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## INTRODUCTION

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## BACKGROUND

### The Initiative

The Thames through London has increasingly become a focus for both concern and optimism about the city. The river has been identified as 'one of the Capital's greatest but most undervalued resources' and 'the most important natural and visual element in the Capital's unique urban character'<sup>1</sup>. The Thames Landscape Strategy comes as part of a widespread response to the plight and potential of the river.

The initiative for the Strategy originally sprang from the 1991 exhibition of ideas for the capital's river, organised by the Royal Fine Art Commission<sup>2</sup> and inspired by Judy Hillman's *A New Look for London*<sup>3</sup>. As part of the exhibition, Kim Wilkie showed how the upstream Thames is linked by a network of historic landscape lines and vistas to form the landscape structure of this part of the city.

These ideas caught the imagination of local interest groups and coincided with a growing concern to find a way of carrying the special character of the riverside into plans for the future. Although many of these issues are addressed in local authority Unitary Development Plans, there is no co-ordinated strategy which follows the river beyond borough boundaries. Gradually the project evolved into looking at how the riverside as a whole could be enhanced, re-instating parts of the historic landscape to work with today's uses and nature conservation habitats. In the end it was decided that a landscape strategy for the river throughout the area was needed to supplement local authority plans and relate to London-wide policies.

### The River Thames

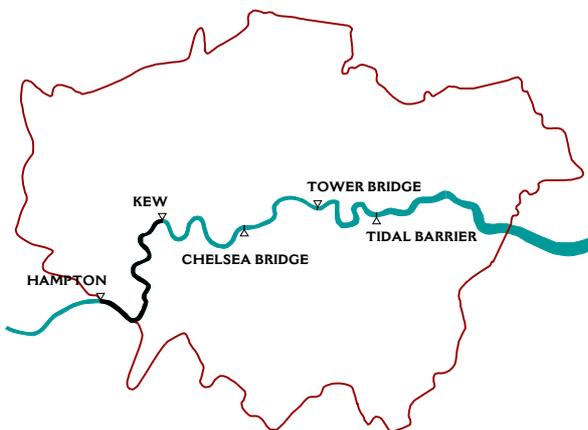
Old Father Thames has a special place in British culture. The river links the capital westwards to Windsor, Oxford and the centre of England and eastwards to the sea. The character of the river changes along its course. Through London, the north-flowing section from Hampton to Kew has a particular arcadian quality, modified between Kew and Chelsea by breweries and larger buildings. The urban centre of London dominates between Chelsea and Tower Bridges, and then changes to the maritime and dockland part of the city as far as the Tidal Barrier. Beyond the Barrier, the marshes and industrial areas of the East Thames Corridor lead to the estuary and the sea.

The upstream London Thames between Hampton and Kew flows through one of the most remarkable metropolitan landscapes in the world. It is a unique combination of a natural landscape, with rural pastures and flood meadows; a formally designed landscape of avenues and vistas; a public landscape of interconnected parks, towpaths and river recreation; a cultural landscape which has inspired painters, poets and composers since the Tudors; and a working landscape of boatyards, docks and commercial centres.

Although the Hampton to Kew stretch is only a part of the continuum of the whole river, it seemed sensible to start the analysis of the Thames with a recognisable and manageable unit. This stretch has been defined by the three palaces, positioned at significant bends in the river, which through their parks and patronage have shaped the character of the landscape over six centuries. Much of the 17th- and 18th-century landscape structure still survives, connecting the palaces and villas along and across the river and up through Richmond Park to the centre of London. Originally a private and privileged landscape, the area has become a haven for recreation and nature conservation, offering more publicly accessible open space and a larger expanse of Sites of Special Scientific Interest than any other part of London.



Old Father Thames



The Thames through the Greater London Area

## The Commission

Following a brief feasibility study in 1992<sup>4</sup>, Kim Wilkie was commissioned in February 1993 as the landscape consultant and environmental planner to draft a landscape strategy for the riverside between Hampton and Kew.

The Strategy has been jointly funded by the Countryside Commission, English Heritage and the Royal Fine Art Commission Trust, with contributions towards the preparation of the final report from English Nature, the National Rivers Authority and private benefactors<sup>5</sup>.

