



# The Victoria Embankment

## How one structure tames the Thames in London

The construction of embankments along the Thames in Victorian London alleviated several problems. The Thames was used as an open sewer and the Great Stink of 1858 spurred Parliament to act. The embankments allowed Sir Joseph

Bazalgette's sewer system to be built underground, diverting waste away from the river and improving its health. In addition to incorporating parts of the London Underground, the embankments eased congestion by creating new roadways along the Thames.

### Box 1 A working river



Somerset House is a grand neoclassical building from the Georgian era and one of the most elegant buildings in central London. When Sir William Chambers (1723–1796) designed the building, he made the riverside frontage its grand showpiece, with sweeping terraces and ceremonial staircases that led directly down to water gates on the Thames. During the 1800s, Somerset House was a hub of state administration, especially for taxation, and a home for learned societies including the Royal Society and the Geological Society.

This image from about 1850 shows Somerset House before the construction of the Victoria Embankment. For many buildings and organisations of this era in central London, the river was an active part of daily life. Boats docked at riverside steps, allowing easy transportation of goods, people and mail. Officials, dignitaries and society members could arrive by boat, step off at the river stairs, and enter the building direct. Before the railways, the river was the fastest way to travel in London.

### Box 2 Construction

The construction of the Victoria Embankment between 1865 and 1870 transformed Somerset House's relationship with the river. Land was reclaimed from the river allowing the construction of a wide roadway and public gardens. Direct access to the river was lost, so boats could no longer dock right at its doors. The embankment radically altered the aesthetic and functional relationship: the river was now seen more as a scenic backdrop rather than a working waterway for Somerset House and other buildings that once fronted the river.

This photograph shows the construction of the underground railway line and the Victoria Embankment in front of Somerset House in 1869. Today, this line forms part of the District and Circle Lines on the London Underground.



### Box 3 Modern era

This aerial photograph shows the Victoria Embankment and Somerset House in November 1972. Compare it with the image from 1850 and note the transformation of the riverside environment, with plane trees lining the road. Waterloo Bridge is at bottom left.

Several major embankments were built along the Thames in the Victorian era as part of Bazalgette's river improvement and sewer projects. Together they transformed the river and the waterfront in central London. The Albert and Chelsea Embankments were completed in 1869 and 1874, respectively. The embankments included gardens, promenades and public spaces, transforming the riverside into a more pleasant and prestigious environment, reflecting Victorian ideals of progress, civic pride and urban order. The channel of the Thames was narrowed and deepened, thereby improving navigation. The narrowed channel now flows more quickly, and this may be one of the reasons the Thames has not frozen in central London in the modern era.



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