

Action for the River Kennet

River talk

A PARTNERSHIP OF PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE KENNET

2013 gets off to a great start

The new year brought good news for ARK supporters: more rain and the prospect of less abstraction.

After a long period of drought, this winter's exceptionally heavy and sustained rainfall (not to mention snow) has breathed new life into the River Kennet. Not only is the river running at full spate but the

chalk aquifer on which it depends for its summer flow is once again fully charged.

The other good news is that after twenty years of battling by ARK, Thames Water has finally agreed to construct a pipeline to link all homes in Swindon to Farmoor Reservoir in Oxfordshire. This means less water from the Kennet Valley will be needed to keep Swindon's taps flowing once the pipeline is completed in 2015/16. For full details of the story see John Lawson's article on page 4.



Commendation for ARK's Stonebridge Lane project

In November 2012 our Stonebridge Lane chalk stream habitat restoration project was the 'highly-commended' runner up in the small grants category of the prestigious National Biffa Awards for building communities. Congratulations to all concerned!

And another prize!

ARK's 'Care for the Kennet' campaign, run in partnership with Thames Water, has been named best Community Led Project at the UK Water Efficiency Awards. At a ceremony at the House of Lords, Water Minister Richard Benyon MP applauded our support for his Department's Love Your River campaign. The judges described our project as 'elegant and inspirational'.



Pictured from left to right: Lord Chris Smith of Finsbury, Chairman of the EA; Charlotte Hitchmough, Director of ARK; Karen Simpson, TW Water Efficiency Analyst; Richard Benyon MP, Water Minister.

News from the Chairman

This year we start with a river and aquifers overflowing with water, albeit not enough invertebrates and fish upstream – and some generally good news from Thames Water.



New year – New hope?

Last January, Thames Water disappointed us by telling an open meeting in Marlborough that they could not provide a time-table for the north-south Swindon link pipeline – essential to reduce their abstractions at Axford and Ogbourne – before the end of the year 2012. Even the funding arrangements had yet to be agreed. It was therefore a pleasant surprise when it arrived on 3 January this year.

It is generally good news and with added bonuses. John Lawson's article on page 4 gives the detail. The timetable proposed for the link – completion in mid 2015 – is reasonable given the scale of the project. On the downside, Thames Water have applied to extend their Axford licence temporarily from this April, albeit at a slightly lower rate. We have objected, on the grounds that they have had many years warning of the environmental need to reduce this abstraction.

Without our twenty-plus years of evidence-gathering, constant challenging of the authorities and support from successive MPs Michael Ancram and Claire Perry, we would not have got this far. As ARK and as individuals, we shall keep up the

pressure and not rest until we have seen the end of the export of water from our aquifer.

More national support for the cause

In the last month, we have welcomed two more sources of support for the cause of endangered chalk streams.

On 23 January the Commons Environment Select Committee published its report into the draft Water Bill – to which ARK submitted evidence – criticising the Bill's lack of urgency in reforming abstraction to protect the environment, and calling again for OFWAT to be given a stronger environmental responsibility. For more detail, see www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmenvfru/674/67402.htm.

In the same week, a draft 'Charter for Chalk Streams' was issued for comment by the Angling Trust (National Campaigns Co-ordinator Martin Salter, former Reading West MP). It arose from a Chalk Stream Summit attended by ARK in December.

It cites the Upper Kennet as a prime example of the damage done to chalk streams by over-

abstraction, and calls for more urgent action from Government, Natural England, the Environment Agency, water companies, farmers and land managers. Once finalised, there will be a public launch and presentation to the Government, backed up by a campaign to garner public support for reform. ARK has submitted comments and strongly supports this initiative.

Back on the river

We continue as busy as ever on other fronts: working in schools, restoring river habitats, monitoring river life, hosting the Kennet Catchment Partnership process, and developing Stonebridge Meadow and Wild River Reserve for the benefit of all, in partnership with Marlborough Town Council – described in the following pages.

I must also give credit to our Director Charlotte Hitchmough for her consistent success in obtaining valuable media coverage, most recently about the high river flows, flooding and high pollution risks on top of all else she does. Her ability to explain complex issues simply is always effective. And as ever my thanks to you all, members and supporters.

