



The Cam Valley Forum is an unincorporated association, registered with HMRC as a charity.

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28 February 2022

CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL: TO THE RIVER PUBLIC ART CONSULTATION

This paper sets out the Cam Valley Forum's response to the [proposals](#) issued on 7 February 2022.



'This proposal is for a 50m ... long sculpture along the riverbank at Laundress Green. The sculpture will flow in and out and over the riverbank, glinting a gold metallic colour, etched with the design of Cambridge Lace and incorporating specially selected bio-diverse plants growing within and around.'

1. The Cam Valley Forum is a voluntary, charitable association of local individuals and groups with diverse environmental, recreational, academic and business interests. Our mission is to be an authoritative voice for the River Cam and all its tributaries: defending its health and wellbeing for its wildlife, environment and everyone that enjoys it; safeguarding its historical and cultural importance; and seeking, through a reasoned and evidence-based approach, changes in policy and practice to enhance the entire Cam catchment.
2. In 2016, the Council approved a project budget of £550,000 for a new public art commission to promote and celebrate the story of the River Cam. The brief required *'an artist to be resident on the river for at least one year and to creatively engage the local community and stakeholders to build a resource and to discover hidden narratives. To explore the river's relationship to the foundation of Cambridge as a city, its ecology and social history through research and community engagement and activity leading to the development of a permanent work to be located somewhere on the river within the city's boundary'*. The appointed Artist in Residence, Caroline Wright, explained her approach at one of our committee meetings but left us puzzled and concerned that this substantial amount of public money might be frittered away.
3. We have visited the exhibition, spoken to the artist, and studied the accompanying information and the [To the River](#) website. For the reasons explained below, we object to the proposal and urge the City Council not to proceed any further with this proposed permanent artwork.

Concept

4. The concept is flawed and seems unrelated to the river's relationship to the foundation of Cambridge as a city, its ecology or social history. The proposed golden stainless steel finish - inappropriate 'bling' - will quickly become grubby and faded. If the intention is to commemorate all those who have kept the University running over the years, it would be better to focus on the washerwomen than on the dirty laundry. The laundry did not wash itself on Laundress Green!

Practicality

5. It is difficult to see how curves might be created from the sheet metal to simulate '*the shape of flowing ripples along and up and over the riverbank*'. What gauge will the sheeting be? Will it be rigid enough to maintain its shape? It seems unlikely that embossed lace patterns will give it a non-slip surface. Stainless steel is difficult both to shape and to emboss. If made of mild steel, it will rust, or if made of aluminium, it risks being stolen by metal thieves.

Justification

6. What is the rationale? Cambridge is not famed for its lace and our academic gowns do not have lace! Why gold? A silver finish would be more appropriate, with the riverbank being adjacent to Silver Street and the pale Portland stone of its Lutyens bridge. The artist stresses the feminine attributes of the work, alluding to the laundresses, fabric, knitting and lace patterns; but is this not an uneasy reference if the sheet steel 'fabric' is draped into a muddy river?

Purpose

7. It has been suggested that this artwork will provide a new riverbank but the existing sheet-piled bank is sound and secure and has no practical need of this embellishment.

Location

8. The proposed siting is on the less frequented northern bank of Sheep's Green and not, as stated, on Laundress Green. It will therefore be seen mainly from a distance, and as such will have limited impact, particularly once it has lost the polished shine that it may have when new. It will be seen more as a long thin grubby metallic ribbon than as a sculpture.

Maintenance

9. The river level does vary; in winter-time the bank is sometimes flooded, in summer the bank can be several feet high. Sadly the river water is frequently turbid with moderate to high levels of pollutants. This means that the surface of the sculpture, particularly below the high water level, will quickly become coated with dirt.
10. It is intended to '*utilise the existing metal sheet piling, that is installed along the bank, as a framework on which the piece will be fixed and formed. The bankside will be backfilled to the work's edge to ensure there are no protrusions or slip/trip hazards*'. Ducks, geese and cattle will excrete onto this horizontal surface of the sculpture. Picnickers (who do often use this bank in the summer when Laundress Green is busy) will sit on it, and may leave litter.
11. It is unreasonable to expect the Parks Department to clean the sculpture and maintain its shining appearance as the artist intends. It might perhaps be hinged, to enable it to be cleaned from the land, but whatever the mechanism it will surely be difficult to lever up from the riverbank.

