

# Community camaraderie

Source talks to Carol Price, a Lancashire litterpicker who has mobilised her community to clean up their local stretch of the River Darwen at Hoghton Bottoms. March saw their fourteenth annual clean up, organised with support from Action Darwen Valley, Lancashire County Council, the de Hoghton estate, City Skips and Sainsbury's to name just a few.



## Q Can you tell us what volunteer work you've been doing on the River Darwen?

Basically it's a case of cleaning up the river, picking up plastic and anything that's lying around – when we go for walks with our dog and so on. I've organised an annual clean up every year for the past fourteen years too.

## Q What motivated you to get involved?

I was embarrassed. Even though it wasn't my rubbish, I was horrified by the state of the place. That was it really, just a case of seeing that the rubbish needed to be picked up, and beginning to pick it up myself. That's how it started, and that's how it goes on.

It's selfish really, I do it because when it looks nicer it's a nicer place to live. It has the knock-on effect of making things better for other people who come here, and keeping the litter from reaching the beach and the sea, but it makes where I live look better and that's why I do it.

## Q Was litter a bugbear of yours before you moved here to live beside the river?

I wasn't aware of it before, but we'd only been here a few weeks when we saw the bushes by the riverbank completely littered with shredded plastic. It was just obscene. Until then I hadn't realised the extent of the problem. Litter had been collecting there for decades, so the first few years of the clean up were horrendous, with stuff intertwined and tangled in barbed wire and brambles. It's a lot better now.

The Darwen litter trap has helped too, people here are amazed at how much it collects. They notice immediately when it's not working how much litter comes down, so there's an obvious benefit in that.

## Q And you've managed to persuade your neighbours to join you for an annual clean up?

Yes, although many of them will only do it once because of the nature of the rubbish that you're pulling out, sanitary towels and so on, which is disgusting.

We try to make sure the clean up falls on a free day for most people. A local farmer lends us his tractor to squash everything down in the skip so that we can fit more in, and the gamekeeper from the de Hoghton estate brings his trailer along a couple of weeks later to move the bagged-up litter and larger debris.

We provide litter-pickers, rubber gloves, hand wipes and a picnic bag – everything you need for a grand day out!

## Q Do you enjoy the day?

Well, I often say to my husband "Oh no, that damn river clean is looming!" I can't pretend it's always nice doing it, but when it's over you can see the benefit straight away – instant gratification.

It sounds corny, but there's a real community spirit and camaraderie on the day, a kind of fascination with the horror of what we're doing. It sounds bizarre but it can be fun because you're with likeminded people, and working for a common cause. Even when it's pouring down it brings out the Dunkirk spirit!

## Q Is there one thing that would make it easier to keep the river clean?

The ideal would be for people not to throw litter in the river at all, but I think the main issue is the amount of packaging that's used. I don't think things like sanitary towels or crisp packets should be able to be washed up and not disintegrate for months and months on end.

I sound like an old fogey now, but when I was a girl you bought your sweets in a paper bag, and if you happened to drop it, it would turn to mush after a rain shower. There's stuff in that river now that's been there for decades, and was probably reusable in the first place. It just annoys me.

## Q What's your proudest achievement on the Darwen?

We were given a Unilever Dragonfly Award for improving the environment, and we used the prize money to install a picnic bench on the riverside. When I see people sitting on that bench, enjoying a picnic, not leaving behind any litter, that's perfect. I go past and think, 'well, you don't know that I helped to get that bench'. I never say anything, but I get a real sense of satisfaction from seeing it, because that's just what the money was for.

## MORE INFORMATION

If you'd like to get involved with cleaning up the River Darwen, please contact Sarah Whitman, Action Darwen Valley [s.whitman@merseybasin.org.uk](mailto:s.whitman@merseybasin.org.uk) or 01772 877392