

THREE MEN IN A BOAT RE-VISITED

PART ONE

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: MIKE TRIPPITT

With the classic comedy novel *Three Men In A Boat* firmly in hand Mike Trippitt takes Campervan George along the banks of the River Thames

Jerome K. Jerome

The author of *Three Men In A Boat*, was born in Walsall on 2nd May 1859. He worked as a clerk, journalist, actor and teacher before his first book was published in 1885. *Three Men In A Boat*, now regarded as a literary classic, is a fictitious tale recounting many of the author's real experiences along the river with his two friends. Montmorency, the dog, did not exist.

I'm often asked: "Why is he called George?" In fact, our VW campervan is named after George Wingrave, one of the *Three Men In a Boat* in Jerome K. Jerome's Victorian comedy novel. It's my favourite book. Published in 1889, the novel recounts Jerome's two-week caper aboard a double-sculled camping skiff on the River Thames with his friends George and William Harris, and his dog Montmorency. Though a mix of travel writing and fiction, the story describes lazy lives in the 19th century, the river and many places that "peep" at the Thames from its banks.

I've decided to bring George to his spiritual home, to travel beside the Thames towards Oxford, and to see and savour the idylls described by Jerome 130 years ago. My journey starts, like that of the *Three Men* at Kingston-upon-Thames. It's a warm summer's afternoon, so the town is busy. I'm heading a short journey upriver to King Henry VIII's Hampton Court Palace, but the road is closed due to one of three cycle races in the area. I arrive at a T-junction where a marshal is standing officiously in the

road. "Is Hampton Court left or right?" I ask him. "Left," he replies laconically. "But it's closed. How do I get there?" "Turn right and Google Maps it. We're from Southend." How helpful, I think sarcastically. But it was marginally more informative and polite than a "How should I know?" So, we do indeed pull over and "Google Maps it".

I am going to Hampton Court to see its renowned maze. When *Three Men* arrived here Jerome told Harris that he'd never been in the maze. Harris recounted an earlier trip when he'd been to Hampton Court with his cousin: "You keep on taking the first turning to the right. It's very simple. It's absurd to call it a maze... We'll just walk around for ten minutes and then go and get some lunch." Harris's optimism proved unfounded and together with some lost and bewildered followers he acquired in the maze—"people who had given up all hopes of ever getting in or out, or of ever seeing their homes and friends again"—Harris was unable to find his way out. He, and those who regretted placing their faith in him, had to be rescued by a maze keeper.



Now, which way should I go?



The Two Brewers



Three Men In A Boat at Chertsey Lock



The Windsor Duck

The exact origins of Hampton Court Palace Maze are lost, but it was most likely created for King William III in the latter 17th century. It's the oldest surviving hedge maze in the UK and has half a mile of paths. I navigate the maze using Harris's right-hand rule in 12 minutes, although some folk take longer. "Which way shall we go?" asks one little boy. "I think ... I think ..." ponders mum. "I think I don't know which way to go." The Maze is great: good old-fashioned fun, no Wi-Fi, no smartphone, no whizzes and no bangs. It's just a simple path through yew hedges that's been mystifying and

charming visitors for one hundred and eighty years. Even Harris was converted at the end of his ordeal. "Harris said he thought it was a very fine maze ... and we agreed that we would try to get George to go into it," recounts Jerome. Not my 'George' of course. But a maze to drive around in a campervan? Now,

that's an idea.

That evening we pitched at the Caravan and Motorhome Club's Chertsey site. In 1889 Jerome and Harris rowed from Kingston to meet George at Chertsey—"George goes to sleep at a bank from ten to four each day, except Saturdays, when they wake him up and put him outside at two"—but I chose the site because it is close to the river, and several places of interest are in easy reach.

In the evening sun I cycle along part of the Thames Path to Penton Hook. The path stretches 184 miles from near the river's source in the Cotswolds to the Thames Barrier at Greenwich. Through Surrey, Berkshire and Oxfordshire it provides outstanding walks and cycle paths through meadows and along riverbanks.

At Chertsey Lock I pause to watch two motor cruisers pass through. The lock keeper, a friendly man sporting a white, wide-brimmed hat, assists them.

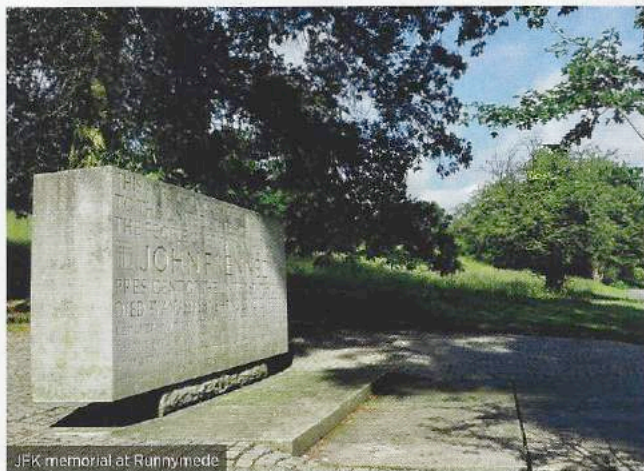
"THE MAZE IS GREAT: GOOD OLD-FASHIONED FUN, NO WI-FI, NO SMARTPHONE, NO WHIZZES AND NO BANGS."



