

The Five Weirs Walk

How voluntary action transformed
an urban riverside



Urban River Corridors and
Sustainable Living Agendas

Brightside Weir on Sheffield's River Don

Produced by the
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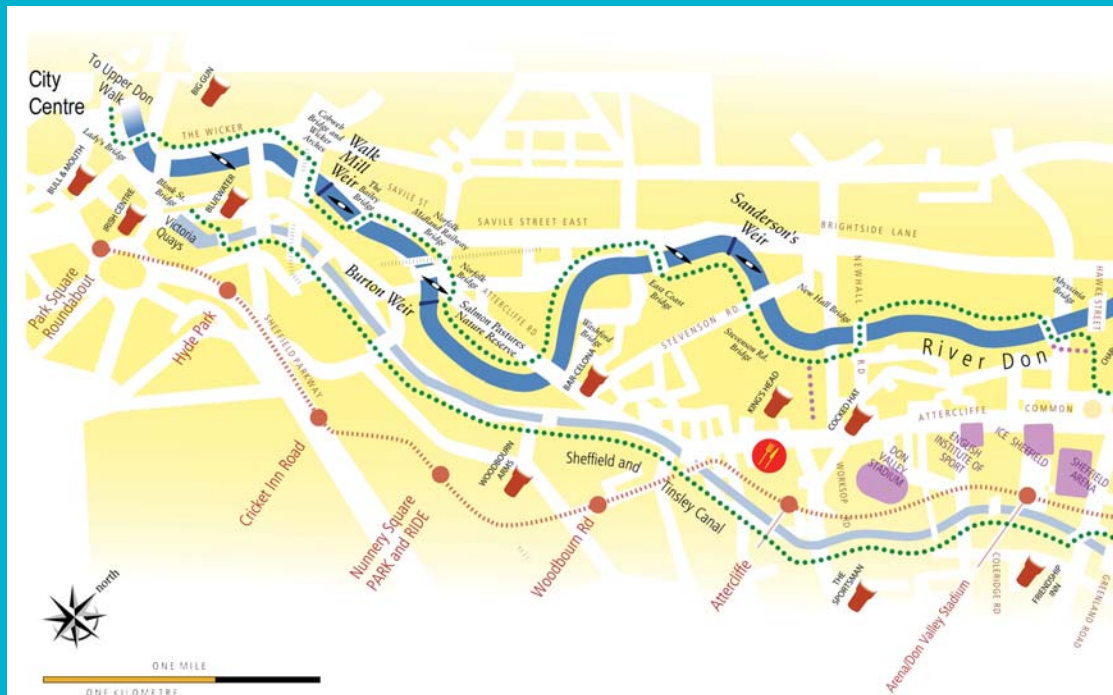
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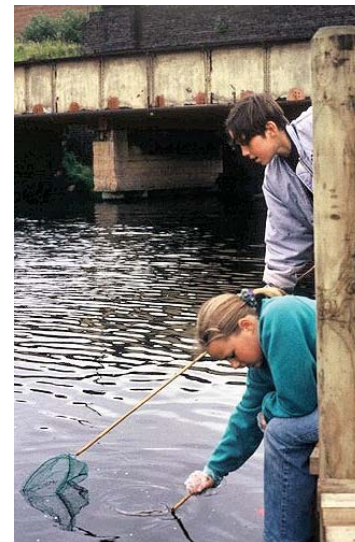


The Five Weirs Walk

This booklet tells the story of the Five Weirs Walk, a public path and cycle route along the River Don in Sheffield. The Walk was conceived, developed and steered to completion by the Five Weirs Walk Trust, a handful of enthusiasts bolstered by support from statutory authorities, private companies, local charities, national funding bodies and countless members of the public. Over a period of 20 years and more, the Walk developed from a bright idea to a keystone in the regeneration of the urban river corridor.

When the University of Sheffield undertook a major research project on urban river corridors, the Five Weirs Walk presented an opportunity to look at the role of voluntary action in a successfully completed local project. With the full support of the Trust, the story of the Walk has been explored as a case study for this research. One outcome of the collaboration is this booklet, which will bring the Five Weirs Walk story to a wider audience.

Now that the Trust's job is done, it seems a good time to reflect on the experiences and lessons of more than two decades of activity, spanning a range of different political, economic and social climates, in the hope of inspiring other groups engaged in voluntary action for rivers and regeneration.



Pond dipping near Sanderson's Weir





Above: The River Don was once an industrial conduit

Right: Fishing at Walk Mill Weir

“There was wildlife down there, there were kingfishers, there were herons. Even though the river was still mucky, it was getting better.”

