

History of the Thames Path National Trail.

The Thames Path National Trail was inaugurated on 24 July 1996 when the final section of the Trail's route opened at the Thames Barrier in Woolwich, London. It is one of 15 National Trails and the only one to follow a river.

The 184 miles of the Thames Path from source to sea follows the route of the old towing path created during the industrial revolution when rivers and canals were the main ways of trading and moving freight.

The Thames Navigation Commission managed the River Thames from 1751, and in 1771 a new Act of Parliament gave it powers to improve and complete the navigation of the Thames and Isis from the City of London to Cricklade. The Commission built pound locks to make the Thames a super-highway of its day.

The Thames Conservancy was created in 1857 to manage the tidal river from Teddington to Yantlet Creek on the Isle of Grain.

The arrival of Brunel's railway was disastrous for the Commission, and in 1866 it was abolished and its property transferred to the new Thames Conservancy. In 1909 the tidal river, or Tideway, was transferred to the Port of London Authority.

The Thames Conservancy continued to manage and look after the River Thames until it was disbanded in 1974 and Thames Water Authority took over its powers. In 1989 the National Rivers Authority took over Thames Water Authority. In 1996 the Environment Agency took over the NRA and continues to manage the River Thames.

In 1947 the towing path along the Thames was identified by the Hobhouse Committee on National Parks as one of six long distance and coastal recreational walking routes. The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949 enabled the six routes to be created and they are now all National Trails.

When the River Thames Society was formed in 1962 one of its aims was to establish a continuous public walkway, following the historic towing path and extending access both to the source of the River Thames and through London.

In 1973 David Sharp, a volunteer with the Ramblers, went to a meeting with the River Thames Society to discuss the creation of the Thames Walk. At this pivotal meeting he drew a sketch map of a possible route and passed it round the table.

David's clarity of vision sparked the campaign. "I realised that we had to survey the route properly and really identify the problems," he said later. "That's how it started."

For the following 23 years volunteers from the Ramblers and the River Thames Society, along with other campaign groups, worked with landowners, local authorities and politicians along the proposed route to create what we now know as the Thames Path National Trail.

This was very challenging because the proposed route followed the old towing path, which had been eroded due to flooding and in some places washed into the river.

There were 22 places where ferries no longer existed and several footbridges would need to be built to enable the route to cross the river. New public access would need to be created from Lechlade to the source of the River Thames in Coates, Gloucestershire.

David Sharp co-ordinated survey work by Ramblers groups the length of the river to produce a 44-page report that provided clear evidence that a continuous path was possible, using existing bridges and creating new sections of path.

Local authorities were vigorously lobbied, and in 1981 the Ramblers published the first ever guide to a waterside walking route, researched, written and illustrated by David. This galvanised public support among walkers and politicians.

In 1984 the Countryside Commission carried out a feasibility study, and in 1989 the route of the Thames Path was approved as an official long-distance footpath.

There was still much hard work to do with persistent campaigning by local pressure groups as well as the Ramblers and the River Thames Society, and negotiations with landowners and planning authorities to ensure riverside access for most of the 184-mile route.

The Thames Path National Trail was officially opened on 24 July 1996, with a new guide book written by David Sharp.

David's vision from the first meeting with the River Thames Society in 1973 was finally realised. He told journalists: "I'm proud and a little amazed. 20 years ago it just didn't seem possible that we'd get to this point with all the problems solved."

Writing in the Ramblers' magazine David said: "I got hooked and the Thames Walk became part of my life. I wanted it to happen. I wanted to see something put in place that other people could enjoy."

David Sharp died in April 2015 aged 89. There is a memorial bench to David and his wife Margaret beside the Thanes Path in Barnes.

Thames Path National Trail Partnership

Today a small team based at Oxfordshire County Council runs the management of the Thames Path, dealing with legal issues, organising contractors to maintain and repair the Trail, and coordinating the small army of volunteers who regularly monitor and look after the Trail.

The Thames Path National Trail officer reports to a Partnership of 34 organisations including the Environment Agency which manages the River Thames from source to Teddington Weir, the Port of London Authority which manages the tidal Thames through London and Natural England which provides funds from Defra.

The Ramblers and the River Thames Society are key members of the Partnership along with the Thames Estuary Partnership, the NFU, Cycling UK and the London Thames Strategies.

The Partnership includes 23 highway authorities along the route of the Trail, from Gloucestershire to the City of London, each responsible for repairs, access improvement works and carrying out statutory legal processes because the National Trail is on Public Rights of Way, mostly Public Footpaths.

In 2020 volunteers from the Thames Path and Ridgeway National Trails were honoured to receive the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service, the highest award a voluntary group can receive in the UK, in recognition of their work looking after the two National Trails through Oxfordshire.

Contact the Thames Path National Trail Officer: Thames.Path@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Further reading

Thames Conservancy. Where Smooth Waters Glide: 250 years of caring for the River Thames exhibition at Berkshire Record Office

<https://thames250exhibition.com/>

The River Thames Society and the Thames Path

When the River Thames Society was set up in 1962 one of its aims was to establish a continuous public walkway alongside the River Thames, following the historic towing path and extending access both to the source and through London.

<https://www.riverthamessociety.org.uk/>

The Ramblers and National Trails

Over the last sixty years the Ramblers have played a pivotal role helping secure the footpath network in England and Wales. We literally helped put rights of way on the map as well as championing long distance routes like the National Trails.

<https://www.ramblers.org.uk/>