

RIVER LEA ART TRAIL

Funded by UK Government

East Herts Council

Lee Valley
For nature, sport and discovery



WELCOME TO THE RIVER LEA ART TRAIL



The River Lea Art Trail is a vibrant celebration of community, sustainability, and the natural beauty that connects the towns of Hertford and Ware. What began as a passion project to revitalise our local towpath has transformed into an open-air gallery, turning functional resting points into meaningful works of art.

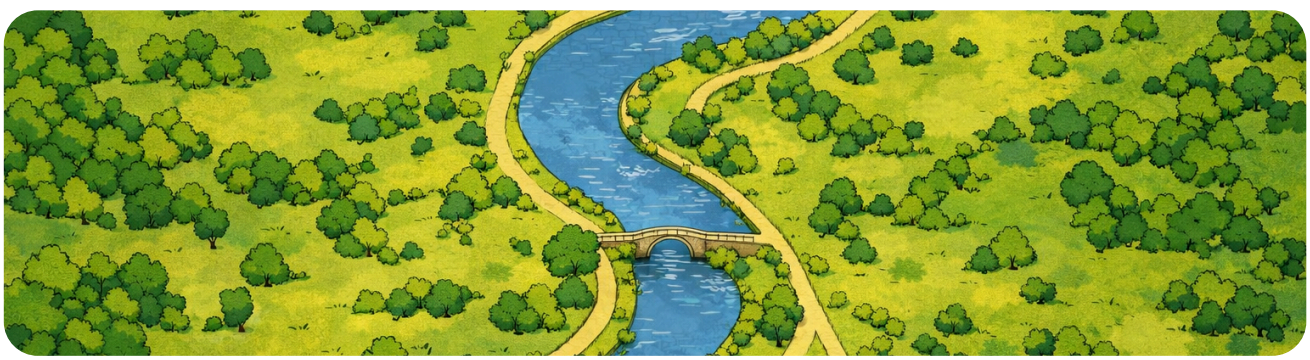
This project was born from a desire to breathe new life into the riverside. Many of the benches along this well-loved route were in desperate need of care. Through a unique collaboration, we have been able to upcycle the majority of these assets rather than replace them all. This effort was made possible by funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund via East Herts Council, with generous support from the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority, Hertfordshire County Council and a private sponsor.

At the heart of this trail is a true community spirit. We are incredibly grateful to the Ware Mens Shed, whose talented members volunteered their time to strip, repair, and ensure the integrity of the benches before any paint touched the wood. Their hard work ensures these benches are not only beautiful but sturdy and accessible for years to come.

The designs you see today were selected from over 40 incredible entries. The eleven chosen artists have each brought a unique style to the trail, with every bench telling a different story inspired by the wildlife, heritage, and spirit of the River Lea. From intricate hand-painted insects and birds to abstract patterns reflecting the river's history, these pieces offer a moment of reflection for commuters and leisure seekers alike.

We invite you to wander the path, discover each hidden gem, and enjoy the River Lea in a whole new light.

JADE DAWN
PROJECT MANAGER & RIVER LEA ART TRAIL ARTIST



“THESE BENCHES OFFER IMPORTANT SPACES FOR REST AND REFLECTION, WHILST ALSO CELEBRATING THE HISTORY AND IDENTITY OF THE LOCAL AREA BY BREATHING NEW LIFE INTO THIS BELOVED TOWPATH”

The River Lea Art Trail provides comfort, enjoyment and education to regular visitors of this towpath, as well as to those exploring our district for the first time. This has been an ambitious and collaborative project, fulfilled only thanks to the diligent efforts of the local community, local councillors, council officers and members of the public.

Firstly, I must thank Jade Richardson on behalf of myself and of all those who go on to spend time along the River Lea Art Trail for her work on the project; her determination and vision have been instrumental in realising this unique installation of art. I am proud and grateful to have been afforded the privilege of helping Jade select the diverse themes and artwork styles for the trail.

Equally important to the River Lea Art Trail has been the Ware Men's Shed, as without their volunteers and expertise throughout the process of refurbishing, decorating and reinstalling the benches, this project would not have been possible.

I would like to extend my gratitude to the brilliant artists who have ensured that these benches will serve their community well, whilst also beautifully reflecting the history and identity of the local area. I am sure they will become well-cherished, offering joy and respite for many, many years to come. I am excited to have the additional support of Age UK through their Take A Seat campaign, with the benches giving people of all ages the opportunity to take a break and enjoy the characterful scenery.

