

Turning the Wharf Stream team's dream into reality

Words: ELIZABETH ROGERS
Photos courtesy: DAVID MILLER

EYNHAM, an Oxfordshire village not far from the River Thames, now has a greater claim to be described as a 'riverside village,' thanks to the efforts of a small group of people who have opened up a stream from the river that runs much closer to the heart of the village.

The Wharf Stream team, led by David Miller who has stalwart fellow volunteers in Wilf Wilkins and Richard Higgins, has with other helpers from the local community now provided a launch point there for canoes and small boats.

Joining the River Thames at a point about 200m downstream from Swinford Lock, the Wharf Stream is 900m long.

The idea began five years ago, and David Miller wrote to Eynsham Parish Council suggesting that this waterway that had deteriorated into what was then little more than a rubbish-filled stream should be opened up. To do so would give the village back its small boat access to the river, he pointed out.

There was encouragement from the parish council, and the team got their project under way.

"We set to work to clear the fallen trees, the weeds and the bank encroachment and the rubbish that had been there for years," David Miller relates. Neighbouring landowners helped: a manufacturing company moved the larger trees out of the water and Oxfordshire County Council pollarded the overhanging trees from its own land.

"Our village did not have a small craft launching point – everything else being privately owned and the nearest giving public access was five miles away," he explains.

"But now canoes and small boats can launch here. There is a footbridge which restricts cruisers, but one small one managed to get through this summer."

The work that has been carried out can have a lasting effect on this waterway. The stream is now the same level as the river, so no longer in danger of drying out.

The first mention of a wharf at Eynsham was in 1302. "So it really is part of our history," says David Miller.

Horse-drawn barges used it when taking stone, and hay as cattle-feed, along the waterway network and when bringing back coal for the householders of the village.



Last of the summer wine! The Wharf Stream team, from left: Richard Higgins, David Miller, Wilf Wilkins and Trevor Johnson, landlord of The Talbot Inn.

The Oxford Canal Company, an operator which went into liquidation in 1922, carried out some widening of the stream.

David Miller, Wilf Wilkins and Richard Higgins have been the main workforce, but other local people have joined them on frequent occasions. Interest in the project was raised when David gave a presentation in the village about the benefits that the stream provides.

The Wharf Stream Team needed a boat from which to deal with weed growing away from the banks, and one came to them through the landlord of the Talbot Inn, which stands streamside. He had discovered a disused boat, and the *Rex* served a very useful purpose for three or four years.

When a replacement was needed, a request was placed on the local recycling website and resulted in a donation of a boat, the *Ollie Dog*, with an outboard motor.

"After five years we have got where we want to be," says David Miller. But this is an ongoing project and the team meets once – sometimes twice – a week to carry on the good work."

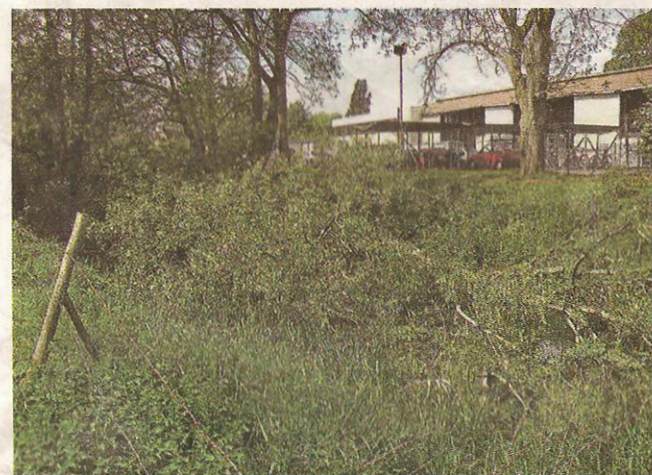
The stream has been very beneficial for wildlife and from some of the reclaimed wood an otter holt has been made – there having been evidence of the presence of otters. Kingfishers are regular visitors.

Non-boaters can enjoy the surroundings by using the public footpath that runs on the west bank of the stream, and at the Talbot Inn the landlord has erected raised staging which overlooks the water.

An 'archaeological' sweep of the water proved interesting. Using wet suits the team investigated its depths – but came up with only such items as a car seat, tyres and a water tank. "But we had fun doing it," says David.

"We enjoy what we do. It's fun to go down to the stream and we are in good company. It's good for our minds and it's a challenge."

The next idea on which they will be working is to provide an installation on which the history of the wharf stream is available for visitors to read.



Before work began in 2007, the stream is barely visible beneath a fallen tree.



What a transformation – the stream in 2011.