

The Thames 200

Like so many expeditions the idea of the Thames 200 came over a few drinks in a bar on the lines of how much we have enjoyed longer rows and why not make it something really challenging this year. After a few options were considered, we fixed on a plan to row down the Thames from Reading to Leigh-on-sea, a distance of 200km (122miles in old money) over five days.

We had a crew of Sally, Liz, Maria, Neil and Keith but a boat would be useful. This was resolved after a conversation with Bob Leeds who was delighted to lend us his Clayton Skiff, 'Witchoar'.

Not only would he lend it to us, but he also set about arranging for it to be repainted, antifouled and even have some banners made advertising our 'Thames 200'. What a star!

The route was planned, accommodation arranged, and the boat trailed and launched in Reading the weekend before.

We arrived at Reading to find a dismal, wet and chilly start to our adventure. Our planned 'full English' came to nought as we found it was not served in the marina cafe on a Monday morning. After a delayed start whilst we waited for the rain to ease, we set off in the late morning to head down the river.

We soon escaped urban Reading and made our way through the water meadows of the upper Thames. It was the first week of the school holidays and we were expecting to be fighting with paddle boarders, kayakers, motor cruisers and gin palaces for a place in each of the locks we needed to pass through. Surprisingly we found we had the river to ourselves and most of the locks too. A few were manned whilst others we had to operate ourselves.

Witchoar is a fixed seat rowing boat with four oars and a cox so our plan was to row for about an hour and then swap round so that we changed rowing positions and had the occasional rest whilst steering and could see where we were going instead of where we had been.

We soon got into a routine and although the skiff is quite heavy when loaded with personal gear and about 50kg of confectionery, we were making good progress. Neil was invariably sitting in bow seat and was recording an account of the row, particularly videoing each bridge as we passed under with a short commentary, usually interrupted by one of the other crew innocently making a remark or a squeal of delight as something was spotted.

Shortly before we embarked on our journey Neil had decided that he was going to seek sponsorship, mainly from his work colleagues and contacts, and as our journey progressed the total increased by the hour. This was starting to get serious as we now had to finish what we had started.

We stopped at Sonning for lunch and carried on through the home of rowing at Henley-on-Thames and rowed the course of the recent Henley Royal Regatta. Unchallenged we were first in our class observed only by a few swans and a coot and the empty stands that would have been ringing with cheers only a few days earlier.

Our day finished moored to the riverbank and a comfy bed awaited at the famous Bell Inn at Hurley, tired but not exhausted, after 15 miles of rowing and 5 locks. We were relieved that the first stretch had been successfully completed without mishap and delighted that the day had been spent in good humour, banter and one-liners.

We were pleased to find the boat was waiting for us when we returned in the morning after an evening meal followed by a few drinks and a huge breakfast.

It was a lovely day on the river, and we set off in good spirits and more joking, much of which was getting nearer the knuckle as each hour passed.

Again, the river was ours almost alone and one boat-hire owner said it was the quietest summer he had known. This of course speeded our journey through the locks as we passed Marlow, Cliveden (of

Christine Keeler and John Profumo fame), Maidenhead and Brunel's iconic brick railway bridge. Maria who had lived locally was pointing out riverbank houses of well-known celebrities, Neil was continuing his recorded commentary and occasionally rowing. He was also the main man when we came to locks, jumping ashore, pulling the boat along, operating the lock gates when it was unmanned and finding the toilets for the rest of us. Where we did meet lockkeepers, they were always happy to see a rowing crew and interested that we were heading so far down the river. And always commenting on how quiet the river was.



Our first Lock



Windsor Castle

The day progressed and we soon had Windsor Castle on our right and Eton College on the left. We found a suitable mooring just a short distance from the town centre and headed off to the accommodation we had booked for the night. We were set up in our three-floor apartment almost opposite the castle and a few paces from the pub where we treated Sally to her first ever Wetherspoon experience. Another 15 miles and 7 locks ticked off today.

The first two days had been quite relaxed, but we were now upping our game with Teddington our target and 25 miles of rowing and 8 locks to navigate.

So, it was an early 6am alarm call and a gourmet breakfast courtesy of Chef Neil. Toasted sourdough under smashed avocado, poached eggs and bacon with a balsamic drizzle washed down with tea or coffee. We were ready to hit the river.

We curved around Windsor with the castle appearing at all angles in the early morning sun. We passed Runnymede, site of the signing of the Magna Carta which kicked off a day of random but interesting quiz questions to test the rest of the crew.

One of the most hilarious moments of the trip occurred when just after sending a text to his boss Neil recounted a scatological story involving a blocked toilet using some colourful language. Unknown to him his phone was on dictation and somehow sent the full story to his boss. Just after realising this had happened Neil received a text in response 'Are you on drugs' which became a running joke for the rest of the journey.

The riverbank was becoming more urban as we passed under the M25 and eased our way through Staines, Weybridge, Shepperton and Sunbury and the river was noticeably widening. We were

approaching our finish for the day and a little weary we glimpsed Hampton Court and moored just upstream of the mighty Teddington Lock.

