

FACT FILE RIVER THAMES

LENGTH 215 miles (346km)
The Thames is England's longest river (yes, the Severn is five miles longer but its source is in Wales - so it has to make do with the title of Britain's longest river). The Thames has 214 bridges, 17 tunnels and more than 80 islands.

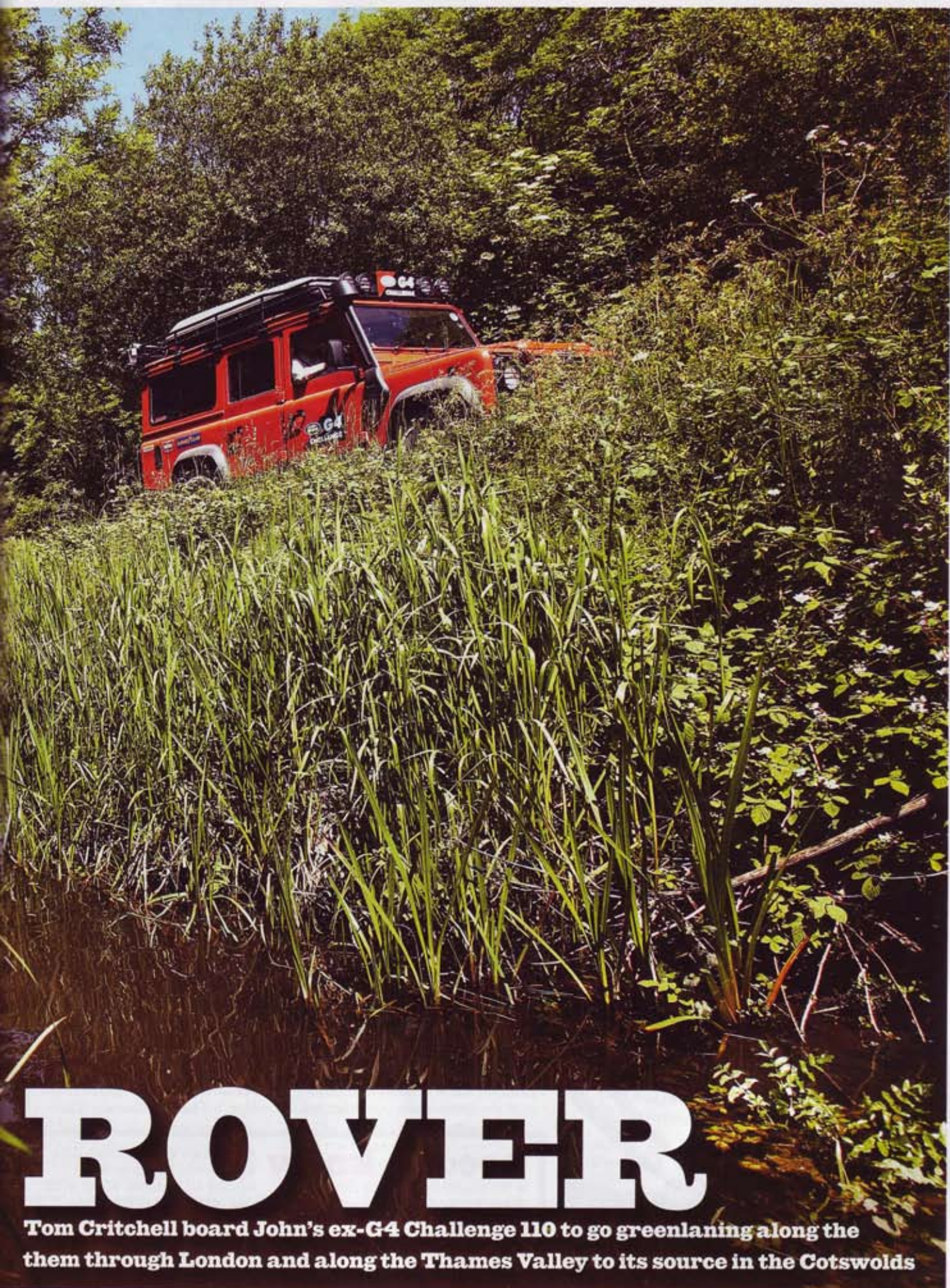
SOURCE Thames Head, Gloucestershire.
SOURCE HEIGHT ABOVE SEA LEVEL 361ft (110m). Interesting fact: the huge Queen Elizabeth Bridge over the Thames at Dartford is 88ft (26m) higher than the source.

