

Simon Read

# Thames Path Public Art Strategy

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HUFF

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## Section 1: An account of the project

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When Henry Thoreau built a hut over a stream feeding Walden Pond, he realised that before he could write, he had to know the place that he was writing from, each was bound up with the other. Thoreau earned his living as a land surveyor, so quite naturally, a component of knowing the place, was for him, surveying it. There is a parallel here for any kind of speculation; that to generalise with authority upon the way things happen upon the surface, it is necessary to know what is going on beneath. His thinking, we know in reality led him into deep water as a social and political theorist, with the outcome of the principle of Civil Disobedience.

This could be apocryphal but nevertheless the spirit serves as a model for my own approach. All of the work I have made upon the Thames this year has been the product of an enquiry, before this project I had little familiarity with the Upper Thames and therefore felt that orientating myself to it, gaining insight into what makes it tick by understanding so far as possible its nature and the nature of its organisation, was to be my goal.

Of necessity, I have been obliged to work on many different levels, all bound by the single thread of the river path, which I have endeavoured to walk wherever and whenever possible. My first thought was that one way or another I had to penetrate beyond the most popular characteristic of the river, celebrated at least since the time of Jerome K Jerome; a source of leisure, pleasure and a symbol for England and its heritage, an area I could not do justice to and already well documented by others much more qualified than myself.

Throughout my visits and walks along the river, I have kept a journal, not only to remind myself of the order of events, but also to enable me to plot a gradual clarification of what could become a viewpoint. Throughout this I was to discover of course, that events do not run according to pattern and, were I to adopt a prescriptive attitude to my visits, I would automatically censor a large part of a rich and diverse experience.

25th January 1994, Henley to Reading:



*Between Shiplake and Sonning*

Started at Henley resenting from the start the constraints imposed by this landscape of privilege and privacy, forcing me away from the river along an access road for fancy riverside homes. At Shiplake, trying to find a way back to the water, I met a lady in headscarf, secateurs in hand and mutt in tow, when I commented that this River Thames seems a well kept secret hereabouts, denied, with a knowing smile, that there was any access to the river at all. Showing her the way

marked upon my map, she responded "Oh that's what they all say", turned around and walked away.

However, the day was to be retrieved after all. It is clear, cool and dry and I do have the place to myself. In fact weekdays along the river, out of season, it often seems to me that there could have been a national disaster of which I was ignorant. I find myself on a private drive to a very private looking school, Elizabethan-style buildings, and manicured lawns. I feel that perhaps I am in the wrong place. A woman, splendid in black lycra, freewheels down towards me on her bicycle, she grins, I lose heart,

perhaps this isn't the way to the pub after all. I turn round and see her again at the bottom of the hill. "Hello, where are you going, have you walked far?" "Oh the pub, top of the road, past the church, keep on to the crossroads and you can't miss it." Steak and kidney pie with veg, home made, just the job. A man in regulation blue glances up from his book over the rims of his glasses, a benign security guard? "Walking far?" "No just to Reading." I give him a potted version of the project, he turns out to be the relief lock keeper for Marsh Lock out for his lunch and in chatting mood. "Mike the Bank" as he is known, due to his previous life as a bank manager, swapped his life for the river and now lives in a narrow boat at Mapledurham. He tells me about the Hydraulic Research Centre, where under cover of massive sheds whole projects are modelled, such as the Maplin Airport and the Maidenhead-Eton Flood Relief Channel. "You should drop in on them." So it goes; passed through this project in unpredictable relay.

Back over the cross roads, down in the long grass by the road sign, overlooked before in my haste, bouquets and bouquets of flowers. "He was a lovely boy", "One in a million", "We will miss him always".

Down by the river at the bottom of the hill again, the lady with the bicycle is still there, her bike now leans against the open doors of a large shed and she is on the threshold gazing in. Sturdy boys on an eight-sized rowing machine exercise in perfect rhythm, in and out. Too shy to watch or be enticed out of my envelope, I pass on, recalling those old fantasies about housemaster's wives.

The river, because it is linear like a journey, could become an armature for other concerns and provide continuity for events that may not actually be related. It is a well-known formal device in writing that a journey may lend its own continuity to discontinuous facts or disparate tales, from Boccaccio's Decameron to Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. We don't know exactly what is around the corner, only what we expect to see and it is this that serves as a context for other unpredictable and fugitive aspects of experience.

One of the terms for the brief for this project was that for the sake of convenience, I should limit myself to the Berkshire Thames. This I chose to ignore since when I drew it on the wall, I knew that it would be incomplete and unsatisfactory and that to understand a part, it must be put in the context of the whole. Therefore I determined to draw a map of the entire river from source to mouth at a scale of 1:250,000 and use this as a basis for looking at the relationship between it and the landscape it passes through. I could grandly choose to disregard urban development and concentrate upon the whole area only in terms of water, or the degree to which the river as a line travelled in time relates to its meander in space. This map has become a focus and reference for much of my thinking around the project. In showing it and other material, I invite you to join me in my journey.

Much of the work has been directly the result of me racking my brain for what factors might integrate an experience of the river; however, the more I explored, the more patterns evaded me and any attempt to impose an agenda seemed arbitrary. There are a number of studio-based drawings, the purpose of which is not to project ideas about the river but rather to act as a reservoir for my own thoughts and discoveries. Any form in them comes directly from the course of my investigations; my priority is to explore.

At the outset, I was given a considerable amount of reference material, names to contact and archives to view. Together these made it quite clear that whatever the nature of my work, it was fundamental to the contract to the contract that I should be spending time in the field, familiarising myself with the resources available. Obviously the NRA was to be one of my main contacts; indeed I discovered that through the kind support of Andrew Grahame, Recreation Officer, I was able to pursue a line of enquiry as it developed from department to department. In enabling me to operate in an ad-hoc manner, I am extremely grateful to the NRA and its officers for giving their time and patience, explaining and discussing aspects of river management and supplying me with reference material.

As my concerns became focused, I felt that I could approach people with specific questions; for example, in the matter of riverbank maintenance and the conservation of the river environment, I could not have better contact than with Peter Chaplin, director of T Harrison Chaplin Ltd, a unique company specialising in all aspects of care for a water landscape. He gave me, through a lifetime's experience and generations of memory, insight into the practicalities, aesthetics and ecology of river management and very generously, he allowed me the run of his library.

I have found it important to understand how the various authorities involved in the river strive for a difficult balance between the large numbers of conflicting demands made upon it. Where it is clear that the approach must be pragmatic, hardnosed even, it is encouraging to find how much trouble is taken to ensure natural habitat and harmonious landscape.

It is interesting that a strategy for how the Thames is administered has been centuries in the making: decisions made now are for the greater part continuations of those made earlier. It is typical that the final site for a lock or weir is often arrived at by habit and sustained wrangling between conflicting interests as much as through practical consideration.

With such factors as the increased development of the Thames Valley, the shift from commercial to leisure navigation, reconciling the function of drain to that of a source of drinking water, a flood control mechanism that does not impair biodiversity and habitat, it would be impossible to organise without careful monitoring, awareness of the organic integrity of the river and very fine tuning.

When I started this project, I imagined that through it I could pursue a line of enquiry linked to my way of life: I own a barge, the behaviour of water, at sea and on an oozy tidal river is integral to my life and that of my family. An earlier project, eventually realised through the Aldeburgh Festival, was concerned with re-enacting a series of surveys of the Coast of Suffolk, from offshore, made in the 19th century.

I have an abiding interest in the way in which pragmatic information acts as an evocative trigger for the imagination and how an assumed separation between objective and subjective needs, under scrutiny, cannot be located.

As I stated earlier, I thought that the complexity and unfamiliarity of the project would preclude a single line of enquiry, however, the behaviour of water is enduringly fascinating to me. I had the opportunity to join Tony Gilbert and Pat Dwyer of the NRA Navigation Department on a routine patrol up the river. In addition to pointing out where Billy Walker, Ernie Wise, Rolf Harris and David Dimbleby lived, they introduced me to the variety of weir structures that exist, their functions and the perils of the “standing wave”.

The idea of a standing wave intrigued me: known as a “stopper” amongst canoeists, it is created and often enhanced by weirs, where water expelled at the base of a sluice, upon hitting the lower level of the river, turns back upon itself to create a wave form that appears to travel upstream. Highly developed wave structures of this type are used to dissipate the energy of falling water and limit the effects of scour upon the riverbed and erosion of the downstream banks, which otherwise would be caused by increased water velocity.

I find the idea of a form that is simultaneously static and dynamic very attractive and this started a kind of quest for me. My first stop was to contact Dr Stephen White of H R Wallingford (Hydraulic Research Wallingford) to find out what a standing wave looks like and how it behaves; he led me through the dynamics of wave structure and showed me how research is carried out by precisely modelling and observing river and coastal environments. Armed with a starting point, I did as he urged, go and look at specific weir sites and see how wave structures are generated.

In this, I was greatly indebted to Dick Greenaway of the survey department of the NRA who furnished me with complete plans and surveys for three weir sites, also to Alan Watts of the Navigation Department who organised a licence for me to go on to the weirs, draw and photograph them at close quarters.





*Undershot, Romney Weir*



*Overfall, Boulter's Weir*

My objective was to make photographs of specific kinds of water behaviour and produce a number of accurate drawings speculating upon the relationship between weirs waves and scour. Besides the technical challenge of making the drawings, I am interested in the way that known and determined structures can be a framework for an act of speculation; there is an imaginative point where elements of information meet, which is the essence of the work: what is happening in the water and how do I visualise turbulence.

This element of the project was particularly satisfying, an ideal partnership between artist and institution. Were there to be any kind of continuation into the future as a realised and coherent body of work, I would consider further and deeper exploration of waves and weirs to be an exciting ingredient.

