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FROM ROYAL HIGHWAY TO COMMON SEWER: THE RIVER THAMES AND ITS ARCHITECTURE

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I am always anxious to help wonderful Gresham College whenever I can, but I have to say I was a bit alarmed when I was asked to give a lecture about the River Thames, not only because it is such a vast subject, but because it is also such a familiar one to so many people here. So I wracked my brains as to how I could say something that would be new and interesting this evening.

I have decided to give an experimental lecture; I shall be talking about the Thames and its architecture of course, but I want to do it exclusively through the eyes of those who recorded it in pen, pencil, ink and paint from the fifteenth century to the present day. This, I think, is a very revealing exercise as, what it shows, is that as the Thames changed so, of course did painter's perceptions of it and as a consequence so did people's perceptions of London. So tonight we will be looking at the physicality of the buildings on and around the river but I shall be making some observations about what the river, and those buildings, tells us about the evolving image of the city.

No matter how much we know about London and its history it is still hard take our minds back to the reason why this city was first founded. But it is an inescapable fact that the reason that we are here tonight is because of the River Thames. It was the Thames that encouraged the Romans to settle here in AD 43. It was the Thames that provided their drinking water. It provided their sanitation and importantly it provided the route for their trade and thus their prosperity. The Romans built the first port of London and since then, with little interruption, London has remained a major trading centre. Long before the great docks were built in the 19th century the pool of London was the hub of European and eventually, world, trade. These facts are fundamental to London's existence.

As we shall see this evening, the Thames's importance has been and remains multi-faceted. Until the 17th century it was the transport artery of the capital. Roads were narrow, dirty, crowded, badly maintained and often impassable. To get from one part of London to another the easiest route was by the river. We also have to remember that there was only one bridge. If you wanted to cross to the other side of the Thames at any other point other than London Bridge you had to take a boat. This total reliance on river transport for moving east, west, north or south meant that the river was crowded with vessels carrying people and goods. The watermen had a stranglehold over the economy and smooth running of London. They plied their trade day and night in order to keep the city moving.

So it is not surprising that when the first artists turned to depict this great city The Thames was omni present. A late 15th miniature found with the poems of Charles Duke of Orleans, illustrating the imprisonment of the Duke in the Tower of London, is our first painting of the river. It is possible to clearly see the Tower of London, the white tower, but more importantly for our purposes London Bridge and The Thames. The artist has illustrated the effect of the constraint imposed by the narrow arches of London Bridge showing the rapids that had to be shot by the watermen in their wherries. But this view of about 1500 can be supplemented by the work the Antwerp artist Anthony Van Den Wyngaerde. Between 1539-1544 he produced 14 large pen and ink sketches of London between Westminster and Greenwich which are now in the Ashmolean Museum. His work,



which was not engraved, constitutes the earliest known attempt at a detailed topographical study of London recording monastic foundations, royal palaces, courtier mansions, warehouses, wharves and centre stage in all this is the river. Wyngarde is the first London artist who gives us any real understanding of the topography of the river and its importance. His drawings tell us a huge deal about London in the early 16th century.

But Wyngarde is also important he begins because to shift our focus from the city. His views encompassed all the royal palaces both on the Thames and off. His view of Hampton court from the river emphasises the huge importance of river transport to all from the king downwards. Just look at the great water gate providing access directly from the royal barge into the king's' innermost apartments. Every major house along the river from the middle ages till the civil war had such a water entrance.

Wyngarde stands alone in the sixteenth century as a chronicler of London and the Thames. But his mantle was inherited in the seventeenth century by Wenslesaus Hollar, the second person to create a great panorama of the city. The hiring, by the Earl of Arlington, of Hollar comes at a turning point in the recording of the image of London. Hollar entered the service of Arlington soon after they met in Prague in 1635 and he was settled at his patron's residence, Arlington House, one of the Strand Palaces with a river frontage. At that time the topographical scene was still dominated by foreigners particularly the Dutch and the Flemish who favoured depicting London from the top of Southwark Cathedral with the Thames running in the middle like a ribbon. The example I show you here is by an unknown artist and is here in the Museum of London. The prominence of this view may have been connected with the fact that Southwark was the principal point of entry into the capital for visitors approaching from the south and the place where many foreign painters and craftsmen settled.