Mike Wild, ecologist and Five Weirs Walk Trustee

“We were inspired by the history of Sheffield’s western rivers, where large sections were reclaimed from industry in the early 20th century to provide green corridors. Our vision was to offer similar amenities to the less fortunate east end of the city.”

Simon Ogden, Secretary, Five Weirs Walk Trust

The Five Weirs Walk vision

The Five Weirs Walk is a surfaced path and cycleway stretching for 7.5 km along the River Don, from the centre of Sheffield to the Meadowhall shopping complex on the city’s eastern outskirts, passing the five historic weirs from which it takes its name.

The Don had once driven Sheffield’s industrial boom, first as a source of power, later as a coolant and a conduit for waste. Its banks were lined with the forges and mills for which the city was renowned, and its waters ran thick with industrial effluent and sewage. By the 1980s, in a period of economic decline, reduced pollution was an unexpected dividend. Water quality improved, and there were hopeful signs of wildlife returning to the river. But much of the riverside was still occupied by semi-derelict industrial property, and the Don itself was largely invisible and inaccessible.

The goal of the Five Weirs Walk Trust was a restored, accessible river that the people of Sheffield could discover and enjoy. The intended route was divided into phases, so that the Trust and its partners had time to organise fundraising, negotiate with landowners and leaseholders, draw up access agreements and generate public support at each stage. The Trust directly constructed six phases of the Walk, costing £8 million at today’s prices, while a further five phases were built by public or private sector developers.



Today, the Five Weirs Walk has opened up the riverside to walkers, cyclists, anglers, canoeists, nature lovers, industrial history enthusiasts and many others. It follows the riverbank almost all the way, with only occasional diversions, and connects with the Sheffield-Tinsley canal towpath, the Upper Don Walk, the riverside path to Rotherham and the Trans-Pennine Trail.

Building a team

The Five Weirs Walk was the brainchild of a handful of individuals working in the same Sheffield City Council offices near the river in the late 1980s. They quickly drew in like-minded friends and associates, and set up the Five Weirs Walk Trust as a limited company and registered charity.

They shared not only a vision for the river corridor, but other important attributes too. They were dedicated and energetic, and had a range of expertise in various professional spheres. The original team included an environmental scientist, a landscape architect, a solicitor, a quantity surveyor, a water analyst, a city planner and a bank manager.

They also had excellent connections, which enabled two important local organisations to be brought on board at the outset. These were the Sheffield Junior Chamber of Commerce, whose members had already been organising voluntary clean-ups of the river, and which gave the Trust access to the local business community; and the Sheffield City Wildlife Group, later to become the Sheffield Wildlife Trust, which brought environmental expertise and “green” credentials.

Recruitment was an ongoing process. The solicitor who steered the project through some of its trickiest legal hurdles was inspired to join when she attended a Five Weirs guided walk, after the sad loss of the Trust’s original legal adviser. This crucial role included dealing with access negotiations and construction contracts.

At the heart of the Trust was its Committee, numbering around ten people at any one time. A few remained core members for all or most of two decades, while others joined for shorter or longer periods. The Committee developed strategies, made decisions, and dealt with sponsors, landowners and officials, drawing on their considerable expertise and connections, and all giving their time and skills for free.



Trustees and supporters in the 1990s

“None of us ever thought we were taking on a job for 20 years!”

*Lisa Judson, Chair,
Five Weirs Walk Trust*

“I went on a walk I saw advertised, and then to a public meeting about what people can do to help. At that meeting I asked how they were managing for legal advice.”

*Miranda Myers, Legal Adviser,
Five Weirs Walk Trust*

Widening support

Another key to making the Five Weirs Walk a reality was building up widespread popular support. As well as the core group on the committee, there was a much wider constituency of supporters who volunteered for different tasks at different times. The Trust's Bulletin, published annually from 1988 onwards, canvassed support in a "How you can help" section. This wider support base was informally constituted as Friends of the Five Weirs Walk in the early 1990s.

They helped with jobs such as fundraising, leading guided walks, giving slide shows, selling badges, organising fun days, and undertaking regular "clean-ups" of the Walk and riverbank, which were held twice a year and open to everyone. People with particular expertise were drafted in to give public lectures for the Trust's regular programme of winter talks.

