



ACTION FOR THE RIVER KENNET

Minutes of the A.R.K. Annual General Meeting
Wednesday 30 November 2005

The Wesley Hall, Oxford Street, Marlborough

Attendees from committee

Nigel Thompson (Chairman)
Val Compton (VC)
Roger deVere (RdV)
Geoffrey Findlay (GF)
Martin Gibson (MG)
Charlotte Hitchmough (CH)
John Hounslow (JH)
Peter Marren (PM)
Mike Matthews (MM)
Michael Maude (MM)

1. Welcome

Sir Nigel Thompson welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Apologies

Jack Ainslie (JA), Mrs Rosalind Allen, Ken Carter (KC), Mr Clauson, James Dallas (JD) Sean Dempster (SD), Mrs Dow, Lord Kennet (WK), Nick Maurice (NM), Mrs Rankin, Alastair Service (AS), Tony Wells (TW).

3. Minutes of the AGM December 9th 2004

The minutes were accepted as a true record of the meeting.

4. Matters arising

There were no matters arising.

5. Chairman's report

Sir Nigel Thompson reported on the year as follows:

This time last year we were lamenting the low water levels in the River, and sadly the situation has got progressively worse. Despite a wet October, the groundwater levels are well below average (and declining) and river flow is very low: it will take sustained high winter rainfall before the Kennet can recover.

Ten of the last 12 months have experienced significantly below average rainfall. The river is dry to Fyfield and is barely a trickle through Manton – at a time of year when we would expect to the river to begin to flow again.

All this means that the ecosystem is more fragile than usual and any water abstraction or pollution has a much greater impact.

We are starting to look forward and prepare for the next Review of the Abstraction license (in 2007) for which we will need to deploy all our resources and the best scientific case we can muster. Since the last abstraction license review 'people power' has become more significant in decision making, as has 'sustainability'. If there was ever an example of unsustainable abstraction then pumping water out of Axford and over the catchment boundary to Swindon is obviously unsustainable.

5.1 Activities in 2005

Spring River Walk hosted by Marlborough College

225 people enjoyed a walk along the River Kennet and around the Marlborough College Nature Trail, organised by Sean Dempster. River Keeper, John Hounslow oversaw a display of fish and invertebrates in tanks to allow visitors to take a closer look at what lives under the surface of the Kennet. The walk took in a stretch of the river usually closed to the public, and experts were on hand to explain the rehabilitation work to the college fishery, which has improved the river habitat.

Our open days are a chance for people to access a bit of river which is usually private, and to gain an understanding of the Kennet's ecosystem. We plan to hold another in 2006.

River cleanup in Marlborough

Val Compton and her son Dominic have kept up their efforts to keep the Kennet litter free, regularly wading through the water to remove rubbish. Marlborough College Conservation Group also spent several afternoons in the river on ARK's behalf, removing anything from traffic cones to shopping trolleys.

Newsletter

We have continued to distribute our newsletter, three times a year. We thank Charlotte Hitchmough for editing and producing it.

Publicity

ARK has made a concerted effort to increase awareness of the River in the local media and have been successful working with the Gazette and Herald, the Western Daily Press, BBC Wiltshire Sound, GWR FM and the BBC TV Points West.

Greetings cards and Maps

Geoffrey Findlay's ARK Map and Guide to the River Kennet is still selling steadily. This evening is the first chance to buy our new greetings cards. The artwork has been created for ARK by local artists Simon Orton and Eric Kilner and the cards are on sale this evening priced £8 for a pack of 8 cards and envelopes.

Talks

The ARK committee have given talks to a variety of groups including the Wiltshire Farmers Club.

5.2 Partnerships

ARK has made great progress this year, working in partnership with other organisations. A few examples are:

Interpretive Panel in Marlborough.

The ARK Map has been adapted for use as an 'interpretive panel' which is now in-situ by the river in the George Lane car-park, Marlborough. ARK worked in partnership, and with funding from, the Marlborough Area Development Trust (MADT) on this project. The Town's Mayor, Hilary Cripps unveiled the panel.