Statistically the number of early views from this angle is staggering and when Hollar first came to London it was from this angle that he drew London (1647). To create this magnificent work Hollar made hundreds of individual drawings, most of which are now lost. But a careful examination of the view reveals that his observation was particularly accurate. Here you see the end plate of the six plates it took the cover London from west to east. In the whole panorama, despite the overwhelming topographical detail, the river still dominates, full of life and action.

But it was also Hollar who made the first image from the west standing on the roof of Arlington House and followed it up immediately after the Civil War with the extraordinary bird's eye view of the Strand and Covent Garden. This is the great lost image of seventeenth century London, the only surviving impression of what must have been a bigger project to map the whole of the city in minute detail.

The emergence of new viewpoints of London gradually changed perceptions of the river and of London. By 1600 all painters wishing to depict London showed it as a water-based city rather than one that was essentially land based. Until the 1720's the presence of the river Thames seemed so essential to painters that the majority of the close up views of the capital were centred on waterfront sites. During the seventeenth century view of great London buildings, the royal palaces, St. Paul's cathedral, Lambeth Palace are all from the river. Here is *Richmond Palace* by an unknown 17th century artist now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, showing the Thames in the foreground and the Palace nestling under the bows of a tree to the behind. And here is Somerset House by Cornelis Bol from about 1660. The Royal palace, then home to Henrietta Maria is shown far to the right, the greatest expanse of canvass, like at Richmond, taken up by water. Even at the end of the century Knyff's view of Windsor Castle, once more is dominated by the snaking river full of Thames barges carrying their goods westward. It is difficult during this period to find close up views of the people, river, streets, quarters and landmarks of the capital. Views such as this of *the Thames frozen over in front of London Bridge* dating from 1677 in the Museum of London are quite exceptional. Here unusually we see Londoners skating, sliding, snowballing and even shooting. We can see swan stairs, one of the many Thames side staircases leading down to the river. The river froze upstream of London Bridge because the arches of the bridge constrained the river's flow and slowed it down enough for it to freeze.

The Great Fire presented a challenge to artists who wished to depict London. A whole series of paintings illustrate the disaster and many of them feature the river in the foreground. This example, from the Museum of London's collection was painted as from a boat in the vicinity of Tower Wharf sometime between eight and nine o'clock on the evening of Tuesday 4th September. What it records, as far as we can judge, is exceptionally accurate, again a rarity for a seventeenth century view. The painter has shown the irregular spacing of the arches



on London Bridge, and that they were pointed not round, he also shows the Tower with exceptional accuracy. Even Hollar in his long view misinterprets the shape of the towers of the white tower.

As today, one of the most animated topics of conversation and one of the biggest frustrations of being a Londoner was transport. The invention of the Pomeranian carriage in the mid seventeenth century had caused a revolution in transportation. Suddenly it became comfortable to travel by carriage thanks to the new suspension of the Pomeranian carriages. First the monarchy, then the nobility and then the gentry began to move about London by road. The great houses of the nobles were redesigned to have their principal entrances on the landward side so visitors could arrive by carriage and the importance of the old riverside Watergates, such as the one we saw at Hampton Court, rapidly declined.

This set up the great seventeenth century battle between the watermen and the carriage owners. Rather like the RMT union the watermen could hold the whole of London to ransom, but the coming of the carriage fatally weakened their influence. Or did it? Paintings like *The Thames at Horseferry* of 1706-10 in the Museum of London show that even for the owner of the coach and pair on the ferry he was at the mercy of the watermen. The only place you could take your carriage across the river (other than the bridge of course) was the horseferry at Milbank.

What particularly focused artists' attention on the subject of the river during the eighteenth century was the construction of new bridges. Since the building of London Bridge in the Twelfth century, the city had had only one crossing. In response to growing criticisms about the overcrowding of London Bridge, the capital acquired a further four bridges during the Georgian period, respectively Putney Bridge, opened in 1729; Westminster Bridge, built between 1739 and 1750; Blackfriars Bridge, between 1760 and 1769, and Battersea Bridge in 1771-2.

