



text + work

...in the footsteps of Henry Taunt

Curated by Graham Diprose and Jeff Robins

29 September - 17 October 2008



INTRODUCTION

There is an interesting parallel between the way that wet collodion technology swept away the Daguerreotype and Calotype of the 1850's and the way that digital imaging is rapidly replacing silver based technology during the present decade. Then as now, there were photographers and artists who insisted that anything new could not be nearly as good, either in the quality of the captured image or in the risk of the image fading if archived or displayed over a long period of time. Many photographers could see their comfortable workflow and their clients disappearing as a new breed of pioneering image-makers explored and pushed the boundaries of these new techniques. What was for certain was that once these movements started, and particularly in the commercial arena, changes in both the Victorian and present-day eras were inexorable

Henry Taunt was one of these cutting-edge photographers of the early Victorian era and a pioneer of using wet collodion photography out on location. The advantage of this new technology was that the thin 'syrup-like' carrier for Silver Bromide would stick to glass plates allowing sharper images with shorter exposure times. The disadvantages included the need to mix the chemicals

and coat the plates just before exposure, take the picture while the emulsion was still damp and process it immediately. Once the collodion dried on the plate, it was impervious to any water, developers or fixers. Another concern was that chemically it was a close relation to 'nitro-glycerine' and a slip up in mixing the right ratio of solutions could easily be your last. For these reasons most Victorian photographers of the 1850s and 60s were more than happy to work from their warm studios with outdoor scenes painted on backgrounds in their portraits and still life images, and a darkroom close at hand.

From the summer of 1860, aged 18, Taunt's work involved rowing to a suitable spot on the Thames, setting up a dark tent beside the river, setting up the camera, then coating his glass plates with the collodion emulsion, taking the picture and processing the plates before they could dry out. Finally, he could wash his glass negatives in the river and dry them in the sun, as he rowed back to his evening base. It was this pioneering spirit that was the technical inspiration for Jeff and me in making '...in the footsteps of Henry Taunt'.

PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In 1998, a good 3megapixel digital camera would cost £500. The results, although in colour, would be considerably less sharp than Taunt's large format glass plate images from 1860. For £15,000+ you could buy a six megapixel digital back to attach to your Hasselblad. It needed mains power, sometimes to run a small fridge or fan system to keep the chip cool, and needed to be tethered via Firewire to a very fast desktop computer that could handle the enormous 15meg files.

Jeff and I had both discovered that we each had a book and some images about Taunt and his Victorian photographs of the River Thames. I had amused myself in the summer of 1998 by looking out for Taunt's 'tripod spots' while travelling up to Oxford on my summer holiday and this gave us both the idea of recreating his images of the Thames 125 years on, as far as possible from the same vanta-

ge points. At the time, I was involved with another project, London's Found Riverscape, to remake a 1937 Black and White panorama of both banks of the Thames between London Bridge and Greenwich and needed to use a Fuji 6 x 17 cm panoramic film camera to at least match the quality of the original's detail.

Therefore when Jeff and I first mooted the idea of making '...in the footsteps of Henry Taunt', it did not seem that digital imaging was a viable option. However, over the winter of 1998/9, all this was to change as Phase One, who make high resolution digital backs for professional cameras, announced that their new 'Lightphase' 6 megapixel digital back could run off video camera batteries rather than mains power. Only a very few portable units would initially be coming into the UK. The famous royal photographer, Patrick Litchfield, was

considering buying one and the rest were for demonstration. After only a little cajoling, Jeff and I convinced Phase One that a really good field test was required. Shooting '...in the footsteps of Henry Taunt' digitally was the perfect project and the third unit fell into our hands, for five weeks, over the summer of 1999. At the same time Sony announced that their new Vaio range of PC laptops would support a mini firewire plug and they were also 'relieved' of one of these new computers, loaned to us for the project.