Geoffrey Findlay



Moth Nights in Stonebridge Meadow

ARK's moth group will continue to build on the important records gathered in 2011 and 2012 by holding eight moth nights in Stonebridge Meadow – weather permitting.

Everyone is welcome (children must be accompanied by an adult, wellies and a torch essential). Find us along the main footpath from the Stonebridge Lane entrance to the meadow – we're by the Marlborough Town Football Club entrance to the meadow.

Using three moth traps and with the expertise of the County Moth Recorder we have already recorded more than 115 species on the reserve. Four of these are classified by the IUCN as endangered, meaning that their numbers have declined by more than 90% over the last 35 years.

Dates for you to get up close to moths and learn more are: 5th April, 2nd May, 8th June, 2nd July, 3rd August, 6th September, 4th October and 10th November. Times will be confirmed closer to the dates. For more details contact Anna on 01672 511028.

[Anna Forbes](#)

Stonebridge Meadow Reserve Management Plan

In July 2011, ARK took advice from experts and consulted residents and users about the way in which the Stonebridge meadow reserve should be managed and cared for. Following two events in the meadow in Spring and Summer 2012 and discussion at the ARK AGM in November 2012, the updated version of the plan has now been finalised. As well as providing a blueprint for visitor access and management of the meadow's flora and fauna, the plan includes detailed proposals for improvement of the river habitat.

Redd recording

Every winter ARK volunteers measure the health of the river by surveying the number of wild brown trout nests ('redds') dug in the river bed.

In 2011/12 the previous summer's drought meant that fish were almost entirely unable to spawn in the stretches above Marlborough. Further downstream, however, we were able to record no fewer than 46 redds at the Stonebridge Wild River Reserve – a 92% increase on the previous year's total and a direct result of ARK's programme of habitat restoration.

During November and December 2012 the intense flow of silty floodwater made recording impossible. However, conditions began to improve towards the end of January. We therefore are keeping our fingers crossed for better results by the time the recording season ends in March.

[Harry Forbes](#)

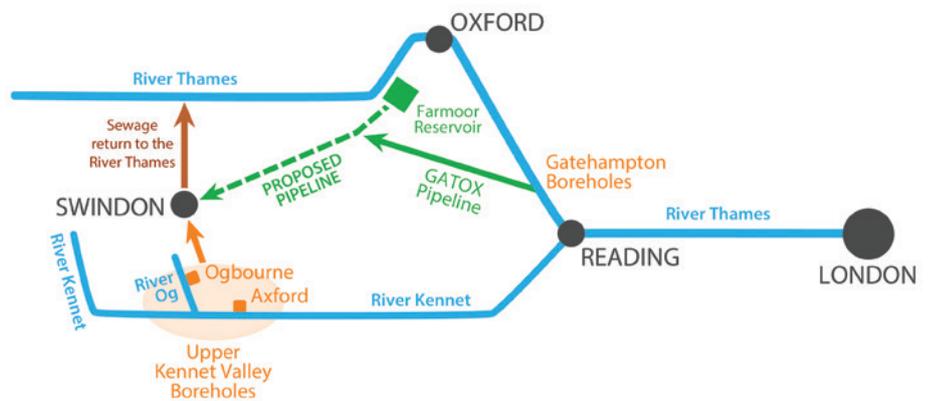
New pipeline to help save the Kennet

Since its creation twenty years ago, ARK has been campaigning for the water supplies from the River Kennet to Swindon to be reduced. At last, some significant improvement is in sight.

Swindon needs about 40 million litres of water a day – 40 megalitres/day or MI/d. At present, about 15 MI/d comes from boreholes at Axford and Ogbourne in the Kennet Valley. The rest is derived from the Farmoor reservoir to the west of Oxford, which is filled by pumping water either from the Thames itself or via the GATOX pipeline from the Gatehampton boreholes in the gravels beside the river near Goring.