Supporting the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

ARK was pleased to be able to show experts and interest groups from the North Wessex Downs some of the problems facing the Kennet. John Hounslow and Roger De Vere guided a group along the river in Mildenhall during the summer. We have since been working with the AONB and are delighted to say they have contributed funding to the Marlborough River Restoration work that's planned for 2006.

Environment Agency

We welcome John Hallett from the Environment Agency. He is project manager for the Kennet Chalkstream Restoration Project which he will talk about shortly. We hope to be fully involved with this project as it develops. James Dallas and Sir Nigel Thompson are on the board of Trustees.

Marlborough River Restoration Scheme

Geoffrey Findlay has been driving this new project to restore some of the more urban stretches of river. We have secured funding from the North Wessex Downs AONB.

Work should begin in January in Manton. We are optimistic that MADT will also be able to support us financially, and we plan to make a more substantial bid to the AONB sustainable development fund in 2006. We will also be looking to involve the private sector in sponsoring the project, either with help in kind or funding and are pleased that the Rotary Club have already shown some interest in the project.

The project is a partnership between Marlborough Town Council, the Marlborough Area Development Trust, Kennet District Council and ARK. We have been supported by the Environment Agency, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, St. John's School and Marlborough College. Each organisation has provided either help in kind and/or funding to get the project off the ground.

Three river restoration sites have been identified: Manton Recreation Ground, Marlborough Town Centre (Figgin's Lane to Kennet Place, including Cooper's meadow) and the St. John's Foundation Trust Site at Stonebridge Lane.

5.3 Challenges

Tottenham House development

Tottenham House hotel and golf complex has been granted planning permission, subject to conditions, but a water supplier has not yet been identified.

During the planning process Thames Water were simultaneously the body who advised the planners on water resources and the potential commercial water supplier. Bearing in mind that Thames Water is now a subsidiary of the German RWE company, this seems inappropriate. ARK has written to Michael Ancram who has taken the matter up with Margaret Beckett. Mrs Beckett responded by saying 'planning authorities no doubt see it as good practice to consult water companies over developments that have significant implications for water supply to ensure that, where necessary, supply and disposal infrastructure can be timed to come on stream when needed to serve the development. One of the key reasons for this is because water companies have a duty to supply water for domestic purposes irrespective of their water resource situation.'

St John's School

Although ARK broadly supports the School's desire to move to a single site, the extra housing associated with the development will significantly increase demand on the already over-abstracted Kennet.

Abstraction license renewal

Thames Water's license to abstract water from the aquifer at Axford is up for renewal at the end of 2007 and the consultation process is beginning. ARK will be strenuously arguing that abstraction from the Kennet is not sustainable and that any no license to abstract should be granted. NT quoted from the article by G Maurice, written in 1947 'At first all was well, or nearly well ; for already I could see that the river was ailing. Some years before, men had come and sunk a deep bore into the great chalk range which, like a huge sponge, absorbed the winter rains and discharged them all summer to the springs of the river. The men found water in abundance and pumped it over the watershed to an industrial town in another river basin. Thus the river began to shrink. And the town grew and the industries grew and the individual consumption of water grew. More bores were sunk, more pumps put in, and adits were made in the chalk till a thousand million gallons were being taken.'

We have had almost 60 years to deal with the problem, but it still persists.'

6. Accounts

The Treasurer Martin Gibson completed his second year as ARK's treasurer and reported on the accounts for those two years (attached). He commented that ARK has the profile of a much larger organization than it actually is, which gives it great credibility and thanked CH for her work in raising ARK's profile.

In 2007 ARK aim to reach a round sum of £100,000 for the legal costs of fighting the abstraction license. ARK aims to finance its day to day running costs by membership subscriptions, while simultaneously raising a 'fighting fund' through donations.

