

Action for the River Kennet

# River talk

A PARTNERSHIP OF PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE KENNET

## Get Waterfit for 2015



One of the easiest things any of us can do to keep chalk streams healthy is to use less water

And saving water has never been easier. In the Kennet Valley all our domestic and industrial water supply comes directly from the aquifers that feed the river. Every drop we save is a drop left for the river, to keep it flowing healthily.

Anyone in the Marlborough/SN8 and Hungerford/RG17 postcode areas can have a free Get WaterFit for 2015 visit. All you have to do is call 0800 358 6665 to book a visit and all the latest water saving gadgets will be fitted for FREE. There is no charge, you won't

notice they are there, and a family of four can save up to £180 a year in metered water and energy costs.

So far around a quarter of Marlborough homes are already saving water, and the campaign now includes Hungerford and all the outlying villages. The number to call is 0800 358 6665, or you can email [helen@riverkennet.org](mailto:helen@riverkennet.org).

So, rise to the challenge – Get WaterFit for 2015, and let's see how much water we can save.

Get WaterFit for 2015 is a partnership between Action for the River Kennet and Thames Water. Get WaterFit for 2015 visits are carried out by a trained Climate Energy fitter.

## Rivers Trust Awards

On 26th November ARK's Technical Adviser John Lawson received not one but two accolades at the annual Rivers Trust awards ceremony, the first for his contribution to Science and Innovation and a second for his work on Fisheries and the Environment. Harry Forbes was awarded a special prize for his 'Outstanding Contribution to the Riverfly Movement as a Volunteer'.



## Lady Kennet

We are very sorry to learn of the death on 21st November of Elizabeth Young, Lady Kennet. She and her late husband Lord (Wayland) Kennet were enthusiastic supporters of ARK from its earliest days and only last summer she wrote to tell us about some of her pre-war memories of eels (River Talk 31, page 4). Her warm friendship will be greatly missed.

**Photo:** John Lawson collecting his award.

# News from the Chairman

Last November, ARK returned to Marlborough Town Hall for its AGM, having held our previous two meetings downstream.

## Another busy year

Richard Aylard, Thames Water's External Affairs and Sustainability Director, presented the company's plans for the new Swindon pipeline that will enable them to reduce abstraction from the Kennet Valley. We warmly welcome this, but Thames Water know that our long-term goal is still to end any abstraction which does not return to the Kennet.

Graham Osborn (TW) described the problem of mis-connected drains and the harm they cause to rivers. Andrew Kerr (Sustainable Eel Group) then gave a fascinating talk on the extraordinary – but only half understood – life cycle of eels, a species once common in the Kennet.

Harry Forbes reported on our Riverfly Monitor teams, whose growing archive of data will shortly be accessible through a powerful data-handling system that ARK is developing with the new community interest company Natural Access. Catharina Landstrom (Oxford University) then described how ARK's campaigning work is being highlighted in a major research study into how the public influence environmental policy.

Our Director Charlotte Hitchmough gave a characteristically impressive account of the range of projects and activities described in our Annual

Report and in this issue of River Talk. This ended with the well-deserved award to Liz Wright of the ARK Volunteer of the Year Prize (see page 8).

## Save our Waters

The Environment Agency are consulting on the next Water Framework Directive River Basin Management Plan. Our Catchment Management Plan sits underneath this, and we and the Kennet Catchment Partnership will be giving a detailed technical response.

Meanwhile, The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) have set up a website called 'Save our Waters' which is a non-technical way for people tell government how much they care about water in the landscape. The River Kennet already has more representation than any other river but we'd like to persuade as many ARK members as possible to take part – all you need to do is visit <http://saveourwaters.org.uk>

## Looking ahead

As 2015 gets into gear we continue to attract funding for new ventures. Most recently we won a substantial grant from Thames Water's charity arm for major habitat restoration near Mildenhall, including a public pollution awareness campaign.



We are expanding our work downstream in schools below Hungerford, and will focus our water efficiency campaign there. Thanks to Martin Salter (former MP for Reading West) we have joined a large project to restore Reading's old pumping station and surrounding habitat, as a visitor centre.

