

The Duke of Northumberland's River

- 1 Former industrial uses have left a number of braided stretches to the River Crane between the Staines road at Baber bridge, Hounslow and The Meadway in west Twickenham, and within Kneller Gardens the river divides into two streams taking divergent courses to the River Thames. There is an important and interesting historical background to the construction of the northern stream, now known as the Duke of Northumberland's River, in the mid 16th century.
- 2 After the dissolution of Syon monastery in 1539 the manor of Isleworth Syon passed to the crown. John Gates, a gentleman of the King's Privy Chamber was appointed keeper at Syon and Bailiff of the manor. In 1543 he was granted money to build two watermills at Isleworth on the sites of former mills that had relied on water from the Bourne, a stream flowing from Heston.
- 3 The water from the Bourne had long been insufficient; hence the decay of the earlier mills, so money was also granted for a project to bring water from the River Crane before Twickenham to join the original stream bed near where today St Johns Rd crosses the river. To maintain the flow of the Crane to other mills, water was brought from the Colne near Harmondsworth across what was then part of Hounslow Heath to the Crane at Baber Bridge, next to the Staines Rd 1½ miles west of Hounslow. The first section was around 6 miles in length; the lower section from Twickenham to Isleworth, 2 ½ miles.
- 4 The work of digging out the river took place in 1544/5. These were extensive engineering operations for their time, requiring judgements on levels and rates of flow- for a time the section from the Bourne to the Crane flowed in the wrong direction. John Pylkyngton was in charge the work, employing '80 of the best ditchers in the country'. Local tenants were conscripted to scour out the old brook. Carpenters for the mills came from Essex where John Gates had extensive landholdings. Things did not finish well for John Gates- He was involved in the Lady Jane Grey plot and was executed in 1553.
- 5 A section of the river at Harmondsworth was diverted later in the 16th century. In 1604 the transfer of the land at Syon with the manor and river rights to the Duke of Northumberland was formalised; in 1635 a surveyor, Moses Glover, prepared his celebrated map of Isleworth for the Duke. On this map the course of the river can be clearly seen, and it is shown as being the main channel of the 'Isleworth River', rather than the original river Crane. The Duke retained rights over the river until 1931. It has usually borne his name, but the lower stretch appears as the Isleworth Mill River on 19th Century maps.
- 6 Over the centuries the river has provided power and water supply for an extensive range of industrial processes; Flour milling in Isleworth town; along what is now St Johns Road copper milling, paper making, then brazilwood dye making, finally brewing; possibly snuff making in an adjacent mill. Mills for Calico printing on the site of Cristabel Close, and on the land across the river from the Green. Upstream were at various times gunpowder mills, swordmaking, papermaking, cartridge making, and mills processing flax and seed oil.

- 7 In recent times the river has been diverted in two locations; for nearly 3 miles at Heathrow in the upper section, and through the Mogden Sewage Treatment works, where the river is in a concrete channel, and a length of 500m. has been moved 60m to the east. Through the site of the former Brewery on St John's Road the river is enclosed in an early Victorian brick channel; there are concrete walls along the banks adjacent to bridges, and on the outside of the bend across from the Green; in some locations the banks have been reinforced with unobtrusive wooden shuttering, as at Riverside walk, and in Kneller Gardens. Along these stretches the river is around 6m wide. There is shuttering elsewhere, now mostly decayed, and along long stretches the riverbank is simply earth, reinforced with vegetation. Where on its original course the river remains much the same as when those 80 ditches constructed it over 450 years ago.

- 8 The Duke of Northumberland's river is of considerable historical importance. It is essentially a mill leat, and as such not matched elsewhere in width or length. It was not such a formidable engineering operation as the monastic and other mediaeval navigation and drainage channels in the Fens, but the overall work would have exceeded that for port navigation cuts made in this period, and although of less width and depth, it matched in engineering effort the new channel for the Sussex Ouse at Newhaven, constructed in 1539, 6 years earlier.

- 9 In the London area it is preceded only by the wide defensive moat round the city. It was also in 1544 that a London Conduit Act gave approval for water to be brought to the city from Hampstead Heath and Muswell Hill. But this was not proceeded with and it was nearly 70 years- 1613- before the construction of the more famous New River, bringing drinking water to London from Hertfordshire. The DNR was followed,- and copied- in 1638, when the 'companion' Longford River was constructed to take water from the Colne to the ponds at Bushey Park, and to Hampton Court.

- 10 Because of its historic importance The Duke of Northumberland's River is worthy of listing as a monument to protect its character. One aspect of this character are the weirs and sluices; at the St John's Rd brewery site in Isleworth where there is a 1m drop; at the former Kidd's mill also in Isleworth, where it meets the Thames; and perhaps most dramatic, at Baber bridge where the river drops to meet the Crane. Equally important are the long stretches of placid water flow. The sections of the river between Worton Green and Riverside walk at Worton, and between Kneller Gardens and Mereway open spaces well demonstrate this aspect of the river's character and setting, in accessible and attractive environments.