

# Go with the flow

The banks of the River Thames are littered with historical houses and royal residences, says **Carla Passino**, who advocates experiencing them all on a walk upstream

Illustrated by Fred van Deelen

**K**EW PALACE is coy. From the Thames Path, it's only a glimpse of red topped by a forest of chimneys and sheltered by the mighty trees of Kew Gardens. The smallest Royal Palace was once a merchant's house, but George II and Queen Caroline thought it a good home for their daughters. Its charms later won over George III and Queen Charlotte, for whom it became a private retreat from the pomp of the Court, then a place of shelter during the King's madness.

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Echoing the royals, many of the great and good fell for the stretch of riverside from Brentford to Twickenham—a landscape so pretty that it was nicknamed Arcadian Thames—and garlanded it with great houses. One of the most venerable buildings is Syon House, with crenellated towers that appear almost suddenly past a river bend, offering themselves to the public gaze with none of Kew Palace's modesty. The Duke of Northumberland's London home started life as England's only Bridgettine Abbey, a dual monastery that gave the estate its Biblical name. Henry VIII dissolved it in 1539, but the monks eventually had their revenge. When the King died in 1547, his remains lay at Syon House for a night: legend has it that

the coffin exploded and some irreverent dogs licked his blood.

Despite this, the royal connection endured: Lady Jane Grey was at Syon House when she agreed to become Queen, Elizabeth I visited four times and James I was lavishly entertained there by Henry Percy, 9th Earl of Northumberland—until the Earl, implicated in the Gunpowder Plot, was locked in the Tower. A prisoner for 16 years, Percy tried to swap the estate for his freedom, but the King refused, which was perhaps a mistake, as Syon House had 'bathing houses', a rare convenience at the time.

The estate has since remained in the possession of the 9th Earl's descendants through the female line—Sir Hugh Smithson having taken the Percy surname from his wife, Lady Elizabeth Seymour, Baroness Percy, with whom he commissioned Robert Adam to remodel the house and Capability Brown to redesign the park.

From the Kew bank, the sweeping view conceived by Brown is reversed, rising towards the house and the Percy Lion perched on the roof, which seems to poke a passing cloud with its tail, straight as an arrow.

Nearby, Isleworth's All Saints' Church, medieval in origin, was almost rebuilt by Wren in the 17th century and wrecked by a fire in 1943. Today's church is mostly the 1970 work of architect Michael Blee. It looks pleasantly odd against the 18th-century buildings around it, such as the white-washed London Apprentice, a Grade II\*-listed pub that may once have been the favourite destination of City Livery apprentices on their days off.

On the Kew side of the river, an obelisk seemingly rises from the waters of the

Thames's side channels, beyond which stands a cupola-ed house. The house is the observatory George III had built to watch the transit of Venus in 1769, with the obelisk, now a favourite perch for the many herons that hunt for fish in the shallows, one of three built to align astronomical instruments. The King also kept a collection of clocks at the Observatory and, for a while, London's official time was set there—grey stones now mark Richmond's meridian line, albeit almost lost in the riverside traffic of bicycles, runners and dogs walking their owners.

**'The house is the observatory George III had built to watch the transit of Venus in 1769'**

The River Thames is equally as busy: rowing boats, canoes and the odd narrowboat chug past Asgill House—Sir Charles Asgill's golden tribute to his own meteoric rise to Lord Mayor of London—coasting down the echo of Henry VIII's Royal Palace, spritz-holding crowds hanging onto the last vestiges of summer and heroes on stand-up paddleboards labouring at the foot of *Peggy Jean*, a barge-turned-Australian restaurant.

Despite the odd flash of modernity, it's easy to imagine J. M. W. Turner on a little wooden boat by the stone arches of ancient Richmond Bridge, soaking up the views he'd later paint, or on the river bank, waiting patiently to catch a fish. 'One of his great →







passions was fishing and he would go out on the Thames either by himself or with friends,' explains Matthew Morgan, museum director at Turner's House in Twickenham.

The artist lived close to the river for 13 years (1813–26), in an idiosyncratic house he had designed himself. He might have initially fashioned it like one of the towers he so often painted, but later remodelled it, borrowing motifs such as the hallway's double arches from his friend Sir John Soane.

Elegant, rather than grand, Sandycombe Lodge was very much a retreat for him—he never painted there, although he probably sketched, and never invited customers or patrons, only his friends. 'He was not using this place to impress people. When he travelled around England, very often he'd stop off at the nearest big house and say: "Do you want me to draw something?"' But he wasn't really doing any of that here.'

Had he decided to do so, he'd have had almost too much of a choice of subjects, not least Orleans House, where Louis Philippe, Duc d'Orleans, lived in 1813–15, and Marble Hill—although, by then, the Palladian villa was no longer the glittering jewel that George II's mistress, Henrietta Howard, had built as her riverside haven. Under her ownership, it had become a favourite haunt

of London's best and brightest, prompting Alexander Pope to write: 'There is a greater court now at Marble Hill than at Kensington.'

It was a role the house would reprise when Capt Jonathan Peel and his wife, Lady Alice, bought and restored it in the 1820s, but it was not to last—after Lady Alice died in 1887, Marble Hill almost risked being lost to development. Today, it is once again magnificent, having reopened in May after a three-year conservation project that revived both interior and gardens.

**'Over the centuries, it has amassed such a rich history that even the longest-serving member of the collections team still discovers new things'**

Whereas Marble Hill, as does Syon Park, lords it over the Thames, showing off its pristine splendour to every passing boat, Ham House, evoking Kew Palace, hides behind a wall of trees on the opposite bank of the river, reached by the historic Hammertons Ferry. The house had originally been built

for Thomas Vavasour, Knight Marshal to James I, but its most formidable resident was Elizabeth, Countess of Dysart. Her father, William Murray, a staunch Royalist, fled to France in the Cromwell years, leaving Elizabeth and her mother, Catherine, to (wo) man the estate: 'They managed to prevent the house being sequestered,' says Ham House's curator, Hannah Mawdsley. 'They were very good at negotiating and playing the political landscape.' Possibly good at spying, too: Elizabeth visited France a few times and might have carried messages to Charles II: he gave her a pension of £800 a year when he regained the throne. Later, with her second husband, the Duke of Lauderdale, she expanded and redecorated Ham House and enlarged the estate, creating French-style avenues—'basically to show off and say "Look how rich and important we are".'

After the Duchess's death, the house went to the children from her first marriage with Lionel Tollemache and remained in the family until 1948, when it passed to the National Trust. Over the centuries, it has amassed such a rich history that even the longest-serving member of the collections team still discovers new things, according to Dr Mawdsley. 'There's always more to learn—that's the joy of history.' 🐦

## At home along the River Thames



### Isleworth, £3 million

One of the oldest houses in Old Isleworth, this almost 4,000sq ft, Grade II-listed house has six bedrooms, three reception rooms and plenty of original features, plus a mature garden and a perfect location on postcard-pretty Church Street.  
*River Homes (020-8995 0500)*



### Petersham, £6.95 million

Built in 1712 and extended in the 1930s, this former hunting lodge for Richmond Park, which spans 4,745sq ft, is a magnificent family home with four elegant reception rooms, six bedrooms and spectacular gardens.  
*Knight Frank (020-8939 2808)*



### Twickenham, £3.5 million

Completely renovated in 2014, this Edwardian house is conveniently close to the Thames and Marble Hill. With 2,970sq ft of accommodation, it has four bedrooms and a double reception room opening onto the kitchen and long leafy views.  
*Savills (020-8614 9100)*