

THE CHARACTER OF THE LANDSCAPE

2.39 The Thames enters the Greater London Area at Hampton. From Hampton to Erith, the river flows through the metropolis; an urban area even though much of the riverside is verdant open space, particularly in the first stretch between Hampton and Kew.

2.40 The character of the river is wonderfully varied and this chapter concentrates on understanding how that variety works. We have deliberately avoided detailed uniform design guidelines, such as standard building setbacks from the water's edge. At this level, such guidelines would tend to stifle rather than encourage the variety in character. Instead we have tried to highlight the main factors which determine the landscape character and propose recommendations to conserve and enhance it.

2.41 *Landscape Character Guidance LC 1: New development and new initiatives within the Strategy area should be judged against the paramount aim of conserving and enhancing the unique character of the Thames Landscape as defined in the Strategy.*

The River

2.42 Although, being a physical boundary, the river is often on the periphery of county and local authority jurisdictions, it is essentially the centre of the landscape. The Thames has carved the terraces and banks that line its course, the valley sides drain down to its edges and the water acts as the main visual and physical focus. It is a dynamic force, constantly changing with the tide and reflecting the wind and the weather on its surface.

2.43 Downstream of the great expanse of water at the confluence with the Wey, the Thames flows from west to east – the Desborough Cut by-passing the large meander near Shepperton. Between Hampton and Kew, the Thames is forced around Richmond Hill, flowing from south to north in a series of tight bends. The pronounced meander divides the landscape into a sequence of short reaches, visually separated by the bends in the river (see Chapter 4). Of the 7 main bends, 6 are dominated by open space (particularly on the convex bank), associated with local palaces and villas:

- Hurst and Bushy Parks
- Hampton Court Park
- Ham Lands
- Petersham/Marble Hill/Richmond Hill
- Old Deer Park and Syon
- Kew

Only the Kingston bend is without substantial areas of green open space.



2.44 Each bend is emphasised by islands deposited in the river, splitting the Thames into two channels. The majority of the islands are thickly covered in trees, particularly on the up- and downstream ends and accentuate the divisions between reaches, separating settlements on opposite banks. The Isleworth and Brentford Aits in particular create individual side-channels with a completely different and discrete character. The side channels, the short reaches and the narrow intimacy of the Thames through this area make this part of the river friendly for small boats and recreation.

2.45 The interaction between the course of the river, the islands and the open spaces contributes to the structure of the urban landscape, separating the city into a sequence of villages or small towns with individual communities and identities. These distinctions help to divide London into neighbourhoods that can function at a manageable level – at a size where people can feel they belong. The perception of London as a series of linked villages saves the city from becoming the dwarfing metropolis its actual area might suggest. The distinctions between each community are much clearer from the river than from roads, where ribbon development tends to create a continuous urban blur.



The distinct village waterfront at Hampton

2.46 At the same time as separating distinct communities, the river and its towpaths also provide a physical and visual link between villages.

Guidance LC 2: *Enhance the river as the central feature in the landscape, conserving its bends, islands and open spaces to define the distinct communities along its banks. Protect and promote the water and towpaths as a linear link and space between the separate villages.*

The Hills

2.47 The Thames has carved a broad flood plain. The blue-green hills to the north and south of the valley give a distant sense of enclosure and an impression of countryside beyond the metropolis. Churches rising from the hills act as prominent landmarks against the horizon. The line of the tree-covered Surrey Hills, pierced only by a sequence of spires, is particularly significant from Hampton Court Park, Kingston and Surbiton, as are the Chilterns from Richmond Hill.



Farrant's 18th Century view of Richmond Hill from the river remains much the same today

In general however, the city is flat. Where hills do rise from the floodplain, for example at Hampstead, Harrow and Crystal Palace, they command fine views and invoke a special excitement in the landscape. The double drama of river and hill at Richmond creates one of the most spectacular topographies in the capital. Richmond Hill rises from the edge of the sharp bend in the river at Petersham, set off by the surrounding parks and meadows. The view from Richmond Hill is probably the most painted view in London, if not in Britain. Greenwich is the only other part of the capital where river and hill meet in a similar way.

Guidance LC 3: *Work with local authorities to conserve the drama of the relationship between Richmond Hill, the River and the Park.*

The Views

2.48 Within the metropolis, the only chance of a **panoramic view** is usually from tall buildings or the occasional glimpse from high ground. Down below, the streets keep views short. In this part of London however, the large areas of continuous park and meadow land, the river corridor itself and the prominence of Richmond Hill, provide a number of spots where broad expanses of grass, water and trees stretch to the horizon. Views extend as far as Windsor Castle, Crystal Palace and St Paul's Cathedral.