In the event of this becoming reality, I envisage a form that will automatically integrate the diversity of impression and speculation, a form in which events can happen and themes developed in a way that does not make them mutually disruptive, a form that allows time for patterns to emerge. There are forty-six lock sites on the river, each of which can be visited in any order. My proposal is to produce a piece of writing and image for each one and where they would together be thematically linked there would not necessarily be a sequential narrative continuity between them. These would be poster format and displayed upon the navigation information notice boards at the locks. This gives both order and allows for digression, which together build up a body of information upon the river whilst singularly are quite self-contained.

The posters would reflect the preoccupations I have had so far and the research conducted upon weirs and water. However it is important that this should not cancel out other aspects of place or experience along the way. In this project, in the light of such a rich diversity of material, my inclination is to be inclusive rather than exclusive.

The river is not only a series of disparate locations; it can be a framework for developing and exploring questions. Essentially my interests have been in exploring what is immediately out of sight. It can be appreciated that the Thames is a line on which histories and physical distances meet; previous decades, far away centuries, time to be picked up later or to be contained from earlier. The information I have garnered so far, like the river, meanders; for the river is a line in both time and space.

## Section 2: Extracts from the journal.

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3rd October 1993- Boulton's Lock to Marlow.

I am very aware that the Thames, once it is past London, becomes a symbol for England: quintessentially English, embodying ideas of control, British views of nature and a well managed environment, good housekeeping.

A pair of kestrels over Westbourne Park on the way out of London, the sky clear and blue. Lines of grand houses, a stucco castle, a chateau, a Russian palace complete with onion dome, all set close to each other, close enough to run next door for a cup of sugar.



*A rendered castle near Marlow*

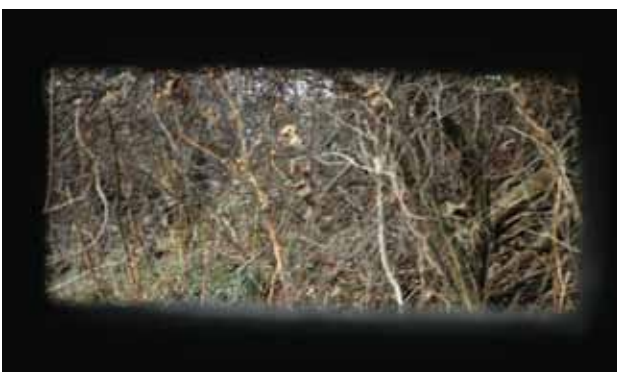
I think it is the stillness that I find worrying, the water passing at the same rate all day and every day. It makes the tidal river seem much more vigorous. After all, it is tamed and controlled and it is with perverse relief that I hear how much it can flood by. Centuries of control, first of all established by the need of a head of water for milling.

12th October 1993- Pill Box at Gatehampton Railway Bridge.

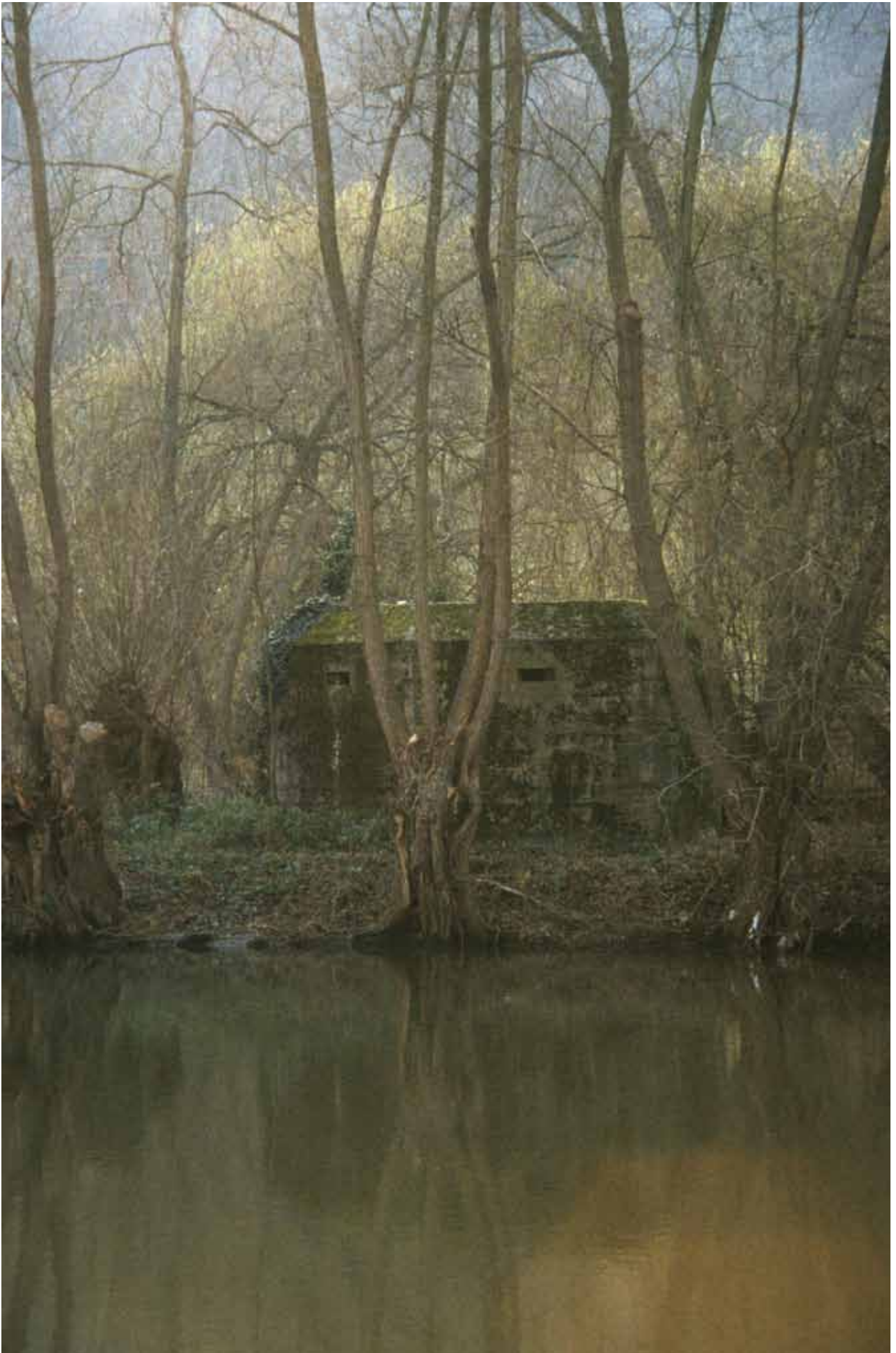
River as a symbol. Threat draws one map, the picturesque another.

“Feindwärts”, the German word for the direction from which you expect to be attacked. Any view must be read subject to context. From inside the pillbox what one normally associates with a leisurely kind of beauty in the landscape becomes fraught with fear. This transition has happened in former Yugoslavia with the shift of holiday destination to war-zone.





*'Feindwärts' Views from inside a pillbox at Gatehampton Railway Bridge*



*Pillbox on an eyot near Goring*



15th November 1993.

Management and control of the river is to an extent determined by appearance and attitudes to beauty derived from the romantic period and picturesque tradition of landscape. The attitude to landscape is culturally indexed.

I am not sure what I mean by this except that an attitude to culture or what is beautiful provokes a reflex response. We have inherited, through traditions of the picturesque, a set of ideals of how a landscape should look, and this has been continually repeated and watered down in imitation of already known and established models. The question lies in what the appropriate models might be: Eric de Mare, for example, makes us very aware of a highly formalised and utilitarian view of the landscape, which is pretty subjective in terms of what is considered good or bad. I am concerned here with assumptions and how the management of the appearance of the river has to be a matter of give and take between the different interests involved.

22nd November 1993.

Lock sites are automatically the busy points of the river; often there would have been a mill and one or more weirs. The river may split here into several channels with varying degrees of calmness or turbulence. There is the lock itself where the drop between levels is manifestly rationalised and controlled. So far as the river is concerned, it is the water that is constant rather than the architecture that flanks it. This is often ignored.

10th January 1994-Godstow Lock.

Conversation with David Wilson, Lock Keeper at Godstow Lock:

I wanted to elicit from him a point of view of the river. First he feels that attention drawn from the outside is by definition a problem because it diversifies the river and paradoxically is counterproductive so far as conservation is concerned.



*Polling the willows*  
From 'Life on the Upper Thames'  
H.R. Robertson, 1875

Conservation to him is the greatest priority and incompatible with opening up the river as a national pathway. However it does appear that opening up the path all of the way through should also highlight the kind of attention needed to conserve the river environment and the desire to care for it.

The question of how the river may be used is interesting. The problem of conservation can have the effect of attempting to stop an evolving environment in time and as such seems prone to being confused with conservatism. We know that the appearance of landscape has always changed in tune with its function, in fact the managed landscape of the river at its best is an expression of its function. Pollarded willows are particular and traditional to the river irrespective of whether the cut wood is used or not. In the absence of a purpose, this is

tantamount to pruning the garden hedge. Obviously trees have to be tended but it makes sense that a part of the language of management is the utilisation of its product.

Trees are planted and allowed to develop along the bankside, taking away the identity of the towpath and substituting that of a shady walk. The landscape is bound to change.



