

The Arcadian Thames: ‘London’s Countryside’

The stretch of the river that the TLS focuses on has been known as the ‘Arcadian Thames’ for over 300 years and is a theme that flows throughout the Thames Landscape Strategy.

The Arcadian Thames, where each reach offers its own special delights and leads to new discoveries around every corner. The amazing combination of natural beauty and Royal history has created a real countryside in the city – a pastoral haven, on the doorstep of Central London where humans, water and wildlife live in harmony.

A Royal Landscape

Up to the Tudor period, the Thames landscape between Hampton and Kew consisted largely of quiet riverside villages, orchards and market gardens supplying the capital with food. Following the construction of Richmond and Hampton Court Palaces the landscape began to evolve as successive royal and aristocratic families moved to the area. Up and down the river a series of great palaces, grand houses, magnificent gardens and hunting parks were constructed amid the water meadows and woodland, linked to one another by grand avenues of trees. By the mid eighteenth century, a true Arcadia had been created – a rural paradise on the doorstep of London.



A Landscape of Inspiration

During the eighteenth century, this concentration of wealth and power together with the area’s stunning beauty attracted the most influential thinkers, poets, artists and

landscape designers of the day. This short stretch of the Thames quickly became the focus of culture, inspiration, taste and design that ultimately changed the face of the English countryside.

Arcadia was in essence an idyllic pastoral paradise, a place where man and nature co-existed in perfect harmony. These ideas led to the formation of the English Landscape Movement and would ultimately spread across Europe.

The People's Landscape

During the nineteenth century the delights of the Arcadian Thames were opened up for the enjoyment of the public so by the late Victorian age, the once privileged landscape of the C18th had become the 'Playground' of London' where Londoner's came to walk, relax or simply to mess about on the river. Arcadia had been democratised.

A century ago however, the now world famous landscape was almost lost as suburbia crept relentlessly up the Thames. It was only the successful 'Indignation!' campaign led by local people to halt the proposed development that saved 'The View from Richmond Hill' and much of the Thames riverside we enjoy today.

A Countryside in the City

Today, the Arcadian Thames offers unrivalled public open access and recreational opportunities and collectively contains more listed buildings, conservation areas, wildlife sites and registered parks and gardens than in any other comparable location in the UK.

The Thames Landscape Strategy was established in 1994 to understand these events of the past in order take them full circle to conserve, enhance and promote the watery landscape for the next 100 years.