We continue, in partnership with Marlborough Town Council, to manage and improve Stonebridge Meadow, and were pleased that the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust recently designated it as the 'Stonebridge Meadows Wildlife Site'. We were also pleased that the Council confirmed that it would continue to allow grazing on Coopers Meadow.

Finally, as ever, I express many thanks to Charlotte and her team of staff and volunteers for their great work in both keeping the ship afloat and exploring new worlds. And I express our thanks to you, members, partners and donors – without you none of this could happen.

Geoffrey Findlay

**Photo:** As Chairman of ARK I was invited by the Town Mayor of Marlborough, Cllr Marian Hannaford Dobson, along with representatives from other local organisations to meet the Duke of Kent, when he came to unveil a plaque to commemorate the start of the WW1.

# Transforming Marlborough College's Stretch of the Kennet

Not many schools are fortunate enough to have a trout stream flowing through their grounds, let alone one as famous for fishing as the Kennet.



As well as two lakes, Marlborough College owns about half a mile of the Kennet between the Pewsey Road Bridge and Preshute Bridge. Given that the source of the Kennet is only a few miles upstream, one would expect our stretch of the river to be fast flowing, well-oxygenated, gravel-bottomed and full of the classic chalk stream plant, water crowfoot.

Unfortunately, the river is impeded by two weirs, one at Fox's Bridge, the other at the bottom of the Master's Garden. As a consequence, the water flows much more slowly than it should, banks of silt are deposited on top of the gravel that trout need to spawn in, and river plants cannot become established. Instead of a burbling torrent of water, we have, in many parts, a featureless, over-widened, sluggish canal.

With the invaluable advice and assistance of ARK, the College is actively involved in rehabilitating the fishery. About ten years ago both lakes were dredged and cover logs were placed in the river to help trout

avoid predators. In September 2014, the College's Conservation Group embarked upon a long-term project to enhance the river, starting with the stretch above Fox's Bridge.

With financial support from the College, a channel was cut in the weir to increase the flow and enable fish to migrate upstream throughout the year. The next stage of the project is to use natural materials such as bundles of hazel and willow to protect eroded banks and narrow the river in sections.

Over the next few years, this project will slowly transform the College fishery into a faster-flowing stream capable of supporting a much more diverse array of wildlife. This will benefit not only the trout and the fishermen who stalk them, but also all those who enjoy walking along or sitting beside this beautiful river as it flows through the heart of Marlborough College.

Sean Dempster



## Stonebridge Meadow Consultation

Last summer ARK and Marlborough Town Council, joint owners of Stonebridge Meadow, ran a public consultation about the future management of the site.

From the 246 responses received, feedback was overwhelmingly positive about the present and planned use of the Meadow. People's comments will also be valuable in drawing up plans for the future in partnership with the Town Council.

The top three reasons given by respondents for what makes Stonebridge special were the River Kennet, the wildlife and the footpaths. There was strong support for the approach taken to public access, showing that people value the wildlife of the protected riverbank, but can still enjoy it.

A two-thirds majority did not support part of the meadow being transferred to a football club.

We look forward to continuing to work with the Council, the community and a host of expert specialists to keep Stonebridge special for people and for wildlife. Look out for public events at Stonebridge at [www.facebook.com/riverkennet](http://www.facebook.com/riverkennet)

Anna Forbes

# Water Meadows

## Places that once brought wealth now bring wildlife.

Today the meadows along the floodplain of the Upper Kennet appear as grass fields mixed with patches of rush and runnels of sedge, often with pools of standing water in winter. But a century ago they would have looked very different.

Instead we would have seen a carefully maintained series of main drains and smaller carrier drains controlled by sluices and earth or board dams; a grid-plan of water. In May we might see lambs gambolling among the buttercups between the shallow drains. In June, with the sheep now on the down above, we might see the field 'shut up' to produce a crop of hay. We might have heard the drum of a snipe, the whistle of a redshank or the plop of a water vole entering the river from its hole in the bank. Come late autumn and the watery grid of the drains would reappear, spilling 'panes' of silvery water over their banks. And we might spot a solitary workman known as the drowner controlling the flow of water through a series of sluice-gates and keeping the whole complex system in good repair.