MOUTH Thames Estuary, Southend-on-Sea, Essex.
PASSES THROUGH Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Greater London, Surrey, Kent.



Three men in a **LAND**

John Pearson, Neil Watterson and photographer
route of the River Thames. Their journey takes



ROVER

Tom Critchell board John's ex-G4 Challenge 110 to go greenlaning along the
them through London and along the Thames Valley to its source in the Cotswolds

Unlike Jerome K Jerome and his two friends in the 19th century book *Three Men In A Boat*, Team LRO won't be travelling on the Thames for this adventure – but we'll be driving the best greenlanes alongside the river.

Jerome's trip was from Kingston upon Thames to Oxford. In previous adventures in this series we've travelled the full length of the rivers, from sea to source but, for this one, we're starting at the Dartford Crossing – the most easterly road crossing of the river, with a bridge taking traffic north to south and tunnels carrying it the other way.

There's no point in travelling any further towards the sea and, to be frank, if you're just following our greenlane routes you can save a lot of time by picking up the first lanes between Henley and Reading and ignoring London. The capital doesn't exactly welcome 4x4s with open arms so, unless you're keen on some sightseeing, our advice is to turn off the M4 at Junction 10 and head west through the Thames Valley.

After turning off the congested M25 we head into London's even more congested traffic.

Our plan is to cross the Thames on board the Woolwich ferry, where the South Circular road joins the North Circular, but a notice tells us there's a hour's delay so we skip that and cross through the Blackwall Tunnel.

We pass through the western tunnel, which was built in the late 19th century. Our mine of information Mr N Watterson tells us that this tunnel's sharp bends were designed so that horses wouldn't bolt when they saw light at the other end.

When we get to majestic Tower Bridge there's stationary traffic due to the bridge being raised for a ship to pass upstream. This gives us time to view the Tower of London, and debate whether the suited blond-haired man who passes on a bicycle really is Mayor Boris Johnson.

Once over Tower Bridge we want to get out of London as fast as possible, but that's a relative term with lots of traffic making it a painful journey.



Our first greenlane, near Caversham, is overgrown, but a pleasant drive.



GREENLANE #1

SU 726774

OS Landranger 175

Slightly muddy, but that's just the very top level – it's hard underneath. Becomes tarmac for a while before returning to gravel.

★★★★★



NEIL'S MADE-UP FACTS ABOUT THE THAMES

#1 The Beatles recorded their influential 'Abbey Wood' album above the launderette on the high street. The zebra crossing is still there!

On the far side of Chiswick Bridge Neil's mapping shows a byway alongside the Thames, but it turns out to be tarmac all the way and quite busy. We imagine it's even more hectic here in April, when the famous university boat race is held, because the finish line is by the bridge.

We cross into Surrey and pass Runnymede, where King John signed the Magna Carta in 1215 – when his subjects made him agree to be bound by the law. These days it's the location for a number of impressive memorials, which include the John F Kennedy, the Commonwealth Air Forces and the Magna Carta one.

Then we drive past two more historic sites. The first and less significant one is Windsor Castle, one of the Queen's official residences;

the second is Taplow, where Neil tells us he bought his Series IIA – the Red Shed – 21 years ago.

Due to the London traffic we're up against it on time, which is a real shame because we have to miss out on a planned visit to LRO reader Jason Stevenson's Lovibond's brewery at Henley-on-Thames. Jason and his colleagues use only Land Rovers to deliver their various Henley beers. The brewery shop is open on Saturdays from 11.00am to 5.00pm. Their beers are also available in local pubs and some Waitrose supermarkets, or you can order on-line at lovibonds.com.

