

A Little Stream, a Little Boat

**One man's encounter
with the River Thames**

Simon Baynes

A little stream best fits a little Boat;
A little lead best fits a little float;
As my small Pipe best fits my little note.

Robert Herrick, *A Ternarie of Littles,*
upon a Pipkin of Jelly sent to a Lady
from *Hesperides* (1648).

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1. The Name

Is it unique, I wonder –the name?

I am thinking of the town that has been our home for ten years, Thame in Oxfordshire. It is on the River Thame. Now we all know towns that are distinguished from others of the same name by the river they lie on: Burnham on Crouch, Newark on Trent, Newcastle upon Tyne, Ross on Wye, Shipston on Stour (some of them are fussy about the *upon*, and some about hyphens). We also know towns which take their name from bridges over rivers: Cambridge, Edenbridge, Weybridge; and towns named from the mouth of rivers: Exmouth, Dartmouth, Teignmouth. Rivers also give their name to districts: Royal Deeside, Merseyside, Tyneside. But I cannot think of another instance where the name of the river on its own is the name of the town. I have not trawled through the gazetteer, but I do not recall towns called Ouse, Ribble, Medway, Test or Tees. Is Thame unique?

The word (according to *The Oxford Dictionary of English Place Names*) means “dark flowing river” (which one would think applies to most rivers at some stage in their careers!). Other rivers (Tame, Teme, Team, Tamar, etc.) probably take their names from the same root. Our river stems from the confluence of streams in Buckinghamshire, rounds Aylesbury and Thame on their north-west sides, passes through several villages in Bucks and Oxfordshire, and is the boundary between the two counties for some miles, before entering the Thames near Dorchester on Thames; an insignificant stream with a course of some thirty miles in the heart of the south midlands, used by a few angling clubs, and driving several mills, not apparently used for navigation, and flooding regularly in winter. I have sometimes wondered, if a little river like this were to be filled in and the land ploughed, would it make any difference to anyone? It is not important; it is hardly necessary; and that, for me, is what makes its charm.

But there is more to be said about the name; “...entering the Thames...”, I said. But no! It is not as simple as that. The Thames is a mighty river – not in breadth or length, but in history, story and song. Almost anyone in the world with a little education could name the River Thames, and probably no other in Britain. But how did it get its name?

Well, this is one theory: the upper river, above Dorchester, was originally called (like other English rivers) the Ouse. This name, possibly because of the academic influence of Oxford University, was latinised to Isis – “The Ouze, whom men do Isis rightly name”, says Spenser. At Dorchester, the Thame and the Isis meet, and so the river below that point was called the Thame-Isis, or Thamesis, a form found in old writers; and this was finally shortened to Thames.

The matter is further complicated by the fact the Milton confuses the two names; he wrote about “royal-towered Thame” (because he needed a rhyme for *name!*); “royal-towered” can surely only refer to Windsor. Well, he was only a student at the time; the line comes from *At a Vacation Exercise*. The youthful Pope used the same pair of rhymes.

Whether or not the theory is correct, it is certain that writers up to the nineteenth century talked about the “marriage” of the two rivers (ignoring their other tributaries), fancifully personifying them – as we shall see below. It follows that our little river Thame is five-sixths of the name of one of the most famous rivers in the world.

2. The Poem

In 2003 I wrote a poem-sequence, called simply *The River Thame*. The body of the poem is twelve sections, written in differing forms and styles, imagining the life of the river in each of the twelve months of the year, and tracing its course from its beginnings until it meets the Thames. It touches on geology, flora, fauna, fishing, agriculture, industry, local customs, old houses, villages and history (particularly of Thame itself). It relies on the map, a little research, a little observation, and a lot of imagination.

It is not just description; it has a recurring message. 2003 (like, I suppose, every other year in human history) was a year of war. The invasion of Iraq to root out Saddam Hussein, with his supposed “weapons of mass destruction”, began in March 2003. So the theme of the poem is the contrast between

the horror of war and the enduring peace and beauty of the English countryside. It is still amazing to me that, in spite of the relentless spread of industry and housing to serve a bulging population, so much of rural England survives; so much that seems a hidden world, which pursues its busy life undeterred by the activity of man. So the poem becomes a hymn of praise for the peace, beauty and unending interest of the natural world that surrounds us, and into which we can so easily retreat to find refreshment and renewal of spirit. So far at least, as Hopkins said:

nature is never spent.

3. The Voyage

Ever since moving to Thame, I have wondered whether it would be possible to boat on the river. I have never once seen any kind of boat on any section of it. It appears to be used only by a few angling clubs. There are various mills marked on the map, but it seems unlikely that they are still working. And so the fact that no one else seemed to be doing it was an added incentive to wanting to navigate this small stream, as far as possible from source to mouth.

The idea reminded me of Robert Gibbings' 1940 classic *Sweet Thames Run Softly*, describing his one-man voyage down the Thames, as near as possible from the source, in a boat he had designed himself, and illustrated with his own beautiful woodcuts. His title comes from Edmund Spenser's 16th century *Prothalamion*. If I may adapt Spenser's line, my prayer would be:

Sweet Thame, run softly till I end my song!

The main question was, where to start. There is no single source. The Thistlebrook flows west from near Mentmore in the Vale of Aylesbury and skirts the north of the town. It is then joined by an unnamed stream which starts further west and crosses the A413 Aylesbury-Buckingham road just south of the village of Hardwick. This, I thought, would be the place to start, so I went to explore. Parking my car near Hardwick church, I walked to the bridge and down to the side of the stream. It was shallow and weedy, and fifty yards downstream it was blocked by a fallen tree. I ruled it out, and went on to the next accessible point, the bridge on the A41 Aylesbury-Bicester road, just after the two streams have joined. On the map this looked promising, but when I got there I found that the river, though wide enough to navigate, was choked with reeds. There was a notice on the bridge put there by the local angling society, saying "Please make the minimum of noise". The true fisherman's creed; "Study to be quiet" (I Thessalonians 4.11) is quoted by Izaak Walton in his *Compleat Angler*. But it is slightly ironical here, as, though it is a minor road, cars pass at the rate of five a minute!

