

AINA CASE STUDY

HEALTH, WELL-BEING AND RECREATION

The Thames Path: from source to sea



The Thames Path begins at Thames Head in the Cotswolds and finishes at the dramatic Thames Barrier. Plans are underway to extend the route further east along both shores of the estuary.

A long distance path which follows England's second longest river

The Thames Path is a designated National Trail which follows our second longest river from its source to the Thames Barrier – a distance of 296 kilometres. The route, which was formally opened in 1996, passes many famous places of interest and a great variety of scenery accompanies the river, ranging from the Cotswold Hills out to the wide expanses marking the start of the Thames estuary.

Parts of the route have always been available to walkers, though lengths with diversions away from the river were necessary. In addition, historic ferry points allowed towpath users to cross from one bank to another and lockside bridges also helped access, but, as times changed, recreational use of the path increased, and after the Second World War campaigns began to call for a fully accessible riverside walk.

Natural England are responsible for the upkeep of the trail, with the support of organisations such as the Environment Agency and the River Thames Society. A management group publishes a Thames Path Management Strategy to direct development of the trail for the next five years. The route passes through more than twenty local authority areas, and these are all actively involved in promoting the route, which is also marketed via the River Thames Alliance. Natural England maintain a website with news of events, guided walks, path closures, etc and a network of volunteer River Wardens keep an eye on the state of the path, with reports sent to relevant bodies when needed.

The removal of stiles and the provision of signage, including links from railway stations, has made the route more accessible to many people. Information boards are provided at locksides and the Environment Agency help to distribute leaflets and tourist literature to visitors. The trail usefully connects to fifteen other long distance routes and a range of circular routes, many suitable for less mobile users, connect to nearby towns and villages. Cycling is permitted where designated, and any potential conflicts between walkers and cyclists are addressed through the Thames Path Cycling Policy.

The success of the path is now clearly demonstrated by its popularity as one of the most popular walking destinations in England. The well managed route and its quintessential English landscapes attract more than half a million annual users for short distance rambles and more than 26,000 annual users for longer waterside walks.