SWEET LASS, SWEET VIEW

by GILES WORSLEY

TO walk out onto Richmond Hill and look south-west down the Thames is to drink in a view that Leonard Knyff would still recognise from the 1720s and Turner from the 1820s. There is Ham House with its grid of avenues; there, jewel-like Marble Hill. In the far distance, it is true, are a handful of tower blocks. To the right Hounslow begins to intrude. But the overwhelming impression is that of a sylvan landscape. It is hard to believe that one is in the middle of a great metropolis.

Nor is the impression all that deceptive. Look at a map of the river from Hampton Court down to Kew Bridge and you will see great wedges of green intruding into the dull grey of urban sprawl: royal (or formerly royal) parks such as Kew, Richmond, Bushy and Hampton Court; old commonland such as that at Sheen, Ham and indeed Wimbledon; the gardens and parks of once-proud aristocratic villas: Marble Hill, Radnor House, Ham House and, the most remarkable survival of all, Syon House, still owned by the Duke of Northumberland.

This is where 17th- and 18th-century aristocrats, bankers, poets and painters escaped from the crowded city to their villas, creating an English version of the Venetan Brenta. It is the landscape of Alexander Pope where the English pastoral tradition of poetry was crossed with gardening to create one of England's great contributions to western civilisation, the ideal of landscape gardening.

That this landscape should have survived largely intact is a remarkable achievement, partly of planning but mainly of belligerence and active philanthropy by locals over many decades. Today, the broad strokes of that landscape are secure. No one would threaten to demolish Ham House and build over its park as they once tried to do at Marble Hill. But, at a local level, it remains under intense pressure, and, although individual items are cherished, the interrelation of the whole is all too often forgotten. This should alter if the proposed Landscape Strategy for the Thames between Hampton Court and Kew is successful, a strategy which turns conservation from being a defensive weapon against change into an active approach towards land management.

The strategy is a child of the Royal Fine Art Commission, growing out of the exhibition of ideas for the Thames through London which the commission organised in May 1991. The upper reaches of the Thames were given over to a firm of landscape architects, Kim Wilkie Environmental Design, whose proposals created so much local interest that the commission decided to develop them further. A special Thames Landscape Committee served by Mr Wilkie was set up and the Landscape Strategy for the Thames

(*Top*) 1—The surviving fragment of the great mile-long avenue that stretches past Ham House towards Richmond. It could be restored. (*Left*) 2—The Syon House boathouse with Twickenham church behind

Parks, villas and gardens still line the Thames between Hampton Court and Kew Bridge, but if this 18th-century landscape is to be preserved and enhanced into the 21st century it needs to be managed as an entity. That is the goal of the Thames Landscape Strategy, published here for the first time.

3—Looking north across Richmond with Richmond Old Deer Park and Kew Gardens in the distance

presents its initial proposals. They make excitingly positive reading.

At the heart of the strategy lies the need to understand the existing landscape. To the English, who like their countryside pure, the Thames around Richmond has always been something of an anomaly, a densely developed suburban landscape since the late 17th century, formed of villages, villas, parks and farms, rather than the extensive countryside of the traditional country house. But it is thanks to this suburban tradition that the landscape has managed to survive the encroachment of more intensive housing in the 19th and 20th centuries without being too severely compromised.

To understand such a landscape requires particular skills—skills which the young disciplines of garden history and landscape architecture have been able to provide. Thanks to the work of Mr Wilkie and of the Garden History Society, which is carrying out the historical research for the committee as a special project partly

Heritage, the complex inter-relationships of the Thames landscape are being unlocked. Once these are understood, proposals can be put forward suggesting how they can be preserved and, where they have been eroded, how they can be restored.

At the same time such information provides the framework around which the wider interests and potential conflicts of those who use the landscape can be assessed, everything from dog walking through nature conservation to the commercial use of the river.

Many of the problems faced by this area of the Thames spring from divided ownership and local government control. By fortunate chance the London Borough of Richmond-upon-Thames straddles the Thames and controls the key part of the area under consideration. The borough's active support has been vital in allowing the strategy to develop beyond a pipedream. But, in all, four local authorities intrude on the landscape, together with a myriad of

have tended not to look beyond their own boundaries.

Yet decisions made by one borough can often intrude on another. For instance, Hampton Court Palace lies in the borough of Richmond, but the three great avenues that radiate from it have views across the river into the borough of Kingston. One is aligned on Kingston church tower. Thus the borough of Kingston, like all the boroughs and landowners, needs to consider the effect of any decision on its neighbour. The Thames Landscape Strategy provides a vehicle for doing this by breaking that introspection and making everyone realise that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

In knitting the landscape together the restoration of vistas and avenues plays a key part. John Rocque's 1741 *New and Accurate Survey of the Country round London* provides a fascinating survey of the area around Richmond, showing particularly the dominance of the avenues that formed a grid around

4—The view from Henry VIII's mound, little changed in centuries

5—Radnor Gardens. They would benefit from integration into the wider landscape

still survive, although sometimes they have been truncated, their full extent forgotten.