However, inspired by Henry Taunt, this was going to be pioneering stuff, as none of this kit had been used together away from civilisation or to take more than one or two images at a time. Everything had to run on batteries that had a much shorter life than those used today. Lunchtimes and evenings, we would

have to stop at pubs and ask the landlord if we could sit near an electrical socket, to recharge everything and to back up the files to zip disks. Like 140 years before, the contemporary innkeepers of the Thames were often very interested and exceptionally helpful with our practical needs. We probably sat at many of the same tables in the same inns as Henry Taunt, chatting to the locals. By the autumn of 1999, we had taken the (then) highest resolution series of digital landscape pictures in the world, for '...in the footsteps of Henry Taunt'.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

We had used photocopies and tiny illustrations in books to line up our new images to Taunt's originals while out on location and, if we were to make usable pairs of pictures, would need to find much higher quality versions of his original photographs. We approached English Heritage's National Monuments Record in Swindon with a list of 100 of Taunt's images of the Thames that we had recreated. Out of our first list, their initial trawl of negatives found only 15 that matched and were suitable to scan and our hearts sank. Perhaps we would not have a 'then and now' project after all. Next came many days at Oxfordshire Studies library who had acquired a large collection of Taunt's prints after his death in 1922.

Most of their Taunt images in Oxford were filed by villages rather than features on the River Thames, so that for example Rushey Lock and Tadpole Bridge could be found in a box marked 'Buckland', the village nearby, and a crash course in the geography of the Oxfordshire countryside became necessary. Around this time both organisations started to prepare a joint catalogue of their Taunt images, and some stored behind the scenes in Oxford Library and others in albums held by English Heritage began to yield many of the missing images, mainly thanks to the help and enthusiasm of the staff from both organisations. By 2002 the joint catalogue had turned into a successful Heritage Lottery bid to digitise over 13,000 of the Taunt photographs that they jointly held and these were

set up with many other photographer's work on their Viewfinder website <http://viewfinder.english-heritage.org.uk/> and <http://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/OxfordshireStudies>

Jeff and I were delighted to be invited to offer our photo essay of '...in the footsteps of Henry Taunt' to English Heritage as a story for the new 'Viewfinder' website, which was the first publication of this project and where it can still be seen today. However many of the images had suffered damage over time and a major task was to restore these digitally back to a quality that Taunt himself would be proud of.

<http://viewfinder.english-heritage.org.uk/story/intro.aspx?storyUid=46>

PROJECT OUTPUTS, THE EXHIBITION, THE BOOK 'RIVER THAMES REVISITED' AND THE WEBSITE

It remained our ambition to produce a book and exhibition of the project, but this would require a willing publisher, finance for exhibition production and also a suitably prestigious venue to launch the show. For a couple of years, we struggled before each of these came together, in a matter of months. Jeff and I have been invited by Thames and Hudson to produce a new textbook to be called 'Photographic Imagemaking' which is presently a major project for both of us, but has a deadline a couple of years hence. It made sense to ask them if they would consider publishing Taunt for us. While they declined, they introduced us to Frances Lincoln, who were very enthusiastic about the project. About the same time "London's Riverscape" had an exhibition at the River and Rowing Museum, Henley said they would be interested if we produ-

ced an exhibition of '...in the footsteps of Henry Taunt'. The final piece fell into place when English Heritage, National Monuments Record, whose personnel, had become good friends during our research, offered to support the exhibition production. Oxfordshire Studies also generously supported us with special rates on rights but, more vitally, checking draft texts for accuracy.

There followed a frantic twelve months compiling the book texts and exhibition captions, using OCR to retrieve Taunt's 1885 text without re-typing, checking rights on all photographs and getting permissions and making arrangements with the River and Rowing Museum for an early October 2007 launch. Appropriately, most of the text for the book was written aboard 'Taunt's River' in the summer of 2006 cruising the Thames

and stopping off at museums and libraries for research. In October 2006 we shot the last two new images. They were of Staines and Chertsey Bridges. They were inspired by a new set of Taunt images purchased by the River and Rowing Museum in 2004, that interestingly had been auctioned as 'Frances Frith's'. Our technology had changed yet again, even in these few years. The new Leaf camera had a 17 million pixel back and its own screen to control the image, so we no longer needed a laptop.

Pamela Ossola was asked to design the exhibition for us and later on also layouts for the website that was constructed by Phil Gryce. We are delighted that both outputs have managed to be sympathetic to the traditional Victorian images of Taunt and yet have a very modern European design appearance.

At Christmas 2006, with less than a year to go, two issues were of concern: one was the rising production costs of the exhibition and the other was archiving the project since English Heritage NMR wanted our digital images to add to their collection, for future generations to see. This was very flattering but raised the question of how to send a digital image down at least the 150 years that it would be expected for Taunt's 100 years older images to survive, as silver on gelatine.

