



UNIVERSITY
of
GREENWICH | Greenwich
Maritime
Institute



CONFERENCE REPORT

RUNNING THE RIVER: HOW THE PAST INFORMS THE PRESENT

Thursday 11 July 2013

University of Greenwich, Old Royal Naval College, Park Row, London SE10 9LS



[Image of conference session courtesy of Keith Harcourt – The Archives and Artefacts Study Network (A2SN)]

An event organised by the Greenwich Maritime Institute as part of its ESRC-funded research project *Running the River Thames: London, Stakeholders and the environmental Governance of the River Thames 1960-2010*

Project Team: Prof Sarah Palmer and Dr Vanessa Taylor

Website: <http://www2.gre.ac.uk/about/schools/gmi/research/case-studies/running-the-river-thames>

Twitter: @ThamesGov

For more information please contact Vanessa Taylor:

Email: runningtheriverthames@gre.ac.uk

Background to the Conference

This was the final conference for the project 'Running the River Thames: London, Stakeholders and the Environmental Governance of the River Thames 1960-2010'. Research finished at the end of July 2013. Drawing on documentary evidence and discussions with key Thames players and interest groups, the research has focused on changing modes of environmental governance, political legitimacy and public participation since the 1960s.

Among the themes the project explored were the impacts of the shift to river-basin management on the political status of London and on urban governance more generally, and changing frameworks for democratic participation on the river. A central objective was to provide a historically informed assessment of the current emphasis on stakeholder consultation and its implications for environmental citizenship. Archive research across the Thames region centered on issues such as water resources, sewerage and refuse disposal, pollution control and flooding.

The one-day gathering of invited speakers and participants, many of whom had assisted research, brought together those in the developing field of environmental urban history and others working on river governance. It provided an opportunity to highlight under-used historical resources for the study of rivers, to compare the case of the Thames with other major urban rivers, and to assess the legacy of the past for the environmental governance of rivers today.

SESSION SPEAKERS

Chris Bellamy (GMI) ▪ Judith Burnett (University of Greenwich) ▪ Kevin Collins (The Open University) ▪ Hadrian Cook (Kingston University) ▪ Michael Hebbert (Bartlett School of Planning/University College London) ▪ Sue Kidd (University of Liverpool) ▪ Sarah Palmer (GMI) ▪ Christine McCulloch (University College London/University of Oxford) ▪ Liz Rees (Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums) ▪ Liz Sharp (University of Bradford) ▪ Sue Tapsell (Middlesex University) ▪ Vanessa Taylor (GMI) ▪ Alex Werner (Museum of London).

For [speaker biographies](#) please click the link.

SESSION CHAIRS

Richard Dennis (University College London) ▪ Philip Pinch (London South Bank University) ▪ Ben Page (University College London) ▪ Sarah Palmer (GMI) ▪ Vanessa Taylor (GMI).

For [chair biographies](#) please click the link.

CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS

Gary Beckwith (City Cruises PLC) ▪ Dido Berkeley (Thamesbank) ▪ Victoria Carolan (GMI) ▪ Alan Cartwright (Port of London Authority) ▪ Allan Cochrane (The Open University) ▪ Jason Debney (Thames Landscape Strategy) ▪ Roy Edwards (University of Southampton) ▪ Bill Ellson (Creekside Forum) ▪ Michael Everard (Greenwich Forum/GMI Advisory Committee) ▪ Peter Finch (River Thames Society) ▪ Martin Garside (Port of London Authority) ▪ Rob Gray (Friends of the River Crane Environment) ▪ Keith Harcourt (The Archives and Artefacts Study Network/HMRS) ▪ Barrie Hargrove (London Borough of Southwark) ▪ David Hilling (GMI/University of London) ▪ Vicky Holmes (Museum of London Docklands) ▪ Tony Kennerley

(Independent Consultant) ▪ Debbie Lawther (Faversham Creek Trust) ▪ Alison Leighton (GMI) ▪ Kate Lonsdale (The Open University) ▪ Paul Lynch (Thames Landscape Strategy: Kew, Hampton, Weybridge) ▪ Dominic Martyn (Environment Agency) ▪ Gustav Milne (University College London, Thames Discovery Programme) ▪ Colin Morris (Consultant) ▪ Murad Qureshi (London Waterways Commission) ▪ Roger Squires (Inland Waterways Association) ▪ Nick Tennant (Thames Tideway Tunnel) ▪ Jill Thomas (Consumer Council for Water) ▪ Chris Ware (GMI) ▪ Dave Webb (Environment Agency) ▪ Andrew Whetnall (Formerly Consumer Council for Water) ▪ Martin Wilcox (GMI) ▪ Alice Wilson (Environment Agency).

Conference Programme

Professor Judith Burnett, Pro Vice-Chancellor Faculty of Architecture, Computing, Humanities and Professor Chris Bellamy, Director of the Greenwich Maritime Institute, opened the conference by welcoming speakers and participants.

