

**Application form: Cherishing the rivers to which we belong**

**Each year the Prix Charles Ritz rewards a trophy and a cheque for works undertaken with devotion and commitment by individuals/communities who make a difference to the rivers they cherish. This year, the Fario Club, London, has established the Prix Charles Ritz award for England and Wales, to honour projects here helping to preserve our rivers for future generations.**

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| **Individual/ Club / Organisation:** The Don Catchment Rivers Trust |
| **Project name:**The Living Heritage of the River Don |
| **Date of completion:** Main project finished end of 2018. However, project volunteers are still working to improve the river. |
| **Project objectives – what did you do and why? Why was there a need for the project?**  The Don Catchment Rivers Trust (DCRT) is a charity that established in 2010 to protect and improve the many rivers and streams in the River Don Catchment, an area that roughly overlaps with South Yorkshire in northern England (see Figure 1).  The catchment was one of the cradles of the industrial revolution, due in part to the waterpower provided by the fast-flowing rivers. In the C19th and C20th industry became progressively heavier, with extensive coal mining, and coking, chemical and steel works setting up along the Don (see Figure 2). The river was devastated, being canalised, dammed with weirs and extremely polluted by toxic effluent that wiped out all aquatic life. By the 1980s industrial decline had set in, and as river water quality improved, nature returned remarkably quickly. Otters, kingfishers and damselflies have reappeared along with many other species.  Despite the progress, the Don still has a long way to go and many problems remain. One high-profile casualty of the industrial revolution was Atlantic Salmon, which once thrived in the Don. In recent years, small numbers of salmon have been entering the Don, mistakenly straying into the river while attempting to return to their natal rivers to spawn. Excitingly such fish have the potential to recolonise the Don, but unfortunately the many weirs on the river have physically obstructed them from reaching spawning habitat.  People have also yet to fully benefit from the recovery of the Don. Decades of severe pollution and poor access has impoverished local people’s relationships with the river. Many barely register its existence or hold negative perceptions of the river as ‘polluted’ and ‘dirty’. This image problem is compounded by litter strewn uncared for riverbanks, which entrenches neglect, inertia and apathy. The Trust and our partners viewed this situation as a missed opportunity, as we recognised the river could become a major asset to local communities as a wildlife-rich green-blue space that enriched the lives of local people. It was particularly a shame as many of the communities that live along the Don suffer from deprivation (see Figure 3), not only in terms of unemployment linked to industrial decline, but also culturally and socially. Such disadvantaged communities have the highest rates of mental and physical health problems, and so would stand to gain the most from having the Don as a place of respite from everyday stresses and as a space for walking, fishing, cycling and experiencing nature.  To further the ecological restoration of the Don and unlock its potential for local communities, the Trust successfully applied to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) for a Heritage Grant to fund a three-year project we called the Living Heritage of the River Don. This project had two interdependent objectives. The first was to install fish passes on a series of weirs, putting in place a migration ‘superhighway’ to enable Atlantic Salmon to recolonise the Don after an absence of hundreds of years. The second was to encourage the public to engage with and use the river, so that it became more of an asset for local people. The two objectives were interconnected as key to getting people engaged with the river was to improve attitudes towards it, and there was perhaps no better way of achieving this than by returning salmon. The fish is an iconic species people associate with healthy rivers, so its return would generate headlines and send a powerful and surprising message that the Don has transformed from a grossly polluted river to one full of life.  The Living Heritage Secret Streams project began in 2016. In the first year we installed two Larinier fish passes and three easement-type fish passes (see Figures 4 & 5) on orphan weirs (i.e. weirs for which ownership had been lost over time), opening up spawning grounds to migratory fish in the middle of Sheffield. We also started a vibrant three-year community engagement programme that aimed to inspire and mobilise local communities, develop people’s skills so that they could bring about change, create positive perceptions of the river, and foster understanding of its heritage. The activities we ran included:   * A **volunteering programme**. With twice weekly river working parties, this was one of the biggest elements of the project. Volunteers cleared rubbish, improved riverside trails, and tackled invasive species. * **Training programme and apprenticeships**. Training courses were put on to upskill our volunteers and members of the public in a wide range of subjects including practical and conservation skills (e.g. use of tools such as brushcutters). We hosted two apprentices that obtained a formal qualification in Environmental Conservation. * **River Guardians School Sessions**. This initiative aimed to engage with local schools and educational organisations to inspire children to care for and take pride in the river on their doorstep through a range of activities such as river dipping, practical volunteering and survey work. * **Youth Art Programme**. Art events were put on for young people e.g. we created a river-themed mural on a bridge with heavy graffiti. * **Voices of the Don**. To spread the story of the history of the Don and gather the voices of local communities, oral histories were collected and used in project materials such as interpretation boards. Stories, poems, images and thoughts about the Don were collated into a high-quality hardback book. * **Don Discovery Days**. Community events were held to promote the Don as a place to visit and enjoy. Activities such as Bioblitzs were put on to provide fun interesting ways to learn about its natural, cultural and built heritage. * **Nature Days**. Nature walks and events were held to get people experiencing and identifying wildlife. * **Don Valley Way**. A 29 mile riverside trail was formalised that connected the major population centres of Doncaster and Sheffield. It is accompanied by eight circular walks that explore and celebrate the heritage next to the river. The trail is freely available via its own dedicated high-quality website or phone app, and includes interactive mapping and audio trails. * **Geocaching**. This is essentially an outdoor treasure hunt involving the use of navigational techniques to hide and seek containers. We set up river-themed caches and challenges along the Don Valley Way. |