Our mapping shows a UCR near Hurst. This is tarmac all the way, but it does have a ford through the river Loddon, a Thames tributary. The



need to know

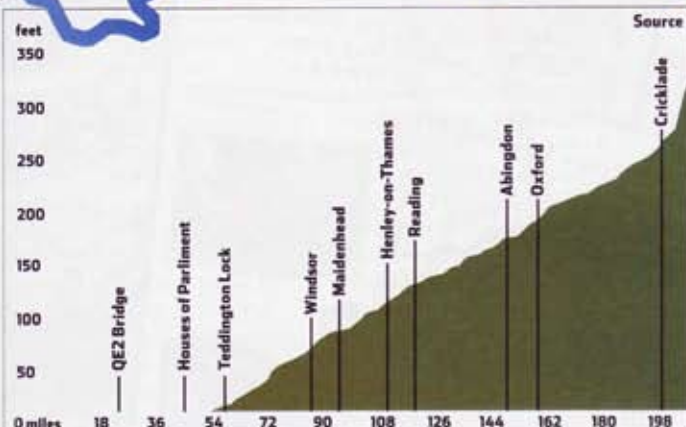
- We stayed at: The Dog House Hotel, Abingdon. doghousehotel.co.uk, 01865 390 830.
- Camping, caravan sites and accommodation: information-britain.co.uk. This is the best

- website we've found that lists all kinds of places to stay suiting all budgets, along with places of interest in the areas.
- London tourism: visitolondon.com is all-encompassing.
- Runnymede memorials: tinyurl.com/flw65.



OTHER THAMES VALLEY GREENLANES WE VISITED

- A Chiswick Bridge TQ 204765 OS Landranger 176**
Tarmac byway alongside Thames near Chiswick bridge.
- B Hurst SU 781748 OS Landranger 175**
Ford through river Loddon by the Land's End pub.
- C Moulsham SU 584828 OS Landranger 174**
Hard-based, tree-lined lane.
- D Cholsey SU 594858 OS Landranger 174/5**
Leads down to where the ferry once ran across the Thames.
- E Wallingford SU619884 OS Landranger 175**
Very overgrown - needs lots of clearance work.
- F Inglesham SU205992 OS Landranger 163**
Very overgrown, but looks well used. We didn't drive it.



Views over the Thames Valley are looking lovely at the lane near Woodcote

Loddon crossing, near the Land's End pub, is quite shallow today, but a sign warns traffic not to attempt it when the river is in flood.

Finally, many hours after leaving Peterborough, we reach our first greenlane, near Caversham. It's overgrown in places, but we prune back the bushes and rampant pink dog roses to protect the 110's paint and it turns into a pleasant forest drive. There's one muddy section, but the surface underneath is firm and stony. After a short tarmac stretch the lane becomes a gravel farm track.

The quaint cast iron toll bridge (you'll need 20p) takes us from

Pangbourne to Whitchurch, and at this point the river also marks the county boundary, so we drive from Berkshire into Oxfordshire.

The Thames Valley is starting to get really beautiful now, and the next lane we drive reveals some lovely views as we emerge from woodland near the village of Woodcote. The track is lined by traditional British trees, including oaks.

There is the blot on the far horizon in the shape of the Didcot power station's cooling towers, but the

GREENLANE #2

SU 625818
OS Landranger 175
UCR starting from the village and heading through the trees before opening up to give views over the Thames Valley and Didcot power station in the distance.

