

Account of Purley on Thames

Thames Portrait

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Thames Portrait - A book by E Arnot Robertson 1937

Describes the Thames in word portraits and photographs. The main Purley section starts at page 86. but there is a small item on page 8

Page 8

At Medmenham, at it happens, mere strollers would not be turned off, but that is by the owner's leniency, not the people's right. At Mapledurham they would be because here lives a riparian owner unparalleled on the whole Thames, I believe, in that he has engaged an ex-policeman to see that no-one who can possibly be prevented from so doing enjoys the use of the tow path. All that the law prevents him from doing is to turn off the people connected with river craft

Page 86

The reaches between Goring and Pangbourne, and from Pangbourne to Mapledurham, hold as richly and compactly as anywhere on the river the kind of heavy, fertile beauty which I find so moving in the countryside. I think that it is indescribable in essence, so that any attempt at description, like a bad picture of a desired person, must be irritating, and I will not give it. There is little to say except that I like this part of the river better than the rest, and often go over it in mind when I cannot do so physically. The Thames here is feeling its way between the Chilterns and the Berkshire Downs. It is not photographic ground either; the shapes are too sweeping, in bend and hillside and far-stretching woods.

Pangbourne itself is dull except for the stretch of water in front of the naval college, enlivened by chubby future officers managing fleets of sailing dingies more incompetently than any children I have seen elsewhere. There seems to be something about modern naval training which destroys the natural cleverness of small boys dealing with sail. In the course of a life spent, nearly all of it so far, near some water or other, I have never yet observed a naval man in anything smaller than a pinnace without wondering whether it would be courteous to offer him help.

At Mapledurham our own boat behaved admirably for once. It was quite a long time since the steering gear had gone wrong: a splice in the wire to the rudder, which accounted for this tendency, had worked round again to the jamming point, and it let us down, or rather held us up - actually both at once - in the best possible place.

There is a mill at Mapledurham which has been in the hands of the same family since the time of Henry VIII.

We went up the backwater by the lock to photograph it. The lock here is between an island in midstream, and the bank near which is the village of Purley. On the other side of the river is the village of Mapledurham. There is no way for these two neighbouring villages to have any contact with one another except through the personal kindness of the busy lockman, who is not an official ferryman; but he will take people over in his boat when he can. To get across is a chance matter of standing and shouting from the Mapledurham bank, in the hope that he will happen to hear, and can spare the time. My voice gave out first the only time I tried. A bridge is the obvious solution. But a

bridge would need legs on the mill owner's ground, and it might slightly interrupt his long view of the river. So....

This is the place, referred to before, where an ex-policemen was engaged to keep people, other than those strictly entitled by law, from using the towpath in a field which was not even directly in front of the owner's house.

We knew none of these things when we landed on an apparently deserted little island between the lock and the backwater, hoping to find there the best position for photographing the mill. Trees were in the way, however; we had just got back into the boat when a servant came to tell us to go away.

A little group of people came out from the mill and stood in earshot, I think, but evidently unwilling to speak to us, while we explained to the man what we were doing: we wanted a view of the mill from the water: would he ask the owner if - The servant interrupted to say that permission would not be given, so what was the use of asking?

Unfortunately, we had only the suspicion, at the time, that permission was not even necessary. - And would we go away at once? - But, we said, we wanted to have lunch. (It was Magna Carta island all over again; only this time, in the heat of the argument, I left the potatoes on the primus and ruined my best camping saucepan, which stiffened our tempers) We could not have lunch in the boat here, the man insisted, because this was private water. All the way along the backwater as far as the lock. We were to start up and get off at once.

"But surely the Thames Conservancy-" The servant was explicit that it had nothing to do with the Thames Conservancy. Just the mill owner's private water.

I think if people had not stood around so ostentatiously to see us turned off, while the servant - evidently under instructions - refused to let us speak to the owner, we should not have wrenched at the steering wheel so irritably that the wire jammed again on the other side. We were among piles; picturesque piles as old as the mill, which must not be damaged. Do what we would, we could not get the boat under control. Undoubtedly if I had been the mill owner I should have thought that our extraordinary course was taken on purpose. We circled a post on our left; we hauled on the reverse lever and shot backwards, not in the same circle but, because of the relative positions of rudder and propeller, straight onto a pile on the opposite side. These nice old posts were far too decayed and tottery to damage us as we charged them erratically, one by one, but they trembled under the impacts and both of us, in an atmosphere of fury from the bank, became incompetent with laughter on the supposedly private water, in a craft behaving like one of those water-boatmen insects, which weave their way wildly about the surface of stagnant ponds.

We looped our way out in the end, and something - probably the memory of the watching figures - prompted us to enquire of the Thames Conservancy whether the owner really was within his rights. All Mapledurham seemed sadly to believe he was.

The banks were his, yes; but the exclusive use of the the water for boats, no. Once on the scent, the Thames Conservators, as stated before, are tigers about just this sort of thing.....

I should like to be able to say, as proof of the nobility of our spirits, that when we returned to the backwater to get the photograph by page 33 we took the boat in as quietly as possible, whipped out the camera, and came away at once in a big-hearted silence. But we did not, of course.

