



ACTION FOR THE RIVER KENNET

Newsletter Number 13

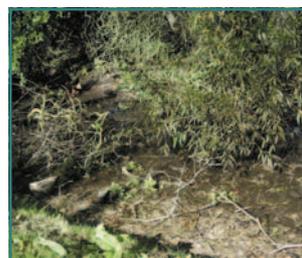
ARK Annual General Meeting Wednesday, 30th November

ARK members and guests are invited to the Action for the River Kennet 2005 AGM at the Wesley Hall, Oxford Street, Marlborough at 7pm. We are delighted to welcome back naturalist Peter Marren as our guest speaker and hope to hear from the Environment Agency too. Refreshments will be served. The hall is behind Methodist Church, opposite the Pilates Studio and parking is available in the Parade and on the High Street.

Marlborough River Project

An exciting scheme to dramatically improve the river in and around Marlborough is under way. ARK has been working in partnership with Marlborough Town Council, Kennet District Council, the Marlborough Area Development Trust (MADT), the Environment Agency and St John's School to create a river improvement scheme which will take place over the next 5 to 10 years.

Phase one has identified six projects which will result in an immediate improvement in the appearance and ecology of the river. We also hope to open up a new area of public access. The project sites include George Lane, Stonebridge Lane, Cooper's Meadow and Manton Recreation Ground. The work will include river bed cleaning, bank reinstatement, tree thinning and vegetation planting. The partnership has applied to the AONB Sustainable Development Fund to finance part of the first phase and we expect work to begin over the Winter.



Problems along the Kennet's banks in Marlborough: derelict structures, eroded banks and overhanging trees.

The Kennet in the news

ARK has been working to increase public awareness of the poor state of the river, following what is now 11 months of below average rainfall across the catchment. During August groundwater levels dropped by another metre, leaving more river bed dry in the upper reaches. We have succeeded in getting coverage via the local and regional press, TV and radio.



BBC radio journalist Annie Martin interviews Mayor Hilary Cripps about the state of the River in Marlborough

Kennet District Council will lead the second phase of the project, which will entail 'soft-engineering' the river bank in Marlborough town: reinstating the natural chalk stream characteristics and removing the 20-year old concrete and brickwork. The result will be a healthier ecology and a prettier river— an asset the town can be proud of.

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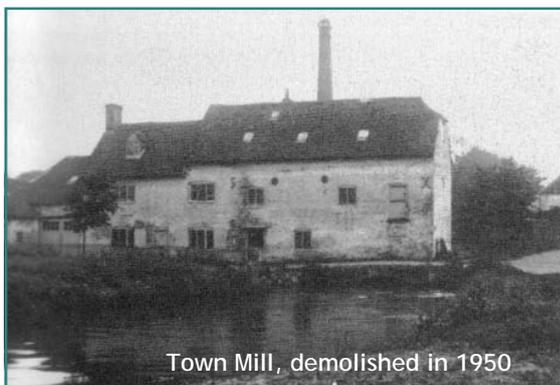
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The passing of a River An obituary by Godfrey K Maurice Extracts from an article printed in Blackwood's Magazine, 1947

'The river ran at the bottom of the garden where a plank bridge spanned it with railings on either side. All of us at the age of four had to give a promise that we would not go further down the garden than the first grass path. At the age of six we were promoted to the second grass path. At eight most of us had learned to swim and were allowed right down to the river, and no one bothered about us any more.

There was good reason for these precautions. In those days the river flowed under the bridge deep and smooth, brim full in the longest droughts of summer. Men had drowned in it—to this day the fate of two men has left the names Wheeler's Pool and Pockock's Hole. And there was the occasion when a man ran the whole length of the garden to tell Cox, the coachman, that a child was struggling in the water. Cox, a little wizened man, agile as a scrum-half, raced down the garden, saw the child lying on the bottom under the bridge, dived in and brought it out. But it could never be made to breathe again.

It was always worth while looking up and down stream as you crossed the bridge at the bottom of the garden to watch the trout lazing about. Turning downstream you soon came to the Town Mill where you could see Dell, the Miller, with half a dozen helpers, their clothes white with flour, heaving sacks, climbing up and down ladders, while the produce of the Mill poured down chutes and the Mill itself rocked and shuddered. The harnessed river flowed deep and quiet above, but, freeing itself by turning the great wheel, it roared white and foaming below, gradually smoothing itself out in a black stream broken here and there by eddies.'



