



# 1.0 INTRODUCTION



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## BACKGROUND

### The Initiative

1.1 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'*. The Thames Landscape Strategy comes as part of a widespread response to the plight and potential of the river.

1.2 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 and inspired by Judy Hillman's *A New Look for London*. 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 Development Plans, there was 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

1.3 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 Tudor times; and a working landscape of boatyards, docks and commercial centres.

***'The bard retires, and on the banks of the Thames erects his flag of triumph; wild it waves  
In verdant splendor, and beholds, and hails  
The King of Rivers, as he rolls along'.***

*William Mason*

***'I have seen the Mississippi.  
That is muddy water.  
I have seen the Saint Lawrence.  
That is crystal water.  
But the Thames is liquid history'.***

*John Burns*

1.4 Although the Hampton to Kew stretch is only a part of the continuum of the whole river, it seemed sensible in 1994 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.

#### **The 1994 Thames Landscape Strategy Commission**

1.5 Following a brief feasibility study in 1993, Kim Wilkie was commissioned in February 1994 as the landscape consultant and environmental planner to draft a landscape strategy for the riverside between Hampton and Kew. The Strategy was jointly funded by the former Countryside Commission, English Heritage and the former Royal Fine Art Commission Trust, with contributions towards the preparation of the final report from English Nature, the former National Rivers Authority and private benefactors. The Strategy was 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 was warmly welcomed by the National Agencies, private landowners and local interest groups.

#### **The Thames Landscape Strategy Partnership**

1.6 *2012 Update: The TLS partnership was established in 1994 to take the Strategy forward and ensure that the policies, projects and management proposals set out in the Kim Wilkie report were implemented on the ground. The partnership brought together the main riparian organisations and communities that have an interest in the river corridor and has employed a full-time member of staff to co-ordinate the project. Details are set out in Chapter Six.*

#### **The Thames Landscape Strategy Review**

1.7 *2012 Update: Since publication in 1994, the ground-breaking TLS report has stood the test of time. Changing priorities, organisational modifications and the requirement to adapt to climate change have, however, necessitated the need to review and update the original 100-year plan.*

## **PHILOSOPHY**

### **Understanding the landscape**

1.8 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.

1.9 The complicated cultural and historical associations of an area and the activities - 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 Alexander Pope's *genius loci* - the spirit of the place.

***'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 VI)*

### **Involving the community**

1.10 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.

***'Thames! Most loved of all old  
Oceans sons'.***

*Sir John Denham*

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

1.11 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.

***'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 in the smallest  
pretext of fine weather the  
mighty population takes to the  
boats'.***

*Henry James*

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.

### **Long-term planning**

1.12 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. 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.

## **The 1994 APPROACH**

### **Environmental Partnership**

1.13 The Thames Landscape Strategy was 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 was a landmark document that recognised a shift in attitudes towards environmental planning.

1.14 The Countryside Commission, English Heritage and English Nature together placed a new emphasis on the complex interactions within the landscape and between those with responsibility for the environment suggesting 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'.

The 1994 Thames Landscape Strategy was therefore funded by central government with the aim of implementing the policies set out in this statement. The approach of the Strategy was 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**

1.15 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.

***'The TLS is that very rare animal: an organisation with real popular appeal and an imaginative sense of what it is about, landscapes that fires people's imagination'.***

*Sir David Attenborough*

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**

1.16 The sub-regional analysis 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. This analysis is translated into recommendations for environmental policies that are anticipated to be included in local planning frameworks and in the policies and programmes of the many statutory organisations with powers and responsibilities in the area.

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

1.17 The study area is 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. It was envisaged that the proposals presented would 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**

1.18 Throughout the 1994 study, there was 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 was 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 was 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 became 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.

### **Implementation**

1.19 It was expected in 1994 that the responsibility for wider consultation and implementation of the Strategy would lie with the local authorities, statutory agencies and landowners. A principal purpose of the 1994 report was to provide the local authorities with the information they need to plan the Thames Policy Area as a national resource which stretches beyond individual boundaries.

1.20 Finally the Strategy showed how landscape planning and management could operate, both at statutory and community levels. Specific recommendations were 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**

1.21 The Thames Landscape Strategy was published at a time when attitudes on strategic planning were converging, concern for London's environment was increasing and the Government had published a White Paper on *This Common Inheritance*. The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and Europa Nostra were promoting the study of cultural landscapes, particularly in connection with river valleys.

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

*'The Thames Landscape Strategy is as much about the day-to-day link between the landscape, the community and the authorities as about the long term vision'.*

*Kim Wilkie*

### **Planning Boundaries**

1.22 The Thames Landscape Strategy also took account of the way that 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 it was suggested that 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 designation**

1.23 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.

### **Community involvement**

1.24 The approach to the Thames Landscape Strategy 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**

1.25 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.

**Guidance for future development**

1.26 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.

BROWN OWL

