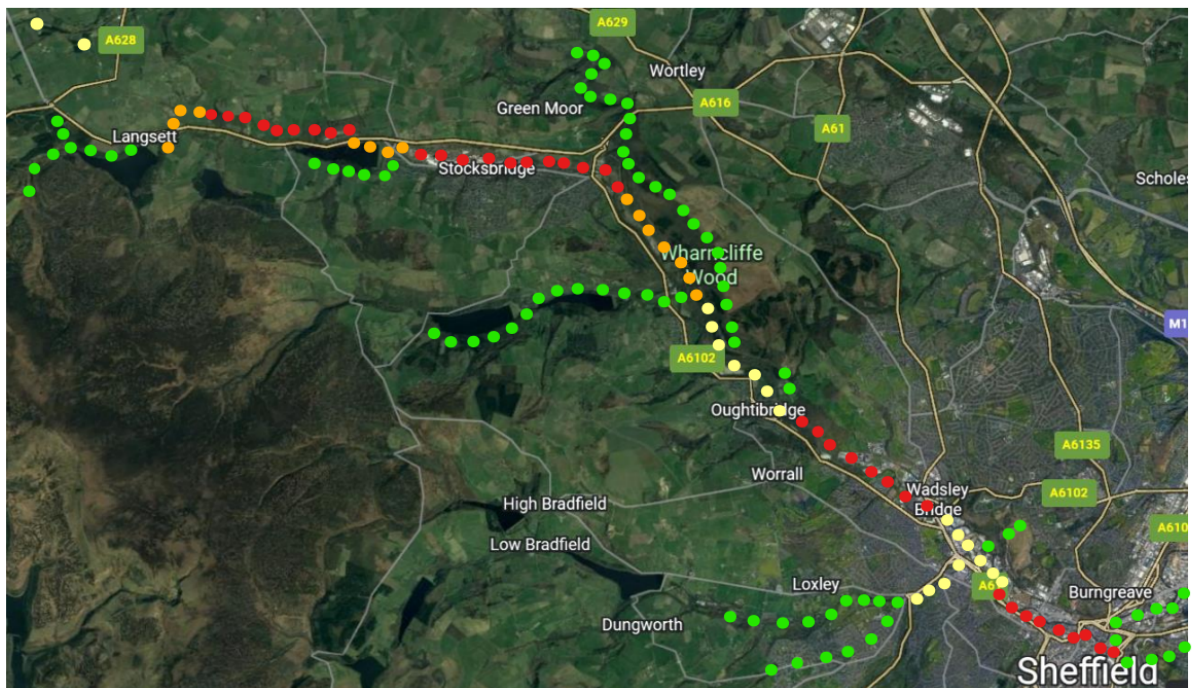




UPPER DON TRAIL TRUST ANNUAL TRUSTEES REPORT

2023



Upper Don Trail Planned Route

● Completed ● Paused/abandoned ● Planned

● Linked Trails

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Overview

The year 2023 saw some significant progress but also some major setbacks. However, the progress is solid and permanent, and the setbacks can we believe be recovered from. Overall extensions to the trail by developers through the planning process are continuing apace while awareness of and interest in the Upper Don Trail continue to grow. The new year 2024 offers some new opportunities which with the help of supporters and partners we can seize. The onus is really on public authorities to recognise this and take advantage of the momentum and offers of help.



'The knock-through' - Little Kelham

Route Development

2023 finally saw the 'knock-through' linking the trail route through **Little Kelham to the Brooklyn Works** section and across the now permanently pedestrianised Ball Street Bridge. Anticipation of this and the other improved walking and cycling routes associated with the Kelham Neepsend Low Traffic Neighbourhood were the factors which led to the abandonment of our Little Kelham Bridge project in 2022.

Further work is anticipated as part of the council's Connecting Sheffield programme to install improved walking and cycling space on **Neepsend Lane** including a new controlled crossing of the hazardous Rutland Road Bridge.

The feasibility study on upgrading the public footpath from **Hillfoot to Herries Road**, funded by Sustrans, was completed by consultants for the council and then unfortunately dismissed as too costly and challenging owing to topography and the presence of large electric and gas lines.



However, we were not shown the report and no input from the Trust or other stakeholders was invited. Only many months later, thanks to local councillors, did we receive the report along with an addendum from Sustrans engineers suggesting that a solution drawing on new materials and techniques could reduce costs significantly.

We believe it would be short-sighted and defeatist if the council was to simply abandon any prospect of improving the existing right of way between the Five Arches on Herries Road and the riverside at Wardsend Cemetery. This section of the Upper Don Trail would hugely improve the link to the riverside from large housing estates like Parson Cross and Southey. It would be especially disappointing given the exciting developments planned alongside this stretch of river.

Key among these is the flagship plan for a proposed **Parkwood Springs Country Park**, which has just been awarded a £19m Levelling Up grant. The Master Plan for the country park has always extended all the way to the riverside. Plans have also been unveiled recently for an exciting environmental education centre at Wardsend Cemetery, and there is imminent investment in flood defences along this stretch of the Don. In total, there is potential for a multi-funded, multi-functional solution to this hugely under exploited stretch of the river. An improved stretch of the Upper Don Trail really should be a vital part of it all! We look forward to taking part in further engagement on how it might all come together.