The erection of Westminster Bridge was the major public building project of mid-18th century London. The need for an alternative conduit for commerce, transport and communication to the dilapidated and overladen London Bridge had been voiced for years; however, it was a collection of civic-minded and commercially astute members of the Westminster elite who organised political action on the matter. Meeting regularly at the Horn Tavern in New Palace Yard they succeeded in provoking parliamentary legislation. This "Society of Gentlemen" lobbied for and helped to ensure the passage of a bridge-building bill in 1736. A body of nearly 200 commissioners was set up to supervise proceedings, and in 1738 work began according to a plan executed by Charles Labelye, a Swiss engineer who subsequently managed the project until its completion in 1750.

The scheme for a new bridge met with sustained and vociferous opposition from the beginning. Petitions to Parliament from the Lord Mayor, Aldermen and Commons of the City of London complained that their traditional status as commercial guardians of the river would be undermined, and that trade and jobs would be sucked out of the east of the capital. As you can imagine the discontent voiced by the Thames watermen was even more acute.

By its defenders, the bridge was described as a testament to a modern ideal of civic enlightenment. For the entrepreneurial aristocrats who created it, it was both a monument to civic responsibility, and a flamboyantly modern fixture in the metropolitan environment of commerce. The bridge's uncluttered, neo-Palladian design, with its gently curved façade of gleaming white Portland stone and subtle neoclassical detail, linked it to ideas of an antique culture celebrated in terms of patrician virtue, social order and physical rationality. The monumental scale of the technological intervention it necessitated dominated the discussion about the bridge as it emerged out of the water. Crowds of people came to stare, and a boating tour around its environs – which temporarily offered a lucrative, if ominous, new business sideline to the watermen – became an essential part of the polite touristic circuit of the city.

It has been established that almost all of Canaletto's early English patrons were Commissioners of the bridge. In particular, the artist executed a series of paintings and drawings for Sir Hugh Smithson, a leading voice in the "Society of Gentlemen", and an active member of the Board of Commissioners throughout the project. *London seen through an arch of Westminster Bridge*, is Canaletto's first painting for Smithson. In it the artist clearly redeveloped many of the conventions of his Venetian river views. The city is depicted as a rhythmic assemblage of architectural landmarks with the more muted facades of docklands commerce. The importance of Westminster Bridge can hardly be overstated; it became a focus for a whole school of painting. Here is Samuel



Scott's view in the Tate. It is closely related to that of Canaletto and shows charmingly, but alarmingly swimmers in the foreground.

The bridge was symbolic of London's new neoclassical image and the two views of the Thames now in the royal collection by Canaletto capture this in its canonical form. The bright sunlight that exposes every detail of the city's topography suggests an ideal clarity of vision and understanding, indeed a state of enlightenment. Nowhere to be seen are the London mists and fogs, transparent space and perspective read as metaphors of freedom and order. London is shown here as nowhere else as the modern Rome and St. Pauls, Westminster Abbey and Westminster bridge as the great monuments of the imperial city.

Lord Mayors Day, painted by Canaletto in 1747 and now in Prague is a tour de force of colour, pageantry and detail. The imperial city once more forms a perfectly observed backdrop. The river is teeming with craft. The lord mayor's barge and the City company barges appear in many of Canaletto's views but nowhere as richly as here. Surely here Canaletto was dreaming of the regattas and ducal festivals of Venice and this perhaps calls into question the reality of the scene. Canaletto's viewpoint for this painting was chosen by many other painters, but by 1769 Blackfriars Bridge interrupts the view.

William Marlow's work of 1775 now at Yale has the new bridge at its centre and for all intents and purposes shows a different city to that of Canaletto. The colouring is more muted and the river emptier - perhaps all more representative of the everyday light and colour of the Thames riverscape. In the right the Thames foreshore looks quite clean with a discarded anchor and a lighter filled with coal. A much busier low tide scene is his view of the Adelphi painted two years earlier. Here there are boats under repair and coal being discharged from beached lighters onto carts coming down to the foreshore. Again this is not Canaletto's river of pageantry and light, it is the everyday river of life and labour.