Leaving Aylesbury, the river flows south-west towards Eythrope, the next point with possible road access. This is an estate owned by descendants of the mighty Rothschild family, who seem to own half of Buckinghamshire. It was daunting on three counts: it is approached by a single track road, and the nearest turning point for the car was a good quarter of a mile away, a long way to carry the boat and other gear. Secondly, there is a notice by the riverside saying "Private. No fishing or trespassing." Who owns rivers, I wonder? Thirdly, when I surveyed the spot, I found it overlooked by a lodge, and there were two men working on the bridge. It would be impossible to pump up the kayak and set off in full view of them.

Three miles downstream I found what seemed like the perfect place to start, a bridge on the road between Chearsley and Cuddington, just above Cuddington Mill, and south of the village of Nether Winchendon. There is a small lay-by near the bridge, and the area is sheltered by trees and so not too public. There I aimed to start. I would have to be content with not travelling the upper one-third of the river – even if I was able to cover the rest.

I hoped to complete the journey in a week, paddling five or six hours a day; but I had really no idea how long it would take. My plan was to leave my boat in the water moored to the bank at the end of each day (I prepared two wooden pegs with ropes), with a notice on it saying

**Please do not remove. This boat will be moved
tomorrow morning [date]. Any problems, ring ____ ,**

relying on my wife Caroline to drive me to each access point, and meet me wherever I ended up at the end of the day. But the whole venture was fraught with uncertainty.

4. The Hazards

Paddling down a small inland river seems a very sedate occupation, but before starting I anticipated certain possible hazards, which made it into a minor adventure. First was my worry about the law. Who owns rivers? The nation? The County Council? Local landowners? Angling clubs? Is the right to roam as extensive on English waterways as on land? Does a small unpowered boat need a licence? The odd thing is that I have still not been able to find out. I wrote to the County Council, and got no reply. The local police station had no information. I looked up the Environment Agency on the web, and found a number to ring. They licence boats on the River Thames. But what about its tributaries? It was not their responsibility. Try British Waterways. I rang them. No, the River Thames did not come under their authority. And so, baffled by bureaucracy, I decided to take a risk. I would float my boat on the river and hope that there were no officious traffic wardens, angry landowners, irate fishermen, or barking dogs, patrolling the River Thames. It was going to be a one-off trip; in a few days, I would be there and away.

Secondly, there were the unknown risks of the river itself: possible weirs, mill-streams, backwaters, or man-made barriers; stony shallows that might damage the bottom of the boat; more likely, areas of thick reed or other weed, fallen trees or other debris, that would make navigation difficult. A largely unused river could well be quite overgrown in places, even though the parts that I have seen look so inviting.

Thirdly, there might be health and safety risks. Was I strong enough for the job? Would I simply get exhausted? Would it be a strain on the heart? on the back? on the arms? I tried to keep in good shape, and did extra arm exercises for some weeks before. (After all, I climbed Ben Nevis in May.) And, unlikely though it seemed, there may be the risk of injury by one means or another. There may also be the danger of damage to the craft; or its theft overnight. And weather? Perhaps I am over-confident, but I don't think anything less than a hurricane, or severe flooding, will deter me.

5. The Gear

The smallest kind of one-man kayak, with a two-bladed paddle, was what I was looking for, and I eventually found one on Ebay, which I bought for £60 (new). Because of difficulty of transport and suitable river access, it had to be inflatable. It came with its paddle, hand pump, waterproof bag, instructions in six languages – and (sinister) puncture repair outfit. It was made in China. I must say, when first blown up on the living room floor, it inspired confidence. I reflected that, though I have been messing about in boats of one kind or another for seventy years (we grew up within ten minutes walk of the River Cherwell, and kept a small rowing boat on it), this was the first one I actually owned. A little boat to fit my little river.

There is a strong net attached to the front of the kayak, which I trusted would hold the things I needed to take. If the September weather was kind, I would wear shorts and trainers, and a life jacket; and I made a list of what to take in the bag:

- anorak with hood
- sweater
- spare pants and socks
- a towel
- food and water
- a small notepad and pen
- a small sketch pad and pencil
- a small book (to read in lunch breaks)
- map (OS 165, then 164)
- camera
- mobile phone.

As it was for the Swallows and Amazons, the planning and preparation and making of lists was all part of the fun. I had done all I could, and I was ready.

6. Day One

September 9 (Tuesday). After an indifferent summer, the last two weeks have been consistently grey and overcast, with quite a lot of rain, and serious floods in some parts of the country – the remote effect, perhaps, of hurricanes *Gustav*, *Hannah* and *Ike*, which have successively ravaged the Caribbean. The River Thames is somewhat swollen, with considerable floods in the water meadows on each side – but that is nothing unusual. This morning – steady light rain.

Day One – well, I am ashamed to call it a day! We drove to the agreed starting place, inflated the kayak, assembled the oar and stowed the gear under the net. I then said goodbye to Caroline and pushed off, just after 9 o'clock. I returned a sadder and a wiser – and wetter – man, at 10.30! Ah well; to paddle hopefully is better than to arrive, as Robert Louis Stevenson might have said.

The first two minutes of my voyage went swimmingly. The stream then narrowed, and was soon choked with reeds. I pushed through these as best I could, but eventually came to a halt. I then realised that the river was divided for that stretch – a common occurrence, I suppose, in very flat land. I guessed that the other stream, away to my right, was the main one. I secured the craft, stepped out of it into ankle-deep water, and waded through sodden ground to the main stream to prospect; then went back, fetched the boat, and dragged it across the wet grass. Short stretches of the main stream were more open, and paddling along it was a pleasure, but I soon came to more obstruction. This was mainly in the form of willows growing on the banks or actually in the river, cluttering the way with their drooping branches, and with dead logs and branches floating or submerged. When there was no clear water, and not enough space to wield the paddle, I sometimes had to work myself through by pulling on the branches.

Thankfully there was no one in sight, and no dogs either; only herds of fairly noisy and inquisitive cows in fields on both sides, indignant at this trespass on their peace. I pressed on, hoping all the time for clearer water, until I met another obstacle: a footbridge, with a clearance of only a few inches. This I managed to negotiate without too much difficulty; I let the current hold the kayak sideways on to the bridge, stepped up onto it, then hauled the boat onto the bridge under the lower metal rail, dropped it on the other side, stepped in carefully, sat down and continued on my way.