The feedback and enthusiasm already being shown towards the artists and their benches by passersby during installation has been delightful to hear. It’s wonderful to know that the River Lea Art Trail has already started to have a positive impact on our local communities, and that it will continue to do so for a long while yet.

COUNCILLOR VICKY GLOVER-WARD
EAST HERTS COUNCIL
EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR PLANNING AND GROWTH





MEET THE WARE MENS SHED

Ware Mens Shed provides a community space for men to connect, converse and create.

A registered charity (number 1194281), they are based at Cemetery Lodge, Watton Road, Ware, SG12 0AX and meet there on Mondays from 10am.

Volunteers from Ware Men's Shed offered their hands, tools and advice to the River Lea Art Trail, helping the artists involved by working to remove the benches that were due to be upcycled, transporting them and reinstalling them.

You can join the Ware Men's Shed here: membermojo.co.uk/waremensshed

For more information please contact Jim Turner at jim@waremensshed.org.uk



"The Men's Shed in Ware is a place for mostly retired men, and we do a lot of woodworking projects, but most importantly, we're there to have a chat and a cup of tea!"

"Lots of men retire, leave work, and then don't have any natural community to go to, often becoming very lonely, especially if they are bereaved or have some long-term health problems. The shed provides a place for them to meet like-minded people and just natter basically!"

John Palombo, Ware Mens Shed

START THE TRAIL IN WARE WITH BENCH 1 NEAR THE CANAL & RIVER TRUST VISITOR CENTRE

OR

START THE TRAIL IN HERTFORD WITH BENCH 10 NEAR THE OLD BARGE PUB AND MAKE YOUR WAY TO WARE



BENCH 1 PAINTED BY CLAIRE WATERFALL-ALLEN

"Seeing those bold flowers bloom again, in a new place, fills me with happiness."



Hi, I'm Claire — an artist who has always been drawn to bold colours, big spaces, and the joy of creating with my hands.
My journey began in art college and continued with a degree in Product Design, but the real spark came when I started working as a scenic artist for SMTV, Nickelodeon, and the Disney Channel. Painting for television introduced me to the thrill of large-scale work and bright, expressive colour — the perfect beginning for a lifelong love of mural painting.

Over the years, I've balanced my creative life with a career in education, teaching Art and DT and now working as a teaching assistant. During school holidays, I run an Art Club at Courtyard Arts, a space where children can discover their artistic confidence and experiment freely. I also craft bespoke clay families — small, heartfelt sculptures created for people who want something truly personal. I'm at my happiest with a paintbrush in my hand or rolling out clay, completely absorbed in colour and making. My friends even call me "Rainbow", which feels just about right.



The design for my bench grew from a mural I painted on a playground wall at the school where I once worked. I painted flowers — big, bright, joyful flowers — to represent the growth of the children, connected to the cartoon-like styles and artists we explored in our art lessons. When the school closed in July, the mural was lost, and saying goodbye to it felt like losing a little piece of my heart. So when the opportunity to paint a bench appeared, I knew instantly what I wanted to bring back. Seeing those bold flowers bloom again, in a new place, fills me with happiness.

My influences include David Hockney, Michael Craig-Martin, Georgia O'Keeffe, Pablo Picasso, Vincent van Gogh, and Keith Haring — artists who share my love of strong colour, expressive shapes, and playful simplicity.
I'm delighted to be part of this project and work alongside some amazing local artists and I hope my work brings a burst of colour and joy to our local area.

@CLAYFULFAMILIES

Activity 1:
How many flowers can you count on the bench?

Activity 2:
How many colours can you see on the bench?

What3words: festivity.riches.cope



BENCH 2 PAINTED BY ANASTASIA OLAROU

"Connection, joy in the world and celebrating what is important is key to me."



I am a Hertford artist, inspired by nature and my materials. My bench celebrates local insects - their diversity and hard work which play an essential part in our lives.

Until I had paused to paint the little guys, I hadn't truly seen them or how splendid they were, they are just so small.

Now I see them everywhere!



OLAROUART.CO.UK

Sadly, we don't all have gardens, and time to look closely. Through these larger than life paintings and accompanying poem, I hope people can discover the secret world of our local insects without needing a garden or magnifying glass. Perhaps it'll inspire someone to feel curious enough to peek under a hedge or behind a bench next time they are out and about.

