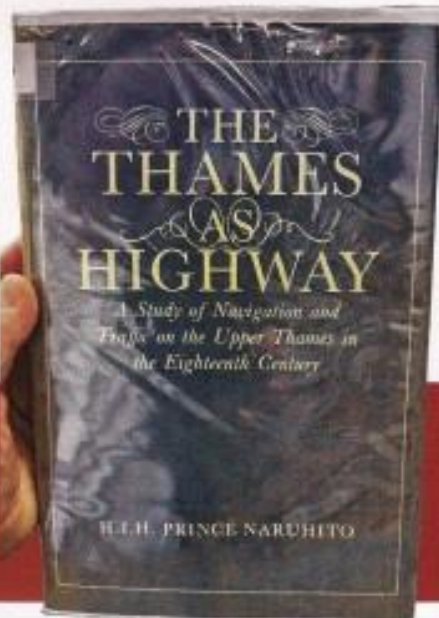


THE EMPEROR and the waterways

Who knew that the Emperor of Japan is a UK waterways enthusiast and expert on the history of cargo-carrying on the River Thames? ANDREW DENNY reveals all...



It all started with a throwaway remark earlier last year by Ken Burgin, director of the Cotswold Canals Trust. I was speaking with him about the upcoming coronation of King Charles, who performed the official opening of the Stroudwater restoration in 2018, and asked Ken what other connections the new king had with the restoration.

"I heard a story that when studying at the Royal Agricultural College in Cirencester he once walked part of the Thames & Severn Canal with the Crown Prince of Japan," he replied. Adding hastily, "But that's apocryphal."

Well, Sherlock is my middle name and I like nothing better than ferreting out apocryphal tales. It took me very little time to discover that the Japanese Crown Prince was His Imperial Highness Prince Naruhito, now Emperor of Japan. Searching for evidence of when he might have been in England in the last 50 years, I learned he had attended Merton College Oxford from 1983 to '85. I then learned that he had studied the history of cargo-carrying on the Thames in the 18th century.

After he returned to Japan, he wrote a 120-page thesis: *The Thames as Highway: A Study of Navigation and Traffic on the Upper Thames in the Eighteenth Century*. This was duly published by the Oxford University Press in 1989.

Was it available to read? Merton College said copies were lodged in the main university libraries, but there had been few private copies. Some appear to have turned up for private sale occasionally, but none is currently available. I steeled myself for a trip to the Bodleian Library.

TWO YEARS ON THE THAMES

However, I soon learned that in 1992 the prince had also written *The Thames and I: A Memoir of Two Years at Oxford*. Originally published only in Japanese, it was translated into English in 2006. I quickly found a copy online.

The Thames and I turned out to be fascinating and charming. It is mostly about his bemused adaptation to the ob-so-strange British culture, and (for most of us) the even-stranger culture of Oxford University.

The book slowly turns into a love letter to the royal river, and a growing fascination with waterways in general. Only 30 of its 145 pages cover Naruhito's thesis, but it is

"The book slowly turns into a love letter to the royal river, and a growing fascination with waterways in general"

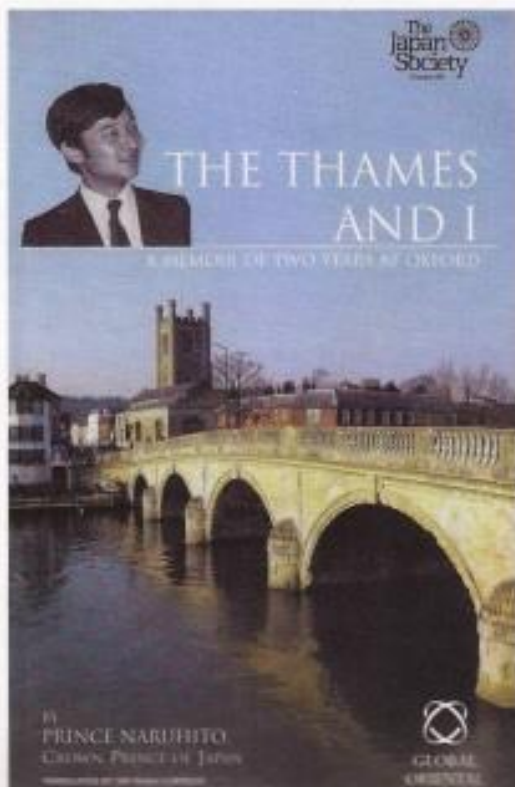


THE BOOK AND THESIS

The Thames and I was originally published in 1992 in the Prince's own native language. It was translated by Sir Hugh Cortazzi, former UK ambassador to Japan, with an introduction by Prince Charles, and published in 2006 by Global Oriental Ltd (ISBN 1-905246-06-4). You may find second-hand copies online (e.g. abebooks.co.uk).

The 118-page thesis itself, published in 1989 by the Oxford University Press, is *The Thames as Highway: A Study of Navigation and Traffic on the Upper Thames in the Eighteenth Century*. It is only available to read in university libraries and a limited number of other places, which would explain its obscurity. I read it in one three-hour burst at the Oxfordshire History Centre, and was allowed to photograph select pages (£9 charge).

