

# River Thames, Culham,

## General Information

The Thames is the second longest river in the United Kingdom and the longest river entirely in England. It rises at Thames Head in Gloucestershire, and flows into the North Sea at the Thames Estuary. The Thames is 215 miles (346 km) long. It's usually quoted source is at Thames Head (at grid reference ST980994), about a mile north of the village of Kemble and near the town of Cirencester, in the Cotswolds.

Culham Lock is a lock on the River Thames in England close to Culham, Oxfordshire. <http://www.culhamvillage.org.uk/> It is on a lock cut to the north of the main stream, which approaches the large village of Sutton Courtenay. <http://www.suttoncourtenay.co.uk/>

Culham Lock is one the many locks on the River Thames and as early as the Domesday Book there is a record of a mill on the Thames nearby at Sutton Courtenay, where the river originally meandered. However, in those days the lock (probably a flash weir) was difficult to negotiate by boat due to the shallow river - and the tolls were said to be the highest on the Thames, making it unpopular with merchants using the river.

The lock was built of stone by the Thames Navigation Commission in 1809.

The associated weirs are on the old course of the river under the massive causeway which separates the millstream from picturesque Sutton Pools. The causeway is very old and was thought to have been built by Saxon labour

**Map ref** - O/S sheet 164. 508949

## Facilities

There is a free car park at the lock but with a height barrier, with 6ft 8in head room.

**Licence** – A Thames Licence is required (<http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/homeandleisure/recreation/boating/31605.aspx> )

Canoe England Membership includes a Thames licence (take your membership card and sticker with you)

**Trip Length** - 9 miles. This can be a 2-3 hour trip but it's up to you as to how long you want to be and enjoy your time out on the water!

## Special note:-

This trail is suitable for most types of canoes and kayaks and paddlers used to slow moving water, it is worth remembering that the return trip is against the river flow and the current can become quite strong after rain.

## Start and Finish

This paddle starts and finishes at Culham Lock

[http://www.visitthames.co.uk/poi\\_detail/184/2135/poi\\_detail.html](http://www.visitthames.co.uk/poi_detail/184/2135/poi_detail.html) on the River Thames near Abingdon. <http://www.abingdon.gov.uk/Core/AbingdonTC/Pages/Default.aspx>

Culham is a 'shrunken village' in that it is much smaller today than its original size. There are suggestions as to why this has happened and one is that the Black Death and poor harvests following wet summers in the 14th century led to a population decrease.

- The ingress point is above the lock.
- The journey starts by paddling up stream to the point where Culham Cut joins the main course of the river.
- Turn left onto the old river passing several weirs, just before reaching the mill at the end of this section there are several portages on the left, which allow you to launch into the lower Sutton Pools. This area is well worth exploring before proceeding down stream and rejoining the main river below Culham Lock.
- After passing the 'delightful' views of Didcot power station <http://www.rwe.com/web/cms/en/97538/rwe-npower/about-us/our-businesses/power-generation/didcot/> and passing under a large girder railway bridge, Clifton Hampden Weir appears on your right. There is a small floating portage point on your right immediately after passing the weir; it is very easy to miss! Proceed onto the bank and through a gap in the fence, launching back into the weir stream at the end of the weir retaining wall.
- You are now in the Long Wittenham back water. <http://thames.me.uk/s01420.htm> This little used section is the old river course and winds it way back to Clifton Hampden Bridge <http://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/579422> by-passing Clifton Lock. [http://www.visithames.co.uk/text/210/clifton\\_lock.html](http://www.visithames.co.uk/text/210/clifton_lock.html) Clifton Hampden Bridge is the ideal lunch stop, there is limited parking in the near by village, if you only want to make this a one way 5 mile paddle.
- The return trip is now an upstream 4 mile paddle. This time fork to the right and take the lock cut, either portaging or passing through Clifton Lock and then following the river back to Culham.
- Culham Lock is unfortunately one of the most 'canoe unfriendly' locks to get out at, as the staging is about 4ft above the water level. Fortunately the lock keeper is very friendly, it is well worth having a word with him at the start of the trip giving him some idea of the time of your return, he has always allowed us to lock up to the higher level to get out and take the easier route back to the car park.

With thanks to Robert Yeowell for this trail