

The River Thames and the Popularisation of Camping, 1860–1980

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SUMMARY

Recreational camping is usually thought to have been popularised by organisations such as the Association of Cycle Campers (founded in 1901) and the Boy Scout movement (1907). This article argues that ‘camping out’ was already fashionable on the Thames between Oxford and London by the 1880s, as part of the late Victorian craze for pleasure boating. Greater restrictions imposed on water-based camping by landowners then contributed to its reduced appeal by the end of the century. Records from one of the river’s largest rental companies, Salter Bros of Oxford, are used to show that there was a revival in the activity during the interwar period and spectacular growth during the Second World War (followed by a subsequent decline). This was partly due to the popularity of the tent punt, as well as greater numbers of women boating, although one-way trips and long-distance journeys in manually powered craft slowly fell out of favour. Motorised vessels proliferated on the river after the Second World War and the firm disposed of its ageing camping fleet in the 1970s, at a time when the number of cabin cruisers on the waterway was nearing its peak.

Only a few studies have examined the rise of recreational camping and they tend to focus on the static land-based activity that predominates today and the organisations which helped to encourage it. H.J. Walker’s study of the outdoor movement from 1900 to 1939, for example, traces its roots to the end of the nineteenth century, when it became an ‘integral part’ of the range of activities offered by organised youth groups. The Boys’ Brigade (founded in 1883) was particularly influential, as it ran summer camps (the first in 1886), which were initially in barns and halls, but were soon held under canvas. It was one of these (in 1907) that inspired Robert Baden-Powell to set up the Boy Scout movement along similar lines, which soon outgrew the Brigade. A further development was the creation of the first holiday camp at the end of the nineteenth century. Joseph Cunningham, the superintendent of the Florence Working Lads’ Institute in Toxteth, took groups on excursions in the early 1890s, which led to the rental of a permanent site on the Isle of Man. By the turn of the century there was enough demand for it to be open from May to October, and in 1909 the site boasted 2,000 visitors per year. Cunningham’s enterprise, which was subsequently expanded and diversified by his descendants, was ‘by far the largest single provider of camping holidays’ between 1900 and 1939, and it was also responsible for inspiring other similar ventures. In the 1930s, one notable visitor was Billy Butlin, who was looking for ideas to develop his own business empire.¹

By contrast, Hazel Constance traces the origins of recreational camping to the Association of Cycle Campers (founded in 1901), a group of enthusiasts formed from the earlier Cycle Touring Club (1878). Her account is the most influential, because it has been promoted by the Camping and Caravanning Club (the largest organisation of its kind in the country today), which developed from the Association. The pioneer of the pastime is said to have

¹ H.J. Walker, ‘The Outdoor Movement in England and Wales, 1900–1939’, University of Sussex PhD thesis (1987), p. 265.

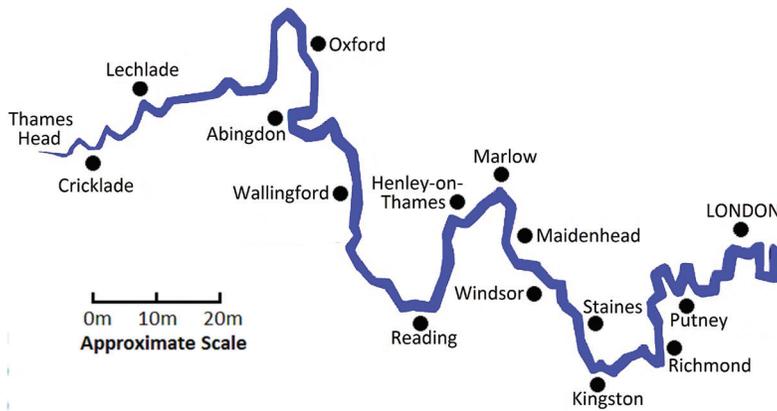


Fig. 1. Map of the river from Thames Head to London. The 'upper Thames' was a term used by Londoners to describe the waterway above the capital, but in this article it is used to mean the section above Staines, which was the jurisdictional boundary of the river authorities.

been Thomas Hiram Holding, who drew his inspiration from a childhood trip across the American prairies in 1853. He was a tailor who developed a number of lightweight fabrics for tents that he used in camping trips around the country (some of which were undertaken by canoe). A holiday to Ireland at the end of the nineteenth century was said to have been crucial in the development of the activity, because he had a lightweight camping kit produced for the trip (weighing approximately 14 lb), which was designed to be carried on a bicycle. In his subsequent book about the trip (1898), he encouraged other enthusiasts to contact him, which led to the Association being established. Although its first official trip only attracted six participants (travelling to an orchard near Wantage), by 1906 the group had several hundred members.² As the modern organisation proudly states on its website, it was from this 'small acorn' that grew 'the mighty oak known as the Camping and Caravanning Club'.³

Little academic attention has been given to water-based camping,⁴ but there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the pastime was already very popular on the upper Thames (see Fig. 1) well before either the Boys' Brigade was holding regular camps under canvas or the Association of Cycle Campers was formed. Indeed, although the term 'camping out' was formerly associated with the army – and it is no coincidence that some of the youth organisations that helped to popularise certain recreational forms of the pursuit in the twentieth century were run along military lines – by the 1870s it was becoming more widely used to describe a pleasurable activity. Furthermore, a number of sources show that there was a close link between the pastime and the waterway. As one early book (1886) on the pursuit noted, the activity '*as usually indulged in*' [emphasis added] meant 'a boating trip on of our beautiful rivers; and by far the greatest favourite is of course the Thames'.⁵ Similarly, another, written four years later, described the river as the preferred destination for those who wanted

² H. Constance, *First in the Field: A Century of the Camping and Caravanning Club* (2001), pp. 13–165.

³ A potted history can still be found on its website: www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk/aboutus/about-the-club/history/ (accessed 22 October 2014).

⁴ It is briefly mentioned in D.G. Wilson, *The Victorian Thames* (1997), pp. xii–xv. The present article is an expanded version of the discussion about water-based camping in S.M. Wenham, 'Oxford, the Thames and Leisure: A History of Salter Bros, 1858–2010', University of Oxford D.Phil. thesis (2013), and S. Wenham, *Pleasure Boating on the Thames: A History of Salter Bros, 1858–Present Day* (2014).

⁵ 'Gyp', *Camping Out: Or, Holidays Under Canvas* (1886).

to partake in the pastime, because it was an ideal waterway for beginners – although it also conceded that there was also a ‘comparatively small number’ who preferred gypsy camping, which required a horse-drawn trap or caravan.⁶

THE RISE OF CAMPING ON THE THAMES

It has been suggested that during the Victorian period a ‘minor revolution’⁷ occurred on the upper Thames that caused it to develop from a ‘great commercial highway’⁸ into a ‘vast pleasure-stream’⁹ with boats stretching in an almost ‘uninterrupted procession’ between Richmond and Oxford.¹⁰ The 1870 *Rowing Almanack* was one of the earliest publications to describe the change, as it included a feature on the journey between Oxford and Putney, which it noted had ‘become exceedingly popular’, despite there being ‘but little knowledge concerning the route and the halting-places on the banks.’¹¹ By 1874, an ‘old canoeist’ from Windsor reported that the journey had become ‘the “Grand Tour” of the fashionable boating world’ and ‘the favourite voyage of the Oxonian rowers in vacation, and of London oarsmen all through the summer season’. He recorded that ‘the gigs, “company boats”, dinghys [sic.], and canoes which have ascended and descended the Thames this season nearly double those of last season, while the same was said last year of the increase over the preceding year.’¹² A number of sources confirm how popular the trip had become. *The Pall Mall Gazette* wrote in 1877 that ‘There are probably very few persons with any love of rowing who have not navigated at some time or other the wooded reaches of the Thames from Oxford to London’,¹³ whilst four years later the owner of the prominent boat company, John Salter, wrote in his guide to the river that ‘The journey from Oxford to London by water has during the last few years been so widely patronised that at first sight any instructions on the subject may seem superfluous.’¹⁴

The statistics from the lock tolls have been analysed in more depth elsewhere,¹⁵ but they confirm that traffic was increasing on the river at this time. They suggest that the greatest rise in pleasure boating occurred between 1879 and 1887, when receipts for such craft more than doubled from £1,647 per annum to £3,805 per annum.¹⁶ This was also the period when they accounted for the majority of toll income, having been roughly on a par with commercial traffic in 1879.¹⁷ Nevertheless, although there was a general rise in pleasure boating on the upper Thames, the majority of people only visited one part of it. As Walter Jerrold explained in 1904: ‘From the Nore to London it is the highway of commerce, from London to Oxford it is the stream of Pleasure, from Oxford to the Cotswolds it is the stream of quiet.’¹⁸ There were many

⁶ A.A. MacDonell, *Camping Out* (1890), pp. 10–11.

