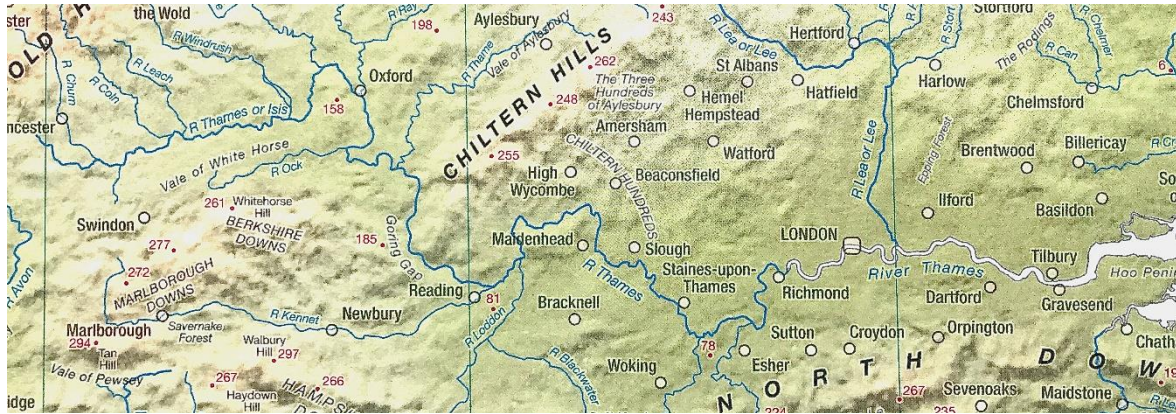


## 5.10. River Thames (Abingdon to Windsor)

### 1. Location

The case study covers a section of the middle reaches of the Thames between Abingdon and Windsor. The river frontage includes open countryside, historic towns including Abingdon, Wallingford and Reading and numerous picturesque waterside villages.



### 2. Why was the Case Study Site selected?

This section of the Thames contains a varied selection of geomorphological features and it flows through both open countryside and highly developed riverside towns. On account of the natural beauty of this part of the Thames, some of our greatest artists and engravers illustrated this part of the river, including Ireland, 1792<sup>1</sup>; Farington, 1794<sup>2</sup>; Boydell, 1796<sup>3</sup>; Daniell, 1830<sup>4</sup>; Westall, 1830<sup>5</sup>; Tombleson, 1834<sup>6</sup>; Taunt, 1900<sup>7</sup>; Belloc, 1907<sup>8</sup>.

### 3. Summary of the Geology, Fluvial Geomorphology and Processes

The river Thames rises at Thames Head in Gloucestershire and flows into the North Sea near Tilbury, Essex, and Gravesend, Kent, via the Thames Estuary. Along its length the river has been subject to some re-defining and widening of the main channel, for example around Abingdon and Marlow before 1850. Since then, further cuts to ease navigation have reduced travelling distances. Thirty-eight major tributaries feed into the Thames between its source and Teddington Lock on the non-tidal section. These include the Churn, Coln, Windrush, Cherwell, Thame, Tang, Kennet, Loddon, Wey, and the Mole. Three canals intersect this stretch; the Oxford Canal, the Kennet and Avon Canal and the Wey Navigation. It's longest artificial channel (cut), the Jubilee River, was built between Maidenhead and Windsor for flood relief and was completed in 2002.

The non-tidal section of the river is managed by the Environment Agency, which is responsible for managing the flow of water to help prevent and mitigate flooding, and provide for navigation. The volume and speed of water downstream is managed by adjusting the numerous sluices at each of the weirs and, at Peak High Water, levels are generally dissipated over preferred floodplains adjacent to the river. Occasionally, flooding of the inhabited areas is unavoidable and the Environment Agency issues flood warnings. Along its length, the river Thames contains over eighty islands. Some of the largest inland islands, for example, Formosa Island near Cookham and Andersey Island at Abingdon, were created naturally when the course of the river divided into separate streams.

