



ACTION FOR THE RIVER KENNET

Minutes of the A.R.K. Annual General Meeting
7 pm Thursday 5 October 2006

The Wesley Hall, Oxford Street, Marlborough

Attendees from committee

Nigel Thompson (Chairman)
Roger deVere (RdV)

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, Mrs Rosalind Allen, Lord Carter, Mr Clauson, Val Compton, James Dallas, Sean Dempster, Mrs Dow, Geoffrey Findlay, R. Goodenough, Mr P Nigel Grove, Lord Kennet, Dr Nick Maurice, Barry Mercer, Anne Outrim, Alastair Service, Kate Staples, Barbara Rankin, Tony Wells.

3. Minutes of the AGM held 30 November 2005

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:

Review of 2006

Drought

The river has endured a prolonged drought – now extending over 22 months.

Despite feeling 'wet' the rainfall for August and September was still below the long-term average for each month. River flow in the Kennet for August was around 62% long term average (i.e.38% below 'normal').

The Centre for Ecology and Hydrology predicts that with the dry soil conditions and given normal September and October rainfall, it is likely that drought conditions will spread into a 3rd successive winter. John Hounslow will give us a more detailed account of the 'State of the River' shortly.

In line with our objective 'to protect and enhance' the river Kennet ARK has been active on three fronts this year:

- **Campaigning**
- **River restoration**
- **Outreach and publicity**

I. Campaigning

Axford abstraction licence. As I reported last year, Thames Water's licence to abstract water from the aquifer at Axford is up for renewal at the end of 2007. ARK are engaged in the negotiation process and have responded critically to the 'Atkin's Report' – a study showing that some (limited) damage is caused to the river by abstraction.

We are strenuously arguing that consumptive abstraction from the Kennet is not sustainable and that alternatives should be found.

We have been disappointed by the Environment Agency's stance as 'neutral arbitrator', rather than 'defender of the environment' and are concerned that they will be bullied by Thames Water into extending the licence in order to protect the public supply. We believe that Thames Water should be forced to invest in a **sustainable** water supply. We would like serious consideration to be given to strategies including recycling water to the Kennet, and investigating alternative water sources for the proposed developments in Swindon.

Thames, which is owned by German utility group RWE, reported pre-tax profits of £346.5m during its last financial year.

Its leakage rates are still well above the industry average at 894 Mega litres per day (to put that in context abstraction at Axford is around 13 Mega litres per day) and the company continues to miss its leakage reduction targets.

Tottenham House – planning

You will remember that last year I reported that ARK had objected to construction of a Golf Course at Tottenham House in Savernake Forest. Although planning permission has been granted, subject to conditions, we are still in correspondence with Kennet District Council and the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs because:

1. The golf course at Tottenham House will require an extra 16 million gallons of water per year, yet planning permission has been granted without any clear idea of where the water will come from.
2. The advice to the planning authorities on water resources came from Thames Water who, we think, have a clear commercial interest in the project as the potential water-supply company.

This example highlights a problem within the UK planning system, where there is a general perception that 'water is not really a planning issue' to quote Kennet District Council. The UK is one of the most water-stressed countries in Europe and water supply should be a central planning issue.

We will continue to pursue both this case and the general principle.

Urban growth in Swindon

With the help of Rosie Henderson and Geoffrey Findlay, ARK have been able to contribute to Swindon Borough Council's 'Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report'. ARK emphasised that Swindon's water consumption has an impact beyond the Borough's boundaries. This should be taken into consideration in any planning decisions.

Water Framework Directive

The Water Framework Directive is a major piece of EU legislation to protect water bodies. The aim is that by 2015 every water body should reach 'good' status. To achieve this every river basin district (RBD) will create a river basin management plan. These will be implemented and reviewed on a six year cycle.

ARK has a 'voice' in this process for the Thames River Basin both through the Environmental and Fisheries representatives.

