces of Westminster, Whitehall, Lambeth and the Tower, the iconic Tower Bridge, a great Abbey, two Cathedrals (St Paul's and

Southwark), a world class arts complex along the South Bank and the cathedral-like Tate Modern. Squeezed in between are the more recent additions to London's tourist scene – the needle-like Shard and the revolving London Eye (see Chapter 6), an aquarium, the London Dungeons, a reconstructed Elizabethan theatre (the Globe) and a Second World War museum ship (*HMS Belfast*).

The Port of London Authority estimated that over £2 billion of GDP was generated by tourism in 2015 in the wards immediately adjacent to the river (Port of London Authority 2016) and that there were 23.4 million visitor trips to attractions beside the Thames in 2015, of which 4.7 million had a direct maritime connection. This reaffirms the significance of the River Thames and riparian territory in London's visitor economy.

London's four World Heritage Sites (the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, the Palace of Westminster and the Abbey, the Tower of London and Maritime Greenwich) all flank the riverside and are symbolic of the role the river played in establishing London and Britain's maritime, scientific and global supremacy during the Empire period. As the Mayor of London wrote in 2013:

The river's vital role as both an artery for transporting people through the heart of London and as a playground for people to explore the wonders of the city are on show for the world to see. A trip along the Thames reveals 2,000 years of riparian history; from the Roman walls at Tower Hill, and the Victorian wharves and warehouses to the soaring peak of The Shard – providing a stunning vista of London's past and present. (Mayor of London, 2013)

In the twenty-first century we have started to see the development of further outlying tourist attractions along the eastern banks of the Thames in London, and indeed its prime remaining tributary (the Lea), as regeneration of the docklands area enters a mature phase. The O2 Arena, the recently restored and re-presented *Cutty Sark*, the Museum of London Docklands, the Crystal, the Thames Barrier and The Orbit at the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park are all relative newcomers to the exalted highway of riverside attractions in London.

### The River as Tourist Space and Visitor Experience

The Thames has been a recreational resource for centuries, even if this role was undermined at the height of the city's industrialisation. With the global development of urban tourism in recent decades, and by virtue of the plethora of tourist attractions and sights, the river has become a thriving tourist space. This is immediately evident when standing on any of the central London bridges and surveying the river craft which pass by. Boats and vessels now predominantly carry sightseers and river piers are cluttered with tourist infrastructure. A walk across these bridges is inevitably interrupted by visitors posing for

