Case study: Railworld Wildlife Haven's journey to

Volunteers at the Railworld Wildlife Haven. Credit: Railworld Wildlife Haven.

The joint winner of the Sustainable Project of the Year prize at the Museums + Heritage Awards 2025 shares how they transformed derelict land into a thriving green space.

Railworld Wildlife Haven is a volunteer-run charity based in Peterborough, England.

In the 1980s, Reverend Richard Paten bought a derelict coal yard next to the Nene Valley Railway with a vision of creating the Museum of World Railways. However, the project evolved when passionate volunteer Brian Pearce MBE proposed a new idea.

“I told Richard I’d like to build a wildlife haven to create habitat and improve biodiversity to help tackle the climate crisis,” says Brian. “He asked if I had any money or anyone to help. I said no, but I’m going to find people.”

Brian Pearce was awarded an MBE for his voluntary work in creating and maintaining the haven. Credit: Railworld Wildlife Haven.

Over the years, thanks to volunteers, companies, groups and individuals the site has been transformed from derelict land to a habitat rich, biodiverse green space, close to Peterborough city centre. "We only put grass seed down, but a year later the area was growing wildflowers. That's nature reviving itself."

After decades of hard work, Railworld Wildlife Haven fully opened in 2024. “It’s been created on a diet of determination, passion and never taking no for an answer.”

Protecting the environment

The project focused on sustainable approaches from the start. “It’s all about reusing, recycling and repurposing. Manufacturing creates a lot of CO2.”

The Caterpillar Demonstration Team spent five weeks digging and landscaping the haven. Credit: Railworld Wildlife Haven.

Companies have donated more than 700 items to the project, which were often destined for scrap, but have now been repurposed. These include:

- Three 1840 Victorian aqueducts from Abbots Ripton donated by British Rail. These were restored in 1998 and are now used as historic footbridges around the haven.
- A relocated Victorian railway station from improvements at A47 Wansford Road. It was saved and rebuilt brick by brick with support from National Highways.
- A local Victorian buffer stop, which was forged by railway workers from a redundant rail line and donated by Network Rail. It now serves as a memorial to rail workers for Railway 200.

The team secured 250 trees through Peterborough Telegraph's Clear-up a Grot Spot competition, which has contributed to achieving its goals.

Engaging the community

Volunteers have been at the heart of the project throughout. "First thing I always ask a volunteer is: what do you like doing?" says Brian. "One young person, who came for his Duke of Edinburgh Bronze Award, thought it would be all about digging and planting. He ended up helping to create a two-and-a-half-metre globe for our Earth Centre. He then volunteered with us for six years."

The team has won many awards over the years, including a Caterpillar Worldwide Award for Community Service and seven UK awards. In 2018 they achieved the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service after clocking up over 13,000 volunteer hours in one year.

The funding

The charity receives no core funding and relies on raising its own money. Over the years, Brian shared his ambitions with people and organisations, which inspired donations of materials, labour and community support. He worked at Perkins Engines, a subsidiary of Caterpillar, for many years and the company helped to landscape the haven and create footpaths, streams, ponds and waterfalls.

The team also received support from The National Lottery Community Fund's Awards for All programme.

The results

Nature surveys show that over 300 species of flora and fauna now exist on the formerly-derelict site.

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An old iron railway bridge has been repurposed as a footbridge over a pond, one of the many habitats created in this inner-city green space. Credit: Railworld Wildlife Haven.

Find out more about the history of the site and the organisation's work on the Railworld Wildlife Haven website.

Sustainable Project of the Year Award

Railworld Wildlife Haven was joint winner of the sustainability category at the Museums + Heritage Awards 2025, alongside Stourbridge Glass Museum. The prize, which is sponsored by the Heritage Fund, recognises projects which

are responding to the climate crisis in innovative and inspiring ways.

Brian says: “It is absolutely incredible to get this recognition for all the thousands of hours volunteers have put in – it is well over 100,000 hours now! We have never accepted no for an answer, we will never and have never given up. It’s all about passion and determination by volunteers to do good in this amazing planet we all live and call our home.”

Top tips

Brian shares his advice for delivering an ambitious environmentally responsible project:

- **Get people to share your dreams.** “There’s no limit to what can be achieved if we all work together.”
- **Think about what you have available to use.** “The railway industry has always reused and repurposed – it’s now called the circular economy.’
- **Be determined.** “The most important thing is that you want to do it. And if you want to do it, there is a way and you’ll find it!”

Developing your own project?

All projects we fund must consider how they will protect the environment. Our?environmental sustainability guidance? provides information on how to plan a heritage project with the planet in mind.

An old iron railway bridge has been repurposed as a footbridge over a pond, one of the many habitats created in this inner-city green space. Credit: Railworld Wildlife Haven.

ard 2026

Artwork was created using recycled materials for the Greener Glass exhibition. Credit: Stourbridge Glass Museum.

ard-winning environmentally friendly approach

Some of the team stand in front of the newly completed roundhouses. Photo: The Scottish Crannog Centre.

Case study: The Scottish Crannog Centre