2.49 In addition to the panoramic views, the Thames is linked by a **network of framed vistas**, connecting and ordering the landscape along and across the river. The vistas have a range of origins:

- **The avenues** that radiate from the riverside palaces and villas still provide a major structure to the landscape. The history of royal and aristocratic patronage in this 11 mile stretch has left a legacy of more Grade I listed buildings and landscapes clustered together than in any other part of the country. The juxtaposition of large houses and estates and the progress of fashionable designers from one estate to the next, resulted in an unparalleled inter-connection and integration of landscape design. Plan 5 and its overlays show how the avenues around Hampton Court, Ham, Richmond, Twickenham Park and Syon began to dominate the valley in the 17th century. By the 18th century further avenues at Upper Lodge, Sudbrook Park, Marble Hill, Cambridge Park, Whitton, Osterley, Kew and Chiswick were providing the major structure to the landscape, linking the main houses and organising the layout of the parks and gardens. The 1752 Heckel view from Richmond Hill shows the flat flood plain webbed with avenues; a view that remains remarkably unchanged 250 years later. During the 19th century some of the avenues were lost and some, such as the Nesfield layouts at Kew, were added. But even at the beginning of the 21st century, the basic 17th-century structure of avenues and vistas survives.

- **Communication sightlines** formed another kind of long-distance vista. Richmond Hill, as the highest point for miles around, commanded views for hunting, defence and beacon communication. The vista from King Henry VIII's Mound in Richmond Park to St. Paul's Cathedral in the City is among the most impressive sightlines in London, especially at night. This is now one of the capital's strategic views, protected by government directive.

- **Astronomical measurement** influenced much of the landscape layout between Richmond and Kew. The King's Observatory was built in 1769 for George III to observe the passage of Venus. Sightlines were opened through the surrounding Old Deer Park to obelisks on the edges of the river to the north and south. The King's time for the Houses of Parliament and the Horse Guards was set from the Observatory meridian obelisks until Greenwich took over at the end of the 18th century. The obelisks and sightlines were lost under scrub growth and golf course planting although have been successfully re-opened and interpreted.



Knyff's birds-eye view of Hampton Court and its patte d'oie



*St Paul's Cathedral - the 10 mile vista from King Henry VIII's Mound in Richmond Park
- James Batten 1987*



The westward view from King Henry VIII's Mound across the Arcadian Thames



Opening the blocked view to Marble Hill House from the river, 2001



The same view today

• **Informal views** across or along the river were pioneered by Brown, Chambers, Pope and Walpole as a new way to look into the ‘natural’ landscape. Many of Chambers’ vistas from Kew have been obscured by trees; Brown’s tree clumps, framing views of Syon, had been joined up by scrub invasion, hiding the house and meadow. The glimpse of the river from Pope’s grotto at Twickenham has been temporarily blocked by a science laboratory; the vista from Strawberry Hill to the Thames is being squeezed out by suburban housing; and views of the water from the towpath are being blocked by scrub growth. None of these intrusions is irreversible and the principle of vistas to and from the special features along the Thames fits well with contemporary urban structure. Vistas can inform and orientate visitors and connect the landmarks along the river. A sense of the space and continuity of the landscape can be achieved through framed sightlines, even where developments have intruded into the wider panoramic views.

2.50 *2012 Update: In 2000, the TLS began restoring the network of views and vistas that provide the backbone to the landscape. In 1997, Syon Estates put in place a long term programme to re-open their lost site lines.*

2.51 The degree to which this particular landscape has evolved, with such an elaborate network of connected vistas, is most unusual. That many of the avenues, sightlines and informal views have survived or have only been interrupted by scrub growth or temporary structures



The view to Syon House, across the river from Kew Gardens, now re-opened

is exceptional. The landscape between Hampton and Kew presents a unique opportunity to conserve the separation between discrete communities and at the same time to revive the visual and physical connections that link them together.

2012 Update: Many of the historic avenues have now been fully or partially restored. At Hampton Court where much of the open historic landscape had survived, full restoration was adopted, whilst at Ham, where modern development had enclosed the surviving avenue network, partial and incremental repair was a more appropriate restoration choice.

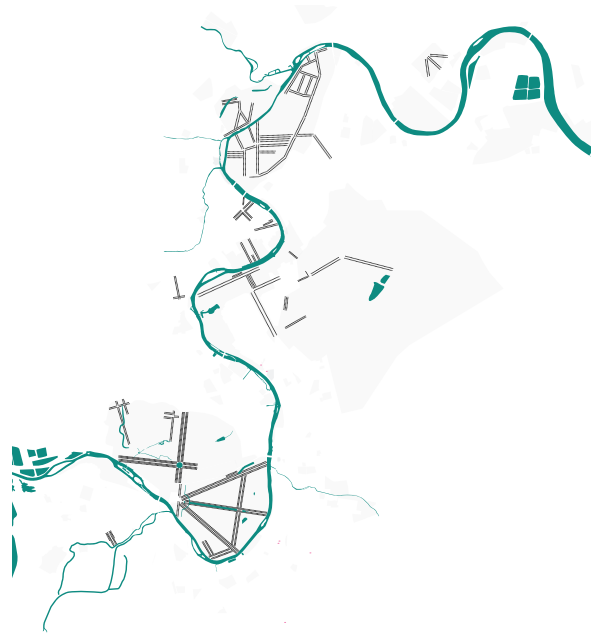


The restored Petersham Avenue, Ham

Guidance LC 4: *Conserve and, where appropriate, re-instate the exceptional network of visual connections that has evolved over the last four centuries.*