After more of the tree- and weed-dodging, a large house came in sight on my left; this was Cuddington Mill. There was no sign of any mill, but the house was embarrassingly close to the water; I expected to be seen, and only wondered what my reception would be: a polite “Excuse me...”, or a furious “What the hell...”? Amazingly, no one appeared, and no dog barked. I struggled on. Then came the real adventure.

There was another footbridge, with hardly any clearance. I reckoned to repeat the hoisting-over process. But this time the horizontal rails on each side of the bridge were too close together for the kayak to pass through. So I had to heave it almost upright in the water, then lever it over the top rail, about 4ft high, and drop it the other side. It needed all my strength, but I did it. Then came a minor disaster. I stepped down into the boat and sat down, but before I could grab the oar, lying on the bridge, the current started moving me away. I reached out too quickly, over-balanced, and the kayak capsized. Holding onto it, I swam the few strokes to the shore, and got onto the bank, which was not easy, as it was sloping, wet and slippery. I was totally drenched. Thankfully it was not cold, so that did not matter too much. I was only worried for my mobile phone and camera, but they were in a small bag in my kit bag, so all was well. I righted the boat, got in again, grabbed the paddle, and pressed slowly on.

Having overcome this hurdle, I hoped for nothing worse, and expected all the time that the river would soon open out and become more navigable. Alas, no! Only a short distance on, the trees became thicker than ever, and with no glimpse of any clearing beyond, I had to admit defeat. I could not go on.

I was not so far from civilisation – away to my right, up the slope of the hill, I could see Chearsley, and along the horizon on my left I saw lorries moving – the A418 Thames-Aylesbury road. But I was some distance from any road, and I did not fancy trekking across fields, perhaps encountering cows, barbed wire fences, or farmers. Anyway, I could not abandon the boat. There was only one option – to go back the way I had come. This I managed, coping with all the same obstacles in reverse, and lifting the boat over the two footbridges. I was now going upstream, so the current was noticeably against me; it was not too strong, but it made steering that much more difficult. I got back to the starting place without further mishap, at half past ten; deflated the kayak, and stacked the gear in the layby. Thankfully the mobile

phone worked; I rang Caroline, and we were home by eleven. A hot shower, dry clothes and a coffee felt good!

I was certainly pleased with the boat. With so many marshy shallows to ride over, overhanging branches to push through, and floating logs to negotiate, I was afraid of damage to the plastic; but it is tough, and survived, and in the few stretches of clear water, was a pleasure to handle. It just needed a certain amount of wiping down when we got home, and cleaning out of willow twigs and leaves, as well as water!

The light rain continued for most of the day. In the evening I walked over to the Thame Barns Centre for a meeting of Thame Historical Society, and heard a brilliant illustrated talk on the parish of St Thomas, Osney, in Oxford – an area around the canal and the railway, off the tourist track, but full of history, which has featured in recent news because of flooding.

How am I to think about that first day? “One crowded hour of glorious life”, as Scott loved to quote? A moment of madness? Or just a ridiculous waste of time? Well, it has been a good experience. It shows, for one thing, the seductive unreality of maps. That sinuous little blue line, so clear, so sharp edged, is enough to make anyone want to explore. But how different from the clogged, weedy, reedy, willowy, muddy log-jammed reality on the ground!

There is also a deeper value in such a quixotic exercise. It has taken me to one of the wild places. Earlier this year I read *The Wild Places* by Robert MacFarlane, which explores and describes some of the remotest places in the British Isles. But the most interesting facet of that exploration is that you don’t need to go to the Cairngorms, or the Burren, or Cape Wrath, to find wildness. Some of the wild places are very near. One chapter of the book is about the “holloways” of England. These hollow ways are ancient paths or lanes which have become disused but are still there; totally overgrown, but discernible; hidden, but viable; often sunk between high banks, green tunnels below the level of the landscape.

My little stream, or the tiny part of it I have traversed, is a little like that; below ground level (but not much); offering a bird’s eye view – a water bird. Well, not perhaps a duck; say the view of a very tall swan! At any rate, for a short stretch of time this morning I was isolated from 21st century Buckinghamshire; very near its bustling life, but remote from it, noticed only by cows and a few water birds, and the occasional red kite soaring over. That perhaps makes it worthwhile.

At any rate, it has not deterred me from wanting to continue the journey tomorrow. Should we not say, as Gerard Manley Hopkins said,

What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wilderness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wilderness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

Naturalists and conservationists are no doubt glad that such places exist. It is surely comforting to know that England must be riddled with little rivers and streams comparatively unaffected by human development. Together with unploughed moorland, unimproved meadow and unmanaged woodland, they must be our best safeguard for the survival of many kinds of wildlife.

7. Day Two

September 10 (Wednesday). The next starting point I thought viable on the route of the river was Notley Abbey. This is a beautiful Elizabethan mansion, once owned by Sir Lawrence Olivier and Vivien Leigh. It has recently been taken over by a firm that runs it for wedding venues.

We drove down the long drive under an avenue of lime trees. There was parking on the left, very close to the river, though within sight of the house. No one came out. Two cars passed – people going to work there, we supposed – but did not stop. A pony neighed, a dog barked, and two rabbits hurried away. We blew up the kayak, stowed the gear, and I was off by 8.45, in good time for Caroline to get back to Thame Church for the monthly “Sparklers” event for parents and pre-school children. The day opened with sunshine – “a season of clear shining to cheer us after rain”, in the words of Cowper’s hymn.

This trip was much more successful. There were still a number of trees, weeds, and other debris in the water, which slowed down progress, but far more open water. I still had to land on the bank and drag the boat over the grass to avoid an obstacle two or three times. But the river led me steadily on towards Thame. There, away to my right, Long Crendon Church and Manor House stood out in the sun. Then came the long range of buildings on Long Crendon Industrial Estate. There was a minor setback when the river narrowed to about 10ft, with barbed wire fences on both sides, which was slightly daunting – and then stopped altogether! The barbed wire ran right across in front of me, and the water seemed to peter out. I realised I had taken a wrong turning; paddled back about a hundred yards, and to my relief found the main stream. And then, at last, a glimpse of the great tower of St Mary's Church, Thame, peeping through the trees.

