



The other Iron Bridge

Ciara Leeming reports on the six-year campaign to save a Marple landmark.

Peter Clarke was walking his dog when he noticed the state of Marple's iron bridge.

The Grade II listed, Georgian structure – which spans the River Goyt in the Cheshire town's Brabyns Park was declared unsafe in 1991 and had fallen into serious disrepair.

As half the team behind the campaigning community website *Marple UK*, Clarke – also landlord of the Ring o'Bells – was ideally placed to lead calls for action.

Six years and more than half a million pounds later, campaigners are finally seeing their efforts pay off. The 194-year-old carriage bridge is being renovated and will reopen before Christmas.

Clarke, who fought alongside friend and website partner Mark Whittaker and pensioner Ann Hearle, chair of Marple Local History Society, says: "We were looking for a campaign to direct our energies into and agreed on the bridge.

"We had no idea how long it would take or how much it would cost. We thought the work would perhaps cost £50,000 – but it ended up costing more than ten times that figure."

"Pub quizzes helped raise £16,000."

Built using iron from the Salford Iron Works, the bridge provided access to what was then the Brabyns Estate from the nearby village of Compstall. Few of its kind remain in Britain.

It survived with a minimum of maintenance until the structural assessment in 1991. Then, a temporary Bailey bridge was built across to take weight off the structure. It remained for 16 years.

Clarke and Whittaker used the local press and their website to raise their concerns. As the issue picked up momentum, they formed the Iron Bridge Restoration group, with Hearle – a font of local knowledge – and Stockport council.

First, they needed to find out what was wrong with the structure. A project planning grant application was made to the Heritage Lottery Fund, which put £30,000 towards the survey and design solutions. Meanwhile, campaigners set about raising funds.

Clarke wrote to local businesses and groups to ask for support, and held regular quiz nights at his pub. He

and Whittaker did a six-day sponsored walk from Brabyns Park to Ironbridge in Shropshire – home of the world's first iron-made bridge. These and other events took the total to £16,000 in five years.

The project was delayed when a gas main – supplying the whole of Compstall was found to run buried across the bridge. Eventually, however, the renovation contract was put out to tender and won by Tameside firm Dew Construction, subject to a successful grant application.

The group applied to the Heritage Lottery Fund in January 2007 and learned in June that they had been awarded £424,700. An additional £59,000 came from Stockport council's transportation team and Marple area committee.

Tim Boylan, a council official who managed the bid, says: "The local campaigners were naturally interested in restoration of the bridge, but Heritage Lottery has got different priorities. As well as restoration, it requires improved access and learning, and the grant was towards all these things."

To fulfil these requirements, information boards and listening posts will be placed near the bridge, and site access improved. An exhibition will be displayed at Stockport Story Museum.

This summer, the area around the iron bridge was cleared of vegetation and readied for the work. The Bailey bridge was finally lifted off with a crane in September prompting cheers from watching campaigners. Next, scaffolding and protective sheeting was put up around the structure, and the restoration began.

The site will be unveiled in December, with an official opening next summer. A production company will make a corporate documentary and short film about the project.

Hearle, who moved to Marple 37 years ago, says: "It was a magic moment when the Bailey bridge came off. There were times

L-R Peter Clarke (The Marple Website)
Cllr. David Goddard (Leader of Stockport Council) **Ann Hearle** (Chair of Marple Local History Society)
Nicola Marshall (Heritage Lottery Fund project officer) **Mark Whittaker** (The Marple Website)

along the way when we all felt a bit depressed and wondered if we would ever succeed.

"But we've lost so much in Marple – all kinds of buildings have been demolished – that we just weren't prepared to let the bridge disappear as well."

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"Heritage Lottery told us afterwards that one of our biggest strengths was that this was a real community project," says Clarke. "They liked the way we had involved so many aspects of the community, and kept them informed on how it was progressing."

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Clarke says: "We could have thought bigger. A cottage next to the bridge was on the market for a long time because it had no access rights. For perhaps £200,000 it could have been bought and turned into a perfect visitor centre. We recently discovered that Heritage Lottery funds can pay for buildings and that we could have applied for the money."