Meadows like this were known as water meadows. And there was far more to a proper water meadow than a wet field. These were places where the water level was controlled to keep the field more or less permanently damp but not flooded. At the same time the meadow would receive natural fertiliser from river silt and dissolved chalk.

The system only works when you have a fast-enough flowing river for gravity-fed drains and with water at a more-or-less constant temperature. In practice that restricts this form of meadow management to the chalk streams of southern England,



Photo: The evening procession of sheep from water meadows by the River Kennet, near Marlborough.

especially in Wiltshire, Hampshire and Dorset. The practice dates from the early 1600s and by the mid-century it was well-established. The water meadows of the upper Kennet were under the influence of the Earls of Pembroke, progressive landlords who owned Ramsbury Manor and had introduced these 'floated meadows' to their other manor at Wylke.

At its height in the early nineteenth century a water meadow might cost £5 18s per acre to operate. But even so the same meadow made a profit of £4 per acre through sales of hay, greater stock densities and through rents – the rental of a working water meadow was twice that of an ordinary meadow.

Like so many other time-honoured rural practices, the system fell into decline in the twentieth century, especially once cheap chemical fertilisers became available. Today only two water meadows remain in use, not for commercial purposes but for nature conservation. They are both on the Avon near Salisbury at Britford Meadows and Lower Woodford Meadows. It is ironic that meadows which were once among the most highly maintained in the country were – and are – good for wildlife.

For an experience of a Kennet water meadow try the Seven Bridges footpath at Ramsbury. The last bridge is over the River Kennet but the previous six are all over carrier drains big and small, once used to flood the meadows with river water. In one place you can even see the sluice gate overgrown with watercress where it has fallen from the machinery between its brick pillars. We are standing in the midst of a ruined agricultural economy that had once bought wealth to the county – and today brings wildlife instead.

Peter Marren



## Going With the Flow



We normally like to see the river flowing free but it is satisfying when an apparently dead tree can create a wonderful natural habitat.

Turn left down Mill Lane in Ramsbury and as you go over the first bridge look downstream and there it is. A poor dead giant of a tree, I think a Whitebeam, has toppled over ripping out its roots and lying there forlorn and smashed. But look again as to how it has fallen into the river.

It is angled at about ten degrees to the bank, pushing out into the river downstream. What is to be done with

our fallen giant possibly forty feet in length with a diameter of ten or so feet? Peter Marren, ARK's ecological adviser assessed the problem and came up with the following.

Trim off the large branches in the river and roughly tidy the debris on the bank. Magically within days the river was now flowing round the tree. Another channel has been found by the Kennet. Also, the tree may start to sprout again despite its apparently terminal state.

A big thank you to Mike Sinden, Anna Forbes and the volunteers for their excellent work here.

**Rodney Owen-Jones**



## River Habitat Restoration in Mildenhall

The first phase of our project to improve river habitat through the village of Mildenhall is almost complete.

A new fish bypass has been installed on the south bank to allow fish to swim around the Mill House. Lowering the bed of the stream in the garden will also make sure that carrier streams don't dry up. The final stage will be to lower the base beneath the mill wheel so that the whole river can run faster in summer months, thereby helping to keep sediment in suspension, reducing algal build-up and encouraging good ranunculus growth. Huge thanks to the Mill owners who put up with significant disruption right outside their front door, to the great team who worked in mud and rain to get the job done before river levels rose for the winter and our wonderful volunteers who completed all the pre-work surveys.

**Charlotte Hitchmough**

## Is a Leaky Loo Costing You?

In his visits to fit water efficiency devices in homes around Marlborough, our fitter Nick has come across a number of 'leaky loos'. Often these are completely invisible, with water constantly seeping from the cistern into the pan, but they can waste up to 2,800 litres of water per week and cost nearly £300 per year to metered homes.

It's easy to test whether your loo is leaky by using either a dye tablet or a sticker. You can pick up a free test kit from DIY Rainbows or the Town Council offices in Marlborough – or if you can't get to town just email [charlotte@riverkennet.org](mailto:charlotte@riverkennet.org) and we'll post you a dye tablet.