Researchers have identified the Thames as a discrete drainage line, flowing as early as 58 million years ago. Until around 500,000 years ago, the Thames flowed on its existing course through what is now Oxfordshire, before turning north-east through Hertfordshire and East Anglia and reaching the North Sea near present-day Ipswich. At this time the river system headwaters lay in the English West Midlands and may, at times, have received drainage from the mountains of North Wales.

The 1947 Thames flood was, overall, the worst twentieth century flood on the river affecting much of the Thames Valley, as well as elsewhere in England, during the middle of March 1947 after a severe winter. Other significant Thames floods since then have occurred in 1968, 1993, 1998, 2000, 2003, 2006 and 2014.

Towns and villages along the course of the Thames can be affected by both river flooding from the Thames, generally a slow process with one or two days' warning beforehand, and a water level that tends to stay high for several days, or flash flooding, caused by exceptionally heavy local rainfall, which can rapidly cause pooling in the centre of communities without warning and last for only a short time.

#### **4. How can the Art Imagery inform us of river change?**

The riverside towns, such as Abingdon and Wallingford, were much painted and the sequences of images illustrated in this case study show expanding riverside development over time. Many of these towns developed at crossing points of the river and the bridges often extend far beyond the course of the river itself and across the adjacent floodplain, illustrating a long history of flooding of adjacent low-lying land through the river's course at these points.

At Culham, south of Abingdon, the winding and meandering course of the Thames at that time is clearly illustrated in the aquatint engravings of Joseph Farington, who journeyed down the Thames between 1794 and 1796, producing highly detailed aquatint views of this open, virtually undeveloped landscape. Today, apart from some small communities, the natural space remains undeveloped and, no doubt, still provides capacity for water volumes when the river overtops its banks.

An expansive watercolour view by A.R. Quinton illustrates the Thames flowing through the countryside in the vicinity of Streatley, Goring and Pangbourne. The views from Streatley Hill today, although more obscured by tree growth than in the early twentieth century watercolours, still provides river scenery that has changed little outside the confines of the attractive Thames-side villages along this part of its course.

At the time of this case study visit, river levels were high and at Pangbourne, Sonning and Henley-on-Thames the levels were extremely high. Through Henley-on-Thames the prolific Alfred Robert Quinton painted views of the river, looking towards the bridge from the riverside walk, and as he often revisited such beauty spots as they developed between 1900 and 1934, a sequence of change is provided. These show increased standards of river bank protection at several towns, including Abingdon, Wallingford and Henley.

On account of its attractive riverside location and charming architecture, the town of Marlow was much painted over the last two hundred years and the physical features and character here remain little changed, whilst, at Cookham, bordered by the lock and weir, these installations help manage water flows along this part of the river. At Maidenhead the famous Boulter's Lock was a popular tourist spot in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods and was painted by numerous artists and this historic site remains virtually unchanged today.

One of the most painted parts of the Thames apart from central London is that section of the river that passes between Eton and Windsor. The views looking across the Thames from both the Eton side towards Windsor Castle, and from the Castle looking across to Eton College were the subject of innumerable oil paintings, watercolours and engravings over time. However, on account of the railway line, other infrastructure and tree growth, it is difficult to replicate the views with present-day images at this location.

Overall, the extensive Thames art imagery provides a detailed record of the characteristics of this section of the river over the period from 1790 to 1930, and point to a long history of water level management within what has always been a prosperous area with careful maintenance of its cultural heritage and natural beauty.





**Figure 10.1 (above):** *Abingdon* by Edward Duncan. Watercolour. c.1870.

Courtesy: Fine Art Photographic Library.



**Figure 10.2 (left)** shows the same location painted by Harold Sutton Palmer in 1920. The present-day views (**Figure 10.3 below**) shows that the scene has changed little over time.