See heritagesearch.oxfordshire.gov.uk/search/allcombined/0_50/allscore_desc/naruhito.





enough to make it a waterways book, on a subject largely untouched by conventional scholarship. Who were the 18th-century boat operators on the Thames? What were the cargoes and how valuable were they? What tolls were charged? What types of boats were used? What regulations were in force, and how did the boatmen coexist with the millers, the flash lock operators and the customs men?

I tracked down a copy of *The Thames as Highway* in the Oxfordshire History Centre, and made an appointment to see it.

You might be tempted to assume the prince would simply have read and rewritten Hadfield and other waterways scholars. But no. The surprise was that so little of this subject, the carrying trade on the Thames, was ever teased out of archives by earlier waterways historians. For nearly two years Naruhito clearly spent many hours combing through records offices, and then painstakingly assembling his thesis back home.

ARRIVAL IN OXFORD

On arrival in June 1985, the prince embarked on a three-month crash course in improving his English with Mr & Mrs Corcos, a couple who had taught at an English language school in Japan. As homework he was given a waterways book written by John Gagg (unspecified, but probably *The Observer's Book of Canals*, which had just been published).

At the time, Naruhito had not decided on the exact subject he would study, merely that it would be about transport in England. But John Gagg's book was to have a great influence on him. "For someone like myself who knew nothing about canals in Britain, this was a very good understanding of the subject." He would read a chapter a day, and the following day the couple would question him about it.

They also started him on keeping a personal diary to practise his written English. A decade later this diary would provide the memory of exactly what happened during his two-year stay. Thus, he was able to describe in exact detail his first English waterways experiences: firstly a punt on the Cherwell, which left him understandably confused, and then a day trip by boat from Abingdon to Clifton Hampden on the Thames. It included his first experience of locks, followed by a pub lunch at Clifton Hampden's Barley Mow.

"The fact that I can recount all this ten years later is because I wrote about my experiences at the time as part of my homework for Mrs Corcos," he says.



PRINCE'S REQUEST FULFILLED

HIS Imperial Highness Crown Prince Naruhito of Japan visited The National Waterways Museum in Gloucester last month. When HHH was at Oxford University some years ago he studied the history of the Thames in the 18th century and subsequently became very interested in waterway subjects.

HHH left Oxford before the museum was opened and from Japan HHH requested to visit the museum during his visit to Great Britain. Tony Conder, curator, showed him around the museum and said: "HHH was very interested in the history of waterways and took particular interest in our archives which Roy Jamieson talked him through.

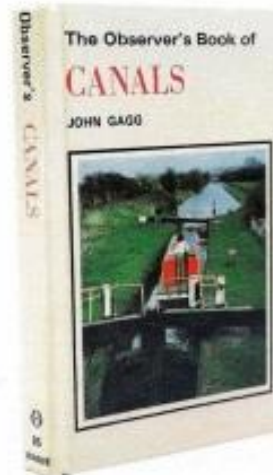
"He spent one hour with us and above all he enjoyed the visit for its transport history. I am very pleased to have a Royal Visit to the museum and especially by somebody who is interested in the subject. It is also encouraging that British canals are taken to the Japanese public."



Crown Prince Naruhito of Japan winds the handle of lockpaddle gear.
Photo: John Robinson

ABOVE LEFT: Abingdon Lock in 1906, a scene little changed in over a century.

ABOVE: The British Waterways in-house magazine records the prince requesting a return to the Gloucester Waterways Museum during an official visit to the UK in 1991.



LEFT: *The Observer's Book of Canals*, the waterways title by John Gagg that Naruhito probably read.

BELOW LEFT: Sapperton Tunnel on the Thames & Severn Canal, a waterway Naruhito also took particular interest in.

During this period, the prince also mixed in high society, which included tea with Queen Elizabeth II at Buckingham Palace, when he was surprised that she poured her own.

CHOOSING WATERWAYS

"From the time I was a child I had been interested in roads as a means of transportation," he writes in *The Thames and I*. "I could not go outside the gates whenever I wanted to, but when I wandered along the paths in the grounds of the Akasaka palace I felt that I was making a journey into a part of the world I did not know at all. For me, these paths played an important role in connecting me with the outside world."

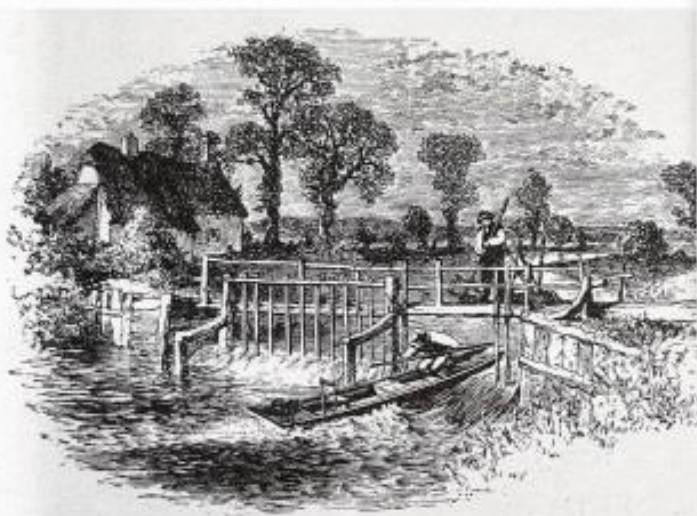
Studying transportation at university in Japan, Naruhito found that there were only limited archives relating to land transport. Far richer were those of the transport of commodities across Japan's inland sea, notably customs and duties on the cargoes. These studies stood him in good stead when he came to England.