⁷ R.R. Bolland, *Victorians on the Thames* (1994), p. 14.

⁸ P. Burstall, *The Golden Age of the Thames* (1981), p. 7.

⁹ *Lock to Lock Times*, 25 August 1888, p. 16, in L. Tickner, ‘Messing about in Boats: E.J. Gregory’s Boulter’s Lock: Sunday Afternoon (R.A. 1897)’, *Oxford Art Journal*, 25 February 2002, p. 21.

¹⁰ *The Century*, 37 (1889), p. 237, in Tickner, ‘Messing About in Boats’, p. 6.

¹¹ W.H. Royston, *The Rowing Almanack and Oarsman’s Companion 1870* (1870), p. 102.

¹² *The Dundee Courier and Argus*, 17 September 1874.

¹³ *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 15 August 1877.

¹⁴ J.H. Salter, *The River Thames: From its Source to Wandsworth* (1881), p. 65.

¹⁵ See R. Stewart-Beardsley, ‘After the Railway: A Study of Socio-Economic Change in Five Rural Parishes in the Thames Valley, 1830–1901’, University of Reading PhD thesis (2009), pp. 112–13, and Wenham, ‘Oxford, the Thames and Leisure’, pp. 119–26.

¹⁶ Bolland, *Victorians on the Thames*, p. 14, D.G. Wilson, *The Thames: Record of a Working Waterway* (1987), p. 93; Henley River and Rowing Museum: Thames Conservancy duplicate minute book 1906, in Stewart-Beardsley, ‘After the Railway’, p. 113. The tolls remained the same during this period, but they were changed from time to time, which makes it difficult to compare figures in the longer-term.

¹⁷ Stewart-Beardsley, ‘After the Railway’, p. 112.

¹⁸ W. Jerrold, *The Silvery Thames* (1906), p. 1.

reasons why the highest part of the Thames was not as popular,¹⁹ including the obstructions caused by antiquated weirs, the comparative distance (and difficulty) of reaching it from London, the absence of major attractions by its banks, and the fact that it was suitable only for smaller craft and was ignored by many of the guidebooks on the waterway.²⁰ Nevertheless, there were quieter reaches even on the section known for leisure, such as around some of the sparsely populated areas between Abingdon and Reading. A number of riverside resorts, like Maidenhead and Hampton Court, became hugely popular in the Victorian period throughout the summer,²¹ whereas some other destinations attracted large numbers of revellers for shorter periods only, such as when regattas were being held.

The increase in pleasure boating and long-distance journeys does not necessarily mean that people were camping – indeed, it is likely that early pleasure boaters stayed in hotels or taverns – but there are a number of sources that record its growing popularity. Whilst there is no mention of the pastime in one of the earliest guidebooks to the river (Mr and Mrs S.C. Hall’s *The Book of the Thames*, published in 1859), two forms of the activity (sleeping by the water or in a boat) are mentioned in Henry Taunt’s *A New Map of the River Thames*, published in 1872. By 1878, *The Saturday Review* was able to report that an idea had ‘lately arisen’ that ‘Thames travelling is spiritless and incomplete unless what is known as “camping out” forms part of the programme.’²² Similarly, three years later, John Salter wrote that despite the recent bad summers, the number of campers had ‘greatly increased’. He added that a return to good weather would no doubt ensure that the activity would become an ‘almost necessary accompaniment to a boating excursion.’²³

Another indication of how popular camping became was the mounting tensions recorded between riparian landowners and those wanting to use their land. In 1876, *The Graphic* complained that the actions of ‘unscrupulous picnickers’ had resulted in some places on the upper Thames becoming closed off to campers, although they had been open to them only ‘a year or two before’. The author claimed that such ‘incursionists’ (as opposed to excursionists) were responsible for crimes such as boiling their kettles with fire made from a landowner’s cherished peasticks, injuring horses with broken glass from champagne bottles, and littering with newspapers.²⁴ Similarly, four years later another writer described the constant ‘ill return’ that had forced one owner of a well-known camping-ground to close, which included ‘cutting down valuable ornamental shrubs, climbing garden walls, stealing fruit and eggs, and surreptitiously milking cows at unholy hours.’²⁵ Campers inevitably congregated in certain areas (where the land was most suitable), and, as one might expect, the problems appear to have worsened as the number of pleasure boats increased. In 1880 *Young England* reminded its readership that ‘up-river excursion parties are held in abhorrence’ by many landowners, because of the damage they caused,²⁶ whilst the following year, John Salter claimed that tents were banned from many locations for the same reason, which meant that finding an appropriate place to stop had become ‘the great difficulty’ of camping.²⁷ As this suggests, the large number of visitors (including non-campers) harmed the very landscape they

¹⁹ See Wenham, ‘Oxford, the Thames and Leisure’, pp. 148–50.

²⁰ Examples include H. Taunt, *A New Map of the River Thames from Oxford to London* (1872), C. Dickens, *Dickens’ Dictionary of the Thames: From Oxford to the Nore* (1880) and W. Senior, *The Thames: From Oxford to the Tower* (1891).

²¹ BRO, D/EX 1457/1/43 (Thames Navigation, bills paid 1838–85 and tolls received 1858–62).

²² *The Saturday Review*, 14 September 1878, pp. 339–40.

²³ Salter, *The River Thames*, p. 68.

²⁴ *The Graphic*, 15 July 1876.

²⁵ Dickens, *Dictionary of the Thames*, p. 32.

²⁶ *Young England: Kind Words for Boys and Girls*, 10 April 1880.

²⁷ Salter, *The River Thames*, p. 72.

Table 1. Official campsites on the upper Thames (1888)²⁸

Sandford Lock island	Sutton Courtenay
Cleeve	Goring (by permission from the Swan Hotel)
Hart's wood	Mapledurham
Norcot Scours (by permit from Keel, the fisherman)	Caversham island
Sonning Lock island	Shiplake Lock island
Marsh Lock	Henley (on the aits)
Medmenham (at the Ferry Hotel)	Cookham Lock island
Walton Bridge	Sunbury Lock island

came to see, as was often the case at popular resorts.²⁹ By 1884 the situation was so bad that a House of Commons Select Committee was formed in order to address the preservation of the river. Edward Neale, owner of Bisham Abbey, claimed that the problem had grown to such an extent that some tenants were even demanding lower rents because they lived by the water:

About 20 years ago boats had much increased, but it was only for ten years he had personally any cause of complaint. Latterly they had become very aggressive and inclined to do damage. They landed in his woods and did damage. There was a great deal of camping done there, and they burned his wood to make their fires. A great many of the visitors came from London and the lower parts of the river in boats and camped in different places. People in steam launches were of a better class, who landed to picnic, and litter, but did not do so much damage... There were some eyots below Marlow belonging to Mr Ellam, which were so infested by landing parties that the tenants said they must have their rents reduced.³⁰

All kinds of groups were subsequently formed to try to protect their own interests, including, for example, the Thames Anglers' Defence Association. After much debate, the Thames Preservation Act of 1885 was passed. This sought to preserve the waterway by imposing certain requirements and restrictions on pleasure boaters, as well as defining more clearly the rights of both river users and landowners.³¹ It also gave the Thames Conservancy greater powers to enforce the law, in order to protect, as one author later put it, 'the orderly majority from the disorderly minority'.³²

A list of designated camping grounds was subsequently reproduced in a number of publications (Table 1) and it is perhaps unsurprising that, over the course of the next century, the activity became increasingly associated with permanent sites on the waterway (eventually including those with holiday homes and caravans). Although the 1888 list only mentioned a few locations, one couple claimed that suitable places were still 'easily found' by asking the lockkeepers.³³ Nevertheless, even though 'the old days of camping at one's own sweet will on any private lawn' had passed,³⁴ the river was still so busy that some people recommended avoiding it altogether. This sentiment was summed up perfectly by *The Pall Mall Gazette* in 1886:

²⁸ *Young Folks' Paper: Literary Olympic and Tournament*, 28 July 1888. Shiplake Lock island is one of the oldest remaining campsites on the river: www.wargravehistory.org.uk/oct08.html (accessed 11 March 2015).

