

## River Axe Crossings

### A visual survey along the course of the river

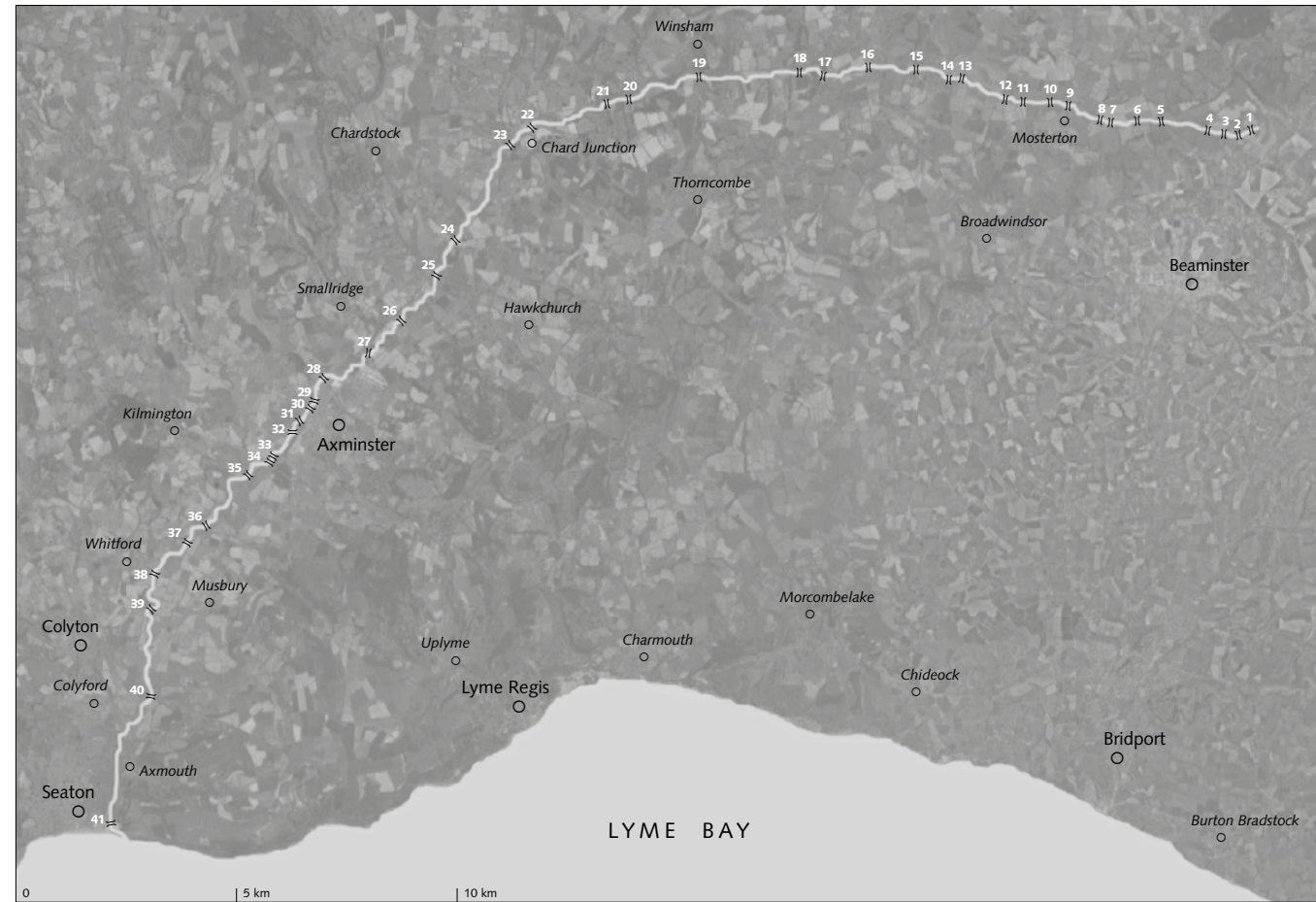
“The Ax rises out of an hill called Axnol, near Cheddington, thence runs to Mosterton, whence it goes to Seborough, Clapton, Wayford bridge, Winsham and Ford, and, crossing an angle of this county, passes to Axminster, thence to Musbury, Culliford, and Axmouth.”

—Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, 1577.

The River Axe flows through Dorset, Somerset and Devon, rising near Beaminster, flowing west then south by Axminster and joining the English Channel at Axmouth near Seaton. During its thirty-five kilometre course\* it is fed by various streams and by the tributary rivers Yarty and Coly.

