

The DCCRT and a Lengthsman at the Lock

The Dartford and Crayford Creek Restoration Trust was incorporated in March 2016 with the following aims:

- To restore the tidal creeks for navigation
- To improve recreational facilities in Dartford and Bexley Boroughs
- To improve habitat for wildlife
- To provide information on local heritage and wildlife

The origins of the DCCRT can be traced back to an evening in April 2015 when a group of like-minded people met at 'The Hufflers' in Hythe Street to agree on what to do about this forgotten backwater. They all agreed that the banks were overgrown, the place a mess and it was totally uninviting for boats. The first manifestation of the group was as a Facebook Group with the rather longwinded name, 'Friends of the Dartford and Crayford Creeks aka Steam Crane Wharf' – the Steam Crane Wharf bit was later dropped.

One of the first tasks of the new group was to recruit as many volunteers as possible who were willing to roll up their sleeves and pull as much in the way of shopping trolleys, wheelie bins, bent bicycles and lorry tyres out of the Creek as they could. Work groups were set up, led by an experienced former River Keeper and the work was accomplished using a sort of kedge anchor fastened to the end of a coil of rope which was thrown out over the river, the intention being that it would hook on to some part of the offending object which could then be hauled kickin' 'n' screamin' out of the river and up the bank. Shopping trolleys weren't too bad, but the wheelie bin full of mud was like trying to pull an unco-operative elephant out of the river! One chap on an inspiration tried pulling the bin out with his car, but only succeeded in pulling his bumper off. We got the elephant out in the end by forming up as a tug of war team, but a fatalistic acceptance that you would end up covered in mud from head to toe was essential. Of equal importance was ground clearance and litter picking by volunteers on the east bank, from the slipway, to the bascule bridge and

at that time just below the lock. All this work needed to be done to make the Dartford Creek safer and more attractive to boaty visitors.

Our first visitor to the Creek in Spring 2015 was the 36 foot narrow boat 'Pentargon Springer' skippered by the very able and knowledgeable Shaun Liam Wall. The arrival of Shaun and Pentargon was for me like the materialization of Doctor Who in the Tardis – a time traveller travelling into the past. Shaun got his boat over the lock cill and 'parked up' (yes I know) against the wall above the inner lock quay. There were no PLA tide tables available for the Dartford and Crayford navigations so one of the early tasks that Shaun undertook over a period of months was a daily Dartford lock tidal watch. Basically, if you knew the height and time of tide at Tilbury, available from PLA tide tables, you could note the elapsed time and thus the approximate time of high tide and the height of water (in metres) over the lock cill. This is important information for mariners who might wish to progress towards the slipway bridge, the bottom end of the Creek, which is much closer to our beloved town. The following year Shaun took Pentargon down there and created temporary moorings on the berm beside the carpark. It was also Shaun who introduced the notion of 'lengthsmen' to the Group.



Pentargon Springer from the west bank

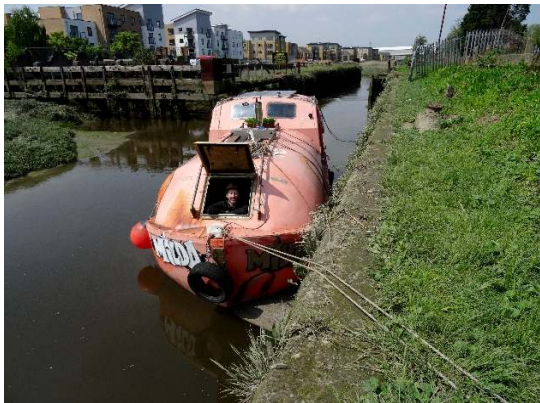


Pentargon from the inner lock quay, overgrown with weeds

Now, I must confess that I'd never heard of Lengthsmen before, but it sounded vaguely romantic and I plunged into good old Wikipedia to find out more. There was quite a lot on the subject but in essence the term 'Lengthsman' was coined in the 1700's and it originally referred to someone who kept a length of road neat and tidy, usually for a few miles between adjacent villages, but Lengthsmen were also employed from the birth of both railways and canals. On the English canal system Lengthsmen were responsible for lengths of towpath and in the absence of a lock-keeper, for locks and their trappings and surroundings – which included the picking up of litter, such as it was in the eighteenth Century.

The job description appealed to me hugely, I love a challenge, and after forty years of neglect, digging out and cleaning up the derelict lock was certainly going to be challenging. And so it came to pass that, figuratively speaking, I took a smart step forward, saluted, and uttered the immortal words, "Please Sir I volunteer to be the Lengthsman for the lock." We shook hands on it; and now, nearly three years later I am still doing it, using only hand tools that would be familiar to an Eighteenth Century Lengthsman (or an Archaeologist).

Pentargon Springer's first trip and lengthy stays in 2015 and 2016 has been followed by a variety of other vessels including several cruisers, a couple of yachts, kayaks, canoes, row boats and dinghies; but especial mention should be made of 'Milda' the converted North Sea Oil lifeboat, skippered by Hamish Campbell, who stayed in the lock during the month of May 2016 preparatory to setting off on an epic three year voyage around the canals and rivers of Europe.



At the present time the eighty five feet in length Thames Sailing Barge 'Decima' is in the lock with owner David Leal and his playful dog Shirna on board.



Decima approaches the Bob Dunn Bridge 20/12/2017



Decima approaches the lock entrance

On Sunday 27th May the DCCRT will be holding its first 'Dartford Nautical Festival' from midday onwards for members of the Public. The main Centre of attraction will be the magnificent Decima but a number of narrow boats from St Pancras Cruising Club will be arriving in the lock the day before to participate. Events will include a Barge Pole procession from The Huffer's Arms at 1 p.m.; a Creek Walk led by our very own Adrian Herbert, from the Hythe Street footpath, starting at 2 p.m.; Morris dancing, and music on board the Decima throughout the evening.

Website: dartfordcrayfordcreek.org.uk

Facebook: Friends of Dartford and Crayford Creek

Hugh Nisbet