**Figure 10.4 (above)** shows the Thames at Culham near Abingdon depicted in 1792-94 by Joseph Farington. This detailed aquatint illustrates the meandering course of the river as it flows gently through its floodplain.

**Figure 10.5 (below)** shows the natural, open character of the landscape today where the river can still flood in times of prolonged rainfall.







**Figure 10.6 (above):** This highly detailed watercolour of Wallingford by the Pre-Raphaelite Follower, George Gordon Fraser was painted in c.1880.

Courtesy: Chris Beetles Gallery, London

**Figure 10.7:** The scene has changed little since then except the right back has become developed and the river banks defended.







**Figures 10.8 and 10.9** show the downstream side of Wallingford's handsome stone bridge. Again, there shows little intervention in terms of flood defences since A. R. Quinton painted his watercolour view (below) in c.1920.

Courtesy: Salmon's.







**Figure 10.10 (above):** A further aquatint view from Farington's 1892 tour of the Thames showing a distant view of Pangbourne from Purley with Streatley Hill on the right. The sweep of the river through open countryside remains largely unchanged, as evidenced by the watercolour of the Thames from Streatley Hill by A. R. Quinton. c.1910. (Figure 10.12, overleaf) and the present-day view (Figure 10.13, overleaf).

**Figure 10.11 (below)** show a watercolour drawing of the Thames at Streatley from river level painted by Alfred A. Glendening in about 1880.

Courtesy: Fine Art Photographic Library.







**Figure 10.12 (Left):**  
The Thames from  
Streatley Hill by A.  
R. Quinton. c.1910.

Courtesy:  
Salmon's.

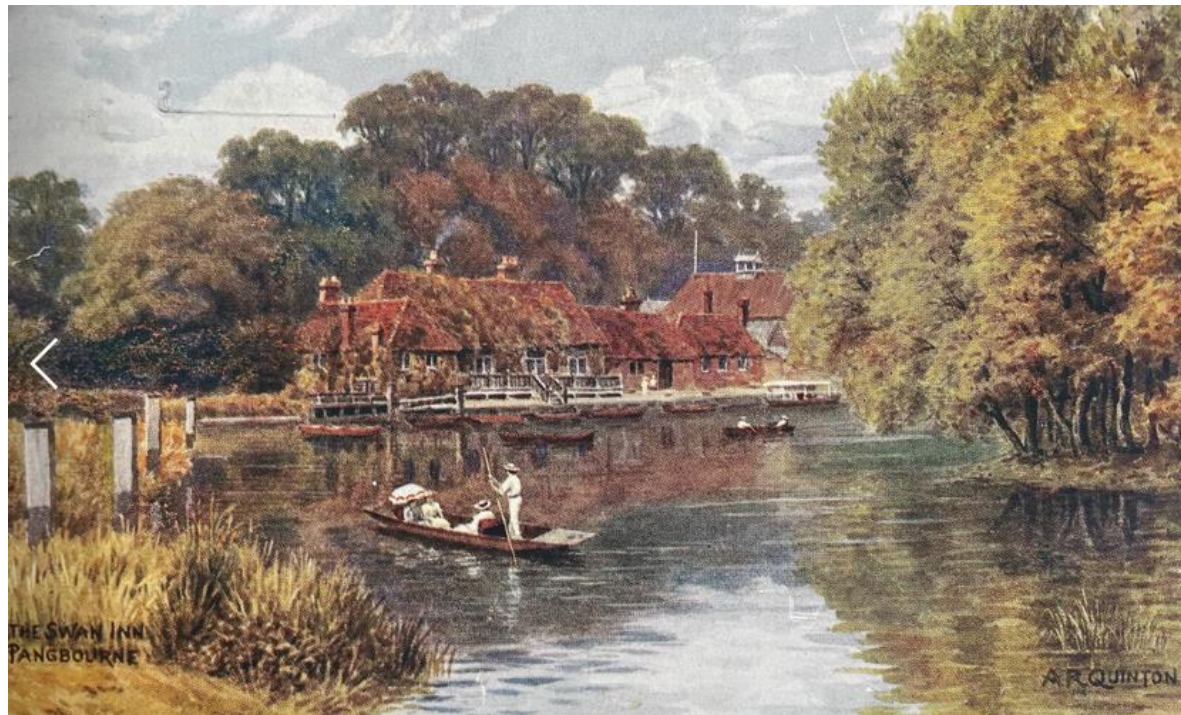
**Figure 10.13**  
(middle) shows the  
course of the river  
below Streatley Hill  
today.



