

THREE MEN IN A BOAT RE-VISITED

PART TWO



WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: MIKE TRIPPITT

Continuing his journey towards Oxford with the classic novel *Three Men In A Boat* close-by, Mike Trippitt and campervan George, discover more delights of the River Thames

Packing up my campervan George to leave a site sometimes fills me with dread: cups and bowls away, bin stowed, bedding packed, boot filled, pop-top down, hook-up unplugged. Where does all the stuff go, and more pertinently, where does it all come from?

Long before the campervan was invented Jerome K. Jerome, George Wingrave and William Harris, the *Three Men In A Boat*, had a similar dilemma. How do you get two-weeks stuff into a little craft? George, who is credited in the book with being "quite sensible" at times, had the solution, and it's as relevant to camping today as it was in Victorian times: "We must not think of the things we can do with, but only of the things that we can't do without." Jerome expands the idea to life generally, and his "Let your boat of life be light ..." monologue is as profound as anything he writes. It's also the subject of posters, memes and motivational directives the Internet over.

After packing up and moving off the Chertsey

site, we arrive at Cliveden, a National Trust estate on the Buckinghamshire-Berkshire border. The Italianate country house is now a hotel, but it was the home of the Astor family. Nancy Astor, who took her seat as England's first female MP in 1919 once lived here.

Cliveden gained brief notoriety in 1961 when Lord Astor hosted "a light-hearted and frolicsome bathing party" (as described in the ensuing public enquiry). There, the then Secretary of State for War John Profumo met one Christine Keeler and soon began an affair with her. This not only caused a national security crisis, but also led eventually to the fall of Harold MacMillan's Conservative Government. The Profumo Affair has been the subject of countless books, documentaries and movies ever since.

The delightful formal gardens at Cliveden are not as extensive as Hampton Court, but its maze is more challenging and the views over woodland and the Thames twenty metres below, match anything Henry could see from his palace

Jerome K. Jerome

Three Men In A Boat

"Let your boat of life be light, packed with only what you need: a homely home and simple pleasures, one or two friends worth the name, someone to love and someone to love you, a cat or dog and a pipe or two enough to eat, enough to wear and a little more than enough to drink. For thirst is a dangerous thing."



Marlow weir



Clevedon



A couple fishing at Beale Park



Justin of Pirate Pizza at Hurley

down river.

Lured by a 'boat hire' sign, I leave the great lawn and descend a footpath through woods to the river. It's a beautiful walk. I meet Paul and Alan, two National Trust employee's getting rowing boats ready for the day. I tell them that I'm travelling the Thames following *Three Men In a Boat*. "But there's only one of you," says Paul.

They decline my suggestion to shut up shop and head off down the river with me to the pub! So, there's still just one man in a boat today.

Hurley Riverside Park is my stop for the next two nights. From here I visit Marlow and Henley-on-Thames. Jay (Jerome calls himself Jay in the book) describes Marlow as "one of the pleasantest river centres I know of," with "many quaint nooks and corners". It is difficult to detract from that a century or more later. Marlow is chic, has buildings to rival any Cotswold

town, has artisans and boutiques in abundance and is home to one of 217 bridges across The Thames and to one of its forty-five locks and weirs. A walk, or cycle, on the Thames Path from here to Bisham Abbey is as rewarding as it is easy. In the High Street, the branch of WH Smith's has a frontage to rival a country hotel, and in a tailor's shop window a suit is reduced from £915 to a mere £455! Marlow is that kind of place.

Henley too has a certain quintessential English air about it. Famed for its regatta, the oldest in the world, 'Henley' is a July fixture in the calendar of the great and good. On the water, some of the world's greatest rowing athletes compete for cherished

prizes. Close to the water, Henley's River and Rowing Museum is a popular attraction. It combines the history of rowing (from the ancient Greeks' Trireme to the modern Olympics) with a history of the River Thames.

There's a permanent 'Wind in the Willows' exhibition too, that recounts the antics of Mole, Ratty, Toad and Badger. It's great for children, especially because the entire section devoted to the exhibition resembles the character's

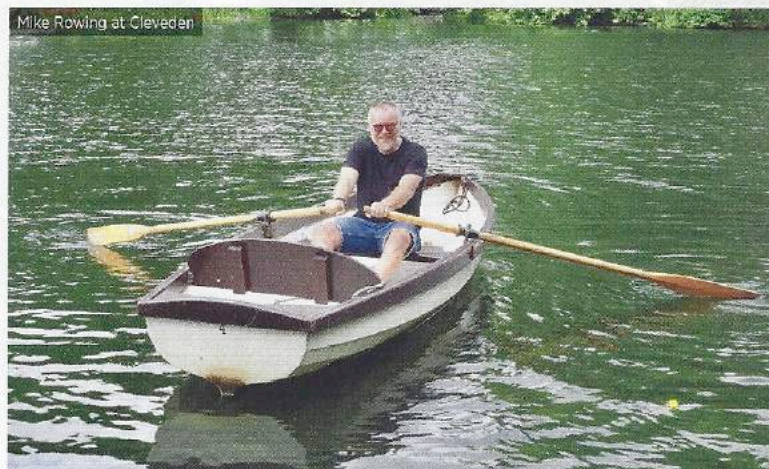
"PACKING UP MY CAMPERVAN GEORGE TO LEAVE A SITE SOMETIMES FILLS ME WITH DREAD."



Gardens at Clevedon



A Victorian double-skulled skiff



Mike Rowing at Clevedon

“THEY DECLINE MY SUGGESTION TO SHUT UP SHOP AND HEAD OFF DOWN THE RIVER WITH ME TO THE PUB!”

underground world. It's dark and twisting, and only the smell of damp earth is missing.

