THE HISTORIC THAMES

THE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT.

THE HISTORIC THAMES

BY

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WITH COLOURED ILLUSTRATIONS BY

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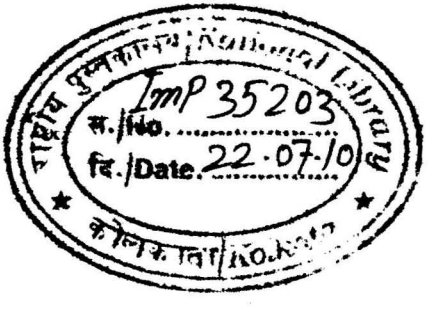
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THE THAMES

ENGLAND has been built up upon the framework of her rivers, and, in that pattern, the principal line has been the line of the Thames.

Partly because it was the main highway of Southern England, partly because it looked eastward towards the Continent from which the national life has been drawn, partly because it was better served by the tide than any other channel, but mainly because it was the chief among a great number of closely connected river basins, the Thames Valley has in the past supported the government and the wealth of England.

Among the most favoured of our rivals some one river system has developed a province or a series of provinces; the Rhine has done so, the Seine and the Garonne. But the great Continental river systems—at least the navigable ones—stand far apart from one another: in this small, and especially narrow, country of Britain navigable river systems are not only numerous, but packed close together. It is perhaps on this account that we have been under less necessity in the

past to develop our canals; and anyone who has explored the English rivers in a light boat knows how short are the portages between one basin and another.

Now not only are we favoured with a multitude of navigable waterways—the tide makes even our small coastal rivers navigable right inland—but also we are quite exceptionally favoured in them when we consider that the country is an island.

If an island, especially an island in a tidal sea, has a good river system, that system is bound to be of more benefit to it than would be a similar system to a Continental country. For it must mean that the tide will penetrate everywhere into the heart of the plains, carrying the burden of their wealth backward and forward, mixing their peoples, and filling the whole national life with its energy; and this will be especially the case in an island which is narrow in proportion to its length and in which the rivers are distributed transversely to its axis.

When we consider the river systems of the other great islands of Europe we find that none besides our own enjoys this advantage. Sicily and Crete, apart from the fact that they do not stand in tidal water, have no navigable rivers. Iceland, standing in a tidal sea, too far north indeed for successful commerce, but not too far north for the growth of a civilisation, is at a similar disadvantage. Great Britain and Ireland alone—Great Britain south of the Scottish Mountains,

that is—enjoy this peculiar advantage; and there are few things more instructive when one is engaged upon the history of England than to take a map and mark upon it the head of each navigable piece of water and the head of its tideway, for when this has been done all England, with the exception of the Welsh Hills and the Pennines, seems to be penetrated by the influence of the sea.

The conditions which give a river this great historic importance, the fundamental character, therefore, which has lent to the Thames its meaning in English history, is twofold: a river affords a permanent means of travel, and a river also forms an obstacle and a boundary. Men are known to have agglomerated in the beginning of society in two ways: as nomadic hordes and as fixed inhabitants of settlements.

There has arisen a profitless discussion as to which of these two phases came first. No evidence can possibly exist upon either side, but one may take it that with the first traditions and records, as at the present time, the two systems existed side by side, and that either was determined by geographical conditions. A river is an advantage to both groups, but to the second it is of more consequence than to the first; and in South England, if we go back to the origins of our history, it is in fixed settlements that we find the first evidence of man. With every year of research the extreme antiquity of our inhabited sites becomes more apparent. And indeed the

geographical nature of Southern England should make us certain of the antiquity of village life in it, even were there no archæological evidence to support that antiquity.

South England is everywhere fertile, everywhere well watered, and nowhere divided, as is the North, by long districts of bare country, or of hills snow-bound in winter, or of morass. Its forests, though numerous, have never formed one continuous belt; even the largest of them, the Forest of the Weald, between the downs of Surrey and Kent and those of Sussex, was but twenty miles across—large enough to nourish a string of hunting villages upon the north and the south edges of it, but not large enough to isolate the Thames Valley from the southern coast.

From the beginning of human activity in this island the whole length of the river has been set with human settlements never far removed one from the other; for the Thames ran through the heart of South England, and wherever its banks were secure from recurrent floods it furnished those who settled on them with three main things which every early village requires: good water, defence, and communication.

The importance of the first lessens as men learn to dig wells and to canalise springs; the two last, defence and communication, remain attached to river settlements to a much later date, and are apparent in all the history of the Thames.

The problem of communication under early conditions is

THE THAMES VALLEY FROM HENNERTON, HENLEY.

serious. Even in a high civilisation the maintenance of roads is of greater moment, and imposes a greater burden, than most of the citizens who support it know; but before the means or the knowledge exist to survey and to harden roads, with their causeways over marshes and their bridges over rivers, the supply of food in time of scarcity or of succour in time of danger is never secure: a little narrow path kept up by nothing but the continual passage of men and animals is all the channel a community of men have for communicating with their neighbours by land. And it must be remembered that upon such communication depend not only the present existence, but the future development of the society, which cannot proceed except by that fertilisation, as it were, which comes from the mixture of varied experiences and of varied traditions: every great change in history has necessarily been accompanied by some new activity of travel.

