

# **The New River Action Group**

(Registered Charity No. 803282)

The New River Action Group is the overall federation of more than forty local amenity, special interest and residents' associations which jointly campaigned on the New River when it was threatened with being 'terminated' north of Enfield 25 years ago. The Friends of the New River was set up at the same time, and is the organisation which individuals rather than groups join. It was and still is an important distinction, because the flowing river today covers some 25 plus miles (37 if you include the now non-flowing parts of the old course), and the aim was that the direction of the campaign should be determined as much by the groups in the federation as by the Friends. All of the member groups had their own memberships of scores, often hundreds, occasionally a thousand plus, and many of the larger ones were and are highly influential. The river flows through their local areas and it was important that these organisations were just as much in the driving seat as the Friends of the New River.

The New River, as they say, is neither new nor a river but is in fact an artificial watercourse constructed in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century to bring water from Chadwell Spring, near Ware in Hertfordshire, to London. Most of it is still in use today under the ownership of Thames Water. The working watercourse now ends at Stoke Newington and the section between here and the original head at Sadler's Wells has been largely filled in, but it is still possible to trace the old course through streets and parks where fragments of the "river" survive as decorative water features.

The New River was constructed between 1602 and 1613. Edmund Colthurst proposed the idea of this fresh water supply for Londoners in 1602, obtaining a charter from King James I in 1604 to enable its construction by channeling water from Chadwell Spring and, when a greater flow was needed, diverting water from the River Lea nearby.

After digging the first two-mile stretch, Colthurst ran out of money. Construction was restarted in 1609 by Hugh Myddelton, a London goldsmith, investor and entrepreneur. Myddelton added capital and his considerable commercial skill and the project made rapid progress. However, nearing completion the project again ran short of funds. Myddelton convinced King James I to invest fresh equity in return for 50% of the company, resulting in one of England's earliest public/private infrastructure partnerships. The New River was completed and continues to supply fresh water to London today, remaining as an embodiment of Colthurst's vision and Myddelton's energy and entrepreneurship.

After its opening official on 29 September 1613 Myddelton gave Colthurst some shares in the New River Water Company, which continued to supply the capital with water until 1902, when it was taken over by the Metropolitan Water Board. This in turn was taken over in 1973 by Thames Water.

The New River is the only river in the UK (or perhaps anywhere?) to be wholly owned by a private company. It was this company which proposed in 1985 to close the New River. Once the Chadwell Spring had ceased to flow into its channel it would have eventually dried up, been filled in (like the parts in Enfield and Islington when the course was straightened and shortened in 1859) and an enormous amount of valuable land would have been made available for sale, and eventually housing. This green corridor, so valuable for wildlife, would have just disappeared off the map.

It was against this background that the New River Action Group was formed, and eventually succeeded, along with others, in stopping this and went on to obtain access for walkers. Thames Water had believed that their impressive new ring main would store sufficient water in the London aquifer (the chalk layer beneath the city), but they were wrong. After only a few years London's increasing population meant that once more extra water supplies were needed and new pumping stations were built along the route of the New River to extract water when needed and to pump it back when the river level sank too low. The walkers' route, The New River Path, was developed between 1991 and 2003 by a partnership including Thames Water, Groundwork, the New River Action Group and others. Much of the route is along service paths beside the watercourse that have been opened by permission, and walkers are asked to comply with the safety notices displayed at access points. Some sections follow public rights of way, and the "heritage" section south of Stoke Newington uses paths through parks and along streets.

NRAG continues to monitor riverside developments and planning applications and ensure this wonderful amenity is kept for Londoners and others to enjoy.