

River Stour Trust News



Dear RST Member

Welcome to the October 2021 River Stour Trust newsletter.

Firstly an apology for the non-arrival of Lock Lintel for the past 18 months. Because of the Coronavirus situation there has been little or no Trust activity for that time, and because of the severe strain the pandemic has put on our finances has meant we have had to save every penny we can. However now we are back in action, you will be getting a magazine within the next month or so, but in the meantime this newsletter will keep you up to date with the latest news.

The VEC Re-opens

As you will be aware, our Visitor & Education Centre at Cornard was badly damaged by fire in 2018. Because of the Covid situation and other problems, rebuilding was delayed for 18 months, but in 2021 it finally re-opened, and is now fully back up and running. As part of the rebuild we altered the verandah to provide a wheelchair ramp, which then meant we could remove the existing earth ramp, and so free off more car parking space.

It is important to bear in mind that the £450,000 cost of the rebuilding was only made possible because the Trust fully insures all our properties, and regularly updates their values.

We thank Derek Cresswell for maintaining the grounds throughout last year. It was his form of outdoor exercise and we are incredibly grateful to him and his team for all their ongoing maintenance and improvements to the site.

Covid 19 Update

The pandemic has meant we had virtually no boat operations or weddings last year, and very few this year, further complicated by the closure of Fen Bridge at Flatford, and the theft of the outboard from Francis J at Sudbury. This has meant we have lost nearly two years of revenue, or some £160,000.

The fact that we are still solvent has been due to several factors. Firstly the Government furlough scheme has contributed to our staff wages, one of our main costs, helped by our paid team often generously giving their time voluntarily. We also received a £10,000 Covid support grant from Babergh District Council.

A special thanks to Graham Simmons for his contribution as Treasurer and Trustee, helping to ensure the Trust was in a strong financial position before the pandemic. We also would like to thank the members who helped by making a donation and/or choosing a 5 year subscription renewal.

Further help came in the form of a £25,000 VAT refund windfall. Up till now we had been paying VAT on our boat ticket revenue, but one of our members, Mike Finch, looked into the question of VAT on boat tickets, and found that they should in fact be zero-rated. After some persuading, the VAT office agreed and refunded 3 years of past VAT we had paid, giving a welcome boost to our funds. Finally, prudent management over recent years had

meant we had built up our reserves, which we were able to draw on. However we must hope that from 2022 onwards the situation will allow us to get back to regular trips and weddings at the Granary.

And on the positive side, the pandemic has meant millions of people who would otherwise have gone abroad have stayed in Britain, with many of these visiting the Stour to picnic, paddle, canoe and swim. Use of the waterways was one of the first permitted activities after lockdown and we are delighted that people have discovered the River Stour and its benefits as a 'blue space'. It is now easier than ever before to obtain a craft, with canoes, inflatables and paddleboards being very popular). However we do have concerns that there is little or no information provided by sellers on requirements before taking to the water, such as licences and the need to ensure you do not trespass on private ground, and to respect local communities living beside the river. The Trust has always promoted responsible use of the river, so that everyone can enjoy its beauty, peace and tranquility and we will continue to work alongside local authorities and other organisations to ensure its new found popularity is enjoyed by everyone.



Sudbury Boat Operations

We had just bought and fitted a new 15hp Suzuki outboard to *Francis J*, our disabled access boat, when it was stolen after its locks were cut while tied up at the Granary. The Covid situation meant that new outboards were in short supply – probably one of the reasons ours was stolen - and it looked like we would not be able to get a replacement for the rest of this year. However fortunately we found a secondhand 16ft disabled access boat on the market, which came complete with a nearly new Yamaha 15 outboard. This was fitted, together with modifications to the mounting system to make it harder to steal. Plus a Datatag Security System that sends an alert if it is tampered with.

An extra bonus of this situation is that we now have a disabled access boat that we can use on the lower river, where previously we had none, meaning the Trust can cater for people in wheelchairs at both ends of the river. You will be interested in the accompanying picture that shows the boat when it was first launched 10 years ago, being tested by the then local MP for Henley-on-Thames, who has since gone on to greater things.

Boat operations are now back full-time at Sudbury, with walk-up trips and Henny lunchtime charters being re-started, but with Covid precautions, and the passenger numbers reduced to allow for social distancing.



Dedham Vale Boating

Operations on the lower river have slowly re-started, with some walk-up trips, plus charters and lunchtime trips for diners at The Talbooth, but our normal Flatford trips have been stopped because the wooden Fen Bridge started to collapse, cutting the navigation in two. Removing and replacing this will be a very costly and lengthy operation, to be carried out by Suffolk County Council Highways Department, and realistically we do not expect it to happen this year.