*Osier cutting from 'Life on the Upper Thames' H.R. Robertson, 1875*

17th January 1994 - Marlow to Henley

Very wet, had to make several detours to avoid floods. I still have the impression of an affluent persons country. There is a kind of sterility about ownership in these places, the character is not allowed to overflow. Occasionally there is an exception, the Old Boathouse at Hurley, a shady dock and the building unobtrusive, daft and captivating. Also at Hurley is a beautiful medieval building with a colossal stone dovecote, there is a fanciful lych gate under which nestles a security camera looking straight at me. This is a sterilised fantasy, quite different to the pragmatism peculiar to lock areas, where there is the same mixture of mechanical function and decoration that we associate with railway stations. Lock keepers gardens are cast in a particular municipal park mould no matter where they are.

There is a welcome inconsistency between the eyots that are left alone around the locks and weirs and the orderliness that relates to the function of the lock, as though the pattern book has by chance fallen open at a different page.

This orderliness is military and its ancestry betokens a particular attitude in Britain to authority and control. Of course given a large standing army and navy the terms of reference were sure to permeate civilian life, and certainly ex-service personnel have found the order of life on a lock, lighthouse or railway station quite congenial.

Cormorants this far up, the fishing must be good. The sounds distinctive, the roar of the weirs, the bubbling of floodwater through low-hanging branches. The "chink" of a Coot directly a counterpart to the white flash of its forehead. The Great Tit see-sawing to itself in bare branches. A field full of Guinea Fowl chuckle away from me. Old boys and a pretty barmaid in the Flowerpot Hotel at Aston find it difficult to drag themselves away: a lovely pub, stuffed fishes in cases (spot the plaster one), a basic, welcome feel to it, nice warm stove, the doors open, no pretension.

Culham Court: yet another wonderful building, set well above the river, its iron fence dented in memory of fallen trees.

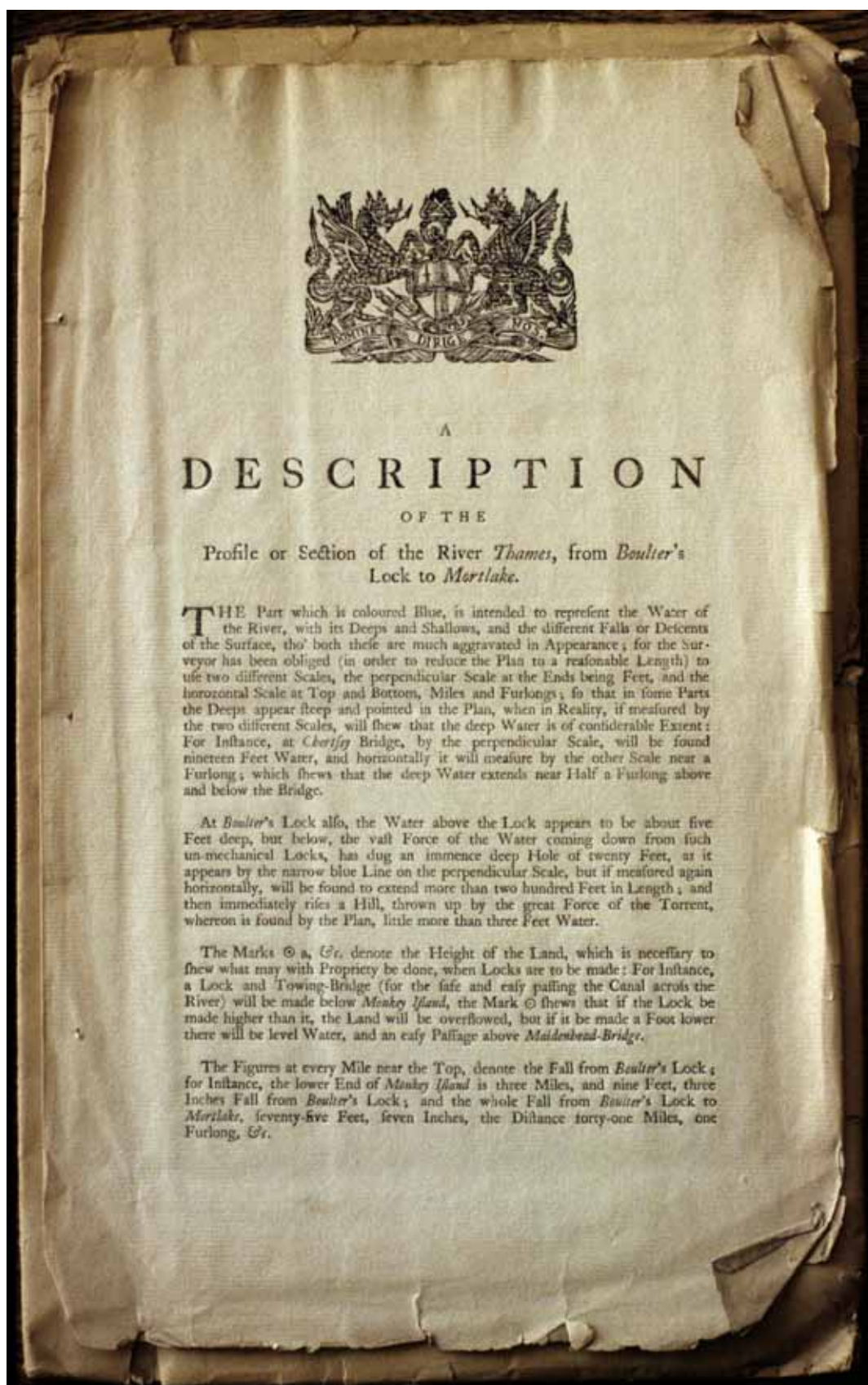
31st January 1994.

Out on patrol with Tony Gilbert and Pat Dwyer. The day's trip was tremendously successful for me: starting at Romney Lock, going as far as Marlow and then dropping back down river to Boulters. I was given a celebrity guide to Thameside living, all cheek by jowl with each other in different style homes. All of those egos jostling for attention: Ernie Wise and Billy Walker, Diana Dors, Gerrie Fit, Rolf Harris, David Dimbleby, Gerald Ratner, George Harrison up at Henley and Lord Young at Cookham.

Met the lock keepers for Romney, Boveney, Boulters, Cookham and Marlow. On the whole they are a jolly, easy-going lot; there is a camaraderie of the river that comes from a single workforce and an insight that is the effect of continuity between roles such as lock-keeping, maintenance and navigation. This makes for symbiotic relationships that would be difficult to replicate in the private sector. Experience gained in one area is often applied in another, men move sideways in the service: boatmen and other navigation officers are often drawn from the ranks of the lock keepers. At present there is disquiet over the market testing of different parts of the service and the cutting of grant-in-aid. Change would not signal an end to the service as it stands but might make it less coherent and would not foster such a thorough attention to detail.

Back to Boulters Lock. I was shown surveys of the river, soundings made to plot the build-up of shoals at the tail of lock and weir. It can be graphically seen how the whole river is continually subject to change; it is an organism that must be monitored. Any action on one reach will have a knock-on effect. Close a sluice here, increase the flow there, sets up a chain of adjustment the whole way down the river.

I was struck by the similarity between this view of the river and the reflections made through the day upon the importance of an integrated workforce.

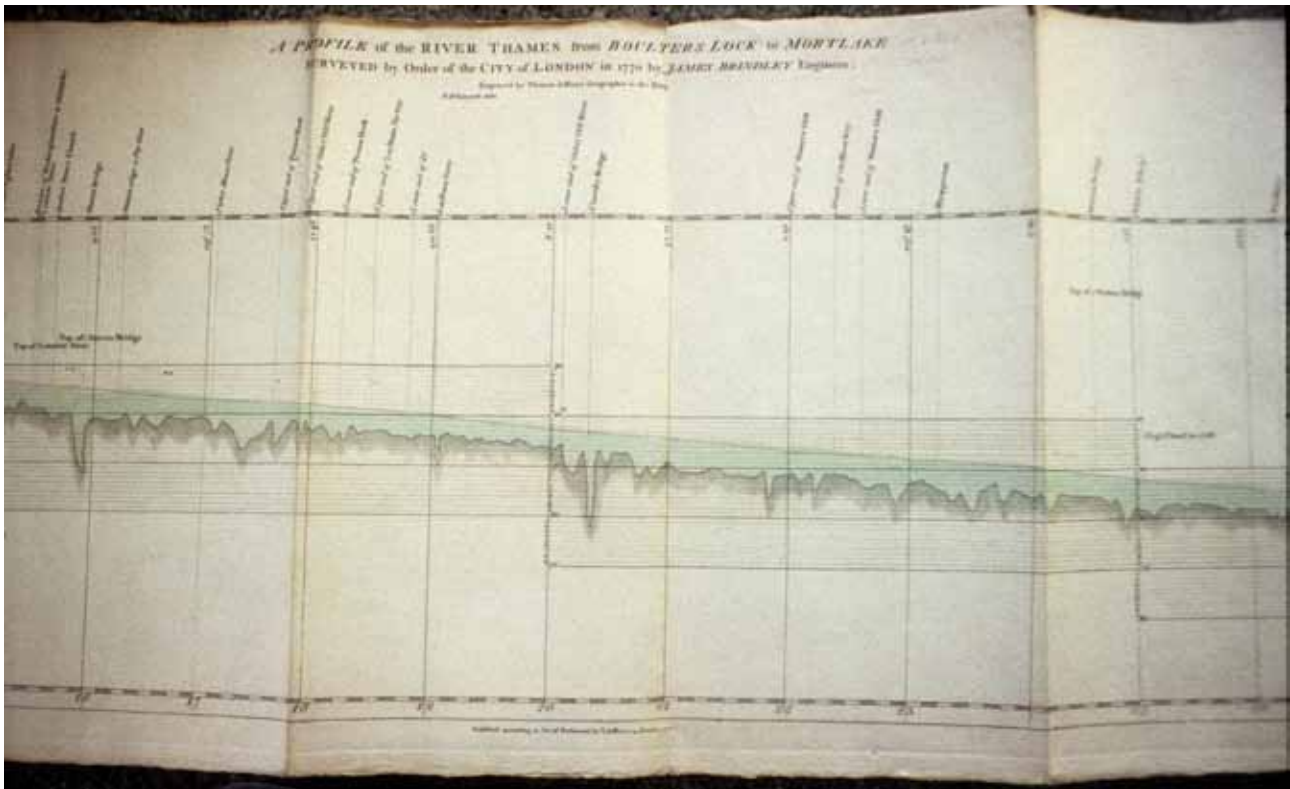


Title page for James Brindley's survey 1780

7th February 1994.