²⁹ See R.W. Butler, 'The Concept of a Tourist Area Cycle of Evolution: Implications for Management of Resources', *Canadian Geographer*, 24:1 (1982), pp. 5–12.

³⁰ *The Standard*, 10 June 1884, p. 5.

³¹ Steamboat regulations were introduced in 1883, but the 1885 Act had a wider remit, which included legislating for other types of pleasure boat.

³² *Leeds Mercury*, 7 July 1900, p. 7. This was a quote from the well-known oarsman W.B. Woodgate.

³³ J. and E.R. Pennell, *The Stream of Pleasure: A Month on the Thames* (1891), p. 145.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

For the last few years it has been gradually dawning upon us, however sad and unwilling we might be to believe it, that the Thames was not the place for a holiday. 'Arry camping in rows of tents on the lock islands, house-boats anchored against every available bank, launches destructive of peace and property rushing up and down – all these were bad enough; but the bitterest part of all was perhaps the knowledge that every respectable person on the banks of the river who did not want to make money out of you regarded you as a pest and a nuisance.³⁵

Indeed, it is perhaps unsurprising that camping on the river (as well as pleasure boating in general) went into a period of stagnation and then decline. By the turn of the century, one author lamented that the activity was 'no longer the easy matter it used to be', as 'barbed wire and notices against trespassers shut off many a meadow which of old would have taken in any orderly camping party without remonstrance.'³⁶

THE APPEAL OF CAMPING

One cannot explain the popularity of waterside camping without linking it to the general rise of pleasure boating on the upper Thames. The reasons for the river becoming a favoured destination have been covered in more detail elsewhere, but they included the rapid growth of London outwards in the late nineteenth century, a romanticism surrounding the natural charm of the Thames valley, a burgeoning appreciation for 'manly' exercise, the appeal and development of waterside resorts, the facilities provided by rental operators, changing social attitudes to boating, the expansion of the railway westwards, the ease of navigating the waterway, and a reduction in the cost of travelling through locks in 1870.³⁷ Furthermore, these changes, and the attention given to the river by writers and painters, ensured that the upper Thames became a fashionable place to visit, which, in turn, drew more people to it. As one author put it in 1889, 'it is the boating throng which has made the Thames the rival of any water-way in the world and given it a character all of its own.'³⁸

Yet there were also specific reasons why camping proliferated in this particular water-based form. The most obvious one was that the equipment that was required for an outing was very heavy in the days before artificial fibres and modern plastics, which made it ideal for transporting by boat. A canvas tent (with guy ropes and wooden pegs) would have been cumbersome on its own – especially when wet – but the overall weight of all of the items needed would have been considerable. Although written facetiously, there is probably some truth in the description of the equipment taken by the 'three men in a boat' – and they tried to travel without any unnecessary 'lumber': a rug for each of them to lie on, a lamp, a basin, three big towels for bathing, clothing (such as two suits of flannel each, two pairs of shoes each, overcoats and other items), a frying pan, a tea-pot, a kettle, a methylated spirit stove, tobacco, umbrellas and all of their food, drink and utensils. This required the use of a large Gladstone bag, two sizeable hampers and a small handbag – and even then there were a number of large loose items.³⁹ In 1878 *The Saturday Review* reported that those camping out on the river tended to require equipment 'on a scale sufficiently elaborate for a protracted exploration of the Red River to the Congo'.⁴⁰ Indeed, the kit itself was also part of the appeal of the trip for some people, and, as the activity grew in popularity, there was a growing range of items that could be utilised on a trip.

³⁵ *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 1 October 1886. An 'Arry (and his female counterpart 'Arriet) was a name usually used to describe a working-class Londoner/cockney.

³⁶ *Leeds Mercury*, 7 July 1900, p. 7.

³⁷ Wenham, 'Oxford, the Thames and Leisure', pp. 124–34.

³⁸ E.R. Pennell, 'The Stream of Pleasure', in *The Century Magazine*, 38:4 (August 1889), p. 483.

³⁹ J.K. Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat* (1889), pp. 37–71.

⁴⁰ *The Saturday Review*, 14 September 1878, pp. 339–40.

There were a number of innovations during the Victorian period (and afterwards) that helped to make the equipment both easier to carry and to assemble, as can be seen by the recommendations of different camping enthusiasts. When Henry Taunt wrote his *A New Map of the River Thames* (1872), for example, he suggested using the 'Rovers' tent produced by Paget and Sons of London, which supposedly had a 'simplicity and lightness' that was 'difficult to be surpassed'. Although at 'under 28 lbs' (presumably just under), its weight was not inconsequential, it had the advantage of only needing to be fixed down by two pegs and it could supposedly be erected in under three minutes, providing a sleeping area of 10 ft by 9 ft, with headroom of 6 ft. This particular product may not have been that widely used on the Thames, however, as a decade later, John Salter, whose Oxford-based business was one of the largest boat-letting firms on the river, wrote that the norm was to use patrol, gypsy or bell tents for such trips. There was no suggestion that any of them were particularly light, and the latter, which resembled a circus marquee and was recommended for larger parties, certainly would not have been. Nor were they especially straightforward to erect. The picture in the guidebook suggests that it had around sixteen guy-ropes, as did even the small patrol tent (starting at 7 ft by 4 ft in size). Nevertheless, he did mention a small boating tent that had recently been introduced (starting at 10 ft by 7 ft in size). Although its weight was not given, it had the advantage of its sides pegging directly into the ground, meaning that it only needed two guy-ropes.⁴¹ We also know that there were other very light tents in existence by the beginning of the following decade. A.A. MacDonell mentioned in his guide a tent that was designed for transportation by a canoe, which provided a sleeping space of 7 ft by 5 ft and yet weighed only 5 lb.⁴² As this suggests, there were lightweight options well before Holding designed the cycle camping kit that is said to have been a key innovation for popularising the activity. The reduction in the weight of tents and other equipment must have helped facilitate the development of land-camping; and of course the spread of the motorcar from the interwar period encouraged it too, as it not only aided the transportation of the kit, but it also opened up the countryside to more visitors.⁴³

Another key reason why camping proliferated on the river was that a number of boat-letters produced craft that could be converted into floating tents. As pleasure boating grew in popularity on the river, the designs of a number of types of boat, many of which had previously been built with other commercial uses in mind, were slowly refined in order to make them more suitable for leisure.⁴⁴ This process can be seen in the evolution of camping craft. Writing in the 1870s, Henry Taunt said that what Oxonians called 'Company boats' tended to be used for such trips. These were a type of broad gig (typically 22 ft by 3 ft 9 in) that had an awning that could be raised and a waterproof covering (attached by rings) that could be run along a line between the two masts (see Fig. 2).⁴⁵ By the following decade, the shorter, but wider (18 ft by 4 ft 6 in) paired-oared pleasure skiff had become the craft of choice.⁴⁶ These had a ridge pole instead of a line between the masts and they provided a sleeping area of approximately 8 ft 6 in by 3 ft.⁴⁷ A further innovation had been introduced by the end of the decade, which was the replacement of the masts with three hoops, over which a green waterproof canvas could be stretched using 'a complicated arrangement of strings' (see Fig. 3). This enabled the craft to be 'an umbrella by day, [and] a whole hotel by night'.⁴⁸ *The Windsor*

⁴¹ J. Salter, *A Guide to the River Thames*, 1st edn (1881), pp. 70–2.

⁴² MacDonell, *Camping Out*, pp. 49–57.

⁴³ See S. O'Connell, *The Car in British Society: Class, Gender and Motoring, 1899–1939* (1998), p. 179.

⁴⁴ Wenham, 'Oxford, the Thames and Leisure', pp. 108–9, 165–73.

⁴⁵ Taunt, *A New Map of the River Thames*, pp. 22–3.

⁴⁶ The principal difference between a gig and a skiff was that the former had straight gunwales, whilst the latter had tapered gunwales (making it lighter).