By the early 1990s, there was an increased focus on promotion and interpretation, including cultural events and public art, so that the Walk would become a feature of the city's heritage. There were riverside events led by popular local writers and musicians, projects with local schools turning children's images of the river into carved benches, specially commissioned installations by sculptor David Nash, and a bronze-cast poem by future laureate Carol Ann Duffy.

The Trust also made a conscious effort to bring on board interest groups such as walkers, cyclists, anglers, canoeists and so on, without letting any one of these interests dominate the project.



*Top: Clean-up volunteers
Middle: Carved bench at
Salmon Pastures
Bottom: Fishing the restored river*

*Right: Local schoolchildren join
in celebrations for the final phase*



An early public meeting generated a lot of enthusiasm from these groups, and although the idea of a representative “user forum” never quite took off, there was continuing general support. Local clubs, including canoeists and cyclists, organised their members to do Walk clean-ups from time to time. Leisure groups also helped by adding their voices to the Trust’s to lobby for better maintenance of the Walk.

The Trust had less direct involvement with neighbourhood-based communities. Voluntary activities such as clean-ups did not attract people living in the residential areas nearest the river. These were neighbourhoods which had suffered particularly badly from post-industrial decline, and the Trust had neither the time nor the expertise to tackle community outreach work. However, where there were clear shared objectives, neighbourhood-based groups could be powerful allies, as was the case in Tinsley (see p.9)



“We were in a very fortunate position. The fishers and walkers and cyclists and bird-watchers were all looking for opportunities to get to the river, they weren’t protecting anything against anybody else.”

The Friends became our audience for the winter talks, guests for our summer walks, and when we wanted to campaign, we had a lot of people who could knowledgeably back what we were doing.”

*Lisa Judson, Chair,
Five Weirs Walk Trust*

Canoeists help clear a section of riverbank after flooding

Strategic connections

“It’s important to have a strategy that can be presented to politicians and planners. They can incorporate this into their policies, then start applying it to new developments. Having a planning authority on your side is important.”

Ric Bingham, Principal Regeneration Projects Design Officer, Sheffield City Council, 1976-2010

Sheffield’s then Lord Mayor, Jackie Drayton, opens the final section in 2007

An important early achievement for the Five Weirs Walk project was the foothold it gained in the strategic plans of powerful public bodies. Within two years of the Trust’s formation, the Walk was firmly rooted in planning proposals for the city.

The close links between some of the Trust’s founder members and Sheffield City Council’s Planning Service helped build a good relationship from the start. The Council’s then Head of Planning was in favour of the Walk idea. Council staff were able to help the Trust with initial design work, much of it done by enthusiasts working in their spare time.

Once the project was on a firmer financial footing, this “help in kind” from the Council was replaced by competitively tendered contracts. Not being Trustees, Council designers were able to bid for and win two of these contracts. Other support included the Council taking over the client role for one phase of the construction, and absorbing a significant overspend on another, as well as occasional help with issues of land acquisition and access.

For the first ten years of the project, the planning and investment authority for the river corridor was the Sheffield Development Corporation (SDC), one of the new

public-private urban development bodies created by the Conservative government in the 1980s. The Five Weirs Walk was soon a fixture in the SDC’s regeneration plans. One helpful factor was that a leading local industrialist, known to the Trustees through the Chamber of Commerce, who had agreed at the outset to be Patron of the Trust, had subsequently become Deputy Chair of the SDC.

There may not have been an obvious convergence between the Corporation’s business-focused approach to regeneration and the Trust’s vision of a “People’s River”, but a good relationship was nonetheless maintained. Until it was wound up by the incoming Labour government in 1997, the SDC played a major part in funding and implementing the Walk.



The pilot phase

The Trust had originally seen itself as a campaigning organisation. Its role would be to promote the idea of public access to the river, get the Council and Corporation on board, and persuade developers to build the walkway as part of the wider regeneration programme. But it soon became clear that a more hands-on involvement could help to kick-start the process.

So the Trust began fundraising for a pilot phase. Most of the money came from local charitable trusts or individuals, while building materials such as topsoil, stone and steelwork were begged from local companies. The pilot phase was right in the middle of the proposed route, alongside a huge scrap-yard. The yard was not using the riverbank and the manager and staff were sympathetic to the Walk project, especially as some of them were keen anglers or bird-watchers.

Although covered in decades of accumulated rubbish from the yard, this first stretch posed no major engineering challenges. Substantial retaining walls were built using gabion baskets filled with stones by hand, so there was no need for expensive machinery. Construction was taken on by the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV), with an experienced and inspiring site manager leading a team of young people on a job creation scheme. Thanks largely to the site manager's skill, the pilot phase showed how the early design details could be made to work in practice, developing useful techniques which would be applied in later stages.

