

**U3A Bikers**  
**The Thames Path to Orleans House**  
**Friday 10<sup>th</sup> June 2022**

The ride to Orleans House, a very fine Palladian villa situated on the Thames in Twickenham, had previously been researched John and Denise. The group had ridden it in October last year and were looking forward to today's ride.

A feature of the ride was the crossing of the river on a small ferry boat near Ham House.

The trip started with a train ride from Clapham Junction station to Mortlake Station.

At Mortlake we had our refreshments at the Metos Coffee House, served by the staff who now knew us quite well from a number of previous visits.

Political debates duly completed, and anecdotes related, we set out past the wood yard, crossed Mortlake Green and on to the Thames Path.

Upstream towards Chiswick Bridge, the paved path followed the long sweep of the river, under Kew Rail Bridge and Kew Bridge, and past Brentford Ait (island).

The ground of Kew Gardens lay to our left beyond a deep moat and a fence. The fine redbrick Tudor building, with its characteristic tall chimneys, was Kew Palace.

Across the river there was a good view of Syon House, another popular destination for the group.

The rowers were busy out on the river and here is a fine coxed eight out, showing their technique.



The path here was a mix of paved surface and firm gravel, some rather bumpy in places. Isleworth Ait was on our right, and on our left was an obelisk, with the King's Observatory just visible in the distance.

Near the obelisk we encountered a sign that rather puzzled us. This was a metal marker post with a slot in it; the post designated the spot as the site of the Meridian Line. This was quite obviously different from the familiar Greenwich Meridian. From the information board we learned that this Meridian Line was used to set the King's time at the Houses of Parliament; this was King George III.

This Meridian pre-dated the designation of Greenwich as the Prime Meridian in 1884.



And so we arrived at Richmond Footbridge, Lock and Weir. There are actually two footbridges and they serve as a superstructure from which the sluice gates hang.

It was here that we found the path leading into the Old Deer Park, and we turned off the Thames Path to explore the park and perhaps visit the King's Observatory, as we had done last year.

Once across the park, turning into a minor road we came to an entrance with open gates and a notice reading "PRIVATE: NO ENTRY FOR UNAUTHORISED VEHICLES AND PEDESTRIANS".

With some hesitation we proceeded. The road led to the beautiful grounds of the Royal Mid-Surrey Golf Club (the photo was taken last autumn), and here we were intercepted by two green-keepers.



They confirmed to us that we were on the right track for the Observatory but discouraged us from proceeding further and so we about-turned.

The King's Observatory is a private residence which we had been able to see on the earlier visit. I'm attaching the photo I took on the previous visit.



We returned to the Thames Path by Richmond Lock and found another, identical Meridian marker post; this one had a Meridian line marked across the river path.

No one could suggest a reason for this duplication!

Continuing upstream, the path took us under Twickenham Bridge and Richmond Rail Bridge to Richmond Riverside.

The Thames Path was a little busier here but after passing under Richmond Bridge, the path continued along beside the fields of Petersham Meadow, then on to a good paved path to the grand-sounding *Ham House Ferry Terminal*.



In truth, the ferry terminal consisted of no more than a wooden platform and a set of steep steps down the river embankment!! Joining a small group of foot passengers we waited the arrival of the Hammerton's Ferry from the opposite shore. There were now ten of us, Martin having joined us here.

When the ferry arrived we carefully descended the steps and loaded the bikes. There was enough for all ten bikes, and a dozen or so passengers, plus the owner's cat. The ferry man remembered us from the previous trip! It took us just five minutes to cross to the north shore.



It was a very short ride along the tow-path to our destination, Orleans House and Gardens, passing the Octagonal Tower and into the grounds of the Stable Café.

This was our lunch stop, offering soups and sausage baps, and a seat in the sunny courtyard.



Niesje had explored and came back to report that the Octagonal Room was open and could be viewed. This baroque room, designed by architect James Gibbs, was added in 1720 for entertaining George II's Queen Consort, Caroline. The room is richly decorated and the photos I took cannot do it justice.



Leaving Orleans House a short detour took us to a house where Walter de la Mare once resided.



From here we headed to Marble Hill Park and the modest Marble Hill House, one-time residence of a mistress of George II.

On the previous visit the house and grounds were undergoing restoration and these were now completed; the work was continuing on the recently-discovered grotto.



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From here the return route was down-stream along the Thames Path on the north shore. On the hill on the opposite were two prominent buildings, identified as the Petersham Home and the Royal Star and Garter Home.