⁴⁷ Salter, *The River Thames*, pp. 68–9. A 25 ft randan skiff, which provided two sleeping areas, was used for larger groups.

⁴⁸ Pennell, *Stream of Pleasure*, p. 6.



Fig. 2. An early camping craft (1875) with a cover hung over a line running between two masts: *The Graphic*, 2 October 1875.

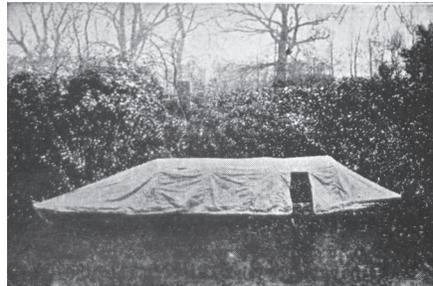


Fig. 3. A pair-oared pleasure skiff and its specially designed cover held up by three hoops (1911): J.H. and J.A. Salter, *Salter's Guide to the Thames*, 14th edn (1911), p. 145.

Magazine described such a boat as being 'fitted à la Salter', after the Oxford boat firm that played a crucial role in popularising the long-distance journey on the river (see below).⁴⁹ Joseph and Elizabeth Robins Pennell, who made a trip on one such craft in the late 1880s, described the equipment that was provided, which appears to have added to the overall appeal and sense of novelty of the trip:

Salter's men at once began to load her with kitchen and bedroom furniture. They provided us with an ingenious stove with kettles and frying pans fitting into each other like the pieces of a Chinese puzzle, a lantern, cups and saucers and plates, knives and forks and spoons, a can of alcohol, and, for crowning comfort, a mattress large enough for a double bedstead.⁵⁰

Sleeping on board, the arrangement favoured by Taunt, had a number of advantages. Putting a cover over the craft was more straightforward than erecting a tent (see below) and suitable land did not have to be found, which was 'decidedly preferable in a wet season'.⁵¹ As Jerome K. Jerome pointed out, it was 'difficult enough to fix a tent in dry weather', but in the wet, a soaked and heavy tent rendered the task 'Herculean'.⁵² Camping on the boat also reduced any chances of a confrontation (or charge) from landowners, which may well have been one of the reasons such craft became popular, given the rising tensions on the river in the mid Victorian period. Furthermore, boats with the hoop arrangement could be set up to provide passengers with cover whilst they were going along, which was very useful during the unpredictable British summers. There were some disadvantages though. MacDonell was strongly in favour of camping *on* the riverside, as he noted that 'most of those who have once tried the boat-tent will probably never use it again'. This was because the unscrewing of the thwarts to make the sleeping area was troublesome, it did not provide much room and the enclosed space resulted in 'a great stuffiness'.⁵³ Another author agreed, complaining that not only did you have to sleep with your head and body under seats, but you soon developed an 'affectionate regard for the numerous insects who come to visit you with a most praiseworthy desire to be friendly'.⁵⁴ John Salter suggested that the 'principal disadvantage' of the arrangement was that one had to rent out a larger boat than might otherwise be required (which inevitably made it more cumbersome to manoeuvre), and even then the room was 'very limited'.⁵⁵ There was not much

⁴⁹ *The Windsor Magazine*, January 1895, p. 462.

⁵⁰ Pennell, *Stream of Pleasure*, p. 9.

⁵¹ Salter, *The River Thames*, p. 68.

⁵² Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 23.

⁵³ MacDonell, *Camping Out*, p. 47.

⁵⁴ *Glasgow Herald*, 15 August 1892, p. 8.

⁵⁵ Salter, *The River Thames*, p. 68.

difference in the cost of the two arrangements though. In 1881, hiring a tent (5s. a day) and a rowing boat for a week-long trip was more expensive than renting a camping craft (15s. more than the equivalent open vessel).⁵⁶ Yet by 1884 the prices were very similar, as hiring a small gypsy tent (12s. 6d. for the week) worked out slightly cheaper than the additional cost of upgrading from an open boat to a camping vessel (15s.), although there was no difference at all, if you opted for a larger bell tent (15s.).⁵⁷

Crucially, both of these arrangements provided customers with a significant saving, when compared to alternative forms of accommodation. Indeed, an important appeal of camping was that it was, as Henry Taunt stressed, ‘cheap!’ [emphasis his].⁵⁸ George Wingrave, one of the ‘three men in a boat’, later recalled that they had opted for camping, because ‘it was a case of doing that or having no holiday. The important thing was that it cost practically nothing.’⁵⁹ The pastime was further encouraged by the reputation of riverside hotels for being ‘extortionate and crowded’ by the end of the nineteenth century.⁶⁰ This can be illustrated by the twelve-day trip that Amy Gouldsmith and her brother made in 1874, which ended up costing them nearly ten times as much (around £22) as they had paid for the boat hire (£2 18s.), largely because of their board and lodging (although they only found certain locations to be busy).⁶¹ Moreover, it is also likely that competitive aquatic events may have helped to encourage the pastime, because many drew crowds that could not all be accommodated in hotels. At the Walton-on-Thames regatta of 1872, for example, it was reported that on the Middlesex side of the river there was ‘...a strong *al fresco* contingent, who “roughed” it admirably well to the accompaniment of iced cup, *pâté de foie gras*, lobster salad, and other inseparable sundries of amateur camping out.’⁶²

As the use of irony suggests, although the activity could be relatively cheap to take part in, many of those going camping had the money (and spare time) to do it in style. Indeed, in 1878 *The Saturday Review* noted that the large amount of equipment used for such trips showed that the ‘psychological curiosities’ who went camping were not motivated by economy, but were instead driven by the desire for independence and adventure, which meant that they could be considered the true descendants of Drake and Frobisher.⁶³ After all, a trip on the river provided the opportunity of exploring the interior of the country, thereby discovering the very heart of England.⁶⁴ Camping also increased the sense of adventure, as it gave travellers a much greater flexibility in their journey. They did not have to get to a certain place by a particular time, as would have been the case if they wanted to stay in a hotel or tavern. In 1875 *The Graphic* suggested that there was nothing ‘handier’ than the camping boat, as it was ‘an existence even more independent than that of a gipsy, for if you are displeased with your night’s resting place, you can haul up your anchors, and glide away to a more attractive spot.’⁶⁵ Furthermore, if a camping party wanted to spend longer in a location, either by preference or as a result of bad weather, they were at liberty to do so. This was also helpful because planning travel times on the river was not straightforward, as it was a slow form of transportation and there were not always obvious landmarks from which to gauge distances. There could also be considerable delays when passing through locks, especially at peak times and in places where the river was particularly busy.

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 65.

⁵⁷ Salter, *A Guide to the River Thames*, 2nd edn (1884), p. 69.

⁵⁸ Taunt, *A New Map of the River Thames*, p. 30.

⁵⁹ *Oxford Mail*, 25 April 1933, p. 4.

⁶⁰ Pennell, *Stream of Pleasure*, p. 6.

⁶¹ Diary of Amy Gouldsmith, 9–20 August 1875 (unpublished, sent to author by Susan Pike, Amy Gouldsmith’s great-granddaughter).

⁶² *Bell’s Life*, 13 July 1872.

⁶³ *The Saturday Review*, 14 September 1878, pp. 339–40.

⁶⁴ A. Byerly, *Are We There Yet? Virtual Travel and Victorian Realism* (2013), pp. 83–141.

⁶⁵ *The Graphic*, 2 October 1875, p. 12.