Mostly I am interested in playing with illusion and the sense of wonder. After studying prop making at the University of Hertfordshire I worked for the film industry. From there I focused on merging 2D and 3D work. Moving to Hertford, I found the thriving art community and the Courtyard Arts Centre where I now teach oil painting.

Most recently I have shown my work at local open exhibitions and the Royal Society of British Artists Annual Show and my "Wilderlust" exhibition in collaboration with Liva Vilnite. However, work that has felt particularly special has gone past gallery walls and involved the wider community, like taking part in Sky Arts Portrait Artist of the Year and Tom Croft's "Portraits for heroes". This bench has been that kind of special project for me and has made me feel truly a part of my town. I am very grateful to have been involved.

Connection, joy in the world and celebrating what is important is key to me. Insects, biodiversity and the connections between us are essential to our future and I certainly hope they bring as much joy to you as they did to me.

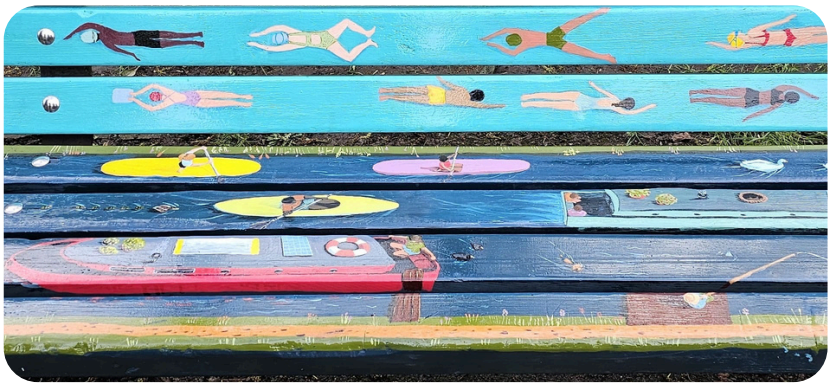
Activity 3: What is a difference between a dragonfly and a damselfly? Can you find them on the bench?

Activity 4: How many insects can you see on the bench?



BENCH 3 PAINTED BY VICTORIA PALASTANGA

"Colour perfectly placed can breach people's defences and make them feel something profound"



Victoria Palastanga is a contemporary artist living in Ware, Hertfordshire. She paints colourful emotive free form paintings including striking abstracts, evocative landscapes, and sumptuous dreamscapes. Colour is the theme that runs through them all.



@VICTORIAPALASTANGA

Palastanga grew up in Lincolnshire and then completed her BA in Fine Art at Newcastle before moving to London. There she had an art studio at Cable Street, Limehouse. She then lived in Amsterdam for three years where she studied at the Grafische Lyceum and was an active member of the art scene there. She is currently working as a children's book designer and has designed and illustrated many books with Penguin Random House publishers. She is married with two children. Painting has been her mainstay throughout her life, and she has exhibited all over the country, more recently in London and Hertfordshire.

Activity 5:
How many swimmers can you see?

Activity 6:
Can you spot a rainbow unicorn?



BENCH 4 PAINTED BY BECKY HARLEY

Becky's bench invites visitors to pause, sit, and take a moment to enjoy the view.



Becky Harley is a Hertfordshire-based artist and Certified Zentangle Teacher (CZT) who runs Ivy's Corner, a creative business dedicated to helping people slow down, relax, and reconnect with their creativity through mindful drawing. Her work centres around the Zentangle Method - a simple, structured form of abstract art created using repetitive patterns.

Zentangle is designed to be accessible to everyone, regardless of artistic experience. The method is built on four 'elemental strokes' that resemble the letters I, C, S and O.



By combining these simple strokes of the pen, anyone can create beautiful and intricate patterns one line at a time. Because the process focuses on the act of drawing rather than the end result, many people find it calming and meditative, helping to quiet busy minds while creating something beautiful.

Traditionally, Zentangle artwork is created on small square pieces of paper known as "tiles." As a small nod to this tradition, the top corner of the bench features a classic beginner's tile design, showing how a few simple patterns can come together to create a finished composition. Each section of the bench has been carefully hand-painted using patterns inspired by the Zentangle method. Some of the patterns used in the design were chosen for their flowing, organic qualities, echoing the movement of the river and the natural shapes of plants and grasses found along the riverside path. The monochrome palette reflects the traditional Zentangle approach of working with pen, and graphite shading on white paper, and on the tan coloured surface adding highlights to bring patterns to life even further.

