



Walking a Royal River

Art, architecture and history from the source to Hampton Court

21–27 September 2026 (MM 180)

7 days • £2,880

Lecturer: Sophie Campbell

Walk between two and six miles a day from the source of the Thames to Hampton Court.

Along the towpath and through the gentle hills which flank the valley.

Visit villages, churches, country houses, gardens and palaces with regal connections from the Middle Ages to the present day.

‘The Thames is no ordinary waterway. It is the golden thread of our nation’s history.’ It is not to disparage Churchill’s irresistibly rotund metaphor to assert nevertheless that, by comparison with the other great rivers of the world, the Thames is puny. But therein lies its enchantment.

While in its lower reaches the river passed through what was for a couple of centuries the largest city in the world and host to its largest port, above the tidal limit at Teddington it was too narrow, too shallow and too meandering to contribute much to the industrial or commercial might of Britain in the early modern era. A vital channel of communication when oars and poles were the locomotive forces – not least to transport rulers and courtiers to their country retreats upstream of the capital – for much of its length the Thames is now a bucolic backwater.

This tour selects some of the most attractive stretches of the river to walk along, but it does not follow a linear journey from one end to the other. While resorting regularly to the towpath (now a designated long-distance trail, the Thames Path), the itinerary also ranges through varied countryside and gentle hills, and includes a representative spread of the best of the buildings, artefacts and art in the region.

As much as anything, this tour is an exploration of the English village. The numerous examples are as well-preserved as they are various. Parish churches and Iron Age forts, manor houses and major mansions, rapturous gardens and leafy churchyards, medieval, classical and railway-era bridges, associations with artists and writers, and of course quintessential riverine landscapes: these are chief among the attractions of the tour.

It omits the larger towns; as a travel writer put it in 1910, ‘You cannot rusticate at Reading’. Even Oxford is by-passed; to cram the city into an afternoon would be cruel.



Cookham Church, watercolour by Ernest W. Haslehurst, publ. 1930.

Itinerary

Day 1: Thames Head. Leave The Swan Hotel, Bibury, at 2.15pm or Kemble Railway Station at 3.00pm. The tour begins with the source of the Thames. A soaring rockface, a majestic spurt: an awesome spectacle. Actually, no. A damp patch, the trickle varying with yesterday’s weather, reached by walking across three fields. Walk from Thames Head to Ewen: 3½ miles, c. 1½ hours. An easy walk on grassy, level fields and along the river bed. First of three nights in Bibury.

Day 2: Inglesham, Lechlade, Great Coxwell. Begin the day with Inglesham church, beautifully isolated and dating to Saxon times. Continue on foot and walk c. 3 miles along the river to Lechlade-on-Thames (c. 1½ hours), a vibrant small town with a fine Gothic church and a handsome bridge. Visit the masterful medieval barn at Great Coxwell, which King John gave to the Cistercian monks in 1203 as part of the Manor of Faringdon. Drive to Coln St Aldwyns and from here walk back to Bibury: 3 miles, c. 1¼ hours. An easy walk through fields and woodland with two short ascents and a descent to Bibury.

Day 3: Buscot, Kelmscott. Begin the walk at Buscot, whose church has a Burne Jones window. It is an easy walk to Kelmscott on a level, grassy path beside the Thames: c. 2½

miles, 1 hour. Break in Kelmscott Village, once the home of William Morris, founder of the Arts and Crafts movement. In the afternoon visit Buscot Park, a Palladian mansion with Burne Jones paintings and outstanding gardens.

Day 4: Wittenham Clumps, Dorchester, Ewelme. Begin at the river at Shillingford and then walk up to Wittenham Clumps, a pair of hillocks with views over a particularly attractive stretch of the Thames Valley: c. 4½ miles, 2 hours. This is a moderate walk that descends through woods and across farmland, passing an Iron Age fort, to Dorchester-on-Thames. Visit the abbey church here, one of the finest medieval buildings in Oxfordshire, where St Birinus baptised King Cynegils of Wessex in 635. Continue to Ewelme, site of a Saxon palace, and today a unique complex of 15th-century church, almshouses and school, all still functioning. First of three nights in Marlow.

