River Ravensbourne, Ladywell Fields (QUERCUS)

Techniques: Re-meandering, backwater & pond construction

Project location: Lewisham, South East London
River: Ravensbourne
County: London
Project end date: September 2008
Length: 200m
Cost: £400,000
Upstream grid reference: TQ372737

Site background
The river Ravensbourne at Ladywell Fields formerly ran along the edge of the park, had been artificially widened and its banks toe-boarded, whilst the river was also hidden behind railings and dense vegetation. As a result it had become largely unnoticed by most park users and had little ecological value. The park itself lacked features and facilities and was under-used, and only 44% users felt safe there.

Works were proposed as part of QUERCUS (Quality Urban Environments for River Corridor Users and Stakeholders), a partnership between the London Borough of Lewisham, Chester City Council and ’s-Hertogenbosch part-funded through the EU’s LIFE Environment Programme which aimed to enhance river corridors and establish them as attractive features of urban environments.

Objectives
To re-meander the river through the centre of the park, creating a well used public open space which would be seen as an important local resource; increase park usage in order to create a busy and potentially self policing place; increase the profile of the river within the park and improve the quality of habitats for wildlife.

Design
A series of works were designed in conjunction with Lewisham Council, Building Design Partnership and the Environment Agency, with Fergal Contracting undertaking the physical works:

- A new meandering V-shaped channel was excavated through the centre of the park, diverting around half of the Ravensbourne’s flow, whilst railings adjacent to the original channel were removed;
- Numerous landscape improvements for example the re-use of excavated earth material to create terraces;
- New footpaths, a footbridge and entrance were constructed to improve accessibility for members of the public;
- A backwater was created immediately downstream of the new footbridge, whilst further upstream an offline ephemeral pond was excavated. This was later connected to the river via a narrow side channel dug by members of the public.

Subsequent performance – RRC’s views (2009)
Ladywell Fields has been transformed from its previously characterless and formless landscape into a diverse, popular and accessible public open space, with surveys indicating that the public’s perception of the park in terms of recreational value and safety has improved. Now 78% visitors feel safe, and use of the park has increased over 2 and a half times. The creation of a new gravel-bedded river channel through the centre of the park has also brought about significant improvements in biodiversity, with survey results indicating a near 100% increase in the number of species present in the park (in particular fishing birds), which are benefiting from the greater range of habitat types now present following the restoration works.