Several bridges were coming up, and I wondered in advance whether there would be enough clearance to float under them. There was, but only just. Sometimes I had to lean flat on my back in the kayak to pass under. First there was the bridge on the Long Crendon road, B4011; then the western part of Thame bypass, the river going from north to south; then Old Thame Bridge, now only a footpath, used mainly by dog walkers; and then the bypass again, going from south to north. Leaning on the parapet of Old Thame Bridge was an elderly man with flowing white hair; he is a common sight in the town. We greeted each other, and I passed under the bridge. He was the only person I saw during the day's trip, besides the people at Shabbington. Good; that is how I liked it!

Just before the last of these bridges, the Cuttlebrook enters the river. I did not notice it. It gives its name to a wildlife conservation reserve where I have often worked as one of the team of volunteers. In fact there is a work party there today; I should be with them!

My constant companions were animals and birds. There were fields of sheep, who took no notice of me, and herds of cows which approached the river in a mob and then stampeded; why do cows do that? Occasionally I saw a small animal swimming, but too far away to see what it was. Lots of signs of small fish. I am no good at spotting unusual birds, or identifying birdsong, but there were plenty of common birds. Ducks everywhere. It is extraordinary that ducks are the most human-friendly birds when you feed them in the park, but here they seem the wildest and shyest; also the noisiest. Groups of them would fly up with a great flurry a long way ahead at the first sight of my boat. There were plenty of pigeons, magpies, rooks and seagulls; swallows skimming the surface; a couple of Canada geese (or were they barnacle?). Swans – a family of four walked slightly ahead of me for the length of two fields, and then slipped into the water ahead as if to escort me. They swam faster than I could paddle. Red kites – we have become quite blasé about them in the area in recent years, there are so many. And herons; once I saw five of them take off into the air at the same time, an impressive sight.

The river skirts shyly round Thame on its north west side, but does not present itself to the town. After the church, I saw glimpses of The Prebendal, the historic property now owned by Robin Gibb of the Beegees, on my left. I expected the garden to run down to the river's edge, but there is a thick belt of trees in between. Then comes what was Rycotewood College until a few years ago (centering on the old workhouse building), now a new housing development. After that, I hardly saw a house.

Out in the country again, there was another farm bridge with about 2ft clearance, which I managed to float under. For a long stretch there was good clear water, but then again I encountered more tree-blockage, and had some more unpleasant battling through to do. On one occasion, there was another near-disaster; in grappling with the willows, I let go of the paddle. Was it gone for ever, I wondered? Would it end up at the Thames Barrier? Luckily it caught on a grove of reeds about fifty yards down stream, and I was able to drift down onto it, with a little hand-paddling to steer. I stopped for lunch in a cow-less meadow, dragging the boat onto the grass and sitting in it, the most comfortable position. I read a little, and phoned Caroline to report progress. The weather had clouded over, but it was mild and dry. However a fresh breeze got up, which made paddling a little more difficult, as my progress was roughly south-west, right into it. The next stretch was fairly featureless farmland, until I saw the squat tower of Shabbington church ahead, and some cottages on the right. The river here divides into three or four channels, and it is an area that commonly floods, but this time I managed to stay in the main stream. It was about half past one. Here I moored the boat, and went for a short footpath walk, to stretch my legs, and dry off a bit. It was not raining, but inevitably I got pretty wet in the boat. Then back to shoot the bridge, another very low one, and emerged to surprise a couple of parties of people enjoying their drinks on the lawn of The Old Fisherman. This is a popular riverside pub, and is to Thame what The Trout at Godstow is to Oxford.

The river turns south at Shabbington, and then makes a long curve to the right till it passes under a bridge (in fact, two bridges) on the narrow Ickford-Tiddington road. I traversed this section without incident, and reached the bridge at about 3.30. Here I would call it a day; but it ended with another mishap. I needed to moor the boat as close to the bridge as possible. Barbed wire fences made it difficult, and the only place I could see to land was close to the bridge, and covered with six-foot high nettles. The trouble was there was no firm bank, but a very slippery muddy slope, and in stepping out I lost my balance, and the kayak tilted on its side, resulting in both the gear and myself being pretty well soaked. I secured the boat, and would have phoned Caroline from there, but the mobile phone had suffered from the ducking and would not work. I hid the oar, my bag and life jacket, and walked to Tiddington, about a mile. There was a phone box by the bus stop; card only; I had no card. A kind lady in the petrol station shop let me use her mobile, Caroline came to meet me, we picked up the gear, and so ended the day, with another session of drying things on radiators. In the evening I was one of the front of house team at the Thame Players Theatre in Nelson Street; the play was Richard Harris' *Party Piece*, an ingenious comedy.

Not a trouble-free day, but at least I had navigated the River Thame from Notley to Tiddington, a distance of about five miles, for a large part of the distance following the county boundary between Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire. I had now done at least part of the thing I had dreamed of doing for years.

8. Day Three

September 12 (Friday). Yesterday was a rest day, filled with various domestic doings. I bought a new mobile phone, and took my watch to be repaired; it had suffered from the ducking. (This was going to be an expensive trip.) In the evening was my weekly church house group, which I was leading, in our house (venue and leader rotate). We did a Bible study on the unity of the Spirit.

Today I set off from Ickford Bridge at about 9am, and soon saw a solitary fisherman. A dialogue ensued, friendly, I am glad to say.

"Good morning. I hope I am not disturbing your fishing."

"That's all right. I must say, I've never seen a boat on the river before. Have you got permission?" - asked out of interest, not aggression. (Answer avoided; too complicated to explain!)

"No, well, I'm trying to explore it as much as possible. I want to write a book about it."

"Oh yes? Actually, there is a book about the river already."

"Well yes, I know..." and I drifted out of hearing. That would be Tony Chaplin's excellent book.

The next section of the river was encouragingly clear, and at some point I would have passed the point where an annual tug-of-war is held between the men of Ickford (Bucks.) and the men of Tiddington (Oxon.). The losers, of course, or at least the front man, gets dragged into the river. It has been going since 1953. A little further on, the Bucks. boundary turns north, away from the river, and now it is Oxon. on both sides.