Unfortunately, the 15 MI/d of water exported from our own aquifer to Swindon is discharged through Swindon sewage works to the River Thames, so it is all lost from the Kennet valley. Investigations by Thames Water and the Environment Agency have shown that this damages the river by:

- Reducing flows in the river below Axford by roughly 40% in droughts
- Drying up the River Og more frequently than would occur naturally
- Damaging the river's ecology, especially the classic chalkstream *Ranunculus* weed on which river insects and fish depend
- Encouraging algal growth, which smothers the river bed and



reduces its ability to support insect life and a habitat for trout and other fish to breed.

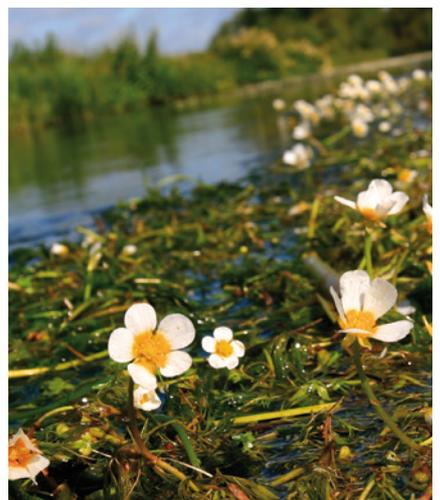
After many years of campaigning by ARK, the Environment Agency has recently agreed to revoke the Ogbourne abstraction licence altogether and to reduce the abstraction at Axford to 9.3 MI/d at most times and just 6 MI/d in droughts. They have agreed that supplies to Swindon can come instead from Farmoor reservoir. However, parts of south Swindon can only be supplied from the Kennet valley so a new pipeline is needed connecting south Swindon to north Swindon and in turn to Farmoor.

Funding for the so-called north-south Swindon link has now been agreed. Construction of the pipeline will start as soon as landowners' consents have been obtained. It will be about 6 miles (10 km) long, with a diameter of 18" (450 mm), connecting north Swindon to the Whitefields Farm reservoir to the East of the Marlborough–Swindon road (between Chiseldon and Ogbourne Downs golf club). It is expected to be finished by 2015, provided there are

no delays in getting the landowner consents.

ARK are delighted by this news. It is a big step towards our ultimate objective of stopping the export of water to Swindon altogether. We will continue to campaign for this, as well as stopping the supplies from the Marlborough and Clatford boreholes, which we believe are damaging the river above Marlborough. But for the moment, let's celebrate a big success.

John Lawson
Technical Director



Muddy Walks

All the rain we have had over the winter has been good news for re-filling the aquifers and getting the river flowing again, but like most things, there is a down-side too. In this case, it's all the other stuff that gets washed into the river.



Pollution which gets in to the river is normally divided into two groups. Point source pollution comes from a defined place, usually a sewage treatment works or an industrial discharge. Diffuse pollution, by contrast, comes from all over the place – it has no single defined source but could originate from farms, roads, industrial forecourts, septic tanks, overflowing sewers, muddy footpaths or building sites. Each individual source may not have a huge impact, but combined they wash tonnes of sediment, pesticides, nutrients and harmful chemicals into the river every year.

Knowing where pollution is coming from makes it easier to measure its impact and to solve the problem. In the case of sewage treatment works this has been achieved by introducing phosphate stripping and more advanced treatment technologies. The latest research shows that pollution from sewage treatment works is no longer the biggest problem for the Kennet. Instead, pollution is coming from

diffuse sources throughout the catchment – which is where ARK's muddy walkers come in.

Members of this volunteer team roam the Kennet and its tributaries spotting places where pollution is reaching the river. In rural areas it may be coming from muddy tracks, as wash-off from fields and manure heaps or as a result of livestock tramping in and out of the river. In urban areas diffuse pollution is likely to come from sewer overflows, road drains or mis-connected sewers.

In December a group of volunteers braved a cold wet afternoon to attend a training event in Froxfield where they learned what to look out for before taking a walk along the A4 to see what was getting into the Froxfield Stream from the surrounding land. Since then we have had a steady stream of information about pollution incidents from our walkers, and our first 'result'.

In December a volunteer spotted sewers bursting their lids in the

centre of Marlborough. Armed with photographic evidence, she reported the incident to Thames Water who have since inspected the problem and will be 'cleaning out the line' to prevent it recurring.