The Strategy has been overseen by the Thames Landscape Steering Group and drawn up in close consultation with the London Boroughs of Hounslow and Richmond upon Thames, the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames and the Borough of Elmbridge. The Strategy has been warmly welcomed by the London Ecology Committee of local authorities in London. National Agencies, private landowners and local interest groups have been involved in each stage of the preparation of the Strategy.

## PHILOSOPHY

### Understanding the landscape

The main aim of this study is to understand the landscape in all its subtleties as a basis for any decisions which affect the environment. *Landscape* is a process of perception, beyond the mere amalgamation of the geological, ecological and architectural features on the ground. The features only become *landscape* once they have been absorbed into the human mind and translated through filters of association. We do not, for example, just register a water meadow as a flat area of damp grass. We tend to see it as a precious expanse of space which has been managed for generations, harnessing the river for irrigation and fertility, and creating a unique habitat of rare plants and wildfowl. In some ways water meadows have become a symbol of an ideal balance between man and nature.

The complicated cultural and historical associations of an area and the activities<sup>6</sup> – both human and wildlife – which continue to bring a place alive, turn land into *landscape*. Though the word originated as a painter's term and has tended to be closely associated with visual impact, all five senses are involved. Landscape is not static and elements of sound, smell and physical awareness each have an effect. Only by trying to understand how these elements interact with the memory or myths of past settlement, can one begin to tease out Pope's *genius loci* – the spirit of the place.

### Involving the community

Because landscape is about the perceptions of the people who live in a place and the activities which bring a place alive, the local community is crucial to the identity and character of an area. Just as former communities contributed to the landscape we have inherited, so the involvement of today's residents is central to the way the river is evolving. Policies for the river environment have to be based on an intimate understanding of how people use the Thames and the special associations which the landscape holds for them. Conservation and enhancement policies for something as dynamic and interactive as landscape can only work if they are based on a broad agreement among the people involved.



Alexander Pope in his Twickenham Grotto

**'all must be adapted to the  
Genius and Use of the Place and  
the Beauties not forced into it,  
but resulting from it'**

Pope to Burlington (Epistle IV)

### **Linking the local and the strategic**

The local landscape combines into larger patterns to form the wider landscape. Views cross property lines; individual waterfronts form part of river-long paths; and single riparian sites link along the water to create a network of natural habitats. Local planning policies need to be placed in the context of a strategy for the river throughout the capital, and strategic planning needs to be informed by the detail of each locality.

The river, so often the administrative boundary and peripheral edge to planning policy, is really the focus of the geological, ecological, cultural and visual landscape. Traditionally the source of water, food, fertility and transportation, the river provides the key to the patterns of settlement, economic activity, wildlife habitats and access for recreation throughout the city. The landscape does not stop at borough boundaries and nor should planning policies<sup>7</sup>.

### **Long-term planning**

The Thames landscape has evolved over millennia and the elements of landscape structure take centuries to mature. In drawing up a strategy it is important to look at least 100 years ahead. Redesigning bank structures or the removal of intrusive buildings may seem impossibly expensive or impractical in the short term. In a decade or two however, the situation may be very different. Buildings become obsolete and banks require major repair work. In the past, local authorities have even taken the decision to acquire land and demolish obstructions to reveal significant views.<sup>8</sup> The landscape is constantly evolving, through the incremental changes of growth and decay as well as major investments by private landowners and public bodies. What is critical is the long-term vision for the city, planning for a time when the apparently impossible can be achieved.

## **APPROACH**

### **Environmental Partnership**

The Thames Landscape Strategy is the first study, jointly funded by the Countryside Commission, English Heritage and English Nature, to be produced following the publication of their *Conservation Issues in Strategic Plans*. The joint report on strategic planning marked the first time that the Government's three main environmental agencies joined forces to produce a statement on environmental sustainability. It is a landmark document which recognises a shift in attitudes towards environmental planning, acknowledging that *'there have been significant developments in policy planning in Britain, Europe, and the world. The environment is high on the political agenda and is recognised as requiring equal if not greater attention than the pursuit of economic growth'*<sup>9</sup>.

