

# On a Bend in the River

— History and Community along the Thames Path —



by Duncan JD Smith

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In 1777 Samuel Johnson declared that “When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life.” These days, however, even the gregarious doctor might despair at the capital’s overcrowded streets. Fortunately, the city’s suburbs are easily reached by Tube, offering just as much colour at a fraction of the pace.

Fine examples in the west are Hammersmith and Chiswick. Not their bustling high streets but

ABOVE: Old Chiswick and the Thames at low tide with Chiswick Mall on the right and Chiswick Eyot on the left (photo © Duncan JD Smith).

rather their tidal riverbanks. Here they define one of the distinctive bends in the River Thames which are so much a feature of the map of London. Much of the riverbank area has been spared overdevelopment, thanks to the divisive Great West Road, keeping it a place apart. This controversial road effectively left parts of the river’s north bank isolated. Indeed, the riverbank in Chiswick is only accessible by underpass.

The streets in this area offer history and community in abundance, with intriguing homes and artists’ studios, houseboats and industrial relics,

RIGHT: Our map shows part of Greater London (shaded yellow) extending upstream along the Thames to the Surrey boundary (map scale 1:400,000).

all set against a backdrop with surprising elements of rurality — not quite what one might expect just a few kilometres from central London.

### BRIDGES AND HOUSEBOATS

The riverbank is accessible courtesy of the Thames Path, a 294-km-long National Trail following the river from its source in the Cotswolds to the sea. Just three kilometres of it cover the distance from Hammersmith Bridge, where this walk begins, upstream to Barnes Railway Bridge in Chiswick.

It is difficult not to admire Hammersmith Bridge. A monument to Victorian engineering, the bridge has connected Hammersmith with Barnes since 1887. Designed by noted civil engineer Sir Joseph Bazalgette, who famously created the first comprehensive sewer system for London, it was not, however, the first bridge on the site. That was designed in 1827 by bridge-building supremo William Tierney Clark and was the first suspension bridge over the Thames.

Running westwards from the bridge is Lower Mall. A microcosm of comfortable Thames river life, it is lined with elegant 18th and 19th-century waterfront homes, venerable pubs such as the Blue Anchor (1722), and several rowing clubs. One of them, the Furnivall Sculling Club, was founded in 1896 by Frederick James Furnivall, a staunch advocate of women's rights, and was the world's first female rowing club.

There's always a bit of a buzz hereabouts but on one day each year Lower Mall attracts thousands of people. They come to watch university rivals Oxford and Cambridge battle it out in the Boat Race, which they've done since 1845. As the course is on the tidal reaches of the Thames, the race is normally conducted on a flood tide between Putney and Mortlake.



The modest whitewashed cottages at numbers 11 and 12 date from the early 17th century and were originally occupied by fisherfolk and wherrymen. Another stands at number 20, opposite which colourful houseboats are moored. Unperturbed by the river's twice-daily rise and fall, the owners take great pride in their community, the stove chimneys of their converted barges puffing merrily. For five generations the moorings were in the hands of the aptly named See family but have recently passed to the owners themselves.

Lower Mall comes to an abrupt end with Westcott Lodge, a fine red-brick Georgian house

Chiswick Mall with (from right to left) Cygnet House, then Oak Cottage, Thamescote and Magnolia, and finally Greenash (photo © Duncan JD Smith).



once a vicarage. Attached to the gable end is an old street lantern given in 1963 by Willy Brandt, then Mayor of West Berlin, to mark Hammersmith's twinning with the Berlin district of Neukölln.

The green space beyond is Furnivall Gardens, laid out in 1951. Remarkably it occupies what was once a navigable inlet called Hammersmith Creek. Industrialisation began here in 1780, with the construction of the Hammersmith Brewery, and by the early 20th century the presence of shipwrights and builders' yards saw the place dubbed "Little Wapping" — a reference to a bustling riverside community, far downstream on the left bank of the Thames. Inevitably river traffic declined and industries relocated, and the last barge sailed from Hammersmith Creek in 1929. Thereafter the Creek was culverted leaving only an outlet in the river wall at Dove Pier. In 1951 steamers ferried

*Perched on the river wall on the opposite side of the Gardens is an intriguing clutch of 18th-century buildings centred on Doves Passage, an ancient 'worple' or bridal way.*

Lower Mall houseboat moorings at Hammersmith (photo © Duncan JD Smith).



excited visitors from here down to the Festival of Britain at Battersea. Before moving on, notice the walled-off area marking the former site of a Quaker meeting house and burial ground destroyed in an air raid during the Second World War.

