



BRUCE BENDELL, SARAH WHITMAN,
RT. HON. JACK STRAW, MP, PROFESSOR PETER BATEY

Words Ciara Leeming

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Caught in a trap

In the first of a regular new series, Ciara Leeming talks to local campaigners about their project in Witton Country Park, Blackburn.

IT was 20 years ago that the River Darwen's litter problem began to bother Sir Bernard de Hoghton.

Growing up near Chorley during the 1950s, the landowner knew the river was polluted.

But it was on inheriting the ancestral Hoghton Tower estate that the scale of the crisis became clear. By then, endless rubbish and fly-tipped material were choking the river and its wildlife, and something desperately needed to be done.

He says: "The Darwen's a beautiful river but the waste that comes down it is horrendous. I've seen eight shopping trolleys in one day, and we get syringes, nappies and all kinds of other nasties.

"I came up with the idea of a litter trap and did some drawings."

But it wasn't until 2004 that Sir Bernard's inspiration moved off the drawing board and into reality, when Sarah Whitman and chairman Bruce Bendell of Action Darwen Valley took up the cause and began to gather support around the idea.

"We've already had interest from Edinburgh, the Manchester Ship Canal and Thames Water."

Sarah says: "When I started to talk to people about the idea of a litter trap, I was inundated with letters of support. People from all over the area who love the river wrote to say what a good idea it was. The overwhelming response we had helped us to secure funding for the project."

The necessary funding – some £114,000 – was granted by the Peter Moores Foundation, Biffaward, the Healthy Waterways Trust and the Environment Agency, allowing detailed plans to be put into operation.

The trap, at Witton Country Park, Blackburn, was completed in April, and is the first of its kind in Britain. Other authorities are now considering following suit. Created by Leeds firm OPEC, the design draws on the company's expertise in oil pollution control. Two moving booms, stretched across the river channel, deflect

debris of all sizes into a large metal basket, specially imported from America. The litter can then be removed and, where possible, recycled.

As the river rises and falls – the Darwen is prone to flash floods – so too does the basket, which even at its lowest remains raised slightly off the riverbed to allow fish to pass underneath.

The trap can remove up to 100 transit vans worth of rubbish from the Darwen each year. But the ultimate aim is to draw attention to – and eliminate – the litter problem in the first place, so the system can one day be removed.

"The main message we want to get across is that litter belongs in the bin, not in the river," says Sarah. The trap's position, close to the park entrance, was deliberately chosen so that visitors would see the scale of the litter problem.

OPEC managing director James Ilsey believes the concept could be adapted to suit other UK waterways: "It can't be done on rivers where there is traffic, but litter is a problem everywhere, so other areas are watching closely. We've already had interest from Edinburgh, the Manchester Ship Canal and Thames Water."

The project continues to evolve as time goes on. A lockable skip will be put on site, and waste stored – both to let it dry and to cut down on transport.

Blackburn MP Jack Straw, who officially opened the project in June, is impressed. "Our rivers are a vitally important feature of the landscape and dealing with litter and fly-tipping is vital to both the habitat for wildlife and the public amenity," he says.

"The location of this litter trap is also particularly helpful as the river flows through a country park, which is visited by thousands of local residents every year.

"I am sure that it will help to make the River Darwen an asset to the area."

BEST & WORST

BEST

"We chose the right people to work with," says Sarah Whitman, coordinator of Action Darwen Valley. "There was a lot of goodwill and passion involved in the project. If OPEC and our environmental consultants, APEM, had worked to rule when it came to charging for their time, we wouldn't have had enough money to make the trap a reality."

WORST

"We underestimated the weather," says Sarah. "Funding restrictions meant we had to start the installation process in November but we didn't get the trap operational until April. We didn't anticipate the impact of bad weather, and weren't prepared for such long delays."



THE DARWEN LITTER TRAP