Here we start to see the gradual but decisive shift in London's image away from the idealised neo-classical capital to the industrial engine house of the world. You see generally speaking the more industrial parts of the Thames were not a focus for painters of the eighteenth century as they ill fitted the classical image of an imperial city. But when painters ventured into the shipbuilding heartlands of the river the focus of their attention was not the river itself, nor its architectural setting rather the ships. Here is John Clevely the elder's *HMS Buckingham on the stocks at Deptford* a typical product of the eighteenth century view of the shipyards which often concentrated on ship launches. Here the foreground shows the walkway across the wet dock, figures viewing the new ship, a passing skiff and in the distance cranes unloading timber destined for the great storehouse.

Now it is time to move on from the eighteenth century and as we do I want you to notice that what is particularly interesting about the early nineteenth century is the abandonment of the Italian influence in painting of the capital and a return to Netherlandish influence. There were perhaps two reasons for this. London was now the leading mercantile city of the world and unlike Italian painting the Netherlandish school faithfully and proudly recorded industry and commerce. It was perhaps for this reason that collectors started to buy Dutch works and put them on display. Interest was stimulated by access to two collections rich in Dutch art, that of the marquis of Stafford shown at Cleveland House and a little later the collection of Sir Francis Bourgeoise shown at Britain's first purpose built picture gallery in Dulwich. In 1814 royal favour was granted to the fashion by the prince regent who bought the great Dutch masterpiece *the passage boat* by Albert Cuyper.

Consider Augustus Wall Calcott's mid channel view of *the Pool of London* in 1816. The work is clearly influenced by Cuyper and shows fishermen at work next to a Dutch boat. The painting is serene, but hardly reflects what we know of the pool of London, at the time the world's busiest port. For this reason the Netherlandish influence is seen most strongly and successfully in paintings of the Thames estuary. Here the focus of the painter's brush moves from the social and architectural setting of the Thames to the raw river and sea. Clarkson Stanfield's *Tilbury Fort' wind against tide* gives us one of the most dramatic renderings of the estuary, it is big - 6ft by 5ft and was presented to the rail pioneer Robert Stephenson on his retirement from the North western railway. It was completed in 1849 and exhibited at the royal academy where it was greatly admired especially for its treatment of the turbulent swell of the river.

In *wind against tide* a small fishing boat known as a peter boat (there is a second one in the distance on the left) is directly in the path of a Thames Sailing barge transporting a load of hay. The hay barge is tacking into the wind



and is on a collision course with the peter boat, a fisherman is standing up trying to shout a warning. On the right a ferry boat is about to set off into the rough seas and the only still point in the whole scene is the gate of Tilbury fort. Now one of the important points about all this is the deep knowledge of sailing, the sea and ships that a painting like this required. Stanfeild, like many painters of his time was an experienced seaman. As a young man he had worked the Thames colliers and East Indiamen and for a short period he was based at HMS Namur the port guardship at Sheerness at the junction of the Thames and the Medway... not in fact, far from Tilbury fort across the river. So he would have understood the skilled seamanship necessary in the squally estuary.

But of course we should not forget that however accurate and precisely observed these sailing vessels were the power of these paintings lie in the brilliant handling of the powerful elements of wind and tide. Clarkeson Stansfield, was a master of capturing the power of the sea and so, of course was J.M.W. Turner. Turner too was very familiar with the estuary and with the technicalities of shipbuilding. He regularly stayed at Margate and went on boat trips in the estuary to sketch the landscape. His *fishing on the Blythe sand, tide setting in* (tate) shows the tide coming in over the sand banks and the fishing boats gathering to fish, in the far distance the landmass of the Isle of Sheppey can just be made out. It was on the way back from one of his trips to Margate when Turner spied the Temeraire, the second ship in the line at Trafalgar being towed from Sheerness? to the breakers yard in Rotherhithe (Nat Gall 1839). As the great ship makes its slow progress to its grave the sun sets over the still waters creating perhaps the most famous view ever painted of the estuary and of a British warship.