Naruhito decided to research transport by water for his university course. He could have chosen the canals, but he gained the impression that the Thames had played a far greater role in commerce than previously recognised and had scope for more original research.

Emperor of Japan

RIGHT: A warm and surprising enclosure in the copy of the thesis sent to the manager of the Oxfordshire History Centre in the 1980s, Miss Barnes.

BELOW: A flash lock lets through a fishing punt. Flash locks operated until the late 19th century, and were responsible for many of the sinkings that resulted in insurance and duty claims for lost cargoes.



Hart's Weir.

"He gained the impression that the Thames had played a far greater role in commerce than previously recognised"

RESEARCH AND FINDINGS

In investigating cargoes and carrying, Naruhito's first insight was that one of the major rural traffics on the Thames down to London was malt for the brewing industry. Malt was subject to duty, payable when the merchant took possession of it. This meant that if any accident occurred in transit (a frequent occurrence on the primitive flash locks and mills of the river), the merchant could claim a refund on the portion lost. Claims and disputes would end up in court records, which were kept scrupulously down the years. From these records Naruhito learned the names and addresses of the merchants, the amount transported, the places where boats had sunk and many other facts about the carriers.

Another avenue of research was the archives of 18th-century periodicals. Here he found articles about the names and fleets of boat-owners, and discussions of the Thames commissioners about improvements to the navigation.

With methodical patience the prince visited county records offices at Gloucester, Aylesbury, Reading, the National Archives at Kew, and the Guildhall in the City of London.

He especially noted the marked change in the types of goods transported up and down the river once the Oxford and the Thames & Severn canals were completed in 1790.

His most fruitful results were found in the Gloucester record office. It contained the archive of the Thames & Severn Company, which – rare among canal companies – owned its boats and kept exact records of its operation. He was surprised by the variety of cargo, sometimes wondering if it was operating a furniture removal service.

The London Guildhall library turned out to be a motherlode for insurance company records. These told tales of the assets and personal property of boatmen, coal merchants, maltsters and many other trades on the river, and showed their relative social positions.

Parliamentary papers were important sources. Naruhito was surprised how much relevant material there was about river maintenance and the resolution of perennial battles between millers and boatmen.

Other sources included apprentice records, in dusty cartons. Despite suffering regularly from hay fever, the prince recalls loving the way he felt in contact with "the raw materials of history ... I felt happy that I had come in direct touch with the ages, through my struggle to read these old papers and by breathing in the dust arising from them".

26th April 1989

Dear Miss Barnes,

I would like to present to you my first book "The Thames as Highway" which was published by the Oxford University Press at the beginning of this month. Thank you so much for your help with my research. Without your help this book would not have come out. Thank you again for your kindness.

with best wishes,

Naruhito

THE THAMES & SEVERN

The Cotswold Canals Trust's 'apocryphal tale' at the start of this piece appears to have come from a day trip Naruhito took to the Thames & Severn Canal towards the end of his stay.

"[Seeing the derelict] Thames & Severn Canal which had been shut at the beginning of the 20th century and had turned into stagnant pools of water, I could not help feeling sad at the contrast between the vitality of the surrounding green fields and the canal which no longer had any life," he tells us.

Naruhito's companion on that day appears not to have been Prince Charles, but his tutor, historian Dr Roger Highfield.

But what made my eyes widen was the argument Naruhito made for the potential benefits of a water transfer scheme that could pay for the revival of the Thames & Severn Canal. Nowadays it's a central plank of the Cotswold Canals Trust's restoration plans, but then, 40 years ago, it was barely a pipedream.

He wrote: "The cost of making [the Thames & Severn] usable would be one-tenth that of laying a pipeline [across the whole length], while the operation of it would be about one-seventh. Canals, which were one of the most important products of the Industrial Revolution, are finding new uses these days and being revived for leisure purposes, or for water supply."

CONNECTION WITH THE PAST

Naruhito comes across as a very cultured, articulate and methodical student. He clearly spent a lot of time in archival offices, noting every visit. I read his thesis at the Oxfordshire History Centre, the successor to the old county records office where he had also studied.

And when I opened up that book, out fell a charming artefact: a personally signed thank-you letter from the prince himself to Miss Barnes, the lady who managed the centre at the time. It was her personal copy, which she had left to the library. And just as Naruhito "felt happy that I had come in direct touch with the ages", so did I.

Modestly, he describes his thesis as 'an interim report', suggesting there is much more to be learned from the records if only you have his level of patience.

Not wishing to succumb to royal flattery, I must, nevertheless, say that the Emperor can be congratulated on adding a uniquely Japanese element to the sum of English waterways history.