

FEATURE

How 50 years of dedication kept boating afloat

River Stour Trust’s work to maintain navigation goes on

FEATURE

By **BARBARA EELES**
barbara.eeles@liffepublishing.co.uk
@SFPsSudbury

The River Stour was once a busy waterway – a vital artery for the goods that powered the lives and businesses of the people of south Suffolk.

Horse-drawn barges plied between Mistley docks and Sudbury brought cargoes like coal, oil and sugar and returned with products such as bricks and malt.

Times changed. The river’s importance dwindled. Locks silted up and rotted away.

And that could have been the end of it, but for a few dauntless enthusiasts. They went to the House of Lords to fight for the continued right of boats to use the Stour.

This year, the River Stour Trust, formed to preserve and promote navigation from Sudbury to the sea, celebrates its 50th anniversary.

It has restored locks, renovated an 18th century granary and saved one of the original Stour barges from the muddy grave where it had laid hidden since 1914.

The trust has built a new visitor and education centre, now also its HQ, in Great Cornard, and every year runs boat trips that allow hundreds of people to enjoy the river.

All this has been achieved by a small charity relying almost entirely on support from its 300 members and around 60 volunteers, who do everything from digging out locks and skipping boats to serving teas.

The trust restored Flatford lock in the 1970s, then Dedham, which now needs more work, and Cornard. The lock at Stratford St Mary,



RESCUED: Volunteers Jim Lunn and Mike Finch aboard the restored Stour lighter John Constable.

described by volunteer Mike Finch as a hidden gem, was officially opened this year after a 10-year project.

“Restoring locks is hard work,” he said. “It means digging out mud, putting in piles, building jetties and cutting down vegetation.

“Stratford lock is so hard to get to. For many years, the only way was to float across on a raft. We had to dig it out using minimal machinery and also move hundreds of tonnes of concrete blocks.”

More than 200 years ago, the Stour, as a working river, was captured in the work of John Constable, whose father owned mills in Dedham and Flatford.

RST vice-president Griff Rhys Jones, a staunch supporter of navigation rights, said: “Constable always painted the navigable river – humans are always at work.

“That seems to have been incredibly important to him ... his father was one of the navigation commissioners.” The presenter, actor, comedian and writer,

whose home is on the Stour estuary, praised the work of the trust. “It is an amazing organisation run by a considerable body of volunteers.

“The locks mean the Stour is one of very few navigable rivers in Britain and it is important to celebrate that fact.”

He is a keen canoeist. “It’s fascinating to get on the Stour, because you find yourself going through stands of irises, and patches of water lilies,” he said.

“The river bed is covered with freshwater mussel shells.” But making the whole length

of river navigable – as in the 18th and 19th centuries – to anything less portable than a canoe, seems next to impossible.

“We would probably have to put in another 15 locks. The task would be enormous and daunting,” said Mike, a retired computer programmer.

The trust has six boats used for its popular river trips. Four are based in Sudbury, taking passengers as far as Henny, and two in

Flatford.

Moored at Sudbury are electric launches Edwardian Lady and Rosette, and a pontoon boat, Francis J, which can take wheelchairs and was given a complete makeover last winter by volunteers.

It was bought by, and named after, Francis J Batten – one of the original campaigners who established the trust.

The fourth Sudbury boat is back on the river where, more than 100 years ago, it helped to keep the local economy afloat.

John Constable – one of the barges known as a Stour Lighter – was raised from the mud in Ballingdon, where they were scuttled at the start of the First World War to prevent use by an invading army.

The lighter was exposed in the 1976 drought. “It was restored by a specialist firm, and is now driven by an electric motor with rechargeable batteries,” said Mike. “We can run it for 50p a day.

“All the boats are low power, and take only nine or 12 passengers, so the regulations are much less



LOCKS ARE KEY: Jim and Mike on the lock at Great Cornard, which the River Stour Trust reopened in the 1990s.

Volunteers are needed in a variety of roles. To find out more, or to book a talk on the trust and Stour navigation, email administrator@riverstourtrust.org or call 01787 313199



HIGH PRAISE: Trust vice-president Griff Rhys Jones at the wheel of an RST boat on the River Stour.



THE ORIGINAL: Trusty was the first boat based at Flatford.



CELEBRATION: Members of the trust mark the completion of the restoration of the North Basin at the Granary in Sudbury.

onerous than for bigger ones.”

At Flatford, they have Trusty II – the original Trusty was their first boat – and Kathleen, named after Kathleen Grimwood, Sudbury’s oldest resident

who died in 2012, aged 110.

The Granary at Sudbury was restored in the 1980s and served for more than 20 years as the trust’s headquarters. It is now hired out for functions and meetings to help fund the

trust’s work.

This Sunday at 10.30am, it will be officially reopened after the refurbishment of its kitchens and toilets.

The Francis J will also be relaunched and, to celebrate, half-price

river trips will be offered from 11am to 1pm, with wheelchair users going free.

John Morris has been RST chairman for two years. “When the trust was set up in 1968, the Stour was considered one of the most important navigations to protect,” he said. “All over the country, rivers and canals were under threat. “The initial aim was to maintain the right of navigation, and restore the three Constable locks at Flatford, Dedham and Stratford. It’s taken 50 years, but I think that’s our greatest achievement.”

Every year, Sudbury to the Sea attracts hundreds of people who paddle their craft almost 25 miles to the Cattawade barrier.

“It’s an amazing event,” says John. “We’re limited to 300 craft and it’s oversubscribed every year. There are canoes, kayaks, paddle boards– one year, there was even a couple of baths.

“The scenery they go through is stunning, and to see them arrive at Cattawade exhausted, but jubilant, is brilliant.”

Keeping the river

navigable is the responsibility of the Environment Agency.

“The more boat movements there are, the less it will need dredging,” said John. “But we have to balance the needs of the ecology and the boating fraternity. We don’t want to turn it into a super-highway.

“There are two main challenges for us at the moment. The lock gates at Dedham don’t work, and we have to raise funds to repair them once we have permission from the owners. The lock island is also eroding badly.

“Another challenge is that below Henny, a bylaw severely limits the number of powered craft. “At the moment, the EU says electric-powered craft should be treated the same as manual ones, but that is in conflict with the bylaw.

“So we still have work to do. My dream is to introduce a trip boat at Bures, and have a third place where people could access the river. We would also like a sponsor to help us provide a lift at The Granary.”



STUCK IN THE MUD: Volunteers prepare to raise Stour lighter John Constable after it was exposed by low river levels in 1976.

More boat skippers have recently been trained. Most are men, but the trust would be happy to recruit more women.

Volunteer trainer Jim Lunn said: “We don’t want it to be seen as a boys’ club,

even though most of the volunteers tend to be men.”

Ex-emergency care practitioner Jim joined when he retired. “I asked if there was anywhere on the river I could keep a canoe, and they said yes,” he

explains. “What they didn’t tell me was that I’d have to build the canoe rack first.

That’s how I got involved.” He sometimes works 60 hours a week for the trust and also runs first aid awareness.