Clean Rivers Trust.

Notes on a third seminar at Allies and Morrison, Southwark Street and held in conjunction with the Centre for London. Thursday 24th November 2011/

This event, the third in a series, involved two of three presentations being given by the voluntary sector and the third being from the professionally festive. A more down to earth approach or was it what the third sector is meant to represent. The whole thing regarding the Thames and empowering individuals and communities to take control or at least participate in the general reinvigoration of the banks, either litter picking or gardening; the great works that have been carried out in the US, Korea, France and else where were sighted. The development of partnerships and ad hoc action to reclame the fore shaws and dereliction.

Regarding the litter angle the Thames Water skimmers do a wonderful job and with out them the Thames banks would be knee deep in human detritus and the fun of cleaning bank week end would be greatly diminished.

London 21's CEO, Debbie Leach, was hugely enthusiastic, the feeling that volentears came from all walks of life gave her organisation a grass roots credibility and status was unnerving. This is not to diminish the actions of the organisation, but does raise more questions than give answers. The loudest howl was how do we stop rubbish being deposited; stop free plastic bags and outlaw fliers? In Moscow in the 1970s and 80s if you dropped a cigarette end you might have been rounded on in the street; not by Community Support Officer or other official but by a regular Muscovite. Not a pleasant experience and once experienced you never put yourself in that position again. Today Moscow has followed the rest of civilisation with pi bald gum spattered paving and windblown bags from Costa and Star Bucks. The cost of perestroika is degrading unlike the litter.

The fun was hinted at of pulling a supermarket trolley from a river, though the law and the financial considerations were not mentioned. Where a trolley is totally immersed or free standing on a fore shore at low tide and the financial payback to a local authority were not mentioned. A few trolleys and the law can be good for local authorities and their council tax payers! Not to mention the scrap value.

One note, London was not founded by the Romans, they built the first bridge and made much of the place once the Iceni had done their thing and taken revenge on the invaders and their 'quisling' subjects.

Patricia Brown of 'Central'; not sure who Central are, but Ms Brown is not slow in pulling rabbits out of hats and showed the effects of communities in New York. Pulling barren areas of the city's waterfronts back into public 'ownership' is remarkable. The retake the wasteland principal is great and works in the States. The French are as ever a nation of government hand downs, and the people like to be given environmental co-proximal. Comparisons between the Paris Plage and the South Bank beach; so cool or what would your cab-driver say.

[The realisation that environmental issues are now main stream and not the preserve of the macro-biotic minority any longer: has allowed politicians to put out 'green' agendas and plans at a vast rate around the world. Yes, they may be laudable or green wash which ever: they need to be grabbed. The vision of Boris Island looms like Alcatraz courtesy of Blue Peter. A fitting memorial, once it was built, to a by-gone age?]

The issues that come to mind are horribly legal; the river: shore line between high and low water; the Crown or common ground, fishing rights and access to navigate or to access the water for other purpose. Similar thoughts arise with the consideration of waste land and its accessibility, the community actions that could be so valuable to local areas but that then is likely to be taken away by owners in title if not in fact or some other wresting away of works that may be done to benefit a locality.

It can lead to the old Pooh and Piglet issue of trespassers w.



The ideas of the community taking responsibility are pleasing but riddled with pitfalls. The risk, not of criminal action but the criminal waste of effort, time and enthusiasm can be a turn off if sites are not protected by agreements. The other aspects that now spring to mind range from liability and insurance. The green aspect can instantly be overshadowed by the threat of accident compensation.

The third speaker, came by some form of transport unknown to Transport for London, being Adrian Evans. Mr Evans is the organiser of the Mayor's Thames Festival. A post he has held for some time. His work is certainly in the direction of focusing the population of the metropolis towards the river.



Thames Frost Fair by Thomas Wyke 1683/84

[The days of a slow flowing river and its ability to freeze to such an extent that public events including bonfires and spit roasting could be undertaken with out too many people drowning or the lack of legal action by the families of those that did allowed for pleasing festivities to take place across the stream.]

The remarkable thing is that most towns and cities that have rivers passing through or by them have abandoned them. Historically they have been places for the poor and lower orders to congregate. The

wealthy kept as far away from these places or they might succumb to the miasma that wafted fragrantly from its waters. We know that is rot now but one hundred years ago the belief was still current. From these and earlier times the waters were not for pleasure they were work and refuse channels. They still are to some degree.

The Thames drains several millions of peoples' sewage waste away daily; it would not be the size or shape it is today with out it. In summer a half, at least, of the river's flow is made up of treated waste water. Much of the areas solid waste is moved by barge to the east of the city for use in power generation, or to land fill. All good green economic uses, the river though needs people to be engaged with its physical entity and that is what the festival hopes to be developing.

The wish to access the river for canoeing, rowing, angling and, though not recommended, swimming in the river are all pass times or passions that are developing. The sport and leisure use of the Thames and its tributaries like the River Lea are signs that the waters are being engaged with.

Recent books are also widening the net of increasing river awareness. In the 1980s the Lost Rivers of London by Nicholas Barton was a best seller (and continues to be) to a quite small, but educated and vocal readership. Today the Rivers of London by Ben Aaronovitch is leading science fiction, detective and mystery fans, a much larger number of people, in a similar direction.

All this is moving forward and democratising the river. The work of the people we have heard in this series of seminars, and as good examples the speakers at this one are all actively demonstrating the ways available for all to be involved.

Harvey Wood.
28th November 2011.