17th century Avenues



18th century Avenues



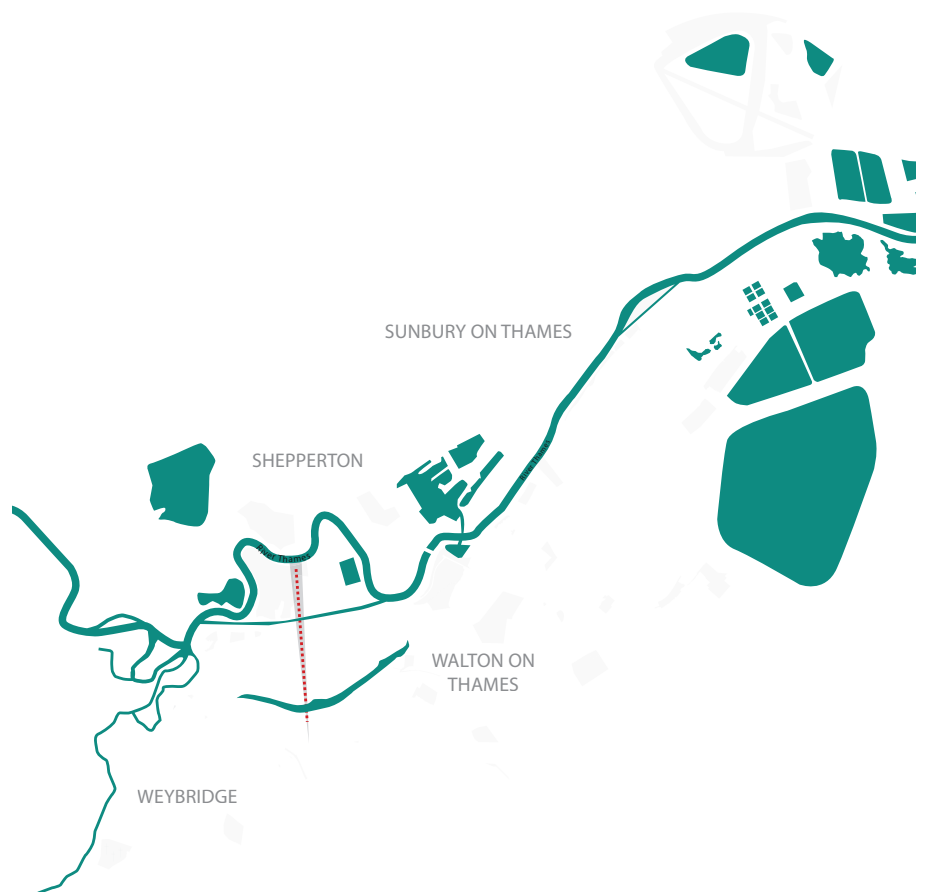
19th century Avenues





20th century Avenues

Figure 8 - Historical Avenues



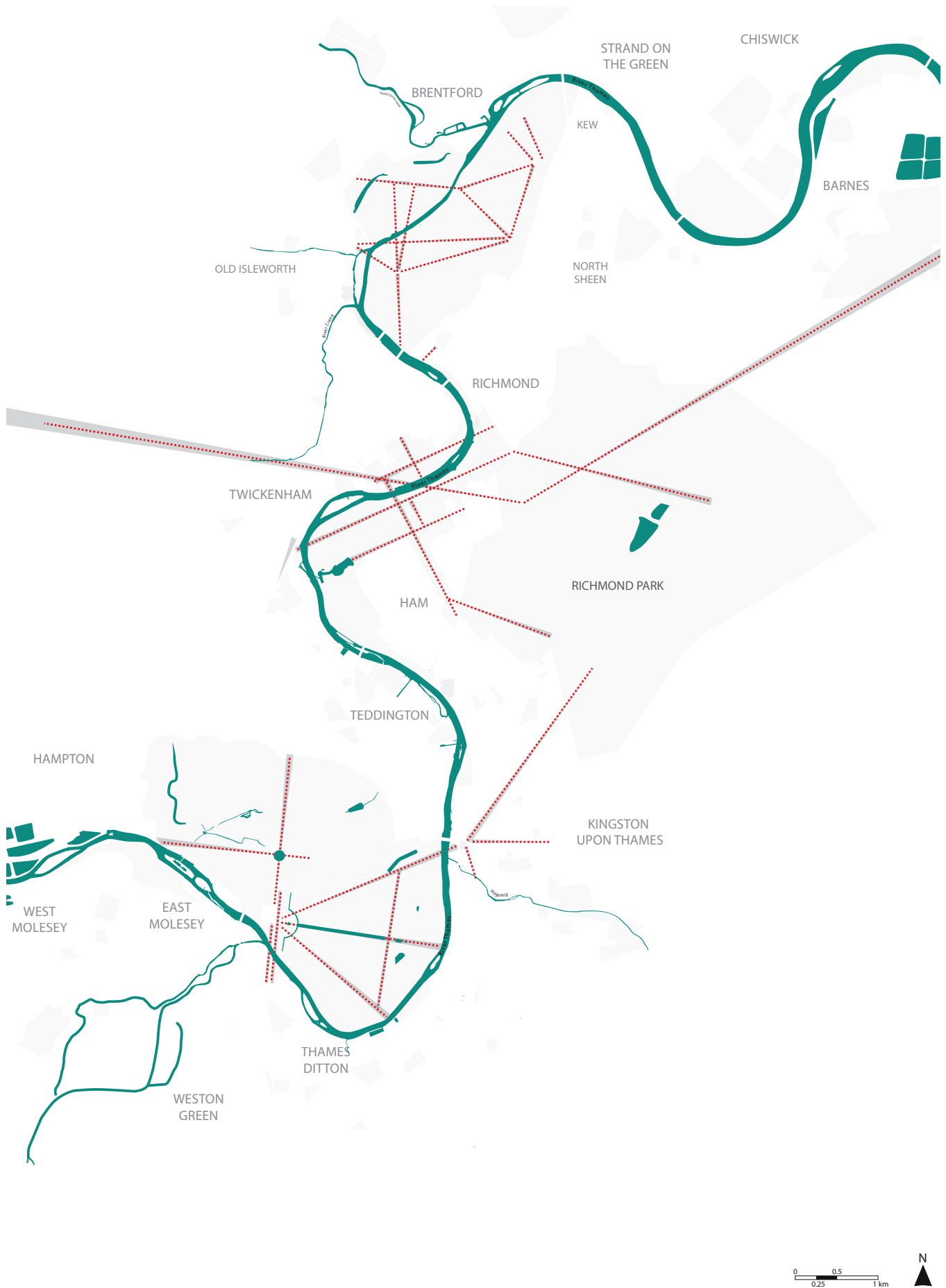


Figure 9 - Sightlines / Vistas

The Landmarks

2.52 Landmarks in a city help to provide a focus of identity as well as a beacon for orientation. The river itself acts as the main landmark or orientation point, but vertical elements that can be seen from some distance are also important. Churches, with their towers and spires, are common landmarks. They also tend to occupy ancient sites, around which settlement has been organised for some time. Palaces, villas, bridges and prominent buildings may be lower and more horizontal, but given the right setting, they can perform the same function. Even unusual trees, such as stone pines and cedars, will form significant landmarks.

2012 Update: The Arcadian Thames has many examples of Great Trees of London including the Asgill House Beech, The Petersham Cedar of Lebanon and the Richmond Promenade London Plane.

2.53 The continuing effectiveness of a landmark is not simply a question of ensuring that the feature is not blocked from view, it also depends on its surroundings:

- **The backdrop**, usually trees or sky, needs to act as a foil, particularly when the landmark catches the light. The visual power of St Raphael's Church in Kingston, for example, depends on surrounding trees screening out the competing buildings. And the drama of the spire of St. Matthias' Church comes from its position on the crest of the Richmond Hill, soaring above the surrounding trees and buildings.