Session One – Setting the Scene

Chair: Professor Richard Dennis, University College London

Professor Michael Hebbert, Bartlett School of Planning/University College London:

Upstream, Downstream: urban environments and their histories 1960-2010

This keynote address set the scene twice over. Academically, it reviewed the panoramas of urban and environmental history, identifying some key landmarks as well as the ebb and flows of ideas. Topographically, it considered the changing panorama of the London Thames across the fifty years since the publication of the Herbert Commission Report and the river's governance. Finally, Michael Hebbert connected the two strands together with some concrete examples of the role of historical interpretation and imagination on the changing Thames.

[Link to Michael Hebbert's presentation slides.](#)

Professor Sarah Palmer and Dr Vanessa Taylor, GMI:

The Running the River Thames Project

This presentation outlined the aims and methodology of the 'Running the River Thames: London, Stakeholders and the Environmental Governance of the River Thames, 1960–2010' research project, funded by a grant from the ESRC. Sarah Palmer explained the reasons for selecting this research topic and described how a case study approach, based on documentary research and discussions with key players, had been used to explore some key themes. Vanessa Taylor reported on the research and on the results of the project, including the forthcoming web-based guide to archival resources for the modern environmental history of the Thames, and discussed some preliminary conclusions.

[Link to Sarah Palmer's and Vanessa Taylor's presentation slides.](#)

Session Two – Resources for the Environmental History of Rivers

Chair: Dr Philip Pinch, London South Bank University

Alex Werner, Museum of London:

The Thames

Museum curator Alex Werner talked about the [Port of London Authority Archive](#), managed by the Museum of London Docklands, as the primary resource for studying the modern environmental history of the river Thames. This contains an unparalleled range of documents, maps, photographs and films covering not just London's enclosed docks but also the conservancy of the Thames. Many different aspects of the river's use and management over the last 250 years can be explored here, including the maintenance of shipping channels, the building of piers and embankments and the location of moorings.

[Link to Alex Werner's presentation slides.](#)

Liz Rees, Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums:

'Here's to coally Tyne': Sources for the Environmental History of the River Tyne

Archivist Liz Rees provided an overview of the history of the River Tyne from pre-industrial times, through its heyday as a great shipbuilding and coal-exporting river port, to its current mixed use as a commercial port and leisure facility. Her paper particularly concentrated on the various reports, plans, photographs and other sources held in the [Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums](#) that give us an insight into the environment of the river and its surroundings.

[Link to Liz Rees' presentation slides.](#)

Session Three – Rivers in Context

Chair: Professor Sarah Palmer, GMI

Dr Kevin Collins, Open University:

River basin managing: connecting to catchment level

Kevin Collins reminded the audience that river basin planning in England & Wales is dominated by the requirements of the [2000 EU Water Framework Directive \(WFD\)](#) to achieve 'good' ecological status. He pointed out that the extent to which this requirement has translated into river basin managing is less clear, not least because the WFD administrative unit of 'river basins' and the first round of river basin planning in 2009 have largely failed to engage and enthuse stakeholders at many levels. In response, the UK government initiated a new emphasis on [catchment-based management](#) for England to help connect stakeholders,

catchments and river basins. A series of catchment pilots had been set up in 2011/2 to explore what a 'catchment approach' might entail, leading to a new catchment policy announced in June 2013 for all catchments in England. The presentation charted some of the recent history of these shifts in managing water resources, river basins and catchments, and explored some implications for future practices and policy.

[Link to Kevin Collins' presentation slides.](#)

Dr Christine McCulloch, College London/University of Oxford:

Downstream demand but upstream resistance. A political ecology of opposition to inter-basin water transfer and large reservoir construction in the Upper Thames region, 1973 to 2010

Christine McCulloch suggested that [integrated river basin management](#) (IRBM), or its close relation [integrated water resources management](#) (IWRM), has all the attractions of the panoptic, modernist view for any authoritarian planner well-served by computer models and systems analysis. The political naivety of IWRM has been denounced by Biswas (2004)* for its perceived discrepancy between the concept of integrated management and actual political institutions and property rights. Oxfordshire was explored here as a case study for discord between idealistic water resource development plans and political realities. Plans to incorporate the Upper Thames into the service of London have, since the 1970s, met with opposition. Struggles against reservoir development have, so far, prevented extensive areas of clay lowlands being drowned under major reservoirs. The first battle against the proposed reservoir at Otmoor has been reconstructed from archival material. The 25-year long, and still ongoing, struggle against the planned Upper Thames reservoir has been investigated by participation in the 2010 [Public Inquiry into the Thames Water Resource Management Plan](#) and interviews with key members of the [Group Against Reservoir Development](#) (GARD).

Christine argued that simple generalisations about participatory environmental democracy do not hold, nor does the stereotype of NIMBYism fit the complexity of motivations engaged in the resistance. She concluded with tentative suggestions for improving the clarity of discussions, with the aim of working towards a co-operative, 'post-hydraulic' society.

* 'Integrated Water Resources Management: A Reassessment', *Water International*, 29:2, (June 2004), 248–256.

