



## **Ipswich River Strategy - “A River for all”**

**- the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.**

In April 1997 Ipswich Borough Council Environment Panel decided that the key area of the town that needed particular environmental improvement was the River. Proposals were presented to full council and agreed. A River Action Group was set up which decided to employ Gillespies, a landscape architect, to research out and outline the main issues and thus set up a Strategy for the future (Ipswich River Strategy 1999). As funding opportunities arose funds could then be obtained and directed towards these identified goals.

The group initially comprised volunteer groups, IBC planning and strategic planning officers, Greenways Project, Anglian Water and the Environment Agency. This group less the utilities (who have attended when necessary) have met ever since on a regular bi-monthly basis. 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 vision for the river (from the 1999 Strategy)

*“At the end of the first decade of the next millennium 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.”*

Hence a RIVER FOR ALL theme was born with objectives which could be developed over time. We are now at the end of that first decade. It was a very ambitious programme, but let us look at the progress, good and bad, during these 15 years and any issues that still remain:

**The need for a greener wider river corridor** – Planting of appropriate ecological species has been encouraged. Building development beside the river now allows for a shared use cycle-way and footpath, but it is to be hoped that future developments will be more generous in allowing viable areas for wildlife.

**Improvements of access and river paths.** – This has been a major success with Sustrans playing a significant part. National Cycle Route 51 has been built along part of the river; where development has occurred on adjacent land, the developers have been encouraged to build a dual-use path along most of the route as part of the planning process. These paths can be used by walkers, disabled people and cyclists. There remains one major blockage and that is the Gipping flood barrier near the London – Norwich railway line at the Sproughton end of the River path. This barrier is lowered to prevent fluvial surges. It has never been used in anger since it was installed in the 1970s. At present to cross the barrier involves climbing steep steps and we are looking at ways in which this obstruction can be negotiated by all users of the River Path. We had hoped that the new housing development at the former Sproughton Sugar works would be involved in paying for this but the planned developer is in administration. Instead we have been discussing the possibility of Network Rail building ramps during the construction of the Ipswich Chord. The Ipswich Chord is a line which joins the Felixstowe line to the mainline preventing the need for shunting via Ipswich Station thus improving rail access for containers to the Midlands.

Another issue is the narrow path between Stoke Bridge and the Princes Street Bridge. If, or when, the planned Tesco development goes ahead it is hoped that an alternative shared use path will be provided.

Access South and North across the river is still poor. We are discussing with the Ipswich MP if there is any way that a separate access bridge could be built alongside the new Ipswich Chord bridge. Closer to town the Sir Bobby Robson Bridge has been constructed connecting the new development at the former Compair Reavell site with the North Bank path and the town.

**Areas for picnics, relaxation and children's play.** - We have now built a picnic area at the old cattle marshalling site just upstream from Princes Street Road Bridge. The skate board park, next to Stoke Bridge, was

supported by the River Action Group and organised by the skaters themselves and has been a great success. As we highlighted at the early planning stage, there is also a need for toilets.

**Health and Safety** – Obviously all rivers can be considered dangerous but people do perceive the Orwell/Gipping as particularly dangerous for children and the infirm. Open Water Risk Assessments will be carried out as part of the management plan process. These assessments will consider the safety of the water courses and may recommend further safety measures for particular stretches or points along the river. The perceived fear of common crime is always present but re-orientating buildings so they look out towards the river, which we have achieved by early involvement in the planning process, does diminish this. Alderman Canal Local Nature Reserve and Recreation Ground did suffer from being in the town's red light district which discouraged many people using and enjoying the area. In recent years this situation has improved considerably, and improvements including new bridges and boardwalks have led to the site being used by many more people, which generally increases security and discourages anti-social behaviour. That said, there are still problems here and elsewhere on the river with alcohol and drug abuse. Dog-fouling is a health problem but regular wardening of the river path may reduce this. Greenways did secure money for a River Warden from the Haven Gateway Partnership Growth Point fund but this has now come to an end and a management plan is being submitted to the riparian owners and Ipswich Borough Council to seek a way forward.

**Appropriate Water recreation** – In the past the river was colourful and lively with barges and boating but sadly this is no longer the case. The public was very keen to see these types of interests reinstated. A representative of the Inland Waterways Association who also represents the recently formed River Gipping Trust is a member of the River Action Group. The River Gipping Trust is gradually refurbishing the locks so as to re-instating navigation rights for larger boating. We also have interest from the Ipswich Canoe Club and there is a desire for a public boat launching facility and/or rowing boat hire (as there was up until the 1960s.). We still have an objective of adding boating but now see this as a longer term goal which will be taken forward at an earliest opportunity. There are a number of sites that fishermen regularly use but some do leave a lot of litter.

**Ecology and Wildlife conservation** – People gain a huge amount of pleasure from the wildlife along the river. It is vital as an ecological reserve in Ipswich. The Borough Council sees the river together with the parks as the green lungs of the town. Fortuitously Anglian Water completed a £33m scheme to improve drainage and sewerage in Ipswich in 2000. The quality of the water has significantly improved as a result of this work. Since the water quality has been improved there are rumours that otter have been seen. However, in an area of very low rainfall and high abstraction to meet the demand for drinking water the flow of the river is greatly reduced. This means there is high build up of nutrients which cause thick duckweed growth. We continue to discuss opportunities to improve water flow and remove duckweed especially in the Alderman Canal.