But none of this is to say that the magic central London always epitomised by London's bridges was any less. New bridges were opened with alarming regularity during the nineteenth century. Vauxhall and Waterloo opened in 1811, Southwark in 1819, Hammersmith in 1827, Chelsea in 1858 Lambeth in 1862, Wandsworth and Albert in 1873 and finally Tower Bridge in 1894. Each one provided a new inspiration an impetus for painters and engravers. In 1777 Richmond Bridge designed by James Paine and Kenton Couse opened for carriages. It was instantly the subject for a number of paintings and a huge number of prints. But the Strand Bridge, now renamed Waterloo Bridge, was the grandest bridge opening of the early nineteenth century and Constable's view of it is his largest and most ambitious work. It was only exhibited 15 years after the actual event that took place on 18th June 1817.

But just look at this incredible painting, 7ft wide with the royal barge in the foreground about to be boarded by the Prince Regent. This is not Canaletto's Venetian view this is the dirty grimy smoky London a place of ceaseless turmoil and activity that we recognise - a tough industrial city not a place of untrammelled elegance and peace.

A completely different style of work to Constable's with nearly the same viewpoint is Charles Deane's newly completed Waterloo Bridge of four years later - 1821 showing a leisurely and still river with a fashionable party about to embark on a trip. This is still a river of warehouses and industry and a waterman stands by proudly holding his boat hook. Such watermen were to be severely threatened with the building of the new bridges and the lifting of the crossing tolls. But their livelihoods were only finally swept away with the creation of the embankments. The embankments were one of a number of changes along the river that, during the third quarter of the nineteenth century, began to transform the opportunities presented to painters and the image of the industrial capital.

The Thames embankments were designed and executed by Sir Joseph Bazalgette the chief engineer to the Metropolitan Board of Works. Built between 1868 and 1874 they were, as you know, named the Victoria, Albert and Chelsea and extended for a length of three and a half miles. Their principal effect was the reclamation of 32 acres of mud and foreshore, some of the most painted parts of the Thames riverscape and the parts that emphasised the dirty, muddy industrial nature of it.

Here is John O'Connor's view of York Watergate before the construction of embankment gardens and underground station. Here is his view of the same area in 1873 after their construction. The scene celebrates prosperity in the well-dressed spectators, a modern, well-administered, clean London, while order and Empire are represented in the detachment of Guards marching along the Embankment. Here we have a portrayal of Victorian confidence in a truly imperial city, a place improved by money, knowhow and technical innovation. Following the completion of the embankments the art journal remarked 'the opening of the Thames embankment has for the first time convinced many of us to the claims of London to architectural beauty.



The other great change to the Victorian riverscape was, of course, the construction of the houses of parliament. In 1834 there was a devastating fire at the old Palace of Westminster which destroyed nearly all the old buildings other than Westminster Hall. The fire led to a competition to design a new home for parliament which, in due course was won by Sir Charles Barry. The foundation stone for the new building was laid in 1840 and the clock tower, Big Ben, was finally completed in 1858. Both the fire and the finished building were a new inspiration to painters principally the two views by Turner – I show you my favourite here and an incredible post fire and rebuilding view by David Roberts of 1834.

The Victorians thus created a new riverscape and one of the first painters to record this, and in due course make it famous was Claude Monet. This painting in the national gallery, *The Thames below Westminster* of c.1872 seems incredibly familiar and modern but when Monet painted it, it was entirely new, the embankment had opened the previous year, New Westminster Bridge in 1872, Houses of Parliament completed 1858 and St. Thomas's Hospital opened in 1871.

