

**Minutes
Environment Scrutiny Panel**

**21 March 2007
5.30 p.m.
Abbey Leisure Centre, Pity Me**

Present: Councillors Wolstenhome (in the Chair), Carr, Colledge, Kinghorn, Leake, McDonnell, Pitts, Simpson, Turnbull and Walton

Also in Attendance: Councillors Hepplewhite, Lightley, Kellett and Woods

Steve Ansdell – Horticultural Manager, Durham University
Tracey Ingle – Head of Cultural Services, City of Durham
Claire Lancaster – Manager, Necklace Park Project
Jeff Riddell – Head of Environment & Leisure Services, City of Durham
John Williams – Land Agent, Durham Cathedral

Apologies

There were apologies for absence received from Councillors Graham and Marsden.

Minutes of the Meeting held on 20 February 2007

The minutes of the previous meeting were confirmed as a correct record.

Scrutiny Topic – Riverbanks

• **Witness in attendance, Mr John Williams – Land Agent, Durham Cathedral**

Mr Williams, Land Agent for Durham Cathedral gave a presentation to Members on the topic of the Riverbanks from the perspective of the Durham Cathedral.

- Cathedral Land Ownership

Naturally, the Cathedral owns a significant amount of the Peninsula within the City Centre, but also the Cathedral owns a large area on the west of the river. In the areas where the Cathedral owns land on both sides of the river, by the regular convention which states that land owners own the half width of the river, the Cathedral is responsible for the whole of that particular section of the river.

- Main Features

Along the sections of the Riverbank that are within the City Centre, there are a large number of mature and over-mature trees which were planted in the mid 18th Century, around the same time that Prebends Bridge was rebuilt. The original bridge was washed away during heavy flooding and rebuilt (and repositioned) by the Dean & Chapter to provide an improved access to, and view of, the Castle and Cathedral. This was done in the style of the famous Landscape Gardener Capability Brown, particularly in vogue at that time.

It is thought that also the flooding washed away many of the trees alongside the river and consequently a number of beech trees were planted. Beech trees reach maturity at an age of approximately 120-150 years, which would make any trees planted after the Great Flood in 1771 quite a bit older than this.

Note: *Tracey Ingle entered the meeting at 5.35 p.m.*

Following the idea of creating interesting vistas for residents and tourists alike, a view of the Cathedral has been opened up from South View. This is along such a line to require the minimal impact on the trees in this area in terms of removals and management.

- Uses of the Riverbanks

The Count's House is an area owned by the City of Durham, but is bordered by land owned by both Durham Cathedral and the University of Durham. The area roundabout has been used for musical performances in the past and this could be exploited by the Necklace Park Project in the future.

Cyclists often use the riverbank as it is a safe route away from traffic. However, it should be noted that the route along the river round the peninsula is a public footpath, and not a bridleway. Some users of the footpaths have indicated that they disagree with the use of the footpaths by inconsiderate cyclists.

When the weather permits, people often enjoy picnicking along the riverbanks. This can result in additional littering. The Cathedral has staff litter picking 300+ days of the year, with the City of Durham providing a picker 3 times per week.

- Buildings on the Riverside

The boathouse on the far side of the river from the Cathedral had a brace removed in the 1950's and consequently there is a need to shore up and remediate failing walls, damaged due to the weight of the roof.

The Old Fulling Mill is leased to the University for use partly as an Archaeological Museum and also part for residential accommodation.

Many of the buildings along the riverbank have similar problems associated with constricted access. The additional problem is that often this is the only access by vehicles to the buildings and these accesses are commonly routes used by the public on foot.

- Water Erosion

There have been occasions in the past where water erosion has caused damage to the footpaths along the riverbanks, with both the City and County Council helping to remediate in the past.

- Weir on the Wear

The weir below the Cathedral is one of the areas of the river where litter and fallen trees can collect. As the Cathedral does not have its own boat to operate on the river, it can prove difficult to get to the materials that collect along this weir.

Often after a large amount of rainfall some of the large branches and tree trunks will pass over the weir, but on occasion, it can be necessary to contact the Environment Agency in order for them to step in.

There is a fish pass to one side to allow spawning fish to get beyond the weir.

A problem that has been identified is that at the two mill races, one each side of the river, there are leaks. These leaks can lead to a situation where water is no longer running over the weir, rather it flows around it. This is not only detrimental for the river wildlife, but also bad in terms of the various boating activities that take place on this section of the river.

- Trees

As previously mentioned, there are a number of large over-mature trees along the riverbanks and this can lead to problems.

In a case where a lime tree had fallen, it was discovered that the centre of the tree was hollow, despite having new growth and leaves and otherwise appearing quite normal. Forestry Commission guidelines state a minimum safe distance of 12 metres (for a trunk diameter of 1-3 feet) around such over-mature trees. Obviously this would prove impossible to achieve along the riverbanks in Durham as this would effectively cordon off the entire riverbank area.

During a large storm in January 2005, it was thought that the strength of the wind being rebounded from the Cathedral caused a large tree (which was braced against wind from the opposite direction) to become uprooted. This in turn led to instability in the surrounding soil which forms a very steep slope. Removal of blanket coverage of ivy at this location (though not total removal) to increase biodiversity had further exacerbated the instability problem and accordingly, a scheme of works was undertaken to shore up the slope using piling.

