



Forum of Partner Members and Supporters of the Great Ouse Valley Trust Saturday November 27th 2021 Queen Elizabeth School, Godmanchester

As Storm Arwen, the first named storm of the winter, swept across the country, and the Omicron Covid variant began to do the same, 45 Partner Members, Supporters and Trustees of the Great Ouse Valley Trust gathered in Godmanchester.

We were there to discuss ***Tourism in the Great Ouse Valley: How can we create a sense of place and improve enjoyment of the Great Ouse Valley for visitors and local communities, while ensuring the protection of the unique beauty of the landscape?***

The meeting began with presentations from three speakers, followed by short Q&As

Adrian Sington, Chairman of the Transformation Fund for St Mary's Church, Godmanchester, described a significant project to re-order the interior of the church. The proposed design will give more flexible space for worship, provide modern facilities and create an attractive setting for community use of the building for meetings and concerts, etc. A new mezzanine level above the nave will become the permanent home of the Godmanchester Porch Museum. Heritage Lottery funding of £1.5M is being sought. Godmanchester has a rich and very old heritage – for example, the archaeology of the outstanding Neolithic ceremonial site, and the Roman military station and its many fine artefacts. Adrian spoke of a 'Golden Thread' linking the cultural heritage of Godmanchester and neighbouring Huntingdon in the shared natural context alongside Portholme meadow and the River Great Ouse. The Transformation Project will enable heritage collaboration. It will attract local people and visitors to appreciate and enjoy Godmanchester as a unique place.

Neil Sloper, Head of Operations (which includes Green Spaces) at Huntingdonshire District Council gave an illustrated presentation on his personal vision for the Great Ouse Valley. Neil emphasised that official designation alone will not give an area 'a sense of place': that must come from the grass roots. He cited the examples of the London City Park and the Colne Valley Regional Park where individuals, groups and local organisations have joined forces to create a designation of their own. They have a shared vision and a joint mission. Adrian showed several film clips of local people speaking movingly of their involvement in projects, and explaining how these have improved both their own well-being and that of their community, as well as enhancing the wider area. The structure of both the London and Colne projects was not dissimilar to that of the Great Ouse Valley Trust. So, Neil asked, how about self-designation? Could we, and should we, do the same here?

Emma Thornton, CEO of Visit Pembrokeshire, and previously CEO of Visit Cambridge and Beyond, gave the main address. Emma noted that during 2020 and 2021 many more people have reconnected with nature to become visitors in their own neighbourhood and rediscover the natural beauty on their doorstep. This presents a great opportunity for the Great Ouse Valley – residents and visiting friends and family are 'Brand Ambassadors', who quietly promote the area. However, research is needed to identify the other visitors – especially their ages and interests. When that is known, facilities and experiences can be suggested or created for them e.g., boat trips, linking with great places to eat and drink, cycling routes, cultural tours. Emma explained the importance of Destination Management where the public and voluntary sector partners work closely to ensure any growth in visitors is sustainable, and protects and preserves what makes the area so special. The ultimate aim should be that tourism is developed in a way that has a positive impact on the local environment, economy and communities; this is commonly referred to as 'Regenerative Tourism'. Publicity and marketing is essential, and whilst there is still a place for poster, leaflets and simple flyers, the majority of all Destination Marketing is now delivered digitally - it is real-time, dynamic and cost effective. Instagram

and Facebook are particularly powerful and effective channels. By building relationships with local partnerships to join with their digital information and platforms, the key messages can be amplified and reception increased.

Emma believed that the Great Ouse Valley has a great asset in its proximity and connectivity to Cambridge and this should be exploited. The unique landscape of river meadows and lakes, attractive villages and market towns make it a special place indeed. The context and the content for successful tourism are already here, but there could be more focus to draw them together.

Attendees then formed in groups of 8 for round-table workshops with a facilitator for discussion.

Questions were:

1. What are the **opportunities and benefits** for looking at GOV holistically to develop it as a place to visit, a place to belong, and thus creating a sense of place?
2. What are the **barriers/hurdles** to developing a sense of place?
3. Can you think of a **brand/identity or strapline** for the Great Ouse Valley?
For example in East Anglia - John Clare country and Constable country

There were lots of ideas! Facilitators at each table drew up summaries and then key points were shared with the whole room for wider discussion. Here are just a few -

Opportunities & benefits of recognising the area as a 'whole':

Visitors would spread out along the valley rather than overload a few 'honey-pot' sites. Development of better transport along the valley would reach a sequence of sites – e.g. Park and Stride activities and a bus service similar to the Norfolk 'coastal hopper'. Resident satisfaction and a sense of pride for the area leads to increased sense of ownership and confidence.

Barriers/hurdles included concerns that the area did not need any more tourists – it was busy enough serving the needs of Cambridgeshire residents. There is limited infrastructure to enable tourists to access the countryside - insufficient coach and car parks, toilet facilities, tea-rooms.

A brand/identity and strapline for the Great Ouse Valley. Definitely not Cromwell Country! Other suggestions – Follow the Flow. Waterways of Peace. A river for Boaters and Birders. Rest, relax, recover in natural beauty. But everyone agreed that we hadn't nailed this yet.

Graham Campbell, Chair of the Great Ouse Valley Trust, thanked all organisers, speakers and participants of the event. It had been a very positive, stimulating morning. There was an impressive range of representatives – Parish and Town Councils, HDC, National Trust, Rotary, RSPB, local businesses and many more – and all were networking and sharing ideas. People were knowledgeable and passionate about the Great Ouse Valley.

Graham summarised the two key points from the meeting. The first was how to manage tourism effectively and the other was, in the absence of official designation, how to manage the area as a whole and confer a recognised sense of place. Neil's fresh ideas on the latter had certainly resonated. The Great Ouse Valley Trust will take both topics back to its Trustees and begin work. And then it will return to Partners, Supporters and Friends, because we can only do this together.

We will continue to keep in touch with you all through our website and Facebook page and so please keep an eye on both these platforms. In the meantime, we take this opportunity to thank you for your continued support and to wish you a very Happy New Year!



Ouse Valley scenes I-r: a Holt Island Nature Reserve guided walk (FOHINR); cruising from St Ives (John McKinnie); Sutton Masque Morris celebrate spring (SM). The Valley offers these and many more visitor attractions throughout the year.