Under the primitive conditions of which we speak a river of moderate depth, not too rapid in its current and perennial in its supply, is much the best means by which men may communicate. It will easily carry, by the exertions of a couple of men, some hundred times the weight the same men could have carried as porters by land. It furnishes, if it is broad, a certain security from attack during the journey; it will permit the rapid passage of a large number abreast where

the wood tracks and paths of the land compel a long procession; and it furnishes the first of the necessities of life continually as the journey proceeds.

Upon all these accounts a river, during the natural centuries which precede and follow the epochs of high civilisation, is as much more important than the road or the path as, let us say, a railway to-day is more important than a turnpike.

What is equally interesting, when a high civilisation after its little effort begins to decline into one of those long periods of repose into which all such periods of energy do at last decline, the river reassumes its importance. There is a very interesting example of this in the history of France. Before Roman civilisation reached the north of Gaul the Seine and its tributary streams were evidently the chief economic factor in the life of the people: this may be seen in the sites of their strongholds and in the relation of the tribes to one another, as, for instance, the dependence of the Parisians upon Sens. The five centuries of active Roman civilisation saw the river replaced by the system of Roman roads; the great artificial track from north to south, for instance, takes on a peculiar importance; but when the end of that period has come, and the energies of the Roman state are beginning to drag, when the money cannot be collected to repair the great highways, and these fall into decay—then the Seine and its tributaries reassume their old importance.

Paris, the junction of the various waterways, becomes the capital of a new state, and the influence of its kings leads out upon every side along the river valleys which fall into the main valley of the Seine.

There are but two considerable modifications to the use for habitation of slow and constant rivers: their value is lessened or interrupted by precipitous banks or they are rendered unapproachable by marshes. The first of these causes, for instance, has singularly cut off one from the other the groups of population residing upon the upper and the lower Meuse, as it has also, to quote another example, cut off even in language the upper from the lower Elbe.

From this first species of interruption the Thames is, of course, singularly free. There is no river in England, with the exception of the Trent, whose banks interfere so little with the settlement of men in any place on account of their steepness.

As to the second, the Thames presents a somewhat rare character.

The upper part of the river, which is in lowland valleys the most easily inhabited, and the part in which, once the river is navigable, will be found the largest number of small settlements, is in the case of the Thames the most marshy. From its source to beyond Cricklade the river runs entirely over clay; thenceforward the valley is a flat mass of alluvium,

in which the stream swings from one side to the other, and even where it touches higher soil, touches nothing better than the continuation of this clay. In spite, therefore, of the shallowness and narrowness of the upper river there always existed this impediment which an insecure soil would present to the formation of any considerable settlements. The loneliness of the stretch below Kelmscott is due to an original difficulty of this kind, and the one considerable settlement upon the upper river at Lechlade stands upon the only place where firm ground approaches the bank of the river.

This formation endures well below Oxford until one reaches the gap at Sandford, where the stream passes between two beds of gravel which very nearly approach either bank.

Above this point the Thames is everywhere, upon one side or the other, guarded by flat river meadows, which must in early times have been morass; and nowhere were these more difficult of passage than in the last network of streams between Witham Hill and Sandford, to the west of the gravel bank upon which Oxford is built.

Below Sandford, and on all the way to London Bridge, the character of the river in this respect changes. You have everywhere gravel or flinty chalk, with but a narrow bed of alluvial soil, upon either bank to represent the original overflow of the river.

At the crossing places (as we shall see later), notably at

LECHLADE.

Long Wittenham, at Wallingford, at Streatley, at Pangbourne, and, still lower, at Maidenhead and at Ealing, this hard soil came right down to the bank upon either side.

On all this lower half of the Thames marsh was rare, and was to be found even in early times only in isolated patches, which are still clearly defined. These are never found facing each other upon opposite banks of the stream. Thus there was a bad bit on the left bank above Abingdon, but the large marsh below Abingdon, where the Ock came in, was on the right bank, with firm soil opposite it. There was a large bay, as it were, of drowned land on the right bank, from below Reading to a point opposite Shiplake, the last wide morass before the marshes of the tidal portion of the river; and another at the mouth of the Coln, above Staines, on the left bank, which was the last before one came to the mud of the tidal estuary; and even the tidal marshes were fairly firm above London. From Staines eastward down as far as Chelsea the superficial soil upon either side is of gravels, and the long list of ancient inhabited sites upon either bank show how little the overflow of the river interfered with its usefulness to men.

The river, then, from Sandford downward has afforded upon either bank innumerable sites upon which a settlement could be formed.

Above Sandford these sites are not to be found indifferently upon either bank, but now on one, now on the other. There

is no case on the upper river of two villages facing each other on either side of the stream. But though the soil of this upper part was in general less suited to the establishment of settlements, a certain number of firmer stretches could be found, and advantage was taken of them to build.

There thus arose along the whole course of the Thames from its source to London a series of villages and towns, increasing in importance as the stream deepened and gave greater facilities to traffic, and bound together by the common life of the river. It was their *highway*, and it is as a highway that it must first be regarded.