A further impact has come in the form of the increased number of paddle-boarders, canoeists and swimmers using the lower river. The pandemic has meant millions of Brits have not been able to holiday abroad, with the result that they have turned to every available piece of open land in the UK, with waterside locations especially popular. The waterfronts at Dedham and Stratford St Mary have resembled Brighton beach on every sunny day this summer, making operating our boats on these narrow stretches difficult or impossible.

Whilst this is causing us problems, we have to recognise that we are in fact victims of our own success, because if it was not for the Trust fighting the proposed extinguishing of the public right of Navigation on the Stour from Sudbury to Cattawade in 1975, no-one would be allowed to use it today, a fact that is probably unknown to the thousands of people enjoying the water, or probably in fact to most of the Councillors and officials at all levels on all councils – parish, borough and County.

At the same time the Environment Agency are struggling to enforce the licensing regulations, which require every unpowered vessel – which includes paddleboards, dinghies and canoes - to pay a £44 licence fee. Last year, they were patrolling with more of an advisory approach but this year they have been enforcing. They have created signage directing river users to the RST website because we offer the ability to get EA craft registration online 24/7.

A further issue is wild swimming, with people taking to the rivers in large numbers, up to 500 at a time for a recent organised swim, often with no warning floats or orange caps, making them nearly impossible for our skippers to spot, and forcing us to suspend our trips. Action needs to be taken by the EA before an accident occurs.



Dedham Lock Restoration

The Trust first restored Dedham Lock in 1990, paying for the gates to be repaired and refaced, but since then we have not been able to make as much use of it as we would have wished, as Stratford St Mary Lock was also derelict.

By the time we restored SSM in 2018, the gates at Dedham, which may be the original ones installed when the lock was rebuilt in the 1930s finally became too unsafe to use.

We therefore set in motion a plan to raise the necessary £120,000 for their replacement, and for piling the top of the lock island which had been eroded by the unconstrained water rushing through the lock. At the same time we started negotiations with the residents of Dedham Mill, on whose property the lock stands, to grant the Trust a 99-year lease over the lock and its adjacent land. This was necessary because the majority of grant funding bodies require that the Charity they are giving funds to either owns or has a long lease on the property to be restored.

For a variety of reasons, finalising this lease has taken over four years, tying up much of the time of our negotiating team. This has also made it difficult to raise the necessary funds, without the lease in place.

However we have been able to raise the £55,000 needed to actually manufacture the gates, from Enover Community Trust, and they have been waiting in store for two years. We have also received pledges of £10,000 from Dedham Parish Council, and £7,000 from Essex Heritage Trust, but these again are dependant on the lease being signed. We hope that we are getting very close to a conclusion, and that the lease will be in place by the end of this year, allowing us to move forward with the restoration.



ITV Anglia News visits the Trust

ITV Anglia visited the Trust in September 2020 to film a feature about us and our activities, and how they have allowed people to enjoy the river over the past 50 years, but particularly how we are enabling people to get out during the pandemic. They followed our 2020 S2C weekend, then had a trip from Sudbury on *Francis J*, and finally went to the lower river to talk about our restoration projects. Trust members interviewed included Jim Lunn, Mike Finch and Seb Cailles. The article highlighted the benefits we provide, including exercise, relaxation, being closer to

nature, and seeing parts of the country that are inaccessible by foot. It went out on ITV Anglia News on Monday 14th September, but then featured in the national ITV 'All Around Britain' programme a month later.

Not only did this get the Trust's activities in front of the hundreds of thousands of people who watch these shows, but importantly it would have been seen by local decision-makers – councillors, MPS, local authorities, all of whom watch the local news closely every day.



Riverside land opposite the Swan at Stratford St Mary

The Trust has now secured a licence giving us and other river users access to the riverside plot of land opposite the Swan pub in Stratford St Mary. Ownership of this land has been in question for some time now, but it has finally been established that it is owned by Northumbrian Water, as an extension to the land alongside, on which their pumping station stands. The riverside plot, with its landing stage has been used by canoeists for many years to launch and recover their boats, and has been used by many as a riverside garden for the pub, but Northumbrian Water finally decided to close it off three years ago. On hearing of this, the Trust wrote to them asking if they would keep it open, but with its use controlled, and they agreed. As a result anyone who has our permission can use the land to launch and recover licensed unpowered boats and canoes, and we can use it to access our electric boats. We are also responsible for maintaining and repairing the landing stage, that was built by River Stour Boating. Stratford St Mary Parish Council also have a licence from Northumbrian Water to use and maintain the riverside garden.



Training

Training of new boat crews and skippers and updating crews' existing qualifications has carried on whenever possible through the lock-down, while still maintaining Covid precautions, to ensure we have enough crews for when we get fully back in operation. But we always need more people to spread the load and allow us to run more trips, so if you fancy trying your hand at crewing or driving one of our boats, or even just selling tickets ashore, get in touch with Jim Lunn our Boat Operations Manager.