Town Mill, demolished in 1950

'More often we were led up-stream away from the

town, past Duck's Bridge, so called after Duck, the jobber, one of whose lame horses could always be seen tethered knee-deep below the farthest arch, where the river rippled over the flinty shallows and was lashed to foam by the pawing horse. Above the bridge was a withybed, too rank and swampy to travel on foot. We used to explore that reach in a canoe on summer evenings and watch the wild duck, moor-hens, and dabchicks, which were very tame in that seclusion. On foot one had to skirt the withy bed along a muddy path called Treacle Bolly, which ended at the sheep-wash.'



The King's Mill on Treacle Bolly

'Past the sheep-wash lay the Horse Close and the Island Meadow, where eels could sometimes be seen in the side stream; from there the footbridge led us to the churchyard, and so to the farm bridge, where we used to catch house-flies basking on the warm brick balustrade and thrown them to the trout below, which took them greedily.'

'...After many years in distant lands I achieved my ambition and acquired the fishing rights of the stretch we used to rent whose centre was the Mill Pool. 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. Year by year the river wilted more till it began to go dry in summer far down from its source.

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State of the River – Autumn 2005

Report by John Hounslow and Mike Matthews

River flow has steadily decreased throughout the summer and the upper Kennet has steadily dried up. It is not unusual for the upper reaches of a chalk stream to dry by the end of the Summer, but this year the Kennet dried unusually early. On August 11th the flow at Knighton Weir fell below 90 mega-litres per day which triggered a 'flow constraint' meaning that Thames Water had to reduce the quantity of water pumped out at Axford.

Rainfall through the summer has been below average. Early July saw a few intense thunder storms accompanied by heavy rain which boosted groundwater levels slightly, but they remain well below average for the time of year.

Weed growth remained subdued all summer. Ranunculus did not become established in many reaches, which remain bare. Watercress is thriving and in some areas (for example Manton, Mildenhall) encroaches across the whole width of river. Algal growth is intense and can be clearly seen as a brown coating on the river bed where water levels and flow are low.

Wildlife. Fly life has been notably poor this year. Herons however are thriving and there has been a high fish predation rate.

Outlook. In a normal year flow rates begin to recover around November. However, Geoff Hardwicke who monitors water levels in Dorset and parts of Wiltshire for the Environment Agency, said 'I can't see the chalk systems recovering to any degree until at least Christmas at the earliest. And if it is a dry winter we are looking at bleak prospects for 2006 with significant environmental damage to the ecosystem.'

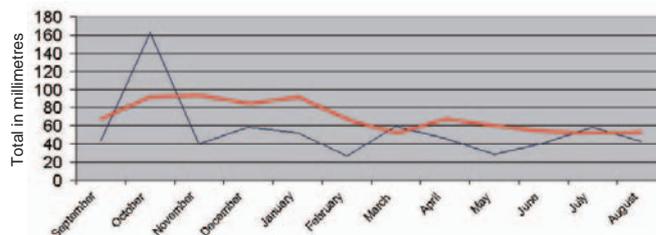
Abstraction and river flow Rainfall for the first 8 months of 2005 totaled only 70% of the average of the last 15 years.

River flows and aquifers are near record low levels, yet the five Kennet catchment pumping stations have supplied the normal 18,500 cubic metres of water per day. The Kennet is not in good shape and the questions must be asked, what is being done to remedy this and what are the plans for the future?

Clatford, Marlborough, Ogbourne and Ramsbury pumping stations have indefinite licenses, supplying 40% of the total. Axford supplies 11 to 12 thousand

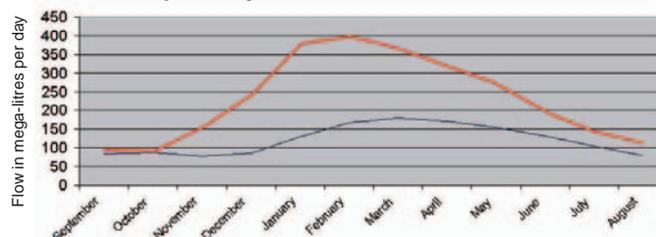
Rainfall at Marlborough Sewage Treatment Works September 2004–August 2005

Blue = recorded
Red = monthly average 1990–2004



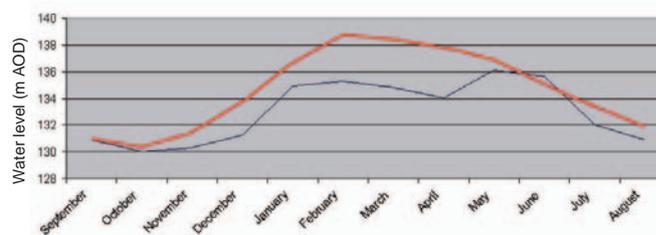
River Flow at Knighton September 2004–August 2005

