

## The Arcadian Thames

Between Weybridge, Hampton and Kew the River Thames meanders through a unique landscape of parks, royal palaces and working communities known as the Arcadian Thames (meaning 'rural paradise'). Centuries of settlement have left a legacy of architecture, accessible open space and nature conservation value unparalleled in the rest of the city – a landscape considered to be one of the most remarkable urban landscapes in the world.

The character of the landscape has evolved from its geology and history of settlement. The river flows north in tight bends around the mass of Richmond Hill, creating a sequence of intimate reaches. The towns and villages along the river banks retain distinct identities, each with its particular history, economy and architectural character, separated by large tracts of accessible open space.



Many of these open spaces are the legacy of royal ownership – the river between Weybridge and Kew being a particular focus for successive generations of royal and aristocratic patronage from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The sequence of palaces, parks, gardens and villas, connected by an elaborate network of avenues and vistas established a structure of open space that has survived to the present. Today, the Arcadian Thames has more registered sites of historic and natural importance than in any other location in the UK and is formally recognised in the London Plan as one of London's strategic cultural quarters.

During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Thames landscape attracted poets, artists, writers and thinkers who were inspired by the river's natural beauty and the sweeping view from Richmond Hill. Collectively, they created a new way of thinking about the natural world; Arcadia became a symbol of idealised English scenery and is considered to be the cradle of the English Landscape Movement. Interwoven with the royal landscape is a constantly evolving working landscape of historic settlements, boatyards, wharves and commercial frontages. This dynamism and activity brings the landscape alive and the details of the domestic architecture and boathouses contribute an essential element to the overall character of the river landscape.



## A Linear Park for People, Wildlife and Water

Originally a private and privileged landscape, Arcadia was saved and democratised in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century with many of the private estates being opened up for the public to enjoy. The Thames became a corridor for transport, people and wildlife; a linear park through the city with more connected open space than anywhere else in the capital. The area was soon re-branded as 'London's Countryside' a haven for recreation – both beside and on the water that continues to attract visitors from across the globe and includes two of the UK'S top ten most visited attractions (Hampton Court and Kew Gardens).

The linked areas of open space also provide a valuable range of habitats for a rich and diverse cross section of wildlife to live and move about in. The natural flood meadows at Syon, the National Nature Reserve at Richmond Park and the SSSI at Bushy are connected by the smaller open spaces dotted along the riverbanks that as a whole, make this short stretch of the Thames such an important inter-connected wildlife site.

Increasingly the open space is being valued as a resource to help the metropolis manage its ever increasing flood risk. It is known that over the next century, London will see more floods and droughts – the parks and gardens of Arcadia will need to adapt.

The Arcadian Thames is a unique combination of a natural landscape, with rural pastures and flood meadows; a landscape of royal of places and riverside villas; a designed landscape of avenues and vistas; a public landscape of parks, towpaths and river recreation; a cultural landscape which has inspired painters, poets and composers since the Tudor times; and a working landscape of boatyards, docks and commercial centres. Above all, it is a place where wildlife, humans and water all co-exist within the confines of Europe's largest metropolises.



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