

# The Changing Face of Leisure on the River Thames L'évolution des loisirs sur la Tamise

Brian D. Hughes

Volume 11, Number 3, October 1992

Fleuves, civilisations et tourisme

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078042ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078042ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Université du Québec à Montréal

ISSN

0712-8657 (print)

1923-2705 (digital)

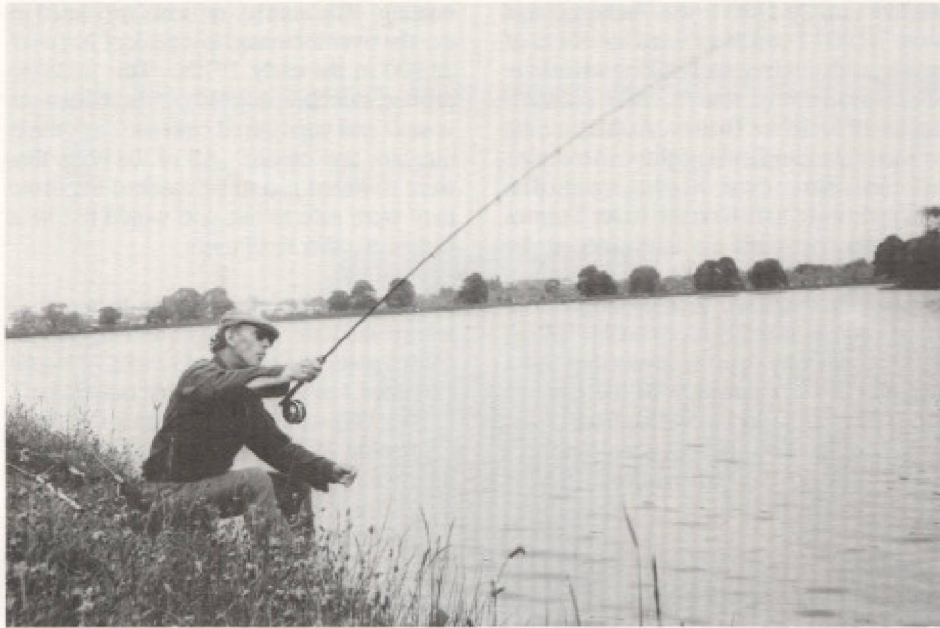
[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Hughes, B. D. (1992). The Changing Face of Leisure on the River Thames. *Téoros*, 11(3), 35–37. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078042ar>

# The Changing Face of Leisure on the River Thames

Brian D. Hughes\*



The River Thames is known, not only for its history but as one of the most popular and most intensively used recreational waterways in the world. It acts as host to activities which include motor cruising, sailing, canoeing, rowing, punting, bankside walking, angling, taking a trip in a passenger boat or simply *messing about* during odd moments of relaxation. Nobody knows when the leisure uses of the River Thames first began, but it is unlikely that much recreational activity took place prior to 1800 except for a few organised sporting events which are referred to later. The River Thames was firstly a commercial waterway and was used for transporting materials and goods between the towns that lie along the 256 kms. between Cricklade and Greenwich. There was a towpath alongside the river and barges were pulled along by horses. However, since 1800 all that has changed and leisure on the river has now almost completely taken over from commerce, even on the tidal reaches.

## Historical Perspective

There has been a public right to navigate the River Thames before records began and certainly since the eleventh century. Control over boats using the river has been exercised by authorities such as the Corporation of the City of London, the Thames Navigation Commissioners, the Thames Conservancy, Thames Water Authority and today the National Rivers Authority and the Port of London Authority. The earliest boats used for leisure purposes were the punts, built in the early 19th century, and the gigs and skiffs which were derived from the wherry, a hand propelled wooden working boat. These were also wooden but were more streamlined than the wherry and resemble most people's idea of what a normal rowing boat looks like. The dinghy, also made around this time was wider and shorter and was particularly popular for activities like fishing.

As the railways provided access from London to many Thames-side towns, and improved transport between the towns, so more and more people took to the river and riverside to enjoy their leisure time. Boats were fitted with all sorts of extras such as picnic tables, sunshades and even hoops and canvas

which converted the boat into a floating tent. For the more gregarious the early nineteenth century saw the introduction of the first passenger steamers. In 1814 the *Richmond* carried day trippers between the centre of London and Richmond and was to be followed by many others. Most notable was the *Salters* steamer service running between Oxford and Kingston but also popular were the services that carried people between Hampton Court and Greenwich, right through the heart of England's capital city.