Chief among these is the mile-long avenue that once ran parallel to the Thames across the front of Ham House from Richmond Hill to Radnor Gardens in Twickenham. The part immediately in front of Ham House survives (Fig 1), but elsewhere it had disappeared or been obscured. Thus, the fact that the war memorial in Radnor Gardens (Fig 5) was aligned on the Star and Garter Home for ex-servicemen in Richmond, on the vista formed by this avenue, had been forgotten, and scrub had been allowed to grow up on the river bank obscuring the view.

The Landscape Strategy should provide the opportunity to open up the view and, in the long term, encourage the replanting of the avenue by bringing together landowners and grant-giving bodies. The Orleans House Octagon is another building hidden from the river by scrub.

Similarly, Ham House, now owned by the National Trust, lies at the centre of the area, but for much of this century it has tended to look inwards. The view from the terrace of the garden towards Richmond Hill has been obscured by scrub on neighbouring land, and the spread of trees along the edge of the Thames means that it is possible to sail down the river without even realising that Ham House exists. All this is beginning to change as the National Trust looks at Ham House in its wider context, helped by neighbouring landowners over whom it has no control but who will share a common interest under the Thames Landscape Strategy. For instance, clearing the trees along the Thames will also open up the view of the icecream kiosk apparently placed on axis with the house on the other side of the river. The Landscape Strategy should give a reason for that to be moved.

It is not only divisions of landownership and planning control that have made the broader management of the landscape difficult. Conservation, recreation, wildlife and the commercial use of the river are often assumed to be incompatible. The Port of London Authority, for instance, is responsible for maintaining the river as far as Teddington Lock and has just spent £4 million on restoring the Richmond Lock, while the National Rivers Authority has control of the river upstream. But, in the past, they tended to concentrate on the river alone and were less concerned with the impact their actions might have on wildlife or the broader landscape. Dog walkers fear that plans to restore historic planting will spoil their favourite parks. Commercial users fear that rising interest in conservation will squeeze them out.

The Thames Landscape Strategy is showing that these apparently rival interests need not be incompatible. New approaches to river-bank management work in harmony with nature instead of trying to tame it. Restoring historic planting can improve a view, not spoil it, and a broader strategy can help fill in those gaps where an extra bit of path could make for a more satisfying walk. The Thames has always been a working river and that remains an important part of its heritage which the strategy would

6—Looking east along the Thames towards Richmond, with Marble Hill House on the left and Ham House on the right

seek to maintain. It is important, for instance, to keep the boat-building yard at Twickenham.

Often problems have arisen or landscape been neglected because one body has assumed that another would object to some proposal. Thus, scrub has been allowed to grow up along the bank of the Thames in Richmond Old Deer Park, now occupied by the Royal Mid-Surrey Golf Club. This has obscured one of the obelisks which align with the Kew Royal Observatory (Fig 7). It was assumed that English Nature would object to this being cleared. In fact, they were delighted with the proposal.

The essence of the Strategy lies in bringing people together, involving all the disparate elements who have an interest in this part of London. Extensive consultation with everyone, from national bodies such as English Nature, through local authorities, landowners and local amenity societies, to find out what people want and what worries them, has been a key part of its work so far. Such a strategy can only succeed if it carries local people with it. Where changes are imposed from above they will often be opposed—changes that might well be accepted, even welcomed, if the locals feel involved. The results of the consultation have been overwhelmingly positive.

The strategy should also serve as the key to unlock other long-standing problems. Among Twickenham's inhabitants, Horace Walpole stands out. His Gothic confection Strawberry Hill was a focal point of Twickenham society. To the surprise of many, Strawberry Hill still survives, but is cut off from the river and barely accessible. The monks who occupy it are looking for a new use for Walpole's creation. The Thames Landscape Strategy provides an opportunity to consider what the best solution would be. Similarly Pope's grotto survives under the main road at Twickenham. It would be a remarkable achievement to restore it.

7—The obelisk in Richmond Old Deer Park: lost in the undergrowth

The preliminary stage of the Strategy is now over, the initial research, consultation and proposals. These now have to be made concrete and included in Local Plans and Unitary Development Plans. The implementation of individual elements will inevitably depend on the resources of landowners and the availability of grants. But, once the structure is in place, people will be keen to get the details right, even though implementation may be stretched over decades.

The success of the Thames Landscape Strategy should have a broader impact than just on one area of London. It heralds a new positive approach to conservation. Thus it is excellent that the Royal Fine Art Commission, the Countryside Commission and English Heritage have each pledged funds to turn the present sketched-out ideas into detailed proposals. If the strategy works on the Thames, similar strategies could be made to work elsewhere.

Photographs: 1, 2, 4, 5, and 7, Mark Fiennes; 3 and 6, Nic Barlow.