

The Thames Heritage Tapestry



Thematic Brief

What we are setting out to achieve

We would like the Thames Heritage Tapestry to be a very special part of the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad, perhaps even becoming regarded as the centrepiece.

We have already had preview displays at the Waterloo Festival and in Bargehouse on South Bank in Southwark, but our main programme of exhibitions will start in January 2012 with a show in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Then we plan to move downriver to London and the estuary via Windsor Guildhall and the Clore Learning Centre at Hampton Court Palace. We hope to hold exhibitions in venues right along the Thames, so that all the schools taking part in the project will have a chance to send parties to at least one show.

So now we all have to work together to create an artwork that will make a world-class contribution to the Cultural Olympiad and form an enduring legacy for future generations to enjoy.

How the Thames Heritage Tapestry will work

The tapestry will make up a multifaceted portrait of the Thames from its source to the estuary through the eyes of the children who live along its banks.

It will run, three metres high across or around each exhibition space, telling the story of the river in all its aspects through four broad subjects, *River-linked work activities*, *Nature and caring for the environment*, *Sport, recreation and leisure activities* and *Local history, architecture and heritage*. Each school will have one of these subjects as its brief, and will apply it to the stretch of the river they have been allocated.

The River Thames

Throughout the recorded history of Britain the River Thames has held a pivotal position as its most important inland waterway. It has served as a boundary but also a link between different communities. It has divided different regions and even kingdoms but has also helped unite them, and today it is a city on the Thames that is the capital of the entire country. It has, therefore, an incomparably important political heritage. The trades unionist and politician John Elliot Burns called it 'liquid history'.

It is a natural resource whose waters and meadows have provided food. As a navigable waterway from just above Lechlade to the North Sea it has provided the means of transporting this food, as well as minerals, like coal and iron, manufactured goods and even people along its length.

It has attracted the construction of great architecture, large and small, along its banks and spanning its waters: the dreaming spires of Oxford, Windsor Castle, Westminster Abbey, the Houses of Parliament, St Paul's Cathedral, the Tower of London, Tower Bridge, London's regenerated docklands, Greenwich, the Thames Barrier, the Dartford Bridge...the list is endless.

Much of England's culture, high and low, has been developed on its banks, schools and universities, theatres, concert halls, music halls, opera houses, gambling dens, opium dens. The first poem in modern English, *Sumer is icumen in*, was composed in Reading Abbey.

The Thames has attracted people from all over the world who have in turn contributed and enriched its - and our country's - heritage, Huguenot, Jewish, Indian, Pakistani, Chinese, African and Caribbean communities - and many others - have settled on its banks. The Thames at Oxford hosts annual Bangladeshi boat races.

Sport has flourished both on and alongside the Thames, boat racing and fishing, horse racing and dog racing, football and rugby, prizefighting and boxing. Much of the 2012 Olympic Games will be centred on or close by the Thames.

This is an ancient but still living heritage that has depended and will depend on generation handing it on to generation. The Thames Heritage Tapestry will play its part in passing it on from today's schoolchildren to tomorrow's and on into the future.

Looking after this heritage

The Thames is very resilient. But over more than two millennia people have placed great strains on its ability to sustain not just its varied habitats for nature and wildlife but the health and livelihoods of the eleven million people who live along its banks and the millions more who depend on it more indirectly.

There are many large-scale issues that Government and local planning authorities must always deal with, like avoiding new building on flood plains or too close to the riverbank and making sure that factories don't release chemicals into the drains and farmers don't allow fertilizers or weedkillers to seep into watercourses and make their way into the river. We have to remember that the Thames itself is the centre of an enormous system of ditches, streams, canals and drains all of which lead into it. So anything that enters even a ditch or a roadside drain will end up in the Thames.

But there are many things that all of us can do individually that together will make a real difference in helping the Thames flourish. We can make sure we dispose of rubbish in litter bins or take it home with us so it doesn't end up in or near the river. We should only put toilet paper or what has passed through us down the toilet, as anything else can block sewers which can then overflow into drains and so into the

river. We should only use as much water as we need to, get leaking taps fixed and don't leave them running when cleaning your teeth or any other time when you don't need to. This way we'll keep the river level where it should be, which is the level that suits wildlife and ourselves the best.

Finally, there are huge issues which, perhaps surprisingly, are those where we can all make the most difference. We can all try to use less electricity, walk or cycle more or use the bus or train rather than ride in a car. We can make sure we recycle as much as we possibly can and learn all the things that can be recycled rather than just thrown in the rubbish bin. This means we will reduce our 'carbon footprint', that is use up less energy produced by burning up carbon and sending it as carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. For this is what causes the global warming that is changing our climate, causing more floods and droughts and ultimately making the sea level rise. All of which is the worst possible news for the Thames and every other river and indeed everything else in the world.

But don't think everything is bad news. Since the 1960s we've been cleaning up the Thames and now it is the cleaner than it has been for hundreds of years, even though there are many more people living along it. We have 123 different species of fish alone in the tidal river and wildlife reserves all along the river are home to countless birds and animals and plants, and not just in the countryside. The Wetland Centre in Barnes and the Rainham Marshes are just two reserves of massive importance, which those of you living near them or lucky enough to have visited them will know. And most importantly of all, the present generation of schoolchildren is more aware of the importance of caring for the environment and more responsible than any other before. Can we look after the Thames? Can we stave off global warming? Yes we can!

Some useful websites

The Thames Heritage Trust	www.thamesheritage.org.uk
The Thames Explorer Trust	www.thames-explorer.org.uk
The River Thames Alliance	www.visitthames.co.uk
The Wildlife Trusts	www.wildlifetrusts.org
A personal guide to the Thames	thames.me.uk

What we would like you to do

We will be giving you your school's individual subject brief and particular stretch of the river. Please research the Thames, your part of the Thames and your subject on the Internet and in books, and please arrange school visits to your stretch of the river.

Please make sure that your canvas portrays your subject but feel free to include anything else you want that relates to the other subjects too.