

# I Never Knew That About the River Thames

CHRISTOPHER WINN



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Acknowledgements

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## About the Book

Discover hundreds of facts you never knew about the River Thames in this intriguing miscellany.

In this delightful book, bestselling author Christopher Winn follows the river from source to sea, uncovering the hidden stories and secrets of its people and places. Learn the fascinating history of England's longest river; see where Frankenstein was born and where Alice picnicked in Wonderland; marvel at architectural triumphs and be astounded by tales of sporting feats and heroic deeds.

*I Never Knew That About the River Thames* provides a captivating journey along England's most iconic waterway and is guaranteed to entertain and inform in equal measure.

## About the Author

**Christopher Winn** has been a freelance writer and trivia collector for over twenty years. He has worked with Terry Wogan and Jonathan Ross and sets quiz questions for television as well as for the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph*. He is the author of the bestselling *I Never Knew That About England*. Books in the same series now cover Ireland, Scotland, Wales, London, Yorkshire and the Lake District and he has written further books on the English, Scottish and Irish. He lives in London and is married to artist Mai Osawa, who illustrates all the books in the series.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

I Never Knew That About England  
I Never Knew That About Ireland  
I Never Knew That About Scotland  
I Never Knew That About Wales  
I Never Knew That About London  
I Never Knew That About The English  
I Never Knew That About The Irish  
I Never Knew That About The Scottish  
I Never Knew That About Yorkshire  
I Never Knew That About The Lake District  
I Never Knew That About Britain: The Quiz Book



*Henley-on-Thames, home of the Royal Regatta*

Christopher Winn



*I Never Knew That  
About*

# THE RIVER THAMES



ILLUSTRATIONS  
BY  
Mai Osawa



EBONY  
PRESS



For Rupert, a true Man of the Thames, and  
for Emma, Loelia and Eden. Thank you  
for all your friendship and support over the years.

# Preface

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*'Serene yet strong, majestic yet sedate,  
Swift without violence, without terror great'*

Matthew Prior (1664-1721),  
English poet and diplomat,  
describing the River Thames

The River Thames weaves its way through England and England's history like a shining silver strand. Some of the country's great events have taken place upon its banks, from the conversion of Saxon kings to Christianity at Dorchester, the crowning of the first English kings at Kingston, and the very first English parliament at Shifford, to the sealing of the Magna Carta at Runnymede and the plotting for the Glorious Revolution at Hurley.

Kings and Queens of England have been born, have lived and died beside the Thames, using the river as a regal highway between royal palaces from Hampton Court to Greenwich.

The Thames is not the broadest or the longest of rivers, it has no spectacular waterfalls or ravines or rapids, but it affords us sights that are unforgettable: cathedrals, cities, quintessential English villages, the Henley Royal Regatta, the Boat Race, the first English university at Oxford, the

world's widest and flattest brick arch at Maidenhead, the biggest inhabited castle in the world at Windsor, the most famous botanic gardens in the world at Kew, the Mother of Parliaments at Westminster, the Tower of London and Tower Bridge, the docks that once formed the biggest and busiest port in the world from Roman Billingsgate to modern Tilbury, the world's biggest dome and the Prime Meridian at Greenwich - the Thames flows from west to east not just across England but across the hemispheres.

Indeed, a journey down the River Thames is a journey not just through the heart of the English countryside, but through the heart of the English people and the English way of life.



# The River Thames

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*I Never Knew That About the River Thames* is a journey down England's greatest river from source to sea, calling in on people and places along the way.

Measured from Thames Head, the River Thames is 215 miles (346 km) in length, the longest river that flows wholly within England. It runs from the west of England to the east through 9 counties, for much of the way forming the county boundaries and separating Middle England from Southern England in much the same way as it divided the Saxon kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia.