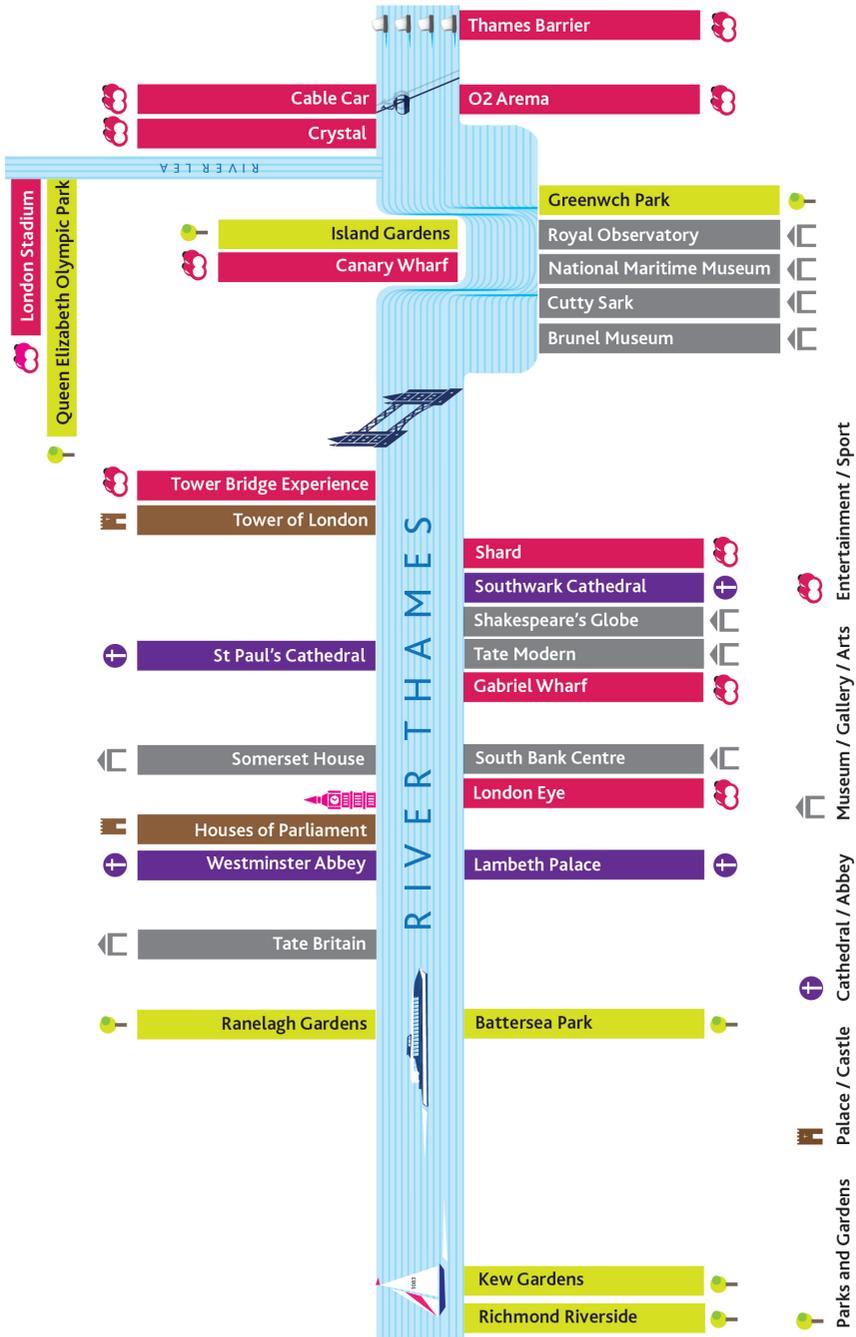


Figure 8.3: A Graphic Illustration of London's Tourist Highway (©Mason Edwards).

photographs. Pedestrianised riverside promenades (especially along the South Bank) are almost permanently inhabited by buskers, performers and pop-up retailers.

City tourism has thrived globally over the last 30 years, driven by a number of supply factors such as civic cultural investment, new and exciting accommodation options, low cost airlines, new events and festivals and by new digital communications. Demand factors have arguably been even more influential as cities have become the key beneficiary of the popular fashion for taking short breaks and discovering new cultural experiences through visiting different cities.

The urban tourism experience can be analysed from a number of alternative perspectives. Two ideas in particular, both heavily embedded in geographical and tourism academic thinking in recent decades, offer useful frameworks through which to consider the role of the Thames in the London visitor experience. John Urry explored the tourist experience through the idea of the tourist gaze (1990; 2002) whereby the visitor is ultimately in search of visual messages, symbols and memories, especially those that can be easily photographed and represented. MacCannell (2001) took Urry's concept further and noted that some places and some situations could inspire a 'second gaze', one that is more satisfying, deeper and reflective. There are few locations in London that can engender the 'second gaze' but the Thames riverside is one of them. It is where the visitor can make sense of London and where great sites can be seen as part of a wider cityscape. On occasions, beneficial weather and light conditions may see the cityscape reflected and refracted in the river water. The meandering nature of the river through central London can lead to abstractions and disorientation in the appreciation of the cityscape, adding more depth to the 'second gaze'. This links to the second conceptualisation of the visitor experience: the occasions when an experience may become fully 'embodied' and sensory. Fully embodied experiences may be fleeting, but they are rich, multi-dimensional and shape memories and attachments (Crouch 2000).

The Thames and its riverside host alternative experiences that suit the visitor's moods and desires, and have the ability to inspire a fully embodied visitor reaction. Waterways offer a means of transport between sights and this is often the most visceral method for moving through the cityscape. They also offer opportunities for adventure through the many adrenaline fuelled rides that are now available on the water. The river can be a place for reflection and contemplation, offering gentle riverside walks and traffic-free spaces to take in views; and it provides numerous attractive places for eating, drinking and socialising; ultimately, it provides diverse views and widescreen vistas and a pleasing setting for the numerous cultural and historic sights along its course. It is worth considering each of these experiential dimensions in more detail.