In the meantime ARK is mapping the information our volunteers collect and feeding the information to the local Catchment Sensitive Farming Officer, who is able to go and speak to farmers and landowners about how to reduce impacts on the river. Often this is as simple as managing farm tracks more effectively, moving a farm gate or under-planting stubble to avoid leaving bare soil.

We are looking for more volunteers to join our walking teams. If you'd prefer to stay warm and dry, we urgently need someone to collate all the information the walkers send in to us. If you are interested in helping, please get in touch with Carolyn@riverkennet.org.

[Charlotte Hitchmough](#)



Mayfly in the Classroom

During 2013 we are looking forward to continuing our 'Mayfly in the Classroom' projects in local primary schools.

'Mayfly in the Classroom' is the Wild Trout Trust's flagship education programme. It aims to connect school children to their local river habitat and encourage learning along the broader themes of biodiversity and ecology. Last year was a great success despite the drought impacting on the numbers of viable Mayfly larvae.

The children are encouraged to be as 'hands on' as possible with the habitat construction and the release of the Mayfly. Pictured is Jenny Harker helping the pupils at St Michael's School in Aldbourne.

Helen Kelly

Fish Pass

ARK's new fish pass at Marlborough's Town Mill has arrived at just the right time to help the Kennet's suffering fish stocks.

On a wild and rainy day in November as the River Kennet rose by the hour, ARK's fish pass at Town Mill was opened in a rather dramatic fashion. Local residents watched in awe as the aqua dam was released and the first surge of water cascaded over the oak boards and inundated the new pools.

The fish pass was built at the end of the summer by local firm P A Matthews, under the watchful eye of ARK's Don Harris and the consultant engineering firm Peter Brett Associates.

The timing of the fish pass's construction could not have been more fortuitous. During the 2011/12 drought the river upstream of the Pewsey Road bridge dried up almost entirely. An electro-fishing survey carried out by ARK in September 2012 confirmed that the fish population was close to zero through the Marlborough College reach and from Manton upstream there were no fish at all. For the river to be able to recover naturally, fish need to be able to swim upstream to spawn the next generation.

The new fish pass replaces a 1.5-metre drop, left after the removal of the historic mill wheel at Town Mill, with a series of inter-connected pools that allow trout, grayling and other species to move freely up and down the river.

Throughout the recent exceptionally rainy winter the fish pass has been operating very well, despite the high flows of water. We are now looking forward to starting work on a second stage, which will let fish swim from the mill pool at Town Mill back into the main river. If all goes well we should get this phase built this coming spring.

We are already seeing trout redds around Marlborough College and Manton, showing that since September fish have been successfully making their way upstream. I'm therefore optimistic that when we do our next electro-fishing survey it will show that the upstream stretches of the Kennet once again have a healthy fish population.

Charlotte Hitchmough

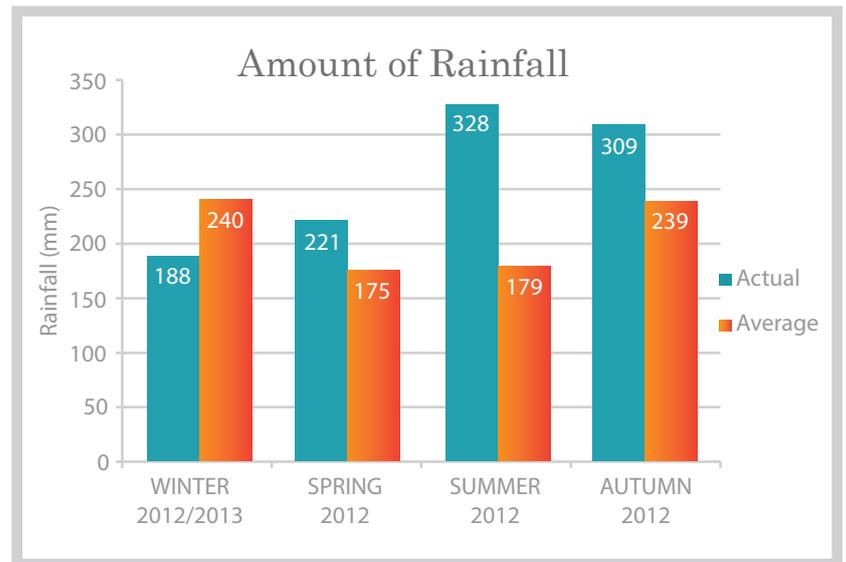


A year of rain – and a replenished aquifer

The wettest spring, summer and autumn in decades mean that the Kennet aquifer is now fully re-charged.