I spent the whole day with the NRA archives and surveys. I met Tom Christie, the secretary to the NRA, who showed me James Brindley's longitudinal section of the Thames from Mortlake to Boulders Lock. This was commissioned by the City of London in 1780 as part of an analysis of the difficulties in navigating the reaches downstream from Boulders Lock to Mortlake, spurred on by competition from the new canal companies.





*A section from James Brindley's survey*

Dick Greenaway of the Survey Department showed and agreed to send me a copy of a survey of 1910 of the fall of the river weir by weir through its length from Lechlade to Teddington. He also showed me examples of contemporary surveys, profiles and sections of the river. His reaction was immediately positive to my suggestion that I might join a survey in progress in order to gain insight into the process. I have the beginning of a notion to make drawings of the relationship between the riverbed and the water surface.

Whenever I visit any of the NRA departments, I am struck by ubiquitous pictures of the Thames. The theme runs through the whole organisation, prints, photos, maps on the walls of offices or in lock keepers' drawing rooms. The organisation is permeated with the river, if I visit someone in his office, he might recommend his favourite book and furthermore produce it from his desk or bookshelf and insist that I borrow it. This reinforces for me a sense that the essence of the operation is personal commitment. The decoration and reading material has not been bureaucratically selected, but is an indicator of each person's enthusiasm and stake in the job.

28th February 1994-Goring to Wallingford

It was a tiring day, having started my journey from East Anglia in the early morning. The river looked fine but there was yet an ambiguity between public/private, rural and tended space, very few surprises. I was overtaken by an eight, pulling easily, relaxed against the freshwater coming down, followed by the coach in his launch, in a hurry of foam. At Cholsey, I am sure that I recognised a ferry point from



*Rowing 8 near Wallingford*



one of Henry Taunt's photographs. Arrived at the quaintly named Beetle and Wedge pub and found it anything but. The car park stuffed with Range Rovers and Jaguars, besuited people in the dining room, out for expense account lunch, look out on the river and bemusedly watch me as I plod by. I was put off eating here.

Wallingford is an attractive place, like many English provincial towns, it is stuffed with antique shops and looks preserved in aspic. I couldn't locate a cake shop or anywhere to buy a pastie or bun. How easy it can be for fatigue and hunger to jaundice one's impression of a place. The laundrette had a faded reproduction Thames print on the wall.

*Old ferry site at Cholsey*

11th April 1994-Visit to H R Wallingford.

My enquiry into the nature of the standing wave: Dr White not that convinced of my credibility and doubtful that I would learn much, was willing to help. He gave me an insight into an area technically beyond my know-how, but grasped in principle. This is all very pragmatic stuff, a far cry from "pretty pictures". There is a tendency to be dismissive. However it is worth being patronised to see beautiful watercourses modelled in concrete to replicate real conditions. Complete harbours with brightly coloured tankers alongside aid the imagination. Waves pushed by pistons at one end of a huge tank, break soporifically upon a sandy beach with rows of gauges that transfer information to a computer base in an office above. We lean over the gantry and watching the beach scene, my host says how he finds the behaviour of water so very beautiful. I grin.

On the way back through Wallingford, by the bridge, there is a playing field, in it is an empty sky blue swimming pool feeding at one end via a stepped overflow weir, an irregularly shaped paddling pool. This could easily have been a job on the side for an employee from H R Wallingford.



16th May 1994-Surveying at Shifford.

A day with the survey team, Nick Mendham, Tim and Dave: this certainly gave an insight into there procedure, a mixture of manual and electronic data gathering, sightlines across the river and soundings made easier through a laser link to the transducer in the bottom of the boat. Very kindly, they took me through the whole process, even putting me in the hot seat. In the weedy and erratic upper reaches of the river, precision seems oddly out of place. The slasher is the tool of choice for locating the correct stations on the bank.



*Surveying activities with the National Rivers Authority team on Shifford Reach*

Much of our conversation turned around the imminent sell-off of the survey unit to other industries, in particular to civil engineering concerns as a result of the market testing exercise. There was bound to be a change of identity in the transfer of an in-house service with strong loyalties to a general surveying contractor with specialist hydrographic capability. Nick was expressing grave misgivings as to what the future might hold for his unit and like others committed to an area, loathe to see it downgraded.

Another form of ordering in this lush overgrown place is the presence of bunkers, each with clear sight-lines to the other, which at the time must have demanded considerable tree felling to establish a clear field of fire. These are now subsiding into the soft clay, their hard rectalinearity softened, chipped, crazed and tilted.

I have the feeling that the whole place has been temporarily forgotten, neglected by all except us who have been sent here to measure it.

8th June 1994-Romney Weir.

When I was at Romney, I had a brief natter with the lock keeper, explaining what I wanted to do on the weir and what the project was about. He was already talking about the weirs though it was a young protégé that he wanted to perform as well as possible for me. "I have put a bit more head water in so I shall close one of the radials and leave one open, do you want to do anything before I do that?" Closes the sluice. "Is that alright?"

I do lots of bits of drawing, some photographing and return an hour or so later. "Well what do you think?" solicitous, an awkward question to answer since things had taken on a personal flavour. "Not much use really?" I was diplomatically anxious to reassure him.

Funny the view I have of what I am doing and how others perceive it. Am I expecting the river to perform for me or am I performing for it?

13th June 1994-Boveney Weir.

On my way to visit the weir, I met a man with a clipboard on the river path, he had little maps of different reaches and was marking on them sightings of different birds. This is a part of a survey conducted by the British Ornithological Trust, made over a three month period.

I asked how a species qualified as native, for we were discussing the way in which ornamental birds like the Mandarin Duck have taken to the environment.

He told me about the New Zealand Flat Worm which, introduced accidentally into this country, is now happily gobbling up good native British earthworms somewhere in a garden near you. This Houdini worm can make itself so flat that when confined in a coffee jar with the lid screwed down tight, one specimen crept out through the thread! Or so the story goes.



*Small overfall Boveney Weir*

### Section 3: Proposal for a further project to take place on the river.

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My first concern in a proposal for work to be sited along the river is the need to reinforce what is particular about the river environment. My interest lies in exploring what is not immediately visible but nonetheless contributes strongly to making it what it is. Memory is a part of this as well as other influences such as the effect of landscape and behaviour of water.

So far as memory is concerned, wherever we look at the river, what we see is the result of memory; the river as a living entity carries its memory along with it. Obviously, much of what has made the river what it is, is now out of sight, submerged even. An important aim of a project would be to bring it to the surface so that it may be seen.

The river has a focal place in English culture, which has become assumed and ill defined through habit. It is not my intention to take an audience through a history lesson. What is important is the intimate identity of the place; after all it is not like TV, which you extract pleasure from by switching on, which is very much the way our domesticated English Countryside seems to be regarded: a part of the leisure industry rather than an integrated working environment. We visit to be entertained but are generally not aware of the detail. Even champions of the river like Eric de Mare see it as a series of vistas to be passed through. Unwittingly we are heirs to a tradition of the picturesque in nature, which renders it as a series of views to be cunningly framed in a way that effectively distances the viewer from the place itself. I feel that an important role to play as an artist is to put others where I would like to put myself: back in the centre of their own experience and I am not talking extreme sports!

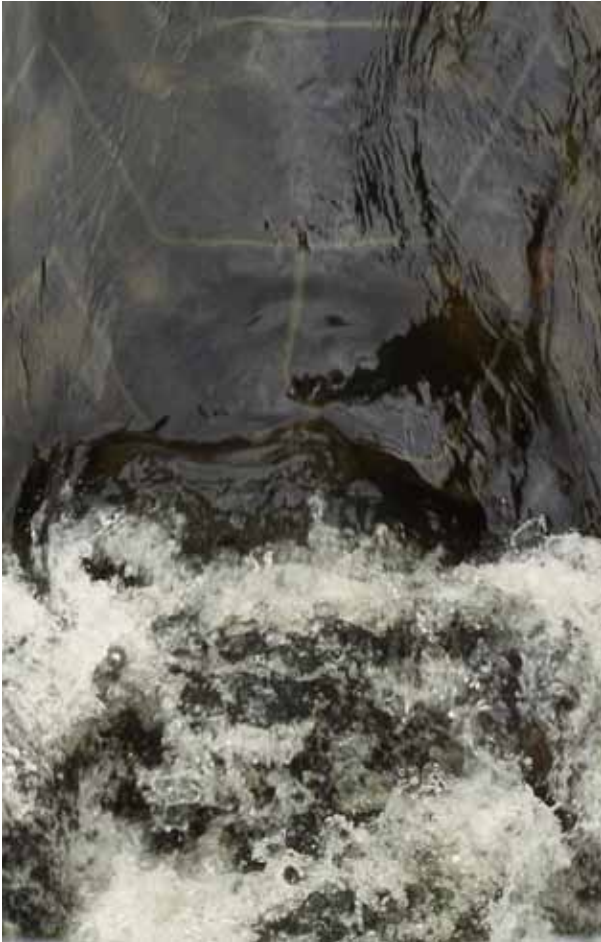
This is a tall order for which any solution is going to appear feeble, however, one vital component is human curiosity and the desire to satisfy it. When I became acquainted with the upper river, I was made aware of the range of controls imposed upon and around it; so far as possible the river is confined to its course and regulated through its weirs, allowing little scope for the odd maverick behaviour. The banks and the immediate landscape, particularly in Berkshire, are tended, manicured even to stultifying dullness. As a reaction to this, I find myself reluctant to recommend adding more paraphernalia to the river in the form of artworks. I have become more interested in drawing attention to the life of the place in a way that does not further clutter it up.

