

Marina Magic

Once at the heart of Industrial Britian, is it possible to invite nature back to our local rivers?

By **Bethany Sewell**

The ongoing conservation work along the River Avon, in the South West of England, is successfully transforming this once industrial landscape into a wild oasis. Freshwater fish, insects, birds and mammals have started to return and reclaim their rightful home.



Left: Saltford Marina, Along the River Avon. Top: The recent return of Otters to the Mill, encourages and supports a rejuvenating ecosystem. Top Right: Kingfishers perch along the bank. Bottom Right: Tony, head volunteer cutting back bank vegetation. Bottom: Saltford Brass Mill, the centre of the Marina's conservation efforts.

They are the ones that are invisible. Forever playing hide and seek with the wanderer strolling up the river. For those who are lucky enough to catch a fleeting glimpse of the long, slender brown body, swimming submerged in the water, the river otter (*Lutra Lutra*) will continue to watch the world go by from the shadows of crevices in the riverbank.

For only in recent times has this majestic creature returned to a few watery landscapes around Britain.

Walking along Saltford Marina, the route which I have taken all my life, the silent stillness of my surroundings, beautiful yet lifeless, has only been broken twice by a darting splash of the otter.

The river, meandering in and around the scheduled ancient monument of Saltford Brass Mill, ebbs and flows, delivering a source of life and power to both wildlife and us. For decades we used this river as a driving force for brass production. Composing and sculpting the landscape, once a wild river, into a canal for transporting coal and other goods up and down the country. As a result, polluting and destroying this wild oasis in the name of economic development and industrialisation.

Through the passage of time, as the golden age of this bustling production site reached its end, the river became silent and so did the otters. Only now could the land rejuvenate and begin to return to the wild haven it once was. As for the Brass Mill, its grandeur degraded as the buyers of the site only sold the property on, its structure too expensive and inconvenient to maintain. The monotony of this cycle repeated itself, until passionate archaeologist Joan Day saved the deteriorating Mill, reviving it and founding the Saltford Brass Mill project. Her vision was to conserve the site and open the Mill to visitors, making it a landmark within Saltford's local community. Due to her tremendous efforts this living landmark has now become a symbol of hope and an example of natural restoration in an age of modernisation and urban development. In the legacy of Joan Day, a group of conservation volunteers have continued to maintain the mill, respecting Saltford's local heritage while helping this once industrial landscape to embrace a much greener future.

Otters are a top predator in British rivers, making their return conservation success stories...



But, what does it actually mean to conserve such a place? Ultimately it is protection against the decline of the natural ecosystem and the impact this has on the community. It is the defence of both zoological and homo-sapien species alike. The end goal aiming to keep a natural balance between both man-made and wild worlds, providing an optimistic opportunity to live in an environmentally connected society, even if this can only be made possible by the Brass Mill volunteers on a small local scale. It is, however, a positive major step in the right direction. Taking time today to create and conserve the circle of life in this small part of Britain. In the hope that we might still be able to live alongside the otter and the kingfisher tomorrow. How do the volunteers conserve the wildlife and natural landscape? "Through many different ways and methods," Tony, head volunteer,

explains. He describes how opening up the sluice gates and letting the waterwheel turn, allows the river to rush through the mill's underground tunnels and out the other side. This allows fish and all kinds of marine life to flow with it, helping the river to have a distributed biodiversity, which keeps this ecosystem balanced. Tony continues, "We also get the waders on and clean the silt build-up every year, to ensure the river is kept unpolluted. But our conservation work takes many other forms to. We keep the vegetation on the banks trimmed, we are planting gardens around the mill and are also adding natural supports to the structural foundations instead of modern refurbishments, to ensure wildlife such as bats and insects can still inhabit the inside of the mill in the winter. ►

Talking Point

It has become a very wild place.”

