**Tales from the Riverbank exhibition Text & Credits**

Tales from the Riverbank

People have used rivers for recreation for hundreds of years. This exhibition explores how the rivers Thet and Little Ouse which run through Thetford have been enjoyed for swimming, fishing, boating, festivals and more since 1880. The project is collecting and celebrating river stories from across the Brecks.

The exhibition has been curated by young people from the Ancient House Museum after-school history clubs, drawing on oral history recordings, newspaper reports, archival sources, images, postcards and posters.

The exhibition is part ofthe Tales from the River project, one of The Brecks Fen Edge and River Landscape Scheme projects, supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund ([www.brecks.org](http://www.brecks.org); [www.heritagefund.org.uk](http://www.heritagefund.org.uk)).

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Archant photos used courtesy of the ©Archant Library in association with the Local Recall Project ([localrecall.co.uk](http://localrecall.co.uk))

This exhibition is complemented by the film made by young people,

‘Tales from the Riverbank: A Fun History of Thetford's Rivers 1880s to 2000s’

<https://youtu.be/RV3NDh5KQKs>

Scan QR to watch the film

River at Haling Path about 1960 © Norfolk Museums Service (Ancient House)

Little Bridge over the river at Thetford, about 1945 © Norfolk Museums Service (Ancient House)

Riverside shops with shoppers © Norfolk Museums Service (Ancient House)

Thetford Town Bridge © Norfolk Museums Service (Ancient House)

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Swimming 1

There has been a long tradition of swimming in Thetford. Navigation to Thetford up the river originally used staunches (locks) until the 1920s. In 1889 a youth drowned at First Staunch, leading to the council building the first river bathing pool in 1890.

Continued swimming in the river prompted local concern and restrictions. A 1909 bylaw required all those over 10 years old to be clothed “to prevent indecent exposure”. Following the death of a boy who attended the Boys Council School in 1911, the head of Thetford Grammar School warned his students about bathing at dangerous places in the river.

Thetford’s river swimming baths had an opening ceremony in June 1922, after unemployed workers completed “major improvements” and reconstruction during the years 1921-1922. They dug out the bank, concreted, installed diving boards and steps, and enlarged the changing sheds. Opposite the sheds was an open area of sand and grass.

The bathing sheds near the river pool were a “very popular” attraction for families. It was about “50 yards long” and “going upstream towards Bury St Edmunds it got deeper and deeper”. The bottom was “very, very muddy” however if you were the first one that day “the water was lovely and clear”. The other side of the river was “very, very sandy” where “families would picnic”. Changing rooms were “a row of wooden huts”. Diving could result in “belly flops”.

The caretaker had a wooden pole with a canvas loop at one end, and if anyone wanted to learn to swim he would walk along the edge leading them up and down. When swimmers asked “can you swim Mr Drake?” he always replied “like a duck my dears!” “But we had our doubts!” one said.

In 1948, a young lady lost her false teeth while bathing in the Little Ouse, near Barnham. A man attempted to rescue them but did not succeed.

Sarah Batstone, ‘The Historical Development of Bathing at Thetford, Norfolk: from Small Rural to Expanded Town’, S.A.K. Batstone, 1994, appendix 5; pp7-8

George Angus, oral history interview for Tales from the River

Doris Richardson quoted in Batstone appendix 14

Bury Free Press 6 August 1948

Children at Thetford Baths ©Archant in association with the Local Recall project

Thetford swimming baths, about 1925 Photo by F H Hird, Watton © Norfolk Museums Service (Ancient House)

Thetford Swimming Pool Ticket, 1938 © Norfolk Museums Service (Ancient House)

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Swimming 2

Swimming in the town declined in the 1960s-‘90s. During this time Thetford’s population increased when it became an ‘Overspill town’, with families and businesses relocating from London. The new population brought different experiences and attitudes. There was more focus on safety. “In 1970 the precarious practice of diving from [First] Staunch was prevented by a fence”, and a terraced area was added for sunbathing and paddling. In 1972 there was an opening ceremony for Thetford’s Sports Centre deck level indoor pool, and the river bathing pool was closed the same year. Despite this, river bathing can be seen to continue, as in the 1975 Thetford and Brandon Times image which depicts sunbathing and paddling at First Staunch.

River swimming continued throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. Locals invited to share memories from the time said that they spent all their summers down there “at the steps”, their mothers sending them out with a “pack up” to spend most of the 6 week holidays playing in the river, having a lot of fun and getting suntans.

A study of the history of bathing in Thetford said that by 1994 swimming in its river had disappeared. Newspaper reports in the late 1980s/early 1990s made alarming claims about the risks of catching Weil’s disease, and there were more opportunities to do other leisure activities.

There has been a revival in river swimming by the 2020s, in part thanks to the Healing Waters BFER Project. This promotes understanding of outdoor swimming and other river recreation and aims to increase access and connect communities to the landscape so people can enjoy the water safely and care for the environment.