Rainfall was the most memorable feature of 2012. There were seven months when total rainfall was well above the long-term average. It was the second wettest year after 2002 and it is interesting that the four wettest years since my records began in 1984 were in the 21st century. It is not surprising, therefore, that the annual rainfall shows an increasing trend of around 15mm over the past 29 years.

Eric Gilbert



Eric Gilbert has been collecting data about Marlborough's weather since 1984. His fascinating record of seasonal and annual readings can be found at www.windrushweather.org.uk

Riverfly Monitoring

2012 saw the number of sites at which ARK volunteers monitor the population of riverfly larvae rise from 18 to 38.

This positive trend started with a flush of interest in late 2011 and early 2012. This led us to organise a training day in June which was attended by nine new monitors, including Rodney Owen-Jones, who surveys up to 15 sites every month. The area in which our sites are located has

also expanded, with sites now being located from Clatford, near the source of the Kennet, almost all the way to its confluence with the Thames at Reading.

Riverfly populations started off lower in 2012 than 2011 at many sites. In April, May and June scores of 11 and 12 tended to replace 15 and 16 at some sites around Marlborough. This can be linked to the drought and abstraction. Riverfly populations may take a year or longer to recover entirely, but by the end of 2012 we could already see higher scores than in late 2011.

The new sites downstream on the Berkshire Kennet tended to show lower scores than we are used to between Marlborough and

Ramsbury. However, some – such as Kintbury/Barton Holt and Avington Sidestream – exceeded the upstream scores, suggesting that localised good habitat can support a healthy riverfly population.

During December and January many of our sites became incredibly coloured, deep and fast flowing due to the high rainfall. This made monitoring impossible at many sites, thus creating an unfortunate gap in the data. However, the shallower sites could still be monitored and as we move further into 2013 we should learn more about the effect that the high rainfall has had.

Harry Forbes

ARK People

Helen Kelly



Helen has been working with ARK on the Care for the Kennet project and this year will be involved both in the community and with eco-councils on reducing water consumption in school. Helen is also our Twitter champion – if you'd like to follow ARK we are @ARKennet. Her email address is c4k@riverkennet.org

Peter Marren



Peter is an all-round naturalist, author of lots of books and articles in all the best papers. He lives by the Kennet in Ramsbury and is ARK's sitting naturalist (and former committee member) who offers advice and provides information when called upon to do so.

Tania Channing Williams



Tania has been volunteering for ARK for just over a year and is a regular Wednesday afternoon volunteer. She is also carrying out her second season as a redd spotter on the River Dun (a tributary of the Kennet) near her home in Shalbourne.

Community Engagement Programme

Many of our members will recall seeing us at local stands and events in 2012, encouraging Kennet residents to sign up for a Free Water Saving Makeover and take advantage of the many water saving devices on offer.

In 2013, we're coming direct to the smaller communities within the Kennet region. Below is a list of where we will be during the coming weeks.

25 February to 1 March
4 March to 8 March
11 March to 15 March
18 March to 22 March
5 March to 29 March

Ramsbury
Aldbourne
Lockeridge
East/West Kennet
Avebury

For further details about what we are doing and where please contact Helen Kelly on c4k@riverkennet.org

Websites worth visiting



West Country Rivers

Trust is an environmental charity established in 1995 to secure the preservation and improvement of rivers, streams and watercourses in the West Country. It does this by:

- protecting ecosystem function and natural resources,
- reconnecting society with the natural environment,
- basing its work on good scientific research.

<http://www.wrt.org.uk>



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Members of ARK receive a copy of this newsletter either by mail or email.

If you'd like to find out more about ARK, volunteering opportunities or membership please visit our website at www.riverkennet.org or contact Carolyn White at carolyn@riverkennet.org

We hope you have enjoyed this newsletter and if you have any comments or ideas for future issues, do please pass them on!

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