

Memories of the Mersey Basin Campaign by Ian Gilfoyle

It seems like only yesterday that I was one of the speakers at the conference that launched the Mersey Basin Campaign at the Lord Daresbury hotel. It was in fact the 18th March 1983, but I can still remember the buzz of excitement as each of us presented 25 year 'wish lists' for our particular area of interest. We were there because Michael Heseltine had grasped the opportunity to clean up the Mersey which he believed needed 'treatment on a massive and unprecedented scale'; a task that would not be completed in less than a generation. This was a remarkably bold step for someone whose business background was in publishing where deadlines are expressed in days rather than months or years, and certainly not decades.

In 1983 I was the Deputy County Planner for Cheshire so my area of interest was the Mersey's Southern Catchment Area, containing 500 miles of river and waterside, including major tributaries like the Weaver, the Dane, and the Bollin. Away from the banks of the Mersey and the Ship Canal, there were then many sceptics in Cheshire, especially in the deep south, who urged us not to get involved. They were convinced that it was a Merseyside problem and that all was ecologically well with rural Cheshire with its black and white cows and black and white buildings.

This argument conveniently overlooked the fact that unless we dealt with the slurry and parlour washings from our black and white cows and unless we reclaimed the land made derelict by those industrial processes that had helped to make Cheshire prosperous then the campaign objectives would never be achieved. Worse still, around Northwich there were riverside areas that were doubly-derelict. Here land had collapsed following underground salt extraction and then industrial waste had been tipped into the resulting depressions. So I took my lead from Tom King, Chairman of the Daresbury conference, who urged us to 'accentuate the positive – eliminate the negative'

For many years the Campaign's progress was heavily linked to European funding, but as that started to wane we again owe a debt of gratitude to Michael Heseltine. He had

returned to the role of Secretary of State for the Environment, and launched the Business Foundation thereby opening up new partnerships and new funding opportunities. Reminding us that campaigns are fundamentally about people, he was truly amazed that so much progress could be made by the focussing of minds on solutions rather than problems.

After the first nine years scientific measures of water quality were encouraging, but as the campaign's first Chairman, Sir John Tavare, said on many occasions – 'it's only when people see the water getting clearer and the fish returning to the rivers that they will believe that the clean-up is really working'. As Sir John handed over the Chairmanship to Brian Alexander the visible results were sufficiently promising to encourage the development of River Valley Initiatives (RVIs), or 'mini-campaigns' as Brian saw them.

A cascade of fish launched the Weaver RVI on the 1st March 1994. The lone fisherman on the opposite bank 'thought he'd died and gone to heaven'! Because of past neglect, opportunities for waterside regeneration on the Weaver abound. By tapping into local enthusiasm and ownership, this RVI, and others, added a new dimension to the Campaign enabling people to make a real difference to their home environment by creating a vision and then helping to achieve it by joining hands with others.

The Campaign's way of working with schools and young people is a success story in its own right. For me, children were the highlight of both the 1993 and 1996 Chairman's Conferences. Under the banner of 'Not on my back yard', Canon Burrows primary school gave a thought-provoking presentation with a selection of songs to the 1993 conference whilst in 1996 the Doodfield school from Marple dramatically demonstrated how local businesses and local people needed to work together to solve problems. At the same event, encouraged by Felicity Goodey, young people gave us a fresh angle on how they could be more involved and urged us to discard our 'grey-suit' image.

John Gummer braved a blizzard to mark the start of the Campaign's tenth anniversary with the launch of the Water Detectives River Search '95 competition. He arrived at North West Water's more formal event absolutely drenched. So it was perhaps even

more impressive that he spoke about the scale of the Campaign with passion and knowledge, and without the aid of a civil service prepared speech. The tour of North West Water's impressive laboratories, which followed John Gummer's talk, served to remind us that water quality our top priority. We are now well on the way to achieving the ambitious target that all Mersey Basin rivers should be clean enough to support fish by 2010.

The halfway stage of the Campaign was marked by the completion of the Merseyside Interceptor Sewer – the 'third Mersey tunnel'. The real significance of this hidden asset can only be appreciated by visiting the truly impressive Sandon Dock wastewater treatment works. Waterside improvements are much more varied and visible with the recently opened Lowry Centre raising awareness of the truly magnificent transformation of the surrounding Salford Quays.

We have indeed been fortunate in attracting the regular attention of Government Ministers, receiving funding from Europe, and reaping the benefits of major investments by the region's businesses. But at the heart of our campaign are the networks of people, young and old, from all walks of life who, by getting their feet wet and their hands dirty, have demonstrated how to 'accentuate the positive' and 'eliminate the negative'. To me, it is the chemistry of these people, involved in something they enjoy and cherish, that makes the campaign special.

Under Joe Dwek's chairmanship with the world-wide River Prize to our credit we are now well into the second half of the Campaign with a new manifesto and new challenges; preserving the best of what we have but expanding into new areas with gathering momentum. It has been such a privilege to be involved in such an impressive and distinctive initiative right from the start and, God willing, I plan to continue participating until 2010 and beyond.

Ian Gilfoyle

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