There are 45 locks on the Thames between Lechlade and Teddington, bringing the river down from a height of 361 ft (110m) at Thames Head to near sea level at Teddington, where it becomes tidal. The river is navigable from the estuary as far as Lechlade, while for small un-powered craft the Rights of Navigation extend to Cricklade. Between the source and Teddington the Thames is administered by the Environment Agency, while from Teddington to the sea it is run by the Port of London Authority.

Despite the presence of considerable heavy industry to the east of London, the Thames is today recognised as one of the cleanest urban rivers in the world.

Along with common practice, and to avoid confusion as the river twists and turns, where places of interest are described as being located 'on the left bank' or 'on the right bank' this means while facing downstream.

I have included the River Churn as an alternative source to Thames Head because I spent some of my formative years living beside the Churn and was brought up to believe it was the true source of the Thames.

# THAMES HEAD TO CRICKLADE

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*Thames Head - official source of the River Thames*

## Thames Head

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There's a little cup in the  
Cotswold Hills  
Which a spring in a  
meadow bubbles and fills  
Spanned by a heron's wing,  
crossed by a stride,  
Calm and untroubled by  
dreams of pride,  
Guiltless of fame and  
ambition's aims  
That is the source

of the lordly Thames!  
BRET HARTE

THE OFFICIAL SOURCE OF THE RIVER THAMES lies in Gloucestershire, 356 ft (105.8 m) above sea level, in a pretty buttercup-strewn Cotswold meadow called TREWSBURY MEAD, 3 miles (4.8 km) south-west of Cirencester. Beneath the shade of an old ash tree on the edge of a copse sits a simple stone inscribed with the words:

The Conservators of the River Thames  
1857-1974  
This Stone was Placed Here to Mark  
the Source of the River Thames

The spot can be reached across the field by footpath, but it's a good thing that the actual spring, the first of four that combine to make up the source, is clearly marked with a pile of pebbles, because for most of the year there is no water to be seen here at all; there is just a shallow, dry river bed and a pleasant rural scene, occasionally enhanced by a lowing herd of cows supremely uninterested in the fact that they are chewing such significant cud.

However, there is water not far below the surface, and indeed, after heavy rain, the whole field can become a lake.

### Thames and Severn Canal

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Rising up behind the source of the Thames is a steep embankment which marks the course of the disused THAMES AND SEVERN CANAL, opened in 1789 as part of a series of waterways linking London and Bristol. The route of the



canal, last used commercially in 1911, runs for 30 miles (48 km) from Lechlade, where the Thames ceases to be navigable for boats of any size, to Wallbridge near Stroud, where the Stroudwater Navigation continues on to the Severn Estuary south-west of Gloucester.

The canal was what was known as a 'broad canal' capable of taking boats with a beam (width) of up to 14 ft (4.3 m) and with a draw of up to 4 ft (1.2 m). Because of the porous Cotswold limestone the canal leaked badly and water supply was a constant problem, so a pumping station was built at Thames Head to replenish the canal from the springs - water that should have flowed east to London found itself flowing west to Bristol instead - and this extraction could be one of the reasons why the Thames Head springs are now largely dry.

## Sapperton Tunnel

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A short walk northwards along the route of the canal from Thames Head, under a railway, past a derelict roundhouse and along a deep cutting, brings you to the magnificent neo-classical COATES PORTAL, entrance to the extraordinary 2.1-mile (3.4 km) long SAPPERTON TUNNEL. At 3,817 yards (3,490 m), it WAS THE LONGEST TUNNEL IN BRITAIN when it opened in 1789, and remained so until 1811, when it was overtaken by a tunnel on the Huddersfield Canal. There is no towpath through the tunnel, so boats had to be 'legged'

through by two people lying on a plank across the bow of the boat and 'walking' along the tunnel walls - dangerous and gruelling work. From the gaping mouth of the tunnel the dank, dripping brickwork recedes into an inky, echoing blackness and it must have taken some courage to enter in, even for hardened watermen.