Despite cold winter weather, the pilot phase was completed early, well within the tight budget. This was a great confidence boost for the Trust and a clear demonstration of what could be achieved.



Opening celebrations for the first phase in 1991

“It was so rewarding. We came in under budget and before time, with a workforce who were really keen.”

*Lisa Judson, Chair,
Five Weirs Walk Trust*



Above: The Royds Mill section, before and after

Right: Constructing the path and its retaining walls

“It was put together as a jigsaw, rather than starting at the top. We started where we could, and built as and when we could.”

*Lisa Judson, Chair,
Five Weirs Walk Trust*

Getting the job done

The success of the first phase encouraged the Trust to continue at the helm. Even so, it faced the daunting prospect of a major infrastructure project along 7.5 km of largely inaccessible and derelict industrial land, which was owned or leased by multiple different companies or individuals.

In areas already scheduled for redevelopment, the Walk was able to benefit from “planning gain” regulations, whereby developers have to undertake social or environmental improvements to mitigate the impact of profit-making projects. This applied in a number of places, including the huge Meadowhall shopping centre development.

One of the project’s highlights was an area known as Salmon Pastures, which was transformed from a post-industrial wasteland to a tiny but important Local Nature Reserve. Now managed by the Sheffield Wildlife Trust, it has a mix of lowland heath, grassland and woodland, and a dazzling array of birds and insects

Where factories were still in full swing along the river, the Trust had a lot of negotiating to do. In one case, the owners were concerned about security, as large quantities of precious metals were kept on site. The Trust got round this by paying for a high quality security fence and CCTV cameras, and the owners were allowed to close this stretch of path from dusk to dawn. The fence was ingeniously disguised as a pergola over which vines and honeysuckle were trained, becoming a distinctive feature of the walk.

Getting agreement from landowners and lease-holders was sometimes fraught with difficulty. As a small charity working on a personal level, the Trust was often able to succeed where a statutory authority would have faced more opposition. But there were times when the Trust needed to draw on all its know-how and connections, as the following two instances demonstrate.



The Tinsley alliance

One of the Trust's highest-profile successes was the campaign for a footbridge over the railway line between the Meadowhall shopping complex and the nearby residential area of Tinsley. This campaign also saw the closest collaboration between the Trust and a neighbourhood-based community group. The massive Meadowhall complex was already on the cards in the 1980s when the Trust was formed. The development was clearly beneficial for the Five Weirs Walk, as it would open up a substantial stretch of the riverside. With the planning authorities committed to the Walk project, construction of this section of path became a condition of Meadowhall's planning permission.

The developers also undertook to construct a footbridge linking the shopping centre to Tinsley. This would connect the Five Weirs Walk to the Trans-Pennine Trail and other long-distance routes. But it would also give Tinsley residents safe access across the railway line, not just to the shops but to the new super-tram network providing fast, easy access to the city centre.



Four years after the shopping centre opened, the bridge had not been built. Workers, shoppers and schoolchildren from Tinsley were still walking dangerously across the railway tracks to reach the tram. The Trust joined forces with Tinsley residents to challenge the continuing delay. They waged a lengthy and very public campaign, supported by local media coverage, and eventually shamed the developers into fulfilling their promises.

“There were kids, and women with pushchairs, walking across the tracks, it was horrific.”

*Mike Wild, ecologist and
Five Weirs Walk Trustee*

“We went to the Tinsley Forum and together we built up outrage. Meadowhall didn't stand a chance!”

*Lisa Judson, Chair,
Five Weirs Walk Trust*



Above: Meadowhall shopping centre, with the river near the top of the picture

Left: The all-important footbridge link at Tinsley

Battle for the Cobweb Bridge

The Trust's ability to harness the support of powerful institutions as well as the general public is amply demonstrated by the long-drawn out struggle over the site of the Cobweb Bridge. The bridge was an innovative, beautiful and eventually award-winning design, which would carry the walkway across the river under the historic Wicker Viaduct.

The land here, on both sides of the river, was owned by the Norfolk Estate but leased and occupied by a largely derelict timber yard. The yard's directors initially agreed to the use of this land for the Walk, but then changed their minds and refused to communicate further. Months of fruitless attempts at negotiation followed, and it looked as though the Trust would lose the promised Millennium Commission funding, which had a strict expiry date.

