

Thames Floods: REFLECTIONS AND IDEAS

- by Francis J. Bloomfield

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Fifty years ago there hung in one of the apartments of Glen Island a very ancient woodcut (I think it was woodcut) of a view of Maidenhead as seen from Bridge Street, looking up towards the town. It was a picture of the old ford through which the Bath-Road passed at the spot where now stand the Chapel Arches. On the right and left of the foreground appears a broad stream; in the middle distance on the opposite bank, in the middle of the road, stood the old St Mary's Church of Chapel of Ease; on the left (south) the heavy, low tiled roofs of the barns and stables of St. Ives; a glimpse in profile of the old Bear Hotel on the right, and the steep ascent of old High-street, with its peculiar old gabled and tiled roofs filling the distance as a background. I took particular interest in this old print as a boy and have never forgotten it. There may be some more of them extant, although I have never seen one since.

The width and volume of that ancient stream which then crossed over the roadway was fully demonstrated by the illustration and is corroborated today by the width of the existing arches which were built later to carry the road over the water, when it evidently became inconvenient as the commerce of the town increased and coaches became more frequent and numerous. Within living memory this stream and general waterway (in common with others) was much broader and voluminous than today. The Ives fish pond or lake has become filled in and the adjacent land made up and built upon. At the first whisper of a flood in those days (50 to 60 years ago) this stream and the old Bear Meadow (which was evidently a shallow depression and bed of the larger stream which had been allowed to become overgrown and silted up) were the first (together with the Moor and its contiguous streams) to tell the tale. How often have we, in those old and happy days, enjoyed sliding and skating on that harbinger of a flood which never materialised but which managed to get frost bitten instead!

The water here, as in many places elsewhere in the lines of depression, seemed to spring up from beneath these low-lying patches instead of flowing over from the watercourses, showing that the peaty and otherwise unconformable strata of the meads was like a sponge – water bearing and full up. But all this has been dammed now; the land has been raised three feet. A picture palace, skating rink and hippodrome supplant and supply the recreation the old water meadow afforded and the water for the most part (both flood and normal) which once found its way in that direction (one of the channels of its old and natural flow) is forced to take another course save the meagre spoonful which runs through the confined channel under the first arch from the fast narrowing ditches higher up the mead. This natural depression or stream bed over which the Chapel Arches were built extends from "Cockmarsh" and the "Berries" across Cookham Moor and by the

Strande and along fields with various intersections and influences (one of which is Wid-brook) to North Town and so along the Chapel Arches and the library, under the G.W.R. on to Braywick joining the river below Bray. There are other confluent streams that make for the same outfall.

You may dig anywhere over the low-lying meads between the old river terrace or bank, all of which I have previously mentioned and the present river channel and can invariably find at an almost uniform depth (varying only with the general fall of the valley bed) fine, clean, unstained river ballast. Sometimes it is of a fine sandy nature, at others it shows distinctly that a huge deep pool has been formed where fine mud and vegetable detritus is deposited in stratified layers. In many places this ballast has been "land dredged" to advantage and profit by land owners, its "sharp" properties being in special demand for concrete building purposes just as the ballast is from the river itself.

The soil that overlies this old Thames bed (and that is what it really is) is extremely interesting being charged with peaty remains of [riverside?] vegetable detritus, nut shells, branches [and twigs?] of willow, leaves, rushes, etc., besides [...] and sand showing similar composition to the eyots that now ornament the Thames [near?] the same spots. In one of these old [...] deposits along the present normal water levels some distance from the river. I once had (52 [?] years ago) the pleasure of seeing some [...] needles and large stag beetles [attached to?] one of the antlers I have in my possession. The deduction of course from this evidence is that the Thames once flowed over the land where now lie high and dry in the summer season the flat meadow-lands which we call meads, and that the ballast (free from the red stain of peroxide of iron which characterises and marks the more ancient gravels of the next terrace or older river bed higher up) is, geologically speaking, the present river's old bed.