The tunnel fell into disuse around 1910 and the Coates Portal was restored in 1977 by the Cotswold Canal Trust, who are in the process of restoring sections of the Thames and Severn Canal. Because the roof has collapsed in a couple of places, it is not at present possible to go all the way through the Sapperton Tunnel, but the Trust is making repairs and it is hoped the tunnel will be open for its full length before too long.

## Thames Path

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Not only does the Thames River begin at Thames Head but so too does the THAMES PATH, THE LONGEST RIVERSIDE WALK IN EUROPE which accompanies the river for 184 miles (296 km) as far as the Thames Barrier in Greenwich. And the only way to follow the infant Thames for the first 20 miles (32 km) or so is along the footpath - the river is too shallow for any kind of boat until Cricklade at the earliest.

## Fosse Way

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From the Thames Head, the course of the river leads off to the south-east and the Thames is crossed for the first time by the Fosse Way, the Roman road leading south from Cirencester towards Devon. 'Fosse' means 'ditch' and when originally built in the 1st century the Fosse Way was little

more than a defensive ditch on the western frontier of Roman Britain, on a line from Exeter to Lincoln.

A short distance beyond the Fosse Way water finally appears as the river springs permanently into life from a small walled enclosure known as LYD WELL, and then heads off towards Kemble, whose slim church spire rises out of the trees in the near distance.

## Kemble

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KEMBLE is built on the site of a 7th century pagan Anglo-Saxon cemetery, ONE OF THE MOST WESTERLY EVER FOUND IN ENGLAND. The present village church has a good Norman doorway and a tower from 1250, to which the spire was added in 1450. In 1872 the whole church was restored, and it also gained a new south transept when the chapel of ease at nearby Ewen was dismantled and rebuilt at Kemble brick by brick.

## Kemble Airfield

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One mile (1.6 km) beyond the village, on the far side from the river, is KEMBLE AIRFIELD, now known as COTSWOLD AIRPORT, which makes its presence felt in the village when the wind is in the right direction. It was built by the RAF just before the Second World War and became a sort of aeroplane garage where aircraft were sent for servicing and a lick of paint - the QUEEN'S FLIGHT were spruced up there.

For 16 years Kemble was home to the RED ARROWS, the RAF's aerobatic team, who would practise in the skies above several times a day, drawing crowds from miles around.



Kemble has since passed through many hands including, for a while, the US Air Force, but is now privately owned and provides a range of services such as aircraft restoration, maintenance, salvage and break-up - it is said to be THE BUSIEST AIRCRAFT SCRAPYARD IN THE WORLD. Kemble remains a working airfield, hosting flying weekends and air shows, and is also home to the BRISTOL AERO COLLECTION, displaying THE ONLY COMPLETE BRISTOL BRITANNIA LEFT IN THE WORLD.

## Ewen

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As the river approaches the village of Ewen it becomes steadily more prominent, a rippling stream of crystal clear water on a bed of stones, but today it is too weak to power Ewen Mill, once THE FIRST MILL ON THE RIVER THAMES, now

called Mill Farm. Ewen is fortunate for having the 16th-century Wild Duck Inn, aptly named since this is THE FIRST PLACE ON THE RIVER DOWN FROM THE SOURCE WHERE DUCKS ARE FOUND. Also in Ewen is THE FIRST OF THE MANY BEAUTIFUL RIVERSIDE MANSIONS for which the Thames is justly famous, in this case an attractive Georgian house set back beyond a green lawn, with a white gazebo by the water.

## Somerford Keynes

This was the Saxons' 'summer ford' and St Adhelm, Abbot of nearby Malmesbury, built a church here at the end of the 7th century - there is still a SAXON DOORWAY from this building blocked up in the north wall of the present-day church of All Saints, which itself dates from the early 13th century. In a recess nearby are the remains of a carved headstone, thought to be Viking, showing two creatures, possibly dragons, fighting.

Beside the church, and formerly approached by an avenue of elm trees, is a charming, gabled stone manor-house from Tudor days. In the garden there is a matching stone dovecote with mullioned windows and a smart new gazebo.

