

## River Wandle Clean Up 9<sup>th</sup> May 2010



When I arrived at Ravensbury Terrace in Earlsfield some 45 minutes before the 11am start time, the teams from the Wandle Trust and Changing Places were already setting up. Thames 21 staff arrived soon afterward. I decided early on that I would work 'in' the river and therefore picked out a pair of chest-waders & gloves that fitted.

A little after 11 o'clock, Erica Evans from the Wandle Trust, and Alice Hall from Thames 21, briefed the 90 or so volunteers about the day's proceedings. It was a very thorough briefing; however, I must admit that as a first-timer I wasn't sure how the physical aspects of my role would play out (i.e. I was a little uncertain about what I was supposed to collect & remove, and what the mechanics of actually doing it would involve). In the end, it was pretty much a case of jumping into the river and "going for it".

Of the volunteers present, there were a higher number of young people than I expected – particularly boys around 8-12 years and girls around 10-14 years. Overall, there were more females than I expected – the gender split was close to 50-50. Interestingly, there were only a handful of anglers present. For efficiency, volunteers were split into 'bank-side' or 'in-river' groups. The bank-side workers ferried items from the bank to the litter collection area by the road, while the in-river workers shifted items from the river bed to the bank.

For my first stint in the river I was given a blue litter 'trailer' or 'sled' that floated behind me and was tethered to me by a loop of rope. I removed anything from the river that I thought looked like litter or didn't appear 'natural', and tossed it into the floating trailer. The water was much clearer than I expected, so I was able to identify items by sight, with larger items sometimes discovered by my feet (such as car tyres, shopping trolleys, sheets of metal, rolls of carpet etc).

I was startled at how some invertebrate life had attached to objects of litter. I spotted lots of leech-like creatures on a computer disc, for example. Occasionally I discovered evidence of objects being used as a surface on which aquatic plants could grow – I removed a large section of carpet that had been used by an aquatic plant as an 'anchor', as the root system of the plant had threaded itself into the weave of the carpet.



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A strong-sense of teamwork amongst the volunteers was evident from early on. Once the clean-up work started, everyone seemed to busy themselves with particular tasks. Offers to help lift heavy items arrived quickly; sometimes solicited, sometimes not. Alongside me in the river were a middle-aged couple who were scuba divers in their spare time. We worked alongside each other for a while and I think the three of us enjoyed discovering and removing the larger objects from the river bed, fed by natural curiosity and the desire to unearth the biggest/most unusual object!



Removing litter from the river proved a more rewarding/satisfying experience than one might think. Aside from physical exertion, there was an element of problem-solving inherent to the removal of certain objects, such as large pipes buried in the sand or heavy motorbikes. As the collection of litter items swelled in size, so too did our sense of achievement.

The “hard work/manual labour” component was prominent throughout – lots of lifting, getting dirty, or in my case, getting wet. I became particularly adept at falling backwards into the river whilst trying to prise items from the river bed. After two loud and spectacular falls, Theo Pike (Chair of the Wandle Trust) proclaimed I had officially been ‘baptised’ in the Wandle!

At 1.30pm we stopped for a break, and the army of volunteers were supplied with a cup of tea and a biscuit or a slice of cake. Some people with other commitments headed home at this point. There was a presentation of equipment involving two young girls from Burntwood School and Erica and Bella from the Wandle Trust. You can read more about the relationship between the school and the Wandle Trust at <http://www.wandletrust.org/?p=1060>.



The second stint in the river was fairly short, given that lorries were arriving just after 3pm to collect the growing pile of litter and scrap. I witnessed (and was part of) more instances of cooperation and problem-solving, such as lifting and transporting a heavy motorbike out the river and along a narrow section of bank, and hauling a large sheet of metal downstream.

By the time we started loading the lorries with litter my earlier exertions (and two falls into the river!) were catching up with me. Thankfully, the loading process was very efficiently run – lots of people pitched in and seemed to know what they were doing. Metal objects and other

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scrap bits & pieces were dumped into one lorry, while the general litter went in another lorry. According to the Wandle Trust website, we removed 4 tyres, 13 metal pipes, 6 rubber pipes, 4 corrugated plastic sheets, 4 carpets, 3 mattresses, 3 metal cylinders, 3 trellises, 2 industrial bolts of fabric, 2 sheets of wire mesh, 2 pillows, 2 ghetto blasters, 2 tricycles, 2 pushchairs, 2 car seats, 2 coconuts, 1 motor bike, 1 safe, 1 car battery, 1 bucket, 1 lamp post, 1 kitchen sink, 1 bed-head, 1 metal trolley, 1 television, 1 gas canister, 1 toilet, 1 heater, 1 football, 1 washing machine plus around 80 bags of assorted other rubbish...

After all that detritus was accounted for, some of the volunteers hung about for a chat, while others packed up and put away equipment. A core group of volunteers retired to a local pub for a bit of post-event socialisation, and I spotted my scuba-diving friends from earlier enjoying a quiet drink together at another venue.

On reflection, I was mildly surprised at the sense of personal and group accomplishment that I felt at the end of the day. Definitely engaged both the mind and the body!

Two maps of clean-up location appear below – the purple line between the two flags shows the stretch of river cleaned.

