

Subject: Thurrock - as featured on BBC One's Countryfile 9/10/16

It's now almost a year on since Thames21 and I started to turn our attention to Thurrock's riverside litter problem, so I thought it might be useful to share my findings with councillors who have been involved, to a greater or lesser extent, in our project. In doing so, I would like to reflect on what has been achieved so far and what still needs to be done. The bare facts reveal the following:

Litter picks in Thurrock

Event*	Date	Volunteers	Total Sacks	Black	Recycle	Trollies	Comments
Tilbury 1-Fort and Power Station - Eastern Shoreline	22/10/15	30	91	91			Also tyres, car dashboard facias, hoardings and traffic cones
Tilbury 2-Fort and Power Station - Eastern Shoreline	14/11/15	3	20	20			
Grays 1-Beach	27/2/16	60	134	74	60	18	
Grays 2-Wharf Hotel	29/5/16	20	68	32	36	10	
Grays-3 Graffiti Wall	7/8/16	3	21	21			Paint cans, trays, aerosol sprays
Grays 4-Beach	24/9/16	23	72	72			Also bulky items
Tilbury 3-Fort and Western Shoreline	1/10/16	8	47	47			Also bulky items
Total		147	453	357	96	28	

*This excludes 'Make a Difference' and 'Clean for the Queen' events which were organised by Grays Phoenix and took place in October 2015 and March 2016 respectively. Most litter picks generally lasted between 2 and 3 hours.

Here are my personal views, which do not necessarily represent Thames21.

What the figures demonstrate is the scale and scope of the problem. Litter is piling up as fast as it can be removed, which means that once a clean-up has been completed, people continue to litter the area. Admittedly, it remains clean for a few weeks but after that it reverts back to its dirty old self. (E.g. Grays beach yielded 74 black sacks in February and 72 in September). Naturally, this has a demotivating effect on volunteers and organisations alike. Of course, some of the litter is flotsam - the ubiquitous small cotton buds flushed down toilets - but most of it is left behind by people who visit the riverside; the likes of containers, aluminium cans, plastic bottles and food wrappers.

Many of the areas we visited looked like they hadn't been cleaned for years. In places, shoreline vegetation, e.g. Sea purslane, had grown over the litter making detection and removal more problematic. The litter was often dirty, smelly, toxic (paint pots along Graffiti Wall), ugly to look at, illegal (nitrous oxide bulbs) and a health hazard - broken glass and rusty nails made it dangerous underfoot. Much of the plastic had deteriorated to such an extent that it was no longer recyclable. Left unattended, it could have been even more harmful because, recent surveys suggest, it can work its way insidiously into our food

chain. Significant numbers of smelt and flounder caught in the Thames recently had traces of plastic in their gut. And it isn't just riverside plastic that finds its way into our rivers; plastics on dry land ultimately gets washed down drains and ends up in our river.

Nothing we uncovered was particularly surprising and our findings can be repeated up and down the country. Marine Conservation Society's annual Great British Beach Clean recently broke records for litter collected by 348 clean-ups - which says more about the scale and scope of the problem than the solution. So clearly this is a general trend and not just an issue for Thurrock. Yet, as the litter builds up and despoils urban stretches of the Thames riverside, should we just sit back and do nothing because it is a national problem?

Meanwhile, there is the changing face of the industrial and social landscape around Thurrock riverside to consider. Recent announcements amount to massive structural changes in the borough, any one of which could upset the fragile balance in the river's ecosystem and its wildlife. Around the corner we have:

- * Amazon announcing a new distribution centre employing around 3,000 staff near Tilbury Docks.
- * Tilbury Green Power building a waste wood burning power station east of Grays beach. It is due to be completed mid 2017
- * The old Tilbury B Power Station being demolished by 2018 - the distinctive high tower went in September
- * Forth Ports acquiring 152 acres of land including a deep water jetty part of the former Tilbury Power Station owned by RWE.
- * The government possibly going ahead with plans for a Lower Thames Crossing, of which Option C would devastate 100 acres of greenbelt. A final decision is due later this year.
- * In January, 2016 Grays offering tentative plans for a new pier and promenade.
- * The dredging activities of Dubai Ports which continue to divide opinion - any resumption would once again raise environmental concerns.

In the short term, strategic litter collections are expected to continue, relying on a small but dedicated band of local volunteers who devote their much-valued spare time to making a difference (see photo). It is vital that these people retain their enthusiasm. They in turn rely on charitable institutions, such as Thames21, which has been going since going since 1998, who do such a great job providing equipment, raising awareness and engaging local community organisations. Their resources are limited and rely on donations to continue their good work. The final link in the chain is the local council's refuse team and the Port of London Authority who remove the litter promptly and efficiently. When all components come together it works brilliantly but is there a better way?

In the longer term, Thurrock Council needs to take a lead and not allow our river to get into such a mess in the first place: the challenge being to pro-actively manage the riverside. Continuing to ignore it becomes a sad indictment in how we view our river and begs the question: how will our neglect be regarded by future generations who will have to deal with it?

Much is made of cutbacks which clearly have an effect, but sometimes it comes down to one word: prioritization. I hail from Southend which attracts 6 million visitors a year. At the end of a summer's day, the beaches are full of rubbish but by next morning it has all been removed to leave the place spotless, so it can be done. Southend is far from ideal, and the beaches are its showpiece so it pays to invest resources in this area, but it goes to show that, with a sense of purpose, great things can be done. Is it too glib to suggest that Thurrock council could redirect some of its parks and countryside divisional resources elsewhere so that beach cleans become part of the normal service along with grass cutting and tree lopping?

Suggestions and observations

So what can be done to reduce littering? I am no expert but as a warden for the River Thames Society I regularly patrol a 29 mile section of the north Thames known as Thames Estuary Path so it gives me some perspective. Here are a few thoughts:

- * Education works, but takes time and is often preaching to the converted.
- * Signs would be useful and make people think twice before dropping their litter.
- * £75 on-the-spot fines would ring alarm bells with the miscreants but would have to be followed through. In June, 2016 Councillor Gledhill said: "This council will take a zero tolerance approach to people who fly-tip, litter and blight our borough through laziness and inconsiderate actions"
- * Litter bins would help, particularly around black spots like Grays Beach, Graffiti Wall and in front of the fort at Tilbury where angling is popular. The notion that the absence of bins encourages people to take their litter home appears misplaced.
- * CCTV might prove a deterrent yet is costly and needs to be sited properly.
- * The Clean it, Cut it, Fill it pilot scheme deserves encouragement but needs to include the riverside.
- * Treat the foreshore and river litter problem in the same way as parks and reserves, notwithstanding potential ownership issues with the Port of London Authority.
- * Establish a budget for the Thurrock Riverside with a senior Councillor appointed to manage the fund.

In broader terms, what is needed is a change in attitudes; attaching more importance to the health of rivers and beaches and treating it for what it is - a fragile and yet invaluable asset enhancing the lives of many. It's also worth noting that Tilbury and Grays would not exist today were it not for the Thames. For this reason alone, surely the world's most iconic river deserves better?

Thank you for taking the time to read this and I look forward to hearing your views.

Regards,

Clive Webster