The good news is that for a limited time in the SN8 and RG17 postcodes Thames Water will pay for a plumber to fix your leaky loo. If you find your loo is leaky call 01672 513672 and we can arrange to have it fixed free of charge.

**Charlotte Hitchmough**

Photo credit: Trevor Pincham



Goldcrest

Photo credit: Trevor Pincham



Canada goose



# A Walk by the River

## 'Red sky in the morning ...'

The sky looked like it was on fire as I set out on Sunday 5th January 2014 but it didn't worry me as the forecast said that the rain shouldn't arrive until about midday.

I was taking a regular walk of mine following the River Kennet from Marlborough to Stitchcombe. A sparrowhawk cruised around disturbing the wood pigeons as I approached the footbridge in Stonebridge Lane. Here, the water level was high and spilled over into the meadow meaning that bar two moorhens, the stretch of river was devoid of birdlife. However, I knew that there would be birds around and I was curious to see what effect the extra volume of water would have on the landscape.

I passed an area which had been grazed in the summer. Short grass was partially submerged by patches of standing water. A flock of about thirty redwings had been attracted to it and flitted between the bushes where they were joined by a song

thrush. Two resident stock doves sat in their favourite tree as I cut across the meadow towards the small bridge which took me onto the path to Minal. The water level here was three quarters of the way up my wellies. Lower than the previous year when nearly the whole meadow was flooded and the surface of the water was littered with thousands of dead snails, washed out of the grass.

Half a dozen Canada geese flew over as I followed the footpath to the old railway line. A small detour to the bridge overlooking the sewage works adding magpie, great spotted woodpecker and long-tailed tits to my list. From there I could see a couple of meadow pipits and about twenty wagtails – mostly pied but also a few greys – which were feeding around the pits and a buzzard perched on one of the handrails and in the trees a goldcrest.

As I approached Minal I saw a mistle thrush and a flock of about fifty goldfinches. Through the churchyard and the meadow beyond where the river had burst its bank and three mallards and a dabchick had escaped

the rushing water and were paddling about in the slack water.

I stood on the bridge at Minal, looking over the river which was at full flow but birdless in contrast to the large areas of still water in Black Field being visited by about twenty meadow pipits, a small number of pied wagtails and a solitary fieldfare while a kestrel watched from a nearby bush and a buzzard mobbed a red kite above.

A large flock of birds in the distance caught my attention. Through my bins I could see about four hundred lapwings flying around and beyond them, two large groups of golden plover. A little egret flew upstream while I watched them – no doubt looking for somewhere calmer and clearer.

I then had a real surprise when a mole ran across the path in front of me and disappeared into the longer grass. When I got to the point where it first showed itself, I could see an average sized molehill and a very obvious tunnel. As I was looking down, what was presumably a



Photo credit: Trevor Pinchen

Long-tailed tit

second mole suddenly appeared at the mouth of the tunnel, stuck its head and front feet out and then retreated back inside. I imagine that the water-logged ground has forced them and many others to find a safer haven.

The raised footpath runs close to the river here and on the opposite bank, a noisy flock of about fifty siskins were active amongst the alders - the sound interrupted by the lovely 'gronk' of a raven that flew overhead.

Down some steps and the water is now ankle deep for a while until I pass through a small copse and into the village. A cormorant circles above me as three swans laze upon the water's edge and a grey wagtail darts and bobs on the grassy bank by the sluice.

I stood on the bridge contemplating the rushing water. No kingfishers today but they will be back when things calm down again. Now it's time for me to head home before that rain arrives.

Adapted from an article  
by Trevor Pinchen



Photo credit: Trevor Pinchen

Little Egret

# Cleaning up the Kennet and Avon Canal

ARK and its partners are working together to solve some complex problems.

On a snowy day in February Richard Benyon MP joined a group of concerned people to look at the issues surrounding the interaction between the River Kennet and the Kennet and Avon Canal.