Taken during the period November 2007 to March 2008,\*\* the photographs look directly upstream and downstream from the centre of each of all the forty-one extant crossings, ranging variously from plain wooden beam, to stone arch, to concrete road bridge; excluded are weirs, railway bridges, and crossings by ford or stepping stones.

From the front of the book the right-hand page sequence shows the direction from mouth to source, while from the back the left-hand sequence is downstream with the river's flow. The crossings are numbered from source to mouth, and while the distances between vary, no account is made from one to the next other than the immediate stage of the river beyond and the particular landscape pictured.



96pp, 147 x 218, offset on matt-coated cartridge, paperback; Axminster, 2008.

The complete sequence is included in miniature in *Printed landscape* (2019). Two slideshows, from source to mouth and from mouth to source, are at [colinsackett.co.uk/riveraxecrossings.php](http://colinsackett.co.uk/riveraxecrossings.php)

\* As with all rivers, the estimated distance from source to mouth is significantly shorter when taken as a general line—not exactly as the crow flies—but certainly less than to account for every meander and to measure the entire mid-stream passage. For example, in the relatively direct upper stretch of the river between Mosterton and Seaborough bridges (9–14) the general distance is 2.8kms, while the actual course measures 3.2kms; in the meandering middle stage, between Broom and Axe bridges (24–25) the comparative distances are around 0.9kms and 1.6kms; and similarly lower down the direct distance from the A35 road bridge to Whitford bridge (33–38) is 3.3kms and the mid-channel distance around all of the large meanders is 6.4kms, almost double.

\*\* The overall view of the river is purposely in its winter state, at other times during the year the definition of the channel and the view ahead is often interrupted by bankside growth and obstructed by overhanging foliage. There is no general condition of weather at the time of the recording of these views, and the level of water in the river varies from periods of relative dryness to following days of persistent rain; the two photographs at each crossing however are both taken on the same occasion. One crossing, Axe Bridge (25) between Broom and Weycroft, was being rebuilt during the period and an earlier pair of photographs, taken in August 2007 are printed; as an exception, and as an example, they show the river in the pastoral lushness of high summer.

“The way into the Axe book is by way of what it is not. From the front of the book the right-hand page sequence follows the direction of the river from sea to source, from the back the left-hand sequence moves downstream with the river's flow. This self-cancelling movement is cut across at forty-one points by bridges of different kinds.

Books have beginnings and ends, front and back covers, but the linear movement is replaced here by a transverse one, raising questions about where, when and why each of the crossings took place. The illustrations at the same time forgo the bridges themselves, picturesque or piquant as many of them are. This is not a sequence of calendar portraits: the crossings are present only as points of vantage, looking up or downstream.

Physical appearances are underplayed in low-angled views in black and white under invariably low skies and foreshortened perspective. The contrast is reduced to shades of middle grey on unyielding shiny paper that throws the images onto the surface. Indeed, the proportion of pictorial denial accumulates to a point where one is forced to take stock and consider the purposed gain.

The book interrupts the conventional river story-line of rise, accumulation and outflow, refuses to be sidetracked by the celebratory spirit, and redirects attention onto the human imperatives that have intersected a natural conduit at different times and for different reasons. It offers neither comfort nor manifesto; it is about landscape, settlement and communication: necessary engagements with a natural feature that remains unchanged. It shows a

way of looking at the Axe valley as it has evolved in collaboration with man: not so much nature writing as human geography. The comments are specific and informative, and again what is not said is as pertinent as the chosen words.”

J. C. C. Mays, *Rare Sighting in the Haldon Hills*, Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World, Haldon, Exeter, 2009.

“One of the most striking features of *River Axe Crossings* is the visual absence of the actual crossings. The perspective chosen places the photographer in the centre of each crossing, where he documents the doubled vantage this position offers upstream, downstream. The material substance of the structure that lies under the photographer's feet is often recorded in meticulous field

notes included at the margin of each page: ‘three-arched stone bridge’ (30, 20), ‘railed concrete foot bridge’ (21), ‘a livestock crossing of parallel railway sleepers’ (34). Sometimes you catch a glimpse of a far crossing in an upstream or downstream picture frame, if the crossings are particularly close together and the line of sight is clear. But, for the most part, the crossings function as standpoint rather than substance, a somewhat arbitrary link in the looping visual chain (upstream, downstream, upstream, downstream) created by the survey of the river's course. There is a curious deferral at work here, which forces the reader/viewer's attention to become aware of the simple oddity of standing above moving water, a still point in a liquid landscape.”  
Caitlin DeSilvey, *Journal of Historical Geography* 36, no.1, 2010.