Becky's bench invites visitors to pause, sit, and take a moment to enjoy the view. Becky hopes it encourages people to slow down, notice the patterns around them, and perhaps realise that if they can draw I, C, S and O, they can create patterns like these too.

IVYS-CORNER.COM

Activity 7:
Which patterns look like plants to you?

Activity 8:
Can you spot where the pen strokes 'i, c, s and o' appear in the different patterns?



BENCH 5 PAINTED BY REBEKAH WEATHERHEAD

Rebekah hopes her bench will help raise awareness of vole conservation efforts across Hertfordshire



Multimedia artist Rebekah can often be found exploring the outdoors with her camera. Her passion for wildlife photography also provides the inspiration for much of her work! She enjoys experimenting with different styles, but particularly likes using acrylics, watercolour and fine liners, to produce eye catching, abstract and illustrative mixed media pieces. She can also be found creating animal sculptures from clay in the pottery studio at Artshed Arts in Ware.



@PAINTS_AND_PENGUINS

Her bench design is inspired by the time she has spent volunteering with Lee Valley and the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust, assisting with water vole (Arvicola Amphibius) surveys. Fortunate to have spent time with these shy creatures, she enjoys observing and photographing their behaviour. Sadly, despite their importance in our aquatic ecosystems, Water vole populations are in decline and Rebekah hopes her bench will help raise awareness of vole conservation efforts across Hertfordshire and encourage more people to get involved.

The bench is divided into four illustrative sections, telling the story of water vole life through the changing seasons, from the first Water vole pups born in the Spring to them spending much of their time underground sleeping (in torpor) during winter. It also depicts the main indicators of water vole presence used when surveying – latrines (tic-tac shaped droppings) and feeding signs (piles of grasses left by the voles which are cut at a 45° angle). Her bench also features other protected river/canal species, the white-clawed crayfish, the European eel and the Bullhead.

Activity 9:
How many water voles can you count?

Activity 10:
Can you find the signs that a water vole might leave behind?



BENCH 6 PAINTED BY JADE RICHARDSON

Jade is the founder of Jade Dawn Designs (formerly Upcycle Antics). Her creative journey began with a love for upcycling furniture, taking tired pieces and giving them a new lease of life, which eventually evolved into abstract painting and teaching creative workshops.

Having lived in Ware for five years, the river has become Jade's ultimate escape route and sanctuary. It was during these walks that the idea for revamping the river benches first sparked.



JADEDAWN.COM

"This art trail has become so much more than I ever imagined, adding colour, supporting local artists, and spreading joy in the community!"



After a successful two-year residency at & by Donna Reeves shop on Ware High Street, Jade now works from her home studio on fun projects just like this one. This trail started as a personal passion project; overseeing it from concept to reality has been a huge, rewarding challenge. Jade is incredibly proud of this project and to have her work featured alongside such a talented group of local artists as well. As Jade puts it: "This art trail has become so much more than I ever imagined, adding colour, supporting local artists, and spreading joy in the community!"

Jade's work is abstract and driven by feeling. She prefers not to over plan, instead letting the colours and the medium flow to guide her. Jade is known for being partial to a bit of gold, so she chose to tap into the River Lea's history for her bench design. Back in the 19th century, the river was dubbed a "golden age" for leisure, and the name "Lea" itself comes from a Celtic word meaning "bright" or "light."

Using gold as a base layer as a nod to this heritage, the design is split to represent two worlds: the bottom half symbolises the flowing water, while the backrest reflects the environment above. To create the intricate patterns, Jade used a specialist "faux malachite" technique. The effect mirrors both the ripples in the water and the wood grain of the trees lining the banks. Through this blend of abstract art and traditional faux finishing, Jade hopes to tell the story of the River Lea as a source of power and community, while providing a vibrant, modern space for reflection on the towpath.

Activity 11:
How many slats are on this bench?

Activity 12:
How many ripples can you count?



BENCH 7 PAINTED BY JAMES PAGE

James' work explores the relationship between people and animals, particularly those we might pass in everyday life but often don't stop to fully notice



James Page is a self-taught artist whose work centres on wildlife, animals, and nature, with a focus on capturing presence, character, and quiet moments of connection. Living on a houseboat on the river in Hertford with his rescue dog Benji, his surroundings continue to shape a practice rooted in close observation of the natural world.