The Countryside Commission, English Heritage and English Nature together place a new emphasis on the complex interactions within the landscape and between those with responsibility for the environment. The joint report states: *'Our interests are linked, in that landscape, nature and historical/cultural conservation are concerned with different aspects of the same environmental resource. Each interest can inform the other'*. And it goes on to identify two further points of particular interest. First, it states that *'there is no regional tier of government in England, so responsibility for regional planning falls in an ill-defined area between central government and local authorities'*. And second, the report suggests that *'comprehensive landscape assessment is perhaps the best way of achieving an integrated approach to conserving the character and quality of the wider environment. This brings together the natural, scenic and cultural value systems we apply to our surroundings'*<sup>9</sup>.

The Thames Landscape Strategy is therefore funded by central government with the aim of implementing the policies set out in this statement. The approach of the Strategy has been designed to :

- demonstrate the complex interactions in the landscape to be conserved and enhanced;
- provide the link between central government and local authorities at a sub-regional level;
- address the concerns, priorities and involvement of the local communities;
- tackle the task through a new two-tier method of comprehensive landscape assessment.

### **Comprehensive landscape assessment**

For this reason, our study has operated at both sub-regional and detailed reach levels, analysing how the area functions as an integral part of the city, while at the same time trying to grasp some of the more fleeting and indefinable qualities of the landscape. The Strategy aims to produce a set of environmental policies, as well as specific project proposals to re-instate and enhance the landscape, which can be adopted by local authorities and private landowners. First, the Thames corridor sub-region from Hampton to Kew is viewed as a whole, looking at particular resources and issues for concern. And second, the area is divided into a series of twelve landscape character reaches, each with its own particular identity and proposals.

### **Analysis of the sub-regional structure**

The sub-regional analysis, set out in **chapter 2**, examines how geological, social and political factors have influenced the way in which the river has been settled. The present urban and natural landscapes have evolved from this pattern to provide the framework for public access, recreation and commerce. The analysis is translated into recommendations for environmental policies to be included in Local and Unitary Development Plans (UDPs) as Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) and in the policies and programmes of the many statutory organisations with powers and responsibilities in the area.

### **Analysis of the local character**

In **chapter 3**, the study area is then divided into visual units of different local character and identity. Twelve consecutive reaches of particular landscape character have been identified. The local history, townscape, nature conservation interest and public access networks are described to give a full and clear picture of the components of the landscape. The Greater London Council Thames-side *Guidelines*<sup>10</sup> and the London Ecology Unit *Nature Conservation Handbooks*<sup>11</sup> have given useful guidance in this analysis. The proposals presented in this chapter will, we hope, influence the development plans and land management practices of the host of private individuals, commercial organisations, charities and public bodies who have responsibility for this outstanding national resource.

### **Consultation**

Throughout the study, there has been consultation and co-operation, both at a national level, with the major government agencies contributing funds and expertise, and locally with the four Boroughs devoting time, knowledge and commitment to the project. The Strategy has been steered by a joint body of local and national authorities and informed by a series of individual consultations with each of the organisations. The research into the landscape history has been undertaken by the Garden History Society, partly funded by the Department of National Heritage.

At the same time, landowners, local interest groups and interested individuals have become closely involved in drawing up the Strategy. A series of interviews with landowners and local interest groups identified specific issues of particular concern and two major meetings, for all those bodies interested in the project, acted as a forum for collective proposals.

**'The Oldest Thing in London he changes not at all'**

C Fox Smith

**'It doth both Sow and Water the best part of Britain'**

William Camden

**'Thames! Most loved of all old Ocean's sons'**

Sir John Denham

**'Sweete Themmes, runne softly, till I end my Song'**

Spenser

**'The noblest river in Europe' (Sir Roger de Coverley)**

Addison

**'I know of no other classic stream that is so splashed about for the mere fun of it. There is something almost droll and at the same time almost touching in the way that on the smallest pretext of fine weather the mighty population takes to the boats'**

Henry James

### **Implementation**

Ultimately the responsibility for wider consultation and implementation of the Strategy will lie with the local authorities, statutory agencies and landowners. Many of the Strategy's findings, based on fresh survey, research and targeted consultation work, re-iterate and co-ordinate policies which already exist in the Local and Unitary Development Plans. A principal purpose has been to provide the local authorities with the information they need to plan the Thames Area of Special Character (amenity areas of metropolitan importance) as a national resource which stretches beyond individual boundaries.

