

**Dalton, John – *boats, locks and bridges, A look back at life on the Upper Thames seen from Wallingford and Benson***; Kim Harvey, Litchborough, Northants, 2021, hardback, 160pp., circa 300 illustrations in b&w and colour, £30.

As is common with great rivers, over the years the Thames has captivated those who have utilised and enjoyed its many resources for work or pleasure. A number of such people have put pen to paper on the subject and a new addition to this list is the author of *boats, locks and bridges*, [*sic*, as on the title page and front cover]. The book is the fruit of research into the history and, where relevant, the current state of fluvial activities, procedures, institutions, firms and people; and also draws on the author's personal experience and knowledge of river usage and of the people connected with it. Having enjoyed spending time on the river for over half a century, the author has lived locally for the last twenty years. The sub-title *A look back at life on the Upper Thames seen from Wallingford and Benson* locates his area of specific interest, and the few paragraphs of blurb about him at the back of the book confirm that this is indeed 'a labour of love'.

The chapters have no systematic sequence; the book is a mixture of topics relating to the upper Thames in general and to the Wallingford and Benson areas in particular with the chapters intermixed; the wider topics being put into a local context in a number of instances.

On such wider topics there are well-illustrated sections or whole chapters, covering overviews of the bodies which have regulated the river; the technical working of locks and weirs; the South Western and Midlands canal networks; barges, their cargoes and their impact on Thames freight traffic; the Thames Path; swan upping; weather-related problems; the local rail network; and the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War Upper Thames Patrol. Passages in the chapters on the river authorities and on locks and weirs offer intimate pictures of the Thames Conservancy officials' 'annual Inspections' of the locks, with the Clifton Hampden lock keeper's wife passing the freshly-cooked potatoes on board for the Inspectors' lunch, whilst the 'Gardens Inspection' in connection with the hotly-contested annual Lock Gardens Competition offered another occasion for dressing up and another sumptuous lunch. The chapter on 'Swans and Swan Upping' introduces a local lady, Diana, who 'seems to have a mutual warm relationship with every swan on her patch', and a page relating the vicissitudes of a particularly accident-prone cygnet.

An extensive chapter headed 'Boats and Boating for Pleasure', is divided into sub-sections 'Passenger Boat Services', 'Pleasure Cruising' and 'Oars, Poles and Paddles'. The early days of the service which would become Salter's steamers, the vessels which were used and the schedules followed are described in detail; for example, in the earlier part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century passengers could board or leave at most locks, including Benson. The various types of smaller craft which, over time, have plied the river are examined: steam, electric, petrol, diesel and man-powered boats are represented, together with their designs, builders, and the yards where they were constructed, and those where they still are. Boatyards from Oxford to Norfolk, and from the tidal Thames to the south and Essex coasts built launches which could be seen on the Thames and a wide range of builders' works are covered in this chapter. Advertisements and much technical detail, including diagrams and full specifications of a number of the craft are included. Apparently 'after the War, many a ship's lifeboat was given a new lease of life after conversion to a river cruiser'. A similar amount of information is dedicated to the non-powered craft. So much highly-technical detail in this thirty four page chapter, a quantity of it not directly relevant to the Benson-Wallingford area, appears

possibly rather excessive for a non-specialist local readership. The lament about the lack of a 'riverside Thames Heritage Centre where the tremendously important history of the River Thames...could be presented...' and the subsequent dismissal of the River & Rowing Museum at Henley as 'displaying only a small range of artefacts' is perhaps a little harsh; the Museum does its best, to the extent that the steam launch *Eva*, cited in this book, occupies a large section of the [town of] Henley Gallery.

Other chapters are more focussed on particular areas. As indicated by the sub-title, the author's particular area of interest is the stretch of river between just north of Shillingford downstream as far as the southern outskirts of Wallingford. There are sections on Shillingford, Wallingford and Winterbrook bridges and fifteen pages relating to Benson lock and weir, their relatively recent renovations and to some named lock keepers there. Benson waterfront merits its own building-by-building section, as do Preston Crowmarsh and Battle Farm. Wallingford waterfront is again described in detail, whilst the chapter on weather extremes cites local instances of floods and ice, relating tales of cycling, and even of driving lorries on the frozen river.

The introduction indicates that the author's intent is that local communities should 'learn more about the history and character of their local river and the riverbank'. The sections relating specifically to the local area are duly exhaustive; however any reader not intimately acquainted with the area and with the exact relationship of one place to another, may be left floundering and searching for the lifeline of equally itemised maps or diagrams. Neither the contents listing nor the index suggest that such help is to be found; having passed in the introduction the small and rather unclear reproduction of a page of Taunt's *New Map of the Thames*, and, turning over page 93, one discovers a reproduction of a 1917 Stanford map of this stretch of river which at least illustrates where Keen Edge Ferry is in relation to Shillingford and the bridge. Unfortunately these are the only maps in the book and do not assist in identifying the exact location of other historic crossings in relation to modern landmarks, nor the relative positions of more modern riverside buildings at Benson, the layout of old Preston Crowmarsh nor of the old waterfront buildings of Wallingford. This reader gleaned some help from a copy of Fred Thacker's *The Thames Highway* from 1914, surprisingly not cited in Dalton's bibliography. A modern map with the old names and locations superimposed would enormously benefit the book.

Similarly, given the manner of the book's presentation and the range of topics covered it is inevitable that subjects, people, places and boats recur in different situations in different chapters. Whilst there is a two-page index which (the reader has to deduce) highlights the illustrations reproduced from earlier works, it appears that only the main or larger entries on a subject enjoy the benefit of being cited in the index, while smaller or passing mentions are ignored. A more comprehensive index would be useful in enabling readers to be able to look back and remind themselves of earlier references to names or topics. There is a short list of sources, but no footnotes to indicate from what source a particular piece of information has been garnered.

An idiosyncrasy of the author is that the title of the book on both the front cover and title page is entirely in lower case lettering, while the subtitle utilises the normal practice of the use of capital and lower case letters. His presentation and punctuation methods are also individual with the extensive use of brackets; more than two hundred and fifty pairs have been counted in the one hundred and fifty pages of text and illustration, and also over sixty exclamation marks. The lines of text are not justified. A proof reader should have spotted the

rather catastrophic mis-spelling of 'Bensoon' on the spine of the book, and also of the actress 'Beatrice Lilly' and the location on the lower Thames of 'Molsey'.

The book is lavishly produced, hard backed with sewn sections, on glossy paper with high quality illustrations, although many of them are quite small. The scattered arrangement of the topics together with the lack of a comprehensive index lessen its value as a work of serious history, however there is much of value: a multitude of tales and facts together with an abundance of illustrations which warrant this volume finding shelf space in the homes of many of the residents of the Benson and Wallingford areas.

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