After leaving a corporate career in marketing over a decade ago, James began teaching himself to paint while travelling, developing his skills through practice rather than formal training.



DOGONCANVAS.COM

What began as a personal pursuit has grown into a full-time career, with his work now hanging in homes across the world. Alongside commissioned pet portraits, he continues to explore wildlife and landscape painting as an evolving part of his practice.

His work explores the relationship between people and animals, particularly those we might pass in everyday life but often don't stop to fully notice. Whether painting a domestic pet or a wild animal, his aim is to portray each subject as an individual, with its own presence, character, and point of view. In doing so, he hopes to encourage a shift in perception: to see wild animals not as distant or anonymous, but as beings worthy of the same attention, connection and protection we so naturally give to the pets we love.

This bench, created for the Riverside Arts Trail, brings that idea into a public setting. Featuring three of the majestic predators found along the riverside — the Fox, Red Kite, and Owl — the piece is designed to reveal itself across the slats as the viewer moves past or sits down. In doing so, it acts as a window into the possibility of what can be seen in the surrounding environment, if one stops and takes the time to look.

Activity 13:
What do foxes, kites and owls all have in common?

Activity 14:
What animal on this bench is nocturnal?



BENCH 8 PAINTED BY MIRANDA VEDA JENNINGS

> *"When deciding what to paint on my bench, I knew immediately it would include herons. I included two for joy!"*



Miranda Veda Jennings
is a multidisciplinary artist and therapist based on the border of Hertfordshire and Essex.

My own practice combines painting, printmaking, drawing and collage. With a rich background in crafts for children through workshops and videos, it's no surprise that families were my first thought about users for my bench.



MIRANDAJENNINGS.COM

I'm a disabled mum and benches actually play a big part of my life. I love to walk in nature, wetlands, along canals but my walking is limited by joint pain and fatigue. To make experiencing the natural world on foot accessible I need places to rest and pace myself.

I walk and adventure a lot with my young children ever since they were born and sometimes it's hard to convince my little explorers to sit and stop with me! I have favourite benches that help me where the location is rich in interest for the children, something to keep them engaged and occupied (along with snacks!) while I rest. When designing this bench I had this in mind, something bright, joyful, family focussed that had an impact from a distance but also enough smaller detail up close to engage explore. Herons are magical to me, I always try and spot them on my walks and I've taken them to be a sign of a "good day". When deciding what to paint on my bench, I knew immediately it would include herons. I included two for joy!

I hope people are encouraged to stop and slow down by my bench, to find a moment to take in their surroundings and simply immerse themselves in our stunning natural world available on our doorsteps.

Activity 15:
Place your finger at the tip of a herons beak. Trace your finger down the head, neck, body and legs to get a feel of how long these birds are. Herons often bend their necks in, but are about 100cm tall when standing!



BENCH 9 PAINTED BY LIVA VILNITE

"Through a child's curiosity, the world reveals itself more slowly and attentively."



Originally from Latvia, I grew up between forest and sea and have drawn since childhood, later earning a BA in Crossmedia Storytelling in Tallinn, Estonia. After 10 years as an Editing Director in documentary TV, I returned to illustration and completed an MA at Ravensbourne University London. Now based in Hertford, I work across book illustration and motion graphics, alongside nature-driven personal projects that keep me connected to my roots.

I am an illustrator whose practice centres on joyful, colourful storytelling. I am not afraid to place ten rainbows in one setting if that is what the story asks for.



My work draws inspiration from folk art, whose simplicity, humility and honesty I deeply admire. Folk traditions speak in a visual language that feels grounded and accessible — something that feels close to everyday life and to the people who encounter it.

Becoming a mother opened an entirely new world for me, one filled with small discoveries, quiet observations and everyday wonder. Walks that might once have felt ordinary suddenly became moments of exploration: noticing a leaf, a bird, a tiny creature on the ground, or the changing colours of the sky. This sense of curiosity and attentiveness lies at the heart of my bench.

The design celebrates colourful simplicity while remaining humble in spirit. Inspired by the native flora and fauna around us, each slat tells a small part of a larger story about the natural world. The first slat focuses on what lives above us — flowers and blossoms, often the first things that catch our eye. Beneath them appear layers of foliage and plants growing closer to the ground. Further along come the creatures that live on the surface of the water, followed by those that inhabit the world beneath it. The final slat enters the realm of night — a place where shapes soften and imagination grows, where we see the least and therefore imagine the most.