Since its re-opening by the Queen in 1990 the once-cinderellic Kennet and Avon canal has become a thriving waterway that provides boating, angling, employment and a tow path enjoyed by thousands of people every year. However, at certain points the canal and River Kennet share the same channel, resulting in relatively dirty canal water being flushed into the cleaner Kennet. Canal water is slow-flowing, shallow (so warm in summer) and frequently 'stirred up' by the movement of boats. The contrast between this and the cooler, fast flowing clear water of the River Kennet is huge. Not only does it look mucky, but it brings with it sediment that chokes trout spawning gravels, and nutrients and algae that smother the river bed and plants like stream water crowfoot. It's a complex problem that is difficult to solve, but one where progress has already been made by working with partners on the Kennet Catchment Partnership.

We have already been able tackle ways to keep canal water clean, to stop canal water overflowing into the River Dun, and to keep the canal moving. At the Wilton Water reservoir that supplies the canal, the Canal and River Trust have installed an

'algal buster' and floating reed beds to naturally soak up nutrients before they reach the canal. Thames Water has improved the quality of sewage effluent discharged from the Kintbury and Great Bedwyn Sewage Treatment Works, and the catchment-sensitive farming advisors have been helping land managers to reduce pollution from surrounding land. As well as this, last year the Canal and River Trust built a series of 'by-pass weirs' around locks to keep the canal water moving, and to stop it overflowing into the nearby River Dun. River Keeper at Hungerford Robert Starr is delighted with the impact of these, 'this winter the Dun has been like a different river' he said 'we've had trout spawning in reaches that haven't been touched for years because they were so choked with sediment'.

So we know that improvements can be made: agreeing the next steps and finding a way to pay for them will be the key to reaching a solution.

Charlotte Hitchmough

# ARK People

## Liz Wright



I joined ARK as I was approaching retirement and looking for a local volunteering opportunity. I began by training as a River Monitor and since then have got drawn into collecting donations on the High Street, looking for muddy inflow channels, redd-spotting and faggot-making in the woods on a sunny winter afternoon beside our lovely river.

## Sean Dempster



I was lucky enough to be brought up in County Cork, where my father ran a salmon fishery on the Blackwater. When I came to teach Biology at Marlborough College, I was delighted to discover a chalk stream and a local organisation dedicated to its welfare. I have been a committee member for a number of years and am especially interested in education and the practical conservation work that ARK is doing with students from the College.

## Tim Clarke



Hi, I'm Tim Clarke, an agronomist who has been working in this area for seven years, advising farmers on diffuse pollution in the Kennet valley. In partnership with ARK, I am determined to help restore the water quality and habitats on the Kennet and its tributaries ... there's still lots to do!

# Dates for Your Diary

## Thursday 19th March

**Soil Health Workshop and site visit for farmers and land managers.** 9.00am – 1.00pm

Woodlands St. Mary Village Hall, Berkshire RG17 7SL

See [www.riverkennet.org](http://www.riverkennet.org) for more details; please book in advance by emailing [charlotte@riverkennet.org](mailto:charlotte@riverkennet.org)

## Saturday 21st March

**ARK at the St John's School Science Fair**

ARK will have a stand at the St John's School Science Fair between 11am – 5pm. If you're thinking of attending the fair, do please come and say hello.

## Marlborough Moth Nights

ARK will once again be hosting a series of Moth Nights. If weather is unfavourable nights will be rescheduled.

Please visit [www.facebook.com/riverkennet](https://www.facebook.com/riverkennet) for where to meet, times and all the latest updates. Warm clothing and a torch are essential. Dates are as follows:

Saturday 4th April, Saturday 2nd May, Friday 5th June,

Saturday 4th July, Wednesday 19th August and

Thursday 3rd September.

For news about other volunteering events (weather permitting!) just visit the What's On column on the ARK website: [www.riverkennet.org](http://www.riverkennet.org)

# Websites Worth Visiting



## The Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT)

The Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT) is one of the world's leading science and conservation institutions in its field. As well as rescuing endangered species from the edge of extinction it protects, repairs and creates exciting new wetlands for people and wildlife.

To find out more please visit: [www.wwt.org.uk](http://www.wwt.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](http://www.riverkennet.org) or email [info@riverkennet.org](mailto:info@riverkennet.org)

Have you visited our exciting website yet? It's been designed for us by Mole Productions of Marlborough and you can find us here: [www.riverkennet.org](http://www.riverkennet.org)

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