Within an hour I had encountered more blockages, and at one point had to land the boat and drag it over the grass. Most of this area was featureless farm land, with not a man in sight (which suited me) - "sweet uneventful countryside", as John Betjeman said of Essex. At one point there was a large flock of Canada (? or whatever) geese, standing motionless on the far side of a field. With the constant flights of duck, I might have been in Slimbridge, or on the Norfolk Broads. Then there was a huge field with perhaps a hundred cows, not moving towards me or stampeding this time, but simply standing. They were not in a herd but spaced out; so beautiful in their black, white, and russet brown, so statuesque, that somebody should have painted them.

The next landmark was one of the best gardens in England - though a thick belt of trees stands between it and the river, and I saw nothing more than a few roofs, a poly-tunnel, and an open-air sculpture. This was the famous Waterperry Gardens, home of a School of Horticulture since the 1930s.

The way then led to Waterstock, a tiny village and a mill, which I reached at about 11am. The mill is a beautiful brick and timber house set in the middle of the river, which divides around it. I stopped just short of it, and moored on the left bank. I wanted a break, to stretch my legs, and visit the church. This I could only do by trespassing; I walked through the garden belonging to the mill, climbed a fence, crossed a field, and emerged on a track alongside a riding school, where a cheerful woman instructor pointed the way to the footpath which led to the church. It was open. A typical village church, like thousands of others around the country. There is a heraldic window showing

the genealogy of the Ashehurst family, a millennium window with bright colours and simple symbols, and an impressive brass panel showing the Bishops of the Diocese and the Rectors and patrons of Waterstock from the year twelve hundred and something. The last rector named was our friend David Wood-Robinson, who was Rector of Holton from 1973.

I walked back to the river – and there was a man working in the garden! “Good morning; I’m afraid I’m trespassing, but…” Then, a piece of good luck; he was a friendly gardener, the owners were away, and he not only suggested it would be safer carry the boat down below the bridge, but helped me do it!

I negotiated further fallen tress, but on the whole the river became wider. I soon began to hear traffic noise, and passed under the M40 motorway, gliding under the vast concrete bridge with cars thundering above me, at about 11.50. I stopped in an empty meadow ten minutes further on, with the hum of traffic from the M40 on my right and the A40 on my left. Lunch, supplemented by a few nice blackberries.

All had gone well till then, but now came a serious setback. Gliding onwards, escorted by five swans, I came to a dead end: a weir. The swans moved to the right, and I saw there was another channel, so I followed – but it only led to another weir. This was Holton Mill, and I could see no way of carrying the boat round. There was nothing for it but to turn back.

Paddling with the current was pleasant enough, but going against it was hard work. I made my way back to the motorway, and investigated the shore to see if there was a way to land, but it was all steep banks, nettles, and a barbed wire fence. The only thing to do was to press on back to Waterstock. Then it began to rain, gently at first, then heavily, and I ended the day almost as wet as if I had fallen in the river. It was hard going, but I arrived back at the point below the mill, where I had launched with the help of the friendly gardener, at about 2.15. I moored the boat with its pegs, and walked back through the garden and up to the church. Thank God for open churches! No one was about, so I took off my soaking top layer of clothing and left it in the porch, with my bag and life-jacket. I then had an hour or so to wait, because Caroline was not free till 3.15. No one came into the church, and it would have been a pleasant wait, if I had not been so dripping wet! Eventually I rang, but could not get the new mobile to connect. Thankfully, a friendly resident in a cottage down the road, who sounded Irish, let me use their phone, Caroline arrived twenty minutes later, and all was well. Thankfully, a free evening, as this time I was really tired.

The weekend intervened. On Saturday I went up to London for a committee meeting of the Association of Christian Writers, of which I am administrator for the time being; a useful and encouraging meeting, and a good sense of bonding, though we only meet as a committee three times a year. The meeting was in a hall in Oxford Street. The massive Saturday crowds contrasted strikingly with my solitude of yesterday! I walked back to Marble Arch at about 4.30 to get my bus, and there were huge streams of people gathering in Hyde Park for Proms in the Park, and there were touts at the gates selling tickets and flags.

In the evening we watched the Last Night of the Proms, conducted by Sir Roger Norrington. I was at school with him, and in the same year. I recalled his conducting the house choir singing *The Old Superb* in the House Music Competitions. He so enthused the whole house, even the non-musical among us, that we won. In his speech he acknowledged the day’s sunshine, which we had not seen much of for weeks – “the first day of the English summer”. He also recited a touching little eight-line poem about music, which I guess summed up his lifelong devotion to the art.

Sunday was the second day of our summer, and when we sat outside for lunch it was almost too hot to sit in the sun. After lunch, we drove back to Waterstock Mill, drove boldly up the drive, and rang the bell. The owners were back; they had already found the boat, and lifted it up into their garden. The man was courteous but disapproving. “Some rivers are navigable and some are not. The Thame is the latter. As simple as that.” Well, I could see the point. I made my apology as graciously as possible, we collected the boat, drained out the water as best we could, deflated it, packed it into the car, and drove home, after inspecting the next possible starting point, Wheatley Bridge.

9. Day Four

September 15 (Monday). The weather today was almost ideal; calm, dry and mild, with intervals of watery sunshine; not too cold and not too hot. For the first time I spent the day in shirtsleeves. We drove to Wheatley Bridge (which we had often driven over on the way to the Asda petrol station, cheapest in the area, or to visit

friends in Wheatley). There was a convenient small layby close to the bridge, with a wall dropping about ten feet into a meadow. I walked round by the nearest gap in the hedge (used by anglers), while Caroline dropped the kayak and other gear over the wall. I pumped up the kayak and stowed the gear. There was an unpleasant muddy slope down to a little backwater, but luckily there were some abandoned pallets lying about, so I manouvered two of them onto the mud to make a launching stage, and I was on the river just after 10am.

After shooting the bridge, another feature soon came in view – massive brick and stone piers on each side. This would have been the old railway bridge, the line that went from Oxford through Wheatley and Thame to Princes Risborough. I was interested to think that I must have passed over that bridge, now a gaping space, many times. When I was in my teens we lived at Stanton St John, and I was in boarding school in London. I used to get the train from Paddington to Princes Risborough, change trains, and get out at Wheatley, where my parents would meet me in the car.