Of the way in which the Thames was a necessary great road in early times, perhaps the best proof is the manner in which various parishes manage to get their water front at the expense of a somewhat unnatural shape to their boundaries. Thus Fawley in Buckinghamshire has a curious and interesting arrangement of this sort thrusting down from the hills a tongue of land which ends in a sort of wharfage on the river just opposite Remenham church. In Berkshire there are also several examples of this. On the upper river Dractmoor and Kingston Bagpuise are both very narrow and long, a shape forced upon them by the necessity of having this outlet upon the river in days when the life of a parish was a real one and the village was a true and self-sufficing unit. Next to them Fyfield does the same thing. Lower down, near Wallingford,

ARTHUR RACKHAM:- THE INFANT THAMES.

the parish of Brightwell has added on a similar eccentric edge to the north and east so that it may share in the bank; but perhaps the best example of all in this connexion is the curious extension below Reading. Here land which is of no use for human habitation—water meadows continually liable to floods—runs out from the parish northward for a good mile. These lands are separated from the river during the whole of this extension until at last a bend of the stream gives the parish the opportunity it has evidently sought in thus extending its boundaries. On the Oxford bank Standlake and Brighthampton do the same thing upon the Upper Thames and to some extent Eynsham; for when one thinks how far back Eynsham stands from the river it is somewhat remarkable that it should have claimed the right to get at the stream. Below Oxford there is another most interesting instance of the same thing in the case of Littlemore. Littlemore stands on high and dry land up above the river somewhat set back from it. Sandford evidently interfered with its access to the water, and Littlemore has therefore claimed an obviously artificial extension for all the world like a great foot added on to the bulk of the parish. This "foot" includes Kennington Island, and runs up the meadows to the foot of that eyot.

The long and narrow parishes in the reaches below Benson, Nuneham Morren, Mongewell, and Ipsden and South Stoke are not, however, examples of this tendency.

They owe their construction to the same causes as have produced the similar long parishes of the Surrey and the Sussex Weald. The life of the parish was in each case right on the river or very close to it, and the extension is not the attempt of the parish to reach the river, but the claim of the parish upon the hunting lands which lay up behind it upon the Chiltern Hills. The truth of this will be apparent to anyone who notes upon the map the way in which parishes are thus lengthened, not only on the western side of the hills, but also upon the farther eastern side, where there was no connection with the river.

There are many other proofs remaining of the chief function which the Thames fulfilled in the early part of our history as a means of communication.

We shall see later in these pages how united all that line of the stream has been; how the great monasteries founded upon the Thames were supported by possessions stretched all along the valleys; how much of it, and what important parts, were held by the Crown; and how strong was the architectural influence of towns upon one another up and down the water, as also how the place names upon the banks are everywhere drawn from the river; but before dealing with these it is best to establish the main portions into which the Thames falls and to see what would naturally be their limits.

It may be said, generally, that every river which is tidal,

and whose stream is so slow as to be easily navigable in either direction, divides itself naturally, when one is regarding it as a means of communication, into three main divisions.

There will first of all be the tidal portion which the tide usually scours into an estuary. As a general rule, this portion is not considerably inhabited in the early periods of history, for it is not until a large international commerce arises that vessels have much occasion to stop as they pass up and down the maritime part of the stream ; and even so, settlements upon its banks must come comparatively late in the development of the history of the river, because a landing upon such flooded banks is not easily to be effected.

This is true of the Dutch marshes at the mouths of the Rhine, whose civilisation (one exclusively due to the energy of man) came centuries after the establishment of the great Roman towns of the Rhine ; it is true of the estuary of the Seine, whose principal harbour of Havre is almost modern, and whose difficulties are still formidable for ocean-going craft ; and it is true of the Thames.

The estuary of the Thames plays little or no part in the very early history of England. Invaders, when they landed, landed on the sea-coast at the very mouth, or appear to have sailed right up into the heart of the country.

It is, nevertheless, true that the last few miles of tidal water,

in Western Europe at least, are not to be included in this first division of a great river.

The swish of the tide continues up beyond the broad estuary, the sand-banks, and the marshes, and there are reaches more or less long (rather less than twenty miles perhaps originally in the case of the Thames, rather more perhaps originally in the case of the lower Seine) which for the purposes of habitation are inland reaches. They have the advantage of a current moving in either direction twice a day and yet not the disadvantage of greatly varying levels of water. Thus one may say of the Seine in the old days that from about Caudebec to Pont de L'Arche it enjoyed such inland tidal conditions; and of the Thames from Greenwich to Teddington that similar advantages existed.

The true point of division which separates, so far as human history is concerned, the lower from the upper part of such rivers is the first bridge, and, what almost always accompanies the first bridge, the first great town. To repeat the obvious parallel, Rouen was this point upon the Seine; upon the Thames this point was the Bridge of London. It is with the habitable and historic Thames Valley above the bridge that this book has to deal, and it will later be to the reader's purpose to consider why London Bridge crossed the stream just where it did, and of what moment that site has been in the history of the Thames and of England.

The second division in a great European tidal river, considered as a means of communication, is the navigable but non-tidal portion.

The word navigable is so vague that it requires some definition before we can apply it to any particular stream. It does not, of course, mean in this connection "navigable by sea-going boats." One may take a constant depth of so little as three feet to be sufficient for the purpose of carrying merchandise even in considerable bulk.

The legislatures of various countries have established varying gauges to determine where the navigability of a river may be said to cease. In practice these gauges have always been arbitrary. The upper reaches of a river may present sufficient depth but too fast a current, or they may be too narrow, or the curves may be too rapid, or the obstruction of rocks too common, for any sort of navigation, although the depth of water be sufficient.

