Out and About

in Runnymede

The Runnymede area is rich in historical associations. **Nigel Saul** looks at other places of interest near where King John gave his assent to the Charter in 1215.

Runnymede and the slopes of Cooper's Hill, looking towards the Magna Carta Memorial. The Memorial was commissioned by the American Bar Association and designed by Sir Edward Maufe.

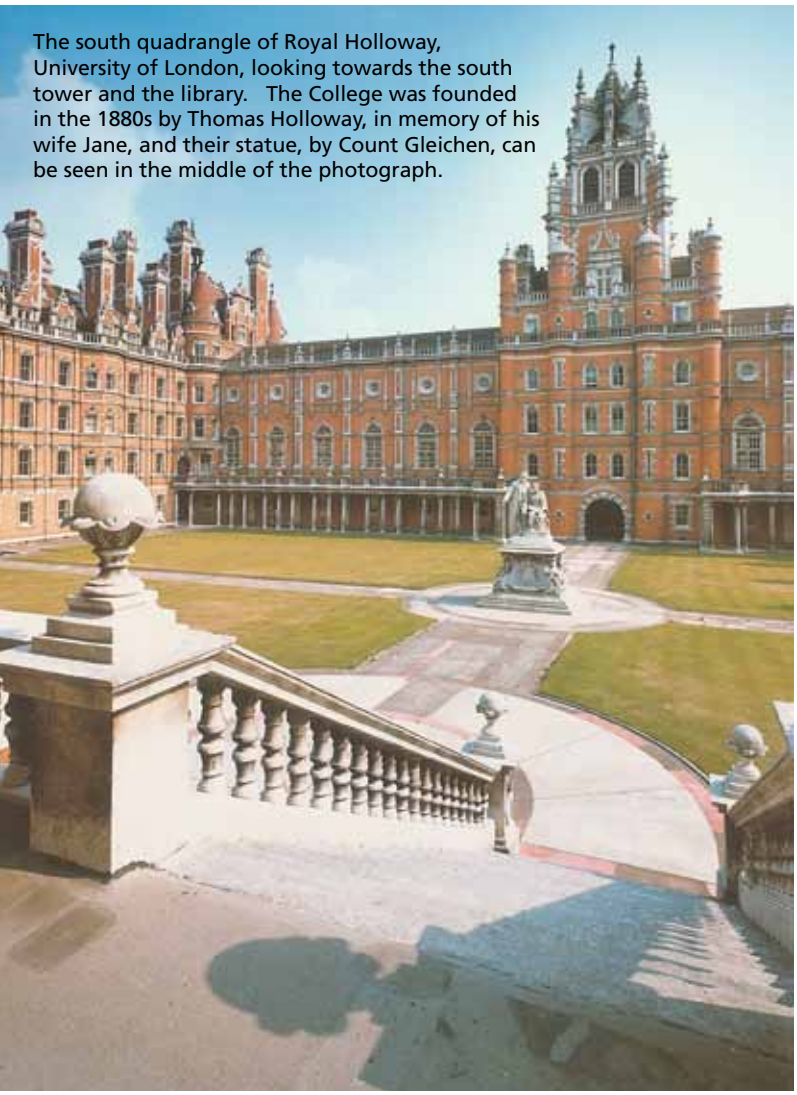
At Runnymede, at Runnymede,
Oh, hear the reeds at Runnymede: -
'You mustn't sell, delay, deny,
A freeman's right or liberty.
It wakes the stubborn Englishry,
We saw 'em roused at Runnymede!'

Rudyard Kipling
The Reeds of Runnymede, 1911

The birthplace of our democratic heritage is a broad meadow on the banks of the lower Thames near the meeting-point between Surrey and Berkshire. The name Runnymede is probably derived from the Old English 'runnig', meaning 'taking counsel', and before the Conquest, and perhaps later, meetings of the local hundred, or consultative body, would have been held there. The meadow and adjoining hillside probably had a liminal significance, lying as they did on the boundary between two Anglo-Saxon kingdoms or, as it was to be later, two English shires.

This part of the lower Thames Valley was an anciently settled one. Just to the east, near where the M25 crosses the river, are the remains of a rich prehistoric settlement, excavated in the 1970s and '80's, when the new motorway was being built. Neolithic occupation of the site was indicated by the presence of pottery and stone artefacts, among the latter, loom weights attesting the spinning of yarn and the weaving of cloth nearby. Around 900BC a new phase of activity on the site opened, with piles being sunk and a waterfront enclosure built, followed by the laying of hard-standings for the beaching of boats. The signs are that the site was a busy and important one for social and commercial exchange, with livestock and goods being traded and the river affording a communications route linking areas with different ecologies and economies.