Clearing some of these large trees does however create an opportunity to utilise coppice of varying sized / aged trees to give a manageable, sustainable amount of tree cover. This should help with improved vistas and also the smaller trees will have less leverage on the soil, and hence would be less likely to result in a repeat of the example mentioned above.

It is hoped that a programme of tree clearing along the peninsula riverbank area could result in a similar outcome to that of a wood at Shincliffe. At Shincliffe, areas where trees have been felled have been seeded and many varieties of once naturally occurring wild flowers are now appearing and flourishing in the clearing. This approach could be adopted for the riverbanks area, creating many more exciting vistas and spaces for people to enjoy. Whilst this would obviously benefit biodiversity, it could also be an opportunity to update the classic "moth eaten" view of the Cathedral (i.e. from the opposite bank up towards the Cathedral taking in the Old Fulling Mill at the foot of the image). This could meet with some initial resistance, but ultimately it would result in a fresher and more spectacular view of the City's famous landmark.

The Cathedral's Management Plan for the trees within is to be submitted to the Forestry Commission, it then in turn will be circulated to the relevant stakeholders for consultation.

- **Witness in attendance, Mr Steve Ansdell – Horticultural Manager, Durham University**

Mr Ansdell, Horticultural Manager for Durham University spoke to Members on the topic of the Riverbanks from the perspective of the Durham University.

- Tree Management

Mr Ansdell reiterated many of the points made by Mr Williams as the University was in a very similar position as Durham Cathedral being a major landowner in the riverbanks area. Whilst the University has adopted a low intervention strategy as regards those trees that are within University ownership, though Mr Ansdell agreed that coppicing could be the best way forward as regards efficient management. The University would hope to follow Durham Cathedral's example as regards their Management Plan and produce a similar document to guide future works.

- Litter Picking

The University have staff that litter-pick on Palace Green and also the area from Windy Gap to the Old Fulling Mill. A resource that has been utilised to great effect in the past is that of volunteers from the University student body. There are volunteers that help with litter picking in problem areas from time to time, as well as those who are interested in helping with other environmental and wildlife projects. Channelling the energies of these interested volunteers could be useful in securing help for various projects in the future, including those associated with the Necklace Park.

- Other Features

The University supports the Riverbanks Garden Project and the many discoveries in and around this area which have remained hidden beneath undergrowth should prove to be of great interest to local and tourists alike. These include sections of the castle wall, an ice house and other small buildings

- The Future

The key to successfully managing the riverbanks will be to continue to work and build on the partnerships with all the relevant authorities and organisations. The reformed Riverbanks Management Group is an important forum for discussion of ideas and the Necklace Park Project is an excellent example of a way to take those ideas forward.

- **Questions from Members**

Members and Guests were asked to raise any questions on the topic with the Witnesses in attendance.

Drawing a parallel with the improvements to the woods at Shincliffe, Members wondered whether it would be possible to persuade the University Colleges to undertake some planting in the area from Elvet Bridge round to the Boathouse. It was noted that St. Cuthbert's Society were known to be interested in participating. It was also noted that there had been an incident in the past where students had helped to clear weeds from an area and, upon removing all vegetation, inadvertently precipitated a landslide. Accordingly, it would be advisable in the future to have any student or voluntary helper supervised by people with relevant technical knowledge.

The City of Durham's Head of Environment and Leisure Services informed the Panel that most complaints received by the Council concerning the riverbanks related to litter. To this end a number of additional litter bins have been placed along the riverbanks. Closer coordination between the City of Durham, the University and the Cathedral as regards litter picking could improve performance, and indeed it may be beneficial to have a full-time employee in place, funded between the three organisations. Durham Cathedral's Land Agent indicated that the Cathedral would welcome further discussions on this matter. It was noted that the Cathedral's Land Agent had been actively involved over the last 15 years as regards the issue of litter picking, by involvement with the Riverbanks Management Group.

Some Members asked whether works to improve the Riverbanks Gardens would require many trees to be felled. Obviously a number would be cleared for safety and to ensure structural integrity of any newly uncovered buildings and section of castle wall (a Grade 1 Listed Building).

To create the desired vistas from various locations it will require the removal of not only over-mature trees, but also of weeds such as Chick Hogweed and Himalayan Balsam. The latter displaces many other species of plants to the detriment of biodiversity.

The City of Durham's Head of Cultural Services noted that funding to kick start many of the necessary works was coming from various streams. This includes a £20,000 input from the Environment Agency. Also funding should become available from Sport England for the various clubs that use the river through Sports Club Agreements. Also ongoing work with the Rights of Way Section at the Durham County Council was leading to improvements to the footpaths along the riverbanks.

With the 2020 Visioning Exercise and the consequent Necklace Park Project, momentum is gathering and the scene is now set to move to the next chapter in the riverbanks story.

The Chairman and Panel thanked the Witnesses and Guests for their attendance at the meeting.

Actions for the next meeting:-

- Second draft Temporary Road Closures Review Report for consideration by the Panel.
- Draft Riverbanks Report for consideration by the Panel.

The Meeting terminated at 6.10 p.m.