

First Steps on Eynsham Art Trail

At the end of 2011, some £20,000 of funds secured from the Swinford Green (Hazeldene Close) development became available to spend on public art in Eynsham. Sue Osborne, chair of Eynsham Parish Council Footpaths Committee, reports.

It was suggested that this art could enhance some local footpaths, if it took the form of waymarkers, interpretation boards, leaflets, sculptures, etc. It might also lead on to improvements on the designated footpaths, such as surface enhancements, cutting back of vegetation, and updating gates and stiles. Heather McCulloch, Arts & Leisure Development Manager at West Oxfordshire District Council, has been working with the Parish Council and colleagues at Oxfordshire County Council's Countryside Team to identify which routes might benefit most from such art.

THE POTENTIAL ROUTE

lies to the east of the village, running beside the allotments, over the dismantled railway to the Wharf Stream bridge and on to the Thames.

The route is not at present entirely made up of public rights of way, but I am delighted to report that OCC has now secured permission from the landowner to allow a new, 'permissive' right of way to be created.

On 22 June 2013, a group of artists, photographers, nature-lovers and other interested parties met at Hazeldene Close for a "Walk & Talk" to explore ideas for the new arts / heritage trail: image © Sue Chapman.



red dotted line from D - F shows the new permissive route – click to enlarge



We began by crossing the busy B4449, on footpath 206/5, heading for the allotments (the Traffic Advisory committee is to consider ways of making the crossing safer). This patch is rather grim, with a large tank to the left (is it a water tank? – no one seems sure) and a sewerage station to the right, which has recently suffered a rather nasty leak. Not an auspicious start, but we have ideas – to paint a mural around the sides of the tank, possibly of trees and greenery, to make it less ugly; or to plant an apple grove nearby. The Countryside Service (OCC) has already agreed to replace the gate across the track here, as well as clearing some of the undergrowth which at present makes quite a good job of hiding the start of the route.

We then walked along the edge of the allotments. An overgrown ditch runs parallel to the path: we discussed the merits of digging it out and whether that might improve drainage in the area. Artistic interpretation at this point could include a theme of growing and eating, or the wild and the tame. OCC will widen the path and flatten it for easier access, as it is rather narrow and rutted in places.

At the end of the allotments, we turned left onto Mead Lane (bridleway 206/23), which is part of an

ancient Salt Route. There are more interpretation opportunities here, which could include information about the route itself as well as forms of transport which may have been used along it.

At the second field boundary, we turned right. The next two legs of the route (before and after the dismantled railway crossing), although heavily walked, are not currently part of the parish footpaths network; thanks to the help and co-operation of OCC and the landowner, permission has been secured for them to become public rights of way.

Here, where the path crosses over the old railway embankment, is one of the prime spots for artwork and interpretation: a heavy-duty climbing structure, perhaps made from old sleepers, could be constructed here. Undergrowth on the embankment could be cleared to make the direction of the tracks more evident, and just beyond the embankment is a prime site for a seat from which to admire the view across to Wytham Woods. This might also be a good spot for some owl, bat or bird boxes to be erected, subject to some research.

Heading south-east from the railway, the path reaches the Wharf Stream and footpath 206/7, where there is a very pretty crossing (OCC have agreed to replace the present footbridge, which has only one handrail, so until then care should be taken when using it). This is another great site for a seat, as well as for interpretation about the Wharf Stream itself and the modes of transport which were used on it, and the goods which were carried along it. A structure here was used to store the paddles which once enabled the water level in the stream to be raised: a sculpture inspired by this could be created and placed here.



footbridge over Wharf Stream, as photographed 01/02/2000

The route continues south-west, towards Eynsham Weir and the Thames. When the weir was reached, the idea of a “Land’s End”-style waymark was put forward – London [59 miles]; Oxford, [6 miles]; Cricklade [xx miles]; the Talbot [500 yards], etc.

At the weir – from which all directions are possible! – the path heads west across a field to the Talbot, where a warm welcome is always guaranteed. Thanks very much to Trevor, who provided tea, coffee and biscuits, and allowed us practically to take over the pub to discuss all the ideas which were buzzing in our heads. Connections were made (who could have guessed that one of us is a creator of wildlife-walk mobile phone apps?), histories discussed (who knew that one of us actually rode on the very last goods train to run through Eynsham?), and a great sense of excitement and achievement was felt by all.

What’s the next step? Well, there will be more meetings to discuss all these ideas and more (willow sculptures, the high-tech industry at Siemens, waymarker designs, family workshops – the possibilities are endless!), as well as the practicalities and time-scales of putting some of them in place. All I can say is many, many thanks to all those of you who have been involved so far and to all those who will be in future. Keep walking – and look out for future news on the development of

the Heritage Trail (name yet to be decided). Hmmm, maybe there's room for a competition here!

UPDATE MAY 2014: Local artists Jane Tomlinson and Lorna Marrison were recently commissioned to create big, bright information panels for the emerging Eynsham Art Trail, linking east Eynsham to the Thames.

Developed in discussion with the community, the panels (right) depict the route and its fascinating history; and some of the flora and fauna to be seen along it. The trail, around one mile long, will be an asset to the village and enjoyable by all ages.

Installation of the panels this summer marks the first stage in a £20k project uniting the county, district and parish councils – and complementing the work of volunteers who have been busy opening up the Wharf Stream since 2006.

It involves gaining permissive rights for footpaths and installing a new bridge (OCC); seating along the trail and features such as owl boxes to encourage wildlife. The project is now also being supported by a grant from the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment (TOE).

Now the search is on for three designs to signpost the new trail. The District Council has invited local artists, schools and community groups to come up with ideas. The three winning designs will be brought to life by Oxfordshire carver Rodas Irving, as 5ft tall waymarkers for installation in the autumn.

Eynsham Day Centre has taken up the challenge during their weekly meetings. They are working with local artist Alice Walker to develop their ideas – incorporating local wildlife and allotment inspired artwork into simplified line drawings which could easily be carved into the wooden posts. Bryan Duffield (79) says ...

"I've always been a keen wildlife enthusiast and remember wading in ponds as a child. As I've grown older I've taken to visiting local nature reserves instead so I am taking inspiration from local woodland animals."