[Link to Christine McCulloch's presentation slides.](#)

Dr Hadrian Cook, Kingston University London:

'An unimportant river in the neighbourhood of London': the use and abuse of the river Wandle

Hadrian Cook introduced the River Wandle in South London, a tributary in the larger Thames basin, flowing into the tidal Thames at Wandsworth. Rising as a chalk stream in springs on the lower dip slope of the North Downs between Croydon and Carshalton. Historical interest in this river derives both from the impacts of urbanisation and from its industrial development that pre-dates what is normally understood as the 'Industrial Revolution'.

Hadrian outlined a number of themes typically identified by scholars researching this river. These included: the transition from trout stream to urbanised sewer; an exemplar of industrial pollution from the south of England; an early case study for the development of environmental auditing; a low-discharge river overburdened with problems of sewage; consequent experimentation in sewage treatment; a place of resource pressures affecting surface and groundwater; innovations in 'mill' technology; ground-breaking water resource legislation relating to both surface and groundwater; abuse of the channel morphology through urban and industrial development. He suggested that if London has turned its back on this sad river, then it may yet come back as a pioneer of 'good practice' in urban river restoration and management. The [Wandle Trust](#) would play a leading role in this process.

[Link to Hadrian Cook's presentation slides.](#)

Session Four – Stakeholders as Environmental Citizens

Chair: Dr Ben Page, University College London

Sue Kidd, University of Liverpool: *Stakeholder Involvement in the Mersey Basin Campaign*

Sue Kidd drew upon the experience of the [Mersey Basin Campaign](#) (1985-2010) to explore how imaginative institutional design can encourage public engagement with rivers. Using examples from its 25 year long history, she considered the multifaceted ways in which organisations and individuals have been encouraged to contribute to the transformation of the River Mersey and its catchment.

[Link to Sue Kidd's presentation slides.](#)

Dr Liz Sharp, University of Bradford:

Water company governance and the imagined public

Liz Sharp focused on the shifting relationships between the UK water companies and the public they serve. Cultural theory was used to unpack four different 'ideal type' imagined citizens. Evidence from the regulatory structure and water company processes was used to explore 'the imagined public' at three points in time: 1987, 2000 and 2013. Dr Sharpe considered both public participation and the mobilisation of the public. In other words, it considered their role in determining the priorities and values through which water is managed in their areas, and their part in taking action to address water-related concerns. The presentation concluded with a reflection on the opportunities and limitations of contemporary management trends for the progressive governance of water in the UK.

[Link to Liz Sharp's presentation slides.](#)

Sue Tapsell, Middlesex University:

Involving citizens in flood risk governance: experiences on establishing a Citizens Observatory of Water

Sue Tapsell considered the challenge of effectively managing our local environments and living safely in them. Meeting this challenge is enhanced, she argued, not only by a good appreciation of that environment but also by engagement with and between relevant stakeholders or environmental citizens. Our environment is dynamic and developing, but so are our technical abilities to monitor the environment and communicate about it. She discussed the new [EC WeSenseIt project](#), which aims to develop local 'citizen observatories' to strengthen water governance and increase community resilience to floods. This brings together innovative low-cost sensor systems, social networks via social media and mobile devices, and relevant professional and citizen stakeholders. It will test if such an observatory is viable, if it encourages engagement with the water environment, and if it leads to more informed decision making. Sue's talk focused on the case study of Doncaster, which has a long history of flooding and where [Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council](#) has formed a partnership with the WeSenseIt team.

[Link to Sue Tapsell's presentation slides.](#)

Concluding Comments

Chair: Dr Vanessa Taylor, GMI

Professor Michael Hebbert, Bartlett School of Planning, University College London

Drawing the threads of the day together, Michael Hebbert recalled Prof. Chris Bellamy's metaphor of the river as a highway. The watery street has many of the attributes of its landward counterpart. Streets are - in modern jargon - 'multifunctional spaces' serving many purposes simultaneously: movement, living, working, play, drainage, biodiversity, meeting economic requirements, expressing local identity, providing social space. The best boulevards combine these multiple tasks to perfection. We like to think of the river that way too: the Thames as depicted in the smiling faces of Environment Agency leaflets and newsletters, a multiple resource, a space for all.

Today Old Father Thames appeared in a rather different light - a zone more of contention than coexistence. We heard much about how this activity has got in the way of that - fish weirs versus navigation; groundwater versus mills; sewage disposal versus freshwater extraction; fracking versus drinking; large craft versus small; tourists v. residents; cyclists v. walkers . . . and more besides. Much too about the tangled legal status of Thames users' competing claims, and the complex institutional legacies of conservancies, trusts, navigation boards, water authorities, ports, local government, private water companies, and other stakeholders. The take-home messages were about regulation and collective action: the content and timescale of the Water Framework Directive; the contribution of policies such as the Thames Landscape Strategy; the political leadership factor in London and its absence upstream and downstream; and Dido Berkeley's urgent call for missing statutory protections.

But the larger take-home message of a day studying the river and its governance was about the importance of history. Michael Hebbert ended with Patrick Geddes, the marine biologist turned regional planner, whose analysis of cities always combined the geographical with the historical setting: the flow of water down the drainage basin, the flow of time through a city and its culture. Sue Tapsell's longitudinal approach to analysis of floods and droughts provided a metaphor for the day. The more uncertain our future, the more we should study and understand our past.