He tells me, “In terms of the otters, we have put up shelves to give them a safe place to feed and are always monitoring them on the motion sensor camera.” This holds great importance as it encourages the otters to continue to inhabit the Mill and the surrounding area.

So, when did otters return to Saltford Marina? Stavros, a volunteer who has been monitoring the otters shows me some exciting footage of these elusive creatures in the Mill. Loading the film onto a small TV screen, he indicates the otters wondering up and down the sluice gates. Having a family of otters inhabit such a man made and industrial structure could only be strong evidence of the interwoven



relationship of humans and nature at this pivotal moment in environmental history. “They started coming very recently, in fact only a few years ago.” “It is very exciting,” Stavros tells me. It is the mark of a new golden age for Saltford Marina and the Brass Mill, an age of thriving wildlife and replenishment of natural habitats.

Top Left: Stavros and his Otter Footage. Bottom Left: Banded Demoiselle relaxing on grasses along the riverbank. Top Right: A pied Wagtail and her chick rest ontop of a Canal boat. Bottom Right: A spider waits for prey in his web woven between leaves along the river bank.

Through the ongoing hard work of these dedicated volunteers, Saltford Brass Mill is becoming a conservation success story and a living legacy to Joan Day. Continuing to provide habitats for all our slimy, winged, furry and scaled neighbours, while sustaining a diverse and vibrant array of plants and trees along the riverbank. In the hope that this thriving natural habitat will continue to provide wild spectacles from life on land, in the river and above us in the sky. ►

Talking point

Left: Woodlouse scurry in between cracks in the path along the bank. Middle: A grey Wagtail sings perched on top of the Mill. Top Right: As the Waterwheel turns, water is distributed up the river. Middle Right: The Saltford Brass Mill Volunteers. Bottom Right: The rush of the Marina continues...



Now, riverside ramblers witness the blue flash of the kingfisher darting over the river, as otters swim below. A transformed landscape all thanks to these conservation heroes.

Although, how can this whole new world be exposed to locals and tourists alike in the southwest? “talks, workshops, walks and more talks.” Says Tony, showing me an array of paintings created by local school children of wildlife at the Mill. Hopeful as they are, the quiet nature of the mill, even when open to the public at the weekends, couldn’t be more disheartening. The ultimate question being, how can this beautiful place be exposed to a wider audience without becoming an unsustainable tourist attraction? The answer is yet to be discovered, but the volunteers, currently having to rely on council funding and national heritage funding, will only be able to sustain their work for so long before money runs out. Nevertheless, there is hope. Through taking the project to local schools, social groups and festivals public exposure of this wild oasis is slowly rising.

For many of us, learning about this extraordinary conservation site is an eye opener to the amazing wildlife that can be found on our doorsteps. From the fleeting grey Wagtails darting between boats, while cormorants take flight in a crescendo of splashing spray. Along the riverbank woodlice and all types of bugs and creepy crawlies hide away or are snatched and swallowed by larger mammals, the foxes and badgers. Not forgetting the otter. The ruler of this land and the waters below.

Understanding the precious ecosystem in which we live with the help of local conservation projects like Saltford Brass Mill, help us to reconnect to our natural roots in a time of major disconnect between nature and humans. Sparking an awareness and appreciation for our wild friends, that live around us and amongst us.

In the hope that one day soon the silent stillness of our walks along Saltford Marina will be lifted with the chirping of birdsong, the buzz of insects and the splash of the otter.



With the continuing help of the Saltford Brass Mill conservation volunteers the future for Saltford Marina and the Brass Mill look bright. Ultimately helping us appreciate and learn to love our local wildlife and keep the revolutions of both the Mill’s waterwheel and the revolutions of our local natural habitats living on and continuing to turn into a prosperous future.

FIND OUT MORE Would you like to get involved with the Saltford Brass Mill Project? follow the link <http://www.brassmill.com> or if you just want to take a stroll up the River Avon, go to ... <http://www.bristolbathrailwaypath.org>