### ARTISTS AND ACTIVISTS

Perched on the river wall on the opposite side of the gardens is an intriguing clutch of 18th-century buildings centred on Doves Passage, an ancient 'worple' or bridal way. The Dove pub, originally a coffee house, attracts drinkers with its riverside balcony and Britain's smallest bar (an early 20th-century addition when only two-bar pubs warranted full licences). It is also where Thomas Arne composed the music for *Rule, Britannia!* In the house next door, the Arts and Crafts artist TJ Cobden-Sanderson established the Doves Bindery and Press, with its own bespoke typeface.

Farther on is Upper Mall, an eye-catching row of 18th-century houses with tales to tell. Numbers 22–24, for example, were rented by Catherine of Braganza, Dowager Queen of Charles II, for her household when she lived nearby during the late 1680s. The semi-circular bastion in front was a turning circle for her carriage.

Of particular note is Kelmscott House at number 26 erected in 1789. The first notable occupant was Sir Francis Reynolds, who in 1816 pioneered the electric telegraph. He was followed by the great Arts and Crafts pioneer William Morris, who named the house out of affection for his country home in Oxfordshire. He established the Kelmscott Press here and in the adjoining coach house set up looms to produce textiles (it doubled as a lecture hall, where the left-leaning Morris invited Fabians such as Keir Hardie and George Bernard Shaw to speak). Today it forms part of a museum administered by the William Morris Society (for details see [www.williammorrissociety.org](http://www.williammorrissociety.org)).

Even the Victorian houses at numbers 30 to 34 have a story to tell. In 1906 the suffragette Dora Montefiore barricaded herself into number 32 and refused to pay her taxes in protest at the lack of

representation for women in politics. During the 1920s another feminist, the poet and activist Naomi Mitchison, lived in the imposing Rivercourt House beyond (now Latymer Prep School).

A blue plaque on the wall of the Victorian terrace that follows states that the artist and printmaker Eric Ravilious rented rooms here in the early 1930s (his *River Thames at Hammersmith* records the scene). The crow's nest outside is used by officials from the London Corinthian Sailing Club to monitor races (since 1962 their headquarters have been in nearby Linden House, an impressive Georgian mansion). By contrast, the housing complex that comes next is modern, built on the site of the former Albert and Atlanta wharves. It is another reminder of the days when the riverbank was industrialised, a far cry from the early 19th century, when artist JMW Turner had a garden studio here surrounded by meadows.

Passing the Old Ship Inn (1722) and the former red-brick Victorian waterworks (now apartments), St. Peter's Church can just be seen, set several streets back. Built in 1829, when Hammersmith was but a village, its neoclassical stone tower still impresses. Although the cottage of typeface designer Eric Gill that stood here is long gone, the area's artistic credentials live on in Hammersmith Terrace, a rare example of 18th-century suburban terraced housing beyond Bell Steps, where for many years a ferry plied its trade. Among its creative incumbents was Sir Emery Walker, another Arts and Crafts practitioner, who occupied number 7. Following his death in 1933 the house survived intact allowing today's visitors to enjoy its period interiors and William Morris hand-blocked wallpaper ([www.emerywalker.org.uk](http://www.emerywalker.org.uk)).

### OSIERS AND ALE

The river's lure for artists continues in the idiosyncratic homes marking the start of Chiswick Mall. Indeed the modern studios built in the 1970s along St. Peter's Wharf by surrealist artist Julian Trevelyan are only made available to creatives (their south-facing picture windows make full use of the marine light). Trevelyan's own home-cum-



The Dove pub and Doves Passage behind (photo © Duncan JD Smith).

studio was next door in Durham Wharf, used originally to store coals from north-east England. He acquired the house in 1934 and later shared it with his second wife, the artist and teacher Mary Fedden, whom he met at one of the soirées for which Durham Wharf became famous. The annual open days they initiated still continue at St. Peter's Wharf ([www.artistsathome.net](http://www.artistsathome.net)).

Outside Cedar House is an old stone marking what used to be the boundary between Hammersmith and Chiswick (today it heralds the London Borough of Hounslow, of which Chiswick has been a part since 1965). From here onwards the houses grow grander, with separate riverside gardens created in the 1880s, when the riverbanks were extended for the installation of sewage pipes (several can be visited each spring as part of the National Garden Scheme). The gardens are regularly inundated by high spring tides, the silt left in their wake being good for the roses.

The stuccoed Island House dates from about 1800 and is named for the island opposite. Chiswick Eyot (pronounced 'ait') floods at high tide with brackish water favoured by the shrubby osier (*Salix viminalis*), a native species of willow. Its flexible stems (called withies) were once harvested to make baskets for Chiswick's market gardeners and fruit growers, as well as eel traps for its fishermen. Although the last nurseryman closed shop

in 1935, the osiers are still pollarded each February and the withies used in woven revetments to protect the island from tidal damage.

Opposite the far end of the island is a draw dock, a paved ramp where goods were once off-loaded from flat-bottomed barges. Included would have been malt and hops for local breweries, and old ship's rope, the tar from which was used by the Chiswick Press to make its ink. Today the ramp is used by schoolchildren exploring the foreshore and swans that cruise Chiswick Mall when it floods.

