

**Scrutiny Inquiry Panel; Protecting, preserving and promoting the River Itchen**  
**Meeting 16 February 2023; Recreation, community use and access**  
**Presentation by Graham Linecar, Southampton Commons and Parks Protection Society**  
**(SCAPPS)**

Southampton is a coastal city and a thriving port. Port security unfortunately, but understandably, means restricted public access to the water. Only a small part of the Itchen frontage is within the Port itself (in ABP ownership) but safety considerations mean restricted public access on other stretches where there are working wharves and marine industry. Elsewhere there are stretches of the Itchen in Southampton you can get to, and enjoy being by, water, but long stretches with no access.

SCAPPS, long established, campaigns for protection and promotion of Southampton's parks, footpaths and 'green' spaces. Benefit for physical health and mental well-being of being in 'green' surroundings is now widely appreciated and recognised. Personal experience supports the conclusion that benefit is enhanced when the 'green' is by 'blue', green spaces alongside water – the attraction of moving water, reflections of light and sky, the ever-changing view. Along the Itchen, try to find more places where people can enjoy being by the river, not just access but space and opportunity to sit and enjoy being there. Safety and security an anxiety - there are places with public access, but some people don't feel safe using them. They look (well, unfortunately some are) neglected and are perceived as attracting anti-social behaviour. Many people feel insecure when paths are overgrown and they cannot see who is around. Paths need to be maintained with clear lines of sight, so other can see you, and you know who else is nearby. Keeping riverside sites and paths well-maintained and encouraging more people to use them helps reduce feelings of insecurity and problems from fly-tipping. Balance against that keeping some places where it's possible to feel connected with nature, to feel away from the busy urban surroundings. Plus sport and leisure activity on the water itself. Various outdoor and water sports activity centres. Boat clubs. Rowing clubs. Marinas and leisure moorings. Seven 'public slipways' on the Itchen where can carry in and launch small craft; not all are well-maintained. Other places not formally designated (can give rise to issues with vehicles wanting access, eg Woodmill).

Itchen, 'taken for granted' but gives identity/sense of place. Strong element in Southampton landscape. Views from bridges. Views across valley from higher ground, (Peartree Green, rising up from Bitterne Triangle).

**Take a trip from where the Itchen enters City to Southampton Water.** Gaters Mill, though A27 near, semi-natural, can get to river. Clear, fast flowing chalk stream, verdant banks. White Swan. Mansbridge, historic bridge and Itchen Navigation, swimming in river. E bank, Riverside Park, one of Southampton's much appreciated and much used bigger parks with range of leisure and sports provision. Riverside path, still semi-natural feeling landscape, fast flowing, clear water. Popular with fishermen (registered as 'village green') and for wild swimming. W bank, historic Woodmill and site of last downstream lock on the Itchen Navigation. The cafe at Woodmill is well-used, with customers enjoying sitting outside with views down the Itchen – one of regrettably few such facilities with waterside tables.

There is at Woodmill, South Stoneham an almost forgotten Capability Brown landscape, now in the divided ownership of University and City Council. South Stoneham House and immediate grounds are owned by the University of Southampton, and standing empty. The Capability Brown landscape extends across the Monks Brook, taking in the Fish Pond and Salmon Pool, now used by the Southampton Water Activities Centre. The Activities Centre has a launching platform for kayaks on the Itchen. SCAPPS has tried to encourage the two landowners, University and City Council, to manage the area in a way which would recreate at least the spirit of the Capability Brown landscape, of lawn sweeping down from the House to the Monks Brook with views across the Fish Pond and Itchen to trees on rising ground the other side of the valley. SCAPPS remains anxious about how the University intends using the House, and what its plans are for the garden and grounds.

**Below Woodmill**, change in landscape character because tidal, but also more activity, on the water and along the banks. E bank, Riverside Park path and still fairly natural 'feel'. W bank, University Watersports Centre. Scope for increased natural management (does University ownership extend to sewage treatment works?). Mid way through Riverside Park, increased provision for formal recreation. W bank, increasing residential, starting with a short section of riverside greenspace at Saltmead. Increasing water sport use, canoes, kayaks, paddleboards, dinghy sailing. St Denys Boat Club. Feeding swans from pontoon. One idea SCAPPS put forward is footbridge at Saltmead giving traffic-free access from north Portswood into Riverside Park.