I hope the bench can feel like a quiet companion. As a mother, I remember how long and lonely some of those early walks could feel, and how silent the world sometimes seemed. A bench can become a small friend along the way — a place to rest, gather one's thoughts and simply be for a moment.

LIIVIIART.COM

Activity 16:
How many fish can you count?

Activity 17:
Which slat on this bench is your favourite?

What3words: last.keeps.brush



BENCH 10 PAINTED BY DONNA REEVES

> *"I hope the piece encourages people to pause, look closely, and connect with the environment"*

I'm Donna, a mosaic and ceramic artist, teacher and owner of the &byDonnaReeves studio and shop in Ware, Herts. I'm absolutely delighted to have been selected for the River Lea Art Trail, a project that feels especially close to my heart - not just as an artist, but as someone deeply connected to nature and our local countryside.

After completing my Art degree, I was awarded a scholarship to study Roman mosaics in Ravenna, Italy - the historic heart of mosaic art.

I launched DR Mosaics in 1996 and, over the past 30 years, have created hundreds of projects in public spaces, schools and private commissions, including work in the US and Dubai. Alongside this, I worked at the BBC in the Scenic Art Department painting large-scale backdrops, and later as an Art Director for film sets - experiences that shaped my sense of composition, storytelling and scale.





ANDBYDONNAREEVES.COM

Teaching has always been at the heart of my practice. As a qualified teacher with over 30 years' experience, I run regular creative sessions and workshops to share my skills and inspire creativity in the community. In 2024, I opened &byDonnaReeves on Baldock Street as both a working studio and shop, and it has since become a welcoming creative hub for many guests of all ages and over 84 exhibiting artists.

The River Lea route between Ware and Hertford holds deep personal meaning. During the Covid pandemic, my family and I walked it regularly, finding comfort in the beauty of nature, the river and its wildlife. Spotting a Kingfisher there felt like a moment of pure magic.

My bench design draws directly from both these experiences and my childhood. As a child, I would cycle through the countryside with my sketchpad, drawing birds and immersing myself in nature, while also being captivated by the Flower Fairies books and their magical illustrations by Cicely Mary Barker. These early influences continue to shape my work and are central to this piece. The slatted bench top will feature a painted river scene with a kingfisher and the Ruddy darter dragonfly, both native to this stretch of the river. The surrounding tree stump forms will be transformed into small, handcrafted clay fairy houses, with hidden details that invite discovery. I hope the piece encourages people to pause, look closely, and connect with the environment.



BENCH 11 PAINTED BY SIMON BALLE

"Being part of this community art project gives students a wider appreciation of art outside of the classroom, creating a tangible legacy they can return to for decades to come"

'Simon Balle All -Through School' is in the heart of the local area. Reflecting this deep connection to our heritage, our school house system proudly takes its names from our local rivers. We are delighted to unveil our contribution to the community bench River Lea Art trail, a project celebrating the talent and creativity of our young people alongside professional local artists.





Being part of this community art project gives students a wider appreciation of art outside of the classroom, creating a tangible legacy they can return to for decades to come.

Following a secondary school competition, three exceptional student entries were selected and integrated into a single vision. The final artwork designed by Verity and Elliette in year 7 and Carolina in year 12 showcases a vibrant tapestry of our native local wildlife, standing as a permanent symbol of student achievement and shared community pride.

ACTIVITY ANSWERS

BENCH 1:

A1: 20
A2: yellow, light blue, dark blue, purple, pink, orange, light green, dark green, red

BENCH 2:

A3: Dragonflies have their wings out like an airplane when at rest, whilst damselflies rest them along their body.
A4: 62! Did you spot the two secret moths? You may have to look behind the bench

BENCH 3:

A5: 24
A6: It's on the top slat!

BENCH 5:

A9: 11! There are 7 adult water voles and 4 water vole pups
A10: Water voles leave behind small tic-tac shaped droppings and piles of cut greens

BENCH 6:

A11: 13 slats
A12: 53 ripples

ACTIVITY ANSWERS

BENCH 7:

A13: All of these animals are all predators in the English countryside
A14: The owl is nocturnal

BENCH 9:

A16: 8

TAG US IN YOUR PHOTOS!

#RIVERLEAARTTRAIL
@EASTHERTSCOUNCIL
@JADEDAWNDESIGNS

