

## **Cam Valley Forum - Chairman's report to the Annual General Meeting for 2011-2012**

### **Water worries**

Our chalk streams have suffered badly from this year's drought – Hobsons Conduit/Vicars brook has been very low, the Little Wilbraham River and the upper stretch of the River Mel were still dry in mid-winter. The Environment Agency was unable to pump water to support to the Mel (to dilute the effluent from the sewage works) as both its pumps were broken, but did manage to keep the Shep and Guilden Brook flowing. As the year progressed the problem of low river flows throughout the Cam catchment and worries about future water resources came to dominate our agenda. We were pleased, therefore, to get a chance to comment on Cambridge Water Company's draft drought plan which, we argued, failed to give sufficient weight to the environmental implications of increasing demands for water. The problem has been highlighted by this year's severe lack of rain but its roots go back much further, and it can only get worse as the population of this area and the demands for water increase.

Stephen Tomkins has taken the lead in drawing up a position paper for the forum as a basis for stimulating debate about water sustainability which, we hope, will promote research into the component issues. More immediately we plan to raise our concerns publicly in a seminar later this year which, we hope, will include some of those in a position to influence current policy. Copies of our draft position paper have been circulated to our members and others, and further copies are available to anyone else interested in this issue.

### **Consultations on plans and projects**

We continued to watch the clean-up of the Hauxton site with concern with Charles Turner, as usual, doing the investigative work and keeping us briefed. We were disappointed that the district council approved an application to change the monitoring conditions, without being put before council members, despite our strong objections. It was worrying too that the vegetation near the site began to suffer. Charles sought advice on the possible cause, but it was unclear how far this was disease rather than air or water pollution from the site. Meanwhile, earlier in the summer Pesticide News published our article documenting the Hauxton saga in which we expressed the hope that our fears would be proved unfounded. The clean-up came to an end in the autumn, much to the relief of people living nearby. There was, however, a leak of polluted water into the Riddy Brook which, we understand, was investigated by the Environment Agency but we are awaiting information about its analysis.

We will continue to watch the Riddy carefully and we hope that the invertebrate surveys being carried out by Ruth Hawksley, on behalf of the Wildlife Trust, at Trumpington Meadows just downstream of the Hauxton site, will find that all is well.

Most of the other proposals on which we were invited to comment have been more welcome. We commended the City Council's proposal to extend the boundary of the Conservation Area to the north side of the river from Elizabeth Bridge to Stourbridge Common but suggested that more emphasis should be given to improving the environment of the common. We also wrote in support of plans by the Trumpington Farm Company to create new permissive paths and a bridge across the river that would extend public access from Grantchester Meadows to almost opposite the footpath into Byron's Pool Nature Reserve, and hence to the future Trumpington Meadows countryside park. We hope that this will go ahead. I was pleased to have an opportunity to talk with City Council policy officer, and her colleagues, on our vision for the Cam and how this might feed into the new Local Plan. We will be watching the unfolding local plan carefully as, we fear, it will bring forward proposals for further development on our green spaces, and may make substantial inroads into Trumpington Meadows. Further afield, we added our support for other objectors to a project that threatened important wildlife site on the river Meuse in Yorkshire

### **River Walks and workshops**

We are grateful to members of the River Mel Restoration Group who, one a lovely May evening, led a walk for our members to look at the group's recent restoration efforts between Melbourne and Meldreth. This interesting excursion was not well-attended, but much appreciated by those who came. The workshop led by Vince Lea of the Countryside Restoration Trust, however, attracted a capacity gathering to learn about Vince's war on mink along the Bourn Brook, as well as Ruth Hawksley's surveys of water voles and invasive plants along the brook, and Elizabeth Ranelagh's work with riparian landowners. We also attended the official opening of the fish pass at Byron's Pool – the fish, however, did not wait for speeches by the Mayor and others, they had already assumed it was open! We congratulated Ellis Selway, of the City Council, who planned, sought funding for, and managed this successful scheme, and were saddened to learn shortly afterwards that he was made redundant.

## **Monitoring wildlife**

Committee members helped Ruth Hawksley, of the Wildlife Trust, carry out spot checks of riverside plants at the survey sites that she established the previous year. This complements the more detailed surveys Ruth has undertaken, paid for by the Environment Agency, at three sites on the Cam. Rob Mungovan has continued to watch, and keep us informed, about the Environment Agency's use of glyphosate in the control of weeds in the river. He welcomed the amended spaying regime this year in the Upper Cam but remains concerned about the regime in the Granta.

Ruth and Rob are organising a training day on 5 May on monitoring aquatic invertebrates. They are hoping to attract people who would take a lead in convening a group of volunteers to monitor regularly a nearby stretch of river. This seems to me to be an excellent way to get more people active in caring for their local river or stream, and the land nearby, which might lead on to other restoration work. Do get in touch with Rob or Ruth if you would be interested to take part. [Rob.Mungovan@scambs.gov.uk and Hawksley@wildlifebcn.org]

## **Litter picks and other events**

Litter clearing is not a main part of our agenda, although as usual we took part in the Big Cam Clean-up concentrating our efforts on Laundress Green and Sheep's Green. They were certainly much needed and so we are pleased that Cleaner Cambridge Campaign, under the chairmanship of Malcolm Schofield, is organising another Big Clean-up for 14 April this year. Why not join us on Sheep's Green from 10 am that Saturday morning? Malcolm has continued his own campaign of removing bottles, cans and plastic bags from the river upstream of Cambridge. We have also sought to get more action on clearing rubbish from ditches near the Backs that lie within the responsibility of certain colleges.

We celebrated World Rivers Day – always the last Sunday in September – with other river-side organisations at the Cambridge River Fair organised by Camboaters. John Terry co-ordinated *River News* for this event, and we displayed examples of invasive river plants and animals. More recently Charles had an interesting day at RiverCare's conference, held Anglian Water's Bird Watching Centre at Rutland Water, which this year focussed upon the role that volunteers could play in monitoring the wildlife of rivers. We remain grateful for RiverCare support for our work.

## **Towards a trust?**

Earlier in the year we re-visited the question of whether the forum should aim to become a charitable trust – or indeed whether it would be better to seek to establish a trust that would work alongside the existing forum. No conclusions were reached but we are inclined to think that the latter model might be the way forward. The second scenario would mean that the new trust would seek funding for, and carry out, improvement projects, while the forum would continue in its advisory and campaigning role. It would certainly take much time and effort to increase the forum's revenue income to the £5000 threshold required by the charity commissioners if we wished it to become a charitable trust. This issue was shelved as we focussed on the impending water crisis, but we will return to it shortly.

## **Good news - Bad news**

The good news is that the native white-clawed crayfish still alive and well in the upper Cam and the Granta. The two populations were found by chance and appear to be very restricted in their extent. This illustrates how vulnerable these animals could be to the removal of trees or de-silting work

The bad news is that we will soon have to say farewell to Sylvia Haslam. We shall greatly miss her depth of knowledge of aquatic plants and riverside issues which has been not only been invaluable, but also made our committee meetings so much more interesting. We wish her well in her new home in Taunton, and hope she will keep in touch and visit us from time to time.

## **And finally**

I would like to thank the committee members who have worked so hard this year. There is so much that needs to be done and that could be done, but only so much a small group of people can achieve. We need to involve more enthusiasts with a wider range of skills: administrative skills, website skills, grant-seeking knowhow, publicity flair, experience with developing projects or enthusing volunteers. If you think you can help us in any way – please do get in touch.