Sitting astride the river below the manor-house is KEMBLE MILL, the third mill from the source. It is overlooked by POOLE KEYNES, built on the site of a palaeolithic village, possibly 10,000 years old, THE OLDEST SETTLEMENT ON THE UPPER REACHES OF THE THAMES.

The fourth mill from the source is LOWER MILL, which has been turned into a luxury housing development and has apparently attracted interest from the likes of BRAD PITT and ANGELINA JOLIE. In the summer of 2008, THE FIRST BEAVERS TO BE BORN IN BRITAIN FOR 400 YEARS were born at Lower Mill.

## Cotswold Water Park

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For the next few miles, the river runs through the heart of THE LARGEST MAN-MADE INLAND WATER FEATURE IN EUROPE, the COTSWOLD WATER PARK, which acts as a kind of overflow for the some 140 lakes, created out of abandoned gravel quarries. Most of the lakes are used for recreational purposes, some have beaches, and some serve as landscape features for luxury housing schemes such as the Lower Mill Estate.

## Ashton Keynes

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As the river arrives in ASHTON KEYNES, THE FIRST VILLAGE ACTUALLY ON THE RIVER THAMES, it flows past a 17th century manor-house on the north bank and then divides in front of the delightful Long House. The main channel then flows south alongside picturesque High Road, which is lined on one side with houses accessed by individual bridges across the water - Ashton Keynes boasts some 20 bridges in total. ASHTON HOUSE, near the south end of the street, lurks behind a high yew hedge but throws out one wing to the river's edge, with a gazebo oriel window that projects over the river at the end of a high garden wall, giving the effect of a castle rising from a moat.

Scattered throughout the village at significant junctions are the stumps of four 14th century preaching crosses, all of them damaged by Oliver Cromwell's Roundheads.

On the northern edge of the village a network of mounds and ditches identifies the site of ASHTON KEYNES CASTLE, a ringwork and bailey castle built in the early 12th century by the Keynes family. The Keynes came over with William the Conqueror and their status as favoured local squires is

reflected in the assortment of villages in the area that bear their name.

## Waterhay

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After leaving Ashton Keynes, the Thames receives a good boost from Swill Brook, which joins it just above Waterhay Bridge. Once considered a mere dribble, Swill Brook is now much bigger than the parent Thames at this point, owing to the water park which has diverted water from the Thames and greatly reduced its flow.

WATERHAY, on the south bank, is now just a couple of farms and cottages, but it used to be a village of some size, with a 13th-century church to match. By the end of the 19th century the village had diminished to such an extent that the church was dismantled and rebuilt up the road in Leigh, leaving just the chancel standing forlornly in the middle of a field.



## North Meadow

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The river now passes through a landscape of water meadows, rich in wild flowers, and winds its way around the conical-shaped landmark of Hailstone Hill to reach NORTH MEADOW, just before Cricklade, a Site of Special Scientific Interest that lies on the flood plain between the Churn and Thames rivers. Since the development of mechanised farming in the 18th century, most meadows of

this kind have been drained and put to arable farming, but North Meadow was preserved in perpetuity as common land by the Saxon court-leet of Cricklade and provides a precious habitat for THE LARGEST COLLECTION OF RARE SNAKE'S-HEAD FRITILLARIES IN BRITAIN, some 80 per cent of all these flowers in the country.



## Cricklade

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The river laps the northern edge of the Saxon burgh of CRICKLADE, which is THE FIRST TOWN ON THE RIVER THAMES and THE ONLY WILTSHIRE TOWN ON THE RIVER THAMES. Originally a small settlement beside the Roman Ermine Street where it crossed the Thames flood plain on a raised wooden causeway, Cricklade was fortified against the Danes by Alfred the Great in about 890, and the layout of the Saxon town and ramparts can still be traced.