Later in the nineteenth century the steam engines were replaced by electric engines, although these were found to be more suitable for smaller boats, including canoes. It was not until the turn of the century that petrol engines became available and these, together with their diesel counterparts have been used ever since to transport the day tripper and the holidaymaker alike.

Holidays on the river were a natural consequence of day and weekend trips. Initially, in the early part of the nineteenth century, the main form of accommodation was camping alongside the river or in the boat itself. Houseboats were popular later in that century and many were available for hire on a weekly basis. However, people generally wanted to enjoy the variety of scenery on the river rather than remain in one spot and shortly after the turn of the century the first steam launches were available for hire on a weekly basis. A condition of the hire was that a captain and engineer came on holiday with you - not to look after you but to tend to the needs of the boat!

Around 1920 the first petrol-driven cabin cruiser appeared on the market and, with the increased reliability and reduced maintenance needs of these engines, people were given the freedom and independence to enjoy a holiday afloat of the type they wanted. Cabin cruiser holidays became increasingly popular between the two world wars and numerous companies were formed offering cruisers for hire. Many of these continued after the second world war and in 1955 the Thames Hire Cruiser Association was formed in an

\* Mr Brian D. Hughes is Recreation and Conservation Manager of the National Rivers Authority (Thames Region), England.

attempt to co-ordinate the activities of these firms and improve service to holidaymakers.

Whilst the general public were using the river increasingly for casual enjoyment and holidaymaking, so organised sport was also gaining in popularity. If organised sporting events are classed as a form of leisure then such events were probably the first examples of leisure use of the river. The Doggett Coat and Badge, the oldest regular sporting event in the world, is a rowing race that first took place between London Bridge and Chelsea in 1716. Colleges such as Eton had rowing clubs that raced on the River Thames in 1793 and in 1829 the first Oxford - Cambridge boat race took place. On this occasion it was held on the river at Henley and only since 1856 has it been held regularly on its present course on the tidal reaches. The mid-nineteenth century saw more and more rowing clubs established and more and more regattas, prompted by the success of the first Henley Regatta in 1839.

Organised boating of other forms was not slow to catch up. The mid-nineteenth century also saw an interest in sailing develop and a number of sailing clubs were established on the wider reaches downstream of Oxford. Initially, the craft used were modifications of gigs, skiffs and dinghies and it was not until the start of the twentieth century that properly designed sailing dinghies were produced. Canoeing clubs were also formed in the mid-nineteenth century after two Oxford students had made the journey from Oxford all the way to Hampton Court. Punting too, whilst still popular with the casual visitor, also fell victim to organisation and punting events were held from 1880 into the twentieth century.

Although boating, in one form or another, was perhaps the most popular activity and the one most readily associated with the River Thames there were other pursuits taking place as well. Of these swimming, fishing and walking deserve a mention.

Swimming was always a popular activity amongst the younger members of English society and many towns in the early to mid-twentieth century had established bathing places. Since 1940, with the danger from motor cruisers, increased availability of swimming pools and concern about hygiene, it decreased in popularity. Today most swimming is confined to charity races.

Fishing was first practised on the River Thames for commercial reasons rather than as a leisure activity. However, in the early nineteenth century fishing as a form of recreation began to increase in popularity, not just from the bank but more particularly from punts and dinghies. In 1850 the first angling club on the River Thames was established at Marlow and by 1880 it was reckoned that some 30,000 Londoners were members of angling clubs and regularly taking advantage of cheap rail transport to fish the freshwater reaches of the River Thames. At this time the position regarding fishing rights was complex and somewhat unclear. Anglers assumed an automatic right to fish on the River Thames and it was not until the latter part of the nineteenth century that this was challenged by the riparian owners. In more recent times it has become generally accepted that fishing rights accompany riparian ownership and it was only by agreement with the riparian owner that an angler could fish from a particular stretch. This applied to bank and boat fishing since riparian ownership includes the bed of the river itself.

Even when the legal position became clearer conflicts continued. To begin with there were regular disputes with commercial fishermen, particularly when angling matches were held and a stretch was intensively fished. More recently as commercial fishing has ceased it is the multitude of boats on the River Thames that interferes with the enjoyment of the sport and the anglers' ability to catch fish. Disputes can be particularly intense during matches when there are large amounts of prize money to be won by the angler, or the team of anglers, catching the most fish or largest weight of fish.