I had clear water for about 45 minutes, the pleasantest part of the trip so far. Then came further obstruction, and I battled through many tangles of overhanging willow and hawthorn. Once the blockage across the river was so complete I had to land and drag the boat round.

Ever since childhood I have loved *The Wind in the Willows*, and re-read it many times. But for these few days, willows became the enemy. A useful corrective, perhaps, to a too easy view of the harmony of man and nature. I felt a little of its hostility. What crevasses, avalanches and minus 30 degree temperatures are to Ranulph Fiennes and Bear Grylls, willow trees are, for the moment, to me. What crazy things they are! Why can't they stand up straight, like other respectable trees? They lurk beneath the surface like black-mouthed crocodiles; their rotting logs wallow like hippos; their gnarled and twisted trunks and branches writhe into fantastic shapes like chinese dragons; their twigs and leaves clutch and drag like spooky arms grabbing at you in a ghost train. They are contorted into anarchic shapes more fantastic than modern sculptures. They are as happy standing in the water as alongside it. I once saw a tree totally uprooted, which had fallen away from the river, and was slowly dying, but the root-mass stood up in the water like a black wall. Another formed a huge cave, that would have been big enough for me to shelter under from the rain. These trees sprawl all over the river as if they owned the place. I felt some sympathy for the Israelites who sat down and wept by the waters of Babylon, and hung their harps on the willows in the midst thereof.

I pressed on, and came to a dilemma. I saw from the map that a mile above Cuddesdon Mill the river divided, and the left stream was marked 'sluice'. I am not too clear about the precise distinction of meaning between a sluice and a weir (though I know one comes from French and one from Anglo-Saxon, a common source of pair-words in our language). This was no kind of gate, but just a narrowing of the stream between two stone piers, causing a water-race and a drop of perhaps one foot.

I probably could have shot it without damage, but I decided on the safer option. The right stream immediately narrowed, and was impeded both by trees and by large groves of rushes, reeds, and bamboo grass, very picturesque, especially when the sun shone on them. For my purpose they were not so great, and sometimes narrowed the stream to two or three feet, so that I could not use the paddle, but had to let the current carry me through. Needless to say, where the stream narrowed, the current swirled through much faster.

At last I began to hear a sound of rushing water, and at about 11.45 I saw Cuddesdon Mill. The river passed under rounded arches with enough clearance – perhaps 3 ft. – but they were correspondingly narrow, and I decided not to risk shooting them. I landed on a convenient grassy area on the right bank, which thankfully was not anyone's garden. Beside it ran a small road, and the mill house was the other side of that. No one appeared. Now I had to carry the boat quite a way, perhaps a hundred yards, along the road and over the second bridge. Thankfully there were no cars, but I met a charming and friendly young mother walking with a push-chair, a little girl and a dog. We chatted.

"I'm exploring the river, as much as I can. I've come down from Wheatley this morning."

"What a good idea!"

No one had said that to me before. And if she had known what it was like, she would not have said it either. But I blessed her for it. It seemed to make the whole crazy venture worthwhile! They were the only people I saw during today's trip. Which suited me fine.

There was no good access near the bridge, so I carried the boat a further fifty yards and luckily found a footpath

gate, dragged it across a grass field, and relaunched successfully. There followed another good smooth stretch, with only a few minor obstructions. At times the river sprawled out until it seemed as wide as the Thames itself. I saw a fine flock of thirty-two geese standing in a meadow, not moving. I counted them. Further on, I stopped for a lunch break in an untenanted field. The ground was waterlogged, so I pulled the boat onto the grass and sat in it.

Moving on, a picturesque village soon appeared on top of a rise away to the west, my right, crowned with a venerable tower, the very image of

The decent church that topt the neighbouring hill described by Goldsmith. This was Garsington, famous for the summer opera seasons held annually (until this year) in the grounds of the Manor House; in a previous generation owned by Lady Ottoline Morrell, with her bizarre lifestyle and generous hospitality to young writers and artists. The village remained in my view for quite a time, like Dorchester Abbey seen from the Thames; the river seems to curl round it.

The peace was palpable. I was within six miles of the centre of Oxford, yet here was a world where I saw no human being, seemingly occupied only by cows, water rats, moorhens, ducks and herons. I passed under what I must call a bridge, though no one could have crossed it. It looked as if it had been last used about the time of the Boer War. The iron girders were rusty, and most of the timbers missing. And then I came to something which surprised me: a boathouse. It was certainly that, for there was a wooden runway leading into the water, but the door was open and there was no boat. I had in fact seen one very small flat-bottomed fibreglass boat yesterday, but it looked dirty and abandoned, and no other sign of navigation on the river at all. The only possible use for a boat, as far as I could see, would be fishing.

After the total quiet, I then began to hear the faint noise of traffic ahead. Then came a very high brick wall on my right, sure sign of a kitchen garden belonging to an aristocratic house, and a moment later I caught a glimpse of the mansion itself – Chislehampton House. Five minutes later I saw the handsome five-arched stone bridge, my destination for today. Immediately below the bridge there was an inviting grassy patch with some trees on the left. It did not seem to be a private garden, though there was a simple seat on it, and there was a house on the right bank opposite. But I soon realised this would not do for a mooring place; it was a tiny island! So I pushed off again, found a secluded spot on the left bank, secured the boat with pegs, left the oar and the life jacket, and walked through a field back up to the road, carrying my bag. It was about three o'clock.

Caroline was not free till 3.30, so I walked up through the village (which was surprisingly busy with cars, and a bus) to see the church, which is apart from the village, but close to the big house. This is the little Georgian church that John Betjeman campaigned to save, and wrote in typical nostalgic style,

How warm the many candles shine
On SAMUEL DOWBIGGIN's design
For this interior neat,
These high box pews of Georgian days
Which screen us from the public gaze
When we make answer meet;

How gracefully their shadow falls
On bold pilasters down the walls
And on the pulpit high.
The chandeliers would twinkle gold
As pre-Tractarian sermons roll'd
Doctrinal, sound and dry.

*Verses turned in aid of a Public Subscription (1952)
towards the restoration of the Church of St. Katherine Chislehampton, Oxon.*

Stood the church clock at ten to three? Well, no, actually, the large blue and gilded clock, dated 1762, stood at a quarter past three. Which was the actual time!