- **The frame** to the view can compensate for the immediate surroundings to the landmark and focus attention on a single feature. The Richmond Park key-hole vista and avenue make St. Paul's stand out from the remainder of the City and the Hampton Court Avenue frames All Saints' Church across the river in Kingston.

2.54 On a more intimate level, features such as railway stations and pubs serve to guide people around their neighbourhood. These elements operate on a more personal and local level. They depend less on set sightlines and more on daily usage.

Guidance LC 5: *Identify, conserve and reveal the main landmarks of the area, with particular concern for the frame and backdrop to the view. Where appropriate, new developments should work with the existing urban pattern.*

The Architectural Waterfronts

2.55 Each historic town centre along the river addresses the water in its own way. The smaller centres of Hampton, Thames Ditton, Twickenham and Isleworth still cluster together around a church with a core wharf or embankment. East Molesey and Teddington focus on their locks. Kew and Ham have grown around their greens. And the three main commercial centres have developed quite distinctive



New development beside Kingston Bridge - reflects the town's history as the main market in the area



Twickenham - the working waterfront at Eel Pie Island



The Quilan Terry Richmond Riverside reflects a different tradition of terraces stepping back to offices and houses



The tower of the Steam Museum soaring over new developments at Brentford

characters, differing markedly in architectural style, scale, set-back from the river and use.

