



*Battersea Bridge from Tremorne Gardens*, oil on canvas, 10×20in. (25.4×50.8cm)

## THE THAMES IN WINTER

Peter Brown chronicles his experiences of painting London's river *en plein air*, from its source to the city, for his exhibition of oil paintings

I know I am not the first to have taken on the Thames as a subject, but the reason all 'overdone' subjects are popular is that they are good. It is the variety that makes the river so exciting, from its rural beginnings, its course through Oxford and the market towns below to our more industrial towns of Reading and Maidenhead, and on to Windsor and the suburbs of London and into the heart of the capital. At the time of writing I have yet to discover Greenwich to Gravesend.

James Kayll at W H Patterson suggested 'Along the Thames' to me as the subject for my next show. I had just done my second exhibition of Oxford and Cambridge, and I had my heart set on London for the next one. I immediately loved the idea.

I started in November and after eight months, one abandoned house move, a birth, christening, change of dealer and an extra 30,000 miles on the clock of my neglected Mondeo, I had 43 oil

paintings. They map a journey of seasons, weather and a small evolution in my painting as opposed to a linear progression along the Thames path.

I started at Lechlade and Buscot but soon leaped to Charing Cross for a couple of days before returning to Wallingford and Abingdon. Then I tried Richmond and back out to Windsor, then Hammersmith to Henley, and so on. I could never work to a rigid plan.

I work on site and in the weather I am given, so where I work on a particular day is down to the previous day's weather forecast. Most paintings take more than one sitting — usually five — so there is a lot of effort involved in returning to a spot when the light is right. I can remember one mad morning driving round a roundabout outside Abingdon because the light was not right, 'dilemma'-ing: "Should I drive to Hammersmith to work on the overcast painting, or should I

stay here?" (the forecast was sunny spells.

### *Small canvases*

In winter I work mainly on small canvases of 10×20in. or 12×15in. Due to the cold and wind it is hard to stay relaxed and to concentrate for more than two to three hours. *Battersea Bridge from Tremorne Gardens*, above, was painted between hail showers. The light was constantly changing and I decided to adopt a light that struck me and worked the sky and water at the same time. I altered these as I worked on the bridge and banks, running to the car during the hailstorms. The weather was changeable and so was the way I did the painting: stop, start, no plan, just trying to capture a moment or the feeling of transient weather.

The light I really love is grey, either rain or fog or just overcast. I hate being in the house with sunlight pouring through the window. This may be something to do with a feeling of guilt I get that I

should be outside capturing it in charcoal. I find sunlight unsettling, distracting and confusing. It creates offensive contrasts that interrupt and fragment planes. Grey light gives uniformity and subtlety, and allows objects their own order and space.

Fog is the epitome of this. It does more than allow objects to sit down and not jump up at you: it makes them sit down. I love the way it represses and simplifies form. To me it does not flatten objects; it does the opposite. Its tangible atmosphere orders the space, engulfing distance gradually.

In the fog paintings I feel I control colour while trying to be as true to the subject as possible, whereas in bright, sunny paintings I am at the mercy of local colour. This may be why artists paint so much *contre jour*; the foggy silhouettes allow you to look into them and discover colour by trial and error.

By adding blue or orange to reach a tone and colour that seemed right, I had started to





▲ *Morning, Windsor Castle*, oil on canvas, 10×15in. (25.4×38cm)



◀ *Winter's Day, Hammersmith Bridge*, oil on canvas, 12×15in. (30.5×38cm)

**"Due to the cold and wind it is hard to stay relaxed"**

► *Spring, Albert Bridge*, oil on canvas, 24×36in. (61×91.5cm)

▼ *Molesey Lock*, oil on canvas, 10×20in. (25.4×50.8cm)



gravitate towards these more workable lights (*contre-jour*) when I thought that perhaps I was doing this because it was easier. I used to paint and draw with the sun behind me, the light doing all those things that I have been whinging about. So I stayed at Windsor until the sun moved around and painted *Morning, Windsor Castle*, left. "That's more like it," I said to myself on the drive home as I studied it in the rear view mirror on the passenger seat.