A few miles west of Runnymede at Old Windsor in the eleventh century there was an important Anglo-Saxon royal palace much favoured by the kings of the day, especially Edward the Confessor, who came here for the hunting. Adjacent to the palace, and perhaps preceding it in date, was a minster church, a church with wide jurisdictional authority over the other places of worship in the locality. The actual village of Old Windsor was itself a considerable place, with proto-urban characteristics, clustering around a wheeled water-mill fed by a leat from the river. After the Conquest, when William I



The south quadrangle of Royal Holloway, University of London, looking towards the south tower and the library. The College was founded in the 1880s by Thomas Holloway, in memory of his wife Jane, and their statue, by Count Gleichen, can be seen in the middle of the photograph.

had established an entirely new castle at what was to become New Windsor, and the political centre of gravity moved to the west, the ancient settlement went into decline, and today not a stone of the palace remains above ground. The church too shrank in importance, losing its minster status and sinking to the rank of an ordinary parish church. As we see it today, the church is a plain though attractive mainly thirteenth-century structure, hard by the river, as the churches often are in this part of the Thames valley. Thomas Sandby, the architect and Deputy Ranger of Windsor Great Park, elder brother of the watercolourist, is buried in the churchyard.

Windsor Great Park itself is the broad landscape feature that dominates the area to the south and south-east of Windsor, the one surviving part of a forest that stretched almost to Reading in one direction and Guildford in the other. Ornamental hunting parks of this sort were often attached to royal palaces in the medieval and early modern periods: an obvious example is the Forest of Fontainebleau in France. Windsor Great Park was created in the early twelfth century in an area of poor sandy heathland ill-suited to arable agriculture – indeed, to agriculture of any sort. Within its bounds was a scattering of hunting lodges at which the king and his friends would stay for a night, some, such as Foliejon, surviving only in name, others like Easthampstead now occupied by later houses.

The Park in its present form is a creation largely of the improvers of the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. At the Windsor end, the great eye-catching feature is the Long Walk, a dead-straight avenue running north-south for two miles from the Upper Ward of the castle to Snow Hill, the highest point, laid out by Charles II's architect, Hugh May. At the top of the hill, closing the vista, is Westmacott's equestrian statue of George III, known as 'the Copper Horse', modelled on the statue of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius at Rome. Off to the east, hidden deep in the Home Park, is the Royal Mausoleum at Frogmore, an Italian Romanesque structure dating from the 1860s, in which Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort lie buried. The Mausoleum is open a limited number of days a year, one of them the Wednesday nearest to Queen Victoria's birthday, 24 May. Close by is Frogmore House, a royal retreat dating in its present form largely from the time of Queen Charlotte, *c.* 1792-1818, designed in the Neoclassical style and surprisingly modest in scale.

Much of Windsor Great Park, especially to the south, was substantially re-designed in the second half of the eighteenth century by the Ranger, William, duke of Cumberland, 'Butcher' Cumberland, George II's second son, and his talented deputy, Thomas Sandby. The massive scheme involved the creation of extensive plantations and rides and the digging of new lakes, the largest of which, adorned with a small waterfall and flanked by the ruins of Leptis Magna, stretches to Virginia Water. It was at Royal Lodge, a *cottage orné* in this part of the Park, that the elderly George IV, bloated and grotesque, lived in seclusion for much of the time that the state apartments in the castle were being rebuilt. On those rare occasions when he ventured forth in his carriage, he would post soldiers on the gates to prevent the vulgar public from getting in and peering at him.

The land to the east of Windsor Forest in the Middle Ages was all part of the estates of Chertsey Abbey, an ancient Benedictine foundation, whose monks did much to shape the landscape and economy of this part of the Thames Valley. The great abbey itself has vanished almost without trace, its buildings plundered at the Reformation, but its historic legacy is still to be seen in the parish churches that the monks built, and in the small towns that they created, notably that at Egham. Egham is the nearest town to Runnymede, and lies a mile to its east, set back from the river, astride the main road from London to the south-west which crossed the Thames at Staines. The now rather unattractive road known as the Causeway, which runs from Egham to Staines, is a well-attested medieval highway. Egham was launched on its career as an urban settlement in the late twelfth century to take advantage of the buoyant market of the time, and the shops which line its main street today occupy the footprint of the medieval tenements. The parish church at the end of the street was rebuilt in the early fourteenth century by the then abbot of Chertsey, John Rutherwick, an able and ambitious man who rebuilt many churches in the area. The church that he paid for was in turn replaced by the present classical structure in the early nineteenth century, but the original dedication stone survives, as does the attractive lych-gate on to the street. Under the west tower are two fine seventeenth-century monuments, transferred from the old building, commemorating Judge Sir John Denham and his two wives. This John's son, the second Sir John, was author of 'Cooper's Hill', the celebrated poem which celebrates the view from this site.

Going south-west from Egham the main road climbs up to Englefield Green, where the skyline is dominated by the magnificent French Renaissance silhouette of Royal Holloway, a higher education college for women founded in 1886 by Thomas Holloway, a self-made patent medicine manufacturer, in memory of his wife. Today a member school of the University of London, Royal Holloway merged with Bedford College is the early 1980s and is now home to nearly 8,000 students, both men and women.

