Hidden among all those twists, turns, meanders and marshes are more than 80 islands of one shape or another, and all have fascinating stories to tell. Most are natural, but a few were created by re-routing the navigation channel or construction of lock islands. Let’s look at just a few of them – together with some interesting characters who have enjoyed an island life.

These facts are taken from *I Never Knew That About The River Thames* by Christopher Winn, published by Ebury Press at £9.99. This new book, illustrated throughout with numerous charming sketches, presents an intriguing miscellany of facts about the river and helps the reader discover the secrets and stories of our most famous waterway. We have three copies to give away – see our special competition!

**Brandy Island**

Close to the smallest lock on the Thames, the estate of Buscot Park (now owned by the National Trust) was bought by Robert Tertius Campbell in 1859, whose fortune had come from the goldfields of Australia. He was an agricultural innovator who immediately began to transform the estate. He dredged the river below the lock and built two waterwheels at Hart’s Weir to pump water into reservoirs which was used to irrigate the fields via a system of brick-lined drainage channels. His main crop was sugar beet, which was used to fatten up cattle and to make brandy, which he then exported to France! He then exported to France! There was even a small railway to take the beet from the riverside fields to the distillery he had built close to Buscot Lock. Today, his unique enterprise is remembered in the name of the site – Brandy Island.

**Boulter’s Island**

A blue plaque mounted on the covered wooden bridge across to Boulter’s Island, next to Boulter’s Lock and just upstream of Maidenhead, says that legendary broadcaster Richard Dimbleby lived on the northern tip of the island – apparently he used to shout at boats to get them to slow down!

**Friday Island**

Just below Old Windsor Lock, Friday Island is so named because it resembles Man Friday’s footprint! There is a little thatched two-bedroom cottage hidden amongst the willows on the island, and between 1966 and 1991 this was the home of Dr Julius Grant, the forensic scientist who proved in 1984 that the infamous *Hitler Diaries*, published with great publicity in *The Sunday Times*, were in fact a forgery.

**Monkey Island**

After passing under the M4, the Thames comes to the secret retreat of Monkey Island, originally known as ‘monks eyot’, which belonged to monks from a cell of Merton Abbey, located upstream near Bray. In 1738 the 3rd Duke of Marlborough, a keen angler, bought the island and built a couple of fishing pavilions, one of them decorated with ceiling paintings depicting monkeys engaged in human activities. Since 1840 the pavilions have been expanded and transformed into what is now a well-known and discreet hotel, where royalty used to take tea on the lawn. In 1991 the ‘Birmingham Six’, who had been sentenced to life imprisonment for a series of pub bombings in 1974 and were then freed by the Court of Appeal, spent their first night of freedom on Monkey Island – in great secrecy of course, and no doubt quite a change from what they had become used to...

**Pharaoh’s Island**

On leaving Chertsey, the Thames flows around Pharaoh’s Island, which was presented to Lord Nelson after the Battle of the Nile in 1798. The admiral used the island as a fishing retreat, though with only one arm he may have struggled to successfully land his catch. Despite only being accessible by boat, the island is now home to a number of large houses which all have Egyptian names.

For a chance to win one of three copies of *I Never Knew That About The River Thames* simply answer the following question:

**Which drink was once made close to Buscot Lock?**

Send your answer on a postcard, with your name and address to: Helen Batten, 23a Cuxham Road, Watlington, OX49 5JW. Closing date: Friday January 14, 2011.