★★★★★



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GREENLANE #3

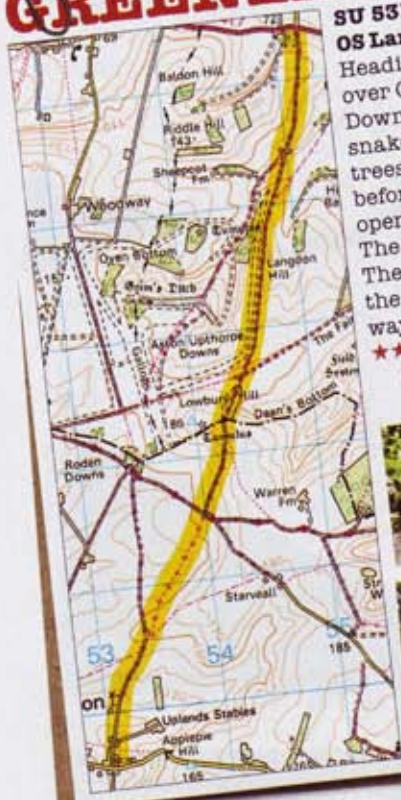
SU 531800

OS Landranger 174

Heading up and over Compton Down, this lane snakes through trees to start with before the lane opens up towards The Ridgeway. Then it's back into the trees on the way down.

★★★★☆

Ordnance Survey Mapping © Crown Copyright AM20109



Our highest rated greenlane of the journey crosses Compton Down after starting through woodland

overall view is pleasant as it opens out initially on our right with a wheat field, and then with fields both sides as we drop down the valley.

To the west of Goring lies the Ridgeway – this is Britain's oldest road, which has been in use for at least 5000 years. Some parts of this 87-mile track have byway status, but they have traffic regulation orders (temporary closures) on them except for May to September. We want people to be able to follow our routes all year round, so we give the Ridgeway a miss and opt instead for an adjacent lane near Compton at the south-western end of the Chilterns.

And what a cracker it turns out to be, earning the only four-star LRO greenlane rating of the whole trip.

Mainly chalk, the track initially snakes through bushes and trees, which we trim back. Then it opens out into a stereotypical English greenlane, climbing up to and crossing over the Ridgeway before

Below: definitely too deep to cross, even for a Defender. A ferry used to operate across the Thames near Cholsey



dropping through superb countryside. It's 3.5 miles and a great place to be on this summer's day.

There's a wealth of greenlanes in this area and we've picked only the best ones for this report, although we have included some more we tried (see panel, page 57).

One thing we did find was that a surprising number of lanes were overgrown – some showed evidence of being used, but others couldn't have been driven for some time. This is a shame because there are some



Wallingford lane blocked by burnt-out trailer

GREENLANE CODE

There are those who would like to ban vehicle access to the countryside, so don't give them ammunition. Please follow these guidelines on every trip.

- The status of rights of way changes over time. Only ever drive greenlanes that have known vehicle rights after studying the relevant Ordnance Survey map. As well as that, you should check the definitive map with the county council, or get in touch with the local Land Rover club's rights of way officer or the GLASS (glass-uk.org) representative. Some definitive maps are now available online.
- All the 'greenlanes' that are published in LRO are byways or unclassified county roads (UCRs). Vehicles are not allowed to drive on restricted byways, bridleways or footpaths.

- Avoid badly rutted/sodden tracks. By driving them, you'll only make them worse and will slow their recovery.
- Don't stray off the defined track. Doing so provides ammunition for those who want to ban us.
- Keep under 12mph. Stop for walkers or horses (switch off your engine to avoid scaring the latter).
- Always travel in groups of no more than five vehicles, unless there's a maximum vehicle restriction. Some National Parks allow a maximum of four-vehicle convoys.
- Don't damage trees or hedgerows, except for sympathetically cutting back any overhanging branches that could damage your vehicle. You're perfectly within your rights to do this, as lanes should be kept to a minimum width of three metres.

- Take recovery gear/spade in case you get stuck. Charge your mobile phone fully.
- Don't travel alone.
- Leave open gates open – but closed ones should be closed again after you've passed through them.
- Take your litter home.
- Supervise dogs and young children, especially when passing livestock.
- Don't drive waterways unless you can be certain there's an obvious right of way across them. And please take extreme care to check that the current isn't too strong for your vehicle to cross safely. If in doubt, do not cross.
- All greenlanes driven by LRO are now rated out of five stars. The rating takes into consideration attractiveness of scenery, terrain, driveability and other interest.

lovely routes along the Thames Valley – are there local enthusiasts out there with secateurs and saws?

One of the 'Other Greenlanes' near Cholsey is called Ferry Lane, which gives a big clue as to what used to operate here. It's a firm-based track that takes us right down to the water's edge in a very pleasant location where people park for fishing or walking along the Thames Path national trail.