My suggestion is to produce a number of image and text posters and infiltrate them into a system that is already in place. Lock and weir sites are natural focal points, areas of bustle in an otherwise placid scene. Each lock has a signboard, often of the rotary openable type, upon which are posted all the official guidance to river users, bye-laws, speed regulations, notification of works to be carried out, pump out stations and safety advice. Assuming the cooperation of the Navigation Department of the NRA, I see this as the most appropriate location for the work. The intention is that the whole work would be forty-six units, one per lock site and each one different from the other. The sequential order of the locks offers the possibility for an integrated series that can develop from one location to another, but not necessarily for this may not necessarily be visited sequentially. The uniqueness of each site offers an opportunity to explore characteristics particular to the place.

I anticipate picking up some of the concerns already started in the current work and would look forward to taking my interest in weirs and water further as we pass along the river. The bunker theme is another that merits further exploration, reflecting upon the strategic importance of the Thames as a perceived line of defence during the last war.



When I was at Boveney to photograph and make drawings around the weir, the lock keeper, quizzing me about what I was up to, recommended I tell people about the fish pass, since he was always being asked about it and whether it could be viewed, which unfortunately, as a site of restricted access, is not possible. This is another line of enquiry: fish passes, their construction, particular examples on the Thames and how salmon migrate through them.



*Fish pass at Caversham Weir*

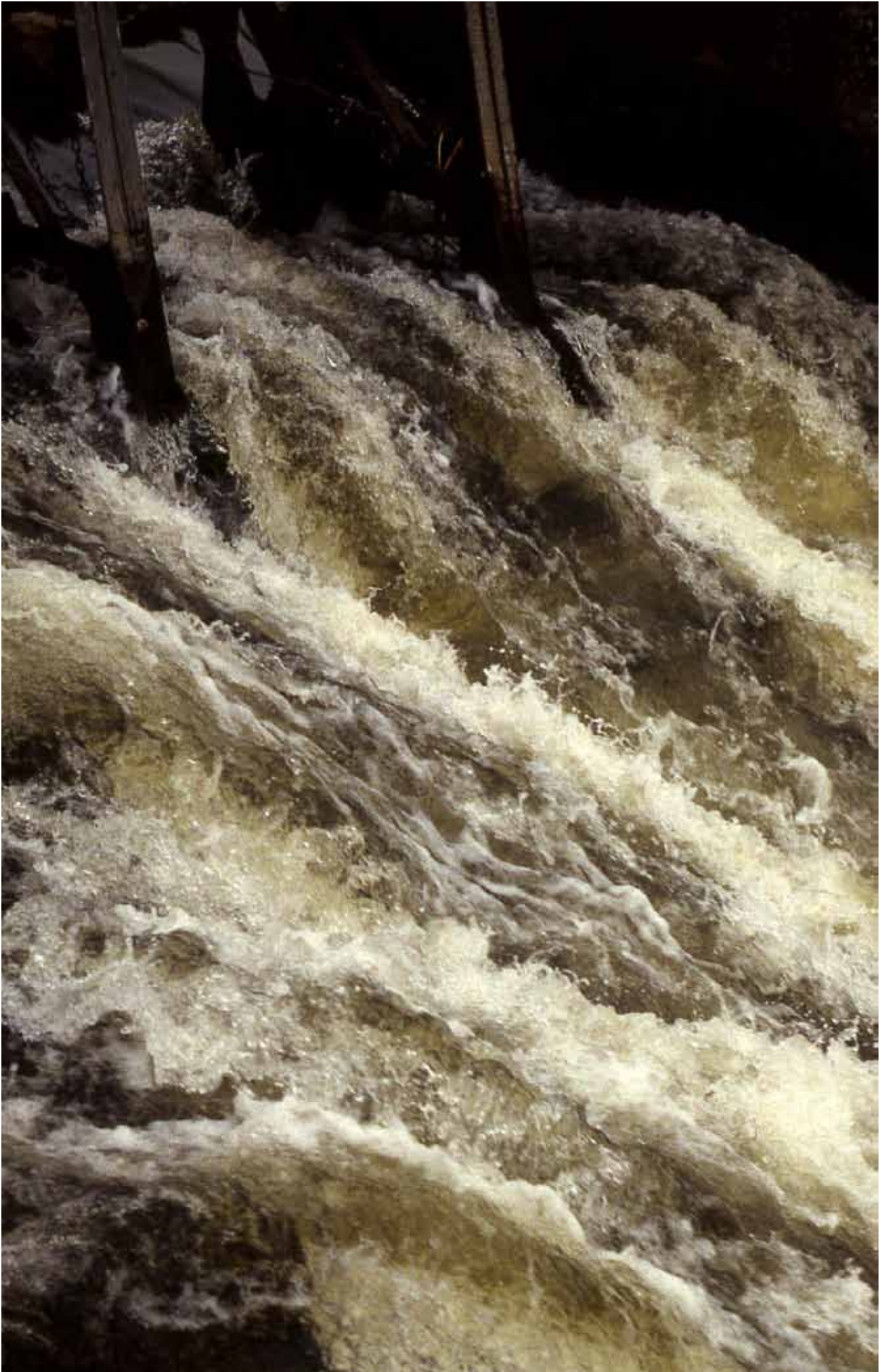
Immediately it is obvious that there are rich pickings to weave together to evoke the essential river. It should be clear that this is not a tour guide and that the starting point is my own curiosity and the assumption that this is something that we all share.

I anticipate text being a vital part of each poster; this could take the form of extracts from a journal, allowing for a subjective response to particularity of place, atmosphere and weather to creep in.

Each poster would be A2 format, full colour off-set litho, displayed by pasting up on the information boards, one per lock. Spares would be available in the event of loss vandalism or deterioration due to UV or weather. The timespan for the series would be one season/year.

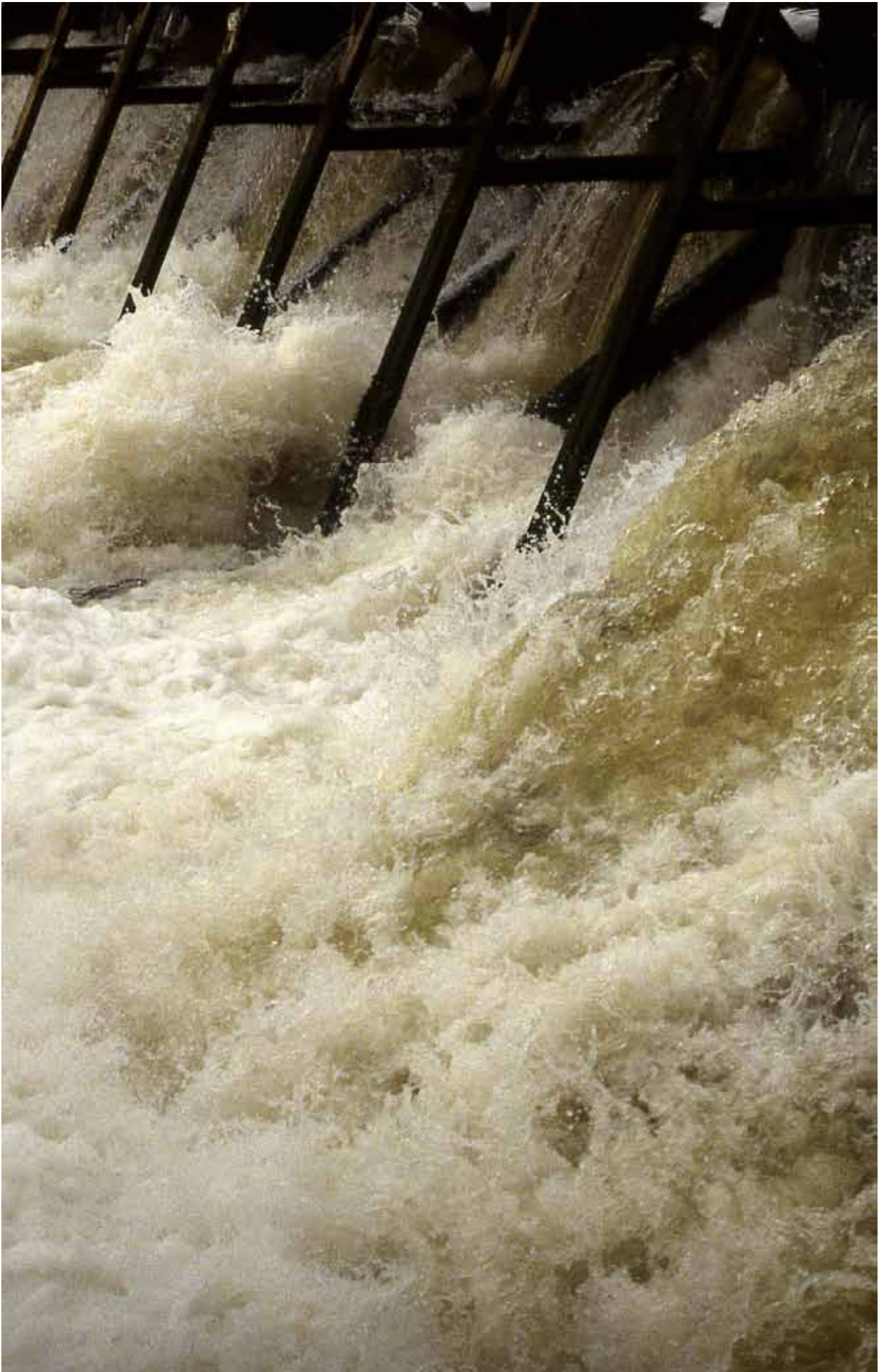
Ideally this would generate a published version of the whole set as a book a limited edition of the whole series for sale at outlets such as the River and Rowing Museum along the river.