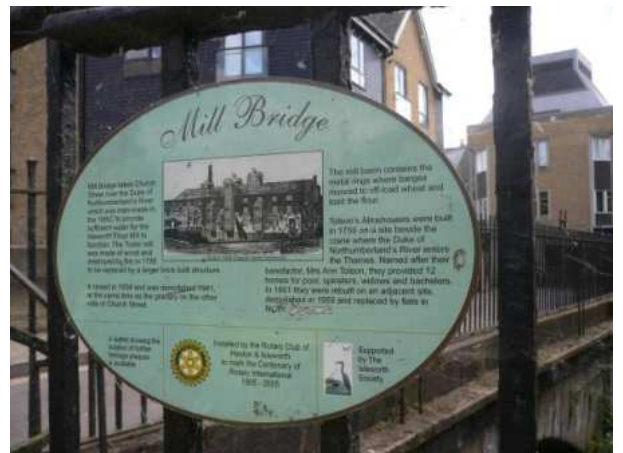
Returning to Richmond Bridge along the north shore we admired again the fine architectural structure of this twin footbridge.

Beyond Richmond Bridge the Thames Path heads inland for a while along a road shared with light traffic to cross the River Crane on a short section of Richmond Road.



We turned into Swan Street to Church Street, and crossed an old bridge, Mill Bridge, over the Duke of Northumberland's River.

Here we left the Thames Path as our route headed up a narrow road along Mill Plat beside the Duke's River, emerging on to Twickenham Road, which we crossed.



From there we took back roads to Isleworth Station (which we avoided - it has steep steps to the platform) and continued on to Syon Lane Station, with step-free access. We were soon on our way back to Clapham Junction for the end of the outing.

So, on this ride we had visited a section of the Thames from Mortlake and upstream for several miles. A ferry crossing made it possible to arrange a circular route. Along the way we saw just a few of the grand houses that were built for the wealthy in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, some with royal connections, and intrigue. Delightful!

**Distance ridden:** 13 miles.

**Riders:** Chris, David, Denise & John, Gisella, Irene, Martin, Jan, John, Niesje.

**Notes: The King's Observatory** (formerly called the Kew Observatory) is a Grade I listed building in Richmond. Now a private dwelling, it formerly housed an astronomical and terrestrial magnetic observatory founded by King George III. The architect was Sir William Chambers. The observatory is within the grounds of the Royal Mid-Surrey Golf Club, which is part of the Old Deer Park of the former Richmond Palace in Richmond. The observatory is not publicly accessible, and obscuring woodlands mean that it cannot be viewed from outside the golf course, which is not open to the general public.

The observatory was completed in 1769, in time for King George III's observation of the transit of Venus on 3<sup>rd</sup> June in that year. A contemporary report says: "His Majesty the King who made his observation with a Short's reflecting telescope, magnifying Diameters 170 Times, was the first to view the Penumbra of Venus touching the Edge of the Sun's Disk."

**Orleans House** is a Palladian villa built by the architect John James in 1710 for the politician and diplomat James Johnston. It was subsequently named after the Duc d'Orléans who stayed there in the early 19th century. By the early 20th century it was derelict and in 1926 it was mostly demolished. However, parts of the property, including the baroque octagonal room designed by architect James Gibbs, were preserved. The octagon room and its service wing are listed Grade I and, together with a converted stable block, are now the Orleans House Gallery, an art gallery.

**Marble Hill House** is a Palladian villa, built between 1724 and 1729 as the home of Henrietta Howard, Countess of Suffolk and mistress of King George II, who lived there until her death. The compact design soon became famous and furnished a standard model for the Georgian English villa and for plantation houses in the American colonies. It is set in 66 acres of parkland, Marble Hill Park. Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift were regular guests at the house during the lifetime of Henrietta. In the late 18th century the house was rented by the Prince Regent (later George IV) for his mistress, Maria Fitzherbert, so the two could continue to meet in private.

The house is owned by English Heritage, which acquired it in 1986. In 2015, English Heritage won a Heritage Lottery Fund grant to develop Marble Hill House and its park in order to improve its presentation and the associated leisure facilities. As part of this project Historic England made a range of landscape investigations to create a clear picture of the development of the Marble Hill landscape from the 17th century onwards.

**Richmond Lock, Weir and Footbridge** is described as "a half-tide lock and barrage" which incorporates a pair of pedestrian bridges. These cross the conventional lock, the slipway and the barrage; the barrage consists of 3 vertical steel sluice gates (each weighing 32 tons) suspended from the footbridge structure. For about two hours each side of high tide, the sluice gates are raised into the footbridge structure above, and river traffic can pass freely through the barrage. For the rest of the tidal cycle the sluice gates are closed, and vessels must use the lock alongside the barrage. Rowing boats and kayaks can use the slipway. Thus, the barrage maintains the water level between Richmond Lock and Teddington Lock (the next lock upstream) at or above half-tide level, making it navigable. Prior to this Thames at Twickenham and Richmond was little more than a stream running through mud banks.

The Richmond lock and weir complex was built in 1894 by the Thames Conservancy. It is a Grade II\* listed structure.

**Acknowledgements:** Source material from Wikipedia is gratefully acknowledged.

*Ride leaders: John & Denise Davies*

*Photos: Niesje de Boer and John Clements*

*Report by John Clements, 11<sup>th</sup> June 2022*