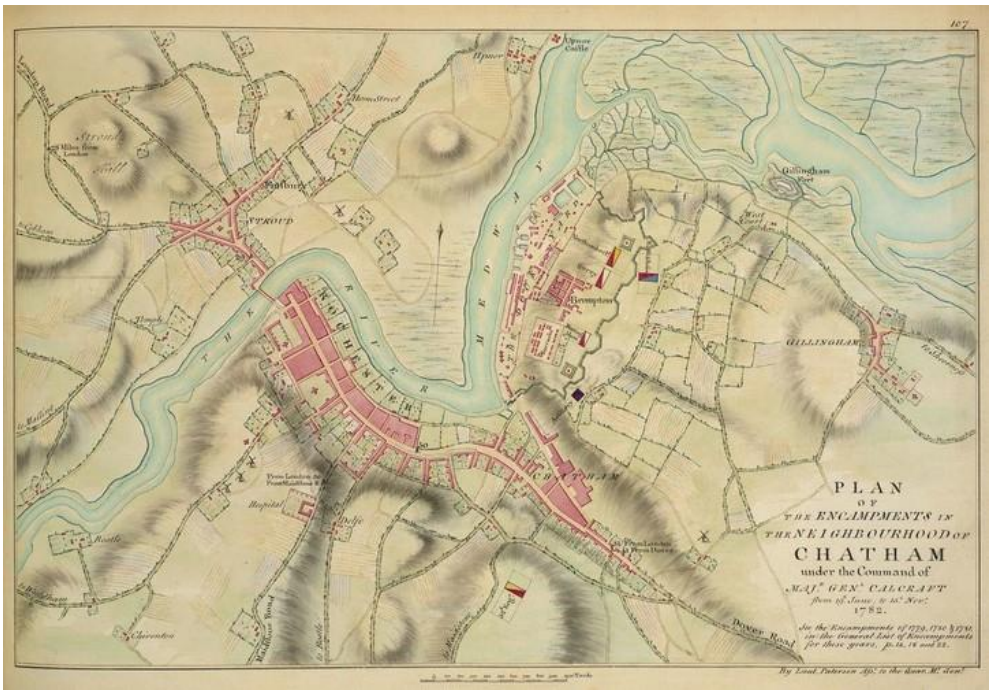
The River Medway: A Living History

By Robert Flood



The River Medway sits at the heart of the Medway Towns and has defined and shaped the lives of the people along its banks for centuries. It has been a highway for trade, a fortress against enemies, a workplace for thousands, and a source of folklore, food, and leisure. Its story is woven into Britain's naval heritage, Kent's industry, and the daily life of the Medway Towns.

There is much to explore about the River Medway – from mighty warships to saltmarsh, from oyster fishermen to flying boats, from folklore to modern leisure.

Shipbuilding on the Medway

Chatham Dockyard

For over four centuries, Chatham Dockyard stood at the heart of Britain's maritime power. Founded in the mid-16th century, it became one of the most important naval shipbuilding and repair facilities in the country. The Medway's tidal waters made it a natural location - close enough to London to defend the capital, but sheltered from immediate attack from the sea.

Some of the Navy's most famous ships were built here. HMS Victory, Admiral Nelson's flagship at Trafalgar in 1805, was launched from Chatham in 1765. Though frequently repaired at Portsmouth, she will always be a Chatham ship. Another great warship, HMS

Temeraire—launched in 1798—fought at Trafalgar as well and was immortalised in J. M. W. Turner's painting The Fighting Temeraire. Her story symbolises the grandeur of wooden warships and their eventual passing into history.

The Dockyard employed thousands, from shipwrights and caulkers to sailmakers and ropemakers. Their collective skill made the Royal Navy a formidable force. Every plank laid and rope twisted on the Medway contributed to Britain's global influence.

The Fighting Temeriare, by William Turner, 1839
The National Gallery Collection.

Private Shipyards

Alongside the Royal Dockyard, private yards thrived. Greaves' yard at Frindsbury launched HMS Bellerophon in 1786. Known colloquially as the "Billy Ruffian", she took part in the Battle of the Glorious First of June, fought at the Battle of the Nile and played a key part in the Battle of Trafalgar. She was also the ship that Napoleon surrendered to and brought him back to England from where he was sent into exile.

At Acorn Wharf in Rochester, Mary Ross ran a shipyard in the early 19th century, one of the very few women to win Admiralty contracts. Her success is a reminder of the Medway's spirit of resilience and enterprise.

