

By Thames and Kennet.
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BY THAMES AND KENNET

A PILGRIMAGE OF THE THAMES. By DONALD MAXWELL. (The Centenary Press. 7s. 6d. net.)

KENNET COUNTRY. By FRED. S. THACKER. Pictures by THOMAS DERRICK. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell. 15s. net.)

The Thames and his tributaries have been much written about of recent years without their interest being exhausted, and both these books have something fresh to add to the growing store of information on the subject.

The Thames is a river of many aspects—a fisherman's river, an artist's river, an oarsman's river, a river of commerce. Parts of Mr. Maxwell's book were contributed to a Church newspaper: hence, no doubt, his rather unexpected presentation of it in the light of an Anglo-Catholic river, and the phenomenon, otherwise somewhat inexplicable, of a book about the Thames which leaves out Hampton Court and Cardinal Wolsey while devoting a whole chapter to Littlemore and John Henry Newman and another to the Clewer Sisters, and omits the living romance of the Port of London in favour of an account of sectarian differences in an East End parish seventy-five years ago. Mr. Maxwell, as usual his own competent illustrator, has set out to look for things "not mentioned in the ordinary guides." By no means all his matter can be thus classified. A good deal of it, indeed, is very familiar. The Bisham Abbey ghost, for example, and the tale of Pedlar's Acre are surely among the commonplaces of Thames-side. Nor is St. Patrick's Stream, one of the best-known of all the river's side lanes, to be looked on as a "discovery." But he is always a keen observer, and whenever he breaks fresher ground, as in his chapters on Southfleet and its ancient church, and the Pilgrim's Ferry between West Thurrock and Greenhithe, he has plenty that is new and interesting to record. It is, or was, customary, he says, for watermen to take off their hats to Lambeth Palace "for luck." If this is so, it is a most picturesque survival, and it is to be hoped that the "interesting stranger" from whom he had it was a reliable informant.

As usual, Mr. Maxwell revels in place-names and their meanings with the characteristic zest of the amateur philologist. But it is surprising to find him, so to speak, brought up with a round turn over so simple an example as Abingdon. "Don," he observes, "is the Saxon for a hill, and Abingdon lies on a marshy level, only a few feet above the water"—forgetting that "don," as he himself mentions a few pages back, is equally a root-word meaning "river."

The Kennet is the most considerable in point of length of all the Thames tributaries, and it is also particularly rich in natural beauty, in interest for the angler and in historical and other associations. Mr. Thacker follows the course of English rivers with an explorer's zest, and he has made full use of the scope afforded by his various visits to the Kennet valley for original and painstaking research into a subject he has made peculiarly his own. He has thrown his net both far and wide and gathered in from old municipal archives, church registers, the books of canal companies and every possible kind of source a mass of information about the valley of the Kennet from its source as one of the most charming of sparkling chalk streams to its prosaic and somewhat unlovely junction with the Thames at Reading. Of Reading itself, a place usually somewhat neglected by the topographer by reason of its outward air of modernity, he has much to tell, as also of Newbury, Hungerford and Marlborough. That curious survival the Hungerford Hocktide Court is dealt with at some length. These observances are generally supposed to commemorate Alfred's victory over the Danes, but a very similar function takes place at Overton, in Hampshire, at a quite different time of the year. In other respects Mr. Thacker perhaps gives Hungerford rather less than its due. The church, it is true, is undistinguished to the point of ugliness: but it is at least no worse than the gingerbread atrocity at Theale for which Mr. Thacker has a misplaced tenderness; and he might well have climbed Ham Hill for its noble view of the "coloured counties" backed by the austere line of the chalk downs, and visited Eddington for the sake of the lovely reach of river, known to the angler, which lies above its rather forbidding mill. Aldermaston, most delightful of Kennet villages, unless it be perhaps Chilton Foliat, receives its share of notice. Mr. Thacker must have been in a hurry when he visited the church there, or he would surely not have missed that delightful touch of nature on the Forster monument, the little dog that worries perpetually at its mistress's stone skirts. There is a reference to a curious local saying that "when clubs are trumps, Aldermaston House shakes." This, surely, is only a variant of the much better-known version of the saying, "Spades were trumps when Basing House fell," probably a punning reference to the tools with which the tunneling attackers found their way into that stubbornly defended mansion. The Aldermaston form of it seems oddly pointless, though it is true that the ownership of the property did once turn, if not on the fall of the cards, at any rate on the toss of a coin.

Mr. Thomas Derrick's line drawings at their best, as in that of Newbury Bridge, are delightful. There is a useful index, but a map of a more practical kind than that which forms the end papers is a felt want.