Planning authorities will have a central role to play in the success of the Water Framework Directive: advice to planners from the Environment Agency says 'Future development needs to be planned carefully so that it does not result in further pressure on the water environment and compromise WFD objectives. Failure to comply with the Water Framework Directive requirements may lead to the European Commission bringing legal proceedings against the UK.'

We are optimistic that this legislation will be beneficial to the Kennet.

New reservoir

The most recent development for ARK has been an invitation from the Environment Agency to comment on the **new reservoir** to the south west of Abingdon.

Thames Water have proposed this reservoir, which would be filled with water from the River Thames, in order to meet forecast demand by 2020. Its principal role is to supply London during dry years but there will be some water pumped to Swindon.

We are waiting to hear more details of the proposal before we comment.

If it goes ahead the reservoir could take some of the pressure off the Kennet catchment - however, even if the development proceeds on time, it won't be complete for 20 years, and the projected housing growth in Swindon will be complete in the next 10 -15 years, so there will be a gap during which time Thames Water will have to find the supply from somewhere else.

2. River restoration

Last year I told you about the newly formed '**Marlborough River Restoration Scheme**'. I am happy to report that ARK have continued to be a driving force behind this partnership and that the restoration project at Manton is largely complete, thanks to funding from MADT and the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and support from the Environment Agency, the Town Council and other partners. Many of you ARK members were able to help in a very practical way, by putting on waders and wielding sledgehammers and trowels.

We would like to build on that success and more projects are planned (subject to funding) for the urban river in Marlborough:

1. a river walk at Stonebridge Lane and
2. a bank restoration project at Priory Gardens 'Reclaim our River'.

If you would like to become involved as working volunteer, please let us know.

Charlotte Hitchmough urged ARK members to 'vote to Reclaim our River' on the forthcoming 'People's Millions' programme on ITV during November. The winning project would win £50,000 of lottery money. The joint ARK/KVAT project had reached the final at had a 5 in 8 chance of securing funding.

Last year we welcomed John Hallet from the Environment Agency to talk to us about the Thames Rivers Restoration Trust. One year on ARK has representatives on the board of trustees and now also on the working group. A full river restoration project downstream of the bridge at Stonebridge Lane is one of the schemes which is being planned. We welcome this positive progress and look forward to seeing an improvement in the River immediately below Marlborough.

In parallel with the restoration work we will continue to vigorously pursue the underlying issue of abstraction; and our representatives the Trustees (NT and JD) will be pressing for action on this point. Ultimately any amount of restoration will be fruitless if there isn't enough water flowing in the river.

3. Outreach and publicity

Spring River Walk from Elcot Lane, Marlborough.

In Early June many of you joined us for beautiful walk which, as usual, gave access to a reach of the river usually closed to the public.

Our open days are a chance for people gain an understanding of the Kennet's ecosystem as well as enjoying a pleasant afternoon stroll. The next one is in a few week's time at Ramsbury (Sunday 29th October, 2-

4pm), walking downstream to Chilton Foliat and returning on the Ramsbury Flyer bus. This event is open only to members. I hope you can join us.

We are extremely grateful to the landowners who allow us access to their river on these occasions and to John Hounslow who sets up all the signposting and organises the route.

Summer Community Fair held at Marlborough College.

ARK had a stall at this new event in Marlborough. Sean Dempster, John Hounslow and Malcom Hanson gave people the opportunity to see the various creatures living in the river and have a try at Fly Fishing. Sadly the rain kept the expected hoards of people away, but those who braved the rain enjoyed it.

Newsletter

Charlotte Hitchmough has continued to produce our newsletter, which has been well received. If you would like to contribute an article or if there are other topics you would like us to cover please let us know.

We are grateful to Martin Harrison and the Marlborough College Ecology Group for their help with packing and delivering the newsletter.

Publicity

ARK has made a concerted effort to increase awareness of the River and the threat of abstraction using the media. We have been successful working with the Gazette and Herald, the Western Daily Press, Wiltshire Life, BBC Wiltshire Sound and GWR FM.

Our restoration project at Manton featured on the BBC's '**Spring Watch**' and on '**Country File**'.