Transport for London (TfL) estimated that 10.3 million passenger movements took place on the river in 2015/16 (Transport for London, 2018) and have projected an increase to 12 million movements by 2020. These figures include river bus services and the Woolwich ferry and do reflect a gradual

increase in tourist boat and cruise traffic over the last decade. The river bus service, run by MBNA Thames Clippers and licensed by TfL, now comprises 17 catamarans and is responsible for 4 million passenger movements (Thames Clippers, 2018), a remarkable statistic for a service only launched in 1999. Though ostensibly a commuter service, the company has embraced sightseers and, increasingly aware of the appeal of its service to tourists, has introduced a visitor audio guide onto its boats.

Other boat services are more dedicated to visitors with companies such as City Cruises and Thames River Services offering a range of short hop-on/hop-off circular cruises as well as longer cruises to Greenwich and the Thames Barrier. More leisurely dinner cruises, event cruises and charter services are offered by all of the main boat operators. There are even cruises where passengers can watch movie screenings. TfL list over 40 operators for private hire and charter on their web site (Transport for London, 2018), and there is evidence of consistent growth in the popularity of corporate hire and private party hire. Over the last decade, the traditional cruising boats have been joined by several operators of speed boats and RIB boats along the river, thrill rides offering high speed twists and an adrenaline oriented, fully embodied experience.

The Thames can be walked from source to the Thames Barrier, a 184-mile route which was given national trail status in 1989 (Fathers 2015). The London Thames Path, downriver from Teddington, splits into two paths either side of the river. The paths on the north and south shores through the capital occasionally veer away from the riverside and at times abut very busy roads, but it is largely a consistent and rather magnificent urban trail. For many, this is the way to enjoy the river; walking several miles along the path enjoying surprising views of familiar and unfamiliar buildings and observing the recent transformation of stretches of formerly industrialised riverside. In places, the walk can feel more like a promenade as the path veers through Battersea Park and along the South Bank into Bankside, the most popular and animated section. The practice of promenading is perhaps returning to London, something which had its heyday in the eighteenth and nineteenth century pleasure gardens of Chelsea (Cremorne and Ranelagh) and Vauxhall (Fathers 2015).

Perhaps some of the most satisfying strolls along the Thames Path are to be had to the west of the city, in Isleworth, Richmond, Kew, Chiswick and Hammersmith, where some of London's best pubs have flourished due to their unique and coveted riverside settings. Historically, many breweries were located alongside the river as ready access to a water source was a necessity and pubs tended to congregate in close proximity. Many a story of the river's ghoulish and dark past is proudly told or displayed in such iconic riverside pubs as the Prospect of Whitby in Wapping, the Trafalgar Tavern in Greenwich, the Dove in Hammersmith and the London Apprentice in Isleworth. In more recent times, restaurants and café operators have sought to take advantage of riverside settings, a boon for business in the summer months.

Much of the success of riverside dining and drinking is related to the sense of nature which the river brings to contemporary urban dwellers and weary

visitors. While the city changes and buildings are transformed or redeveloped, the river (though tamed) is an enduring link to the countryside beyond and the place which preceded the claustrophobia of twenty-first century urbanism. It is the views and the setting which the river provides which have fuelled its pivotal role in London's touristic expansion. The panoramic tourist gaze (see also Chapter 6) is facilitated by the numerous bridges but also increasingly by public viewing galleries in towers and visitor attractions; and in Docklands, by the new cable car 'airline' which flies between Greenwich Peninsula and the Royal Docks.

### The River as Stage

The Thames in London has long been the city's primary public stage. It has served as the venue for royal showmanship, for pageantry and carnival, for national celebrations, for sports and racing, and for cultural expression. This role has been consistently exploited by the city's tourist sector in recent times and extends to the river banks with open-air events and street theatre offered at the South Bank Centre, City Hall, the Tower of London and the Royal Hospital in Chelsea (host of the annual Chelsea Flower Show). More recently, London has adopted the European trend of creating a riverside beach in the summer months.

Since the Tudor period, the river has often been chosen as a route for royal celebration and to mark coronations and anniversaries, personified by the reigning monarch of the time travelling in front of a flotilla in the royal barge (Port of London Authority, 2018). For over 600 years, the newly elected Lord Mayor of London travelled by river from the City to Westminster to pledge loyalty to the monarch, as requested by King John in 1215 in the original royal charter granting freedoms to the city barons. Though the procession now takes place on the streets, the Lord Mayor is still accompanied by liveried watermen (Ackroyd 2007). These traditions continue to this day, with the present Queen having celebrated both her Silver and Diamond Jubilees with a river pageant. The latter took place in June 2012 with a partial recreation of Canaletto's famous Thames paintings as 670 military, commercial and pleasure craft processed downriver from Wandsworth to Tower Bridge attracting an estimated one million spectators (Port of London Authority, 2018). The Queen's Royal Household still appoints a Royal Bargemaster and 24 Royal Watermen (Royal Household, 2018), a link to the past importance of the river for royal transport but also an important symbol of the river's continuing use for ceremonial events.