There's another overgrown lane outside Wallingford, which we have to turn back on. Neil says he would have taken his Series IIA through it – but when we look at the other end it's blocked by a burnt-out trailer.

We've booked into the Dog House Hotel near Abingdon for our overnight stay. It's comfortable if a little pricey – but then so were other places we checked out in this affluent and expensive part of the country.

For the first greenlane of day two we head back towards the giant



Above right: this all-weather track near Wootton runs between barley fields towards Dalton airfield

cooling towers at Didcot power station. There's a greenlane – Hobbyhorse Lane – that runs alongside a landfill site. The first part isn't what anyone would call an attractive drive. The track is obviously used by heavy vehicles and looks as though it would be very muddy in wet weather. In this instance it wouldn't be a problem to use it in the wet because you're not going to cause any more damage than the dumper trucks that come down here. Eventually the lane turns left, where it becomes slightly rutted and overgrown for a short distance.

Next we cross back over the A34 to a greenlane near Wootton. It's an all-weather, mainly flat track between luxuriant green barley fields, heading towards Dalton airfield where the Abingdon 4x4 Festival is held in September. No need to reach for the transfer box lever on this one, but the surrounding countryside is wonderful in the bright summer sunshine.

Then it's a long drive into the Cotswolds before we reach any more driveable greenlanes. There's a possible one near the Cotswolds Water Park, but it's another one that turns out to be overgrown. After that we head to Somerford Keynes where there's a stone-based UCR alongside a holiday village. We wouldn't normally bother venturing down an unexciting track like this, but it runs alongside the Thames. However, this is not the mighty one that flows through the capital. Here, it's just a few feet wide and very shallow.

Our final greenlane is near South Cerney. Here there's long grass and wild flowers growing taller than the Defender's bonnet, and John has to crawl along to prevent seeds getting into the radiator.

To reach the source we park off the A433 outside Cirencester and take a short hike across a cow pasture to reach the stone at Thames Head.

The Three Men in Jerome's book would undoubtedly have been carrying their boat by this stage



GREENLANE #6

SU 020964

OS Landranger 163

South Leaze Farm

Very overgrown

lane, though only

with light flowers.

It's obviously

lightly used.

★★★★★



This track near
Somerford Keynes runs
alongside the (by now
very narrow) Thames



That'll be the source at
Thames Head, then

NEIL'S MADE-UP FACTS ABOUT THE THAMES

#2 Reading is
correctly
pronounced 'reed-
ing' and the local
dialect is very
similar to that
of Yorkshire.

if they'd continued all the way to the
source instead of stopping at Oxford,
because it's absolutely bone dry.

But the Thames isn't about to dry
up, because water does run from here
in wet weather. We see evidence of it
in photos at the Thames Head pub
just up the A433, when we pop in for
a sandwich.

Our journey is not quite over yet,
mind, because there's a lovely long
ford at Dunstisbourne Leer,
and that's just a short drive
north-west of Cirencester.
The ford – on the road from
Dunstisbourne Leer to
Dunstisbourne Abotts – is
all of 200 feet long.

A plea for caution here,
though – this is not a ford
to splash around in for
dramatic photos, because
it runs alongside some

houses whose driveways exit into the
ford. Please respect the residents and
drive slowly through it.

And that's the end of the Three
Men In A Land Rover's journey along
the Thames. It's been another great
adventure, with some excellent
greenlanes through some magnificent
English countryside.

Next month we're heading north to
the river Trent, from the Humber
estuary to Biddulph Moor, for some
great greenlaning. **LRO**

..AND A FORD

SO 975075 OS

Landranger 163

The road

connecting

Dunstisbourne

Leer with

Dunstisbourne

Abotts takes in a

long ford. In fact

the river runs right along the road with a

raised footpath alongside. It's not a place for

splashing around, as houses have drives

exiting on to the ford. ★★★★★



**This is not a ford
to splash around
in for dramatic
photos because
it runs alongside
some houses**