

“a river for all”



The Ipswich River Strategy reviewed in 2015

For a century Ipswich turned its back on its river. The Gipping, once a vital communication link in the industry and commerce of the town and port, became an inconvenience to the 20th century, suitable for little other than the dumping of rubbish. In 1997 Ipswich Borough Council Environment Panel decided that the area of the Gipping from Stoke Bridge to Sproughton needed particular environmental improvement and the River Action Group was established. This group commissioned Gillespies, a firm of landscape architects to help them to research and outline the main issues and prepare the “Ipswich River Strategy”. As opportunities arose funds could then be obtained and directed towards these goals.

Initially the Group comprised volunteer groups, Ipswich Borough Council planning officers, Greenways, Anglian Water and the Environment Agency. More recently members have included Sustrans, representatives from Suffolk County Council, The Inland Waterways Association and the River Gipping Trust. The Group meets every two months throughout the year. It was recognised from early on that, although the strategy gave general objectives for the first decade, a lot of the work would take considerably longer.

The Strategy identified twelve key issues to be addressed:

- Sustainable Development and Diversity
- Community Participation
- The need for a “greener”, wider river corridor
- Improvement of Access and River Paths
- Establishing a Cycle Path
- Areas for Picnics, Relaxation and Children’s Play
- Health and Safety
- Appropriate Water Recreation
- Improving Water Quality
- Ecology and Wildlife Conservation
- Education
- Tourism

These twelve issues were crystallised into a “Vision of the River”, a statement of the basis for the development of the detailed proposals.

“A Vision for the River

“At the end of the first decade [of the twenty-first century] there will be a wide, “green”, lively and well-used river corridor at the heart of Ipswich. The river will belong to the community. Community Groups will regularly meet to review the strategy and identify ways to ensure the improvement of the nature conservation, recreation and landscape values of the river in the future.

“Safe and convenient access will be provided for all users of the river path, including disabled people. A cycle path will be developed along much of the river corridor. Access to the path for people from the south of Ipswich will be improved. People from all parts of the town will regularly visit the river to enjoy walking, cycling, fishing and boating. The path will be widely used for commuting, visiting the town centre and recreation.

“Picnic areas and seating will be provided and a riverside community facility will be developed with education resources, boat and cycle hire, toilets and a riverside café. Display panels along the river will explain the natural and cultural heritage of the river. New community art works will interpret the rich history and environment of Ipswich and attract people to the river.

“The landscape character of the river corridor will change along its length, making it interesting for the numerous walkers and cyclists who use it. The river will link town and country and provide habitat for flora and fauna within the urban area. In the future as redevelopment and environmental improvements occur, local tree and shrub species will be planted in adjacent industrial areas and along roads near the river to improve its setting. New factories will relate their offices and canteens towards the river and provide seating areas to enable staff to enjoy the river environment.”

What follows is an attempt to review what has been achieved, and what has not, in the light of the Vision, and to assess what is still to be done in the future.

“...there will be a wide, ‘green’, lively and well-used river corridor at the heart of Ipswich”

- A great deal has been achieved, some against the background of important work by others. Anglian Water’s “project Orwell” involving £33 million works largely unseen beneath the heart of the town had dramatically improved the drainage, sewerage and consequent quality of the river water and has also helped open up the river corridor for building and leisure developments.
- The River Action Group has backed the Ipswich Skateboard Group in the creation of the skateboard park beside Stoke Bridge. This facility is very well used by boarders and BMX riders, both as an activity centre and as a social meeting point.
- A toucan crossing of Bridge Street links Ipswich Waterfront with the start of the riverside path. There are cycle and pedestrian paths between Yarmouth Road and the Borough boundary and between Princes Street and West End Road. The latter crosses the Old Cattle Yard, where once livestock were unloaded from railway trucks on their way to market, but where now seating offers an opportunity to watch the river or observe wildlife.
- Developers have been encouraged to build the dual-use cycle and pedestrian path as part of the planning process.
- Wildlife is encouraged by sensitive planting and management, as for example in the Wildflower Bank beside West End Road. In the Local Nature Reserve beside the Alderman Canal rare naturally occurring reed-beds have been extended.
- The social, historical and industrial context of the river is recalled by original art work commissioned by the River Action Group – an imposing sculpture on the Old Cattle Yard and another beside Stoke Bridge.
- Between Stoke Bridge and Riverside Road a series of information boards displays various features of the river, such as its geology and wildlife and the way people have made use of it.

- Upstream at Boss Hall the Co-operative Group have made available land beside the river, which has enabled the path to be widened and made safer and more attractive.