### *London bridges*

As the year and the seasons moved on I gravitated more to London. I had decided that the most important thing was to paint what inspired me the most and not worry about doggedly tracking the course of the river. I was to control this show, not the Thames. When I reached the Albert Bridge I was happy to indulge myself. I had been impressed by Hammersmith Bridge but this one blew me away.

Though I am now at the grand old age of 37 and have friends and business in London, I actually do not know the city very well and I am constantly being surprised by it. Albert



Bridge is perfect; I loved dealing with the white.

I remember sitting on an New English Art Club selection panel, and one of the other artists reeling when he saw a painting in which white had been used direct from the tube. While I am not sure that there is anything inherently wrong with this, I have noticed myself considering white much more ever since. I have always mixed white, finding the likes of flake white too harsh on its own. The ironwork on the bridge allowed me to really use white, taking it from cream to cool blue and green.





*Fog, Henley*, oil on canvas, 20×40in.  
(50.8×101.5cm)

*St Paul's From The Millennium Bridge*,  
oil on canvas, 20×25in.  
(50.8×63.5cm)

You have to get away from looking at things in terms of literal perception (clouds are white, the paint work is white, etc) and assess objects visually, ordering them in tone and colour.

Albert Bridge hurls these differences at you. In this light the bridge stands out so brightly from the 'white' clouds behind that you realise that they are closer to grey than white. The bright whites on the bridge in the painting include raw sienna.

Painting something the size of Spring, Albert Bridge was inspiring. I had dealt with the ever-changing light, and looking at the painting now I see that I got the light fairly even across the canvas — that is to say it is fairly close to a moment in time with all the shadows pointing in a similar direction.

Very often I tackle paintings of this size by going along with the changing light as the sun moves across the sky during the day. This to me is what makes *plein air* painting so unique. It is all about experiencing it over a period of time, day after day. You become more involved with the landscape; you get to know the road sweepers, the café owners, the residents, etc, and you get to know your subject.

In terms of getting the light right, I attempt to paint the same parts of a view at times corresponding to previous sittings. So generally a painting can represent, say, a three-hour period of the day.



*Teddington Lock Footbridge*, oil on canvas, 20×16in. (50.8×40.5cm)

### Millennium Bridge

Moving towards the centre of town, I loved painting the embankment near Lambeth and then Westminster. I moved away from the river when I reached Pimlico, painting the wonderful Lupus Street and moving away again to paint Whitehall.

When I made it to the Millennium Bridge I was disappointed to discover that while its position is superb, offering fantastic views upstream and down, these views are obscured by the vast cabling supporting the structure along its sides.

I managed one painting 10×20in. looking towards Tower Bridge by tiptoeing and crouching. It offers a stunning view towards Saint Paul's. The spanking new steel bridge, reflecting sunlight like snow, looks as if it leads right up to the foot of the cathedral. I could not decide whether to paint this with the ramp going back down to the embankment or from the top, so I did both.

While I had been at Hammersmith Bridge two policemen ran a computer check on me in case I was a bomber. Here I was interviewed by the BBC who were doing a vox pops on the gherkin-shaped Swiss Re Tower. I do not think they managed to find one passerby who disapproved. We all thought we were being very alternative by saying: "Actually, I rather like it."

There were a few problems painting on the Millennium Bridge. I was often engulfed by large school groups but it was the joggers that really did it. You are aware of a jogger from the second they land on the bridge to the second their last foot leaves, when you can eventually try to apply that carefully mixed colour to the canvas with a degree of certainty.

At the time of writing I am working at Tower Bridge, returning to Marlow Rowing Club every now and then, and looking forward to discovering Greenwich and going on to the 'vast skies' I have been told about of Gravesend. Vast skies to me means very boring landscape. We shall see. □

Peter's show of oil paintings is at Messum's, 8 Cork Street, London, W1 (020 7437 5545) from November 17 to December 4. It can be seen on [www.messums.com](http://www.messums.com)