Conversely, in some streams of peculiar breadth and constancy very shallow upper reaches may have early been converted to the use of man. The matter is only to be determined by the experience of what the inhabitants of a river valley have actually been able to do under the local circumstances, and when we examine this we shall usually be astonished to see how far inland a river was used until the history of internal navigation was transformed by the development of

canals or partially destroyed by the development of railways. Thus it is certain that so small a stream as the Adur in Sussex floated barges up to the boundaries of Shipley Parish ; that the Stour was habitually used beyond Canterbury ; that so tiny a tributary as the Ant in Norfolk was followed up from its parent Bure to the neighbourhood of Worsted.

In this connection the Thames is of an especial interest, for it had, in proportion to its length, the greatest section of navigable non-tidal water of any of the shorter rivers in Europe. Until the digging of the Thames and Severn Canal at the end of last century it was possible, and even common, for boats to reach Cricklade, or at anyrate the mouth of the Churn. And even now, in spite of the pumping that is necessary at Thames head and the consequent diminution of the volume of water in the upper reaches, the Thames, were water carriage to come again into general use, would be a busy commercial stream as high up as Lechlade.

This exceptional sector of non-tidal navigable water cutting right across England from east to west, and that in what used to be the most productive and is still the most fertile portion of the island, is the chief factor in the historic importance of the Thames.

From Cricklade to the navigable waters of the Severn Valley is but a long day's walk ; and one may say that even in the earliest times there was thus provided a great highway

STREATLEY REACH.

right across what then was by far the most thickly populated and the most important part of the island.

A third section in all such rivers (and, from what we have said above, a short and insignificant one in the case of the Thames) may be called the *head-waters* of the river : where the stream is so shallow or so uncertain as to be no longer navigable. In the case of the Thames these head-waters cover no more than ten to fifteen miles of country. With the exception of rivers that run through mountain districts this section of a river's course is nearly always small in proportion to the rest ; but the Thames, just as it has the longest proportion of navigable water, has also by far the shortest proportion of useless head-water of all the shorter European rivers.

There is a further discussion as to what is the true source of the Thames, and which streams may properly be regarded as its head-waters : the Churn, especially since the digging of the canal, having a larger flow than the stream from Thames head ; but whichever is chosen, the non-navigable portion starts at the same point, and is the third of the divisions into which the valley ranges itself when it is considered in its length, as a highway from the west to the east of England. The two limits, then, are at London Bridge and at Cricklade, or rather at some point between Lechlade and Cricklade, and nearer to the latter.

But a river has a second topographical and historic function. It cannot only be considered longitudinally as a

highway, it can also be considered in relation to transverse forces and regarded as an obstacle, a defence, and a boundary.

This function has, of course, been of the highest importance in the history of all great rivers, not perhaps so much so in the case of the Thames as in the case of swifter or deeper streams, but, still, more than has been the case with so considerable and so rapid a river as the Po in Lombardy or the uncertain but dangerous Loire in its passage through the centre of France. For the Thames Valley was that which divided the vague Mercian land from which we get our weights, our measures, and the worst of our national accent, and cut it off from that belt of the south country which was the head and the heart of England until the last industrial revolution of our history.

The Thames also has entered to a large, though hardly to a determining, extent into the military history of the country ; to an extent which is greater in earlier than in later times, because with every new bridge the military obstacle afforded by the stream diminished. And finally, the Thames, regarded as an obstacle, was the cause that London Bridge concentrated upon itself so much of the life of the nation, and that the town which that bridge served, always the largest commercial city, became at last the capital of the island.

We have already said that the establishment of the site of London Bridge was a capital point in the history of the river

and the principal line of division in its course. What were the topographical conditions which caused the river to be crossed at this point rather than at another?

It is always of the greatest moment to men to find some crossing for a great river as low down as may be towards the mouth. For the higher the bridge the longer the detour between, at the least, *two* provinces of the country which the river traverses. It is especially important to find such a crossing as low down as possible when the river is tidal and when it is flanked upon either side by great flooded marshes, as was and is the Thames. For under such conditions it is difficult, especially in primitive times, to cross habitually from one side to the other in boats.

Now it is a universal rule of early topography, and one which can be proved upon twenty of the old trackways of England, that the wild path which the earliest men used, when it approaches a river, seeks out a spur of higher and drier land, and if possible one directly facing another similar spur upon the far side of the water. It is a feature which the present writer continually observed in the exploration of the old British trackway between Winchester and Canterbury; it is similarly observable in the presumably British track between Chester and Manchester; and it is the feature which determined the site of London Bridge.

From the sea for sixty miles is a succession of what

was once entirely, and is now still in great part, marshy land; or at least if there are no marshes upon one bank there will be marshes upon the other. In the rare places down stream where there is a fairly rapid rise upon either side of the river the stream is far too wide for bridging; and these marshes were to be found right up the valley until one struck the gravel at Chelsea: even here there were bad marshes on the farther shore.

There is in the whole of the upper stretch of the tidal water but one place where a bluff of high and dry land faces, not indeed land equally dry immediately upon the farther bank, but at least a spur of dry land which approaches fairly near to the main stream. If the modern contour lines be taken and laid out upon a map of London this spur will be found to project from Southwark northward directly towards the river, and immediately opposite it is the dry hill, surrounded upon three sides by river or by marsh, upon which grew up the settlement of London. Here, then, the first crossing of the Thames was certain to be made.