Against these achievements some problems have yet to be resolved:

- The path between Stoke bridge and Princes Street is very narrow and hazardous for passing walkers and cyclists, and impossible for wheelchair users. Possible remedies are complicated and expensive. The sheet steel piling of the flood defence system, although now redundant, would be difficult to remove and expensive to ramp over, even with the agreement of the landowners (the future ownership of the site is at present uncertain). To build a structure cantilevered out over the river to take the path would be very expensive and could provide an obstruction to the river flow in times of flood.
- The river path and its environs are subject to litter, some vandalism and graffiti, particularly (although not exclusively) near the skateboard park and the road bridges. Various bodies, such as IBC's Cleansing team, the Greenways Project and Ipswich Wildlife Group work hard, often with volunteer groups, to keep on top of the problem, but it is time-consuming, expensive and often very unpleasant work. Until the path can be designated a Definitive Right of Way there is no one authority that can take responsibility for the work, and even then the associated land and the water itself are the responsibility of a wide range of owners and agencies, meaning that the work has to be conducted on a piecemeal basis.
- The former flood barrier at the Borough boundary has now been removed, but the substantial concrete structure that supported it remains. The only way across this is by narrow, awkward concrete steps, difficult for walkers and cyclists and quite impossible for wheelchair users. The Group is investigating ways of negotiating this obstacle, any of which would involve external funding.

"The river will belong to the community. Community groups will regularly meet to review the strategy and identify ways to encourage the improvement of nature conservation, recreation and landscape values of the river in the future."

- Community involvement has always taken place mainly through the River Action Group itself. The Group values help from volunteers, such as those from Greenways and the Ipswich Wildlife Group. In the initial stages neighbourhood groups were consulted and public meetings held.
- The Group has produced a leaflet and plan to encourage the public to enjoy the riverside path. This has been revised and is available free of charge from the Tourist Information Centre, IBC's Drop-in Centre and Grafton House and is also available to download from the Greenways website.

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- The dual-use pathways between Princes Street and West End Road and from Yarmouth Road to the Borough boundary have been designed and constructed to high engineering, security and aesthetic standards, as specified by Sustrans. They are hard-surfaced and are lit at night.
- Much of the route coincides with National Cycle Route No 51 and is therefore planned and constructed under the auspices of Sustrans. Until the stretch between Stoke and Princes Street bridges can be brought up to standard that part of Route 51 is

directed through quiet streets and alongside West End Road as far as Yarmouth Road. It leaves the river at Boss Hall to join Sproughton Road.

“Access to the path for people from the south of Ipswich will be improved”

- The Sir Bobby Robson foot-and cycle bridge now links the developments along Ranelagh Road with West End Road, near the council offices and ITFC’s football ground. If, as is expected, Elton Park on the south bank just upstream of the former sluice site is developed, it is hoped that a foot-and cycle bridge across the river will be provided.

“People from all parts of the town will regularly visit the river to enjoy walking, cycling, fishing and boating.”

- Walking, with or without dogs, fishing and cycling – although in places still on rough and muddy surfaces - have all been taking place for years . The prospect of formal navigation rights on the lower Gipping is still a long way off, but the group has been investigating the possibility of reintroducing small craft such as canoes on some stretches of the river. Meanwhile the River Gipping Trust are gradually refurbishing the locks higher upstream with the objective of reintroducing larger vessels.

“The path will be widely used for commuting, visiting the town centre and recreation.”

- Increasingly use is being made of the path between the Riverside Road area and the town centre by people wanting a commuter route that avoids main roads.
- A public footpath alongside the Alderman Canal connects West End Road to Handford Road, linking the riverside with the town centre. This is both convenient and attractive, passing a important wildlife site and a recreation area.
- The sugar factory site has now been purchased by Ipswich Borough Council, so there is now a range of opportunities for the Group to work with the Council to carry out further enhancements. These could include new paths and cycleways, a new Local Nature Reserve and permission and facilities for angling and canoeing. Perhaps a car park and a small “country park” could be introduced to draw people to the river
- The provision of a “Riverside Environment Centre” has for long been under discussion, but suitable sites have not yet been found. This would provide information and advice about the river as well as other matters of environmental concern, and also accommodation for such bodies as the Ipswich Canoe Club and provision for cycle and boat hire.

The Future

Key future plans and aspirations of the River Action Group, some of which are clearly long-term, include:

- A continuous cycle route from Stoke Bridge to Sproughton, negotiating the narrow section upstream of Stoke Bridge, the former sluice site at the Borough boundary, the former sugar beet site and Sproughton Millennium Green.
- Riverside Environment Centre and facilities for small craft.
- Negotiations with riparian owners concerning boating on the Gipping.
- Responsibility for maintenance and cleaning of the path to be clearly determined.
- Links from south of the river, e.g. at Elton Park.

- Improvement of water flow through Alderman Canal and upstream of Yarmouth Road – control of duckweed.
- Provision of toilets near skateboard park.
- (Very long term) work on weirs to enable permanent navigation and perhaps a river bus.

The River Action Group is grateful for the help and support of many groups in the creation and enhancement of the river corridor:

Arts Council England Lottery Programme
Countryside Agency
East of England Co-operative Society
Environment Agency
Gipping Angling Preservation Society
Greenways Project
Hanson Environment Trust
Inland Waterways Association
Ipswich Borough Council
Ipswich Society
Ipswich Wildlife Group
Local Heritage Initiative (Heritage Lottery Fund)
Nationwide Building Society
Suffolk County Council
Sustrans

And many other un-named individuals who have given their time, labour and expertise in this undertaking.

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