2.56 Richmond steps back from the river, with parks and terraces rising to houses and offices. The Richmond Riverside development and the Kingston John Lewis project show very different approaches to the historic waterfront. Each project responds to the style and ethos of the town it fronts. Kingston, for example, has historically been the main market in the area, while Richmond's palaces and villas have been set above riverside lawns.

2012 Update: Kingston, historically the main market place, has retail and restaurant uses on the town centre waterfront. There has been substantial development of residential flats since 1994 on former industrial sites at Charter Quays, Kingston and on the site of the former timber sheds at Hampton Wick, now called 'Salamander Quay'. Planning permission for 359 flats on the former Kingston Power Station site was granted, on appeal, in 2008. Brentford's industrial and dock yard frontage has been partially redeveloped although the area between the High Street and the river still remains undeveloped. A property developer has assembled former industrial sites but the area remains undeveloped.

2.57 So long as these towns are separated by open spaces into discrete identities, the contrasts contribute to the variety and vibrancy of the river. Where the large-scale buildings of Kingston straggle along the Portsmouth Road as a line of apartment blocks, the divisions with Surbiton and Thames Ditton are blurred and the strength of the river landscape reduced.

2.58 Design details, building materials and colours combine to contribute to the character of each waterfront. Again, every waterfront tends to have its own style. In Brentford, for example, the London brick of the Steam Museum tower and the surviving Victorian industrial and dockyard architecture, has influenced new development. In Twickenham around the White Swan waterfront, the Georgian houses cluster together in bright white against the backdrop of trees. East Molesey retains an Edwardian character around the lock, reminiscent of Sisley's paintings. And Kingston has developed a scale and modern style of its own (see Chapter 4).

2.59 The actual river edges in each town tend to be more similar. Brick and stone embankments and steps rise vertically from the water, stepping back to slipways or out to wharves in response to the docking and loading for which they were built. At Richmond and Eel Pie Island the wharves are still used for boat repairs, but mostly the waterfronts now serve tourist boats and pedestrians. The stone embankments, cast iron railings and slipways offer contact with the water and a series of unusual and exciting spaces within easy reach of the town centre. Particularly where the waterfronts are backed by pubs and boat sheds, the spaces are filled with people strolling, drinking, sunbathing or just sitting and watching. These waterfronts provide some of our most popular and successful urban spaces.

Guidance LC 6: *Conserve the distinct characters of the different waterfronts. New developments should be inspired by their context, complement the particular style, colours and materials of each waterfront and contribute to the required infrastructure and the public enjoyment of the river edge spaces. The established diversity of riverfront uses should be retained as part of a varied and vital community.*

The Small Riverside Parks

2.60 The small, municipal waterside parks are generally less successful public spaces than the hard waterfronts. At the height of Edwardian maintenance, these parks would have been trim and colourful with beds of annuals. Some parks, such as the Richmond Terrace Gardens and Kingston's Queen's Promenade, are still well-kept and highly popular. The 1994 report expressed the view that in general the parks were suffering under the constraints of funding cut-backs leading to neglect. The report identified problems of crumbling walls, graffiti, closed-down lavatories, dusty shrubberies, broken asphalt, burnt-out seats, litter and dog faeces which are turning the municipal parks into unwelcome places for children to play or adults to relax.



A grassy walk in Hurst Park



Champions Wharf Twickenham

2.61 *2012 Update: Considerable progress has been made since 1994 in enhancing small riverside parks. The Thames Landscape Strategy has raised substantial sums for project work from a variety of sources including landfill tax credits, S106, the Heritage Lottery Fund and private donations. In addition to funding major projects for avenue restoration, towpath improvements and biodiversity works, these have enabled improvements to small riverside parks including:*



Orleans Gardens - restored by local volunteers



Watermans Park, Brentford



The Terrace Gardens, Richmond, magnificently restored in 2008

- **Bridge House Gardens Richmond** – high quality hard landscaping and planting has improved access and amenity. The associated conversion of an arch in Richmond Bridge to a café contributes to a lively use of the gardens on the terrace adjoining the towpath; and,

- **Riverdale Gardens Richmond** – a new access path and seating
- **Cambridge Gardens East Twickenham**
- **Waterman’s Park Brentford**
- **The Bishop’s Palace Waterside Kingston**
- **Hurst Park Molesey**
- **Orleans House Gardens Twickenham**
- **Marble Hill Park Twickenham**
- **Richmond Hill**
- **Great River Avenue**

2.62 2012 Update: Considerable scope remains for the enhancement of small riverside gardens to:

- meet current demands;
- relate to the water;
- create greater nature conservation interest;
- provide adequate seating;
- provide adequate safety and disabled access;
- control litter and dog faeces;
- offer occasional performance spaces;
- help manage flood risk by making space for water where appropriate,
- have a fresh and inviting character; and
- be maintainable within current budgets.