Membership: There are around 100 members who have not paid a subscription and we will chase these up. ARK needs new members: current members are our best recruiting resource.

Map: the costs of producing the map are now all covered so all proceeds from map sales go to ARK. MG encouraged people to buy maps as Christmas gifts.

The accounts were accepted – proposed by John Hounslow and seconded by David Watson.

7. Election of Officers

7.1 Election of Honorary Officers

The following were proposed by Nigel Thompson, seconded by Geoffrey Findlay and elected *en bloc*.

Honorary Treasurer	Martin Gibson
Honorary Secretary	Alastair Service
Vice Chairman	Geoffrey Findlay
Vice Chairman	Roger de Vere
Technical Director	Mike Matthews

7.2 Election of Executive Committee

The following were proposed by Janet Hierons and seconded by Diana Keast and elected *en bloc*.

Jack Ainslie	Peter Marren
Val Compton	Michael Maude
James Dallas	Nick Maurice
Sean Dempster	Tony Wells
John Hounslow	

7.3 Election of Chairman

Roger de Vere proposed that Sir Nigel Thompson continue as Chairman, seconded by Martin Gibson. There were no other nominations.

9. State of the River

John Hounslow, River Keeper at Mildenhall reported on the State of the River.

JH has worked in the catchment since 1975, and his brother looked after the river before him. Throughout that time he has seen drought and flood, but undoubtedly the river is in a worse condition than he has seen before. Even the drought of 1976 did not impact the river as badly and by the spring of 1977 it had bounced back to health.

The river has lost its capacity to repair itself. The years 2000-2002 were very wet with good flow and good weed growth because higher flows create bigger plants. However in 2003 the river dried despite the aquifer being so full at the start of the season - it didn't sustain the river for the year.

The prevailing weather pattern has been increasing unstable. Chalk streams don't respond well to extreme events.

This year all river keepers have been particularly concerned by the lack of fly life. Running a trout fishery, where fishermen only use dry flies is very difficult when there are no flies to imitate.

Over his career John has watched the river steadily decline. The fishery begins at the old Railway bridge to the east of Marlborough, and historically the weed in these upper reaches was prolific – but for the last few years river flow has not been sufficient to stimulate weed growth.

The accumulated rain over the last 10 months has been 50% less than normal. It's surprising that the river has not dried all the way to Marlborough.

It seems that other rivers, although struggling to deal with the low rainfall, have not deteriorated as much as the Kennet. A possible explanation is water quality. 'The solution to pollution is dilution' and with so little water in the river the flow from the sewage treatment works, road runoff, phosphates from farmland are all more concentrated.

For the river to recover there must be twice the average rainfall for the whole winter.

10. The chairman welcomed John Hallett, Project Manager of the Kennet Chalkstream Restoration Project (part of the Thames Rivers Restoration Trust).

John Hallett (Environment Agency) explained that the Kennet Chalkstream Restoration Project had grown from concern about the river Kennet.

The project recognised that the Kennet needed a 'complete catchment overview'.

It would address problems including habitat degradation, river management, alien species, sewage treatment discharges and abstraction. It would enhance the river value as a recreational and fishery resource.

It recognised that there were problems all down the river.

The project was run by a project team which included representatives from English Nature, British Waterways, West Berkshire District Council, Thames Water, the Kennet and Avon Canal Trust and the Kennet Valley Fishery Association. Local knowledge from groups and riparian owners would be co-opted as necessary. Building partnerships was crucial for the success of the project. The first stage of the project was to put together an action plan for the long and short-terms. The project had recognised that priorities were habitat restoration, buffer strips and the canal/river interface.

The project was keen to help support other projects to enhance and speed up the level of river restoration.

John Hallett concluded that it was important that all the groups involved worked together to achieve the best outcome for the river.

11. AOB

There followed questions and discussion about possible solutions to the problem of abstraction. These included the option to pump water back to the Kennet catchment.

The meeting was followed by a presentation by naturalist Peter Marren.