

# AINA CASE STUDY

## HEALTH, WELL BEING, RECREATION AND SPORT

### The Itchen Navigation Heritage Trail



*The attractive Itchen Navigation at Shawford, just south of Winchester*

#### ***Restoring a valuable chalk river system for wildlife and recreation***

The Itchen Navigation Heritage Trail project (2007-12) repaired and enhanced the navigational section of a chalk river system which extends from Winchester to Southampton. This was constructed in the 18th century to allow the passage of barges but since it ceased to be used commercially the channel developed into an important wildlife habitat with a significant population of the rare southern damselfly as well as otters, water voles and a range of scarce freshwater and riparian invertebrates. A lack of maintenance, however, had led to breaches in some of the worn-down banks which were putting wildlife and waterway heritage at risk and the project therefore aimed to restore the Itchen as a valuable feature for local people. The Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust led the work which was supported by a £1.6 million grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Wildlife friendly bioengineering techniques were used to stabilise and repair the banks, with specially planted or seeded berms protecting vulnerable areas from future erosion. These now provide habitat cover for many key species and help to enhance the variability of in-channel flow. In one location, difficult access across wetland meadows meant a small monorail system was established to deliver tools and materials to site. A ten year maintenance programme was prepared to assist riparian landowners, with a focus on wetland vegetation.

The project encouraged local people to contribute to practical conservation and heritage tasks as well as research, photography, arts and events. More than 200 volunteers undertook species surveys, tree and shrub clearance, removal of invasive species, footpath maintenance and fence repair work. These tasks complimented the larger engineering works and facilitated sensitive management of adjacent habitats. Some volunteers were trained in techniques of historic brickwork and helped restore some of the original, but crumbling, structures.

Recreational facilities now include an improved public footpath along the entire length with 1km suitable for disabled access. Mobile displays and leaflets help inform and interpret the waterway and the project won a prestigious Living Wetlands Award in 2010 when one of the judges commented: "The Itchen Navigation Heritage Trail project is an inspiring landscape scale project involving strong partnerships to create high quality habitats for the benefit of wildlife, people and the landscape".

As the end of the project drew near, some volunteers formed the Friends of the Itchen Navigation, with the intention of monitoring, reporting or resolving problems and helping landowners to maintain the waterway into the future.