| **How have the objectives been achieved?**  The Living Heritage of the River Don project has been a big success all-round. Five fish passes were delivered on schedule and within budget, quite an achievement for a small charity given the scale of the capital works. This broke the back of the work required to restore connectivity in the Don. It has created the momentum to tackle the last two remaining weirs that still needs addressing, with Sheffield council currently installing a pass on one and plans to address the other at end of the year at an advanced stage. Early indications suggest that the soon to be complete migration superhighway is already beginning to work, with two salmon being found in Sheffield in January 2019 (see Figure 6). The examination of one of these fish showed that it had spawned, so hopefully we will soon find evidence of the first River Don born salmon for two or more hundred years.  As we hoped the news generated headlines in local papers such as the Sheffield Star (e.g. www.thestar.co.uk/news/salmon-found-in-the-river-don-in-sheffield-151917) which has really got the message out about improvements to the ecology of the Don. Staff, trustees and volunteers consider the return of salmon to be one of the greatest legacies of the project. Global wild Atlantic Salmon populations are declining across their range, so this positive story from the Don is particularly good news.  The volunteering component of the project was a high point with 386 volunteers of all ages (e.g. see Figure 7) contributing 2799 hours of their own time to the project. Together they removed over 20,000 kg of rubbish, including over 4000 bin bags worth, 29 shopping trolleys, 87 tyres, and 36 traffic cones. This has really transformed the feel of streams and rivers (e.g. see Figure 8). It has also been really great to hear feedback from some volunteers about how their involvement made a contribution towards their wellbeing:  *"I had just retired when I started and my confidence took a bit of a dive. Working in a practical way, feeling useful and making new friends helped restore my feeling of self worth"*  *"As a antidote to my depression and a way to increase my social circle and make friends."*  *“Going to miss my Moss valley volunteer days with DCRT - hard work but worth it to see the difference made. Plus it gave me a good workout for body and mind”*  The quality of DCRT’s engagement with volunteers was recognised with the ‘gold standard’ grade of Rotherham Volunteer Kitemark PLUS.  Both project apprentices attained their Environmental Conservation qualifications, learning a range of skills and gaining experience with a variety of different audiences such as school pupils, members of the public, and volunteers. One of the apprentices enjoyed the experience so much that he has remained with us on a higher-level apprenticeship.  A large number of volunteers and members of the public attended training courses, such as vegetation management, tool maintenance, hedge laying, wildflower identification and using mammal tracks for surveying. Some courses such as hydromorphology were so popular that additional sessions were run. In total 187 people gained qualifications or certificates. A particularly important part of the training was to provide the skills the project volunteers needed to become a self-sustaining autonomous group, so that their efforts to improve the Don could continue once the project had finished. This ambition was realised and the volunteers now identify as the ‘Friends of the Don Valley Way’.  The Don Valley Way Heritage Trail the group maintains and improves now provides an engaging new way for people to encounter a rich natural, industrial and built heritage along the river. The rights of way largely existed before the project and so the capital costs for its establishment were minimal. The project formalised and highlighted the trail by creating signage, leaflets, activities, maps, audio guides and a dedicated website ([www.donvalleyway.org.uk/](http://www.donvalleyway.org.uk/)) and phone app. Geocaching along the route has been one of the unexpected successes, bringing a large new audience to the banks of the Don.  Lastly we’ve reached 1177 young people through our River Guardians programme, and around 4000 people through community events (see Figures 9 & 10). We think we’ve made an impact as examples of feedback from children include:  “*The river is clean, amazing and interesting*.” - Year 4 pupil, Canklow Woods school  “[As a result of my visit I will] *Tell my friends not to put rubbish in the rivers*.” - Pupil, St Gerard’s Primary School  In addition to the river, the project has also been transformative for our own organisation, with us working with volunteers for the first time and establishing what has become a highly motivated and talented community engagement team. It has also greatly expanded our influence, credibility, reach, capacity, and impact.  Overall the Living Heritage of the River Don project has been highly successful, meeting or exceeding the expectations of all involved. We think that one of the biggest triumphs of the Living Heritage of the River Don project has been its multi-faceted nature; having ambitious aims to improve the natural environment, river heritage, and to engage local communities in a variety of way. That we’ve met our ambitions and made great strides forward on all these fronts, including returning salmon to the Don, embracing community engagement, and celebrating all aspects of the heritage of the River Don, is something we are proud of. |

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