I anticipate the project taking two years to complete, which would make it available for the opening of the Thames Path in 1996.



*Radial Sluice, Boulter's Weir*





*Buck Sluice, Boulders Weir*

## Section 4: Observations upon the conduct of the project.

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Being offered this project was like being invited to take a holiday from myself and my normal practice. It has been a delight to be involved in something, the terms for which being that I should find a starting point and explore. In order that this strategy can work, it is necessary that there is good understanding between artist and patron, without which there is the fear that the artist may not deliver. The patron gets cold feet and needs reassuring, the relationship deteriorates and all kinds of muddle ensue.

I am often asked to be involved in projects where an assumption has already been made as to the nature of my contribution and I get the impression that the sponsor or curator just wants me to make it for them. For this reason a strategy such as this is very welcome, where the artist is given back the initiative.

Very often projects remain open due to either a shortfall in funding or slackness in administration. Happily this has not happened. We agreed at the outset how the project was to be funded and what should be its duration and this has been administered admirably.

Along the way there have been some hiccups between sponsor and artist and perhaps this was inadvertently caused by the presence of an agency as an intermediary. My impression is that ArtPoint were put in the position of fielding awkward questions that only I could deal with and that I should have had a more discursive relationship from the beginning with the Countryside Commission and Allied Lyons. For my part, there continues to be confusion as to who I am answerable to: since Christy Johnson of ArtPoint has been my immediate contact, it has been as though I am working for her, which, pleasurable it may be, has tended to screen the fact that she has been managing the delicate task of translating my state of play to the sponsors and filtering their needs to me. Immediately as many agendas are set up as there are parties involved.

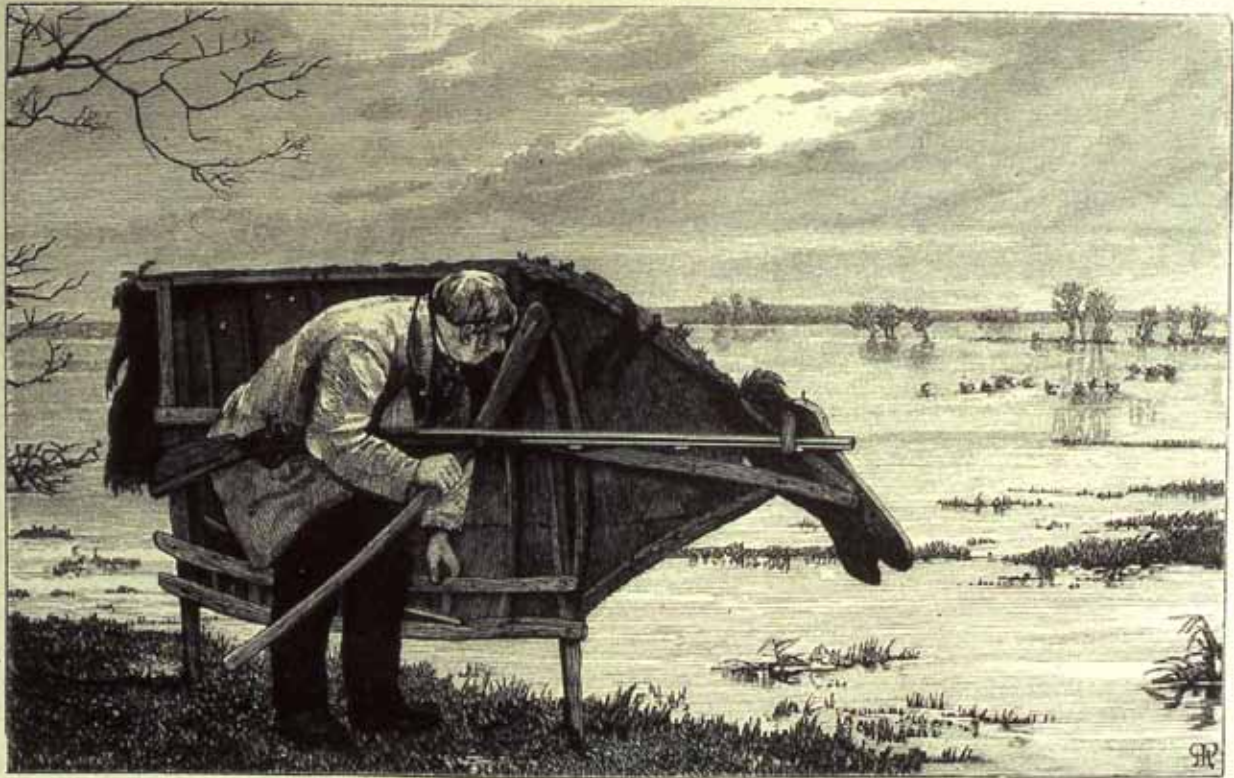
Since the NRA are at the sharp end of managing the river, it is them that I have been going to most for help and information. I am extremely grateful to them for opening doors for me. However it has sometimes been difficult overcoming initial reservations as to the relevance and justification for the project. I have often found myself explaining the nature of the work to staff totally unacquainted with it. This meant that often I had to overcome initial resistance before time was given purely out of goodwill or else grudgingly. I was always aware that these are busy times, which made it that much more gratifying when I was received with enthusiasm and when people put themselves out for me. Given the nature of the project, I was surprised that the NRA were not drawn more fully into it as a partner (which of course they are in the matter of setting up the Thames Path). It would have made my job easier.

I regard projects like this to be a licence to open doors that otherwise would be closed to a casual outsider. The more this kind of initiative may be set up, the more likely the public view of the artist may be demystified and the greater chance there is for the artist to establish a complete relationship with culture in a wider sense.

*S. A. Pearl.*

*25th August 1994.*





APPROACHING THE FOWL WITH STALKING-HORSE.



SHOOTING WITH THE STALKING-HORSE.

Taken from 'Life on the upper Thames, H.R. Robertson, Virtue Spalding & Co. 1875



## Bibliography

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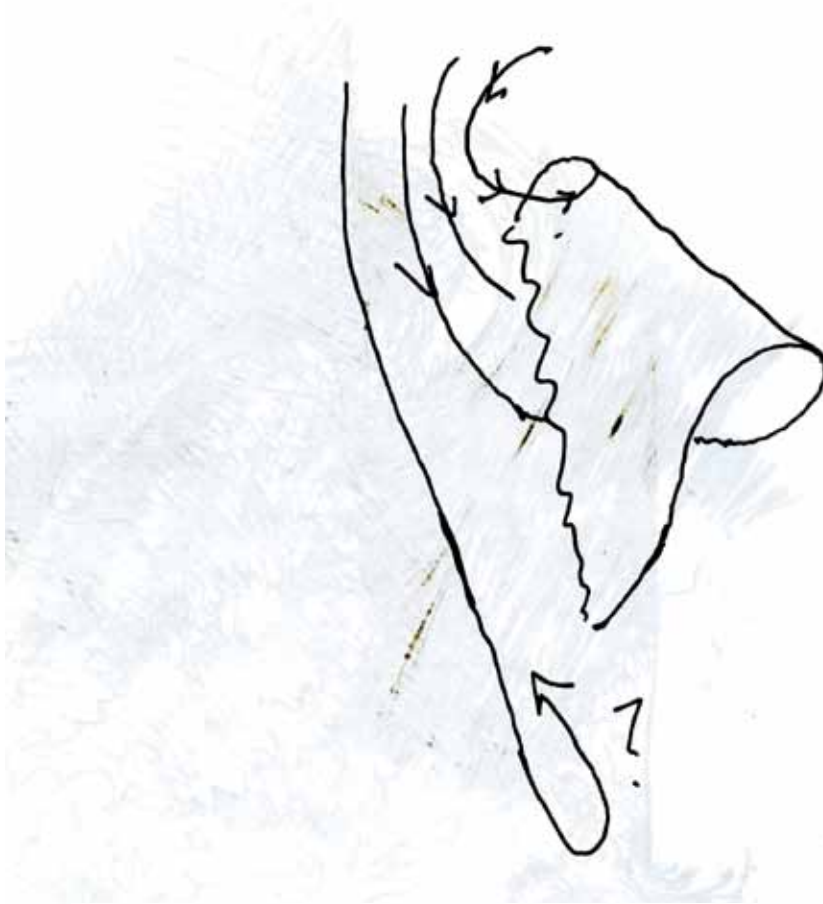
Life on the Upper Thames Spalding & Co. 1875	H R Robertson	Virtue
Time on the Thames	Eric de Mare	Architectural Press 1952
The Thames Highway I General History	Frederick Thacker	London 1914
The Thames Highway II Locks and Weirs	Frederick Thacker	London 1920
The Stripling Thames	Frederick Thacker	
The Compleat Angler	Isaak Walton	
Sweet Thames Run Softly	Robert Gibbings	Dent 1940
Till I End My Song	Robert Gibbings	Dent 1957
The Oarsman and Anglers Map of the River Thames	E G Ravenstein	1965
The Thames from Source to Tideway	Peter H Chaplin	Whittet Books 1982
Waterway Conservation	Peter H Chaplin	
The Victorian Thames	David Wilson	Oxfordshire Books
The Thames, Record of a Working Waterway	David Wilson	
The Thames	A P Herbert	Weidenfield and Nicholson 1966
The Making of the Middle Thames	D G Wilson	Spur Books 1977
Viktor Schauberger, The Living Water	Olaf Alexandersson	