2.63 Gardens with scope for improvement include:

- *Canbury Gardens, Kingston;*
- *Waterman’s Park, Brentford*
- *Gothic Garden, Richmond.*

Detailed opportunities are set out in Chapter 4.

Guidance LC 7: Restore or re-design small, municipal waterside parks to make the most of the river and enhance nature conservation interest. Encourage the involvement of local interest groups to create spaces they can use and enjoy.

The Private Gardens

2.64 Long stretches of the riverside open space are made up of private gardens, particularly through Twickenham, Teddington and Thames Ditton. Some of the islands too, such as Garrick’s and Tagg’s Aits, are covered by bungalows and their gardens.

2.65 Many of the gardens are substantial, full of mature trees and form a significant part of the landscape structure and nature

conservation resource. In areas such as Teddington, houses are set back up to 50 metres from the water's edge, barely visible through thick trees. In others, such as the terrace developments at Thames Ditton, the houses form a continuous, harsh line on the water's edge with no softening trees or vegetation. The white paint of stucco or fencing in full sunlight can begin to dominate the scene where there are no trees to provide shade or mask the impact. The shape and species of trees are important. Bright exotic trees and dark conifers jar on a landscape of native deciduous trees. And the character of the aits is changing with the gradual replacement of low, wooden bungalows by two-storey brick houses with picture windows. Their gardens, which used to run down to open wooden jetties, are increasingly becoming hidden by concrete block walls.

2.66 In side channels or discrete reaches, cheerful domesticity can add a welcome variety to the river. Where continuous suburban development begins to merge one community into the next, the housing can become oppressive. Garden tree planting does much to reduce the impact of houses on the river, though this has to be balanced against residents' loss of light and views.

2.67 Riparian gardens merit advice and, where they have a significant influence on the river character, control and assistance on tree planting and bank treatment. Advice should cover tree size, species, positioning and bank integrity.

2.68 Garden and street trees some distance from the river also contribute to the river landscape. The garden and street trees to the south of Hurst Park and on the Surrey Hills, for example, create the backdrop to the riverside open spaces. Local authority policies, controls and agreements, such as for underground cable-laying, need to take account of the importance of these trees in the wider landscape.

Guidance LC 8: Provide advice and assistance on private riparian garden tree planting, maintenance and bank treatments. Minimise intrusion into the river landscape as new developments arise and retain the sense of rural green space and wildlife interest between and through towns.



Private gardens on Garrick's Ait add much to the character of the river

The Built Sites

2.69 There are a number of potential riverside redevelopment sites close to town centres where there is pressure for retail, residential or office re-development. These sites have a major effect on the urban pattern and land use, particularly on the way that the space relates and connects to the river.



The converted boathouses at Lower Ham Road, Kingston

Guidance LC 9: Guide re-development of built recreation sites to complement the scale, character and urban structure of the surrounding waterfronts and make the most of the amenity, river-related recreation and nature conservation potential. New vistas and access routes should be incorporated into redevelopment.

River Infrastructure

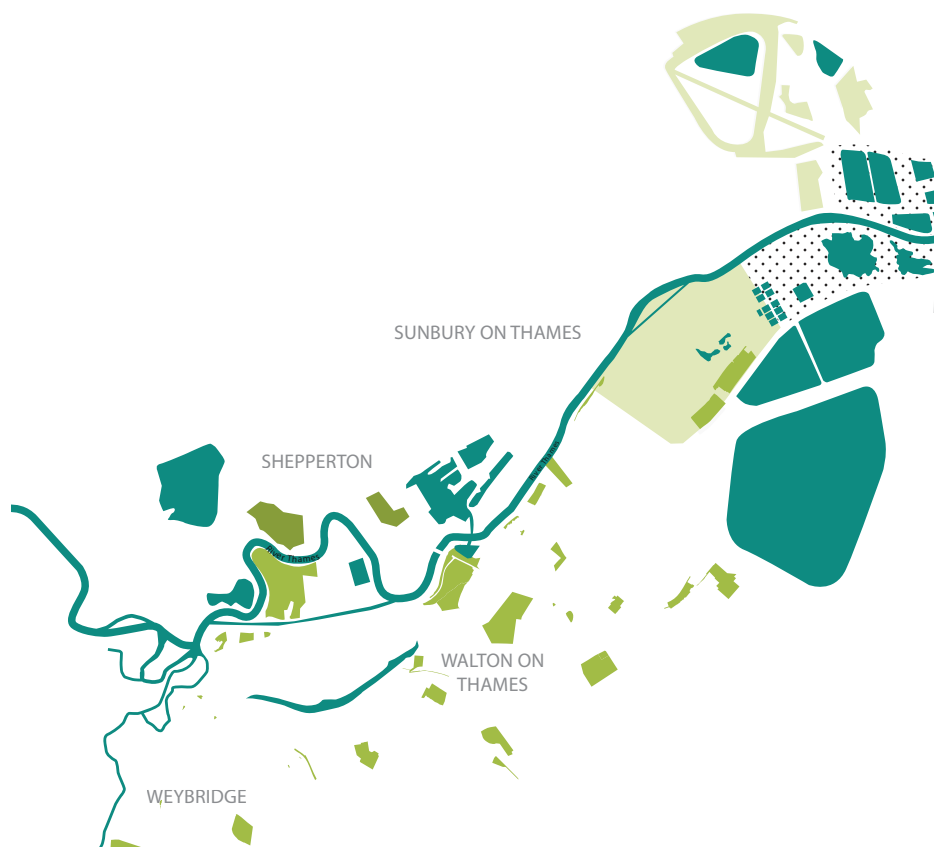
2.70 *2012 Update: The following topics that were contained in Chapter 2 Landscape Character have been moved to Chapter 3 River Infrastructure so that the Review can be extended to include those functional matters for example set out in para 7.27 of the London Plan and relevant saved policies contained within the Replacement Elmbridge Borough Local Plan 2000 (RTT2 - RTT13):*