In the ensuing impasse, the Trust's Committee used their expertise and contacts to the full, drawing on supportive institutions and individuals to get the matter resolved. There were attempts at mediation by influential individuals, including the Council's former Head of Planning and the President of the Sheffield Law Society. They generated a lot of media coverage, aimed at embarrassing and challenging the timber yard directors into resuming negotiations.

Structural detail of the Cobweb Bridge



When all this proved fruitless, the Trust asked the City Council to use its compulsory purchase powers to acquire the land needed for the walkway. Many of the Trust's supporters lobbied their local councillors, resulting in strong cross-party political support, and the Council agreed to use its compulsory purchase powers. However, compulsory purchase is a slow process, and there were still fears that the Millennium funding would be lost.

The winning strategy was a two-pronged manoeuvre. While the Council began proceedings towards a Path Creation Order, the Trust's legal adviser liaised with the Norfolk Estate's managing agent, who was a long-term supporter of the Walk. As a result, the Trust was granted an over-lease to a

key part of the site at a nominal rent – and promptly gave the timber-yard, now its tenant, notice to quit.

The Trust finally bought the plot in question, the only instance in the whole walkway project where outright purchase of land was necessary.



“We recognised right from the very beginning that it would be difficult, because the ownerships and leases of the riverside were many and various.”

*Lisa Judson, Chair,
Five Weirs Walk Trust*

“Each negotiation was a psychological challenge, figuring out what approach would best persuade the owners to give up the land. Different Trustees came into their own depending on the approach needed.”

*Miranda Myers, Legal Adviser,
Five Weirs Walk Trust*

*Construction work on the
Cobweb Bridge*

The future of the river

“The Five Weirs Walk Trust shows what a small group of people with enough determination and ingenuity and a clear vision can achieve for their local environment.”

*Simon Ogden, Secretary,
Five Weirs Walk Trust*

*River Stewardship Company
volunteers carrying out
maintenance work*



From the outset, the Trust saw the Five Weirs Walk as fitting into a bigger picture, with the long-term goal of increased public use and sustained care of the river. The City Council was unwilling to take on overall responsibility for a river which it did not generally own. So as early as 1992, the Trust proposed the creation of a new, permanent agency with this remit.

The Trust was quick to build links with the new Environment Agency, when it was formed in 1996, and to emphasise the growing city-wide consensus on the need for better river stewardship. The creation in 2003 of the Sheffield Waterways Strategy Group, bringing together a range of interests from public, private and voluntary sectors, helped focus attention on the need for a practical solution to future maintenance and management of the river.

A key factor from 2004 on was the involvement of Groundwork Sheffield. Although then a newcomer on the local scene, Groundwork Sheffield was part of an established national network with long experience of environmental regeneration and partnership working. As members of the Waterways Strategy Group, Groundwork Sheffield and the City Council drove forward the Trust's vision and secured initial grant funding for a river stewardship scheme.

This took the form of the non-profit River Stewardship Company – a partnership between Groundwork, Sheffield City Council, the Environment Agency, Sheffield Wildlife Trust, the Five Weirs Walk Trust, the Upper Don Walk Trust and South Yorkshire Forest – which was established in 2007. As well as practical management of the river corridor, the River Stewardship Company runs volunteering projects and outreach work with local communities, and is now being held up as a model for river management across the country.

The Five Weirs Walk Trust will eventually merge with its Friends network, to continue in a lobbying and advisory role as well as actively promoting riverside walks and overall enjoyment of the river. The Friends network is open to anyone to join, and new members are always welcome.

About the URSULA Project

The URSULA project brought together researchers from a number of different disciplines to examine how urban river corridors can be sustainably regenerated in order to maximise the benefits to society, the economy and the environment.

The project recognised that different people have different needs and aspirations, which may be in conflict and can either contribute to or detract from the overall quality of life. URSULA aimed to develop new knowledge about how these demands can be negotiated to develop “win-win” opportunities. By showing how these challenges can be tackled, URSULA’s research will contribute to the regeneration of urban river corridors worldwide.

URSULA combined the expertise of the Universities of Sheffield, Bradford and Durham, as well as external stakeholders and practitioners. The project, which was funded mainly by the Engineering & Physical Sciences Research Council, ran for four years, ending in March 2012.

For more information about the places and issues mentioned in this booklet, please visit:

Five Weirs Walk Trust:
www.fiveweirs.co.uk

Sheffield Wildlife Trust:
www.wildsheffield.com

River Stewardship Company:
www.the-rsc.co.uk

The URSULA project:
www.ursula.ac.uk



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