**Figure 10.14 (Left)**  
shows a tranquil  
scene on the  
Thames at nearby  
Goring Reach in  
c.1920 by A. R.  
Quinton.

Courtesy:  
Salmon's.

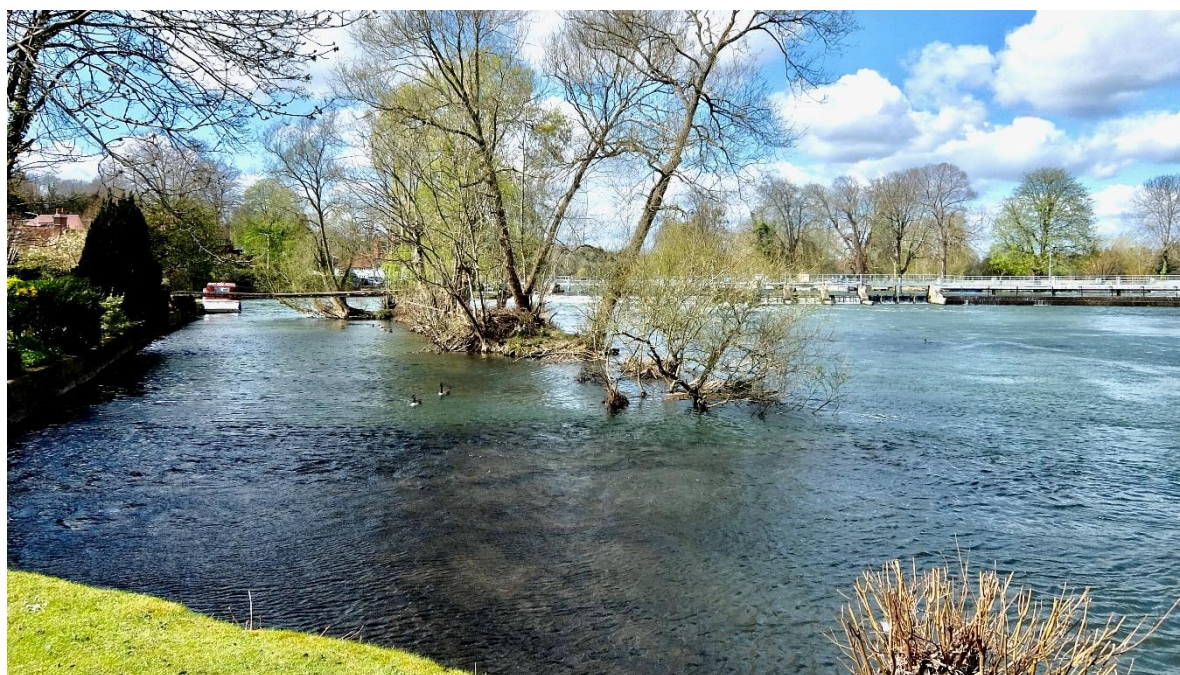




**Figure 10.15 (above):** The pretty Thames-side small towns and villages, such as Pangbourne, Wargrave, Marlow and Cookham, were popular subjects for late Victorian and Edwardian artists and book illustrators. Colour picture postcard manufacturer's, such as Salmon's of Sevenoaks, commissioned Alfred Robert Quinton and others to paint detailed watercolours such as this view of Pangbourne. c.1920.

Courtesy: Salmon's.

