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The river as an arena for leisure and pleasure in Early Modern England

Rivers have always been highways and frontiers. They have had, and continue to have, multivariate uses – ranging from sources of water and sources of energy, to the basis of social power. Rivers have also been used as metaphor for most aspects of being human. Their rich symbolism and liminality can be used to explain why, historically, they have played such an interesting role as a venue for leisure. Beyond this, the particular leisure which was executed on or by rivers had many unique characteristics. For example, leisure centred around rivers involved more fluid borders between class and gender than that which one would otherwise would expect in early modern England.

Unsurprisingly, rivers were considered dangerous during this period. Coroners' records from the 16th century show that as many as 53 per cent of all unintentional injury deaths were caused by drowning (Towner and Towner, 2000:102-105). People who worked on the river were also considered to be dangerous. Bargees, watermen and river gypsies had a reputation for violence and theft, and were often referred to in the same way as witches. The river itself held damp chills, vapours, and fog - all considered unhealthy and dangerous (Ackroyd, 2007:183 and 221). Flood records show that even meandering rivers, although most of the time fairly benign, could suddenly swallow up fields and houses, and tear away bridges. The river was physically unstable, but also eluded social control. An example of this lack of social control, is that everyone felt free to swear on the river¹, and a term for swearing was actually "water-language"(ibid).

But although the river was dangerous, it was also purifying. A well known practice during witches' trials was to see whether the accused would float or sink when thrown in the river. However it is perhaps less well known that the river was also used to purify bad language – or water-language. A ducking chair was attached to a rope, and any foul mouthed 'scold' would be ducked in the water three times to ensure her purification (Fletcher, 1995:273, MacFarlane, 1847:68).

Whilst the river was considered purifying and sometimes benign, it was mostly considered dangerous, and the people who mastered it, disreputable (Wiggelsworth and Foot, 1992:43). There

¹ Jerome three men in a boat

was, however, one exception. Lock-keepers were considered jovial and amicable characters. Perhaps this is because when the river was directed, held, sluiced and thereby tamed, it became less dangerous, and so the people who mastered its tame state were also considered less threatening. This might also be connected to the period when the river becomes an important arena for leisure in Early modern England.

Although use of the concept 'leisure' in pre-modern historiography is contested and often referred to as an anachronism (Burke, 1995, Rabinow and Rose, 2003), the first definition of leisure is actually to be found in the early 14th century. It had the same meaning as today, which is freedom of work. Furthermore, the term 'weekend' had already entered the English language in 1638 (www.merriam-webster.com). Sunday had been more or less been a day of leisure since Christianity arrived in England in the third century. If we take a long-term perspective we can in fact see the evolution of a leisure conscious population sometime between 1300 and 1800. This development might be related to social control and civilising processes (Elias and Howell, 1999). Whatever the fundamental dynamics might be, there were certainly a range of chosen arenas for this leisure. But the special lure of riverine and riparian landscapes was clearly evident, from the middle ages onwards. Although England is an island, more people had access to its rivers than its ocean. Rivers were used as sites for leisure long before the Victorians regarded the seaside fashionable, for example. Certainly, fairly benign rivers were needed for these early ways of pursuing leisure. What happened when the river became an increasingly popular venue for recreation, and what kinds of recreation evolved?

Angling

The first surviving important work we know of angling is the "Treatyse of Fysshynge Wyth an Angle" supposedly written by Dame Juliana Burners in 1496. This work contains beautiful illustrations of tackle and a clear woodcut of an angler using a rod with line and float (Radcliffe, 1921). The next important book about fishing is Izaak Walton's *Compleat Angler* (1653). The compleat angler is considered one of the most important English books written, and only the bible has been published in more editions. Piscatore, Izaak Walton's angler, approaches nature both as a philosopher and scientist (Mostue, 1999:53). Izaak Walton regards angling as the perfect compromise between the social need for peace and civility, and the individual need for excitement and fraternity (Franklin, 2001). This perfect compromise is conducted beside the water but still, interacting with it. By exploring the various ways of mastering the river with rod and line, the river as a venue for contemplative leisure is established.