In March 2007, both answers came at once. HP launched their Z3100 12 ink printer with pigment inks with at least a 250 year expected life and Fujifilm UK began production of their Museum Fine Art range of papers. They were very similar to the old acid free fibre based papers that Taunt would have known, except that the silver-gelatine layer was replaced with a surface to accept digital

printer inks. Both companies became interested in the project and loaned us a printer and gave us the materials to produce the exhibition. Our research on '...in the footsteps of Henry Taunt' has been of considerable interest to a number of prestigious museums and galleries, all concerned by the very short life of digital media such as CDs and DVDs and the prohibitive costs of migration of files to new media and file formats. Tifs or jpegs may be unheard of by 2050, let alone 2108.

The fact that ink jet prints could have a life of at least double a darkroom C-Type colour print is also becoming interesting to galleries and the fine-art market. Both can use the same Baryte paper but without it passing through developers and acid fixers. Resin coated prints are well known to be far less archival than fibre based images.



Anglers Hotel at Teddington

Reproduced by permission of Oxford Country Council OCL 11000

TOURING '...IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF HENRY TAUNT'

Following a very successful launch hosted by the River and Rowing Museum in October 2007, the exhibition remained there until January before travelling to Reading Museum. It has featured in an 8 minute slot on ITV Meridian, BBC Radio 4 Excess Baggage, Robert Elms Show for BBC Radio London and The Henry Kelly Show for Radio Berkshire. The Environment Agency (River Thames) has also endorsed the project and featured it on their website. Part of the exhibition visited Blenheim Palace in May 2008 and a mini version of the show went to a number of summer Thames events including Beale Park Boat Rally and Henley Regatta. Following this visit to text+work, The Gallery, the Arts Institute at Bournemouth, the tour continues to Abingdon Museum with 6 months at The Fox Talbot Museum, Lacock presently awaiting final dates. The project book 'River Thames Revisited' has already sold over 80% of its 5,000 print run.

<http://www.henrytaunt-footsteps.co.uk>



Taunt on his houseboat

Reproduced by permission of Oxford Country Council OCL 3

CONCLUSION

Like Henry Taunt before us, we too have used the cutting edge technology of the day to make our images of the River Thames. In the 10 years, since the project inception, our pioneering landscapes with a 6 million-pixel camera without the need for mains power can now be matched by any good quality compact or DSLR camera. There would have been concern that any ink-jet prints in a 1998 exhibition might not last a month on display without serious fading. Those in this exhibition according to the Wilhelm Imaging Research Institute, should last for 200-300 years without any noticeable loss of quality.

But most important of all to Jeff and me, is to put the work of this remarkable English Victorian photographer, often eclipsed by the likes of Frances Frith, in the public domain and to show that 125 years later the River Thames that was the great love of his own

long life remains a beautiful place to visit, walk, mess about on a boat, or take photographs.

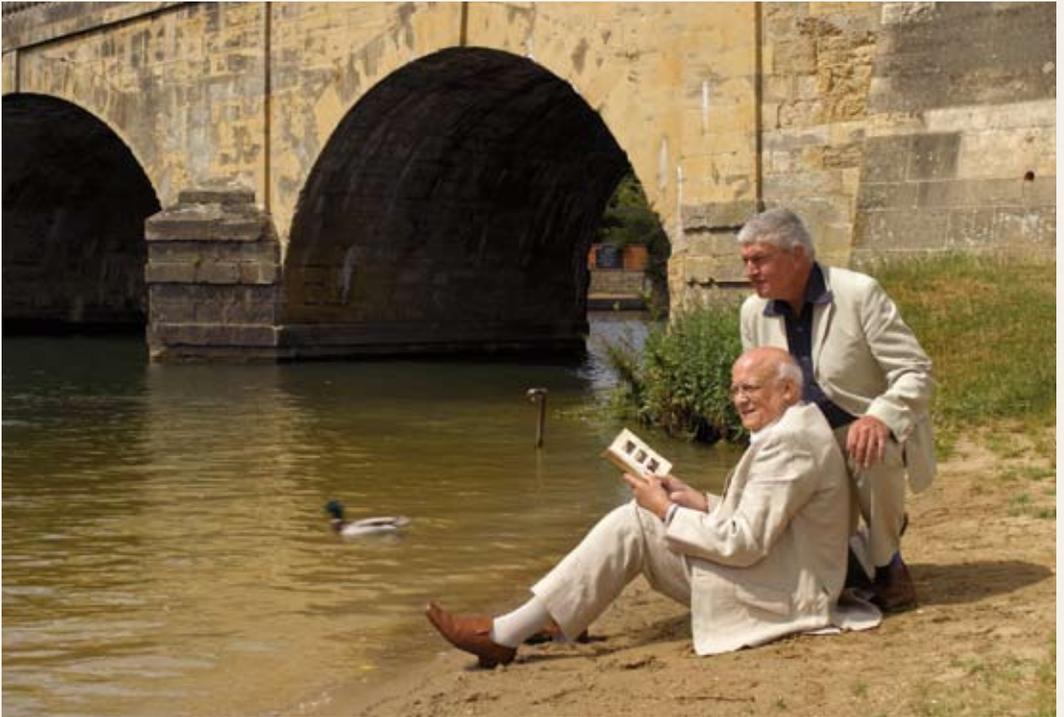
One wonders what equipment and techniques will be used in a further century and what the comparative documentary picture will depict, should someone decide to take another walk down the Thames in 2108 '...in the footsteps of Henry Taunt'.