Though not here in Jerome's day—our Queen opened it officially in 1998—the museum does house a Victorian doubled-scull skiff similar to that used by the Three Men. The boat used by Steve Redgrave and Matthew Pinsent at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games hangs in the museum's education centre to inspire future generations. The rowers were the only Britons to win gold that year.

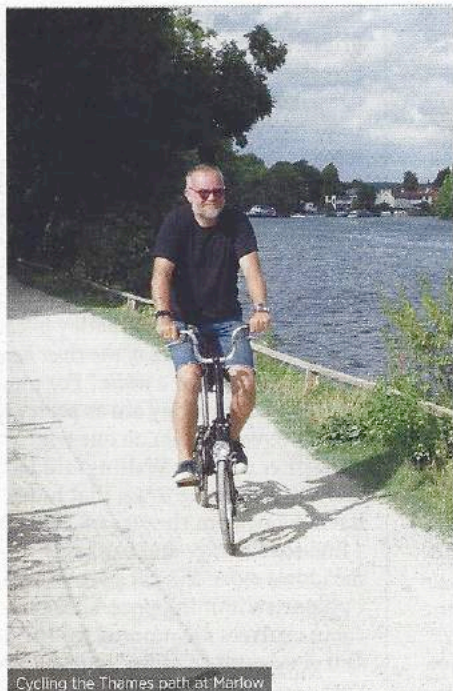
Later, whilst strolling through the town, I find Jonkers Rare Book Shop. I have to drop in. “Do you have a first edition of *Three Men In A Boat?*” I ask Sam, a director. She says they haven't got one presently, but she clearly knows the book well: “They were in a pale blue



George outside The Bull



The lock and weir at Goring



Cycling the Thames path at Marlow

linen cover and their condition does vary. It is difficult to get one in very good condition, but we do get them from time to time." Sam tells me that prices vary from between £200 and £600. That's not bad for a book that cost just a couple of shillings when it was first published.

During the journey from Henley, we park at Sonning—"the most fairy-like little nook on the whole river"—for lunch at "The Bull". Jay says the pub "is a veritable picture of an old country inn, with green, square courtyard in front" and "with low, quaint rooms and latticed windows, and awkward stairs and winding passages." It's just the same today, and the walk from it through the churchyard to the towpath and on to Sonning Lock is sublime.

IN A TAILOR'S SHOP WINDOW, A SUIT IS REDUCED FROM £915 TO A MERE £455! MARLOW IS THAT KIND OF PLACE."



Clivedon House



Henley On Thames



“THE WALK THROUGH THE CHURCHYARD TO THE TOWPATH AND ON TO SONNING LOCK IS SUBLIME.”

Back at Hurley later, I walk out of the site onto the riverbank adjacent. From a barge, Justin, a trained chef, makes and sells fresh pizza here each Wednesday. He moves between Hurley, Marlow and Henley. “I’ve been doing this for three years, but have had the boat for years and years,” he says. I wonder what the *Three Men* would have made of pizza by the river. Alas, Justin tells me that due to demand he has run out of dough. No pizza for me then, but there’ll be another chance, I’m sure. The site is one to return to again and again.

Following the Thames as closely as we can, George and I spend our final day travelling upstream, through Shiplake and Pangbourne. At Beale Park there’s a peaceful path along the water’s edge to enjoy. I linger for a while watching an older couple fishing. The sun beats down and the fish seem lazy, not wanting to bite. There’s nothing doing whilst I’m watching. “Fishing not catching”, I think fisherman call it, but even so, I can see the pleasure in sitting quietly in this

spot whiling away an hour or two.

Our next stop Goring, on the east bank, is a delightful village. Across a bridge on the opposite side of the river, Streatley is equally alluring. Jerome describes them as “*charming places to stay at for a few days.*” He was right, and it holds true today.

We are due in Oxford tonight and I want to stop in Wallingford before then. So, after an hour we press on. The *Three Men* intended to make Wallingford the same day too but stayed two nights at Streatley because “*the sweet smiling face of the river here lured us to linger for a while.*” For me, Goring and Streatley are as pretty as any place we’ve seen on our trip.

Further upriver, Wallingford is another attractive town that hides itself away from the stream. There’s a fine road bridge and bankside meadows close to a car park and an outdoor swimming pool. Close by cabin cruisers are moored for the day, and youngsters paddle board on, and swim in, the warm clear water. I could

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



Sunning Lock

"THE GENTLE ROLLING VALLEY, OPEN COUNTRYSIDE AND PEACEFUL, FARAWAY RIVERBANKS OF OXFORDSHIRE SIT IN CONTRAST TO THE LIVELY KINGSTON AND HENLEY."

easily spend more time here just watching the world go by.

My tour finishes at Oxford Caravan and Camping Club site from where I head home the following morning. The gentle rolling valley, open countryside and peaceful, faraway riverbanks of Oxfordshire sit in contrast to the lively Kingston and Henley.

After two weeks cramped in a little boat, including a second week full of inclement weather the Three Men had had enough: "Here's

to Three Men well out of a boat," Harris toasted.

Not for me though. True, we've had great weather, but nonetheless Old Father Thames is enchanting. Along its non-tidal reaches one can sit listening only to the sound of birds calling and reeds rustling in a gentle breeze, or in contrast enjoy the pomp, history and bustle of its riverside towns. For campervanning, the river and its banks have everything. And as for a toast at the end of my trip along the Thames. Well, that's an easy one. "Here's to the next time." ■