It is not known whether a permanent bridge existed before the Roman Conquest. It may be urged in favour of the negative argument that Cæsar had no knowledge of such a bridge, or at least did not march towards it, but crossed the river with difficulty in the higher reaches by a ford. And it may also be urged that a bridge across the

Rhine was equally unknown in that time. But, the bridge once established, it could not fail to become the main point of convergence for the commerce of Southern England, and indeed for much of that which proceeded from the North upon its way to the Continent. Such an obstacle would oppose itself to every invasion, and did, in fact, oppose itself to more than one historical invasion from the North Sea. It would further prevent sea-going vessels whose masts were securely stepped and could not lower from proceeding farther up stream, and would thereupon become the boundary of the seaport of the Thames. Such a bridge would, again, concentrate upon itself the traffic of all that important and formerly wealthy part of the island which bulges out to the east between the estuary of the Thames and the Wash, and which must necessarily have desired communication both with the still wealthier southern portion and with the Continent. But, more important than this, London Bridge also concentrated upon itself all the up-country traffic in men and in goods which came in by the natural gate of the country at the Straits of Dover, except that small portion which happened to be proceeding to the south-west of England: and this exception to the early commerce of England was the smaller from the comparative ease with which the Channel could be crossed between Brittany and Cornwall.

Finally, the Bridge, as it formed the limit for sea-going vessels, formed also if not the limit at least a convenient terminus for craft coming from inland down the stream. It would form the place of transhipment between the sea-going and the inland trade.

Everything then conspired to make this first crossing of the Thames the chief commercial point in Britain; and, since we are considering in particular the history of the river, it must be noted that these conditions also made of London Bridge what we have remarked it to be, the chief division in the whole course of the stream. This character it still maintains, and the life of the river from the bridge to the Nore is a totally different thing, with a different literature and a different accompanying art, from the life of the river above bridges.

We have seen that the river when it is regarded as an avenue of access to men for commerce or for travel is, especially in early times, and with boats of light draught, of one piece from Lechlade to London Bridge. There was in this section always sufficient water even in a dry summer to float some sort of a boat. But the river, regarded as a barrier or obstacle for human beings in their movement up and down Britain, did not form one such united section. On the contrary, it divided itself, as all such rivers do, into two very clearly defined parts: there was that upper part

The Bells of Ouseley.

which could be crossed at frequent intervals by an army, that lower part in which fords are rare.

In most rivers one has nothing more to do in describing those two sections than to show how gradually they merge into one another. In most rivers the passage of the upper waters is perfectly easy, and as one descends the fords get rarer and rarer, until at last they cease.

With the Thames this is not the case. The two portions of the river are sharply divided in the vicinity of Oxford, and that for reasons which we have already seen when we were speaking of the suitability of its banks for habitation. The upper Thames is indeed shallow and narrow, and there are innumerable places above Oxford where it could be crossed, so far as the volume of its waters was concerned. It was crossed by husbandmen wherever a village or a farm stood upon its banks. Perhaps the highest point at which it had to be crossed at one chosen spot is to be discovered in the word Somer*ford* Keynes, but the ease with which the water itself could be traversed is apparent rather in the absence than in the presence of names of this sort upon the upper Thames. Shifford, for instance, which used to be spelt Siford, may just as well have been named from the crossing of the Great Brook as from the crossing of the Thames. The only other is Duxford.

While, however, the upper Thames was thus easy to cross

where individuals only or small groups of cattle were concerned, the marshes on either side always made it difficult for an army. The records of early fighting are meagre, and often legendary, but such as they are you do not find the upper Thames crossed and recrossed as are the upper Severn or the upper Trent. There are two points of passage: Cricklade and Oxford, nor can the passage from Oxford be made westward over the marshes. It is confined to the ford going north and south.

Below Oxford, after the entry of the Cherwell, and from thence down to a point not very easily determined, but which is perhaps best fixed at Wallingford, the Thames is only passable at fixed crossings in ordinary weather, as at Sandford, where the hard gravels approach the bank upon either side, and at other places, each distant from the next by long stretches of river.

It is not easy, now that the river has been locked, to determine precisely where all these original crossings are to be found.

The records of Abingdon and its bridge make it certain that a difficult ford existed here; the name "Burford" attached to the bridge points to the ancient ford at this spot. It is a name to be discovered in several other parts of England where there has been some ancient crossing of a river, as, for instance, the crossing of the Mole in Surrey by the Roman military road.

SOMERFORD KEYNES.

First Mill on the Thames.

The next place below Abingdon may have been at Appleford, but was more likely between the high cliff at Clifton-Hampden and the high and dry spit of Long Wittenham. Below this again for miles there was no easy crossing of the river.

The Thames was certainly impassable at Dorchester. The whole importance of Dorchester indeed in history lies in its being a strong fortified position, and it depends for its defence upon the depth of the river, which swirls round the peninsula occupied by the camp.

It has been conjectured that there was a Roman ford or ferry at the east end of Little Wittenham Wood, where it touches the river. The conjecture is ill supported. No track leads to this spot from the south, and close by is an undoubted ford where now stands Shillingford Bridge.

