

The Island

Contributed by Administrator
Tuesday, 06 June 2006

Thames Ditton Island - A Resident's view...

Most casual visitors to Thames Ditton - and many of those who have lived here for some time - fail to notice that some of its inhabitants live off-shore! Turning the corner between Summer Road and the High Street affords only a glimpse at the entrance to the Olde Swan pub. But if you dawdle in the pub car park you can look across the back stream of the river and see a few houses. From that vantage point the giveaway is of course the striking suspension bridge: if one crosses this the hideaway that is Thames Ditton Island unfolds around you. The bridge itself is only visible as you sail upriver from Kingston, but even then the main stream of the river bears away and the back stream is lost behind the trees.

Henry VIII lived at Hampton Court long before there were any locks: the River Thames was then tidal at least as far as Sunbury, and there were no bridges. Back then, the usual way from Surrey to the King's residence and the surrounding district was by carriage or cart, down the High Street, over what is now the Slipway and, at low tide, straight through the ford to the other side. With the tide in, the ferryman would take you over for a groat or two. At that time, the king would be rowed up from Westminster to his place in the country. The last mile or so would have been on a narrowing, twisting creek, especially at low tide.

To effect a grander arrival, he had the river dug out straight, thus leaving the islands separated from their home county, Middlesex. Indeed, the islands were thereafter still treated as being in Middlesex and only moved into Surrey at the county upheaval in 1972. Before there were locks and weirs to control the levels, Summer Road would flood at most high tides, and be barely passable at all in the winter months, hence its name.

The first wooden bridge over the river at Hampton Court opened in 1753, but there was a toll and the ferries remained: they were cheaper, and it was quite a way to walk just to reach the bridge from the village. The first, rather rickety, bridge was replaced first by a more substantial timber one, in 1778, and by another, in steel and brick, in 1865; this one lasted until the concrete structure we have today was built in 1933. The Thames locks began to appear late in the 18th century, the last to be built being that at 'Moulsey', in 1815.

The Island, one of three, is 350 yards long and has 47 houses and a population of around 100. On the second largest, Boyle Farm Island, is a single house, home to just one family. Swan Island, between the two, is the smallest. On it was once the ferryman's hut, recently restored by the present owner, in which the original incumbent must have passed a meagre life, taking people across the main stream and to and from the Island, for a small fee at all times of the day and night.

In Victorian times the slipway, with its riverside inn, provided a useful dock for the passage of goods and people up and down the river. Large sailing barges from the Port of London would moor here to load or unload, their crews and attendant wagonners taking rest and sustenance at the inn.

The Island was then not much more than an overgrown, muddy, tree clad hump, but the skiffs of the day trippers from Kingston would be moored there to allow their occupants to enjoy a riverside picnic. In the early part of this century came the fad for riverside weekend bungalows: the idea spread and a number of holiday chalets were built on the Island. Life there must have been a matter of indoor camping, as there were no facilities of any kind: water and paraffin had to be ferried over in cans, and only the smarter sheds had a roof over the earth closet.

As time passed, the attractions of the waterside location drew more and more people, so that by 1930 the whole of the perimeter was covered in wooden bungalows, with the owners' boats moored at the bottom of their gardens. It was the building of the suspension bridge in 1939 that really opened up the Island as a place for permanent occupation.

As well as providing passage on foot, it also carried the water, electricity and gas in, and the sewage effluent back out to the town drains. Originally leased from the island's owner, the publican at the Olde Swan, by 1963 all the houses had passed into freehold ownership and a limited company was formed to take over the bridge and adjacent gardens and to provide maintenance services.

Each householder has to bear a share of the running costs, of which the principal items are the purchase of water and the regular repainting of the bridge. Nearly all the dwellings are on stilts, in an attempt to prevent flood damage, but the river has, in times past, risen to cover the island in several feet of water.

More recent incursions have merely covered gardens and lawns, the mild annoyance being repaid with the depositing of a rich silt. However, these days, with the newly refurbished weir system at Teddington, and the control system operated by the Environment Agency at Reading, even though the river still goes into spate several times each winter as the rain that has deluged over the whole of the Thames Valley finally arrives at its final reach before the tideway, levels have now ceased to be of any great concern, although river outings have to be curtailed as Father Thames rushes by a fast

walking pace.

Life on the Island is different, with river views, passing vessels, wild life and a complete lack of road traffic. Shopping expeditions have to end with a haul over the bridge, or in a trip in the family launch. [Several supermarkets have just solved this problem as they will deliver right to the door.] Each wave of newcomers has invested in an upgrade or complete rebuild in timber or brick, so the Island has almost lost its rustic look, but a few of the original bungalows modestly remain. The one problem that is met by all newcomers is where to leave one's car long term. Those who come from areas where the houses have no garages, such as Richmond, and where one learns to cope with finding a parking space, have nothing to fear. Islanders who can neither find nor afford a lockup garage in the village use the nearby streets. The public Slipway takes about a dozen cars but access to the river has to be maintained for boat launches and emergency vehicles. Most people [apart from those who consider even a two-minute walk unacceptable] find it workable, even if one sometimes has to cruise around to find a parking space. But it would be better if the incoming commuters could be kept away, or at least persuaded to use the existing office parks and Colet's field, instead of idly taking the easier kerbside slot in the village.

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