Teddington impresses as a riverside village on first visit with a selection of pubs and restaurants and local shops for local people. The Teddington Travelodge less so, it was all that was on offer, so we accepted our fate and spent a moderately comfortable night after a very tasty Italian.

So far so good although we had now used 60% of our time but only achieved 40% of our distance. Thursday was to be a 33-mile day and we needed to time our start to ensure we left Teddington Lock about 90 minutes before high water to allow us to carry the ebb tide down to Greenwich. The good news though was the latest update informing Neil that he had now had over £10,000 in sponsorship pledges.

Since the first morning we had no rain and today gave us a nice following breeze as we entered our last lock and into the challenge of the tidal river.

Initially the tide was against us as we rowed past Ham and towards Richmond and it was slow going. We were now on the Great River Race course and Witchoar knew this part of the river well after several years of competing in the GRR with her owner Bob Leeds.

The tide turned and we started to pick up speed down towards London. Not so many years ago this river was a hive of activity with commercial traffic heading to the many wharves and docks, barges heading up the Thames and into the canal system and ferries taking passengers across the river. Rather like our experience upstream we had the river through our capital city virtually to ourselves. Neil continued to give commentary through the bridges, Sally, Liz and Maria were spotting various locations and we were all laughing at comments and banter as we rowed.

We raced the University Boat Race course in reverse from Mortlake to Putney, and radioed the PLA to inform them we had passed under Wandsworth Bridge and were now under their jurisdiction. The tide was now running fast and the bridges were being ticked off quickly and soon we were into Central London. The Houses of Parliament loomed on our left and as we passed it was spot on midday and Big Ben chimed us through with 12 bongs. "Wow that's amazing!!" said Liz over Neil's video commentary.

Soon we were swept through London Bridge and an overfall caused by the bridge piers, passing HMS Belfast and right through the central arch of Tower Bridge. Old docks and wharves now sites of high (extremely high) cost flats and apartments were on both sides of the river and soon Greenwich with its classic buildings was on our right. Just a couple more miles now and we kept the ebb tide past the O2 to Greenwich Sailing Club where we had arranged a mooring.

We lugged our kit to the overnight hotel, met some friends and went to a local pub for a meal. Once a hangout for dockers, lightermen, carters and bargemen it is now a 'gastropub' lacking character and characters.

Friday was the last day of our Odyssey. Could we navigate the tide, traffic, weather, 43 miles of rowing and fatigue that would challenge our day. We left a tad later than planned and we had about 1.5 hours of flood tide to stem and then 5 hours of ebb tide to get to Southend Pier before the tide changed again and would make life a bit more difficult.

Back in the day of commercial traffic smaller vessels would 'work the slacks'. This was cheating the tide on the inside of bends. As we came down Woolwich Reach, we crossed the river and cut into the corner on the port side to save time and rowing effort against the tide. There was not a vessel under way to be seen apart from a PLA launch which soon chased us down and respectfully but firmly requesting we keep to the right (starboard) side of the very empty river. 'Of course, but we will just get round this bend first if that's ok'.

The tide turned and was now picking up as we had the QE II bridge in sight, one of our landmarks for the day. This is real industrial riverside and not much that was pretty to be seen. Our first ship

passed us on her way out to sea and then it was lunchtime drifting past Gravesend. Another quiz question. 'Which famous Princess is buried in Gravesend Churchyard?' *

We passed Tilbury Fort, site of the famous speech by Queen Elizabeth I after the Armada and then the new London Gateway Port and into Sea Reach with strict pilotage instructions to keep to the Kent side of the river and away from shipping. Still keeping the ebb tide we were now passed the graffiti covered sea wall of Canvey Island and drew level with our destination of Two Tree Island. Unfortunately, we had to carry on almost to Southend Pier so we could enter Ray Creek as it was now almost low water and the sandbanks of the Chapman Sands were in the way.

Ready to cross over to the north side we played a short but subservient game of chicken with a huge container ship heading upriver. We could have crossed in front with ease as it was just ticking along waiting for the tide. But safe and sure is wisest and saved the PLA getting vexed again as we were still just within their limits.

We entered Ray Creek about ¼ mile from Southend Pier and now headed into what had become a strengthening westerly breeze to make our last hour a tough row to the slipway at Two Tree Island. We arrived with just enough water to make it without grounding to be met by Ian Pavey with the boat trailer the other side of a locked gate. A suggestion of a further row around to Leigh-on-sea was met with mutiny but thankfully a couple of phone calls flushed out the contractor who was supposed to be on site. We were soon able to recover the boat and breathe a sigh of relief that a 43-mile day had been completed.

We had achieved our 200 km challenge. Over the course of 5 days, we had laughed till it hurt, had appreciated each other's company and bonded in a way that can only be achieved when things get a little bit tough.



London Skyline



Mission Accomplished

All of it was fun but the serious bit was that Neil single handed raised over £16,000 for St Mungo's, a charity aimed at helping the homeless – a huge effort and a very worthy cause.

Finally, huge thanks to those who helped us to undertake this trip especially, Bob and Ian.

Will we do it again? – watch this space!

- *Quiz answer – Princess Pocahontas