Safety

12. The safety of the installation, both to the general public and to maintenance staff, needs very careful consideration. There is a danger that risk assessments will require mitigation measures that will further detract from its appearance.

Vulnerability

13. The installation may become damaged through impacts from punts, metal theft, vandalism, or even by cattle. Many consider that, as far as possible, nature should be left as nature.

Artistic merit

14. The resident artist was vague regarding her artistic intentions. Will there be any progression in the detail of the folds or facets or ripples over the 50 metres? The visual does not show a coherent purpose across the length. It would seem that what is produced will largely be decided by the steel fabricator. We are uncertain of the artistic merit of the installation.

Environment

15. The intention is that *'a range of bio-diverse plants will be planted at specific points along the length of the work on the landside'*. There is even a suggestion that the plants might grow out of pockets in the sculpture. Such planting may detract from the attractiveness of the traditional grass meadow above the riverbank. This artificial sheet metal intervention will contribute nothing to the much-valued ecology of the Sheep's Green Nature Reserve.

16. One suggestion would be to create a new scrape or ditch on the Green, linked to the river, with stands of native locally-sourced plants such as marsh marigolds (yellow), (purple) loosestrife, and (cream) meadow-sweet; these would provide bursts of colour at different times of the year and benefit biodiversity. This would provide a good setting for an appropriate sculpture and would be a more meaningful way of celebrating the natural and cultural value of the river.

Heritage

17. Sheep's Green Nature Reserve is a much-loved area and steeped in history. This unnatural and inappropriate proposal does nothing to preserve or enhance this area.

The website

18. There is little of substance on the [To the River](#) website, which sets out the outputs of the commission to date:

- The [Knit for the river](#) video describes how undyed knitted squares of wool were stitched onto a roll of coir matting and then submerged between stakes to create a natural revetment to the riverbank near Byron's Pool. The knitted wool contributes nothing to the revetment beyond a vague artistic notion, is unseen once installed and not intended to last.
- [FLOW on Vimeo](#) describes how a bottle of water was taken from the river near Bait's Bite Lock, carried upstream and emptied near Byron's Pool. We formally objected to this project at the time given the risk of re-infesting the upper Cam with Floating Pennywort, as we had just completed a major project to eradicate this invasive weed from the upper Cam.
- 'What Colour is the River?' was *'an instagram/social media initiative exploring the colour of the river through photographs of the River Cam water'*. The superficiality of this exercise somewhat jars with our ongoing 'citizen science' [research](#) into river pollutants and turbidity.
- The only other significant output appears to be a study with ARU of the etchings of Gwen Raverat. This identifies locations from where she sketched and relates them to current photographs of the viewpoints.

Art that celebrates the River Cam

19. We initially supported the idea of the Council funding art that would celebrate the river and create a lasting and positive legacy. Our members are passionate and knowledgeable about the Cam and its tributaries but our offer of constructive involvement was not taken up. We suggested a number of sites and themes for the art installations, including a life-size sculpture on Laundress Green depicting the washerwomen at work. Many cities around the world have such sculptures and they are often much enjoyed by locals and visitors alike.

20. We applaud the Council for contributing to the £400,000 allocated for the Greater Cambridge Chalk Stream Project. This money will be put to good use in restoring the health of our valued rivers. We ask the Council to re-evaluate how the Cam Art budget of £550,000 of public money has been used, and to use what funds remain to commission at least one high-quality art work that will create a lasting and positive legacy and be appreciated and enjoyed for many years.
