The River Thames as it flows through London has 13 tributaries many of which are underground, lost or forgotten; this poster gives examples of how we can remember them through literature. When they flowed through their valleys for all to see they were often used as a focus by writers who can remind us of these ‘forgotten’ rivers.

Settlement
The Romans settled London on the banks of the Thames on the hills of Ludgate and Cornhill divided by the Walbrook and bounded on the west by the Fleet.

Rudyard Kipling noted their effect on the Thames:

‘Life was gay and the world was new
And I was a mile across at Kew!
But the Roman came with a heavy hand
And bridged and roaded and ruled the land’

(The River’s Tale, 1865)

By the time of John Stow’s 1603 Survey of London, the population of London was 130,000; it was a million by 1800 and 6 million by 1900. Even in Stow’s time the rivers were grossly polluted: urbanisation encroached on the rivers and they were covered and forgotten. In 1854, Joseph Bazalgette’s sewerage scheme could have been the death knell for London’s rivers, but they are still there beneath our feet. Writers who knew them when they were above ground can remind us of their presence...

The Fleet
Alexander Pope in the Dunciad (1728)
‘to where Fleet Ditch with disemboguing stream rolls the large tribute of dead dogs to the Thames’.
The Fleet rises in Hampstead and meets the Thames at Blackfriars.

The Neckinger
Bill Sikes met his end here...
‘in such a neighbourhood beyond Dockhead stands Jacob’s Island, surrounded by a muddy ditch known as Folly Ditch’
Charles Dickens (Oliver Twist, 1838). The Neckinger flows through Southwark and meets the Thames at Bermondsey.

The Walbrook
‘These lisping hawthorn-buds, that come like women in men’s apparel, and smell like Bucklersbury’
Shakespeare, (Merry Wives of Windsor, 1600). Bucklersbury, on the banks of the Walbrook, was the home of the Grocer’s Company.

The Wandle
“... the cress-set rivulets in which the sands danced and minnows darted above the Springs of Wandel”
John Ruskin, (Praeterita, 1885). The source of the Wandle is in Croydon.

Reflections
‘At our feet they lie low
The little fervent underground
Rivers of London...
... Being of our world they will return’
(U A Fanthorpe, Rising Damp, 1980)

Richard Jefferies warned of the apocalypse if we don’t take care of our rivers ‘as no care was taken with the brooks, the hatches upon them gradually rotted...flooding the lower grounds, which became swamps...’ (After London, 1885). Remembering our rivers through literature can raise their profile, liberate them from the shackles of culverts, providing a safer and healthier environment: local communities can find their lost rivers by engaging with such writers as Dickens!

“Beneath the cranes of Croydon” The Wandle runs free!

Acknowledgments
This poster is based on an exhibition prepared for the MA Literature, Landscape and Environment at Bath Spa University, supervised by Dr Tracey Hill. Thanks are also due to staff at Croydon Local Studies Library, the Environment Agency (Jo Murphy and Richard Copas), the Guildhall Library, Camden Local Studies Library, Institution of Civil Engineers Library, John Harvard Library Southwark, London Metropolitan Archives, Merton History Society; also the guides on river walks at the Totally Thames Festival 2014: Tom Bolton, Tom Chivers, Henry Elliot and Paul Talling.

The author:
Dr Trevor Turpin is a Director at Nicholas Pearson Associates, Bath.
Graphic design Susan Macnab