

# Finding space for water - River Irk, Alkrington

Environment Agency  
Mersey Rivers Trust



Above: Softened banking

## Date carried out

October 2017 – March 2018

## Location

Alkrington, Rochdale

## Background

The River Irk at Alkrington offers valuable greenspace in the urban area of Rochdale. Once part of the Alkrington Hall estate, the river runs through an area of well established woodland and now forms part of Alkrington Woods Local Nature Reserve (LNR). Informal paths run through woodland along the banks of the River Irk and around the fishing lodges at Rhodes. The land is owned by Rochdale council, who invest in the area by working with active volunteers to manage the woodland and riverside park.

The whole of the River Irk waterbody is heavily modified; while this particular stretch has an artificially straightened and canalised channel, with hard banking to either side. There is limited flow diversity, and the presence of 5 check weirs add to the lack of natural conditions and reduced ecological connectivity.

After significant investment in the sewerage infrastructure, the water quality of the Irk is improving. Now the modification of the river corridor is having a wider environmental impact and limiting the natural River Irk ecology to recover.

## Partners

Environment Agency, Mersey Rivers Trust, Rochdale council.

## Themes



Urban



Healthy Rivers



Water Quality



Green Infrastructure



Above: River Irk – off-take to wet grassland

## Project

This project was delivered by Mersey Rivers Trust (MRT) working closely with the Environment Agency. One of the principle aims of the project was to increase the experience of MRT in delivering river restoration projects. An experienced Environment Agency project manager supported the delivery of the project.

The project involved improving flow diversity

by notching the five check weirs, lowering and softening the banking and reconnecting the flood plain by providing improved connection to adjacent low lying areas.

### Constraints

Although the existing paths are not formal footpaths, they are well used by the local community, and the presence of paths on both side of the river needed to be maintained and protected.

During the construction phase of the project, two large sludge mains were found in the footpath. These were not present on the services search, but limited the ability to lower and re-section the banking.

The ground conditions varied significantly, with the presence of bricks and concrete in the bank causing issues with pegging the coir matting.

### Outcomes

- **Learning:** MRT improved their understanding of contracting, Construction, Design and Management Regulations 2015 and risks and issues management.

- **Channel improvements:** The notches in the weirs have improved flow diversity of the channel. The lowering of the banking was limited due to the constraints, however, the hard banking has been removed and brash bundles and coir matting to protect the new re-profiled bank. Over time, we expect the channel to widen as silt and sediment is deposited behind the brash bundles.

- **Connection to the flood plain:** This was achieved by using pipes under the footpath to take high flows into two areas - one a natural low lying area and the second old mill lodges.

- **Creation of priority habitat:** The project has created and expanded approx. 0.3ha of wet woodland and 0.4ha of wet grassland.

### Learning

Support from technical specialists, in particular, expertise in biodiversity and hydromorphology was needed to advise on this project. As this wasn't available from within MRT, the Environment Agency specialists provided support. In particular hydromorphology expertise is in short supply in third sector organisations.

Some of the constraints on the project were only discovered during construction. This meant that the plans needed to change. It's very important to ensure that all parties are consulted on the changes to make sure that the best solution is found.

Project identified the need for detailed project drawings and landscape schedules at outset, so all parties are clear of delivery outcomes.

Support of volunteers from Rochdale and MRT was critical to the success of the project.

### Next Steps

Monitor the success of the project by photographing a fixed point on the channel works over several years. Maintain and review new assets, as required, to ensure continued operational functioning. Continue to support partners to develop their experience by embedding learning in other projects.

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