

BLUEBELL RAILWAY and the OUSE NAVIGATION

Pulling away from the platform at Sheffield Park Station heading towards Horsted Keynes few passengers will appreciate that for the first two miles of the journey the train closely follows the River Ouse, as it winds its way from its source near Slaugham towards the sea at Newhaven. Yet, over two hundred year ago, and fifty years before the Lewes and East Grinstead line and Sheffield Park Station, was built, the river was a major transport link between Newhaven and the rural areas of Sussex. That could all change if a major project being undertaken by the Sussex Ouse Restoration Trust (SORT) is realised, heralding an era of co-operation rather than competition between rail and river.

For over fifty years during the first half of the nineteenth century this section of the river and the adjacent canal cut formed part of the Ouse Navigation, allowing barges to transport various goods and materials to and from those rural areas, including the bricks for Balcombe Viaduct on the Brighton line. There are however few obvious signs these days to remind us of the existence of that navigation.

To discover or see what remains of those bygone canal days you either need to have some previous knowledge of its existence or to walk the footpaths and woodland close to the river. Along the edge of the large expanse of woodland south of the railway and the winding river and beyond the limits of the public rights of way lies the straight man-made cut of the canal that eliminated the twists and turns of the river through this part of the valley. It includes two curiously named locks - Bacon Wish Lock and Polebay Lock.

Downstream and just half a mile south of Sheffield Park Station and adjacent to the public footpath, part of the route of the Sussex Ouse Valley Way, lies another of these lock structures - Iron Gate Lock. This is situated within a short cut on a bend in the river on land owned and managed by the National Trust (NT), on the southern edge of the Sheffield Park and Garden estate.

Three years ago a joint effort was made by the NT and the Trust to clear the lock site and expose what remains of the structure and the NT has since promoted the site and encouraged visitors to the Gardens to visit the lock as part of their walk leaflets. The lock, although in a poor state and requiring a complete rebuild, enables visitors to gain some sense of history about how the river landscape across this area of Sussex was once utilised by a form of transport, so vital at that time, albeit for a relatively short period. To date restoration work hasn't yet started and the site has become a little overgrown again but discussions are currently in hand about the next steps.

How might restoration of the lock benefit the Bluebell? Well, it would enable SORT to run trip boats along the river, so enabling Bluebell passengers to enjoy another form of historic transport. A purpose-built landing stage on the river within easy walking distance of the Station, perhaps adjacent to the present picnic area, would enable passengers to board a small day-trip boat and set off for a short cruise and to

enjoy the experience of passing through a restored lock. The trip could be incorporated as part of a day at the Bluebell and would also help to promote the work of SORT and perhaps encourage the future restoration of other locks on the river.

SORT, which has been in existence for well over ten years, was formed by a small group of enthusiasts keen to restore the lock structures on the Ouse Navigation, with the ultimate goal of enabling pleasure boats to once again use the river.

For the greater part of those ten years most of their efforts have been targeted on the restoration of Sutton Hall Lock near Isfield, several miles south of Sheffield Park. This lock lies adjacent to a public right of way and on land owned by Sutton Hall Estate and, having secured permission from the Estate, restoration work began in 2006. Nine years later the end of the work required to restore the lock is within sight. Progress would have been faster had more volunteers been available.

Reminiscent of the Bluebell, SORT is financed solely from membership subscriptions and donations but is supported the Inland Waterways Association (IWA) and advised on all technical matters by an experienced IWA Consultant.

To become a member of SORT visit www.sxouse.org.uk, contact the Membership Secretary at membership@sxouse.org.uk or write to The Membership Secretary, Copperfield, London Road, Uckfield, East Sussex, TN22 2EA.

Members are not expected to get immediately involved in the actual physical restoration work although volunteers are always made very welcome on site. There are other ways they can be active within the Trust or they can merely follow progress and offer support and encouragement. Come and join us with our restoration plans and help to promote co-operation between our two organisations.

Terry Owen
Sussex Ouse Restoration Trust (SORT)
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