Finally the Strategy shows how landscape planning and management could operate, both at statutory and community levels. Specific recommendations have been made for joint working arrangements for the boroughs, for a project officer and for a community advisory group to carry the project proposals into implementation.

## **WIDER APPLICATIONS**

### **A model for strategic planning**

The Thames Landscape Strategy will be published at a time when attitudes on strategic planning are converging and concern for London's environment is increasing. The Department of the Environment is currently reviewing future policy for the capital. The Department of Transport has set up a River Thames Working Group. A joint report on *Conservation Issues in Strategic Plans*<sup>12</sup> follows on from the Government White Paper on *This Common Inheritance*<sup>13</sup>. The London Planning Advisory Committee (LPAC) in 1994 published its *Advice on Strategic Planning Guidance for London*, including a specific chapter on the Thames. LPAC has also published a report on London's Urban Environmental Quality<sup>14</sup>, emphasising the importance of the river and sight-lines. London First is co-ordinating a ten-year vision for the capital. The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and Europa Nostra are promoting the study of cultural landscapes, particularly in connection with river valleys<sup>15</sup>.

The Thames Landscape Strategy provides a solid example of how these issues can be brought together in one plan with specific application to part of London. It makes the leap from theory into practice, translating policies into specific projects and management practices which will have a direct impact on the landscape.

### **Planning Boundaries**

The Thames Landscape Strategy also takes account of the way that existing political and administrative boundaries do not always constitute sensible limits for environmental policies. Watersheds, for example, tend to define the edges of landscape regions better than the rivers at their centres. In that sense the Strategy's approach could well be applied not only for the remainder of the Thames through London, but also for other river valleys and regions of landscape sensitivity.

## Landscape designations

Concern for the Thames through London has revived ideas about creating a special status for the riverside. LPAC's strategic advice gives strong support to the designation of the River Thames and associated open spaces as Metropolitan Open Land and the whole river landscape as London's Premier Area of Special Character. Recognition of the role of the Thames Corridor as a linear park and wildlife habitat have led to suggestions for a special park status<sup>16</sup>. And the unique concentration and interconnection of Grade I listed palaces, villas and parks along the Thames between Hampton and Kew raises the question of the potential of the area as a World Heritage Site<sup>17</sup>.



## Community involvement

The approach to the Thames Landscape Strategy has tried to demonstrate how the local landscape and community concern can inform the strategic planning process. The coalition between local and central government and consultation with local interest groups and private landowners has been central to the study. One of the ultimate aims of this report is to provide a clearly illustrated document which is readable and widely understandable and will help to inform residents and local interest groups in their local environmental decisions and lobbying.

## Green cities

The Hampton to Kew stretch also demonstrates a rare example of how parkland, public access networks and habitats of high nature conservation value can be integrated into a city. The unparalleled degree of open space and public amenity - and this within the largest metropolis in Europe - makes a fine model for urban design. The protection and ecological management of open spaces in the capital forms part of a London-wide strategy for nature conservation, promoted by the London Ecology Unit. The Countryside Commission also recognises the value of these wilder open spaces within the city, grant aiding sympathetic management practices under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme<sup>18</sup>. The Scheme helps to support the traditional methods of land management in maintaining the scenic and nature conservation interests of historic and riverside landscapes and, where appropriate, encourages greater public access and participation in conservation.

## Guidance for future development

Planning and design guidance for new developments is becoming more urgent in the face of increasing pressures on the riverside landscape as the country emerges from recession. Nearly 40 per cent of the Kingston river frontage, for example, will be coming up for re-development over the next couple of years. By explaining the value and context of the landscape sufficiently early in the development process, it should be possible to inform planning briefs and influence designs at a stage which could help to reduce later misunderstandings and conflicts at public inquiry<sup>19</sup>.