Meanwhile, we welcomed the council's initiative to put forward major improvements to the existing but still very substandard **Penistone Road** cycleway as a high priority for the next programme of investments from the Department of Transport. However, we fear that this heavily trafficked and polluted route will never feel as safe or attractive as an off-road trail for many users and that both routes need improvement for different outcomes.

At **Oughtibridge Valley** (formerly Oughtibridge Paper Mill) house building has been accompanied by construction of most of the 0.75 km stretch of the Trail within the estate required by planning. Meanwhile we are delighted that design and costing of the long-awaited bridge and cycle footway over the Don to Forge Lane and the village, using a £750k developer contribution, is now finally progressing and council transport planners are cautiously optimistic that any shortfall in funding resulting from inflation can be met from other sources in the coming twelve months subject to further consultation on the details.



Emerging Trail and riverside park at Oughtibridge Valley

The Trust, working with local councillor Lewis Chinchon and residents has made progress towards agreement to opening Yorkshire Water's gate and road which is the main obstacle to safely accessing Forestry England's Open Access **Wharnccliffe Woods** and the Trans Pennine Trail at Plank Gate. It has been heartening to find so many local householders willing to become volunteers to look after the proposed new route.

At the huge former brickworks site at Deepcar, Bloor Homes appear to have almost completed reclamation of the site. This includes new reedbeds to deal with the minewater, and the retaining walls for the 1km new riverside trail are under construction.



Bloor site August 2023 with new reedbeds

Reclamation of the adjoining More Hall tip by Liberty Steels has also begun to accelerate with the prospect of tree planting taking place.

The major disappointment of the year has been the decision of the **Stocksbridge** Town Deal Board to first 'pause' and then abandon most or all of their ambitious £2.75m proposal to complete the four missing sections of the Trail between the mouth of the Ewden Valley and Langsett via More Hall, Fox Valley and Underbank.

Whilst questions remain about how these decisions were arrived at, the Trust and its partners continue to promote a constructive way forward. We are pressing for the sharing of all designs, costings and appraisals by the Town Deal Board team so that we can work collaboratively to find alternative solutions including savings, phasing and new funders.

Ironically, in early 2024, Highways England will complete a £1.75m investment in a new crossing of the Stocksbridge Bypass. This is designed to link two sections of the Trail at Underbank Reservoir and the Little Don Trail through Sheephouse Woods. The latter has been recently upgraded by Barnsley Council as far as Alderman Head Farm. They plan to continue right to Langsett Reservoir when Yorkshire Water and Highways England complete their respective parts under the A616 and through their treatment plant to the dam.

Citizen Science and Water Quality

2023 saw a huge increase in public awareness of river pollution and declining bio-diversity nationally and locally. This resulted from a range of causes including the failings of water companies, misguided agricultural practices, fly tipping and the increase in plastics and 'chemicals of concern' which we are all often unknowingly releasing into our drainage systems.

In Sheffield, volunteer River Ranger groups have become established on the Sheaf, Porter, Meersbrook, Loxley and Rivelin. They are affiliated to local river trusts and work with professionals from the Sheffield-based social enterprise River Stewardship Company and the Don Catchment River Trust.

These initiatives have been welcomed by the Environment Agency as it gives their woefully under-resourced Land and Water Team many valuable extra 'eyes and ears' on the riverbanks.

Several groups and individuals, including anglers and kayakers, have already done good work in their locality to report incidents and carry out water quality and ecological sampling, some for many years. Recently more volunteers have received training in River Fly sampling from DCRT. A number of significant incidents and issues have already been identified and reported.

One of the Trust's objectives in 2024 is to consolidate these activities in the Sheffield Upper Don into a Ranger Group along similar lines to other local rivers. We are therefore actively appealing for volunteers to help us do this.





Our stall at Stocksbridge Fox Valley Market

Public Engagement and Wayfinding

The Trust attended a number of public events with our stall including the Oughtibridge Gala and Fox Valley Market.

We ran two well attended walks in September for the Walking Festival. We staged volunteering events with SOAR and Friends of Wardsend Cemetery on the Wardsend/Club Mill section of the Trail. These included construction of new steps and installation of a new interpretive board on the Toad Hole Dyke .

Our speakers also gave a number of presentations to local community groups.

Working with local arts practice Gotham D, we have begun to draw up a Wayfinding proposal for the whole trail including a common suite of signage, naming strategy, physical and digital interpretation and landmark art installations. It is hoped that partners such as developers will be willing to buy into this common style and strategy to make the emerging Upper Don Trail easier to follow and enjoy.

Getting Involved

There are numerous ways to get involved in the Trust's work, from becoming a paid member and supporting volunteer events, becoming a River Ranger, helping us with our online media, commenting on planning proposals on the river or becoming a Trustee. Please get in touch.

info@upperdontrail.org.uk