Blue = recorded
Red = monthly average 1990–2004



Groundwater Levels Rockley Observation Borehole September 2004–August 2005

Blue = recorded
Red = monthly average 1980–2004



Data source: Environment Agency

cubic metres per day, mainly to the Swindon area. That water is not returned to the Kennet's drainage system. The present license expires at the end of 2007, and, starting 1st January 2008 the Environment Agency proposes to reduce the permitted daily average from 13,700 to 9,300 cubic metres per day, substantially less than is being abstracted at present. In view of the plans for major housing developments in the Swindon area ARK has asked Thames Water to explain how this will be done. They replied that they will be finalising their strategy to cover the Axford license in the coming months and will keep ARK informed once there is more news to report. Watch this space!

Mike Matthews

(Continued from page 2)

'Every summer now when the rainfall is below average the river dries almost to the garden where I played as a child'

'But by taking thought we could have both rivers and water for domestic and industrial use, and if war forced the necessity upon us, a way of achieving it would be devised. We pat ourselves on the back and puff out our chests when we have a five year plan for anything, but no one will consider a fifty- or a hundred-year plan, which is what our rivers need.'

The full 9-page article is available on our website www.riverkennet.org, or by calling 01672 513672.

Your photographs

A message from the Environment Agency's John Hallett

As Project Manager for the Kennet Chalkstream Restoration Project (see ARK newsletters 9 and 10) I rely heavily on information received from river users to help formulate action plans designed to improve the current state of the river. 'A picture paints a thousand words' so a photograph is a good way of illustrating the river's present condition.



John Hallett at Stonebridge, Marlborough

I am keen to create a photographic record of problems on the river, with particular emphasis on the following: Turbidity (clarity), Pollution, Flood and Low flow.

Photographs can be sent by e-mail or post and should include:

- Time/date
- Place
- Weather conditions (previous 24 hrs if possible)
- Camera used
- A brief description of what the photograph illustrates

Please email photographs to:

john.hallett@environment-agency.gov.uk

or post to: John Hallett, Red Kite House, Howbery Park, Wallingford, Oxon, OX10 8BD.

Tel: 01491 8283713

May I take the opportunity to remind everybody that pollution incidents, whether on the river or elsewhere, should be reported to the Environment Agency's incident hotline on 0800 80 70 60.

Nature notes – the water vole

Peter Marren

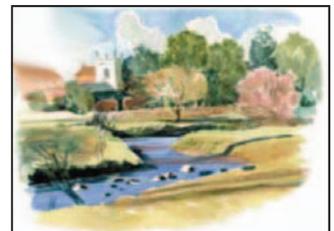
The River Kennet is one of the strongholds for this charming but much-declined animal. Water Voles are about the size of a rat (they are sometimes called water rats) but they are plumper and much more attractive with round heads and furry ears. You often see them sitting up and holding a shoot to nibble with their forelegs. Especially when feeding, Water Voles can be quite tame and let you watch from a few yards away (if you keep quiet). They live in burrows on steep muddy banks (which are easier to find than the voles themselves). You sometimes hear them dive into the water with a 'plop' and see their furry heads above water as they are propelled along by their hind legs.

A good way to check whether Water Voles are present is to look for their distinctive splayed prints, about the size of a hamster's, in wet mud. You can also look for their distinctive cylindrical droppings. They like dense areas of vegetation near the water with plenty of their favourite plants - yellow iris, sedges and sweet-grass. Unfortunately the vole's numbers have been reduced by mink, and its future depends on mink control.



ARK greetings cards

New ARK greetings cards will be available in time for Christmas. Featuring water colours of the



Kennet by local artist Simon Orton they make unique and useful gifts and will be great for writing all those 'thank you' notes. The cards will be sold in packs of eight, featuring four designs. They will be available at the AGM in November.

Tottenham House update

ARK were concerned to discover during the Tottenham House planning process that Thames Water, a subsidiary of the German company RWE, were simultaneously the body responsible for advising the planners on water resources and the potential commercial water supplier. A similar situation appears to be true with other water companies across the country. This seems to ARK to raise a conflict of interests. We have written to Michael Ancram who has promised to raise the issue with the Government.