Windsor Castle from the Long Walk



The Long Walk in Windsor Great Park



JFK memorial at Runnymede



George at Runnymede National Trust

“IN THE WARM EVENING AIR I THINK OF VICTORIAN ENGLAND, AND OF THE PLEASURE IT MUST HAVE BEEN TO MEANDER SLOWLY UP RIVER IN A LITTLE BOAT.”

It's all very peaceful, all very civilised. A small boat then eases into the lock. Those aboard chat to the lock keeper. The hand of serendipity has delivered a modern *Three Men in a Boat* here just for me. I smile at the coincidence, and in the warm evening air think of Victorian England, and of the pleasure it must have been to meander slowly up river in a little boat.

Next morning we're off early and pass Thorpe Park and signs for Legoland. Theme Parks did not exist in Jerome's day, but it's a reminder that this area has plenty for all the family. My next halt however, has been around at the heart of the British way of life for 800 years.

The Magna Carta, sealed by King John at Runnymede on 15th June 1215, remains the foundation of the rule of law, justice and our fundamental freedoms. Whether it was signed on the meadows now owned by The National Trust or a short distance upstream on the privately owned Magna Carta Island is uncertain. Jerome, for what it is worth, favoured *“the popular island theory”*, least not due to the advisability of *“getting such a slippery customer as King John on to the island, where there was less chance of surprises and tricks.”*

Runnymede combines meadows, woods, memorials and art installations in a harmony that imparts its historical significance in an understated, yet powerful way. It is a spiritual place, one of commemoration and celebration. My ninety minutes here is strangely uplifting and moving.

The 130 years since the *Three Men* rowed into Windsor are but a small part of the town and castle's history. Architecturally, it's a fascinating and largely unchanged place. The High Street and Castle Hill accommodate restaurants, bars,



Hampton Court Palace.



The Thames at Chertsey

national retail chains, independent local shops and souvenir shops. Tacky and tawdry mix uneasily with opulence and grandeur, but it is delightful. The castle dominates the landscape. Though I choose not to go in, a walk through Windsor Great Park affords spectacular views of it. The river, that is always close by, is home to 200 mute swans. Such numbers would not be supported without hundreds of visitors feeding them each day.

Mute swans live for between fifteen and twenty years, and contrary to popular belief are not all owned by The Queen. The monarch owns about half of the swans at Windsor with the rest belonging to The Worshipful Company of Vintners and The Worshipful Company of Dyers.

“THE CASTLE DOMINATES THE LANDSCAPE ...A WALK THROUGH WINDSOR GREAT PARK AFFORDS SPECTACULAR VIEWS OF IT.”



Windsor 'A picture from the Thames'



The Jurors at Runnymede

“YOUNGER PASSENGERS CHEER NOW THAT THE UGLY DUCKLING HAS TRANSFORMED INTO A GLIDING SWAN.”

Strolling back from the Great Park I come across The Two Brewers public house. It's been here since 1792, but is not mentioned in *Three Men*. Harris in particular would have wholeheartedly approved of its ethos: "Dedicated to Life, Liberty, Food, Drink and Other Less Serious Matters". I'm drawn in, and before having a date with something most curious I enjoy a drink sitting outside

We stayed at

Chertsey Camping and Caravanning Club Site
Bridge Road, Surrey KT16 8JX
www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk

Hurley Riverside Park
Hurley Berkshire SL6 5NE
www.hurleyriversidepark.co.uk

Oxford Camping and Caravanning Club Site
426 Abingdon Road, Oxfordshire OX1 4XG
www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk

in the blazing sunshine, under brightly coloured blooms hanging from baskets.

The Windsor Duck is like nothing else in the town. "Quack! Quack!" it hails from a loudspeaker. The yellow amphibious craft, plies from the Theatre Royal on the hour for a 60-minute trip around the town and along the river. At £21 it isn't cheap, but driver Paul and crewman 'AG' give an informative and entertaining tour. There are other tours around Windsor and several tripper boats to take visitors on a leisure cruise along the river. After a slow, laboured journey through the streets The Duck arrives at the slipway and plunges into the Thames. Its bow wave ripples out as it finds momentum in the water. Younger passengers cheer now that the ugly duckling has transformed into a gliding swan. It's an unusual and enjoyable experience. Windsor looks a picture

from the water.

Later, after a ride up to Maidenhead and back through the royal estate I eat at the Bells of Ouzeley on Old Windsor's waterside. Jay, (Jerome refers to himself as 'Jay' in the book) says the pub is "a picturesque inn ... and a place where a very good glass of ale may be drunk." It's a family orientated gastro-pub now, and whilst I do not sample the ale, I enjoy a burger and a sumptuous dessert, looking out at the last of the day's motor cruisers passing by. What would the river here have been like 130 years ago, I wonder.

I've had two good days along the lower reaches of the non-tidal Thames. It's hard to think we're just 17 miles from central London. Later tonight, back at the campsite, I'll plan tomorrow and pick up Jerome's book once more. What will *Three Men* and me get up to next? ■