Day 5: Cliveden, Henley-on-Thames. Cliveden’s magnificent formal gardens and woods beside the Thames have been admired for centuries. See the River and Rowing Museum at Henley-on-Thames with its extensive collection of art, photographs and boats relating to river history. An easy walk from Henley to Hambleton Marina along the river, passing Marsh Lock and Weir.

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continued

Day 6: Cookham, Windsor. An easy walk from the hotel, on a level, tarmac or grass beside the river to Cookham: 4½ miles, c. 2 hours. Cookham is the life-long home of painter Stanley Spencer (1891–1959); there is a gallery of his work and a fine parish church. Visit Windsor Castle, founded by William I and occupied by every monarch since. The Queen spent most of her private weekends at the Castle, which is also used for State occasions.

Day 7: Hampton Court Palace, London. An easy, level walk from Kingston Bridge to Hampton Court: 1½ miles, c. 45 minutes. Begun by Cardinal Wolsey, the palace was enlarged by Henry VIII and 150 years later partly rebuilt by Christopher Wren for William III and Mary II. The most sumptuous of surviving Tudor palaces is joined to the most magnificent of 17th-century buildings in Britain; great interiors, fine works of art, beautiful gardens, a formal park. Drive to London, arriving by c. 3.00pm.

Lecturer

Sophie Campbell. Travel writer, journalist and guide. She has written for publications including the *Telegraph*, *Times*, *Guardian*, *Condé Nast Traveller* and *Saga Magazine*. She writes a monthly column on heritage tours for the travel pages of the *Telegraph* and is one of their London online experts. Sophie has also presented a series of BBC2's *The Travel Show*, lectures regularly on travel writing and is a Blue Badge Tourist Guide, specialising in London. Her book on the traditional events of the summer, *The Season: A Summer Whirl Through the English Social Season*, was published in 2013.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £2,880.
Single occupancy: £3,520.

Included: hotel accommodation; breakfasts, 1 lunch and 4 dinners with wine, water, coffee; transport by private coach; all admissions; all tips; the services of the lecturer and the tour manager.

Accommodation. The Swan, Bibury (cotswold-inns-hotels.co.uk): a 4-star, former 17th-century coaching inn in the heart of the village. **The Compleat Angler, Marlow** (macdonaldhotels.co.uk/compleat-angler): comfortable 4-star hotel, well-positioned beside the Thames with excellent views. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

How strenuous? This is a walking tour, graded easy. There are 7 walks and all are graded easy with the exception of 1 moderately strenuous route which involves a climb of 230 feet up to Wittenham Clumps. Some walks include ascent and descent, climbing over stiles. It is essential for participants to have appropriate walking footwear, be in good physical condition and to be used to country walking with uphill and downhill content. You should be prepared for the (sometimes inclement) British weather. Average distance by coach per day: 38 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.

Walking tours

This is a walking tour. Our walking tours require a different scale of fitness and agility to our other tours. You should be used to country walking and have a good level of fitness and balance. There are ascents and descents, climbs over stiles and terrain which can be uneven, loose, slippery or muddy. Appropriate footwear and clothing are essential. Only in weather conditions which are so extreme as to be dangerous would a walk be cancelled.

Please attend to the walk descriptions for details of the distances covered, lengths of walks and type of terrain.

We also grade both individual walks and tours as a whole using the following system:

Easy. A short and mostly flat walk lasting 1–2 hours, on well maintained footpaths or roads, perhaps with short periods of gentle ascent or descent. An 'easy' tour will consist of mostly 'easy' walks, perhaps with a couple of 'moderate' ones. There might not be a walk every day.

Moderate. A walk of 2–3 hours' duration, with significant elevation gain, or stretches of rocky, gravelly or slippery paths. A moderate tour will consist mostly of moderate walks, perhaps with a couple of easy or challenging ones, too. There is likely to be a walk every day.

Challenging. A walk that is longer than 3 hours, has steeper, longer or more frequent episodes of ascent and descent, or is tricky under foot. Tours graded as 'challenging' will consist mostly or entirely of this level of walk, perhaps with some moderate or easier walks too.