Another reason why water-based camping became popular – which would also have appealed to those wanting a greater sense of adventure – was a delivery or retrieval service that Salter of Oxford (Salter's for short) offered free of charge to its customers. This enabled parties to go on longer one-way trips without having to worry about getting the boat back to Oxford, which made travelling a much easier proposition. The service was so successful that *Lock to Lock Times* claimed that it had 'the greater influence than *anything else* in popularising the Thames', as it helped to 'revolutionise the art of tripping' and bring 'the beauties of the within the ken of a large section of the public'.⁶⁶ Indeed, the firm's landing stage at Folly Bridge became a landmark in its own right, as it was one of the busiest on the waterway in the late Victorian period.⁶⁷ By the late 1880s, Salter's had an incredible 900 boats in its fleet (of which over 400 were pleasure boats), and, by the early 1890s, 800–900 parties were heading to London every year (although not all of these would have camped).⁶⁸ There would have been a constant stream of small craft heading towards London with a number of new parties presumably starting the trip on most days during the summer. Indeed, this was the experience of Joseph and Elizabeth Pennell in the late 1880s. As it was pouring with rain they chose to delay their departure from Folly Bridge, but were amazed to see that although the outlook 'looked hopeless', two or three other pleasure parties started out on their trips down river regardless.⁶⁹ Furthermore, they also subsequently discovered that the storage fee of 2s. 6d. (paid by the boat hirer to whoever looked after the boat until it was collected by Salter's) caused considerable competition between the respective yards downstream: 'From every landing-place men cried out 'Keep your boat, sir?' – for Salter has agents on the river whose business it is to take care of boats left by river travellers until his van calls to carry them back to Oxford.'⁷⁰ Although the majority of customers stayed on the Thames (usually travelling downstream), the delivery and/or retrieval service was extended to other rivers in the country by the mid 1880s (albeit with a charge),⁷¹ and then, incredibly, to any in Europe by the end of the decade.⁷² Writing in 1906, Henry Wack explained how the system worked:

A voyager of the Thames orders his canoe at Folly Bridge, Oxford, of Messrs Salter Brothers, and arranges for it to meet him wherever he intends embarking. Vans haul craft anywhere along the stream, and call for those which are left by persons who have completed their cruise. In summer considerable traffic is carried on in this manner. People go to Oxford, or some other town up the river, row or paddle down twenty miles a day, leave their boat with the nearest waterman, notify Messrs. Salter by postal card and have no further responsibility in the matter.⁷³

A further appeal of camping – at least for some – was that it provided the opportunity to enjoy a simpler bucolic existence that was in stark contrast to that of the rapidly growing industrial cities. H.J. Walker suggests that authors like William Morris (*News from Nowhere*) and Robert Blatchford (*Merrie England*) helped to propagate an 'anti-urbanism', which was accompanied by a nostalgic yearning for a 'return' to an earlier rural idyll.⁷⁴ The search for quieter climes

⁶⁶ *Lock to Lock Times*, 25 January 1890, p. 50 (my emphasis).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 27 October 1888, p. 5.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 5 August 1893, p. 2. Most of the other craft were racing boats, the majority of which were hired to the boat crews of the Oxford colleges.

⁶⁹ Pennell, *Stream of Pleasure*, p. 5.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p. 136.

⁷¹ Salter, *Guide to the River Thames*, advertisement.

⁷² Salter's archive (Oxford), advertisement, 1888.

⁷³ H.W. Wack, *In Thamesland: Being the Gossiping Record of Rambles from the Source of the Thames to the Sea* (1906), p. 11.

⁷⁴ Walker, 'The Outdoor Movement', pp. 8–14. William Morris's *News From Nowhere* (1890) was inspired by a trip he took on houseboat from Salter's a decade earlier from Kelmscott House in Hammersmith to Kelmscott Manor in Lechlade: J.M. Baissus, 'The Expedition of the Ark', BL, Add MS 25.207 – Vol. XVII 605 h. 6. (A), www.morrisociety.org/publications/JWMS/SP77.3.3.Baissus.pdf (accessed 13 March 2015).

was certainly influential in motivating some people to take to the river. In 1891, F. Campbell Moller wrote that:

‘Up the river’ is a phrase most felicitously significant to the Londoner conversant with the charm and romance of boating life on the summer Thames. It means an almost idyllic phase of outdoor existence which, in manifold fascinations and picturesque surroundings, is indigenous to England and peculiar to this river. What fox hunting is to Britain boating is in its season to the Londoners – a pastime for the people of the metropolis.⁷⁵

Lisa Tickner argues that the developing literature advocating outdoor pursuits from the 1870s was partly in response to ‘the debilitating effects of “civilised” life on urban masculinity.’⁷⁶ The Oxford photographer Henry Taunt, for example, recommended boating and camping as the perfect antidote to a ‘fast and energetic’ age.⁷⁷ Although some questioned the wisdom of being exposed to the plentiful night-time mists and fogs by the river,⁷⁸ many believed in the constitutional benefits of such a trip. Indeed, concerns about health were at the forefront of Jerome K. Jerome’s famous journey, and he extolled, amongst other things, the virtues of ‘fresh air, exercise, and quiet.’⁷⁹ There was also a growing appreciation for ‘manly’ exercise and a camping trip on the Thames had the dual appeal of hard work and enjoyment.⁸⁰ Jerome described camping out as offering an existence that was ‘so wild and free, so patriarchal like.’⁸¹ Another writer suggested that it gratified ‘man’s inherent fondness for primitive life and “roughing it”.’⁸² One author even went so far as to suggest that the craze of becoming an ‘aquatic Bedouin’, which he claimed originated in America, was some kind of Darwinian reversion to primeval type, with those partaking in the activity wanting to return to the wild.⁸³ As this suggests, camping by the river was generally for those fit enough to undertake such a trip, although there were some options available for those wanting less exertion, such as using a sail (on the earlier boats that had masts), hiring a waterman to propel the boat, or being towed.⁸⁴ Lastly, another appeal of the activity was that it facilitated other types of leisure activity. ‘R.W.S.’ argued that a key attraction of pleasure boating and camping was ‘The picturesque and varying scenery about the river, combined with excellent sport both with gun and rod.’⁸⁵

Given the variety of reasons why camping became popular, one can see why increased levels of traffic on the river may have damaged the overall appeal of the pastime for some, especially those in search of a peaceful rural idyll. Nor was there as much scope for exploring ‘wild’ terrain – especially on the busier sections of the upper Thames – as by the end of the nineteenth century the restrictions placed on campers had, as one commentator put it (in rather exaggerated terms), reduced ‘miles of vacant margin’ to ‘barely yards’ of usable land.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, the activity still retained some of its appeal, and it is perhaps unsurprising that once the river quietened down in the subsequent decades, there would be a resurgence of camping again, albeit in a slightly different form.

⁷⁵ F. Campbell Moller, ‘Boating Life on the Upper Thames’, *Outing*, 18:4 (1891), p. 279.

⁷⁶ Tickner, ‘Messing About in Boats’, p. 7.

⁷⁷ H. Taunt, *Taunt’s Map of the River Thames from Oxford to London, Pocket Edition* (1877), pp. 55–7, in Tickner, ‘Messing About in Boats’, p. 7.

⁷⁸ Dickens, *Dictionary of the Thames*, p. 32.

⁷⁹ Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 16.

⁸⁰ *The Standard*, 18 June 1885.

⁸¹ Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*, p. 19.

⁸² *The Dundee Courier and Argus*, 17 September 1874. The article was written by ‘An Old Canoeist’ in Windsor.

⁸³ *All The Year Round*, 15 September 1877, pp. 131–3.

⁸⁴ Wenham, ‘Oxford, The Thames and Leisure’, p. 144.

⁸⁵ Taunt, *New Map of the Thames*, p. 22.

⁸⁶ *Leeds Mercury*, 7 July 1900, p. 7. There would have been fewer restrictions on campers on some of the quieter rural parts of the river above Oxford.

