

New Avon Trust

The idea of extending the upper reaches of the Warwickshire Avon and forming a junction with the Grand Union Canal in the Warwick or Leamington Spa area is not new. Since the river was reopened to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1974 the Upper and Lower Avon Navigation Trusts have expended a considerable amount of time and effort in pursuing that goal, against much opposition from some riparian owners, and with little encouragement or enthusiasm for the project from local authorities. Much of this part of the river has a good navigable depth and has, in the past, been 'tamed' with weirs and extensively used for milling. Four weirs survive upstream of Stratford, at Alveston, Hampton Lucy, Barford and Warwick and, although those at Alveston and Hampton Lucy have been reduced in height, they still manage to retain a surprising depth of water.

Few roads come near the river and, apart from the M40 crossing which allows a tantalizingly brief glimpse of a deep and navigable reach, only two other bridges cross the river between Stratford and Warwick. Both these crossing points occur close below weirs and show shallows quite out of keeping with the character of most of this section. The potential for tourism on the higher reaches of the river is enormous and, upstream of the tourist 'Mecca' of Stratford, the river passes several other attractions such as the National Trust's Charlecote Park, a working watermill at Hampton Lucy and the historic town of Warwick, with its famous castle overlooking the river. Considering the proximity to centres of population, the upper reaches of the river are remote and stunningly beautiful but, for the most part, unseen.

Engineering studies for the proposed link suggest there should be no problems. Six locks are needed to reach Warwick, and a short canal would have to be built to bypass a shallow loop below Barford. The new connection with the Grand Union Canal offers the possibility of a boat lifting structure which could itself be an attraction akin to the Falkirk Wheel.

About 18 months ago a group of like-minded individuals, all of whom had some involvement with the river, began to meet on a regular basis. Some of the members of this group with links to the existing Trusts were already very active in support of the extension. The group in effect became a 'think tank' to explore further ways of pursuing this aim. Others with local interests, concerned with the economic benefits, began to join the group which, about a year ago, became the Avon Committee (September & October 2003 WW).

However, the group has, for some time, seen the need to form a new Trust whose focus is solely concerned with the Avon above Stratford, but which works closely alongside the other existing voluntary bodies. The Avon Committee has disbanded and the Stratford & Warwick Waterways Trust was formally created on 8th March.