Graham Diprose & Jeff Robins
May 2008



Taunt by his boat at Wallington Bridge

Reproduced by permission of River & Rowing Museum 2004.57.48



Graham Diprose and Jeff Robins at Wallington Bridge
Reproduced by permission of Graham Diprose & Jeff Robins

GRAHAM DIPROSE

Graham Diprose is Lead Tutor in Photography in the School of Graphic Design at the London College of Communication, the largest college in The University of the Arts, London. Having spent many years as an advertising photographer, he now works with undergraduate and postgraduate students developing skills in all areas of applied and experimental digital and craft photography.

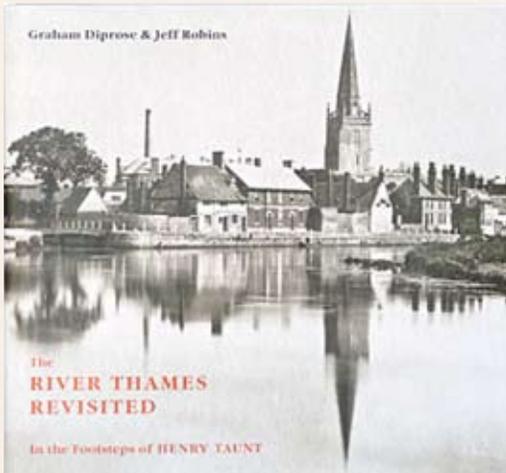
He worked with two colleagues and the Museum of London to remake a ten mile panorama of both banks of the River Thames from London Bridge to Greenwich that mirrored an original commissioned by the Port of London Authority in 1937. It was exhibited in City Hall in the centre of London in 2004 and more recently at the River and Rowing Museum in autumn 2005. A 180 page book of the project 'London's Riverscape-Lost & Found' sold it's entire 5000 copy print run and a new book 'London's Changing Riverscape' is being produced for the PLA Centenary next March.

JEFF ROBINS

Jeff Robins is a professional photographer with extensive experience of working in the advertising and marketing domain and as a lecturer and consultant to the profession, on digital imaging.

His clients have included Nationwide Building Society, British Telecom, Hasbro and Bernard Matthews, along with various design, marketing and advertising agencies. A strong interest in computer technology made it easier for Jeff to embrace the new digital imaging techniques as they developed. Today Jeff teaches alongside Graham on postgraduate courses in digital image-making at the University and is Course Director of a very intensive 'Launch your Career in Photography' course, run by Artscom, in the college's professional training area. Jeff is currently working with Graham Diprose on the production of a new photographic text book for Thames and Hudson, which is due to be published in 2011.

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THE BOOK 'RIVER THAMES REVISITED' AND THE WEBSITE
www.hentrytaunt-footsteps.co.uk



Thames Revisited
...in the Footsteps of Henry Taunt

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To order this book direct from the
authors, please log onto:
[www.hentrytaunt-footsteps.co.uk/
thames-revisited.htm](http://www.hentrytaunt-footsteps.co.uk/thames-revisited.htm)

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Taunt Camping
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EVENT

The gallery invites you and your guests to the text+work event and private view.

Thursday 9th October 2008
from 4.30 to 5.30pm, Lecture Theatre Two.
Followed by a Private View in the Gallery
from 5.30 to 6.30pm

For further information and to book a place for the event please contact:

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www.textandwork.org.uk



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