Mrs Mary Ross of Rochester (c.1770-1847)

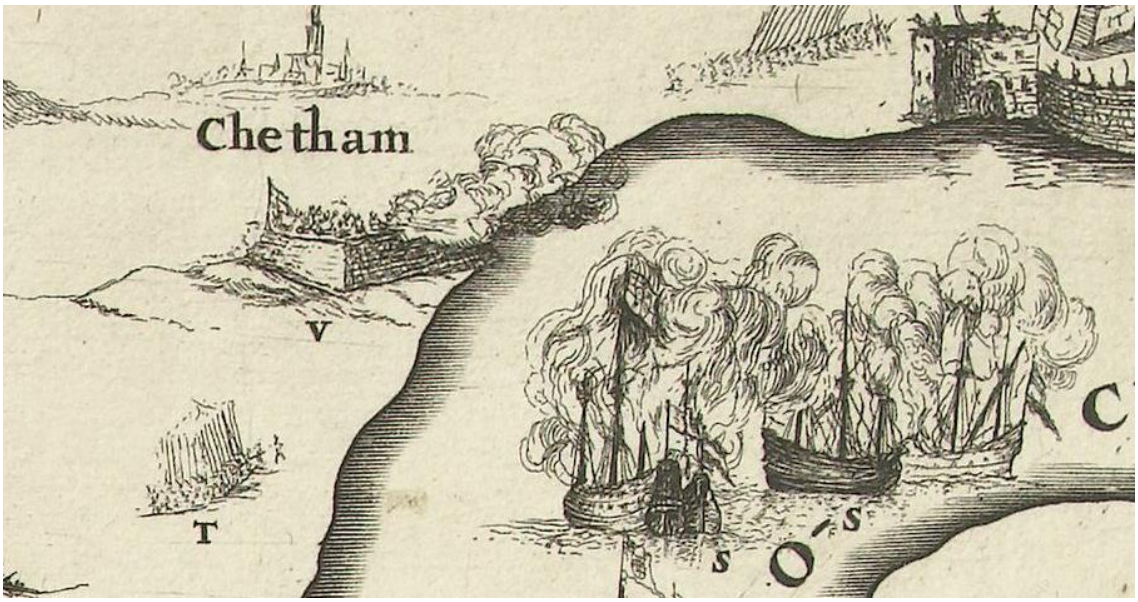
Barges and Workboats

Not all shipbuilding on the Medway produced ships of war. The river was also home to thriving barge-building yards. Men like William Gill of Rochester built the sturdy sailing barges that became the workhorses of the Thames and Medway. With their wide, shallow hulls and distinctive spritsails, these barges carried everything from bricks and timber to grain and beer. For much of the 19th and early 20th centuries, they were the heavy goods vehicles of their day, moving vast quantities of cargo around the estuary and upriver. The smaller yards also built many of the bawley's and doble's that were to ply their trade as fishing vessels on the Medway.

War Comes to the River

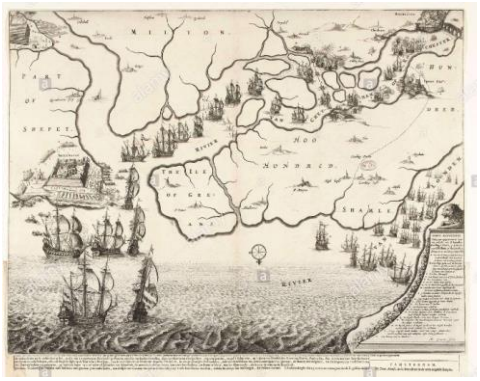
The Dutch Raid, 1667

The Medway has not always been a safe haven. In June 1667, the Dutch fleet launched a daring raid up the river, one of the worst humiliations in English naval history. Exploiting weak defences and political turmoil during the Second Anglo Dutch War, the Dutch broke through the chain protecting the Dockyard and sailed upriver.



Details of 'Map of mouth of the Thames with the trip to Chatham', by a Dutch artist 1667, Rijksmuseum Collection

They burned several warships and captured HMS Royal Charles, the pride of the English fleet, towing her back to the Netherlands as a trophy. The Dockyard at Chatham narrowly escaped destruction, but the raid exposed the vulnerability of the river.



The aftermath changed the Medway forever. Stronger fortifications were built, including Upnor Castle's reinforcement and the later construction of massive Napoleonic forts along the river.

