

# “a river for all”



## The Ipswich River Project Reviewed

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 20<sup>th</sup> century, suitable for little other than the dumping of rubbish. The River Action Group was established in reaction to this. Since then, increasingly with the new millennium, new residential and commercial developments, encouraged by the River Action Group, have focused on the river. Such developments as the Ipswich Village project have been initiated by Ipswich Borough Council. The River Strategy was incorporated into the Council's Local Plan. The concept of "A River for All" is gaining momentum as people become increasingly aware of the benefits and delights of the riverside.

The River Action Group came together in 1997. It consists of local community groups working with Ipswich Borough Council to examine and promote new opportunities for the people of Ipswich to enjoy the river that passes through their town.

In 1999 the group commissioned a firm of landscape architects, Gillespies, to help them prepare the "Ipswich River Strategy", which outlined the aims of regenerating the river corridor from Ipswich Docks upstream as far as Sproughton.

The Strategy identified twelve key issues to be tackled:

- 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 for 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 next millennium there will be a wide, 'green', lively and well used 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 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."*

Half way through the ten-year period of development foreseen by the Vision, the River Action Group decided to review progress on the river project. What follows is an attempt briefly to record and assess what has been achieved so far in the light of the Vision for the River, what is currently under development and the group's aspirations for developments in the future.

## Towards Realising the Vision

*“At the end of the first decade of the next millennium (i.e. by about 2010) there will be a wide, ‘green’, lively and well used river corridor at the heart of Ipswich.”*

- In five or six years a very great deal has been achieved. Some must be seen 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 has dramatically improved drainage and sewerage and has thereby made the water quality of the river much better. It has also helped to open up the river corridor for building and leisure development.
- 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 the start of the river path with Ipswich Waterfront. A cycle and pedestrian path now links Princes Street and West End Road. This has been finished to a high specification with lighting and hard surfacing. It passes through the Old Cattle Yard, where once rail trucks unloaded livestock on their way to market, but where now seating offers an opportunity to watch the river or observe the wildlife.
- 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 - a mural on the wall facing the river, an imposing sculpture on the Old Cattle Yard and another beside Stoke Bridge.
- Between Stoke Bridge and West End Road a series of eight information boards displays various features of the river, such as its geology and wildlife and the way local people have used it.
- Upstream at Boss Hall the Co-op Group have made available land beside the river, which will enable the riverside path to be widened and so made safer and more attractive.

Against these successes some problems have still to be resolved.

- The path between Stoke Bridge and Princes Street is in places very narrow, making it hazardous and uncomfortable, especially for passing pedestrians and cyclists, and almost impossible for wheelchairs or pushchairs. Possible remedies are complicated and expensive. The sheet steel piling of the flood defence system forms the boundary of the railway sidings area here. It would be difficult to move the floodwall back, even if the railway company agreed. One solution would be to build the river path onto some kind of structure cantilevered out over the river. Another would be to create a ramp over the flood defence wall and to route the path through what is at present railway land, perhaps through the “spare” railway arch under Princes Street. That would involve the railway company being willing to make available some of its unused land, but the prospects of this are at present uncertain.
- The river path and its environs are subject to litter, some vandalism and graffiti, particularly (although not exclusively) in the area of the skateboard park and the bridges over the river. The lighting of the sculpture “The Navigator” for example has had to be abandoned because of repeated deliberate breakage of the equipment. Various bodies, such as IBC’s StreetCare, the Greenways Project and groups of volunteers work hard to minimise the problem of litter and to keep the vegetation appropriately cut, but to keep on top of it is time-consuming and expensive, and much of it is unpleasant work. Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that no one authority has responsibility over the whole route, so maintenance and cleaning tend to be carried out ad hoc and piecemeal. While the Borough and other authorities have been generous in their capital funding of the project there is so far no mechanism for meeting ongoing expenditure. This in turn is partly because there is as yet no definitive map of the rights of way within the Borough of Ipswich. Hope lies in Suffolk County Council prioritising action on producing such a definitive map.

- The Flood Barrier at the main line rail bridge and IBC boundary is a formidable impediment to convenient and safe negotiation of the path, with steep, narrow steps and awkward turns. Construction of ramps to circumvent it would involve the acquisition of some land.
- There is as yet no permission to route the path across the Millennium Green at Sproughton. A possible alternative would be to use Church Lane with a suitable connecting bridge over the river.