In the last few weeks we have distributed hundreds of post cards around Marlborough inviting people to find out more about ARK. So far we have had over 50 responses, and we hope to turn many of those into ARK members.

6. Treasurer's report

The Treasurer Martin Gibson completed his third year as ARK's treasurer. He presented the year's accounts. The number of paying members was 251 with 34 junior members. 114 members were now paying by standing order. This greatly reduced ARK's admin costs. This year the treasurer was working to recruit more members and looking for corporate members. Smith's Gore and Marlborough College were already supporting by paying £100.00 pa. MG noted that ARK's profile was greater than its actual size and thanked CH the part she played in building positive PR.

David Watson proposed that the accounts be accepted. The Mayor, Bryan Castle seconded the proposal.

7. Election of Officers and executive committee

Election of Honorary Officers

The following were proposed by Nigel Thompson, seconded by Michael Maude and elected *en bloc*.

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

President	Lord Cater of Devizes – proposed by Michael Maude, seconded by Nigel Thompson
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Chairman	Sir Nigel Thompson - proposed by Roger de Vere and seconded by Martin Gibson
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Election of Executive Committee

The following were proposed by Martin Gibson and seconded by Nigel Thompson and elected en bloc.

Jack Ainslie	Peter Marren
James Dallas	Michael Maude
Sean Dempster	Nancy Sampson
John Hounslow	Tony Wells

Standing down

Val Compton
Nick Maurice
Alastair Service

8. Any other business

Gary Mantle (Wiltshire Wildlife Trust) asked whether ARK would comment on the 'Wiltshire Strategic Board's Sustainable Communities Strategy'. The committee agreed.

John Hallet (EA) pointed that the Asford abstraction licence renewal was being negotiated between the EA and Thames Water under the agency's Sustainable Abstraction Programme which gave proper consideration to environmental impact of abstraction.

There was some debate about how people might be encouraged not to feed the ducks. It was agreed that an overpopulation of duck as currently exists in Marlborough and Ramsbury. The ducks increase erosion of the banks, they eat any weed that starts to grow and their excrement and the excess bread in the river raises nutrient levels in the watercourse whilst their dabbling increases turbidity. The bread left on the banks attracts rats, which carry Weils disease and are a potential health hazard. Suggestions included: having signs by the river and by the bread in Waitrose and Sommerfield; PR through schools; written advice from the RSPB.

Chris Booth, a freelance Riparian Engineer working with the EA, reported that he had some success reducing duck feeding on Letcombe Brook using signs and a public information campaign.

11. Report on the State of the River in 2006, John Hounslow.

John Hounslow (JH) began by thanking ARK members and committee for safeguarding the role of river keepers by helping to ensure the survival of the River Kennet as a healthy chalk stream. In the past Keepers have been very territorial, but over the years some have mellowed. The river corridor habitat can't cope with year-round public access, but JH is pleased to be able to open his stretch of river a couple of times a year to allow everyone to enjoy it.

State of the River year 2005-6

October 2005 started wet, but the wet winter didn't follow and by early March the situation looked desperate. At the start of the fishing season in May there was no weed and the flow was down 30% on the long term average. Weed growth was quickly eaten by ducks at the start of the season, but became established during the summer, helped by the plentiful sunshine. Ranunculus became re-established in upper reaches, where it has been absent for years. A possible explanation is that the reduced rainfall washed less phosphate off the soil and as a result the water quality improved allowing the ranunculus to become established.

The water down stream from Marlborough STW is murky, particularly under low flow conditions. The EA confirm that the STW is operating within its consents.

Fly life has been average to poor, but during hot summers that is usual.

The water vole population has been very good, and only 1 mink was caught this year.

There are no otters on the Kennet at the moment, but on the Test they are becoming established and it is only a matter of time before they move to the Kennet.

In summary, despite the very dry weather, the river has survived, and it has shown what an incredibly complex ecosystem the Kennet is.

The formal business of the meeting was concluded and after a break for refreshments, naturalist Peter Marren gave an entertaining presentation about 'Strange things in the Kennet valley'.