Of the lovely houses facing the island most have a story to tell. The three-storey Morton House, for example, boasts a fire insurance plate depicting Britannia. It was issued in the 1720s, when the Mall was becoming fashion-

*Running away from the river is Church Street, so beautifully preserved that it is difficult not to think one is in a country village. Even the Victorian tower of the disused Lamb Brewery scarcely detracts from the scene.*

Church Street and the disused Lamb Brewery (photo © Duncan JD Smith).



able due to the construction of nearby Chiswick House (and the river rather than the unpaved road was the most efficient way of travelling). Another, Walpole House, has seen a colourful roster of incumbents, including the mistress of Charles

II, Barbara Villiers, Irish politician Daniel O'Connell, and more recently the designer Jasper Conran (during its time as a school in the early 19th century, the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray was a pupil, and he memorialised it as Miss Pinkerton's academy in *Van-ity Fair*). The coachman of Walpole House probably lived at nearby Oak Cottage, and it was an unsuccessful attempt to demolish this building to make way for flats that prompt-

ed the creation of the Old Chiswick Protection Society.

Across Chiswick Lane South stands Fuller's Griffin Brewery, where beer has been brewed for over 350 years, filling the air with its hoppy aroma. The brewery passed to Thomas Mawson in 1685, hence Mawson's Row on the right, where the poet Alexander Pope lived for a while. In 1845 the brewery was signed over to three families — the Fullers, Smiths and Turners — and it remains in their descendants' hands to this day (since 1959 their flagship ale has been London Pride). Brewery tours reveal an important complex of 18th and 19th-century industrial structures and a former head brewer's house draped in Britain's oldest wisteria planted in 1816 ([www.fullers.co.uk](http://www.fullers.co.uk)).

#### WHARVES AND MEADOWS

Another interesting group of buildings is centred on the Church of St. Nicholas, patron saint of sailors and fishermen. In front of the whitewashed Old Vicarage is a slipway, where foot ferries docked until 1933, when Chiswick Bridge was opened. The moorings alongside the slipway are a reminder that Chiswick Mall was opened to houseboats during the Second World War to ease the bombed-out capital's housing shortage. One of them, the *Mayflower*, was home to American actor Phil Brown, who appeared in the first *Star Wars* film, and his wife Ginny, who made bespoke shoes for

RIGHT: The Church of St Nicholas in Old Chiswick (photo © Duncan JD Smith).

Hollywood actresses (she recounted her bohemian life here in the book *Swans at my Window*).

Running away from the river is Church Street, so beautifully preserved that it is difficult not to think one is in a country village. Even the Victorian tower of the disused Lamb Brewery scarcely detracts from the scene, which includes a former Elizabethan pub, the Old Burlington. Chiswick first developed as a village around the church in the late 12th century. Although the present building was rebuilt in the late-19th century, the ragstone church tower is resolutely 15th century in date. A notable grave in the churchyard is that of William Hogarth, once the country's most important portraitist, whose former home survives not far away near the Hogarth Roundabout ([www.williamhogarthtrust.org.uk](http://www.williamhogarthtrust.org.uk)). Less well known is Arthur Howell Burden, junior purser on the ill-fated *Lusitania*.

The scene changes dramatically beyond the church. Church Wharf is lined with modern neo-Georgian homes, comfortable but colourless. Here the stories concern what came before. Thus the first few houses sit on land once occupied by tumbledown fishermen's cottages, which went by the colourful name of Slut's Hole (derived from the word 'sluice'). Beyond was once Thornycroft's Boatyard, where between 1864 and 1904 launches and torpedo boats were built for the Royal Navy (the company relocated to Southampton when their vessels could no longer pass beneath Hammersmith Bridge). Around the same time the Chiswick Soap Company began landing wax here for use in manufacturing Cherry Blossom Boot Polish. One night in 1940 incendiary bombs ignited their barges turning the wharf into an inferno.

Another modern housing development on a former wharf is Corney Reach. Prior to these houses being built in the mid-1990s, archaeologists turned up Neolithic flints, Roman pottery, and a Saxon burial. Pier House was built at the same time, a communal facility opened under the auspices of the Chiswick Pier Trust, where the public are educated in all aspects of the river. The Pier



itself, with attendant houseboats and rare visitor moorings, stretches out in front, whilst alongside it are the orange rapid-response vessels of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution.

Corney House, a mansion after which the area is named, was bought and demolished in 1832 by the Duke of Devonshire, whose estate surrounded it. Chiswick once had its own sewage works here but beyond were only ever meadows, and much of it remains open space today having been acquired by a public-spirited local council in 1923. The various playing fields, promenades and allotments are managed by the Dukes Meadows Trust and run all the way to Barnes Railway Bridge, where this journey ends. ■

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