In 979 a mint was established in the town, operating until 1100, and Cricklade coins occasionally come to light - there are some examples in the town museum. The Royal Collection in Copenhagen has a fine example of a Cricklade coin sporting the head of King Canute. An old coaching inn, the Red Lion, now stands on the site of the CRICKLADE MINT.

## St Sampson's

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Cricklade's most prominent landmark from the river is the imposing tower of the parish church, ONE OF ONLY FIVE CHURCHES IN BRITAIN DEDICATED TO ST SAMPSON, THE CELTIC SAINT. The church itself was built in the 12th century on the site of a Saxon chapel, but the tower was added in 1552 by John Dudley, the Duke of Northumberland, father-in-law of Lady Jane Grey. He was executed not long afterwards.



*St Sampson's Cricklade*

### Cricklade in Legend

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Over the years various romantic legends have attached themselves to Cricklade, fostered and enhanced by numerous writers and commentators. Some believe that Cricklade is where St Augustine converted the Anglo-Saxons of Wessex to Christianity in 597, before moving on to Aust on the River Severn to meet the Welsh bishops. Others claim that the name Cricklade is a corruption of Greeklade, the home of learned monks who established ENGLAND'S FIRST UNIVERSITY here in the days of the Mercian King Penda,

pre-dating Oxford by 600 years. And William Morris reckoned that the tower of St Sampson's was paid for by the proceeds of a gambling win, as suggested by carvings of the four playing card symbols on the ceiling.

Whatever the truth, Cricklade, once described by William Cobbett as 'that villainous hole . . . a more rascally place I never set my eyes on . . .' is a very pleasant place today and is set, as the town motto tells us, 'in lovely surroundings'.

## Oldest Roman Catholic Church

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Near the river is the church of ST MARY'S, which stands on an earth bank above the High Street that was once part of the Saxon ramparts. Of Saxon origins, it was rebuilt by the Normans and retains a fine NORMAN CHANCEL ARCH. In 1981 the Church of England made St Mary's redundant, and it was later taken back into the Roman Catholic Church, making it THE OLDEST ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN BRITAIN.

## The Rights of Navigation

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Cricklade's Town Bridge, a single arch built in 1852, is the limit of navigational rights on the River Thames, which up to here acts as a public highway across private land. Between Cricklade and Lechlade, however, the river is too shallow for any kind of substantial cargo boat, and once the Thames and Severn Canal had been completed in 1789 the

Thames above Lechlade was rather abandoned as a viable thoroughfare. There are plans to restore the section to navigation and occasionally a light cargo is carried up to Cricklade in order to ensure that the navigational rights are not lost.



## THE RIVER THAMES

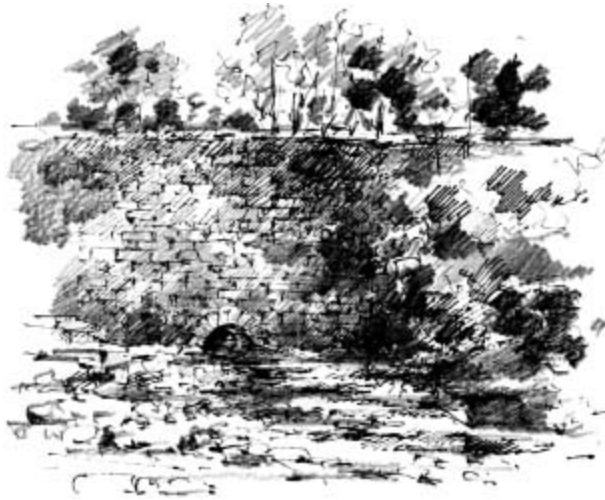
HORATIO HORNBLOWER, C.S Forester's naval hero, travels along the Thames and Severn Canal in a horse-drawn narrow boat on his way from Gloucester to London in *Hornblower and the Atropos* - and has to help 'leg' it through the Sapperton Tunnel when one of the boatmen gets sick.

