

## The River Isis

While Alice was hearing from the White Queen about the effects of living backwards on the pain from pricking her finger, they came across a brook between two squares of the chessboard.

Alice



Alice rows the Sheep. John Tenniel (1870).

## The River Isis

The waterway between Oxford and Woodstock is the Isis, the name for the upper reaches of the Thames. A key inspiration for the *Alice* stories, it was well known to Henry, Eleanor and Alice.

Eleanor



The River Isis with a swan.

While the White Queen was telling Alice about the effects of living backwards on the pain from pricking her finger, she morphed in dreamlike fashion into a sheep knitting in a shop modeled on the sweet shop that still stands on St Aldate's Street, opposite Christ Church and indeed on the shop's owner who had a bleating voice and was incessantly knitting. In a further transformation, the Sheep's knitting needles become the oars of a boat in which she was rowing Alice in a brook that ran between two squares of the chessboard. The shop and its surroundings were in fact flooded in December, 1852, when Lewis Carroll was an Oxford undergraduate.

“‘Oh, much better!’ cried the Queen, her voice rising into a squeak as she went on. ‘Much be-etter! Be-etter! Be-e-e-etter! Be-e-ehh!’ The last word ended in a long bleat, so like a sheep that Alice quite started.

She looked at the Queen, who seemed to have suddenly wrapped herself up in wool. Alice rubbed her eyes, and looked again. She couldn't make out what had happened at all. Was she in a shop? And was that really — was it really a sheep that was sitting on the other side of the counter? Rub as she would, she could make nothing more of it: she was in a little dark shop, leaning with her elbows on the counter, and opposite to her was an old Sheep, sitting in an arm-chair, knitting, and every now and then leaving off to look at her through a great pair of spectacles.

‘What is it you want to buy?’ the Sheep said at last, looking up for a moment from her knitting.”



St. Frideswide rowing on the River Isis to Binsey. Woodcarving by Alice Liddell (-1870).

The River Isis is the originating branch of the Thames River that joins other tributaries below Oxford to form the headwaters of the Thames, which then travels down through London to become England's longest river. The lower reaches of the Isis formed the route that must have been travelled by King Henry II between Woodstock Castle and Beaumont Palace in Oxford, such as in September 1157 when he hurried from Woodstock to Beaumont where his queen Eleanor of Aquitaine had just given birth to their son and future king, Richard. In the decade of the 1160s these were two of the favourite palaces of the royal couple, and they must have travelled along the river many times. Princess Alice would also have known it from her time in Henry's court.

The river figures in the Arthurian legend of the Lady of Shalott, from the late 12th century prose romance *Mort Artu*, in which the Demoiselle d'Escalot dies of unrequited love for Lancelot and is found drifting down the river to the palace of Camelot in a boat. In later versions, she suffers the curse of having to view the world only by reflection through a mirror, and dies because she could not resist looking directly at Sir Lancelot. The mirror world to which she was confined is reminiscent of the *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* theme. The Arthurian legends were explicitly encouraged by, and presumably drew on the lives of, Henry and Eleanor (Stones, n.d.; Willingham, 2007).



The goddess Isis rowing. Tomb painting (-1350 BC).

'I don't quite know yet,' Alice said very gently. 'I should like to look all round me first, if I might.'

...

'How can she knit with so many?' the puzzled child thought to herself. 'She gets more and more like a porcupine every minute!'

'Can you row?' the Sheep asked, handing her a pair of knitting-needles as she spoke.

'Yes, a little — but not on land — and not with needles —' Alice was beginning to say, when suddenly the needles turned into oars in her hands, and she found they were in a little boat, gliding along between banks: so there was nothing for it but to do her best.

'Feather!' cried the Sheep, as she took up another pair of needles.

This didn't sound like a remark that needed any answer: so Alice said nothing, but pulled away. There was something very queer about the water, she thought, as every now and then the oars got fast in it, and would hardly come out again.

'Feather! Feather!' the Sheep cried again, taking more needles. 'You'll be catching a crab directly.'

'A dear little crab!' thought Alice. 'I should like that.'

'In the water, of course!' said the Sheep, sticking some of the needles into her hair, as her hands were full. 'Feather, I say!'

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Chapter 5.*



The Old Sheep Shop. (Note Egyptian-design kite.) John Tenniel (1870).

Swans were reputed to have been introduced into England in the 12th century, or at least claimed as royal birds, presumably by either Henry I, with his menagerie at Woodstock, or by Eleanor and Henry II who would have brought them from France. They were a favoured dish as the centrepiece of royal banquets.

It is not known how the river came to be named the Isis, but the name was in wide use by the Oxford literati in the early 19th century (see McCulloch, 1842; Paterson, 1826; Davies, 2010), as in the report of flooding from the Illustrated London News of Dec 4, 1852: 'The Cherwell and the Isis are, in extent, more like seas than rivers', or the description of 'the Isis shining like molten silver' (Bradley, 1853). The name is derived from the Egyptian goddess of nature and magic, daughter of the god of the Earth and the goddess of the Sky. In particular, Isis was goddess of the river Nile, with her tears for her dead husband, Osiris, believed to be responsible for the annual flooding of the river.



The Lady of Shalott as the river goddess, Isis. J.W. Waterhouse (1888).