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Thames Pageant

Like millions of people worldwide, I have just enjoyed watching Queen Elizabeth's Diamond Jubilee Pageant along the River Thames. Unlike television viewers in their comfortable armchairs, the Queen spent the whole time standing up, which is very admirable considering her age, especially as the rain and wind settled in towards the end. I greatly enjoyed the colourfulness of the event, with everything swathed in Union Jack* flags, banners, ribbons, swags and other creative decorations. The corgi dog shaped cake created by the Women's Institute was quite memorable. The aerial views from the cameras on top of the bridges were especially interesting, as all the detail of the muddy choppy waters was absent. The river looked like a giant flat grey motorway with a cavalcade of boat shaped cars gliding along it. One could almost believe that it would be possible to run across it. This did in fact occur at the Frost Fairs held on the Thames during previous centuries, when the river was wider, shallower and slower, enabling it to freeze over during some of the colder winters.

The River Thames was a big part of my childhood as I spent the first thirty years of my life living in close proximity to it. My earliest memories are of asking to go and see it whenever we were in the suburb of Woolwich. We would go down a narrow alleyway and all of a sudden emerge from between the grimy Victorian brick buildings onto the path and railings beside the river. The contrast was quite shocking, the sky was big and bright, the river was wide, gleaming and empty of the clutter of manmade objects which surrounded us in daily life. It seemed to represent another reality that flowed unseen behind our small suburban world of buildings, shops, school and home. It was both glorious and unsettling, and in hindsight I think it may have been a faint hint of danger that heightened the senses and made the experience seem more real than daily life.

Later on we lived on a hill that overlooked Greenwich and at times one could see parts of the bends of the river gleaming in the sun, or the tops of huge ships moving along between the industrial buildings. On New Year's Eve all the ships would sound their horns on the stroke of midnight, rising to a crescendo within a minute or two, an unforgettable sound that is not matched by the fireworks that are let off where we are now. We lived quite close to Greenwich Park which has high ground with marvellous panoramic views of the Thames in both directions. One can enjoy the vistas whilst standing on the very ground where the history of England was created by the monarchs of the past. Against this background of thousands of years of history, the present Pageant seems to be yet another in the long list of significant events that the River Thames has hosted. (493 words)