Between 1936 and 1940 Ashton Keynes was the site of the COTSWOLD BRUDERHOF (house of brothers), a pacifist religious community founded in Germany in the 1920s. Persecuted by the Nazis because of their refusal to serve in the armed forces, the Bruderhof fled to England, where they set up a thriving farm business, along with crafts and publishing ventures. They attracted a substantial number of English followers, but with the outbreak of the Second World War anti-German sentiment forced the Bruderhof to flee once more, this time to Paraguay in South America. The Bruderhof buildings, just north of the village, are now occupied by the Cotswold Community School.

The checkered red-brown and white pattern of the snake's-head fritillary is the inspiration for the coat-of-arms and flag of CROATIA, recognisable from the shirts worn by the Croatian national football team.

# RIVER CHURN

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*Seven Springs - alternative source of the River Thames*

Just downstream from the Town Bridge at Cricklade, the Thames is joined by the RIVER CHURN, regarded by many as the true source of the River Thames. Arguments for the River Churn as the source of the Thames are:

- a) Seven Springs, where the Churn rises, is the furthest direct source from the mouth of the Thames, adding about 4 miles (6.4 km) to the length of the river.
- b) Seven Springs sits at 700 ft (213 m) above sea level, nearly twice the height of the source at Thames Head.
- c) Unlike Thames Head, Seven Springs never dries up.

## Seven Springs

The SEVEN SPRINGS of the RIVER CHURN rise in Gloucestershire, just short of the steep Cotswold escarpment that looks north-west across the Golden Valley. A couple of miles further north and the waters would tumble west to feed the River Severn, but at Seven Springs the Cotswolds tilt towards the south and east, and that way runs the River Churn.

The countryside is Cotswold charm at its most heavenly with wide fields of blowing barley, clumps of trees and honey-coloured dry-stone walls. The actual springs, cool and clear, bubble up through Cotswold stones in a deep wooded dell beside the main road from Andoversford to Gloucester, and join together to form a stream that flows under the road and into a pond in the grounds of the Seven Springs pub.

Where the stream emerges from under the road there is a plaque in the wall above it that reads:

HIC TUUS  
O TAMESINE PATER  
SEPTEMGEMINUS FONDS

The inscription means 'Here, O Father Thames, is your sevenfold source'. Having gathered itself in the pond, the Churn begins its journey to London and runs off south through trees towards . . .

## Coberley

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COBERLEY (Cuthbert's Ley) is mentioned in the Domesday Book as the property of Roger de Berkeley. There are long barrows in the fields around, and just to the north of the village are the remains of a Roman villa where some

notably fine mosaics have been found, along with coins, brooches and other artefacts. In 2007 some excavations were made there for Channel 4's *Time Team* programme.

The parish church of St Giles stands a little apart from the village, close to the river, and is approached through a small door next to a huge arched gateway leading into the private garden of Coberley Court.

## Coberley Hall

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The high wall next to the churchyard once guarded COBERLEY HALL, sadly demolished after the owner had lost his all in the South Sea Bubble. CHARLES I stayed at Coberley Hall during his retreat from the siege of Gloucester in 1643; and later his son Prince Charles, fleeing after the Battle of Worcester in 1651 and disguised as a groom, took shelter for the night of 10 September in the old rectory that preceded the present Georgian one.

## Coberley Church

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St Giles's Church, much restored by a Victorian rector, was rebuilt in the 14th century by SIR THOMAS DE BERKELEY, whose splendid tomb can be seen inside the church. Clad in the armour he wore at the Battle of Crecy in 1346, his tall figure rests on top of the tomb, his hands clasped in prayer, his head supported by angels, a lion at his feet.

Lying beside Sir Thomas is his wife, the Lady Joan. After Sir Thomas died, Lady Joan married SIR WILLIAM WHITTINGTON of Pauntley in Gloucestershire, by whom she had a son, Richard. Sir William was outlawed for marrying a de Berkeley widow without the permission of the King and died in penury not long afterwards, so young Richard