

Striding for the Irk Valley plan

More than 100 specially invited guests will be striding out this Sunday, 3 July, to herald the launch of the Irk Valley Local Plan.

Members of community groups and other organisations associated with the Irk Valley will be joining leading councillors and project officers for a day of activities.

Lord Mayor, Councillor Mohammed Afzal Khan, will be at Heaton Park to greet walkers and give them an official send-off, and the day will end with a celebration event at St Michael's and Angel Meadow.

Councillor Richard Leese, the leader of Manchester City Council, will welcome walkers with an opening speech. The event will also feature performances from Moston Active Drama depicting life in the area during the industrial rev-

olution.

Councillor Paul Murphy, chairman of the Irk Valley steering group, and Catherine Hartley, Irk Valley project officer, will explain what the Irk Valley plan will mean.

There will also be speeches from deputy council leader Councillor Jim Battle and Councillor Mark Hackett, Executive Member for Leisure.

Councillor Hackett said: "These walks offer a fantastic introduction to North Manchester's green corridor, the Irk Valley. Along the route, walkers will be able to enjoy the wide range of open spaces and environments which the area has to offer. The combination of our unique industrial heritage and diverse wildlife make the valley a fantastic place to walk."

The four walks, using footpaths which will be open to independent walkers, are:

WALK ONE: Heaton Farm Centre to the Blackley Road entrance of Blackley Forest.

Takes in the newly refurbished farm centre, 18th Century Heaton Hall and Orangery and Blackley Forest, which has just been designated a Local Nature Reserve. Distance: 1.7 miles.

WALK TWO: Harpurhey Ponds, Factory Lane, to Queen's Park warden's hut.

The ponds are former mill ponds dating back to the 1700s and a haven for wildlife, including kingfishers and woodpeckers. The surrounding woodland is a Site of Biological Importance. Distance: 1.3 miles.

WALK THREE: Queen's Park warden's hut to St Michael's and Angel Meadow.

From historic 19th Century Queen's Park continue along the forgotten 1970s Hendham Vale landscaping project, former quarry site of Sandhills, St

Catherine's woodland to city centre green space St Michael's and Angel Meadow. Distance: 1.6 miles.

WALK FOUR: Combines all three of the other walks, plus a link section along

the pavement from Blackley New Road to Factory Lane. Distance: 6.5 miles.

One thousand maps will be printed for each of the four walking routes.

These are being placed in locations such as doctors' surgeries and health centres. These will also be available to download from the Irk Valley project website at www.irkvalley.info from the end of the month.

The walks are organised by Irk Valley Project and supported by the Zest healthy living project and North Manchester Primary Care Trust to promote walking in the area.

Improvement of derelict areas

ST MICHAEL'S and Angel Meadow, where the walks will culminate, is a good example of how derelict and disused areas can be improved.

Like many open spaces within the Irk Valley, the sites have a dramatic past.

St Michael's was consecrated in 1787 as the largest cemetery in Manchester.

It is estimated that around 40,000 plague victims were buried in the cemetery.

Friedrich Engels, who wrote about the area in 1844 in his famous study *Condition of the English Working Class* described it as "desolate place."

The burial ground was closed in 1816 and flagged over in the 1860s, with the site becoming known as St Michael's Flags.

By the mid-1990s, the site had gone into decline. It was a litter-ridden wasteland which attracted anti-social behaviour. As a gateway from the city centre to the Irk Valley, it was in desperate need of regeneration.

A successful bid submitted to the Millennium Commission secured £100,000 of funding which was matched by the City Council.

The community group Friends of Angel Meadow and St Michael's Flags have been instrumental in bringing the area back to life. They successfully bid for an extra grant which funded plant beds, tree planting and the installation of solar lighting.

The result is a welcoming environment which, properly managed, should ensure help promote biodiversity as a habitat for wildlife.

A spokesman for the Irk Valley Steering Group, said: "This site is a terrific example of how committed local people working in tandem with the City Council and other partners can change somewhere for the better.

"St Michael's and Angel Meadow is an ideal place for the consultation on the Irk Valley Local Plan to be launched because it demonstrates how the potential of a forgotten, historic site can be unlocked. The local plan will encourage similar transformations at other sites."