Forts and Defences

The Napoleonic Wars brought renewed fears of invasion. To protect Chatham Dockyard, an ambitious ring of forts was built across the Medway towns, including Fort Amherst, Fort Pitt, and the distinctive circular Hoo forts guarding the river approaches. These defences were part of a wider network designed to secure Britain's naval dockyards, recognising their role as the backbone of national defence.

Today, some of these forts remain as monuments and heritage sites. Fort Amherst, cut into the chalk above Chatham, is the largest Napoleonic fortress in Britain. Its tunnels and ramparts remind us of the era when the Medway was a front line in the struggle against France.

The Royal Engineers

From the 19th century, the Royal Engineers at Chatham used the river for training. They built pontoon bridges across its waters, tested diving equipment, and experimented with new engineering techniques. Their work on the Medway prepared them for campaigns across the world.

Rochester Bridge

A bridge has spanned the Medway at Rochester since Roman times and even gave rise to the Roman name for Rochester, Durobrivae, 'the stronghold by the bridge'. The medieval stone bridge was for centuries the main crossing, linking London to Dover. By the 19th century it was replaced with an iron bridge, which in turn gave way to the elegant Victorian bridge that still stands today, beside its modern companion. The bridges remain a proud symbol of Rochester's heritage, cared for by the ancient Rochester Bridge Trust.

Flying Boats and Balloons

The Medway's history is not only about ships. At Rochester, the Short Brothers established an aircraft factory, specialising in flying boats and float planes. They experimented with balloons before moving into heavier-than-air flight. Their flying boats, launched from the river in the early 20th century, became famous around the world as commercial aircraft for the expanding Imperial Airways and then as war planes in the Second World War. The Short Sunderland is probably the most recognisable and widely used, a patrol bomber that was effective against the U-boat threat and patrolled the skies for many Allied countries during the Second World War.

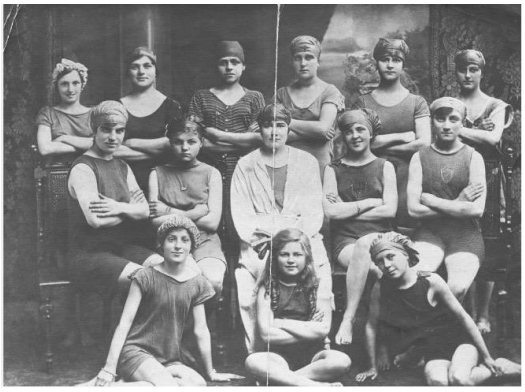
The sight of great flying boats taking off from the Medway was as stirring to 20th century eyes as the launch of HMS Victory had been in the 18th.

Folklore of the Medway

The river has always inspired stories. Fishermen told tales of ghostly ships gliding silently at dusk, thought to be echoes of vessels lost in the Dutch Raid. Others spoke of "river hags" or water spirits who lured the unwary. Local lore also includes the "Medway lights" – mysterious glimmers said to dance on the marshes, perhaps will o'-the-wisps, perhaps something stranger. Such stories gave the river a character beyond industry – a place of mystery and imagination.

Leisure on the Medway

Swimming and the Medway Mermaids



By the beginning of the 20th century, the Medway had become a stage for long distance swimming. Crowds gathered to watch women compete in arduous races between Aylesford and Rochester. The “Medway Mermaids,” as the newspapers called them, became minor celebrities, inspiring admiration for their endurance and skill. One swimmer, Hilda Willing, made one of the first attempts by a woman to swim the English Channel and in 1919, she swam from Rochester to Sheerness, a distance of 16 miles, in a record time of 6 hours.

