

## London Gateway; the Tidal Thames.

**Some notes on thoughts after the first seminar on ‘An Environmentally Sustainable Thames’, 07:11:11 at 85 Southwark Street. London. Organised by the Centre for London and Allies and Morrison.**

The Thames, the best known feature of the London landscape; is probably the least known and certainly the least understood river the further one travels east from Greenwich towards the sea.

From Gloucestershire where the river rises and its route to the capital city are well known, studied and protected. Dons and their attendants will do battle if the Isis is threatened, it's tributaries; Cherwell, Kennet and Ock, among them are loved and nurtured as any doting parent may fuss around its offspring. Even the names of the ‘lost rivers’ under the capital's streets are now used in common parlance; the Fleet, Tyburn, and even Beverly Brook All are part of the tapestry of English history, myth and fable.

This river is well known to most people, who have travelled as far as the M25 crossing at QE2 Bridge and still further eastward, but now this is leaving London and entering the other realm; Dickens writes of marsh and mist, when journeying towards Rochester or Chatham. This was the realm of hulks holding their cargos static; awaiting their transportation to Van Diemen's Land. On the other bank on the north side, are marshes and mineral working sites; sand and gravel being fetched out from the huge alluvial deposits and going to feed the ever growing city; and it's need for ballast as if it needed anchoring further to the London clays. Once these vast holes have been dug out the voids have been filled with the unrelenting stream of solid refuse that spew down river on lighters and barges from the city; by special train for such deemed to nocuous to take by water. This, even in the recent past has been co-disposed with liquid wastes from the industries that used to ring the eastern portion of the metropolis. Even when the river mists had dissipated in the morning light suspect coloured vapours crept across the Pitsea creeks to the river.

Governments at national and local levels have all wondered the purpose best suited to this realm of mud and rush; creek, marsh and solitude. For fifty year airports are dreamt of but vanish on waking to the realities of environment and manmade constraints. Their recurrence is that of fitful rest and long drawn out visions of order and sanitised planning amid the realms of managed tidal ooze.

The Chatham installations placed down originally by Tudor monarchs and have long associations with naval craft still give hope even after their closure and gentrification to civilian purposes that new transport and civilising concrete may come some way to tame the flood. But unlike Canute there is always a trade off; another runway at Heathrow, expansion at Stanstead or even East Midland, where high speed rail links already exist. The spirited realms of pioneers and pragmatists cast their spells with dreams, happy in their waking to mundanity but safe in the knowledge that the marsh will not claim them for its own.

The planners watch the skeins of geese land and take off but in their minds they will forever see jumbos and airbuses, short and long hall arriving and departing.

This marshland and tidal wilderness that fed thousand of London's poor on oysters and samphire, the sites of putchers and salmon weirs originally date back beyond the time of the capital's foundation. In the 1840s men could shoot snipe at Westminster on one day, the next do similarly in marshes near Canewdon in south Essex adjacent to the Thames estuary.

The modernisation of this huge landscape began with the Normans who started the ball rolling at Hadleigh



Hadleigh Castle near Southend.

With a castle the Tudors at Chatham, the Victorians did some work at Southend, Margate and Whitstable between the World Wars Canvey Island was established as a home for so many. All these places have a functionality of place and a place in time. They all had purposes and have not failed in their intended roles. They may not have the modern sparkle or the gloss of Perspex and teak of architectural model fantasies but they carry out the functions of providing shelter, rest, mundane excitements and once security. These places have been modelled within a landscape, dominated by estuary and sky, overawed and visibly insignificant alongside the ever changing, renewing movements of tide, light and air. Nothing is still everything is naturally in flux. Sandbanks are built up and moved on as sand dunes in a dessert. Species come and go; new ones arrive in bilge tanks on the way to Tilbury or Sheerness. The estuary is an accommodating place with room to allow stranger species to find refuge: not unlike the city upstream with its human tide.

It is understood that the new barrier to protect the London metropolis is likely to span the river at Deptford, beyond that is the area of bounty waiting to be harvested; or not. The issues are more complex as are the next; the storm tides that as a saucer raised up. A surge to descend where the winds and tide have mind; the Dutch or English coast.



Canvey Island 1953 Flood.

In 1953 the storm surge inundated the eastern coast of England from the Humber to the Thames; lives were lost along the whole stretch of defenceless land. The response has been huge, costly and time consuming. The whole coastline has a seawall that is maintained for the most part and London has its Thames Barrier. Good design and results that match.

The new barrier once in place will need the coastal defences to match its worth, but, and there is a but; the whole is not accepted as a scheme, other forces have come to play. Either they will meddle at the edges or will drive a wedge though the principles of coastal defence. Economists and environmentalists in harmony carolling the mantra of managed retreat and allowing areas of land to return to what they were prior to 1953. The terms are vague on the surface and new protections are promised; the new defences to protect residential priority area and that of economic worth. They, the defences will all have to join up together other wise the defence will be in the style of the Maginot Line and the invader will enter by the side.