There are surely few students of physiography who would imagine or seriously contend that the present course of the navigable Thames, especially its middle course is quite natural. By the middle course I mean that portion of it say from Oxford, where it leave the [oolite?], flows over the green sand or gaut (which bears the Thames tributary), then entering the chalk outertop, carries its sinuous way to Maidenhead, just below where it leaves the chalk hills and flows on to the broad valley of the London clay and basin. In this portion of its course it certainly has been so long running in approximately the same channel owing to controls as to be considered by some people natural, but a little consideration will show the fallacy of such an idea. It only runs in that course because of the inducements – locks, weirs, sluices, embankments and other *artifices* of control – hence it is in a huge measure artificial. Notwithstanding these statements and coaxings, it does not forget to occasionally remind its keepers of its "ancient power" by the undermining and knocking off a sailent or two, or washing away a foreshore and threatening destruction of a roadway. Our picturesque (?) embankment on the riverside is but an example. Take away your controls, pull up your embankments and camp-sheathings, let the waters have their sweet will again, cease your dredging, and

you will have a wild stream of varying moods and unstaple (sic) temperament – an angry and impetuous torrent in places tearing away the soil and pulling down banks, filling the channel, throwing up fresh reefs and shallows for his own future diversions and gathering up of renewal potentialities of fresh structures. In but a comparatively short time it would be found that he had returned to his old wild ways and was re-carving his path across the meads between the chalk hills which enclose them where hundreds of years ago he meandered from age to age, traversing and re-traversing in a varying path, washing and grinding and re-washing and re-grinding the flint, which, in a long previous age, his ancestor, the old and greater river, had carved out of the chalk for him to play with. It would not be long before he began to divide his forces, splitting up in places, into several streams forming indiscriminate islands and islets (such as we see in front of the Gas Works). This is the picture of any valley previous to the river being controlled.

It is the remains of such wild and natural conditions that we can trace along the valley meads and which are so prominently visible after an abnormal rainfall.

It is the old natural channels and subsidiary streams that I propose should again be utilized in conjunction with the river for the service generally of the community in the amelioration of floods when they come and the constant replenishment of the land springs in the permeable strata which borders the valley and for a considerable distance above the town. The dream is Utopian of that I am well aware: of course it is an impertinence to propose anything be it ever so good for your fellow beings if it is contrary to the conventional right of property or will put a few pounds on the rates etc. Yet we allow a railway company to place a huge dam across the valley and its waterway with most inadequate provision for the passage of the water when in flood.

In the embodiment of the floods, Nature has been trying to tell us how to join hands with her and make our town and surroundings really beautiful and similar to the "city of the waters". The ancient name of our town should give us a clue.. Island Town ("Eylington"). Only think of an English Venice and that the virgin city on the Thames. It only wants a bold lead and the public backing, together with a grant of capital and from "Cockmarsh" and the "Berries" navigable cuttings could be made which could follow the lines of the old water course which could be opened to a uniform depth with the river. The intersecting and [athwart] streams wide enough for navigation but not so deep. The soil placed upon adjacent land would reclaim it for classic villa residences on the margins. The main streams would be brought through the town at the Chapel Arches and the Moor, the latter culverted into a lake. Lattice work girder bridges of elegant design would be built over the bridges to take road traffic, which by this time will be of a very light nature (all heavy traffic being by that time relegated to the railways or airways). The fall of 10 or more feet between Cookham and Bray will be accounted for by provision of picturesque waterfalls, sluices for use in flood time and rollers with landing places for light craft and gondolas. The culverts under the G.W.R. would of course have to be widened

and heightened, the streams coming into one wide stream at Braywick, rejoining the Thames just below Monkey Island.

At the approach of a flood the sluices would be drawn up and the relief from risk of flood is of course palpable. What a pleasant picture this opens up! Boats up in streets; tradesmen taking their goods by water (motor boats) to customers house between Maidenhead, Cookham and Bray, We should be having water carnivals and processions in and around these many streams which of course would be lighted up with electric light and all the latest improvements, and unemployed for several years. – What a dream.

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