

The River Thames in prehistory

The River Thames has played a vital role in the development and story of London for the last 450,000 years. It is only 352 kilometres from source to sea, but throughout time it has shaped and re-shaped the local landscape. It has been used by humans as a highway, a boundary, a food store and a sacred stream.

In London today most of the Thames has artificial embankments, but in prehistory the river was wider and shallower, and probably flowed in a number of different channels.

It is a tidal river and in AD43 Roman London was founded at the point where fresh water met the incoming sea. To Julius Caesar the river was known as *Tamesa* – ‘the flowing one’.

How did the Thames shape the landscape?

At the beginning of the Ice Age, the Thames was much longer and ran through a different part of the UK. It started in the Welsh uplands, flowed across the English midlands and eventually joined the river Rhine in the southern part of what is now the North Sea. Nearly half a million years ago it was diverted into its present valley by ice sheets.

Since then, it has changed course many times because of changes in global climate and sea level. Each time the sea level dropped, the river had to cut its way down through the land to reach the sea, leaving behind a dry flood plain.

Nowadays, these former flood plains, or gravel terraces, are rich in archaeological finds, which were carried there by Ice Age flash floods. These include flint tools and animal bones, such as this woolly mammoth jaw.



200,000-year-old woolly mammoth jaw



Tree stumps from 5,000-year-old forests, some with axe marks, can still be seen along the Thames foreshore.

What did prehistoric people eat?

As well as fresh water, the Thames provided prehistoric people with a wide range of natural resources such as reeds, rushes and timber for building. The river bed was also full of flint **nodules** (large lumps), which were vital for making sharp tools.

The fertile river banks were farmed and the grain, along with other local produce, was exchanged for other necessities such as stone, metal and salt. Wildlife was also plentiful. There were many types of fish and birds, and small mammals like beavers and otters. The harpoon in the photograph is made of antler and was used to catch both fish and birds.

Larger animals, including deer and cattle, also came down to the river to drink. Seasonal runs of salmon, migrating birds and the occasional beached whale would have supplemented this diverse diet.

Together, this made the Thames Valley a very prosperous place to live.



Barbed (serrated) harpoon, nearly 100,000 years old

▶ **Today, over 120 different species of fish, including salmon, live in the Thames.**

Was the Thames an important communication route?



Jadeite axe, 6,000 years old

The Thames provided direct access into the heart of southern Britain and to the North Sea. During prehistoric times, it played a key role in moving people, goods and ideas. Many of the objects found in the river were from distant places, including Ireland, the Lake District, Cornwall and even Europe. This jadeite axe from the Alps was dredged from the Thames and is one of the finest examples of its kind in Europe.

Local communities used wooden boats and rafts, alongside skin-covered coracles, kayaks and canoes to get about. In the 19th century, archaeologists uncovered the remains of a 6,000-year-old wooden dugout canoe in Erith. It had a polished flint axe in it.

In the years before the Roman conquest, high-sided, flat-bottomed boats appear on coins. These could be beached on the shelving river foreshores and unloaded easily.

▶ **London was a major international port until the closure of the docks in the 1960s.**

Did prehistoric people worship the Thames?

Large numbers of objects have been recovered from the Thames during dredging. These include human remains, particularly skulls, as well as weapons, tools and ornaments made from stone, bone and metal.

Many are beautifully made and seem to have been placed in the river deliberately. For, example, this sword was found in the Thames at Richmond in west London. Its blade has been deliberately damaged to make it useless in battle. This happened in rivers across northern Europe.

There may have been a variety of reasons why prehistoric people did this. Was it to appease the river's power in times of flood? Was it a quest for honour and prestige or a show of wealth? Were they gifts to accompany the dead? Were these offerings to supernatural deities or dedicated to the gods by victorious warriors? No one knows for sure.



Sword found in the Thames, 3,000 years old

During Diwali, the Festival of Lights, offerings are still made to the Thames by local Hindu communities.

Was the Thames a defensive barrier?

In prehistory, the Thames acted as both a physical and a psychological barrier.



Bronze coin of the British tribal leader, Cunobelin, AD40

Settlements built on its islands used the water as a first line of defence. The remains of a number of wooden bridges have been found along the Thames. In the medieval period, ferries plied the stretches of river between bridges at London and Kingston, as presumably they would have done in prehistoric times.

In the last century BC, the Thames also acted as a tribal boundary. Archaeologists have mapped out prehistoric territories using coins, such as the one shown. Their conclusions suggest the river might have represented the boundary between neighbouring groups.

According to Julius Caesar, the river was 'fordable at one point only, and even there with difficulty'. There have been many suggestions made for the site of the ford and the battle that ensued as Caesar's troops crossed it. It has never been found!

Rufus Noel-Buxton attempted to wade unsuccessfully across the Thames at Westminster in 1952.

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Further reading

Merriman, N, *Prehistoric London* (London: HMSO, 1990)

Rogers, D, *The Thames* (Wayland Publishers Ltd, 1995)

Wright, P, *The River: The Thames in Our Time* (BBC Publications, 1999)