Swimming

Another leisurely way of mastering the river was learning how to swim. Everard Digby wrote "*A short Introduction for to learnne to Swimme*" in latin in 1587. Digby was later plagiarised by William Percey who published the *Compleat Swimmer* in 1658, an unacknowledged English translation of Digby's swimming manual. "To proceed to declare the ends of swimming, they are many: some delight herin, to cool themselves from the parching beams of the Sun, to clearife their bodies of sweat, to whiten and purifie the skin: others use this excellent Art for the delight and pleasure of the exercise, others practise this Art to fortifie themselves for the danger of waters" (...).(Percey, 1658:3) Reading the *Compleat Swimmer* shows how the river has been used as a place of enjoyment even to children and adults who cannot swim, as they would bathe in it. Although we have no statistics of swimming ability in early modern England, it was most probably not a general skill (Orme, 1983). Yet books like the *Complete Swimmer* and the *Art of Swimming* contain the first traces of an ideology aimed at actually mastering this activity. Swimming was seen as the total embodiment of the river. Not only was it purifying in a practical as well as spiritual way, it also involved a total mastery of the element. Water became controllable not only to man's mind, as in building bridges, mills, and canals through engineering, but also to mans body. Previously, most bathing had been mainly passive ducking, but through swimming one embraced and embodied the element actively. When entering the liminal element of the river, one showed perfect mastery of the natural world. English rivers seemed perfectly suited for swimming, perhaps this is why swimming as a sport was established here first, and as we move into the high period of sporting development, in the 19th century, formally organised swimming emerged in England ahead of any other country. As early as 1837 the first swimming competitions were established (Love, 2007).

Rowing and Sculling

Strangely, boating for leisure was established later than both angling and swimming. Angling was a well established past time in the late 1400s, swimming and bathing became a pastime in the late 1500's. It was probably not until the 18th century that rowing emerged as a leisure activity, certainly in terms of being organised in any formal way. In 1715 Thomas Doggett established a prize for watermen to race on the Tideway in London. The first formal regatta took place in 1775. Participating boats were referred to as "vessels of pleasure", emphasising that these boats were not working boats (Halladay, 1990). Interestingly, as early as 1814, only 40 years after men started competing formally, a regatta held in Chester included a race for women. The following year the first college boat club was organized at Oxford University, and in 1829, Oxford and Cambridge Universities started competing (Wigglesworth, 1986). Interestingly, ordinary people "took on" the

suspect and dangerous element of the watermen, and started mastering the danger of the river, while at the same time pursuing what had now become a laudable pastime. In addition rowing and sculling was healthy for body and soul, and didn't involve drinking and other vices. In 1886 F.J. Furnivall founded the Hammersmith Sculling Club for Girls and Men due to his belief that "the exclusion of women from aquatic sport was pernicious". He encouraged working class women to row, and espoused sculling over sweeps.

So we can see that the river, in relation to rowing as leisure, was a special social site when it came to notions of gender - as it was a special social site in many other ways. Women also swam, as bathing machines and spas along the riverside show. River swimming was well established before the growth in resorts and spas by the sea (Hembry, 1990). Female angling has also been common for a long time (Smith, 2003). A point worth questioning is if the rivers symbolic liminality and its 'otherness' might also have eased its use as an arena for leisure across established social structures.. The river was, and is, a surface to another hidden world, a world with a different order of social class and gender. As we have seen, the river was a very important site of activity as the idea and ideologies of leisure unfolded in Britain from the 1300s onwards. This has not been sufficiently recognised, and it needs to be so. Particularly since an examination and contemplation of the extent and nature of river-based leisure activities, can shed new light on the wider landscape of British society.

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