

## THE RIVER THAMES

The River Thames with its gravel terraces was formed by melting glaciers at the end of the last Ice Age some 12,000 years ago. This was the only place for many miles in either direction where the river could be forded, so from prehistoric times, ancient trackways led down to a ford across the river. By 6-700 BC an Iron Age settlement had become established where Abingdon later developed.

The river provided a means of transport when roads were poor or non-existent; a valuable source of fish; water power for working mills and other industries, and a useful defence against attack. It formed a barrier between the Iron Age tribes of the Dobunni and the Atrebates, and between the warring kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. It afforded protection to the south front of the abbey, and the Thames also formed a natural boundary between the historic counties of Berkshire and Oxfordshire.

The construction of the millstream by Abbot Ethelwold in the 10<sup>th</sup> century – a major early feat of civil engineering – reduced the flow of water in the main river channel, leading to frequent disputes with other river users, particularly the millers.

Around 1052 Abbot Ordric ordered the construction of a new navigation channel which left the main stream near Thrupp, passing through the meadow to the south of his church towards Culham. This had several advantages – it avoided the notorious shallows of the main channel and the long stretch of the bend round Abingdon, and allowed the abbot and monks to enjoy the peace of their monastery free of noisy river traffic. This new channel, the Swift Ditch, remained the main channel of navigation for over seven centuries. The toll charged was 100 herrings in Lent.

Two main streams run into the Thames at Abingdon, the Stert and the Ock, whose name derives from 'ehoc', the Celtic word for salmon. This strongly suggests that salmon once came up the Ock to spawn. The river teemed with many species of fish including eels and crayfish, a valuable addition to the monks' diet.

Flooding has been a regular feature of life in Abingdon, and in very severe winters the Thames can be frozen over, as in 1891 and the Great Frost of February 1895, which was preceded by the Great Flood of November 1894.

The early river traffic consisted mainly of ferries for the transport of people and animals, and barges carrying heavy goods. It was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the Thames was used for pleasure craft – punts and rowing boats, followed by pleasure steamers and sail-boats. Radley College and Abingdon School had rowing eights and fours, and regattas were popular features in the Victorian period.

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