Walking as a leisure activity did not become popular until this century. It is now one of the most popular outdoor leisure activities in Great Britain. Although the inhabitants of the riverside towns will, for centuries, have walked alongside the river as it ran through their towns, longer distance walking or rambling is a fairly recent phenomenon. The River Thames towpath was an obvious walking route, although there were many stretches over which there was no public right of way, merely a right to tow. This situation was gradually rectified and today the public have a legal right to walk along most of its length.

## Present Uses, Management and Plans

The face of leisure on the River Thames continues to change and in the past fifty years a number of developments have taken place. The post-war period saw a rapid growth in all leisure uses of the river but particularly in boating. The number of boats registered to use the river increased to a peak of just over 28,000 in the early 1970s. This included private launches, hire launches, passenger vessels and unpowered craft such as sailing dinghies and canoes. All of the boats that were powered had to be checked to ensure they were safe to use and would not be a danger to other river users.

Over the same period of time there was a related increase in the number of boats recorded going through the 45 locks. The total exceeded 1 million for the first time in 1973 (1,080,938) with the busiest lock (Marlow) witnessing 38,000 boats in that year. This represented a 100% increase on the total figure for ten years earlier. Such a rapid growth in boat traffic meant considerably more work for lock-keepers and navigation inspectors who had to ensure the people were using the river sensibly and safely and were complying with the laws that govern the use of the river. The size of hire cruisers was also increasing as people looked for more comfort on their holidays. This led to increased waiting times at locks as fewer boats could be accommodated in a lock at any one time.

By the early 1970s there were over one hundred clubs or organisations involved in active water sports on the River Thames, such as sailing, canoeing, rowing and angling. In addition, to cater for the needs of the casual boat owner or hirer, there were in excess of fifty boatyards and marinas.

The number of events had also increased. In addition to the major regattas, races and competitions, many clubs now held events for their members on a weekly basis.

All of this activity on just 256 km led to concern that the character of the River Thames would be destroyed. In 1974 the local authorities bordering the River Thames decided to review the situation and produce a set of policies which would prevent the river from being spoilt by excessive use. The then Thames Water Authority was invited to chair this group which, in 1980, produced its report: the River Thames Leisure Policy. The group examined trends in the use of the river and the

effect the increased use was having on the river environment and on people's enjoyment of the river. It acknowledged that there was a good case to be made for restricting further growth in certain stretches and taking steps to reduce existing conflicts between users. Rather than imposing a limit on the number of boats that could be registered the group recommended that further growth be restricted by local authorities refusing to give planning permission for developments (e.g. hire boat bases, marinas, water spots clubs) in those stretches where the level of activity was already high. In addition to these restrictive planning policies the group also recommended the setting up of River User Groups to bring together the different users of a stretch (anglers, dinghy sailors, rowers, etc.). One of the aims of such Groups would be to coordinate their programmes of events to avoid clashes and also to learn more about each others activity. It was felt that by doing this river users would gain a better understanding of the reasons why conflicts occurred and how they might be prevented. Since the production of the River Thames Leisure Policy report many local authorities have adopted the recommendations on granting or refusing planning permission and River User Groups have been established from the highest navigable point down to Tower Bridge in London. These Groups helped to produce a *River Users Code*, a handbook on good river behaviour which all who use the River Thames are encouraged to read.

The last twenty years have seen a levelling-off in the intensity of boating activity on the River Thames. The number of clubs, boatyards, hire bases and marinas dropped slightly from the peak of the 1970s and has remained fairly static since 1985. The number of boats registered has declined (just under 27,000 in 1990) and the number of boats passing through the locks has also decreased (848,778 in 1990). Part of this drop in activity is doubtless due to the report referred to above but there are many other factors that influence the way people spend their leisure time. Activities rise and fall in popularity and those responsible for providing or managing resources must respond accordingly. For example the increased popularity of walking in recent years has led to an increased effort in providing and protecting riverside footpaths. In 1991 it was estimated that 7 million trips were made to the River Thames by walkers.

The Secretary of State for the Environment has agreed to designate a new Long Distance

Path following the River Thames from the source to the Thames Barrier. People take a greater interest in new developments and the Thames Barrier Visitor Centre caters for those who wish to spend their leisure time learning how the River Thames can be controlled and London kept safe from flooding.