*“The river will belong to the community. Community groups will regularly meet to review the strategy and identify ways to ensure 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, which meets every two months throughout the year. As well as officials from the Borough Council, the Greenways Project and Sustrans, the group comprises representatives from the Ipswich Society, the Inland Waterways Association, the Ipswich Canoe Club, the Ipswich Wildlife Group and the Ipswich Cycle Campaign. The group values help from volunteers, such as those from Greenways and the Ipswich Wildlife Group. At an early stage neighbourhood groups were consulted and public meetings held. Future community involvement could take place through one or more of IBC’s area forums.
- The group has produced a leaflet and plan to encourage the public to enjoy the riverside path. This is available from the Tourist Information Centre and IBC at Grafton House, and is now in its second edition. Groups have been conducted on guided walks along the river from Stoke to Sproughton.

*“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”*

- A start has been made. The pathway from Princes Street to West End Road is broad, well surfaced and lit at night. Similarly the stretches of riverside path constructed as part of the housing developments farther upstream near Riverside Road and that under development at the former M.o.D. site in Yarmouth Road are designed and constructed to high engineering, security and aesthetic standards as required by Sustrans. The pathway is suitable for pushchairs, wheelchairs and bicycles as well as walkers.
- Much of the route coincides with National Cycle Route No 51 and is therefore planned and constructed under the auspices of Sustrans. However, at least until the Stoke Bridge to Princes Street path can be brought up to the required standard, Route 51 will be directed through quiet streets between Stoke Bridge and West End Road. It will proceed to London Road alongside West End Road, while the footpath continues along the riverside past West End Road sluice and Orwell Retail Park. Cycle-way and footpath meet up again west of Yarmouth Road bridge. Route 51 leaves the river again at Boss Hall to join Sproughton Road. Those parts of the riverside path will be developed without the active help of Sustrans, although their advice will be sought and similar standards applied.

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

- The group continues to strive for the provision of a bridge to provide access from the Hadleigh Road area to the north bank near Boss Hall.
- There is real need for a bridge across the river between the railway station and the housing developments planned for Ipswich Village. Fortunately the planned development of the Compair Reavell site on Ranelagh Road includes a footbridge (which it is assumed will also be suitable for cyclists). This will meet West End Road near the toucan crossing leading to Endeavour House. This development will include a riverside path on the south side of the river. Together with similar riverside access to be provided at the Pooley’s Yard development opposite the railway station there are the beginnings of a continuous riverside path on the south bank from the station as far as London Road, although many problems of access remain.

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

- Walking, with or without dogs, cycling - although in places still on rough and muddy surfaces - and fishing on the reaches upstream of Yarmouth Road already take place, and have been enjoyed by many people for years. While the prospect of the restoration of full navigation rights is still a long way off, recently the Ipswich Canoe Club has expressed interest in making use of this part of the river, and there is every hope that they will be able to do so, together perhaps with the users of other small pleasure craft.

*“The path will be widely used for commuting, visiting the Town Centre and recreation”*

- A foot- and cycle-path path 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 an important wildlife site and a recreation area.
- The provision of a “Green Living Centre” is under active consideration. This would provide information and advice about issues concerning sustainability and the environment. It would also be a riverside centre, providing a focus for matters concerning the river, and accommodation for such bodies as the Ipswich Canoe Club.

### **The Future**

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

- Responsibility for maintenance and cleaning to be clearly determined.
- Establishment of continuous cycle route, including access across Sproughton Millennium Green and negotiation of the Flood Barrier.
- Riverside Park in Lower Goods Yard between Stoke and Princes Street Bridges.
- Links from south of river, e.g. Harris site/Boss Hall
- Green Living Centre and facilities for small craft.
- Improvement of water flow through Alderman Canal.
- Development opportunities - British Sugar site.
  - More access to south bank
- Permanent navigation, including river bus .
- Provision of toilets near Stoke Bridge and Skateboard Park

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The River Action Group is grateful for the help and support of many groups and individuals in the creation of the riverside path:

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

There is much still to be achieved, but there is increasing public awareness that the Gipping should indeed be “A River for All”, and a substantial and worthwhile start has been made to make this ideal become a reality.

Autumn, 2006