Some of the south shore, Kentish, residents look to the estuary for their defence against the mythic Kentish airport to serve the London Hub of trans-global air traffic. The sunken liberty ship SS Richard Montgomery, which is the mother of their salvation or would an SS Kielce type event, is deemed acceptable and accidents will happen. The salvation is a wreck lost on a sandbank off the coast by Chatham's navigation channel. It is not an invisible threat, its masts, rusted break the surface and has warning notices attached to them. A buoyed exclusion zone is maintained around the site. The vessel was bringing ordnance to Europe in 1944 when she foundered on these sands; much of her cargo was offloaded but what remains; the estimates vary, is considered by government agencies, an amount of explosive that could create an explosion larger than any manmade one has achieved with out nuclear fusion. The knowledge that the ship and cargo (two and one thousand pound, early cluster bombs and much else; the manifest was lost at sea.) have been in place for the last nearly seventy years does not bring about a lack of official concern, the wreck being surveyed annually by the Marine and Coastguard Agency.

The SS Kielce was a similar vessel that foundered off Folkestone in 1946 and exploded during salvage operations in the early 1960s, the fact that no salvage crew members were injured gives rise to a notion that the vessel was detonated purposely to rid the English Channel of a navigation threat. The resultant explosion registered as an earthquake around the world with a recorded strength of over five on the Richter scale. This does not suggest that such an action would be considered in this present age of open government, but accidents do occur.

There are other aspects of development that favour the brave or are they even more foolhardy than trying to land an airport on mud and tidal creeks full of potential airstrikes and malevolent twitchers. A low-level crossing of the river. This ideally to be placed to connect Tilbury and Sheerness. It is what planners would have done twenty years ago, but the navigation laws and traffic on the river has precluded it. To my thinking this is strange as it has been achieved before, between these two locations.



The Bridge Between Sheerness and Tilbury 1914.

This structure was over 1,100 feet long and cost in 1914 \$375,000 and was reported on by the New York Times (27<sup>th</sup> December 1914), including an interview with W Robison, First Officer of the Atlantic Transport Minnewaska.

The makeup of the bridge was as a pontoon that was set in three sections, the middle section of 250 feet, was removed at dawn and replaced at dusk to allow shipping movements and at night gave security from German raiders that were feared might attack London; it also allowed for military transports to move from the east to the south of the country without the bottleneck of the city.

Such an opportunity today would be attractive, both logistically and as an economically viable set of locations for power generation that would be part of the scheme. The navigable channel would still be available when needed and would not require lock gates to be actively passing ships through the structure.

A similar idea has been carried out before with the placing of the Mulberry Harbours on the Normandy beaches in 1944. Part of the structure was destroyed during a storm shortly after being set down; it managed to operate for many weeks even in that condition and being assembled in days under hazardous operational conditions proved such options could be considered. The ideal organisation that might lead on such a scheme would be the Port of London Authority as their interests are the rivers economic wellbeing and to grow its profitability. (© CRT. 2011).

Such an engineering option would be a break away from the damming of river estuaries as in Holland or as proposed on the River Severn. There would be little impact on the local ecology as there would be only a very small slowing of tidal velocities. The migration of aquatic fauna would be unaffected and the marsh lands would likewise feel little if any effects to their habitual flooding and draining twice a day. In the rare event of tidal surge or the treat of such the structure could be closed or even lowered beneath the waterline to protect it. Such a structure would certainly slow surge to some degree and might have some benefit to the proposed second barrier up-stream.

The two ideals that were most to the fore at this seminar generated much thought after the event. The other issues that appeared were all good news and aimed to make one wish to hug a bunny. The works of the London Wildlife Trust are as ever commendable and beyond reproach with out a lawyer present. Like all local Wildlife Trusts they are swayed by consultancy, grants of land and stewardship contracts. Generally they in London are more willing to be forthright about invasive cormorants and the like; which is less muddled than the RSPB are.

I have learnt that the Environment Agency has revamped itself in London and the South East of England; this has got to present some interesting muddles and red face scenarios. They were shown at the meeting to be liked and the individual well known and respected which was a pleasant change. It is hard to be so chipper with the government wanting to be critical and cutting your budget at the same time. Though one knows that lack of funds makes you work better!

The other issue that was for discussion really received little comment after its presentation; Thames Water's Tide Way Tunnel. A great scheme that many organisations would have run away from. Thames admits that the populace will have to pay, and they have acted in the style of the great Victorian engineers and said it will be done. The consultation has been excellent and the company has addressed issues creatively and worked with the Port of London Authority well. The London population is not a collective fool and accept that for once this big brother knows best. The old Water Authority built the Ring Main for the city and its expertise is still about regarding deep holes and boring through the clay, chalk and gravels underlying London. When the final plan is published next year the real sniping will begin. It will be time to make views known then and support will not be in short supply from those that half understand that this is a cusp that needs to be passed over swiftly.

Thames put over the issue neatly and professionally. Humour was also there as it needs to be. As D Healy said in the early seventies there are 'no votes in treating shit' but we can have a laugh!

Harvey Wood. 10<sup>th</sup> November 2011.  
Clean Rivers Trust, NG24 1LR