For a period between the early seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries, the river also played an occasional and unlikely role as host of the infamous Frost Fairs (see Chapter 9). This was the period of the 'Little Ice Age' when winter temperatures were much lower than today and the Thames froze over for up to two months at a time (Historic UK, 2018). The freezing of the river

tended to happen just upstream from London Bridge (the only bridge until 1726), as the bridge acted to slow the flow of the river, which was much shallower before Bazalgette's infilling and narrowing. The temporary Frost Fairs became increasingly popular and carnivalesque with an almost bacchanalian spirit which included skating, puppet plays, food stalls, bear-baiting and general drunken revelry (Fathers 2015). The river acted as a liminal space allowing the populace to create festivity and spontaneous theatre.

In more recent times, the river has become the focus for London's renowned New Year's Eve celebrations, rivalling those in Sydney, New York and Paris. Since the early 2000s, the Victoria Embankment and the South Bank area of the riverside have become the focus for fireworks displays to mark the start of the New Year, utilising the bridges and reflections provided by the river. The popularity of the event has meant that the best viewing areas are now ticketed, providing a further example of the commercialisation of London's public space noted in Chapters 9 and 10.

Perhaps the most notable new celebration of the river is the Totally Thames Festival, a month-long festival held each September which aims to highlight the diversity and emerging creativity of the riverfront and promote the role of the river in London's cultural fabric through installation art, projections, music and talks (Totally Thames Festival, 2018). The Festival began in 2014, emerging from an earlier cultural event (the Thames Festival). Now organised by the Thames Festival Trust, over 150 separate events are held during the festival month.

As a sporting stage, the Thames again boasts a long and proud history. The noble tradition of the watermen was influential in the recreational popularity of rowing which was established enough by the eighteenth century for the first organised regattas to be held, followed by the formation of numerous rowing clubs, especially in the relatively calmer waters of West London. The historic Doggett's Coach and Badge Race claims to be the oldest rowing race in the world (Port of London Authority, 2018), first contested in 1715, and staged every year since, other than its suspension during World War Two. The event still follows its original course, from London Bridge to Chelsea, and involves a straight race between six apprentice watermen.

The most famous race is of course the annual Boat Race between the 'dark blue' and 'light blue' crews of Oxford and Cambridge Universities respectively, first held on the Thames in 1836, which takes place in late March or early April, between Putney and Mortlake. The women's race, not established until the mid-1960s, now takes place on the same day. The Race attracts in excess of 250,000 spectators to the riverbank and now includes several big screens and a 'Fan Park' but it has long been a national institution as a mass television event, watched by up to 10 million people (Boat Race, 2018). As such, it is treasured not so much for the race but for the occasion and for its traditions and familiarity in the British public consciousness.

The other long-established rowing race is The Heads of the River Race (since 1926) which is rowed in March over the same championship course as the Boat

Race, but in reverse. This is a semi-professional event involving the best rowers from around the world, in crews of eight. In more recent times, another race, the Great River Race, has become a popular spectator event, a river marathon held in September, inviting boats of all shapes and sizes to race 26 miles upriver from Millwall to Ham. Now attracting over 300 boats, this is a colourful mass participation event which has been embraced by Londoners and shows that the river can be enjoyed by enthusiasts as well as elite sportsmen.

The Thames now plays host to more than 80 major sporting events each year (Port of London Authority 2016). The re-invention of London's docks as recreational spaces is enabling additional water-sports to be offered, such as water-skiing, paddle boarding and wind surfing. There are now two specialist water-sports centres, at Millwall Dock and at Royal Victoria Dock. The latter hosted Formula One powerboat racing in June 2018, emphasising the Thames' ability to adapt to new and more specialist participation and spectator sports.