I rang Caroline, and sat on a grass bank reading the paper until she picked me up at about 4.0 at The Coach and Horses, and we drove home. After a welcome cup of tea, I went to my keep-fit group (my lower limbs certainly needed exercise!), and after supper we went to a rehearsal for the musical *Godspell*, which is being performed in St Mary's Church Thame in October.

10. Day Five.

September 17 (Wednesday). Yesterday was a family day – Auntie Barbara’s 86th birthday. We drove over to her nursing home in Reading, and celebrated with her and seven other members of the family. The home provided a fine cake.

Today was a leisurely start; I launched from below Chislehampton Bridge at 10.45. The weather was the same as yesterday, and just right for my purpose: dull and cloudy, but mild, calm and dry. We are certainly into autumn. I got the impression that the water level has dropped; there seems to be more muddy banks exposed, and muddy tree trunks showing. A small river like this rises and falls quickly; it would have risen with the heavy rain on Friday, and then subsided.

One might hope that this river, with very few points where it is crossed by roads, or bordered by houses, would be free of litter, but it was not entirely so. There were the ubiquitous plastic bottles, and festoons of old rags splayed on hawthorn twigs in surreal patterns that beat anything Tracey Emmin could have produced. I saw one dead sheep, two footballs and a red and white traffic cone in the water. Michael Flanders would not have been surprised:

Oh the lily ponds of Suffolk
And the dew ponds of the west
Are part of Britain’s heritage,
The part we love the best.
Her river banks and sea shores
Have a beauty all can share,
Provided there’s at least one boot,
Three treadles tyres,
A half-eaten pork pie,
Some oil drums,
A lorry load of tarblocks
And a broken bedstead there!

The Songs of Michael Flanders and Donald Swann (1977), The Bedstead Men.

Having said that, nature’s detritus is far more extravagant than man’s; the lower tree branches are festooned with dead weeds, rushes, leaves and twigs; where they hang in the water, they sometimes collect a big pile of dirty white foam; in other places clots of rubbish are held two or three feet above the water level, indicating how far the river has fallen after a spate.

The first part of today’s trip was uneventful, with some good clear water. In a mile I passed under the bridge which carries the little road from Stadhampton to Drayton St Leonard. I landed for a brief stop in a meadow on my right, and looking round for any landmark I might recognise, immediately saw two buildings I knew just ahead – the graceful spire of Newington Church, and alongside it the substantial square stone pile of Newington House. Moving on, I saw a most extraordinary erection on the right, not apparently belonging to any house: there was a tall mast like a ship’s mast, held by steel cables, and projecting from it, away from the river, hung up to a diagonal, was something that looked like a diving board. It could presumably be swung round over the river; but who would want to dive into such a muddy stream? It might have been a small moveable footbridge to cross the river, but it did not look long enough; and who would want to cross at that featureless point anyway? A mystery.

I then saw a boat in somebody’s garden, a well cared-for looking rowing boat, covered with a tarpaulin. A little later I saw a flat-bottomed punt in the river, and further on a green canoe. This gave me tremendous hope; it seemed to indicate that the river from here on was easily navigable, with no more blockages. How wrong I was!

So I passed Newington – first a large stone house on my left that looked like an old vicarage, then the church, then Newington House. Just past the house, there was a man on a ride-on mower coming towards the river; I don’t think he noticed me; and when he turned to drive away from me, I paddled hard to get out of sight before he turned again. He was the only man I saw on this day’s trip.

Two swans led me for a large part of the way. It was extraordinary how they seemed to pilot me, keeping far ahead, but just in sight. They recalled Spenser’s *Prothalamion* again:

With that, I saw two Swannes of goodly hewe,

Come softly swimming downe along the Lee;
Two fairer Birds I yet did neuer see;
The snow which doth the top of *Pindus* strew
Did never whiter shew...

I could not see much of Drayton St Leonard, on my right, and the church was not visible, but what did present themselves to the river were some idyllic cottages, half-timbered, brick, plaster and thatch, beautifully maintained, with neat gardens; the sort that might cost a million pounds.

When I stopped at one o'clock and landed for lunch I saw another comforting landmark: away on the horizon to the left were the Sinodun Hills, better known as Wittenham Clumps, which we occasionally used to climb as children. They made me feel I was on the home stretch, for they are south of the Thames. But before I could reach my destination, there were two passages where the river divided, and these confronted me with as great a challenge as ever, or worse. I may have chosen the narrower stream; anyway, battles with trees and reeds continued, the boat getting more clogged with twigs and leaves and mud. One time, in the middle of a tangle of branches, I had to stand up in the boat and step over a horizontal branch that barred my way. I knew that there were a series of lakes to the right, former gravel pits, but they were not connected to the river. I passed a large electricity station on the right, and then there was some other industrial building which actually straddled the river; there was a concrete channel, with plenty of headroom, but it was only two feet wide, just too narrow for the boat. Luckily there was a ledge in the concrete which I could walk along, holding the kayak sideways, and so I got through.

At last the two streams reunited, and I was into wider calmer water. And as if by way of a reward, I saw what I had never seen before, a total surprise, a line of bright blue a foot above the water going from right to left ahead of me, the movement so fast it looked like a continuous thread of colour. It can only have been a kingfisher. And a heron rose in front, and a red kite soared overhead. The birds were saying, "Well done!" Or perhaps they were laughing to themselves and saying, "What a fool!"

Soon after that I began to hear traffic noise, and so came to the bridge under the Oxford-Henley road, the A423, and I knew I was near journey's end. The river divided again, with substantial weir to the right, so I went left. I had planned to end the voyage at Dorchester Bridge, but just before that there was the mill at Overy. This was impassable, so I landed on the right hand bank amid waist-high nettles, beached the boat, pushed through some undergrowth and over a barbed-wire fence, and came into Hurst Meadow, an open wild-life area. From this a narrow footpath led back over the river, past an ancient wooden building that had once been the mill. Attached to this was a pleasant-looking house, dated 1712, and in the garden was a pleasant-looking woman, who was not only friendly but helpful. An older woman was there too, her mother perhaps, doing some gardening. She said if I landed on the other side (which was on her property) I could drag the boat through a field and so to a minor road. So I went back, ferried across the river (rather wary of the mill-race), and landed again – this time a little carelessly, getting soaked to the ankles. I successfully pulled the boat across the paddock, saying hello to Molly the pony on the way, collapsed the kayak for the last time, folded it up and stacked it by a gate with the other gear. Then carrying my bag, I walked along the little road to Dorchester Bridge, the fine curving stone structure which carries the road over two (at least) branches of the Thame.