**Figure 10.16 (below)** shows the river close to flooding in April 2022.







**Figure 10.17 (above):** *Sonning Bridge* by A. R. Quinton. watercolour. 1925. The scene is virtually unchanged today (Figure 10.18 below). Historic waterfront properties, old churches and ancient bridges were captured in photographic detail by artists using the medium of watercolour.

Courtesy: Figure 10.17 – Salmon's; Figure 10.18 – Andrew Smith/Geograph Images.







Figures 10.19-10.22 show the progressive development of Henley-on-Thames since 1792. The view above describes the Thames in detail in the vicinity of Henley showing islands in the river, a mill and the developing town.

Figures 10.20 (below) and 10.21 (overleaf) show two views of the riverside at Henley by A. R. Quinton painted in 1910 and 1920.

Courtesy: Salmon's.







**Figure 10.21:** *Henley Bridge* by A. R. Quinton. Watercolour. 1920.

Courtesy: Salmon's.

In the present-day view (**Figure 10.22 below**) the tree-lined riverside path has been replaced by a road and the riverbank defences improved.







Figures 10.23-10.27 show the historic town of Marlow with its fine church, bridge and riverside residences. The bridge in Farington's view above, engraved in 1792, has been replaced; a wide floodplain exists in the foreground. In Figure 10.24 (below) Quinton has painted the town from the riverbank in 1925.

Courtesy: Salmon's.







**Figure 10.25 (top):** The scene at Marlow by A. R. Quinton (c.1920) remains largely unchanged today (**Figure 10.26 middle**). **Figure 10.27 (bottom)**, also painted by Quinton shows the view towards the town from Marlow Woods.

Figures 10.25-10.27 courtesy: Salmon's.







**Figure 10.28 (left)** shows the river scenery at Cookham with its ferry in 1920.

The natural environment portrayed in this view and of Cookham Lock (**Figure 10.29, centre**) are much the same today. The weir at Cookham (**Figure 10.30, bottom**) along with others along this stretch of the

Thames help manage water levels and reduce flood risk.

Figures 10.28 and 10.29 courtesy: Salmon's.



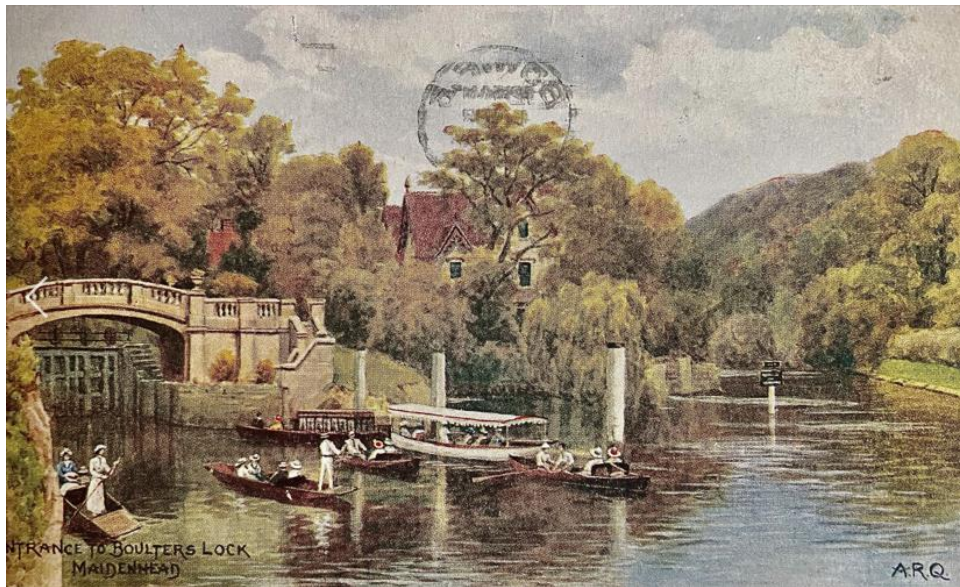
COOKHAM LOCK







**Figure 10.30 (top):** This extensive view by Farington (1792) shows the Thames winding its way towards Maidenhead below Hedsor Lodge. The extent of the floodplain and the open undeveloped landscape is notable.