Below this again there was no crossing until one got to Wallingford ; and here we reach a point of the greatest importance in the history of the Thames and of England.

Wallingford was not the lowest point at which the Thames could ever be crossed. So far was this from being the case that the *tidal* Thames could be crossed in several places on the ebb, notably at the passage between Ealing and Kew, where Kew Bridge now stands ; and, as we shall see, the Thames was passable at many other places. But the special character of the passage at Wallingford lay in the fact that

it was a ford upon which one could always depend. Below Wallingford the crossings were either only to be effected in very dry seasons or, though normally usable, might be interrupted by rain.

It is at Wallingford, therefore, that the main lowest passage of the Thames was effected, and it was through Wallingford that Berkshire communicated with the Chilterns. Wallingford is, then, the second point of division upon the Thames when one is regarding that river as a defence or a boundary. Below Wallingford there was perhaps a regular crossing at Pangbourne ; there was certainly a ford of great importance between Streatley and Goring ; and all the way down the river at intervals were difficult but practicable passages — notably at Cowey Stakes between the Surrey and the Middlesex shore, a place which is the traditional crossing of Cæsar. The water here in normal weather was, however, as much as five feet deep, and this ford well illustrates the difficulties of all the lower crossings of the Thames.

The effect of the river as a barrier must, of course, have largely depended upon the level to which the waters rose in early times. It is exceedingly difficult to get any evidence upon this—first, because however far you go back in English history some sort of control seems always to have been imposed upon the river ; and secondly, because the early overflows have left little permanent effect.

WALLINGFORD BRIDGE.

As an example of the antiquity of the regulation of the Thames we have the embankment round the Isle of Dogs, which is Roman or pre-Roman in its origin, like the sea-wall of the Wash, which defends the Fenland; and at Ealing, Staines, Abingdon, and twenty other places we have sites probably prehistoric, and certainly at the beginnings of history, which could never have been inhabited if the neighbouring fields had not been drained or protected. The regularity of the stream has therefore been somewhat artificial throughout all the centuries of recorded history, and the banks have had ample time to acquire consistency.

It is certain, of course, that works of planting, of draining, or of embankment, which required continuous energy, skill, and capital, decayed after the coming of the Saxon pirates, and were not undertaken again with full vigour until after the Norman Conquest. Even to-day the work is not quite complete, though every year sees its improvement: we are still unable to prevent regularly recurrent floods in the flats round Oxford and below the gorge of the Chilterns; but for the purpose of this argument the chief fact to be noted is that no serious interruption to the approach of the river seems to have existed in historic times.

In pre-historic times many stretches of the river must have afforded great difficulties of approach. The mouths of the Ock, the Coln, the Kennet, the Mole, and the Wandle

must each have been surrounded by a marsh ; all the plain between Oxford and the Hinkseys must have been partially flooded, as must the upper reaches between Lechlade and Witham (on one side or the other of the stream as it winds from the southern to the northern rises of land), and as must also have been the long stretch of the right bank below Reading. The highest spring tides may have been felt as high up the stream as Staines, and both the character of the surface and the contour lines permit one to conjecture that the valley of the Wandle and several other inlets from the lower river were flooded. Yet it is remarkable that in this alluvium, more disturbed and dug than any other in Europe, little or nothing of human relics, of boats, or of piles has been discovered, and this absence of testimony also points to the remoteness of date from which we should reckon the human control of the river.

Here, as in many other conjectures concerning early history or pre-history, one is convinced of that safe rule which, in Europe at least, bids us never exaggerate the changes achieved by the last few centuries or the contrast between recorded and unrecorded things.

The tendency of most modern history in this country has been to exaggerate such changes and such contrasts. In the greater part of modern popular history care is taken to emphasise the difference between the Middle and Dark Ages and

the last few centuries. The forests of England are represented as impassable, or nearly so ; the numbers of the population are grossly underestimated ; the towns which have had a continuous municipal existence of 1500 years are represented as villages.

The same spirit would tend to make of the Thames Valley in the Dark and Middle Ages a very different landscape from that which we see to-day. The floods were indeed more common and the passage of the river somewhat more difficult ; cultivation did not everywhere approach the banks as it does now ; and in two or three spots where there has been a great development of modern building, notably at Reading, and, of course, in London, the banks have been artificially strengthened. But with these exceptions it may be confidently asserted that no belt of densely inhabited landscape in England has changed so little in its natural features as the Thames Valley.

There are dozens of reaches upon the upper Thames where little is in sight save the willows, the meadows, and a village church tower, which present exactly the same aspect to-day as they did when that church was first built. You might put a man of the fifteenth century on to the water below St John's Lock, and, until he came to Buscot Lock, he would hardly know that he had passed into a time other than his own. The same steeple of Lechlade would stand as a permanent landmark beyond the fields, and, a long

way off, the same church of Eaton Hastings, which he had known, would show above the trees.

There is another method of judging the comparative smallness of the change, and it is a method which can be applied to many other parts of England whose desertion or wildness in the Dark and early Middle Ages has been too confidently asserted. That method is to note where human settlements were and are found. With the exception of the long and probably marshy piece between Radcot and Shifford the whole of the upper Thames was dotted with such settlements, which, though small, were quite close to the banks. Kelmscott is right up against the river in what one would otherwise have imagined to be land too marshy for building until modern times. Buscot, on the other bank, is not only close to the river, but was a royal manor of high historical importance in the eleventh century. Eaton Hastings is similarly placed right against the bank; so was in its day the palace of Kempsford above Lechlade, and so is the church of Inglesham between the two. All the way down you have at intervals old stonework and old place names, indicating habitation upon the upper Thames.

