

Living River project review

The Pewsey Avon Trail - a long distance walking route using existing paths and public rights of way

Problem

One of the current threats to the natural heritage of River Avon is a lack of public engagement. This is partly due to limited and intermittent public access to the river.

A key objective of the Living River project was to enhance existing access to the river and one of our access projects was the development of the Pewsey Avon trail.

Goals

- To develop a long distance (28 mile) walking route by linking existing rights of way
- To improve access to and increase awareness of the river Avon by promoting a river themed route.
- To actively engage a variety of stakeholders in the creation of the route.
- To demonstrate that improved managed access can have positive benefits for the natural environment

Results

- A new long distance walking route which links the upper Avon valley with the existing well used Avon Valley path south of Salisbury
- Increased public awareness of the river Avon
- new and easier opportunities for people to access the river



The challenge

The challenge was to develop a new walking route in the Avon catchment that would increase access to and awareness of the river system, without causing problems for landowners and managers of the River Avon,

Improved access is likely to result in improved public understanding of the river environment and its management. However there is often uncertainty and even mistrust about initiatives that encourage access – even on existing routes - from landowners and river managers who have had bad experiences of access to their land or river.

In 2007 the Living River project worked with communities on the River Nadder who wanted to develop a long distance walking route from the source of the Nadder to Salisbury. This was not successful. The key issues that arose were:

1. Misunderstanding of who was responsible for what, especially in relation to consultation with landowners.
2. No clear timetable
3. Limited communication with others who would have been affected by the route
4. Misunderstanding/misinformation about what was proposed
5. Uncertainty about the best way to promote/ mark the route

Although that was a disappointment, lessons were learnt which we applied when working on the Pewsey Avon Trail, a successful walking trail that was developed in 2010.

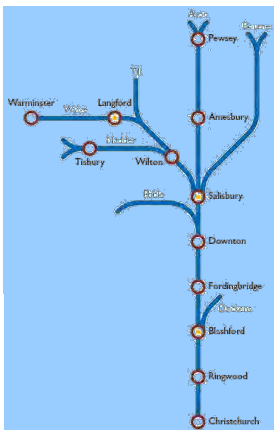
The solution

The Pewsey Avon Trail is an example of an access project which has been welcomed by local communities. The Living River project was approached very early in the development of the Pewsey Avon Trail and we were able to offer advice based on our previous experience, and other elements of our work.

The creation of this route as a marked and publicised trail relied on the goodwill of landowners so early in the process we encouraged the promoters of the proposed trail to engage with landowners and river managers. Pewsey Parish Council contacted all the parishes and councils on the proposed route through their existing networks. The major landowners (including the MOD) and fishing clubs were informed through the Wiltshire Fisheries Association whose members had expressed concerns about the earlier proposals on the Nadder. This proactive approach and what was seen as our ability to learn from our earlier mistakes went down well. Another important consultee was Wiltshire Council's Rights of Way team who would be managing the marked route in the long term, and would have to deal with issues raised by the route's users.

From the start we were very clear about the role that we could play and we agreed our responsibilities with Pewsey Parish Council. We also set a realistic timetable. These shared expectations meant that each partner was committed to their tasks and clear about what they had to do. Collectively we were ready for the setbacks we did encounter so morale didn't drop.

An important success factor was that we engaged expertise from an early stage. To ensure that the supporting materials were good and well promoted we involved a publisher who has produced many walks booklets before. In turn they put us in touch with an excellent walk route writer who sought out local knowledge to produce a route that the Parish Council, landowners and other stakeholders were happy with. Because of his early involvement the publisher also helped make this a financially viable project by advising on production runs, taking a financial stake themselves and seeking innovative publishing solutions when presented with problems.



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The River Avon is a unique part of the heritage and landscape of England. It is one of a number of Chalk Rivers that follow the band of chalk that sweeps across England from the north east to the south west. They occur nowhere else in the UK and are very rare in the world as a whole.

The importance of the River Avon and its tributaries is recognised by its national, European and international wildlife designations.

The current look and character of the river and river valley has been shaped by a long history of human use and support a unique variety and abundance of wildlife not found in other English rivers.

The Outcome

The Pewsey Avon Trail is now established as a walking route from Pewsey to Salisbury. It links with the already very popular Avon Valley Path from Salisbury to Christchurch and means that you can follow the Avon from source to sea.

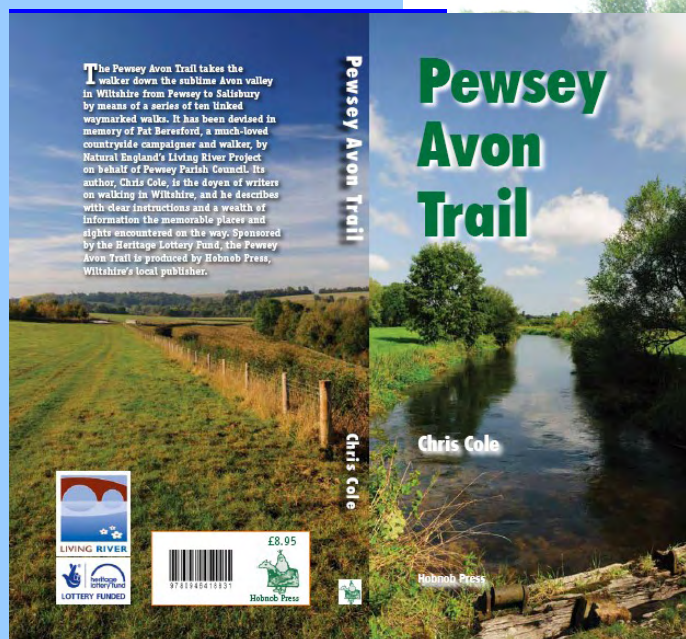
These routes increase the accessibility of the river Avon, by providing a clear route on marked rights of way, with interpretation at important points on the river's journey. They will increase local awareness of existing access to the river and its natural environment.

The project was managed done in an extremely cost effective way through the collaboration with Hobnob press, who were also happy to work with us on the messages that we wanted to communicate about the heritage and value of the river Avon.

The Pewsey Avon trail project generated good publicity from local, regional and national press. It has already received very good feedback from both individuals and organisations using the trail.

Lessons:

- Clearly define roles and responsibilities for the partners
- Consult stakeholders and interested parties early on in the project development, when you can take on their views



The Pewsey Avon Trail book is available from many local bookshops as well as through the publisher hobnob press. www.hobnobpress.co.uk

For more information - www.livingriver.org.uk