

Rivers in towns

How can a town make good use of its river?

The third seminar in the series 'Keeping our Region Special' was hosted by the Ipswich Society at the Waterfront Building in Ipswich on Saturday 17th April 2010. The seminar series is a collaboration between the RSA and the East of England Civic Societies (EECS).

Jack Chapman of the **Ipswich Society** opened the seminar by welcoming all the attendees to the impressive new building sited on the waterside in Ipswich. He then introduced the first speaker **Peter Scotcher**. Peter is a River Ranger working for the **Greenways Countryside Project** in Ipswich. He has responsibility for improving a section of the river Gipping for wildlife as well as pedestrian and cycling access. Once the improvements are completed they must be advertised and promoted in order to increase usage and thus reduce car use in Ipswich. The project emerged from a 1999 Rivers Strategy and the formation of a Rivers Action Group in Ipswich with participation by various groups; including Sustrans, the Environment Agency, Town Council and Civic Societies. The section of river includes 3 miles of old towpath which is a right of way. Various sources of funding have been successfully obtained by the Group including money for public art. Peter explained how the project was advancing with major assistance from volunteer groups and the practical difficulties it faced; particularly those caused by the narrow nature of the path, concrete flood defences and the commercial/industrial nature of many of the properties backing onto it, as well as balancing the needs of managing the banks for wildlife and how that conflicts with other interests.

The next speaker was **Brian Human**, vice-chair of the **Historic Towns Forum**, who spoke on how rivers in towns could be improved and be a 'friend' to the town they ran through. He explained how rivers shaped their location and environment and that they were important historic links and corridors for biodiversity. He said we must encourage their use for leisure activities, including houseboats and tourism. They can enhance a place by providing local distinctiveness and become desirable to live near. We must, however, place conservation and biodiversity uppermost and eschew overdevelopment. We must also consider flood risk and water management and ensure that development is sympathetic, sensitive and enhances river areas by ensuring the local authority adopts plans which protect and enhance waterways. He gave examples of good practise in the region including Ely, Cambridge, Wisbech and Norwich.

Alec Hartley of the **Norwich Society** was the next speaker. He spoke about working in partnership with 'Heart' to improve the river Wensum in Norwich. He saw the river as a 'driver' for tourism, leisure and quality of life as well as an alternative transport route for the city. The river had been essential to the establishment and growth of the city since Saxon times. The problem now is that in the nineteenth century rivers became industrial hubs and people turned away from them. In Norwich they had no proper riverside path and this was something they have wanted to correct for the last 50 years. Three years ago they had received a grant for £75k which they had spent holding a conference and producing a booklet as the first stage in creating the momentum to improve the riverside. This had drawn in all interested parties and helped to create a unified vision and plan. Alec felt this was an essential first step

in 'a long haul' but the river now had new and improved green spaces, historic interpretation signs, public art and a new project to create a complete section of riverside walkway.

Jenny Mant, from the **River Restoration Centre** at Cranfield University, was the next speaker. She spoke about the Thames and explained that it is an extremely modified river which has been much industrialised. Her main concerns were managing flooding as well as the improvement and promotion of the river for wildlife, community benefit and leisure. She explained the importance of '**The London Rivers Action Plan**' (see <http://www.therrc.co.uk/lrap/lplan.pdf>) and its positive influence on local authorities and planning decisions: It has led to many good projects being carried out in the London area and Jenny detailed ones carried out in Ravensbourne, Brent and Barking. (Please see the River Restoration Centre's website at <http://www.therrc.co.uk/> for further case studies)

Stephen Earl, the Conservation and Heritage Manager for Great Yarmouth Borough Council, then spoke about Great Yarmouth. He explained how it had been built on fishing and trade but had its decline in the twentieth century had led to high unemployment and neglected buildings. Stephen had managed to access Lottery funding for projects to improve the town. One of these was the purchase and restoration of a large herring works to house a museum of maritime and fishing history. This has protected a building important to the history of the town and the museum now attracts 35k visitors a year. In 1996 the South Quay was just a car park but lottery funding has been spent reviving and enhancing the area and purchasing a Great Yarmouth Shrimper vessel which is docked there. The Quay now hosts a Maritime Festival each year with 40k visitors. Another project provided sailing activities for some of the high number (70+) of homeless young people in the town. Stephen also spoke of the flood defences developed in the town since the serious tidal flooding of 2007.