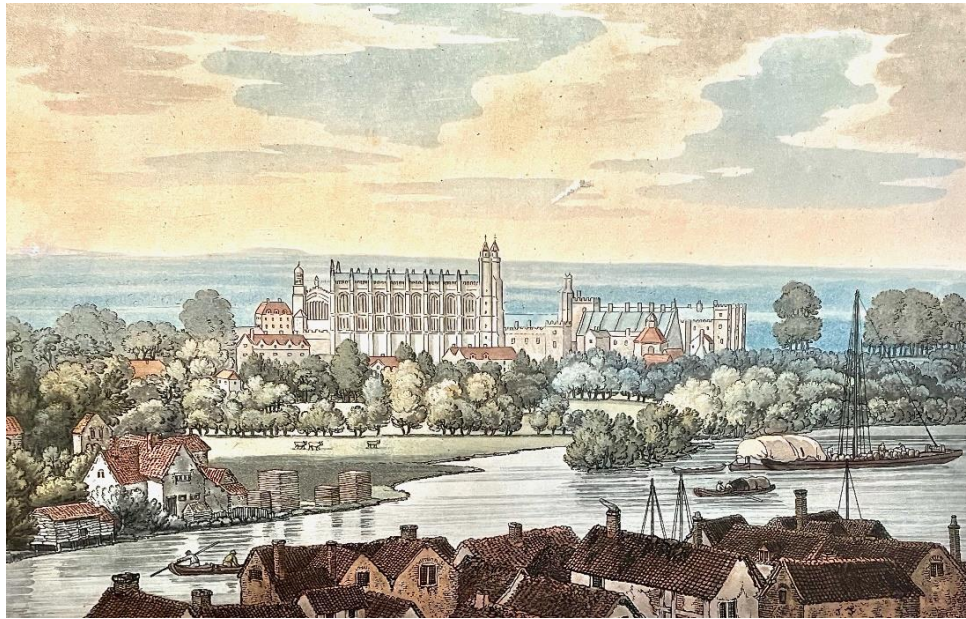


**Figures 10.31 (left) and 10.32 (bottom)** show Boulter's Lock at Maidenhead in 1910 and the present-day view. Such detailed watercolours provide a record of historic structures, many of which have been significantly altered or lost over time.



Courtesy: Figure 10.31 – Salmon's.





**Figures 10.33-10.35** show, left, *Eton from Windsor*, an aquatint by Farington (1752); centre, Eton College by A. R. Quinton, 1920, and, bottom, *Windsor Castle* by Edmund J. Niemann painted in oils in c.1870.

Courtesy: Figure 10.34 – Salmon's; Figure 10.35 – Fine Art Photographic Library.





### 5. What are the key issues that can be learnt from this Study Area?

This case study illustrates how, through chronological arrangement of artworks by artists that have been ranked in terms of their topographical accuracy, one can provide a picture of physical, environmental and cultural heritage change and river management over an extended time period. In view of such art imagery and the ability to search key image sources (such as ArtUK and WatercolourWorld), art can support a broad range of research and practitioner interest within the Environment Agency and other organisations in terms of understanding more about the history and past conditions of the river over this extended time period. Some of the artworks illustrate areas that have been prone to flooding over the centuries and over a significant length of this case study site much of the floodplain remains as important natural space to accommodate river overflows in times of prolonged rainfall and resulting flood events.

### 6. References

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7. Taunt, H.W. 1900. *Thames Scenery*. 47 original photographs.
8. Belloc. H. 1907. *The Historic Thames*. Dent & Co.



Figure 10.36: H.S. Palmer

*The Bells of Ouseley, Old Windsor, on the Thames*

c.1909