CAMPING TRIPS FROM OXFORD, 1911–1980

One of the best indications of the subsequent revival of water-based camping is provided by the records of Salter Bros of Oxford.⁸⁷ Although this only provides a perspective from one city, the firm was one of the largest boat-letters on the river in the first half of the twentieth century and it was a major provider of craft for such outings. The archive contains two ‘master lists’ of the advanced bookings made for manually powered craft between 1911 and 1953. Although the annotation in the documents is not always consistent, meaning that precise figures cannot be relied upon, they provide a wealth of information about how camping trips on the river developed. Moreover, they give a very different picture from the overall pleasure boating statistics for the upper Thames during the interwar period, which show that both the amount of money collected in tolls for pleasure boats and the number of boats on the waterway was declining (from the early 1920s and the mid 1920s respectively).⁸⁸ Indeed, the overall size of the firm’s rental fleet also steadily fell throughout the first half of the twentieth century.⁸⁹

Firstly, the documents show how many people were renting out camping boats in this period. This only provides a conservative figure for the number of people that were camping, as it excludes any of those who may have hired an open boat, but then camped on the bank of the river. The statistics show that the activity started to become more popular again during the First World War and the overall trend was one of further growth throughout the interwar period (see Fig. 4). The most notable rise occurred in the Second World War, when bookings reached their highest for this timeframe, after which the numbers declined – although they were still higher than pre-war levels by 1953. The peak of 385 and 386 bookings in 1944 and 1945 respectively is still well below the 800-900 mark recorded for one-way parties in the early 1890s, but it is not comparing like-for-like. We do not know how many of the earlier figure would have been booked in advance, nor what proportion of them were camping parties (as opposed to those staying in hotels).⁹⁰ The reasons for the Thames becoming popular during the Second World War have been covered elsewhere,⁹¹ but they included the effective closing of the southern and eastern seaside resorts from 1940 onwards, the rationing of petrol from 1942 (rendering cars immobile),⁹² the strain on the railway network (and the public being discouraged from using it for non-essential travel), the promotion of the Thames as a destination by agencies like Pathé News, and the ‘Holidays at Home’ movement, which gained momentum in Oxford in 1942. Salter’s which had around fifty camping craft at the time, was even used by a local newspaper as a ‘barometer’ for levels of tourism during the conflict. In 1942, a company spokesman reported that requests for camping craft were well above the normal level, and that many families were having their first experience of the activity on the river, although they were tending to travel upstream to places like Bablock Hythe or Northmoor, which was the opposite direction to the normal one, presumably to avoid approaching the capital at a time of intense bombing raids.⁹³

⁸⁷ The family began operating on the Thames in Wandsworth in 1836 and the Oxford business was founded by the brothers John and Stephen Salter in 1858. The latter was renamed ‘Salter Bros’ around 1890, when three of John’s sons (John, James and George) inherited the firm. For more information about the business, see Wenham, *Pleasure Boating on the Thames*.

⁸⁸ Henley River and Rowing Museum: Thames Conservancy annual reports 1887–1939; Thames Conservancy, *The Thames Conservancy 1857–1957* (1957), pp. 77–8.

⁸⁹ Data from *Rowing Almanacks* and the firm’s inventory books.

⁹⁰ Salter’s archive: hire fleet bookings 1911–36 and 1937–53.

⁹¹ Wenham, ‘Oxford, the Thames and Leisure’, pp. 154–6.

⁹² There were around two million cars (or one for every five families) in the country on the eve of the Second World War: O’Connell, *The Car in British Society*, pp. 86–8.

⁹³ *Oxford Mail*, 3 August 1942, p. 1.

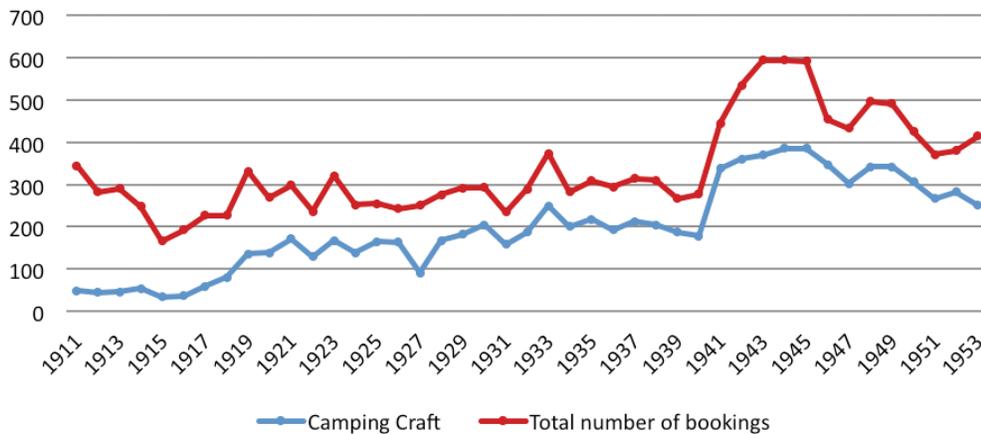


Fig. 4. Advanced bookings for small craft.

Some of the yearly fluctuations in the number of bookings can partly be explained by the changing weather conditions,⁹⁴ but one has to look at the statistics more closely to understand what was happening in the longer term. A breakdown of the different types of vessel hired provides a better insight into why there was growing demand for such craft in the interwar period. Before the First World War camping skiffs were used by slightly more parties than camping punts, but neither accounted for many bookings (typically around fifty in total between them), which suggests that the activity was not very popular (see Fig. 5). During the subsequent conflict the number of bookings for both grew, but whilst those for rowing craft remained relatively static thereafter, the demand for punts continued to increase until they were twice as popular as the former by the late 1920s. By 1931 over half of all advanced bookings (50.2 per cent) for any type of manually powered boat (including day boats) were for camping punts. By contrast, there was relatively little demand for camping canoes (typically fewer than 10 parties per year) until the 1940s, and even then the peak was only 25 in 1949, which was just over 5 percent of the total number of bookings.⁹⁵ It is difficult to explain why certain craft became popular at particular times, but pleasure boating trends were inevitably influenced by a whole range of factors including the type of waterway at a particular location, services provided by rental operators, design innovations, personal preferences of boat-builders and customers, the impact of enthusiasts (and clubs), lock toll charges, changing leisure fashions, and the costs of building, maintaining and/or renting out different types of craft. In Oxford the punt emerged as the quintessential boat associated with the city, one of a number of ‘invented traditions’ closely associated with the university.⁹⁶ It is believed that the introduction of a ‘saloon’ in the centre of the craft (enabling passengers to sit facing one

⁹⁴ The Met Office’s website (www.metoffice.gov.uk) provides historical data for the monthly weather conditions, which can be used to provide an overview – albeit it a simplified one – of which summers (May to September) were hotter and drier than usual (or the opposite). We know that 1920, 1922, 1924, 1927 and 1931 were all bad summers, for example, which is when there was a corresponding drop in bookings. Nevertheless, this is obviously only one variable, as very occasionally the number of bookings fell during a warm, dry summer, such as in 1934 (although this was the second such summer in a row).

⁹⁵ Salter’s archive, hire fleet bookings 1911–36 and 1937–53.

⁹⁶ R. Deslandes, *Oxbridge Men: British Masculinity and the Undergraduate Experiences, 1850–1920* (2005), p. 7; E. Hobsbawn and T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), p. 4; Wenham, ‘Oxford, the Thames and Leisure’, p. 169.

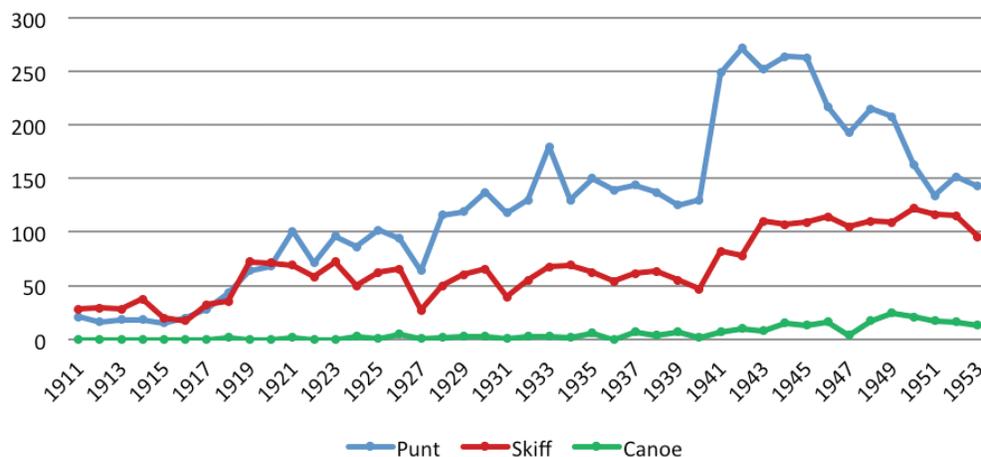


Fig. 5. Camping boats booked in advance.

another) and the narrowing of the vessel's beam (which made it more manoeuvrable) in the late Victorian period led to the boat becoming more popular.⁹⁷ Punts were more closely associated with the city's smaller Cherwell river (for which shallow craft were well suited), but the statistics from Salter's show that they also became popular on the Thames.