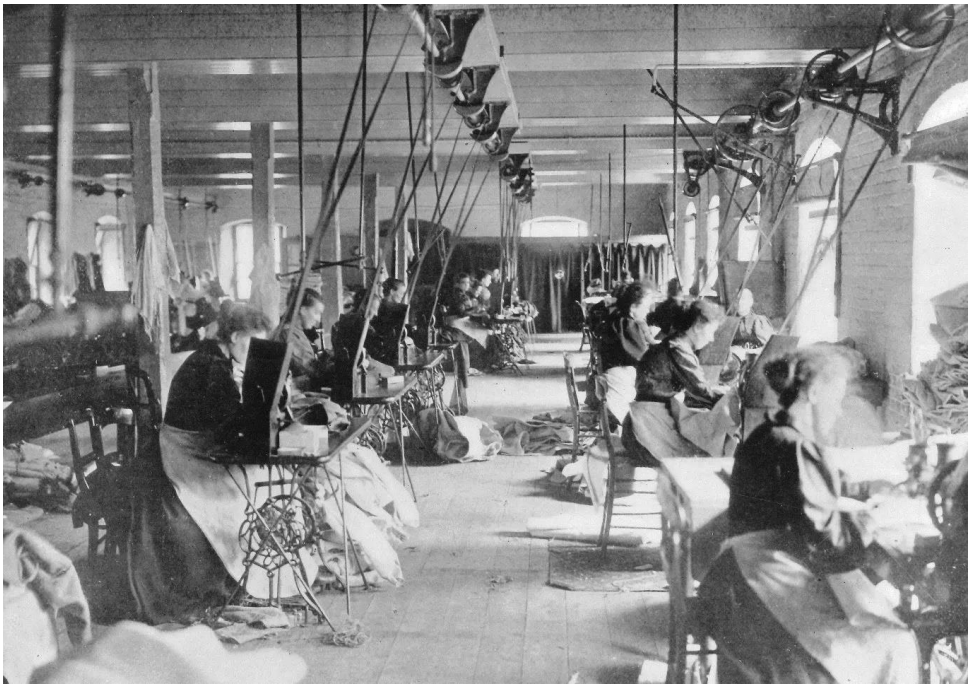
Rowing and Sailing

Rowing clubs and yacht clubs flourished along the river, making use of its long, sheltered stretches. Regattas became popular summer events, with colourful sails and cheering crowds lining the banks. To this day, the river remains a place of recreation as well as history, with the annual Festival of Chatham Reach bringing large numbers of visitors to the river at Sun Pier.

Life on the River

Dockyard Trades

The Medway towns grew up around the work of the Dockyard. Generations of families made their living as ropemakers in the quarter-mile Ropewalk, as sailmakers stitching acres of canvas, or as carpenters shaping oak into warships. Their skills were handed down, creating a community bound together by the river.



Sail loft workers Chatham Dockyard Collection.

Oysters and Fishing

One of the primary occupations of people living in the first villages at Chatham and Gillingham was fishing. Heavy commercial fishing of the river and estuary in the Middle Ages resulted in the establishment of The Rochester Oyster and Floating Fishery Company. This was founded in 1729 when King George II granted fishing rights to a guild in Rochester, in part to regulate and managed the oyster beds in the estuary. Oysters were a staple food for locals and there were many fishmongers in the Towns. Many species could be found in the river including smelts and eels. On rare occasions, giant sturgeon were caught – prehistoric-looking fish that measured up to 7ft long.

Commerce and the Sailing Barge

In the 19th century, the Medway bustled with commercial traffic. In 1878, over 1,100 sailing barges were registered at Rochester. These carried Kentish hops to breweries and barrels of beer to the towns, bricks and cement to the city's builders, and grain from the fertile Medway Valley. Barges were designed to be handled by just two people, and races between them became a proud tradition, with the Medway Barge Sailing Match possibly the oldest in the country. The barges kept the river busy until road and rail transport gradually took over, but their graceful lines are still seen at heritage events, and a new Intra Maritime Heritage harbour is in development with vessels like the Edith May and Lady Daphne.

A Living River: Nature and Wildlife

Despite its industrial past, the Medway supports a rich natural world. Swans nest along its banks, while anglers cast for roach, perch, and chub. Eels, once so plentiful, are rarer now but remain part of the river's ecology. The salt marshes are alive with plants that thrive in brackish mud - samphire, once collected as a vegetable, sea purslane with its silvery leaves, bur-reed, sea wormwood, and cocksfoot grass. These plants help stabilise the mud, store carbon, and provide shelter for birds and insects. Even the less glamorous creatures – the ever-present rats, for example – are reminders that the river has always supported life in many forms.

The Soviet Submarine

A more modern chapter lies moored near Strood Pier - a Cold War-era Soviet submarine. Once part of the Russian Black Sea fleet, it came to the Medway after being decommissioned. Its stark silhouette is a reminder that the river's military associations did not end with wooden warships.

The Medway's Enduring Legacy

The River Medway is more than water flowing to the sea. To walk along its banks today is to encounter centuries of history, bound up in the tides and the landscape. The Medway has carried warships and flying boats, oysters and barges, folklore and families. It is, and always will be, the heart of Medway.