

A day in the life...

Heather Burden guides visitors around the River Severn's historic Diglis Island and its project to save an endangered fish species

INTERVIEW **CAROLINE ROBERTS**

🕒 6.30am

Billy the cat lets me know in no uncertain terms that it's his breakfast time. In any case, I've been awake and reading since 5.30am. At almost 78, I find I need a lot less sleep than I used to and I've usually got a gripping psychological thriller on the go.

🕒 8.30am

After breakfast it's time to head off on the 25-mile drive to Worcester from my home in the north Worcestershire village of Alvechurch. It's a long way to go for a volunteering role but it's worth it. As a small child I'd come with my father to witness the spectacle of the salmon leaping the Diglis weir on their way to their spawning grounds upriver, so when I heard about Unlocking the Severn, the Canal & River Trust's project to open up the river to other migrating fish, I knew I wanted to support it.

Before the weir was built in Victorian times, hundreds of thousands of twaite shad, the project's target fish, travelled up the river from their ocean home to spawn. However, it's a fish built for bursts of high speed, and its forked tail means it can't leap the weir, so it began spawning in the lower reaches where the water conditions are less favourable and there are many predators. The shad

is now on the Red List of endangered species, so the Canal & River Trust has built a fish pass – a series of C-shaped pools and channels that enable it to get past the weir. What makes the project unique is the underwater viewing gallery that allows visitors to watch the fish using it.

🕒 9.30am

Visitors arrive for the first tour of the day – I usually volunteer twice a week and do two back-to-back tours in the morning. Today it's a group from a Severn cruise boat that's added us to its itinerary, so I ready myself to field lots of questions as I know they're going to be fascinated by the industrial heritage as well as the natural environment. There's certainly plenty to see on the island: the massive double-lock gates built in the 1840s to maintain navigation after the weir was constructed; the old forge that's still being used as a metal workshop today; the chapel; and the historic crane that's towered over the island for 70 years.

One thing that everyone loves is the underwater viewing window. Although the shad are only in the river for a month around May and June, we have a motion sensor camera to capture footage that's projected onto a wall, and visitors can catch sight of the 27 other species using the pass, including the snake-like lamprey.



Heather now volunteers at the weir she used to visit as a child

🗨️ Volunteering at Diglis Island has been a life changer. I get so much out of it

🕒 11am

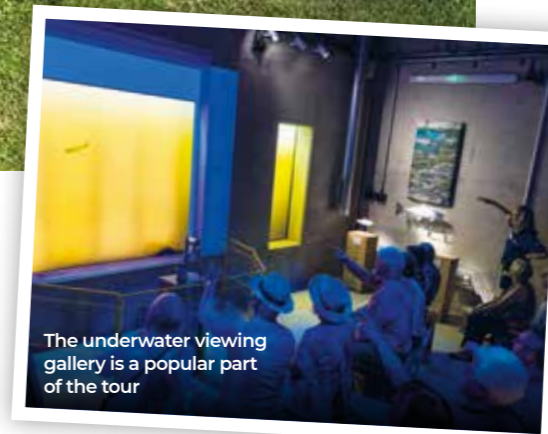
I manage to grab a quick coffee before the second tour group, this time a mix of the general public. When I'm leading a tour I prefer to wing it rather than reel off a script. We have so much information and you don't want to overload the visitors, so I like to get a feel for the group and tailor my talk to their interests.

🕒 1pm

After the morning tours are over, I meet up with the other guides for lunch and

Siou Coleman; Pete Medicott

I always say every day is a school day as you're guaranteed to learn something new on every tour. There's often one question that comes out of left field and it usually comes from a child, like the one who asked when fish sleep. That completely floored me as I had no idea, so we both agreed to google it later. I love it when local people come on the tour as they often bring their anecdotes and childhood memories of the island. We had one 90-year-old chap who was an apprentice here when it was a centre of lock gate manufacture, and he came back afterwards and gave a talk about it.



The underwater viewing gallery is a popular part of the tour

we walk down to the marina where there's a canal boat serving food. We're a sociable bunch and I've made so many good friends through volunteering here. Everyone's proud to be a DIG, a Diglis Island Guide, and of what Unlocking the Severn has achieved. The fish pass has only been open for four years but scientists who tagged some of the fish have found that they're already spawning 10 miles up the river.

🕒 3pm

A quick diversion for some food shopping and then home for a stroll round the garden. I have quite a large ornamental garden and I also grow my own fruit and vegetables so I'm continually harvesting. Earlier in the year it was raspberries, then there were courgettes and runner beans followed by purple sprouting broccoli. I also had a bumper harvest of garlic that I put to dry out in my shed.

🕒 6pm

After dinner, I call a friend I used to work with when I was an admin manager in an NHS psychiatric unit. We make plans for our Sunday outing, which is usually a long walk or a visit to a garden. There are so many beautiful places in this part of the country. Then I decamp to the lounge and watch television for an hour or two before bed. Soaps are my guilty pleasure, although I do enjoy a good drama too.

🕒 10.30pm

Time for bed. As I drift off to sleep I reflect on the morning's events and any new information I've picked up. Volunteering at Diglis Island has been a life changer. I get so much out of it: I love learning and passing on that knowledge, as I feel it's enriching other people's lives too. Plus, I'm out in the countryside surrounded by nature. What's not to love about that? It heals the soul.

Find out more about volunteering with the Canal & River Trust – from greeting visitors to helping maintain towpaths – at www.canalrivertrust.org.uk/volunteer.