Weir drawings taken from my journal

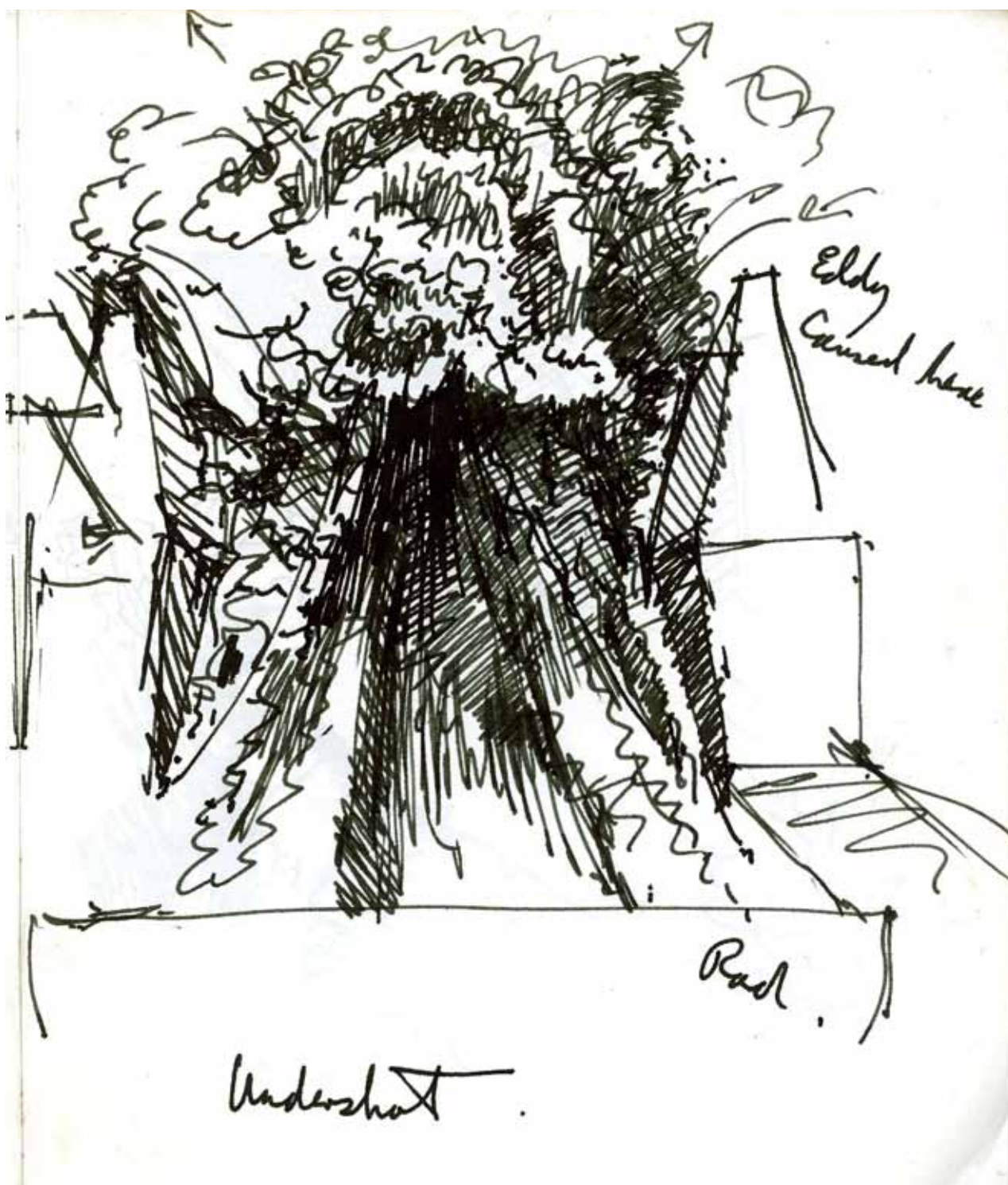


Romney Lock







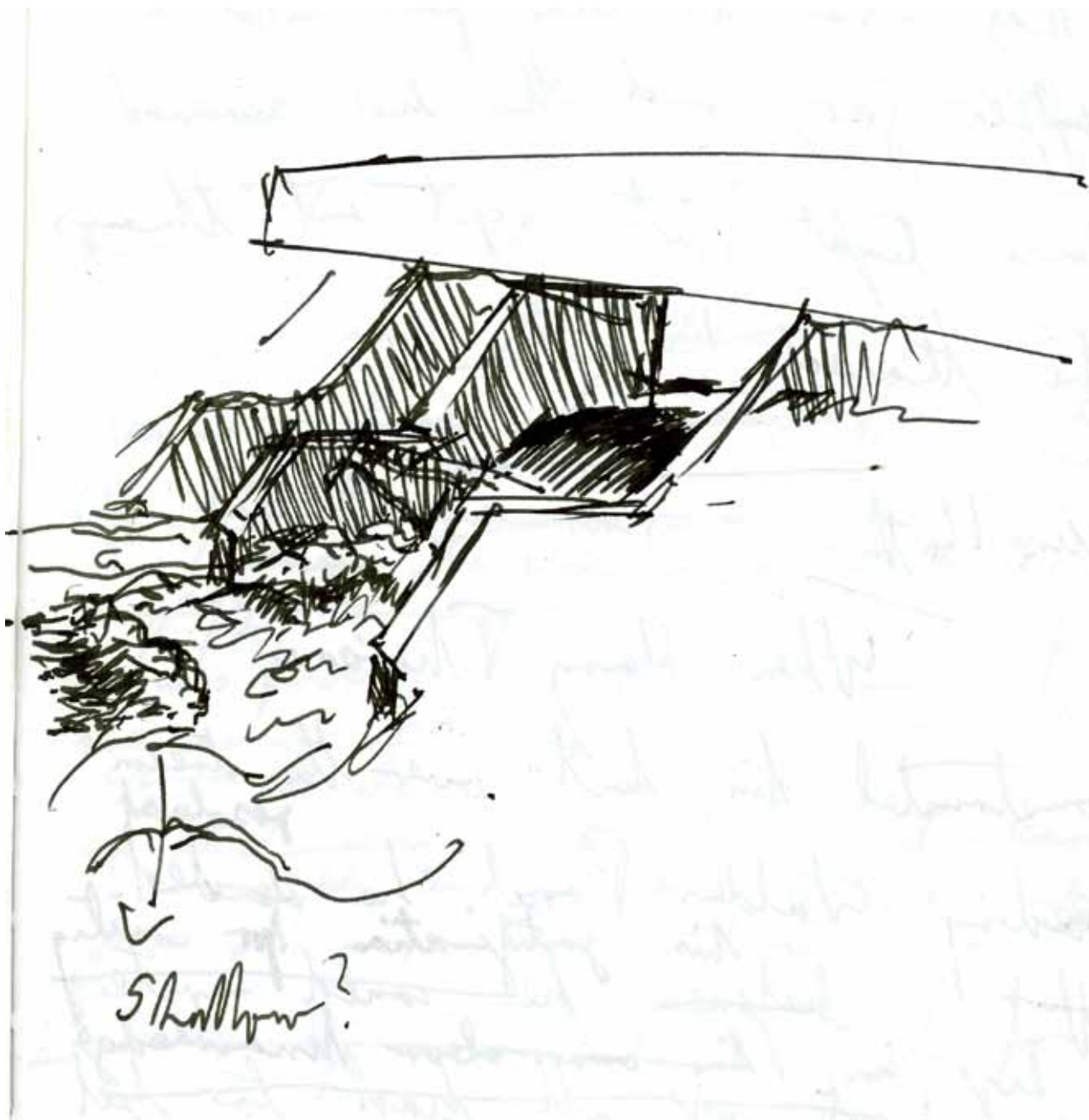


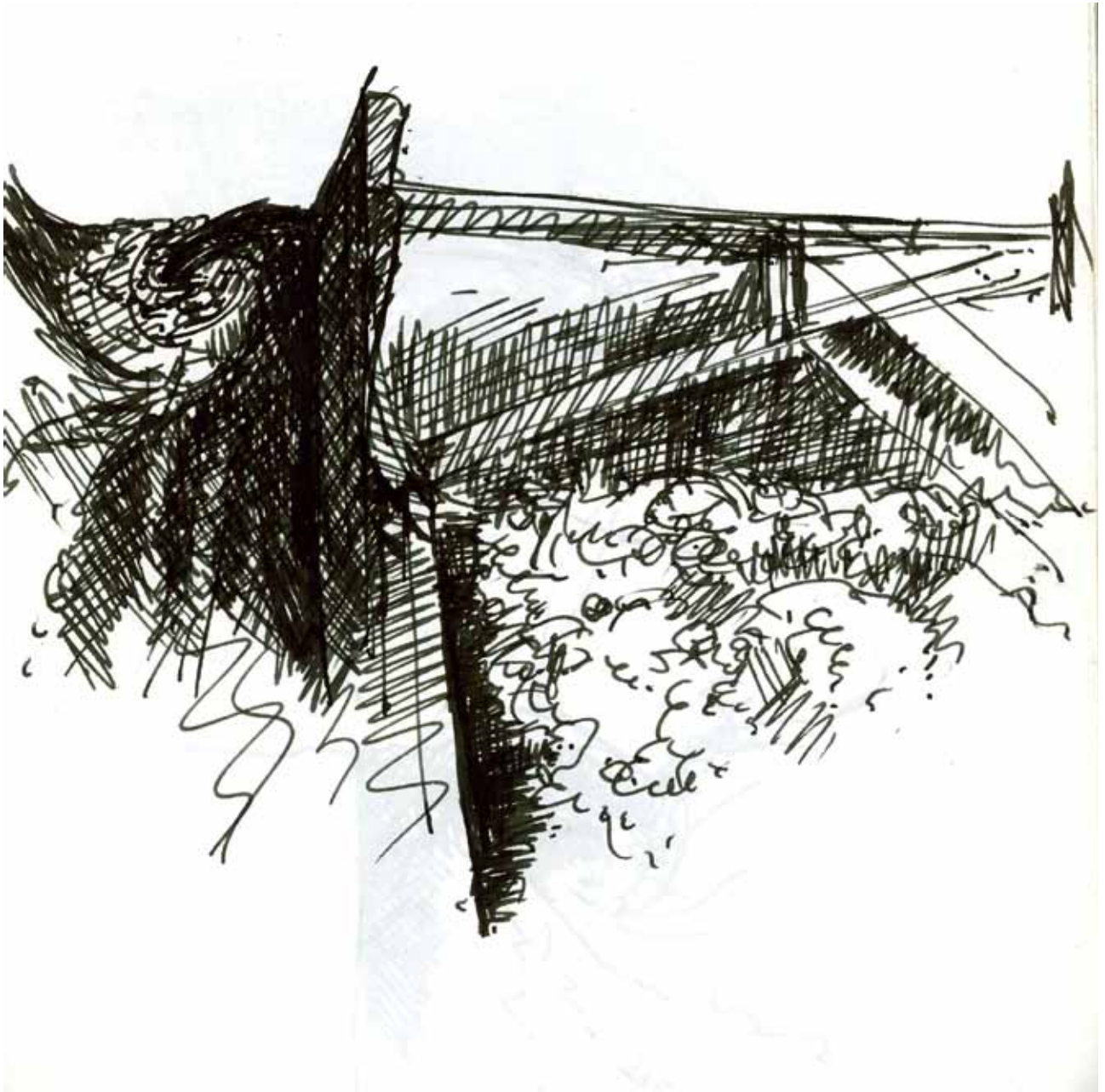
Boveney Weir.