**Cobden Bridge**, landscape/identity. Upstream E bank, S end of Riverside Park (on reclaimed land). Losing the 'natural' feel. Below Cobden Bridge, E bank no access, just glimpses from Whitworth Road. Railway bridge, feature in views up and down stream. W bank, short stretches of unconnected and difficult-to-find riverfront green space. Built development presses in on both banks. River widens, large area of water at high tide, big landscape feature. E bank, Bitterne Manor Park, an underused and under appreciated park with, unfortunately, a somewhat neglected feel. Otherwise, developed, increasing number of moorings. W bank, first of the designated 'public slipways', and a small amenity space, Priory Road Hard. Planning permission for river-front redevelopment secured a path linking from the Hard to the riverside boardwalk by the railway from Horseshoe Bridge. Sweeping views up and down river. Poor quality environment on path by Mount Pleasant Industrial Estate and Inland Homes development.

**Northam Bridge**, a big change in character. Northam Bridge restricts navigation, below, commercial shipping and wharves and marina berths and moorings. River widens, and bends, hence dramatic views over wide expanse of water at high tide. What are ABP's plans for more moorings? The W, Northam, bank is mainly commercial wharves. But the E is a surprise. Below the Kemps Quay marina and moorings, the railway cuts-off the river from the suburban development on the rising ground (Athelstan Road, up to Bitterne). Information to Panel already about Chessel Bay LNR and nature conservation importance of the inter-tidal mud. SCAPPS would like to see formalising, in legal rights and in physical provision, of extension from downstream end of the Chessel Bay green space of a path, perhaps part a boardwalk, to link to the top end of Hazel Road, giving a continuous pedestrian route from Northam Bridge to Woolston. Hazel Road, unlikely to secure access to the waterfront through redevelopment of more than a minority of the industrial sites, even though only some are marine industries, so little hope of a continuous waterfront path.

SCAPPS welcomes and supports Local Plan policy of requiring public access to the waterfront when proposals come forward for redevelopment of wharves along the Northam, west, bank, and designing in such a way that keeps opportunity to link them one to another to give continuous public access. We ask that is not interpreted as requiring only a narrow riverfront pedestrian walkway; it needs also to include soft and hard landscaping creating an attractive place for dawdling, for sitting and for enjoying looking-out across the river.

**Below Itchen Bridge**, W bank Ocean Village, a sad story of lost opportunity, waterfront difficult of access, some closed off. E bank, fragmented access from Itchen Ferry downstream under the Itchen Bridge. Could more be done to promote awareness of historic connections: the ferry, classic late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century racing yachts built and operated from yards here, Supermarine and flying boats and Spitfire? Scope for signing to link-up what is 'open'; sometimes difficult to know what is private and what is open to public access. SCAPPS and others have pressed to ensure development (including Centenary Quay) includes waterfront walkways. Finally, one more of Southampton's prime green spaces, Weston Shore; so much more could be made of Southampton's only 'beach' and 'seafront'.

**Some concluding thoughts.** Stretches most used are continuous routes, paths that connect from one place to another. Care and maintenance matters. Some people feel insecure on the boardwalk and on past Mount Pleasant Industrial Estate and the Inland Homes development because it looks and feels neglected. High quality landscaping and regular maintenance encourages use. The more people using a path, the less the likelihood of anti-social behaviour.

There are then the several riverfront greenspaces which are not connected, are not part of a continuous route. Although perhaps known and used by locals, some seem underused, and look neglected. Planning policy requiring redevelopment of riverside sites to provide public access to the waterfront will increase their number. We need to think about how to heighten awareness of these sites. In some cases it is not immediately obvious if it is a 'public' or private space, and means of access is hidden-away. Signing could help show links one to another, to encourage more use, and perhaps there is scope for Friends' Groups to become active in care and maintenance.