One of the procedures we always test is man overboard. Usually this is carried out with a buoy simulating the casualty, but every now and then we get a volunteer keen enough to do it for real!



Sudbury to the Sea

We were still able to hold our annual Sudbury to The Sea canoe weekend in one of the un-lockdown windows in 2020, but with reduced numbers of 100 boats instead of our usual 300, and careful Covid precautions. This generated its usual valuable revenue and kept the interest in the river high, and we are grateful to Catherine and the team lead by Seb Cailles who made this happen.

The 2021 event also took place, over the weekend of 11/12th September, but this time with 200 boats, and once again proved how popular this event has become.



Tea Room Volunteers Enjoy End of Season Boat Trip

Our dedicated team of Tea Room volunteers at the Granary provide a cheerful and welcome first impression to the public while raising valuable funds for the Trust's work. Throughout the summer season, they offer refreshments, cakes and light meals each Sunday and Bank Holiday, as well as on Wednesdays during the high season of August - and at Santa's special request in winter, of course. Last year they raised over £9,000.

As a small gesture of thanks for their hard work and year-round commitment in 2019, the team enjoyed an afternoon river trip to Henny via Cornard Lock on our Stour Lighter *John Constable*, one of its last trips before the Coronavirus struck four months later. In a partial reversal of roles, the Trust's boat crew volunteers also donned aprons to serve a special lunch and afternoon tea.

Margaret Cresswell won the Horticultural or Environmental Volunteer of the Year Award at the Sudbury and District Volunteer Awards in 2019.

She was nominated by RST volunteer, Chris Turk, on the basis that Margaret has been the mainstay of the River Stour Trust Tea Room at the Granary, Sudbury, for over six years. She organises the rota and tea room provisions as well as being on hand to assist with weekday refreshments for charters and special events. Margaret is nearly always there at the Tea Room, leading her small team by example, and always with a smile.



Coracle Regatta

Another of our annual favourites, the Coracle Regatta took place at Bures, and once again was a great success, with new hands and experienced scullers alike. Thanks to Steve Miles who coordinates this event from afar! This year, we all missed Steve's usual co-organiser, Dick Mundy, who had sadly passed away earlier in the year. Dick was the main reason the Coracle Regatta continued in its present form and also regularly skippered aboard our Dedham Vale trip boats. At his request his ashes will be scattered in the river at Dedham.



Pirates on the Stour

Once again the Stour was invaded in September by hordes of pirates young and old, and the return of this favourite event shows that Trust volunteers are doing everything they can to get things back to as normal as possible. Hopefully by 2022 we can be back up and running full time.



Fen Bridge

A further problem on the lower river this year has been the closure of Fen Bridge between Dedham and Flatford. This iconic footbridge on the Stour was used by the young John Constable to walk from his home in East Bergholt to school in Dedham. A new wooden bridge was installed in 1985, but earlier this year it was noticed that it had serious faults, forcing it to be closed to walkers.

Temporary strengthening was put in place, but the slow collapse continued, with its height above water gradually reducing, so in May the river was closed to navigation, and a boom stretched across the river to prevent boats and canoes passing beneath. This prevented us from taking Trusty down to Flatford every day, and put paid to our usual trips for the whole season. The bridge is the responsibility of Suffolk Highways Department, and they assure us that it will be removed before the end of the year, and a new bridge put in its place, either then or later.



Treasurer, Membership Secretary and Company Secretary Required

These three important positions in the Trust fell vacant during the pandemic, and we need people to take them over. Full information on what they entail is on the website, or can be obtained from the office, or you can chat it through with a Council member. Or you can just volunteer to help with general administrative tasks at the VEC.

Sheila Morris was our long-standing Membership Secretary, and she and husband John have served the Trust for 20 years in a variety of roles and activities, but have now moved away from the area. We wish them the best in their new lives, and hope they will visit us if they should return to Suffolk.

Upcoming Events

This year's AGM will again be held virtually via Zoom. Date, paperwork and further details to follow shortly.

Santa Boat Rides at Sudbury, 11-12 December. Join Santa and his crew of elves for a festive family river cruise. The visit comprises a boat trip, small gift for children, mince pies and mulled wine or hot chocolate in Mrs Claus' Tea Room. More details: <https://www.riverstourtrust.org/events/santa-boat-cruises/>

Your Pictures and Stories wanted

If you have any pictures of the river, or our activities on it, or stories of the last 18 months, please send them to myself for inclusion in the magazine: emrhysbarrell@goring.co.uk.