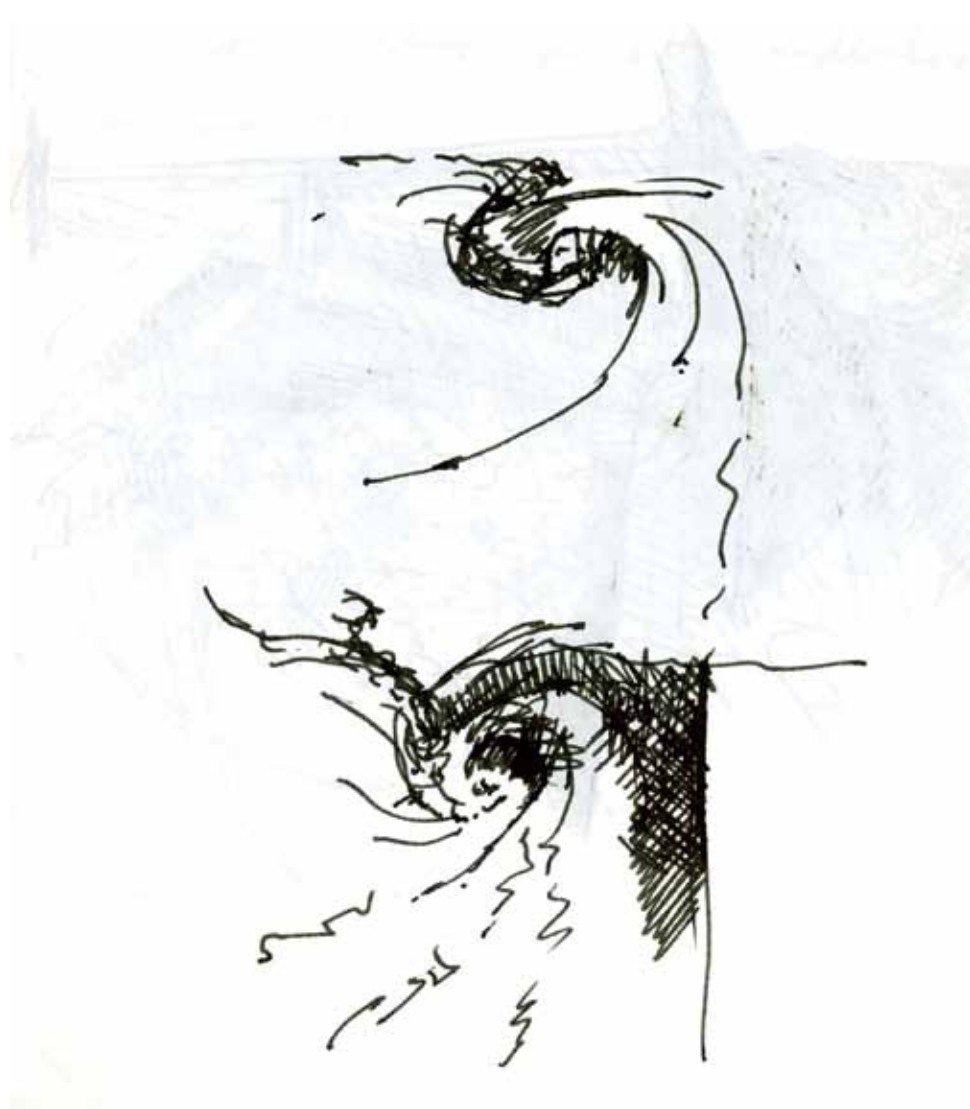
Radials which can either undershoot  
or overfall







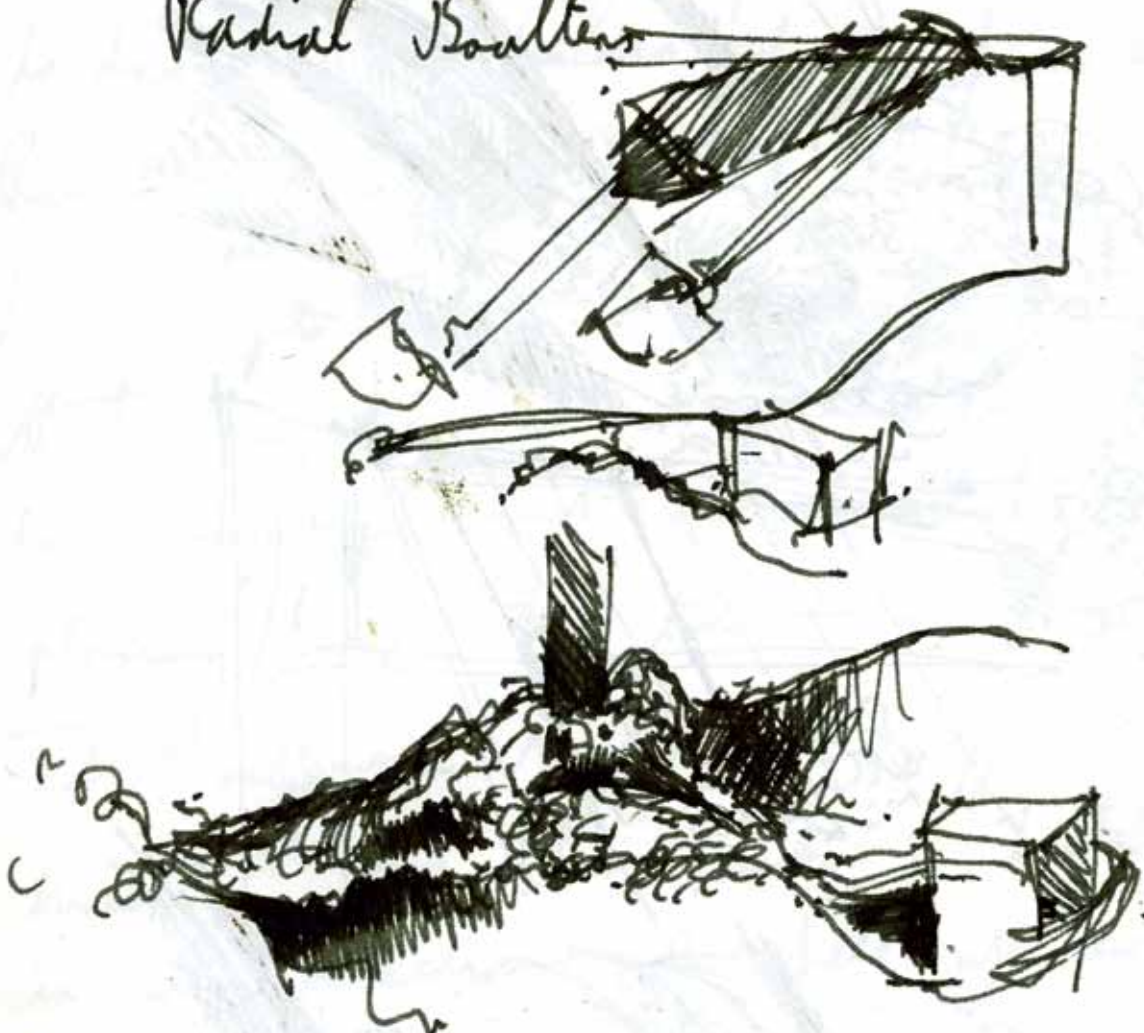








Radial Boulter



Head of river  
Water entering.









