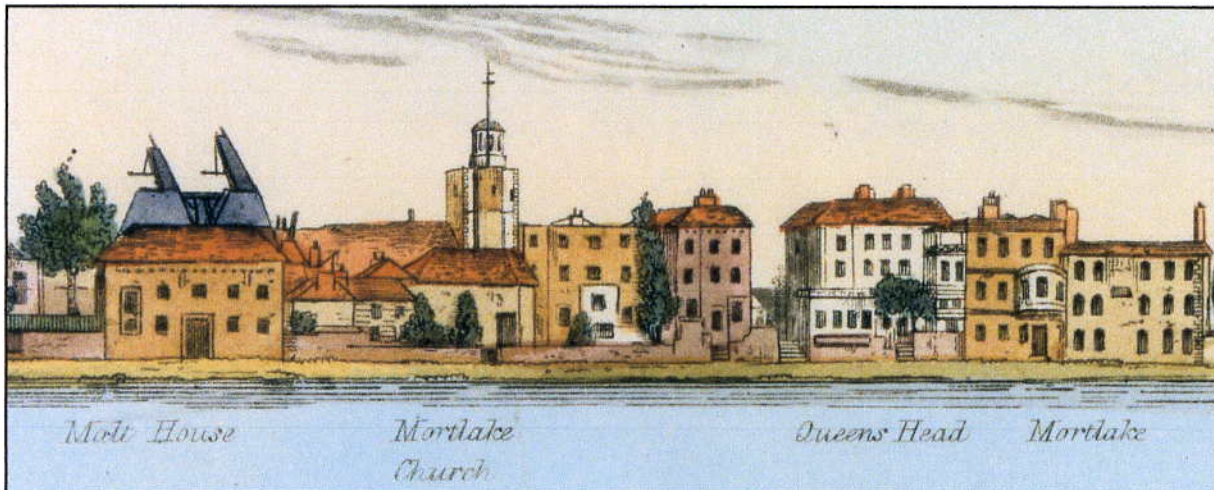


Mortlake's Riverside



The Thames has played an important role in Mortlake's story – it has provided security, a means of transport and relaxation, a source of food and a constant supply of water from very early times.

The riverside at Mortlake was an ideal place for early man to settle. The land is slightly raised and gives clear views of the river – anyone approaching along the Thames from either east or west or from the north bank would be clearly seen. The river bed is of gravel, making it an ideal landing place for boats, and fish were plentiful.

During the Neolithic period (6500 to 4200 years ago) people first began to settle and farm the land. It is from this time that stone axe heads, a polished jadeite axe head and flint arrow heads have been found on Mortlake's river bank. More recent decorated pottery bowls and spear heads, along with 3000 year old skulls have also been discovered. They are now on display in the Museum of London.

The presence of a major route to and from London gave an early opportunity for trading with the capital, and as London grew the opportunities increased. In the 17th century market gardening began in Mortlake in response to the growing demands for food in London, and at the same time a number of small industries appeared close to the river.

By the 18th century London was regarded as an increasingly unhealthy place to live, and many of its wealthy citizens chose to settle in the countryside. A number of large houses stood facing Mortlake High Street with gardens running down to the river. The largest of the survivors is The Limes built around 1720. In the 1820's JMW Turner painted the house and its terrace.

But Mortlake's riverside was no rural idyll. Increasingly these fashionable houses had to put up with the smells of malting and brewing, the odour from dung barges and the toxic fumes from the salt glazed pottery. The earliest major business was the tapestry works established in 1619; later in the 17th century a sugar house was built; and by 1703 there were several malt houses; two potteries and two small breweries developed later in the 18th century.

From the early 19th century pleasure steamers were a feature and in the 1840s paddle steamers for Margate picked up passengers from a wooden jetty at the White Hart. By the 1850s commercial traffic on the Thames was in decline, though the two main wharfs at Mortlake were still in use into the 20th century. The brewery wharf was used until about 1960 and tugs with strings of up to six barges were regularly seen passing Mortlake. Pleasure boats, rowers and scullers, herons and swans, narrow boats and yachts can all be seen along Mortlake's riverside today.