Another reason for the rising number of bookings during the interwar period was the growing number of women taking part in pleasure boating. The records provide only a partial picture of this, however, as only some of the customers listed had 'Miss' or 'Mrs' by their names (as opposed to just the initials being given for the majority of others), and the hirer's gender may not have been the same as everyone else's in the party. Furthermore, although you would have expected the person renting the boat to have been on board, that was not necessarily always the case. Despite the participation of women (including a proportion who were camping enthusiasts) being a notable feature of Victorian pleasure boating,⁹⁸ the statistics from Salter's show that they were still massively outnumbered by men in the early twentieth century (see Fig. 6). From 1911 to 1924 they typically only accounted for between 3 per cent and 8 per cent of the overall bookings (with the two exceptions being during the First World War, when the figure narrowly exceeded 10 per cent in both 1916 and 1917). Yet the numbers continued to increase and from 1925 to 1939 they contributed to between 8 per cent and 16 per cent of the overall yearly totals, with a peak of over 20 per cent reached at the tail-end of the Second World War, before then declining thereafter. Although one might expect a higher proportion during the conflict, as many young men were fighting abroad, the increased number of bookings is still striking. Furthermore, women undertook precisely the same kinds of trips as their male counterparts, including embarking on long-distance one-way journeys and renting out camping craft. Indeed, there appears to have been a wide cross-section of society doing the latter, including professionals, military personnel and some from the aristocracy.⁹⁹

Although renting out camping craft was becoming more popular over this period, the

⁹⁷ R.T. Rivington, *Punting: Its History and Techniques* (1983), p. 9; Wenham, 'Oxford, the Thames and Leisure', pp. 108–9.

⁹⁸ N. Wigglesworth, *The Social History of Rowing* (1992), p. 107; Dickens, *Dickens' Dictionary of the Thames*, p. 32.

⁹⁹ Salter's archive, hire fleet bookings 1911–36 and 1937–53.

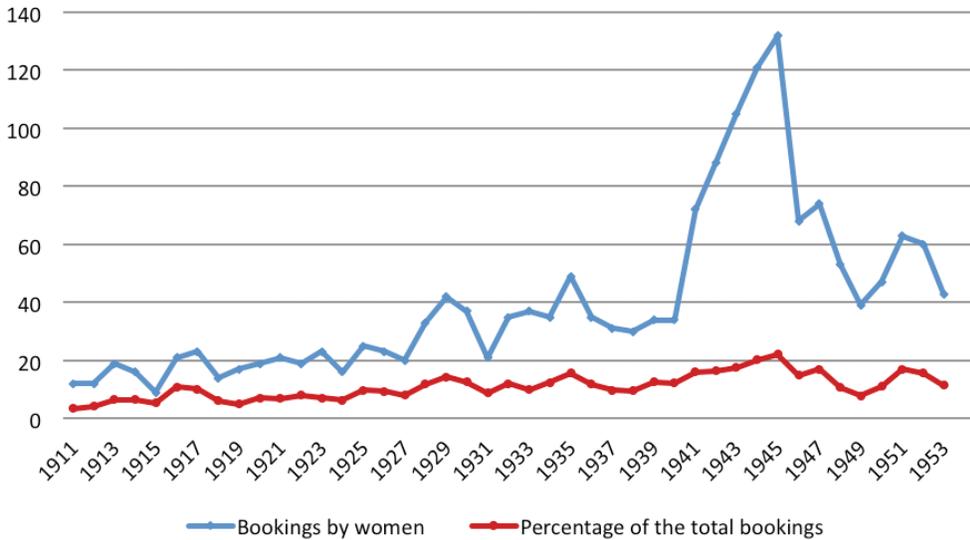


Fig. 6. Number of bookings by women.

types of trip people undertook changed considerably. In particular, both the proportion and number of one-way trips steadily fell (see Fig. 7). In the years preceding the First World War around three-quarters of the bookings made in advance (over 200 per year) were for one-way trips, and yet by the mid 1920s this figure had fallen to around one half of the overall total (fewer than 130 per year).¹⁰⁰ The number then plummeted during the latter stages of the Second World War, when fuel restrictions prevented the firm from being able to offer the normal delivery or retrieval service. After the conflict, Salter's no longer publicised in its guide the option of travelling in camping boats as one of the three main ways of doing 'the Thames tour'¹⁰¹ – the others being by Oxford and Kingston steamer or private launch – which may well have contributed to the further fall in the proportion of people taking one-way trips. By the start of the 1950s only around a quarter of the bookings were for such journeys.¹⁰²

Similarly, the popularity of long-distance journeys slowly declined during this period. Even by 1911, when one-way trips were still favoured by the majority of those booking in advance, only 2 per cent of those travelling on the river Thames finished in a location downstream of Richmond (see Fig. 8). This shows that the once fashionable Oxford to London journey had lost its appeal. Indeed, throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Kingston or Richmond tended to be the furthest downstream people travelled, as the vast majority of people opted for shorter trips with Windsor/Eton (13.6 per cent in 1911) and Henley (11.6 per cent) typically the most popular destinations (downstream of Oxford).¹⁰³ These were cheaper locations to travel to, as the firm had introduced intermediate fares to them in the late Victorian period,¹⁰⁴ and they were also fashionable places to visit in their own right. Another notable change was the growing number of parties only travelling on the highest navigable

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ J. H. and J. A. Salter, *Salter's Guide to the Thames*, 46th edn (1948).

¹⁰² Salter's archive, hire fleet bookings 1911–36 and 1937–53.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ W.H. Royston, *The Rowing Almanack or Oarsman's Companion 1885* (1885), advertisement.

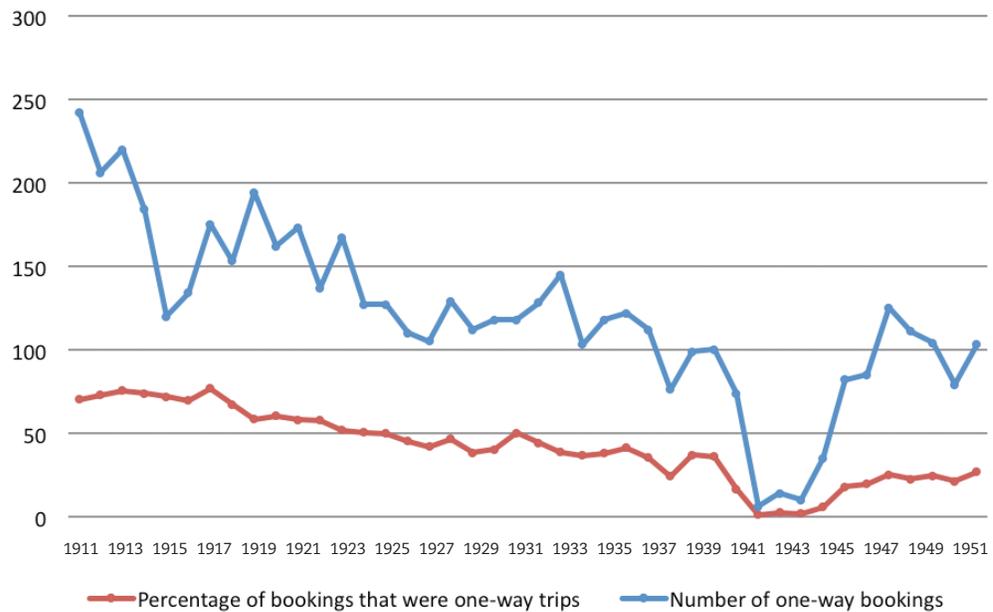


Fig. 7. Number of one-way trips.