A proper system of locks is comparatively modern on any European river. The invention is even said (upon doubtful authority) to be as late as the sixteenth century, but the method of regulating the waters of a river by weirs is immemorial.

INGLESHAM ROUNDHOUSE.

The Junction of Severn and Thames Canal.

We have no earlier record of weirs upon the Thames than that in Magna Charta; but some such system must have existed from the time when men first used the Thames in a regular manner for commerce.

There is but one place left in which one can still reconstruct for oneself the aspect of such weirs as were till but little more than a century ago the universal method of canalising the river. Modern weirs are merely adjuncts to locks, and are usually found upon a branch of the stream other than that which leads up to the lock. But in this weir the old fashion of crossing the whole stream is still preserved. There is no lock, and when a boat would pass up or down the paddles of the weir have to be lifted. It is, in a modern journey upon the upper Thames, the one faint incident which the day affords, for if one is going down the stream but few paddles are lifted, and the boat shoots a small rapid, while to admit a boat going up stream the whole weir is raised, and, even so, a great rush of water opposes the boat as it is hauled through. Some years ago there were several of these weirs upon the upper river. They have all been superseded by locks, and it is probable that this last one will not long survive.

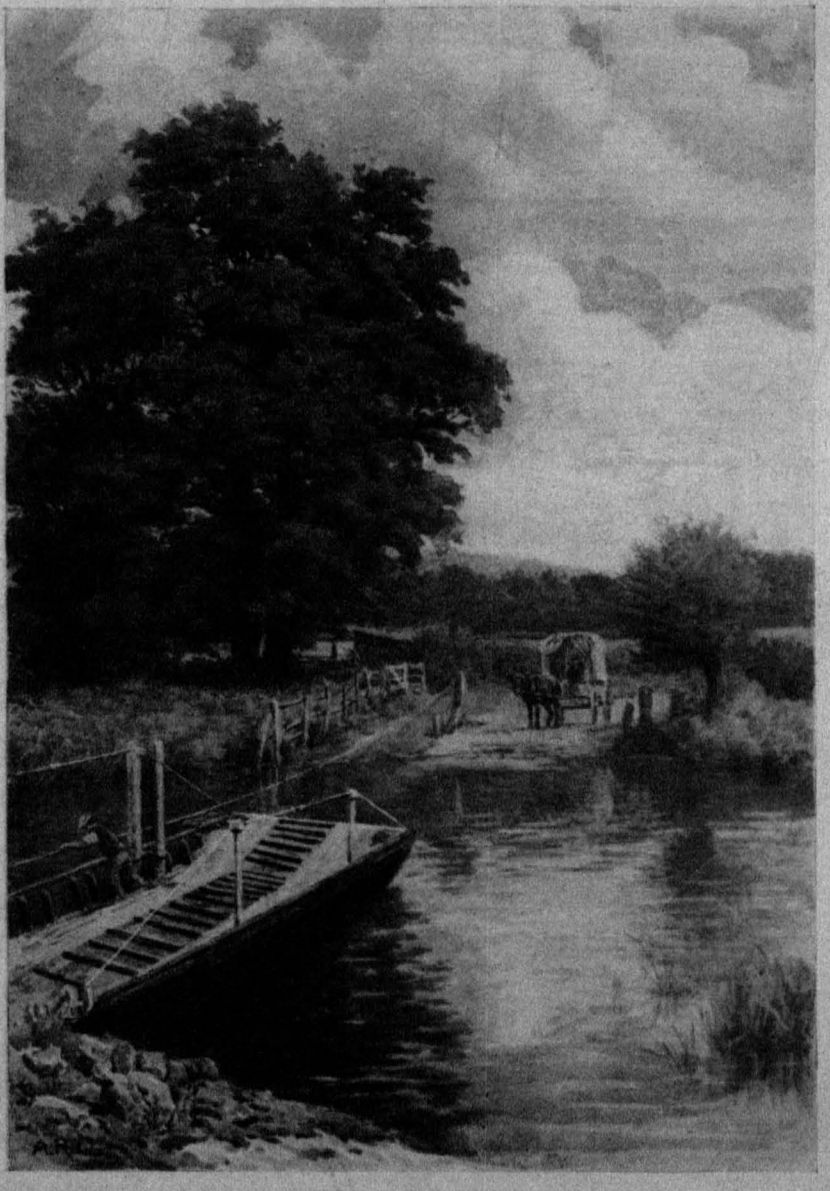
Such weirs did certainly sufficiently regulate the stream as to make its banks regularly habitable. If no local order,

at least the interest of villagers in their mills sufficed to the watching of the stream.

We have in the place names upon the Thames a further evidence of the antiquity of its regulation, for, as will be seen in a moment, none give proof of any important settlement later than the eleventh century.

These place names not only indicate a continuous and early settlement of the banks, but also form in themselves a very interesting series, whose etymology is a little section of the history of England.