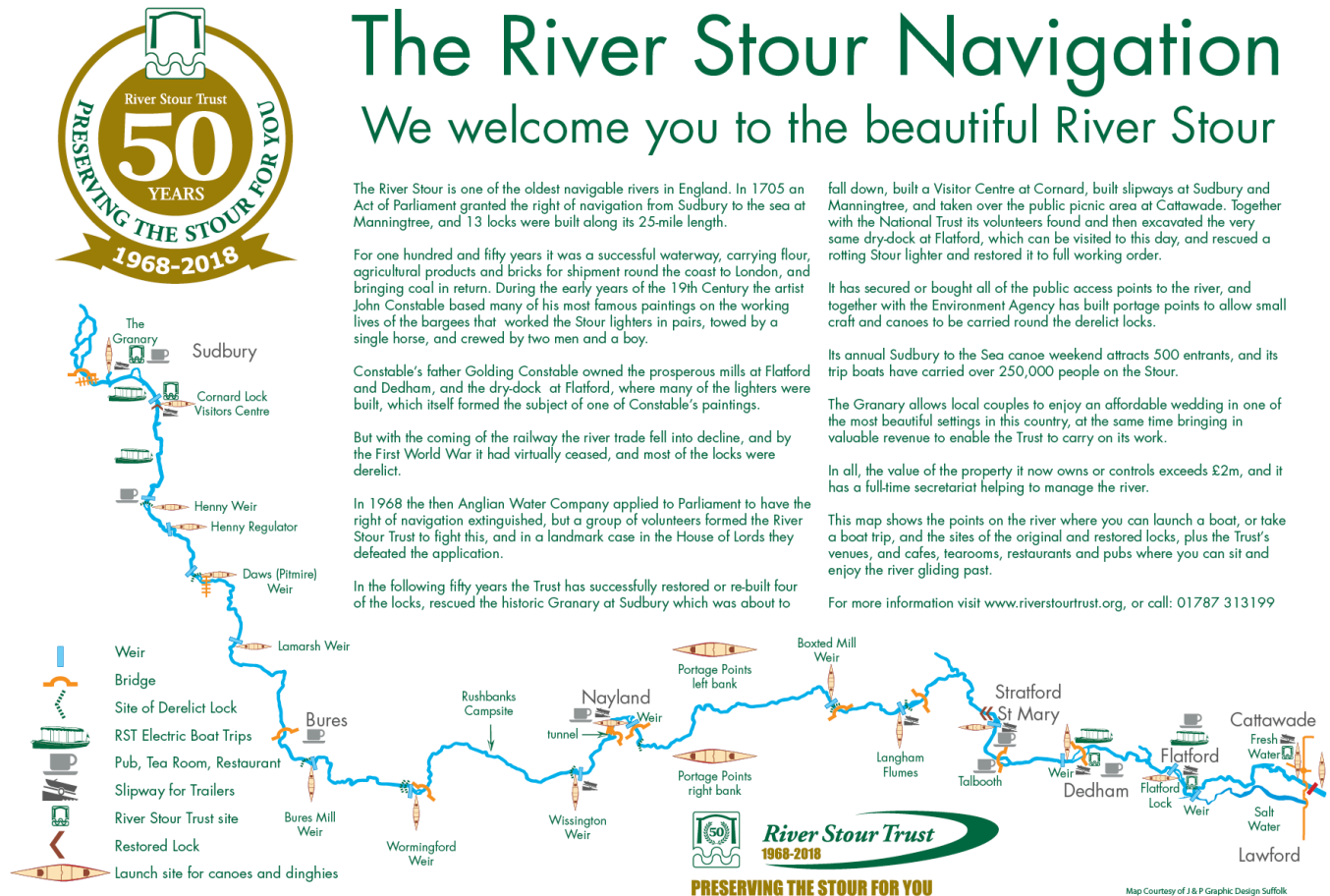
Photographers contributing to this newsletter include John Keeper, Gill Boardman, David Kirkman, Richard Kearton, Chris Turk, Linda Barrell and Mike Finch, but I apologise to anyone that I have missed.



River Stour Boating donates £10,000 to the Trust

The map below shows what the Trust has achieved since it was formed in 1968, including all the places where you can launch or portage a canoe. One company that took advantage of these was River Stour Boating, a Community Interest Company that pioneered commercial hiring of canoes to travel the length of the navigable river. The company closed in 2020, partly because of pressure on its volunteer directors' time, and partly Covid, but they have generously donated the £10,000 of reserves they had built up to the Trust, to be used to maintain and improve access and portage points for the whole community to use. Our thanks to Steve Mann for this gesture. We have also taken ownership of the Jetty at Stratford St Mary which was previously the responsibility of River Stour Boating.

STOP PRESS: We have just heard that our application for a grant of £15,000 towards the restoration of Dedham Lock, from the Pilgrim Trust has been successful. Another major step forward for the project.



None of this would be here for everyone to enjoy today if it wasn't for the Trust, and the efforts of you and all our volunteers over the years. Well done everyone.

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