

THAMES TRADITIONAL BOAT FESTIVAL

Liquid history

Each year, the week after the world-famous Henley Regatta, the River Thames at Henley plays host to the Thames Traditional Boat Festival.

Now in its 45th year, the festival features hundreds of Thames traditional craft and thousands of visitors, including many from abroad. The website describes it as “celebrating the best in British boatbuilding and craftsmanship, evoking the nostalgia of boating from a bygone era”.

What constitutes a traditional boat? It must be built of timber, or riveted steel (not welded), or canvas. Plywood boats also qualify, providing the hull is planked clinker (overlapping planks).

There were hundreds such boats: skiffs, gigs, punts, launches and a type of craft traditionally linked to the Thames – ‘slipper stern’ launches. Slipper stern launches have a unique characteristic: their sloping stern. This unusual design best shows its unique properties at speed, travelling at up to 12 miles per hour (10.5 knots) without a breaking wash.



The event holds competitions between craft. According to the organisers the judging is ‘microscopically precise’.

In 1943 the Thames was compared disparagingly with the Mississippi by an American in the *Daily Mail* newspaper, to which the liberal politician John Burns had replied “The Thames is liquid history”.

After a day spent at the festival, it is easy to come away to the words of Kenneth Grahame, who relied so much on this stretch of the river for inspiration. He wrote, “There is nothing – absolutely nothing – half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.” And so it is, here at Henley. [BNZ](#)

www.tradboatfestival.com

ABOVE Enjoying the charms of steam propulsion aboard *Duet*.

BELOW Another old timer processes up the Thames at Henley.

