

Stratford Guild February 2023 – The Salisbury River Park Project

For the first time that most of us can remember, we had a full house, and turned away a few unlucky folks. It seems that everyone was keen to find out about the mess and disruption that has been created around the central car-park and other places.

Andy Wallis of the Environment Agency and Dave Milton of Wiltshire Council didn't disappoint, as they gave a clear and pretty extensive description, and I hope I can give a flavour of the story here.

It all started with the Russian Novichok attack in March 2018. Central government decided to help Salisbury recover and pledged a large sum of money to help, and as a result the Salisbury Central Area Framework was formed, with the River Park project as one of the major elements.

The primary objective of the project was to improve flood protection for the city, by creating new earth-banks to contain the water.

The secondary objective was to make the river route a much more visitor friendly part of the city, encouraging more visitors and increased visitor spend, to help local businesses.

The third objective was to improve environmental and conservation features through the city.

Along with these three objectives, there are three areas where most of the work is being done:

Fisherton Recreation ground is the area on the other side of the river opposite the Leisure Centre, where new foot / cycle paths, wetlands and a wildflower meadow will all be created along with a new earth-bank which is the first stage of the flood protection.

Ashley Road Open Space is the area opposite the fire station, where there will be more earth-banks and a new children's play area, and the open grassy space will be retained to allow car-boot sales etc. The existing Crack Willow trees are in a very poor state and will be replaced by new Weeping Willows, which are more suitable for this type of location.

The Central Car Park has been the focus of most of the work (and most of the problems). The most significant change will be the removal of the large metal barrier in the river close to the small car-park by the coach park, to be replaced by a series of small naturalistic weirs which will allow Atlantic salmon to get further up the river to spawning grounds. The river section down towards Sainsbury is being remodelled and the banks will be a mixture of improved environmental habitat and a leisure

space with benches and grassy areas. This is the area that was drained and covered in black plastic, and has been the focus of a lot of wildlife relocation effort. For example – water voles have thrived here (very endangered elsewhere in the country) and there was a two-month window last year, after the voles started to become active but before they started to breed, when they could be trapped and relocated to near Ringwood. However, the trappers were not allowed into the river, as that would disturb the fish on their migration, so the fish had to be captured and relocated at a different time. There will be a lot of trees planted (including some mature ones) under this scheme, and a maintenance contract is in place to ensure the careful checking of the trees for 5 years, so they are not just planted and forgotten.

Some underground hazards had to be negotiated – many of us remember the old open-air swimming pool, which was buried in the site and had to be removed. There is also a road bridge which needs to be removed but happened to have the main internet fibre cable for virtually the whole of Salisbury, under it.

The weather has also been unhelpful – drought conditions last autumn, then floods, and now an unusually dry period again. Let's not even mention Covid – just at the time when much of the public consultation had to take place.

Andy recognised, and apologised for the misleading signage in the car park but this has now been rectified. He also explained that the railway tunnel footpath had to be closed although there is a way to walk from the other side of the tunnel into the car park, it is not a legal “Right of Way” - so pedestrians had to be directed to Castle Street.

They currently expect the work to be complete by this time next year.

All in all, a much more extensive project than most of us realised, with a vast number of interlinked (and sometimes conflicting) factors to be juggled. All very impressive.

Richard Death