Ten years has now passed since the River Thames Leisure Policy report was produced. The National Rivers Authority (which took over the management of the River Thames from the Thames Water Authority in 1989) is planning to produce a new report in the next 2 years, working jointly with local authorities, river users, tourist operators and conservation organisations. This will set out policies to ensure the river is not only used in the best way but is improved, in landscape terms, along stretches where it has been neglected or spoiled by residential or industrial development. It will also identify where new facilities are needed to help those who use the river for leisure.

### The Future

The basic appeal of the River Thames is its variety and this will always need to be protected. It passes through unspoilt countryside bountiful in wildlife, through historic towns and villages and finally the capital city of England. It has links with other waterways that can be visited by the boating holiday-maker.

Above all else it will remain a river that needs to be well-managed. Although this paper has dealt only with leisure uses, one should not forget that the river is the drainage channel of the Thames valley and needs to be maintained as such. It provides water for many of the 11 million inhabitants of that valley and needs to be managed in a way that safeguards that supply. It removes the treated effluent from sewage treatment works that cater for these inhabitants and the quality of these effluents therefore needs to be controlled. The River Thames is also home to a range of plants and animals and an increasing variety of species of fish. The way that the river is managed for all these functions greatly influences its value as a leisure resource. The operation of the weirs, the dredging of the channel, the protection of the river banks, the amount of water abstracted for supply and the control of effluent quality all have a part to play. The National Rivers Authority is responsible for managing *all* these functions as well as the leisure uses and is working with all the organisations interested in the River Thames in

order to do the best possible job. By combining good management, control and cooperation with all users we are confident that the value of the River Thames for leisure will be safeguarded. †

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- CHAPLIN, Peter H., *The Thames from Source to Tideway*, Publ. by Whittet Books, ISBN 0905 483 707.
- HUGHES, Brian, *Report of the Working Party on River Thames Leisure Policy*, Publ. by Thames Water Authority, 1980.
- POTKIN, Beryl, *Explore around the Thames*, Publ. by BCM Publications, ISBN 0905 7585 15.

Unpublished data and reports on the use of the river Thames, details from Brian Hughes, National Rivers Authority, Kings Meadow House, Reading, Berkshire, England, RG1 8DQ.

### L'évolution des loisirs sur la Tamise

Brain D. Hughes

La Tamise est l'un des fleuves les plus populaires quant à son utilisation à des fins récréotouristiques même s'il ne fait que 256 km. La concentration d'activités sur cette longueur relativement limitée singularise ce fleuve.

Personne ne sait quand débuta ces activités mais il est certain qu'à partir du XIXe siècle, on assiste à la métamorphose du fleuve.

Le droit de navigation est acquis par le public au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle mais ce n'est que huit siècles plus tard que s'ajoute au rôle commercial du fleuve un caractère ludique.

En effet, pendant que les premiers bateaux se construisent pour les loisirs, le transport ferroviaire se développe et amène le public vers les rives. Canotage, pêche et promenades gagnent une certaine popularité de même que les clubs. Vers 1920, il est possible d'acheter ou louer une cabine pour une croisière afin de passer plusieurs semaines sur le fleuve.

Plus tard, les moteurs à vapeur, électriques, à essence ou à diesel se succèdent dans les bateaux. Les types de vacances comme les appareils évoluent. Le croiseur à essence permet au voyageur d'être plus indépendant. Ces bateaux deviennent tellement populaires qu'après la Seconde Guerre mondiale, la *Thames Hire Cruiser Association* s'est formée afin de mieux répondre aux besoins des touristes. Entre 1950 et 1970, naissent plusieurs compagnies de location.

La renommée du fleuve s'est accrue surtout entre 1970 et 1980. Les activités de croisière atteignent leur apogée avec près de 30 000 bateaux enregistrés et plus d'un million de passages dans les 45 écluses; durant cette même période, plusieurs services (contrôle, sécurité) se développent; plus de 100 clubs ou organismes associés aux sports aquatiques (voile, canotage, etc.), sont en pleine activité.

Toutes ces pratiques sportives constituent un danger pour le fleuve: les problèmes de pollution apparaissent et exigent une réduction des activités sur la Tamise afin de protéger cet environnement; c'est le rôle que se donne le Thames Water Authority. De plus, des groupes d'utilisateurs se forment pour mettre en place un code d'utilisateur.

Quand les conséquences de ces politiques se font sentir, on note une baisse importante du nombre de bateaux enregistrés. Néanmoins, pêche, promenade et événements récréatifs occupent toujours sur la Tamise un rôle primordial.

Pour les touristes, la Tamise agit comme un aimant à cause de son histoire et du spectacle qu'elle offre.