Domestic boathouses add a special character to the waterfront

- the Boathouses;
- the Boatyards;
- the Houseboats;
- the Moorings;
- the Tide;
- the Banks;
- the Bridges, Locks and River Structures;
- the Major Utility Sites;
- the Industrial Sites;
- the Paths; and,
- the Roads.

2.71 It is important to note that these river-related land uses make a very significant contribution to landscape character in addition to their functional roles.



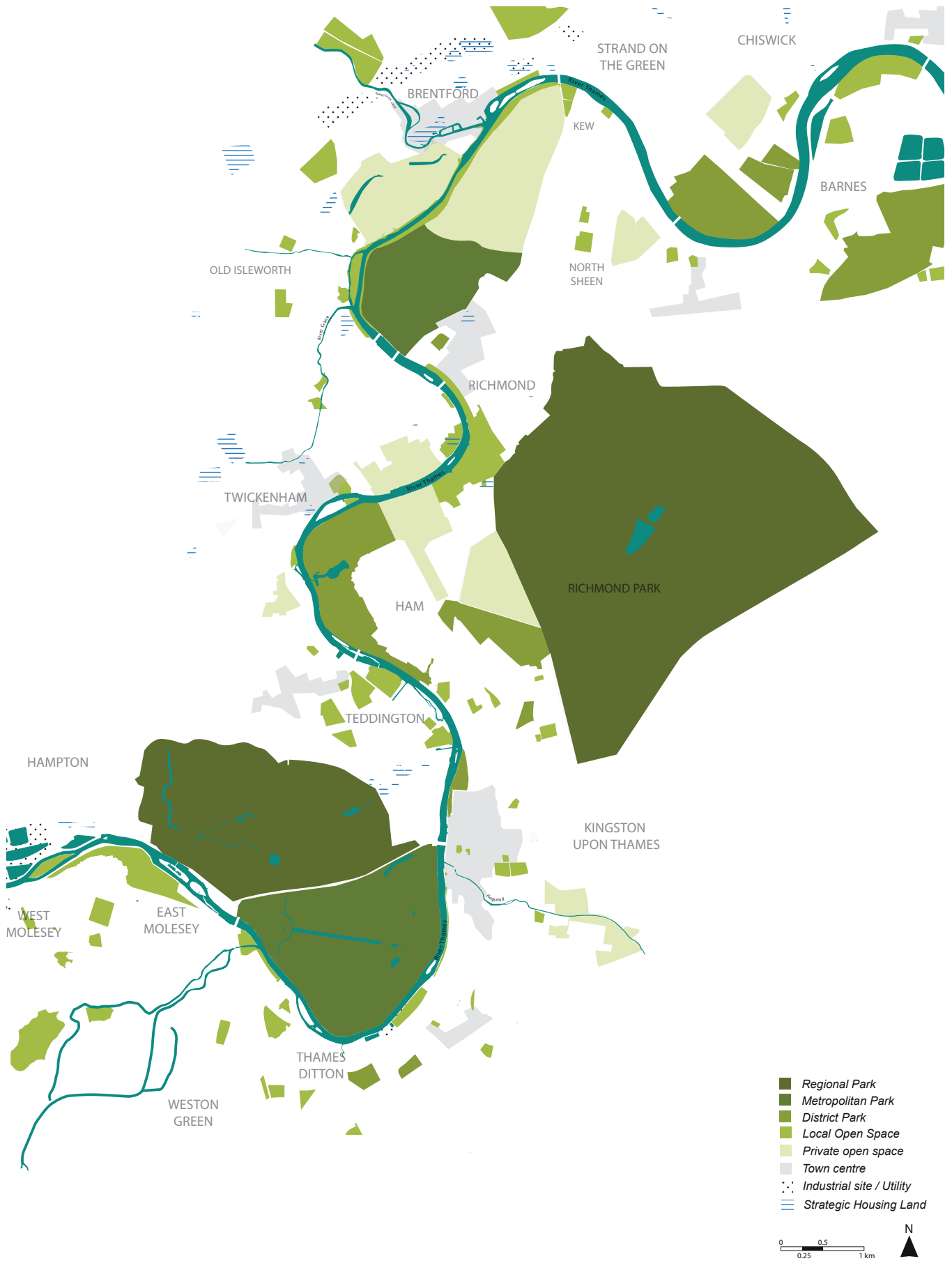


Figure 10 - General Landuse Designations



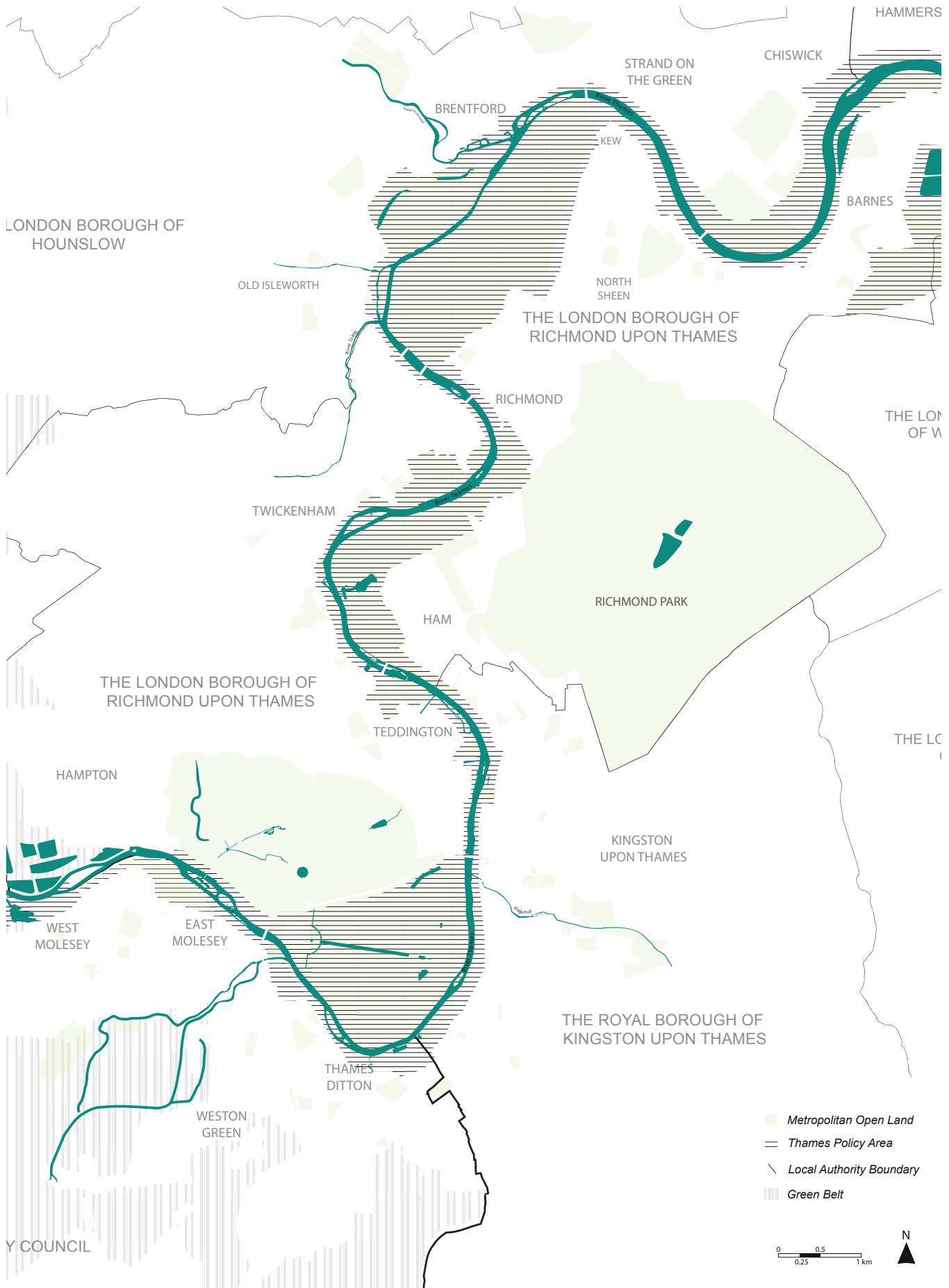


Figure 11 - Designation Boundaries