

Why is the River Thames so important to London?

Settlement and Trade

Background Information

The River Thames is 215 miles long and has been an important trade route throughout its history. Some people believe that the Romans may have been influenced by the Thames when they were choosing where to build London. The first bridge in the capital was located where the current London Bridge stands. It has been rebuilt many times since the Romans first constructed a river crossing there around 2,000 years ago.

Before engineer Sir Joseph Bazalgette built an underground complex of sewers much of the capital's waste was dumped in the river. In 1858, the stench from the river was so overpowering that Parliament had to be suspended and the government had to find a way to rid the Thames of sewage. 82 miles of intercepting sewers were built underground, parallel to the River Thames.

Before the 19th century, cold winter weather would sometimes freeze the surface of the Thames. 'Frost Fairs' would be held on the ice, with Londoners enjoying dancing and drinking. The last fair was in 1814 and it appears unlikely there will ever be another one because the river now flows too fast for the water to freeze.



Key Numbers

Population of London: 8 million

London Underground: 3,500,000 passengers per day

Bridges across the Thames: Over 200

Length of River: 346km

Maximum height above sea level: 110 metres

Last time the river froze: 1814

Biggest flood: 1928

Main tributaries: 38

Industrial revolution	A time of great change in Britain between 1750 to 1900
Population	The number of people living in a particular place
Settlement	A settlement is a place where people live.
Economy	The system of how money is used within a particular country
Agriculture	The process of producing food, and fibres by farming of certain plants or raising animals
Export	Sending products to another country to sell
Import	Bring goods into the UK to sale
Producer	person or business that makes or grows goods for sale
Trade	buying or selling goods or services
Industry	The process of making products by using machines and factories

Types of settlements

Hamlets are tiny settlements - they are just a collection of houses, perhaps centered around a few farms and maybe without even a shop;



Villages are small settlements - several hundred people live in them and they have: a few shops, a place of worship and maybe a school too;



Towns are medium-sized settlements - thousands of people live in them and they have a shopping centre and factories;



Cities are large settlements - they usually have lots of amenities and sometimes a cathedral too (megacities have over 10 million people living in them).



Where does our food come from?

Whilst we can grow many fruits and vegetables in the UK, some cannot grow here because of our climate. We also like to eat them all year round so import many fruits and vegetables from abroad. Whilst these come from different continents the bulk come from:

South America – Bananas, pineapples, avocado, blueberries, chillies, dragon fruit, mangetout, melon

Africa – Apples, grapes, yam

Other countries in Europe – Oranges, mandarins, tomatoes, onions, cauliflower, celery, potatoes, aubergine, lemons, olives, spinach, sweetcorn

Australasia – Kiwi

Asia – Mango, peach, pomegranate, watermelon

North America – plantain, sweet potato

Industrial Revolution - From 1750 Britain went through a process of change in a number of key areas:

- Agriculture - New tools, fertilizers and harvesting techniques were introduced, resulting in increased productivity and agricultural prosperity.
- Industry - factories sprung up all over the country creating more efficient ways to produce goods such as wool, cotton and coal. The increase in factories brought thousands of new jobs.
- Transport and communications - Thomas Telford built roads and canals in the 1700s and George Stephenson and Isambard Kingdom Brunel oversaw the 'Railway Mania' of the 1800s. There had previously been no very fast way of transporting goods and people around the country.
- Technology - There were also many scientific discoveries and technological inventions that changed society and industry. Changes to sanitation and medical treatment such as the work of John Snow and Edward Jenner improved people's quality of life.