An area along the Alderman Canal has been scraped and a reedbed developed. Reedbed is a target habitat in the biodiversity action plan for

Suffolk. River clean-ups have continued; in one case over 80 supermarket trolleys were removed and 180 volunteers were river have been encouraged to charge for the trolleys.

Mowing regimes have improved. For example, the wildflower bank beside West End Road is managed sensitively and indeed supports the nationally rare plant Dittander. We obtained funding for bollards which have been erected to prevent football match parking on the wildflower areas. We have an area ear-marked in the local plan for an Environment and Riverside Centre but pressures remain on the urban area to sell land for profit and development rather than educating the public into preserving wildlife.

**Education and heritage signage, and murals; Tourism.** –We have been successful in obtaining grants and provided an imposing sculpture on the old cattleyard open space, a heritage mural on the on the wall below, 7 information boards explaining both the local heritage, wildlife and the sculpture “Against the Tide”. We continually have to cope with vandalism. With the exception of “Against the Tide”, which is well lit on the skateboard park, - all have been badly vandalised. The signboards now have been renewed and another new one added. The lighting for the sculpture “The Navigator” has had to be abandoned because of breakage of equipment. The statue itself has had to be cleaned to remove graffiti. Sarsen Stones (Ipswich’s “Stonehenge”), near the skateboard, has been badly covered with graffiti. The Local Heritage mural, upstream of Princes Street Bridge has been obliterated by further “street art”; which some might consider as artistic; but the works are simply shapes and do not, as the original did, depict the rich heritage of the river. The original paintings did last for 7 years. Ipswich Wildlife Group obtained a grant and our thanks must go to the Local Heritage Initiative part of the Heritage Lottery Fund who paid for most of this work. The river path is clearly used by many more people since the Group was set up. Alderman Canal takes people into the heart of Ipswich along a Local Nature Reserve. This is a lovely path for commuting or just enjoying a lunchtime stroll. Footpath and cycle track signage has been planned and purchased. The Ipswich Society has funded the publication of the first two editions of a walks leaflet now superseded by a new leaflet. This has just been published by Greenways and will further encourage more people to visit or use the path and cycle-ways.

**Sustainable Development and diversity**- the group has continued to monitor all development along the river and contributed at an early stage in the planning process. Whilst some successes have been achieved, it is an essential part of the Group’s work to try to minimise losses of open space along the river corridor and try to obtain new and appropriate public open space and related facilities through the development process.

**Community participation** – The River Action Group consulted widely over its plans. The group comprises community groups and various Council members and officers. Other organisations and representatives are encouraged to join the River Action Group if they are interested in our work. From the beginning the River Action Group (often via the Greenways Project) has enlisted the help of numerous volunteers, helping with everything from litter clean-ups to building new bridges. For the two years when funding was

available for a River Ranger, even more local people became involved in the river and its management. Along with the Access To Nature (Lottery funded) Project, Greenways has worked with a wide range of community organisations and individual volunteers including disadvantaged and under-represented groups.

## **The Future**

Fifteen years ago we listed 9 major aspirations some of which looked very much longer term goals especially during a recession. Whilst we recognised that most of these were clearly long-term aspirations we have in fact achieved a large element of success with them. The responsibility for cleaning and regular maintenances has still to be resolved.

It does look at though there may be a solution in 2013 to cross the flood barrier at the London-Norwich mainline Bridge. This will give us the opportunity to extend the path all the way to Sproughton.

The riverside park which we hoped for in the lower goods yard has been lost if Tesco planned development takes place. Discussions have taken place with them with only minimal success. Whilst the very narrow riverside path between Stoke Bridge and the Princes Street Bridge will remain, Tesco development will include a high level pathway up to Princess Street. But there is no provision for a road crossing to link with the path from Princess Street to the Navigator. A long term aim would be the provision of a route under the bridge utilizing a spare arch to continue the dual use path.

Links from south of the river e.g Harris site to Boss Hall - discussions are continuing. This matter has been raised with the local MP who is taking the matter up with Network Rail. It seems ridiculous that a new bridge can be built for trains from Felixstowe but no provision made for cyclists or walkers particularly as a key theme now is local access.

Green Living and Waterside Centre with facilities for small craft – although a site was ear-marked originally in the local plan its cost and ongoing upkeep remains a problem. Certainly during the current recession it is likely to be more difficult to deliver. The Ipswich Canoe club feel confident that they could obtain some of the money towards the new build and upkeep. A site to encourage people to live a greener lifestyle and a flagship centre for businesses to promote this is a problem as nobody wants to pay for its upkeep. It does seem incongruous that when Suffolk strives to become the greenest county in the country its county town does not have such a centre. Improvements in the control of duckweed cover in Alderman Canal are needed. Discussions continue to seek solutions to excessive surface weed growth.

Permanent navigation, including possibly a river bus, remains a very long term objective. The River Gipping Trust are refurbishing the locks on the Gipping, they are working downstream from Stowmarket, so it will be some time before they reach Ipswich but this will enable navigation provided permission can be obtained. Meanwhile they are ensuring any bridges are at a suitable height.

The proposed Tesco complex may provide a solution to provision of toilets near Stoke Bridge especially for the skateboard park.

It is clear that a lot of the original vision has been realized but there are some major tasks still to be achieved that will require work over many decades to come.

Not covered in the original strategy, although in the original draft of Gilliespies document, is one of the major aspects of better combining the town with its river. Two aspects would improve access advertising – the new Walk leaflet will help and most towns have a Riverside Park but this may have been lost, Another approach is a Riverside Centre but seems unlikely for many years.