

# A River that Changed

# the World

INTERNATIONAL THIESS RIVERPRIZE 1999  
MERSEY RIVER

## Walter Menzies

CHIEF EXECUTIVE, MERSEY BASIN CAMPAIGN

“Lord Heseltine, Secretary of State for the Environment at the time of the Toxteth riots, took the degradation of the Mersey basin personally. For him it was an absolute disgrace to civil society – he was genuinely saddened that the river that gave life to that part of England was being ignored for the huge and valuable resource it was. Heseltine was a visionary, and he really initiated and drove the ambitious and long-term aims of the Mersey Basin Campaign.

Having the support of the government right from the beginning has been incredibly valuable. The Campaign is fortunate to have received political and financial support from both Conservative and Labour governments, and this has enabled us to influence and bring about change to achieve our objectives. Strong active links with the region’s research universities have also given us an evidence base that is underpinned by sound science. This has been useful at every stage of the Campaign. We’ve made real headway in improving river basin quality, encouraging sustainable development, and particularly at engaging individuals, communities and businesses in the process.

I can’t over-emphasise the significance of partnerships. Recognising that cleaning up the Mersey Basin is beyond the scope of any one organisation or sector, we’ve always been committed to working across the public, private, voluntary, community and academic sectors. As a result, we have often been described as a pioneer and exemplar of how partnerships work. MBC is unique in the world, and within the UK there are no other partnerships that are directly comparable. For this reason, there are no ready-made ‘tools’ that can simply be lifted and applied to our programs.

We are somewhat unique in that we are active at different spatial levels: global, European, national, regional and local. All are related and important to achieving the best possible outcome. We have gained a great deal and learnt a lot from trans-national cooperation with partners in several European countries. We’ve also developed a sophisticated communications strategy, and have found that these communication efforts are critical when working at this many levels. It is no good being correct and worthy, if you are also dull and ignored.

We have been proactive in maintaining a high profile and a good reputation through this communications and media work. For instance, we have been quick to experiment with blogging and social networking. Last year, around World Environment Day, we invented ‘Sammy the Salmon’ whose epic journey down the Mersey captured the regional and local media’s attention. In everything we do, this communication element is taken very seriously. It is most definitely not an optional extra.

To successfully sustain the campaign, it has been essential to maintain the active support of the leading partners – including government, regional bodies, the Environment Agency and United Utilities (the water company). This is all



The Mersey River at Liverpool joining the Irish Sea

“Juvenile salmon have been found in the upper reaches of the river for the first time in living memory.”



“Sustainable development is a powerful unifying idea at the heart of everything we do.”

Art installation “Another Place” by Anthony Gormley, Crosby Beach near Liverpool

## THE MERSEY BASIN CAMPAIGN

In the summer of 1981, two weeks of serious rioting, looting and arson drew attention to the economic, social and environmental decline of the city of Liverpool and its River Mersey. Two hundred years of abuse and neglect had transformed the river into an open sewer, devoid of biodiversity. The unprecedented civil unrest shook the Thatcher Government, whose intervention led to a series of radical and innovative regeneration initiatives. The Mersey Basin Campaign (MBC) was founded soon after, in 1985, with the support of local and regional governments, as well as public, private, voluntary, community and academic sectors. A commitment of all partners to 'make good the degradation of centuries' led to the establishment of an ambitious, long-term plan to restore the Mersey river and estuary, and rejuvenate its surroundings.



Deckhand Barney Easdown on one of the Mersey ferries

about demonstrating value for money, relevance and professionalism. Together with our partners, we have achieved significant improvements in water infrastructure, major upgrades to sewage infrastructure, and the introduction of strict environmental legislation. Many rivers in the Mersey Basin are now cleaner than they have been since the end of the industrial revolution. Porpoises, grey seals, and fish have returned to formerly polluted stretches of the river, and juvenile salmon have been found in the upper reaches of the river for the first time in living memory.

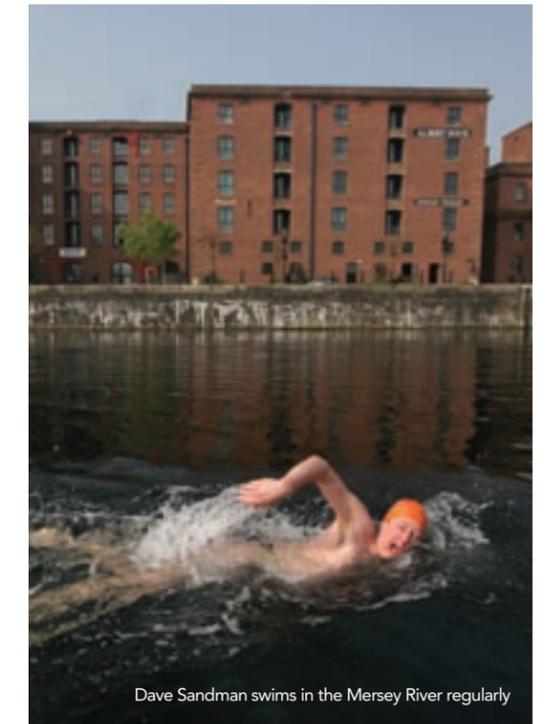
Engagement is very important to us – people are much more important than structures. We work with our communities in many ways: we have locally based staff implementing practical projects, and we organise events such as local forums, celebrations and awards presentations that reach different sectors. Societal and institutional change during the life of the Campaign is something that we have recognised and adapted to so as not to lose momentum. We've had a flexible approach, but maintained consistency in terms of our objectives. At the conceptual level, sustainable development is a powerful unifying idea at the heart of everything we do.

Moving forward, the Campaign has identified several key challenges to address. The industrial era has left a legacy of derelict land that lies alongside our rivers, canals or coast. Many 'heavily modified watercourses' require additional intervention if they are to reach the water quality standards and 'good ecological status' required by the European Water Framework Directive. There are site-specific water quality issues as well. Despite the overall increases in water quality, certain sections of the Mersey Basin still present water quality challenges. For example, the River Weaver in central Cheshire and the Manchester Ship Canal were at the heart of the industrial revolution in the North-West region and need much more attention if they are to be restored.

Public perception of the watercourses of the Mersey Basin still lags behind reality. Some people continue to believe that the rivers and canals of the Mersey Basin are heavily polluted. This issue is often manifest in the amount of litter and debris discarded into the region's watercourses. This negative characteristic makes our rivers and canals appear to be more polluted than they actually are. On the other hand, developers and investors realise that the rivers are now an asset rather than a liability, and new developments invariably maximise the value of waterside locations.

The River Mersey suffered over 200 years of abuse and neglect. The experience of the Mersey Basin Campaign has shown that organisations and individuals need to be involved at all levels. Small-scale community projects are equally as valid in terms of reaching the objectives as large-scale capital investment programs. Many lessons have been learnt, including the importance of building partnerships, since cleaning up the Mersey Basin has been far beyond the scope of any one organisation or sector.

Above all, I feel that the Mersey Basin Campaign has attempted sustainable development, recognising the interrelationships between the environment, the economy and society. I don't know a better idea around which to organise lasting change.”



Dave Sandman swims in the Mersey River regularly