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Assault on Hampton Court Palace



(The Royal Collection)

Hampton Court Palace as depicted by Leonard Knyff (c.1703)

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Of all the natural wonders of England none continues to be more systematically abused than the River Thames as it passes through London. To add yet another injury, Elmbridge District Council now appears to be poised to approve a large development opposite Hampton Court Palace, on the so-called Jolly Boatman site.

The guardians of the Palace, Historic Royal Palaces, has objected vigorously. So have the London Borough of Richmond, Surrey County Council, the Thames Landscape Strategy (set up to offer well-researched guidance on just such issues) and the Campaign to Protect Rural England.

Despite the contentious issues, Hazel Blears, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, has refused to call a public inquiry, saying this is a matter which can be decided locally. This is an abdication of responsibility worthy of Pontius Pilate.

It is obvious to anyone who has cruised, walked, cycled or driven along the Thames, or even watched the Boat Race on television, that many of the most precious parts of the river are those where buildings are low and the banks are green and lined with trees. John Barnes of Historic Royal Palaces points out that just such a "soft edge" runs almost continuously from Hampton Court Bridge to Kingston. Yet again and again ugly riverside proposals have been nodded through because the local council's attitude has been that the river is the boundary and no one in the borough will have to look at the results.

Yet in 1910 Cigarette Island, opposite Hampton Court Palace, was bought for the nation and handed in 1938 to the council (now Elmbridge) which is required to keep the land open in perpetuity. Just one stretch of this river front was omitted, next to Hampton Court Bridge, because it was occupied by the turntable and coal depot for steam engines using Hampton Court station.

It is this piece of land, which should likewise be held in trust for the nation as open space on the river, that is to be the site of a controversial development just 30 metres from the southern river bank. It will loom into view of everyone approaching the Palace from the north. The large green in front of the Palace with Bushey Park just the other side of the road retains its village character, scale and leafiness. The river bridge, which shows the hand of Lutyens, is also graciously low in its lines.

The objection to the present scheme is simply that the bulk it presents to the river is unacceptable, too large and too close. English Heritage objected to the original timber-clad "boathouse"-style proposal by the architects, Allies & Morrison, but when the river front was shown reclad as a Georgian-style terrace by Quinlan Terry it withdrew its objection.

Sir Trevor McDonald, a trustee of Historic Royal Palaces, says: "I feel very strongly. We have a statutory duty to protect the setting of the palace and to ensure nearby development does not adversely effect it. This does and need not do so."

The problem is the more grating since two thirds of the development are not seriously contested and will allow a much needed improvement to Hampton Court station. As the issue divided Elmbridge planning committee the application will now go before the full council on Thursday.

The councillors should recognise that the objections come from their fellow guardians of the Thames, as well as significant numbers of Elmbridge residents. When making their decision councillors should bear in mind that all the other great Tudor and Elizabethan royal palaces along the Thames have gone — Greenwich, Whitehall, Richmond and Oatlands have long vanished. Only Hampton Court remains.

Now the setting of the Tower of London has been hopelessly compromised, Hampton Court Palace must not follow.

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