The river as stage is perhaps most intensively experienced at the South Bank complex. This array of cultural buildings set in a pedestrianised environment overlooking the river is a legacy of the Festival of Britain in 1951. The spirit of celebration and showmanship of that event has continued over the years and has indeed recently spread eastwards to Bankside, helped by the establishment of cultural attractions such as Gabriel's Wharf, Tate Modern, and the Globe Theatre. This is now a destination of choice for Londoners and visitors who want to enjoy the riverside in a traffic free environment with rather unexpected and spontaneous 'fringe style' entertainment and cultural expression. The South Bank has indeed transformed the established tourist walking routes across central London in recent years. It has become a hugely successful place, especially considering that, as recently as the mid-1990s, Southwark Council was bemoaning the lack of riverside eating and drinking opportunities along the South Bank. Its evolution has involved extensive collaboration between a complex network of local partnerships. A combination of well-designed public realm, some fortuitous neighbouring cultural investment and determined involvement of local stakeholders have contributed to this success (Tyler and Morad 2008).

The most recent addition to the South Bank's allure is its regular summer programme of outdoor events based around the creation of a riverside beach scene. Taking inspiration from the success of the 'Paris Plages' along the Seine and from urban beach creations in cities such as Berlin, the South Bank initiative is now extending to other parts of the riverside, including the Royal Docks and Fulham.

The river has been chosen as a setting for countless classic scenes in film and television in recent decades. This has added to its iconography and has been a telling factor in attracting more international tourism to London. The river has staged thrilling chase sequences in recent Bond films and, further back in time, it featured memorably in the Beatles' *A Hard Day's Night*, in *A Clockwork Orange* and in a touching romantic scene, filmed on the South Bank, in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. It also featured in two supremely executed scenes in

the Harry Potter film series; it was flown over by Harry Potter and friends in an immersive flying sequence *from Order of the Phoenix* and was then shown in a sinister light as the Millennium Bridge was destroyed by death eaters in the opening scene of *The Half-Blood Prince*.

### Contested Development

One of the consequences of rapid urban tourism growth is uncontrolled commercialisation and low-quality clutter around the fringes of the spaces colonised by visitors. Writing in 2004, Shaw and Williams reflected on the way in which tourism tends to be driven by globalised trends of consumption and exploitation, and that commodification of place can become ingrained without political will and regulation. Other commentators have further questioned the trend in some cities for the urban tourism experience to be increasingly manipulated and ‘experientialised’ to maximise consumptive behaviour (Smith 2015). Such commodification has arrived along parts of the Thames in London, most specifically around the most well-used river piers and the London Eye. Here perhaps there are signs of touristification at the cost of the authentic riverside visitor experience and the beginnings of a tourist enclave (Judd 2003). However, few observers would consider it to be an issue of major concern, at least not yet. It imposes no more or less touristification for instance than the West End theatre district or the museum district of South Kensington. London



**Figure 8.4:** More London – The South Bank between London Bridge and Tower Bridge (Photo: Eman Mustafa).

has an uncanny ability to absorb tourist pressures, in a way that seems to elude smaller capitals like Berlin and Lisbon.

The boom in London real estate and marketability of riverside living has been more controversial. Significant stretches of the river have become colonised by exclusive and expensive apartment blocks, restricting opportunities for re-introducing trees, planting and recreational areas. Though these can present some intriguing and glamorous sights for the river cruisers, they make the river inaccessible in some neighbourhoods, along both banks.

There are improvements to be made in terms of the river's effectiveness as a tourist space; motorised traffic still dominates too much of the north bank, and there are insufficient pedestrian-only bridges. There remain some frustrating stretches of the Thames path where access to the riverside has been prevented either by legal obfuscation, gated new development or by historic warehouses which hug the river-shore.

Despite these issues, the gradual imposition of tourism and the evolution of the river and riverside into a space, or series of spaces, dominated by recreation and tourism, has generally been a positive and enriching process. The Thames has thrived and become perhaps the most important feature of London's overall visitor package; a place of wonder, refuge and escapism for tourists and Londoners.

### **The Future Role of the River in Destination London**

The River Thames features prominently in the numerous strategies and plans published by the Mayor, the Greater London Authority, the Port of London Authority and London and Partners, the Mayor's official promotional agency. The key policies common to these plans are: making the riverside more accessible; to develop further recreational infrastructure; enhancing biodiversity of the river; and boosting the role of the river as a means of transport for residents and visitors. This last policy will involve a commitment from all the leading stakeholders to better integrate river transport with underground and road systems. London and Partners' Tourism Vision for London (2017) does not make specific recommendations in relation to the river but references its vital role in the future development of new visitor experiences and outlines the essential goal of better integrating river and land-based transport.