Batstone p36

Comments on ‘Swimmers and sunbathers by the river in Thetford in 1975’ 6 October 2018 Thetford and Brandon Times Facebook post

Sarah Batstone, ‘The Historical Development of Bathing at Thetford, Norfolk: from Small Rural to Expanded Town’, S.A.K. Batstone, 1994

Swimmers in the River Pool, Thetford © Norfolk Museums Service (Ancient House)

Swimming at Barnham Cross Common, about 1966 © Norfolk Museums Service (Ancient House)

Swimmers and sunbathers by the river in Thetford in 1975

©Archant in association with the Local Recall project

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Boating

In 1894 James Arbon operated a paddle steamer, The Pride of the Ouse, from the Duke’s Head Inn, Thetford. A paddle steamer is a boat that is powered by a steam engine which drives paddle wheels to propel the boat through the water. In 1894 Arbon advertised short trips from Thetford on Thursday and Saturdays during the summer months (weather permitting), and trips could be arranged with special terms for private parties. It is said that the Pride frequently steamed to Cambridge and back on a Sunday at a speed of about 5 to 6 knots, or 6 miles per hour.

Roger Warner, a Whittington resident since 1966, remembers using his rowing boat to see otters and other river wildlife at close quarters. He explains that “you become part of the natural environment in which you find yourself”. Roger used his rowing boat to provide commentary on the river and the annual duck races he ran.

Following the second world war, young locals converted disused fuel tanks from aircraft into small boats called ‘belly boats’. Chris Thacker said “you just used the pram chassis …like a trolley [to launch the boats]”. These makeshift boats were stored under a wooden jetty near the Coffee Mill. Others re-purposed pulpware baby baths into mini boats.

River Holidays

The river has often given opportunities for organised youth group activities. In July 1932 the First Thetford Boy Scouts camped at Two Mile Bottom. One night they were awoken, scared by “some horses that came, sniffed and galloped around the camp”.

In December 1962 16 boys camped under Christmas trees at Santon Downham. To complete their Gold Duke of Edinburgh award they had to swim the “icy Little Ouse river”. They also constructed a raft which “unfortunately sank before they could reach the other side”.

Ronald H Clark, 'The Staunches and Navigation of the Little Ouse River', Newcomen Society Vol 30 1957; Ancient House Museum catalogue

Roger Warner; Chris Thacker, oral history interviews for Tales from the River

Bury Free Press 23 July 1932

Lynn Advertiser 29 December 1962

Pulpware bath as boat, 1974 Supplied to Tales from the River Project

Pride of the Ouse, about 1900 © Norfolk Museums Service (Ancient House) Thetford

Lighters on the river at Town Bridge, Thetford © Norfolk Museums Service (Ancient House)

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Riverside Festivals

Riverside festivals and carnivals have been popular in Thetford since the early 1900s. Attractions in the 1920s and 1930s included pillow fights on a pole and duck hunts, and when most people in Thetford did not have electricity “the procession of illuminated boats was an exceedingly pretty spectacle”. Carnivals in the 1980s included a car show, fun runs, “numerous displays… around the town” and “the Market Place became a funfair attracting thousands of people”. Local charities raised lots of money; in 1986 a rainy carnival that included a duck race “raised over £1000”.

Since 2017 the festival of Thetford and Punjab has taken place on the riverside close to the statue of Maharajah Duleep Singh.

Other River Pastimes

Roger Weston and his friends began aqua lung diving in search of old bottles in Thetford’s rivers in 1973. They removed algae with weak acids and scourers. Roger said “obviously there are a lot of broken bottles in the mud, but then one’s searching is rewarded when you find a real gem”.

In cold weather, ice provided people with opportunities for fun. The river Thet froze in 1940 in front of Ford Place and “skating was possible at Langmere and Fowlmere”. In 1963 “for the first time in living memory the River Little Ouse at Brandon was frozen over on both sides of the bridge”. Rachel Spinney remembers local youths doing pushbike stunts on the frozen Lynford Lake in the 1980s.

Bury Free Press 4 July 1914; 7 May 1982; 9 May 1986; 9 February 1973; 10 February 1940; 25 January 1963

Rachel Spinney, oral history interview for Tales from the River

Duleep Singh Statue © Norfolk Museums Service (Ancient House)

August Bank Holiday Carnival, 1994 © Norfolk Museums Service (Ancient House)

Winter river scene, Thetford © Norfolk Museums Service (Ancient House)

Boats decorated as part of the coronation celebrations for King George VI in 1907 Regatta at Brandon, 1909 © Norfolk Museums Service (Ancient House)

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Fishing

Throughout the early 20th century many fishing competitions were held at the rivers of Thetford. Many large fish were caught, and notable champion fishermen were Sam Parish and Mr E. Davies. In 1939 Mr Davies caught a 21.5lb pike; truly “a fisherman’s dream come true”.

Following concerns from the Hon. Special Water Bailiff of the Ouse and Cam Fishery Board at “the apathy of the people of Thetford”, in 1935 a visitor attraction was formed by restocking the restocking the river with trout and coarse fish. The repopulation brought people back to the river to fish, making a “profitable attraction”.

In the 1950s, if lucky anglers caught a “half decent sized fish”, old Miss Cracknell from St Giles Lane, Thetford, would give them sixpence for it to feed her cat.

Fishing continues to be a popular pastime to this day.

Suffolk and Essex Free Press 16 March 1939

Bury Free Press 13 July 1935

Chris Thacker, oral history interview for Tales from the River

Sam Parish, 1912 © Norfolk Museums Service (Ancient House)

Children fishing at Iron Bridges about 1954 © Archant in association with the Local Recall project

Fishing by Nuns’ Bridges about 1970 © Norfolk Museums Service (Ancient House)

Fishing, about 1965 © Norfolk Museums Service (Ancient House)

Thetford postcard with fish and game © Norfolk Museums Service (Ancient House)