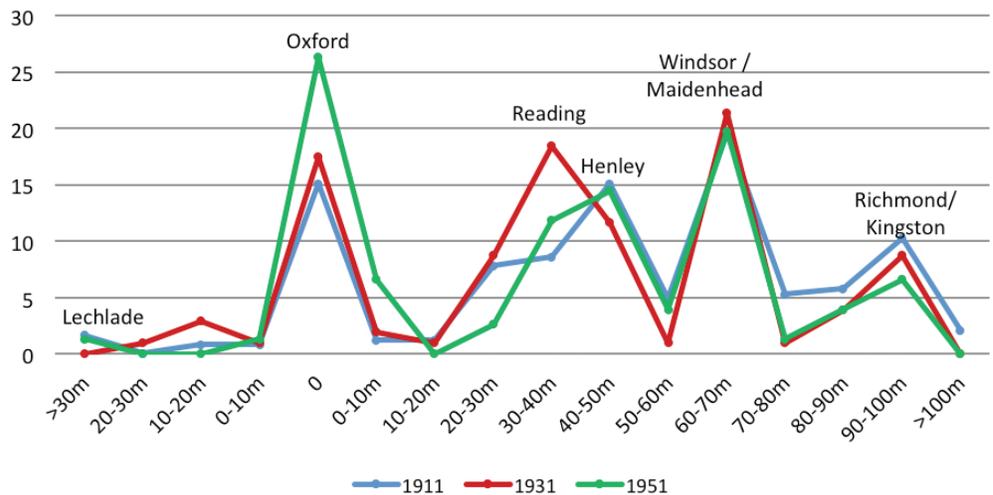


Fig. 8. The finishing point of one-way trips (percentage). The x axis shows the distance in miles from Oxford (by river).

reaches of the Thames. Although the majority of customers (just under three quarters of those on one-way trips) were still opting to head downstream from Oxford by the middle of the century, the university city had become the most popular place to finish a journey, which was largely owing to the popularity of travelling to it from Lechlade (or occasionally Cricklade). The firm started to promote this part of the river more heavily in its guide from

1911,¹⁰⁵ as the obstructions that had once hampered travel on it had been removed by the Thames Conservancy from the late 1860s onwards.¹⁰⁶ The voyage from Lechlade to Oxford also had the advantage of being a shorter distance (just over 30 miles, compared to just under 50 miles from Oxford to Henley), so it was a cheaper and quicker journey (customers were given four days to complete the voyage) than the normal voyages downstream from Oxford. Furthermore, some of its appeal undoubtedly stemmed from it being a quiet rural section of the river – exactly the kind of ‘green and pleasant land’ that some campers were searching for. Indeed, William Morris described the higher reaches of the waterway as ‘This little stream whose hamlets scarce have names. / This far-off lonely mother of the Thames ...’¹⁰⁷

Ultimately widespread camping by the river appears to have been a victim of these changing leisure habits, many of which were connected with the wider shift away from the use of manually powered vessels towards motorised craft, especially for longer journeys. The growth in the number of launches, which were less suited to camping use, was particularly pronounced after the Second World War. Their number increased more than sevenfold between 1946 and 1973 from 2,193 (approximately 20 per cent of the craft on the waterway at the time) to 15,871 (almost two thirds of the overall number).¹⁰⁸ Customers also appeared to want to spend less time and effort on the waterway and a number of commentators suggested that more traditional forms of travel were increasingly seen as antiquated. As one noted in 1951 – despite such craft still being in the ascendancy at the time – ‘the innocent lover of hand-propelled craft’ had become ‘regarded as something of an oddity’.¹⁰⁹ Salter’s played a major part in contributing to this shift, as it became the largest and most successful passenger boat operator on the upper Thames in the twentieth century. Its steamer service running between Oxford and Kingston (started in 1888) and the popularity of its circular tours, run in conjunction with the Great Western Railway (and a number of tour operators) from 1892 and expanded greatly during the interwar period, helped to popularise a new cheaper and faster way of doing the ‘Thames tour’. Indeed, the firm established a monopoly over the long-distance trip and it was carrying around 350,000 passengers per year by the mid 1950s, and half a million customers by the early 1970s.¹¹⁰

Arguably a more direct competitor to the camping trips was the introduction of cabin cruisers on the Thames in the 1920s. This was another faster and less strenuous form of transport that not only offered customers a superior level of comfort, but it also generated greater amounts of income for the firm (without the need for a delivery/collection service). Salter’s had seven such craft by 1934, but it was not until the 1960s that this side of the business was significantly expanded, when it also started offering 38 ft and 50 ft narrow boats for hire (another form of vessel offering overnight accommodation). The firm had six cabin cruisers in 1961, but its fleet had grown to ten cabin cruisers and a narrow boat by 1968 and sixteen cabin cruisers and twelve narrow boats by 1979. Pleasure boating was growing rapidly on the upper Thames at the time (see Table 2) and the busiest period in the river’s history, in terms of traffic on the waterway, was from 1973 to 1981, when the number of craft passing through the locks remained over one million per year (before subsequently declining).¹¹¹

The overall number of holiday hire boats on the river also rose sharply, growing by approximately a third between 1975 and 1980 (the latter representing the peak, after which

¹⁰⁵ Salter and Salter, *Guide to the Thames* (1911), pp. 143–51.

¹⁰⁶ See F.S. Thacker, *The Thames Highway: Volume II: Locks and Weirs* (1968).

¹⁰⁷ W. Morris, *The Earthly Paradise: A Poem* (1867), p. 454.

¹⁰⁸ Thames Conservancy, *The Thames Conservancy 1857–1957* (1957), p. 77–8 and Thames Conservancy, *General Report of the Proceedings of the Conservators of the River Thames during the Year Ending December 1973* (1974), p. 4. This figure is for privately owned craft (not rental boats), but it illustrates the general shift that was occurring.

¹⁰⁹ *Thames*, April–June 1951, p. 67.

¹¹⁰ Wenham, ‘Oxford, the Thames and Leisure’, pp. 196–9.

¹¹¹ *Thames Water Statistics* 1976, p. B6.1 to 1983, p. C5.1.

Table 2. *The number of craft on the upper Thames*¹¹²

Year	Registered vessels	Locks made	Craft through the locks
1956	11,881	206,714	358,855
1966	17,345	297,276	642,587
1973	25,213	447,196	1,080,938

there was a sharp decline).¹¹² The activity was greatly encouraged by Hoseasons, which heavily advertised its services (including using television in the 1970s), as agents for Salter's and other Thames firms.¹¹³ Indeed, it was no coincidence that it was during the same decade that Salter's finally disposed of the last of its camping boats. Their fittings were in a bad state of repair and the craft were replaced by a new generation of motorised cabin craft.

Although the cessation of a century-old service by a major operator that had helped to popularise the activity was significant, it did not spell the end of camping by the river. There were always a few groups that kept the tradition alive and, in 2006, the pastime gained some notable publicity when BBC2 aired a programme featuring a trio of well-known comedians recreating the famous voyage of *Three Men in a Boat*.¹¹⁴

CONCLUSION

This article has challenged the prevailing view that recreational camping was first popularised by organisations like the Association of Cycle Campers and the Scout movement. Although such groups played a key role in helping a different form of the activity predominate in the twentieth century, the pastime was already popular on the upper Thames by the 1880s, as part of the wider craze for pleasure boating. Indeed, the river was one of the first places to attract large numbers of recreational campers. The activity proliferated on the waterway for a variety of reasons, including the ease by which it could be undertaken (owing to both the convenience of carrying the heavy equipment by boat, as well as the range of services provided by rental firms) and its association with good health, adventure, and a simpler existence. The pastime had fallen out of fashion by the end of the Victorian period, but the records from Salter's of Oxford show that the activity grew in popularity again in the first half of the twentieth century. This was partly the result of the tent punt being in vogue during the interwar period, as well as greater numbers of women going boating. Although long-distance one-way trips in manually powered vessels slowly fell out of favour in the following decades, there was a resurgence of camping out during the latter stages of the Second World War, when the river became a convenient outlet for leisure. After the conflict, motorised craft, including cabin cruisers, proliferated on the waterway and the firm finally disposed of its ageing camping fleet in the 1970s.

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¹¹² River Thames Alliance, *Thames Waterway Plan 2006–2011* (2005), pp. 56–62.

¹¹³ *Come Boating with Hoseasons on the Beautiful River Thames* (1976). The Suffolk firm had over 100 Thames cabin cruisers on its books by 1976. In an interview by the author on 20 December 2011, John Salter, Managing Director of Salter's, described the relationship with Hoseasons as being initially 'a licence to print money'.

¹¹⁴ 'Three Men in a Boat' (BBC2, 3 January 2006). The show, produced by Liberty Bell Productions, featured Dara O'Briain, Griff Rhys Jones and Rory McGrath recreating Jerome's trip. Thames Skiff Hire (established in 1986) provided the boat.