The Port of London Authority released a comprehensive vision for the river in 2016 called Thames 2035. They project continued growth for port activity and river freight journeys along the river, but most of the vision concerns aspirations to improve pier infrastructure, increase moorings, and develop further sporting opportunities; continued enhancement of the river ecosystem and enhancing appreciation of the river's cultural and educational resources. A key target is to double the number of people travelling each year along the river to 20 million by 2035.

There have been some innovative new projects for river development which have failed in recent years. A project to establish an extensive floating

boardwalk with event pavilions and a lido on the north bank between the Millennium Bridge and Tower Bridge was mooted in 2012 but did not progress. One project touted as a way to deliver a number of strategic aspirations was the Garden Bridge scheme, a proposal to build a pedestrian only bridge across the river between the South Bank and Temple, a structure designed by Thomas Heatherwick with more than 270 trees and 100,000 plants linked by meandering paths across a wide bridge. The Bridge was set to become another signature attraction for London, combining infrastructure and an experience celebrating the river's transformation into an environmentally clean and bio-diverse resource. The idea was that the garden spaces would change as the pedestrian walked over the bridge, reflecting the character and rich heritage of the riverbanks and offering different experiences as the planting and textures change during the seasons. The project had many high-profile supporters, but was killed off by the election of Mayor Sadiq Khan who was unprepared to underwrite the costs. Investigations are ongoing to work out what happened to the tens of millions spent on consultancy fees for a project that was never built. However, it is unlikely that we have heard the last of new projects to bridge the Thames. The river has a habit of inspiring ambitious projects.

Other new projects are emerging. Battersea Power Station, a cathedral of the industrial age, is being re-invented as a twenty-first century mini-metropolis and there are bold proposals to create a floating village offering ice skating and a lido on Royal Victoria Dock. Also in the Royal Docks, further development of new commercial facilities is likely to see Docklands cement its position as a hub for business tourism, building on the success of City Airport and the ExCel exhibition and conference centre. Meanwhile, the Rothschild Foundation is funding much of a £20 million scheme to permanently illuminate London's 15 central bridges based on designs by US artist Leo Villareal (Rothschild Foundation, 2018).

The prospects for the river's wildlife are perhaps one of the most important aspects of the river's future tourism potential. There are already an estimated 125 types of fish in the tidal Thames (London Wildlife Trust, 2018) and seals, dolphins and porpoises are increasingly spotted swimming upriver towards the city. Investment in wetland nature reserves adjacent to the river bank such as those in Barnes (the London Wetland Centre), Greenwich and Crossness, are encouraging further diversity in the river's bird population. The completion of the Thames Tideway Tunnel in 2021, which will reduce the sewage discharge into the river and its tributaries to virtually nil, will further enhance the cleanliness of the river. Nature and tourism will need to find a way to co-exist in harmony for mutual benefit.

## Conclusions

The river rolls in from the sea and up to London with the tide; at the other end it rises in a field near Cirencester to dampen the green grass

in a dark curving line that soon becomes a stream. The salt water from the sea and the clear sweet water from the low Cotswold hills meet at Teddington (from 'Conclusion': Schneer 2005).

London is often described as a city in constant flux, but some things have not changed, and the geography of the river remains its defining characteristic. The meeting of the tidal Thames and the sweet water from the bucolic landscape of middle England has been the symbolic heart and the lifeblood of one of the world's great cities. London's riparian spaces have provided secure and defensible refuges, routes for trade, the fuel for industry and a recreational setting. In the last few decades, the Thames and its riverside have adapted to a new era, one which involves a complex array of roles, with tourism bringing much of the animation, verve and spirit to its new persona. The Thames is the artery which winds a sinuous path through an urbanised landscape, connects historic monuments and cultural landmarks in a sensory way, provides breathing space for visitors and a space in which creative expression and festivalisation can prosper. It might be recognised as an exalted highway, allowing residents to become tourists in their own city and offering new perspectives to the returning visitor, providing the excitement of travelling 'the open road' through an ever-changing cityscape.

The River Thames is a special river which stirs emotions; it will continue to lift the hearts and minds of many millions of visitors and residents alike in the decades ahead, inspiring a second gaze, perhaps a Waterloo sunset, and an array of satisfying urban tourism experiences.

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