The college's extraordinary main building, which Pevsner describes as the finest Victorian building in the Home Counties, was designed by William Henry Crossland, an

architect who deserves to be better known and was responsible for the scarcely less remarkable Rochdale Town Hall. Stylistically it is conceived as a Loire Valley chateau ranged around two big quadrangles, the library in the far cross wing, the hall in the middle and the chapel and picture gallery in the front, the exotic detailing an eclectic mix of borrowings from Blois, Chambord and other chateaux which Crossland had visited. The most remarkable room in the college is the picture gallery, which has a renowned collection of Victorian art. The founder, influenced by his wife, had a strong sense of the moral and didactic value of art and commissioned his brother-in-law to buy up a large collection of paintings, mainly contemporary works, for the edification of the young ladies. Perhaps the most celebrated items are Millais' 'The Princes in the Tower' and Britton Rivière's 'Sympathy', two touchingly sentimental works, and Luke Fildes's 'Casualty Ward', which articulates the same concern for social reform as Dickens did in his novels.

Stretching north from Royal Holloway, a side road threads through Englefield Green, past St Jude's church, to the wide green from which the village takes its name. Here in October 1852 took place the last duel fought on English soil. The contestants were two Frenchmen arguing over a point of honour, a former naval captain called Cournet and a civil engineer by the name of Barthélemy, whom his adversary suspected of being a police informant. Cournet was fatally wounded and carried to the Barley Mow pub, across the green, to die; Barthélemy took to his heels, but was arrested at Kingston on Thames and, put on trial, was lucky to escape with a light sentence on a manslaughter charge.

The side road continues through the green and then down the hill to Runnymede, passing on the left St John's Beaumont School, designed in 1888 by J.F. Bentley, the architect of Westminster Cathedral. At the bottom, near the river, a turning to the right takes the visitor on to the modern A308 and then, past the trees, on to the Runnymede estate. The hallowed nature of this site is announced by the two entrance piers with their inscriptions commemorating Magna Carta and, behind them, the Lutyens lodges, topped by his trademark steeply angled roofs.

Lutyens was commissioned to design these buildings as an adornment to Runnymede in 1930. In December the previous year the meadow had been saved for the nation by the generosity of Lady Fairhaven, who had acquired

Egham High Street, with the museum on the left and the spire of the United Reformed church further on. Egham can trace its origins as a small town to the late twelfth century.

the land in memory of her late husband, the former MP, Urban Broughton, to save it from threat of development. Runnymede had long been celebrated as the site of the meeting between King John and the barons in 1215, but it had not always been treated with the respect and veneration that it is by the English-speaking world today. In the nineteenth century it had been used for race meetings, which were notorious for attracting pickpockets and ne'er-do-wells. By the Great War, industry was encroaching from Staines and Egham Hythe, and bungalow developments were disfiguring the Berkshire bank near Wraysbury. In the 1920s Lloyd George's financially cash-strapped government hatched a plan to raise extra funds for the treasury by selling off Runnymede to a private owner. A public outcry greeted the news, the government's plans were withdrawn, and Lady Fairhaven's initiative later resulted. In 1929 she presented the property to the National Trust, in whose ownership it remains, and to enhance the site the two lodges were built at the Old Windsor end and two smaller, but similar, kiosks at the Egham end.

The glory of Runnymede today is that it is a magnificent open space in a busy and much built-upon part of England. It is impossible to say where precisely along its banks the two sides met in 1215, as the course of the river has changed since then. It is worth remembering how even today changes are being wrought in the landscape by nature, as the meadows were twice heavily inundated by floods in the winter of 2014. There are just two memorials attesting the significance of the Runnymede site, and interestingly both have an American connection, an indication of Magna Carta's importance in the American tradition. One is the Magna Carta Memorial, an elegant, domed structure commissioned by the American Bar Association to a design by Sir Edward Maufe and unveiled in 1957 at a ceremony attended by both American and English lawyers. The other, close by, is the John F. Kennedy Memorial, designed by Geoffrey Jellicoe, and jointly dedicated in 1965 by HM the Queen and Kennedy's widow, Jacqueline. A major new public sculpture, to a design by Hew Locke, will be unveiled on 15 June this year at the ceremony to mark the 800th anniversary of the making of the Charter.

Above Runnymede, partly hidden by the trees and best viewed from afar, is a quite different memorial, the Commonwealth Air Forces Memorial on Cooper's Hill. This elegant and peaceful building, also designed by Maufe, takes the form of a large arcaded cloister, the walls of which are inscribed with the names of the fallen Commonwealth airmen of the two world wars. On the north side is a tower from the top of which magnificent views can be gained over the Thames valley, towards Windsor in the one direction and Heathrow and London in the other. The view west to Windsor from the Cooper's Hill site is an especially attractive one, and it has captured the attention of artists over the centuries. From Cooper's Hill Lane there are enjoyable walks back down to Runnymede through the woodland. Runnymede and its surroundings constitute a unique site, the nearest to which we can lay claim in England to a great national secular shrine of the kind that our American cousins have in Gettysburg.

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