Of purely Celtic names very few survive in the sites of human habitation, though the names of the waterways are almost universally Celtic, as is the name of Thames itself. But it is probable that in the Saxon names which line the river there are many corruptions of Celtic words made to sound in the Saxon fashion. We cannot prove such origins. We can surmise with justice that the "tons" and "dons" all up and down England are Celtic terminations; they are almost unknown in Germany. There is a somewhat pedantic guess, drawn (it is said) from Iceland, that we got this national name ending from Scandinavia; so universal a habit would hardly have arisen from an admixture of Scandinavian blood received at the very close of the Dark Ages and affecting but small patches of North England. Moreover, as against this theory, there is the fact that quite half the Celtic



Bablock Hythe Ferry.

place names mentioned in our early history and in that of Gaul had a similar termination. London itself is the best example.

If, however, we neglect this termination, and consider the first part of the words in which it occurs (as in Abing-don, Bensing-ton, Ea-ton, etc.), we shall find that most of the place names are Saxon in form, and some certainly Saxon in derivation.

Thus Ea-ton, a name scattered all along the Thames, from its very source to the last reaches, is the "tun" by the water or stream. Clif-ton (as in Clifton-Hampden) is the "ton" on the cliff, a very marked feature of the left bank of the river at this place. Of Bensing-ton, now Benson, we know nothing, nor do we of the origin of the word Abing-don.

The names terminating in "ham" are, in their termination at least, certainly Teutonic; and the same may be true of most of those—but not all of those—ending in "ford." Ford may just as well be a Celtic as a Teutonic ending, and in either case means a "passage," a "going." It does not even in all cases indicate a shallow passage, though in the great majority of cases on the Thames it does indicate a place where one could cross the river on foot. Thus Wallingford was probably the walled or embattled ford, and Oxford almost certainly the "ford of the droves"—droves going north from

Berkshire. One may say roughly that all the "hams" were Teutonic save where one can put one's finger on a probable Celtic derivation such as one has, for instance, in the case of Witham, which should mean the settlement upon the "bend" or curve of the river, a Celtic name with a Teutonic ending.

One may also believe that the termination "or" or "ore" is Teutonic; Cumnor may have meant "the wayfarers' stage," and Windsor probably "the landing place on the winding of the river."

Hythe also is thought to be Teutonic. One can never be quite sure with a purely Anglo-Saxon word that it had a German origin, but at least Hythe is Anglo-Saxon, a wharf or stage; thus Bablock Hythe on the road through the Roman town of Eynsham across the river to Cumnor and Abingdon, cutting off the great bend of the river at Witham; so also the town we now call "Maidenhead," which was perhaps the "mid-Hythe" between Windsor and Reading. Some few certainly Celtic names do survive: in the Sinodun Hills, for instance, above Dorchester; and the first part of the name Dorchester itself is Celtic. At the very head of the Thames you have Coates, reminding one of the Celtic name for the great wood that lay along the hill; but just below, where the water begins to flow, Kemble and Ewen, if they are Saxon, are perhaps drawn from the presence of a "spring." Cricklade may be all Celtic, or may be partly Celtic and partly Saxon.

HAMPTON COURT PALACE.

The Thames

London is Celtic, as we have seen. And in the mass of places whose derivation it is impossible to establish the primitive roots of a Celtic place name may very possibly survive.

The purely Roman names have quite disappeared, and, what is odd, they disappeared more thoroughly in the Thames Valley than in any other part of England. Dorchester alone preserves a faint reminiscence of its Romano-Celtic name; but Bicester to the north, and the crossing of the ways at Alchester, are probably Saxon in the first part at least. Streatley has a Roman derivation, as have so many similar names throughout England which stand upon a "strata" or "way" of British or of Roman origin. But though "Spina" is still Speen, Ad Pontes, close by, one of the most important points upon the Roman Thames, has lost its Roman name entirely, and is known as Staines: the stones or stone which marked the head of the jurisdiction of London upon the river.

To return to the river regarded as a *boundary*, it is subject to this rather interesting historical observation that it has been more of a boundary in highly civilised than in barbaric times.

One would expect the exact contrary to be the case. A civilised man can cross a river more easily than a barbarian; and in civilised times there are permanent bridges, where in barbaric times there would be only fords or ferries.

Nevertheless, it is true of the Thames, as of nearly every

other division in Europe, that it was much more of a boundary at the end of the Roman Empire, and is more of a strict boundary to-day, than it was during the Dark Ages, and presumably also before the Claudian invasion. Thus we may conjecture with a fair accuracy that in the last great ordering of boundaries within the Roman Empire, which was the work of Diocletian, and so much of which still survives in our European politics to-day (for instance, the boundary of Normandy), the Thames formed the division between Southern and Midland Britain. It is equally certain that it did *not* form any exact division between Wessex and Mercia.

The estuary has, of course, always formed a division, and in the barbarian period it separated the higher civilisation of Kent from that of the East Saxons, who were possibly of a different race, and certainly of a different culture. But the Thames above London Bridge was not a true boundary until the civilisation of England began to form, towards the close of the Dark Ages. It is perpetually crossed and recrossed by contending armies, and the first result of a success is to cause the conquerer to annex a belt from the farther bank to his own territories.

It is further remarkable that the one great definite boundary of the Dark Ages in England—that which was established for a few years by Alfred between his kingdom

WARGRAVE.