



THE STEAM PACKET

FREEHOUSE

The Steam Packet History

The River

The Thames was once a teeming thoroughfare with wharves and jetties lining the banks. Each day the tide rises and falls by some twenty feet. For half the day, the water flows in one direction and for the other half in the other direction, with a strange moment of stillness in between while the tide turns. Such is the surge engendered that the force of the current in the centre of the river presents a formidable challenge to a lone rower and would defeat any swimmer. In spite of our attempt to tame it with the flood barrier, the Thames manifests a force of nature that deserves our respect, especially as the water level rises year by year.

You might think that the river has become merely a conduit for drainage and an itinerary for tourist trips these days, yet do not forget that this mighty river is the very reason for the location of London, here on the banks of the Thames.



Historic view of the River Thames

The Steam Packet were a British blues band formed in 1965 by Long John Baldry with Rod Stewart, Julie Driscoll, and organist Brian Auger.



Steam Packet Album from 1965

However, in the context relevant to us, a steam packet or packet ship was originally a vessel employed to carry Post Office mail packets to and from British embassies, colonies and outposts. In sea transport, a packet service is a regular, scheduled service, carrying freight and passengers.

The Woolwich Steam Packet Company (later London Steamboat Company) operated between 1834 and 1888 and offered steamer services from central London to Woolwich and later to Kent, Essex and Suffolk. One of its ships, the Princess Alice, sadly sank after a collision near Woolwich with the loss of almost 700 lives in the greatest disaster in the history of British coastal cruising.

Steam packets are still used today. The Isle of Man Steam Packet Company Limited is the oldest continuously operating passenger shipping company in the world, celebrating its 180th anniversary in 2010. Before the war they had a fleet of five steamers, two of which, Mona's Queen and Fenella were sadly sunk in 1940 at Dunkirk; now they operate a fleet of 3 running a regular service from Douglas on the Isle of Man to England, Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The Steam Packet

Our pub's name comes from the steam launches which used to dock at Kew Pier opposite the pub as part of the regular steam packet service up the river. The earliest censor the pub appears in is 1851 at which time Charles Goff who was 45 was listed as the Victualler. He lived there with his wife Margaret Ann Goff, daughters Esther (the eldest at 20 years old), Elizabeth and Luerar (aged 2) and sons John, Charles and Robert who were all labourers.

In 1881 Charles was still at the pub but his wife now appears to be a much younger lady called Pheobe at just 41 years to his now 75 and in the following census of 1890 Charles is no longer listed; a George Aldred now takes the helm.



This is the earliest photograph we can trace showing the building at the time when our neighbours to the right, Pier House Laundry was under

development; the lovely listed façade was retained whilst offices and commercial premises were built behind it.

Pier House Laundry was said to be the largest in London in its day. The building that stands today was built in stages and dates from two periods – 1904 and 1914 and is similar in style.

Pier House Laundry became highly successful under the management of the Simon family, with 200 employees before the introduction of automation.

There were 19 collection shops at the time of its closure in 1973 and the premises covered over an acre and a half.

Our neighbouring house to the left is Rose Cottage. Nancy Mitford, the famous novelist and one of the Mitford sisters moved to Rose Cottage in the 1930s while married to her first husband, the Hon. Peter Rodd. It is said that during this period, she wrote 'The Pursuit of Love', published in 1945, although she does not appear to have used the Strand as the setting in any of her books.

She divorced her husband and left Rose Cottage but always remembered it fondly. In a letter to an aunt some years later she wrote "Dear Rose Cottage, I've never liked a house more – I often think of it and the reflection of the river on my bedroom ceiling".



Nancy Mitford

We have had some other notable neighbours over the years; the author Margaret Kennedy lived for a while at Strand Green House and made it the setting for her 1924 bestseller, *The Constant Nymph*. Press baron Hugh Cudlipp, poet Dylan Thomas, actor Donald Pleasance and the musician Midge Ure lived at No.70 (Zachary House) in the 1980s.

The German-born painter Johann Zoffany lived at 65 Strand on the Green from 1790 until his death in 1810. It's said that he sometimes used local fishermen as his models, for example as Christ's disciples.



Painting by Johann Zoffany

The Strand-on-the-Green

Our 'Strand-on-the-Green' was simply 'Strand' from the 13th to the 17th century, from the old English word for a bank or shore. It was a fishing community with a ferry service to Kew and one of the medieval settlements that comprised Chiswick. In its early days there was no path along the riverbank, just a series of interconnecting wharves.

In the 16th century Strand-on-the-Green allegedly consisted of 'thirteen houses, fourteen cuckolds and never a house between'. (The extra cuckold was a son who lived with his parents.) The saying was first recorded in 1602 and subsequently appeared in several dictionaries of proverbs.

During the 18th century, the village attracted wealthy residents who built some grand homes here and soon the public houses all came into existence too.

The opening of the first Kew Bridge in 1759 improved accessibility, increased land values and drew some of George III's courtiers when the king was living at Kew Palace.

By 1800, a continuous footpath ran along the bank, although it was liable to flooding at high tide. Orchards and market gardens lay behind the waterfront properties but by the end of the 19th century, these were succumbing to building development and fishing was dying out as the prime livelihood of local families. An increasing number of alleyways provided links to the waterfront.

Chiswick Council erected the borough's first municipal housing in 1903 and the whole locality was built up by the 1930s. During World War II, 41 houses in Thames Road and Magnolia Road were destroyed and a further 60 were severely damaged when a parachute mine landed on 21st September 1941. Some bomb-damaged properties were replaced after the Second World War and older cottages were renovated.

Over 100 human skulls were reportedly found in the Thames opposite Strand-on the-Green during the 19th century and although they have since disappeared, dating of other similar river skulls suggests they may have dated from c.600 BC.

We are thrilled to be breathing life back into this building and returning it to the historic roots of 'The Steam Packet' Inn for many to enjoy for years to come.