I had not completed the journey of the Thame to its mouth, but there is no road access to the point where it empties into the Thames. The only alternative would have been to paddle right out into the Thames and down to Shillingford, the next accessible point, but I decided to end my journey here. Legally, that would have required a licence. It was about 3 o'clock. It is strange, in view of the literary hype accorded to the junction of the Thame and Isis, that Robert Gibbings apparently passed the spot without giving it a mention in his book.

It was on this last stretch of the river, no one knows just where, that King Cynegils of the West Saxons was baptised by St. Birinus in 634AD. It must have been a somewhat muddy affair. From this historic event grew the foundation of the Abbey, and the establishment of the Diocese of Dorchester which remained until the Normans came and reorganised things, who knows why. It is also the River Thame near Dorchester that is the setting for the painting *The Boer War* by John Byam Liston Shaw (1872-1919) in the Birmingham City Art Gallery. I did not see any beautiful black-clad young widows standing pensively on the bank – but the rest of the picture might have been painted yesterday, it evokes so well the country I have been passing through. (If I had seen one in that position, I would have warned the young lady how dangerous it was to stand so close to the water's edge!) It was also about here, apparently, that William Morris saw

Down in the foss the river fed of old

That through long lapse of time has grown to be
The little grassy valley that you see.

The Earthly Paradise, August.

I sat on the parapet at the end of the bridge and rang Caroline. Then I walked up to the Abbey, sat down on the grass outside, and changed my socks. Leaving my bag and wet shoes in the porch, I went inside in my socks (as one would into a Buddhist temple), and saw a small knot of people, among whom was the Rector of Dorchester Abbey (which now functions as a parish church), Sue Booyes. She is also Area Dean for the area which includes Thame. I told her briefly what I had been doing, knowing that she is interested in such things, as she and her husband have a boat on the Thames.

I put my wet shoes on again, and Caroline picked me up at Bridge End. We drove down the lane to Overy and picked up the boat and gear, and so home. I feel the smell of the river will be with me, and in my clothes, for quite a time to come -

the thrilling-sweet and rotten
Unforgettable, unforgotten
River-smell

that Rupert Brooke knew and loved from his experience of boating and bathing on the Granta. Smelly I may have been, but thankfully I had sustained no accident or injury, other than capsizing twice, and numerous nettle stings and scratches from brambles and hawthorns. Nor had the boat. I am full of praise for the kayak; it went through hazards no inflatable should be subjected to, time and again scraping over submerged logs and against spiky branches. It ended up full of leaves, twigs and mud, and took a deal of cleaning, but showed no sign of a scratch. It had served me well. And being so shallow in draught – I guessed not more than four or five inches - it was perhaps the only kind of craft that could have done the job. As Wordsworth said in *Peter Bell*,

My little vagrant Form of light,
My gay and beautiful Canoe,
Well have you played your friendly part.

Well, I have done more or less (but rather less than more) of what I dreamed of doing. A quixotic adventure, of no benefit to anyone; a strange voyage into the unknown, not into space, but within hearing of roads and within sight of villages; the hidden in our midst. The impression that remains with me is the difficulty, and even hostility, of large parts of the river to anyone who tries to navigate it. It has certainly de-romanticised it. It is no longer merely the alluring sinuous blue line on the map, or the “boyish Thame” of literary description. And that leads to a serious historical question.

Was the River Thame of much more importance in former centuries? We know that there were at least nine mills driven by it – Nether Winchendon, Cuddington, Notley, Scotsgrove, Thame, Waterstock, Holton, Cuddesdon and Overy – which were no doubt important to local agriculture and industry. But was it ever used for navigation? There is no reason why it should not have been, if kept clear of trees. The literary passages referred to in my poem (Prelude 2), and even more in Tony Chaplin’s authoritative book, indicates that the Thame was well known. He quotes John Taylor, the 17th century “Water Poet”, referring to the river as

Poor Thame all heavy and disconsolate,
Unnavigable, scorned, despised, disgraced.

Well I must say, that would be rather my view of it. Robert Gibbings, too, says “The Kennet is one of the few tributaries of the Thames which are navigable”. However, Chaplin disagrees. He says,

“the Thame was once commercially navigable this far back from Dorchester [Drayton St Leonard]. For recreational purposes, the river is of course navigable much further upstream as well as downstream, and kayaks and rowing boats, not to mention more makeshift pontoons and rafts, are occasionally to be seen along much of the river’s length.”

I am surprised. I can only think that boats are used for fishing on very short reaches; I rarely found a stretch of more than 200 yards or so fit for unhindered boating.

The Thame is repeatedly presented by old writers, not as one tributary among many, but as an equal partner with the Isis, joining to create the Thames. The Thames has lots of tributaries – Coln, Windrush,

Evenlode, Churn, Dorn, Cherwell, Loddon, Mole, Wey, Brent, Lea; why should the Thames have some sort of pre-eminence? One might expect the Cherwell to have been regarded as the spouse; part at least of it is navigable, and it joins the Isis at Oxford. We might have had a “Cher-isis” river. But whenever a marriage is talked about, it is the Thames which is the bride. Where did all this flummery come from? I can only suppose that Dorchester was such an important centre of ecclesiastical power that it lent its prestige to the river on which it stands. At any rate, I am sure that in all literary history never can such a narrow, clogged, muddy, reedy, tree-choked waterway have been celebrated with such poetic fantasy. In so many ways, the Thames seems unique.

I am glad to have done the trip, but I will never do such a thing again. After this excursion into the wild, I shall relapse into normality, enjoy my mid-morning coffee and my afternoon siesta, and quietly look forward to my 75th birthday, if I can survive for the next three months. The only practical benefit of the experience might be the authority with which I can now warn anyone who thinks of it (though no one will), never, never to be so foolish as to attempt to navigate the River Thames, or any other similar stream, in any kind of boat whatsoever. “Old men should be explorers”, said TS Eliot; but I am not sure that this is what he had in mind.