There then followed a break for a **buffet lunch and a tour of the Ipswich Waterfront area**.

The next speaker was **Richard Glen**, of **Glen Associates**, who is a Landscape Architect and Urban Designer currently working with the Environment Agency on 'multi-disciplinary water space strategy' projects in Spalding and Ely. The importance of this work is recognised by central Government agendas, particularly that of Defra with its 'Waterways for everyone'. Richard emphasised in his talk that funding was available for good projects that took into account landscape, townscape and historic character. He particularly investigated areas like bridges, locks and moorings where people might naturally gather. It was a problem that many waterways are cut-off by fences and have car parks that detract from an area. They provide important wildlife corridors that must be protected and preserved as well as maintaining navigation and important industrial artefacts and landmarks. Rivers can also be 'working rivers' and marinas developed connected to rivers to encourage leisure use (e.g. Northampton Marina). Stephen emphasised that spaces near rivers were a 'natural public realm' which could be used for events as well as for providing sanctuary and peace in urban areas (e.g. Regents Canal in King's Cross).

Phillippa Noon, the River Manager of **Cam Conservators**, then discussed the problems that arise with the pressure of leisure over-use and how this is licensed and controlled. The Cam Conservators have existed since 1702 and have responsibility for a section of the River Cam that runs from Grantchester through Cambridge to Bottisham Lock. There are over 100 craft per kilometre registered on this highly regulated stretch of river with increasing numbers of double punts and rowers year on year. They cannot refuse to register a craft but try to control numbers through mooring policies and the price of registration. Punting is lucrative and important to the city's tourist industry, but there is a considerable problem with traffic congestion on the river which is compounded by the popularity of the sports of rowing and angling. There are also increasing numbers of events held on the river with around 200 scheduled each year. The Cam Conservators have recently been approached by the Environment Agency

to help develop a waterspace strategy and there are other projects in which they are involved such as 'camToo' (see <http://www.camtoo.co.uk/>) and the Cambridge Sports Lakes.

Richard Estop, Planning Design Manager at **Chelmsford Borough Council**, then spoke on the subject of 'revealing rivers in changing towns'. He began by talking of the historic importance to Chelmsford of the 14 mile link to the Blackwater estuary and how, once it ceased to be navigable, the river was ignored. He also explained how the city's flood defence system had been 'brutal' in the way that it had channelled the river. Chelmsford has now achieved 'Beacon Status' through the transformation of its rivers and canal from redundant waterways into successful public areas that give a new vibrancy to the waterways and town centre. Restoration action had been followed by an area planning strategy and increased public access had led to development opportunities being exploited. The new waterway developments have given a 'coherent character' to the heart of the town and created new thriving residential, retail and leisure areas.

Anne Mason, Regional Committee Member for the **Heritage Lottery Fund**, then spoke on how to access funding in the East of England. She said they had funds of £282 million with £95 million of this being earmarked for rivers. The funding is available for projects which include an element of education based around local heritage, that transfer skills and are self-sustaining with long-term benefits. They should try to conserve heritage including traditional crafts and skills. She also emphasised that projects should involve the local community and encourage their engagement. Priority was given to charities and not-for-profit organisations although funding would not be provided for the day-to-day activities of the organisation. There were three Grant Programmes, the first was 'Your Heritage' which paid grants of £3k to £50k and did not require match-funding. The second was 'Young Roots' for projects aimed at those aged 13-25 and the third was 'Heritage Grants' which were for over £50k and required 25% match-funding. Match-funding need not necessarily be money but could also be in labour or another 'in kind' contribution. The HLF currently counted labour at £50 per day for unskilled and £150 per day for skilled, with consultant-style services counted higher. Anne finally spoke of the example of the 'Ebb & Flow Project' which the HLF had funded.

(See <http://www.suffolkcoastal.gov.uk/yourfreetime/arts/ebbandflow/>)

There then followed a **discussion** of issues that had arisen from the day, after which **Peter Landshoff**, the chairman of **EECS**, thanked all the speakers for a most interesting day.

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