With Monet we see that during the last quarter of the nineteenth century there was an emergence of new painterly concerns which affected the way painters depicted the river. The pursuit of the real led high Victorian artists to devise two opposing methods of representation. We can see this polarisation of techniques in the work of two contemporary Frenchmen both of whom painted the Thames, Monet and James Tissot. Here is Monet's *The Thames and the Houses of Parliament* and Tissot's *On the Thames*. Although the works look very different both share the same subject – a perspective view of the London riverside. The predominance of figures in the Tissot, almost to the exclusion of the river invites us to consider the total absence of people in Impressionist views of London, where the favoured elements were the river and the parks. The impressionist fascination for the river was crucial in maintaining the Thames as a centre of painterly concern for the following sixty years. Look at Monet's view which is all river and light, Tissot's painting is full of painstaking details of costume, a dog, a picnic hamper, bottles of champagne, ships and people. Indeed full of what Ruskin was to call 'mere colour photographs of vulgar society'.

We do not know whether Monet met James McNeill Whistler during his time in London in 1870-71 but it is certain that the Thames views of the two painters share certain characteristics particularly the liquid sweeps of paint of sky and river. Whistler used to be rowed up and down Chelsea reach at night by his assistant. This is Whistler's nocturne: *blue and gold old Battersea Bridge*. The picture gives a view of the bridge and looking through the arch at Chelsea church in the far distance but what dominates is the river, the water, the mist and the looming industrial structure of the bridge – it completely defines London.

Philip Gilbert Hamerton, writing in 1875 in relation to Whistler's etchings of the river noted 'The shores of the Thames in London used to be picturesque, and the new embankment will remove much material that is interesting to artists; but the picturesque of the London river is after all nothing but a more entertaining variety of the universal London ugliness. The Thames is beautiful from Maidenhead to Kew, but not from Battersea to Sheerness. If beauty were the only province of art, neither painters nor etchers would find anything to occupy them in the foul stream that washes the London wharfs; but even ugliness itself may be valuable if only it has sufficient human interest and fortuitous variety of lines'.

Here is Whistler's assistant William Graves painting Hammersmith Bridge on Boat race day. And in a completely different genre a picture painted the following year William Holman Hunt's view of London Bridge on the night of the marriage of the Prince and Princess of Wales. These paintings show that the central sections of the river, straightened up, walled in and regimented by the Victorians, with human interest and continual activity, still provided an attraction for painters. Just look at the excitement of Graves's painting with the sense of desperation to view the race, spectators terrifyingly watching on suspension chains. Beneath the still river with a single boat moving past. And Holman Hunt similarly showing the bridge packed with humanity straining to see the royal family.

The London of Monet, Whistler and Holman Hunt was at the very centre of the world, the richest, largest and most powerful city of earth. But only fifty years later it was on its knees pummelled and pounded by German bombs and struggling to regain its economic power – but the port was still functioning and the Thames still an economic artery. This is a painting of London by the Austrian expressionist painter Oscar Kokoschka completed in 1952. In his memoirs he writes:



'During the months spent in London, I painted eleven pictures in all, mostly views of the Thames ... My Thames! Those were still the days when the merchandise of the whole world was shipped up this river; London was still a mother city - as the ancient Greek cities had been - from which surplus population spread out all over the world; it was the metropolis of world trade, the warehouse of colonies in all five continents. There the wind did not blow, as it did in Vienna, from the Russian steppes, but from all points of the compass at once.'

But within a decade of that entry the Port of London had gone, and the reason for the river was lost. Nobody now used it for transport, either for people or for goods, it was really an interruption to London life rather than the centre of it. Cars and busses saw the bridges as obstacles to speedy locomotion not things of beauty. Meanwhile the water became an economic asset for developers. It became the place where if you could build a block of flats you could add several noughts onto the asking price. The river gradually became walled in by sheets of glass and concrete.

Thank goodness for the Thames Festival. Although increasingly blighted by brutal oversized buildings that wall the river in on both sides, Londoners today do love the Thames more now than perhaps at any time since eighteenth century. The festival, cries for a garden bridge, the success of the river taxis, the millennium bridge, the Thames walkways and increasing pedestrianisation all go some way to compensate for the rape of the Thames banks in the central section. However, though London remains an attraction to painters and other artists, I'm not sure that the bulk of commercial glass and steel flats have captured their imagination. And I'm not sure that it ever will.

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