



## ACTION FOR THE RIVER KENNET

Newsletter Number 16

### Reclaim our River— Marlborough's People's Millions Project

The Kennet in Marlborough will benefit from a face-lift in 2007 thanks to a 'People's Millions' lottery grant. Following a concerted PR campaign the 'Reclaim our River Project', led by ARK and the Kennet Valley Arts Trust, won £50,000 of lottery money to restore the section of river by Priory Gardens in Marlborough and to run a summer arts festival to celebrate the river.

Thousands of people telephoned to vote for the river project, which beat stiff opposition from a multi-sports pitch in Yate. The project is a real team effort between many organisations in the town including all the partners in the Marlborough River Restoration Scheme (see back page). Secret Agent Marketing helped run a great publicity campaign and Pebley Beach Motors, the Gazette and Herald and Marlborough College Ecology Group all gave their support. The moment the cheque was presented was broadcast live on ITV West. The crowd of KVAT and ARK members in the Wellington Arms, who had been led to believe they had not won, were surprised by the arrival of the heavily disguised news presenter, Rupert Everett, carrying the giant cheque.



### What happens now?

Now the funding is secure, work can begin. The first stage will be to open up the tree canopy to allow light to reach the river bed and banks. This will be done by a professional tree surgeon. When the river flow has dropped and the temperatures have warmed up we will begin re-instating the river banks. We are looking for volunteers to help with some of this work. The third stage will be planting up the banks with a variety of native plants. Again, volunteers will be welcome.

### What about the arts?

KVAT will manage the arts side of this project and there is still a chance to have your say on what you'd like to see develop. We aim to offer a variety of art forms to try, using the river as inspiration.

### How can I join in?

To register as a volunteer to help with the river work and planting please send an email to [volunteers@riverkennet.org](mailto:volunteers@riverkennet.org) or call Charlotte Hitchmough on 01672 513672. For further information about the arts call Anna Sexton on 01672 516480 or email [info@kvat.co.uk](mailto:info@kvat.co.uk) please address the email 'Reclaim Our River arts project'.



### Jack Ainslie and Dennis Carter

It is with great sadness that we report our founder Jack Ainslie died on 5th January 2007 and our President Lord Dennis Carter of Devizes died in December. Both men will be greatly missed. Lord Carter had recently been ARK's voice in the House of Lords and Jack had been a driving force in ARK since the first meeting in 1991. A special tribute to Jack Ainslie will be published separately.

## Hope for our dying willows?

As many of you will know many willows along the River Kennet are in a poor condition if not actually dying or dead. The cause, it seems, is fungal disease. This takes two forms: a willow scab which produces black blotches on the leaves and causes them to fall early. And, worse, black canker which attacks shoots as well as leaves, resulting in the shedding of twigs and then progressively larger branches. Over several seasons the tree loses more and more of its crown and eventually dies. Both diseases are encouraged by wet weather. Dead willows may possibly be an early sign of climate change, notably mild, wet winters.

Fortunately the disease kills only one kind of willow: the Crack Willow (*Salix fragilis*). Less fortunately this is by far the commonest large willow in the valley. There are many other kinds of willow. The largest is the White Willow (*Salix alba*) which is also attacked by canker but seems to survive it. The sallows and smaller willows do not seem to suffer, or at least not to the same extent.

When I last reported in the newsletter on Crack Willows, in 2005, I was gloomy about the long-term prospects of this tree. It seemed to be going the same way as the elm trees of the valley (remember them?) back in the 1970s. However a possible solution to the problem has emerged. Several old Crack Willows in Ramsbury were felled last year for safety reasons. Yet far from putting the trees out of their misery, cutting down their trunks seems to have given them a new lease of life.



*Two season's regrowth on felled crack willow. Pollarding at four feet higher would safeguard the regrowth from browsing animals.*

One of them was a big, badly cankered willow, which had been falling to pieces all over my neighbour's lawn for years. Yet after the main trunk was cut, the heartwood looked surprisingly sound with no trace of rot or fungal attack. And, sure

enough, last year the stump sprouted a forest of shoots. By cutting it we seem to have transformed a sick old tree into a vibrant, healthy pollard willow of the sort that graces stream banks wherever willows are properly managed.

The same has happened to two old roadside trees felled recently. Now that the litter of fallen dead

branches has been cleared away you can see that these trees had been felled before. What looked from a distance like tall maiden trees were in fact 'pseudo-pollards' with ancient gnarled, partly hollow, stumps. One of them is a remarkable tree intertwined with a younger alder tree which is actually rooted inside the decayed stump of its willow partner. Both 'dead' willows are now a mass of fresh, apparently healthy shoots, which should, over time and after a lot of self-selection and thinning, form a new tree.

So it looks to me as though our Crack Willows could be preserved by pollarding them. This is standard practice in places where willows are used by basket-makers, and also for amenity purposes. Some of our bigger willows turn out to have, on close inspection, big stumps. Was this because they were pollarded in the past (Ramsbury had at least one resident basket-maker at the turn of the last century), or through the result of casual felling? Are there any old photos of willow pollarding in the upper Kennet, especially near Ramsbury?

Anyone considering pollarding a much-loved willow should seek professional advice. However, on the basis of the trees I have examined in Ramsbury, sick-looking Crack Willows might be sound at heart, at least in the trunk. Perhaps the paradoxical answer to incipient climate change in the valley could be the judicious use of the chain-saw and the bonfire.

## Willows in the valley

The Kennet valley is a wonderland of willows. Ramsbury alone has at least ten kinds (specimens of all of them can be seen along the Newtown Road). Here are the ones I have seen. See how many you can spot (though you'll need a good field guide to sort them out!).

Crack Willow	<i>Salix fragilis</i>
White Willow	<i>Salix alba</i>
Weeping Willow	<i>Salix x Babylonica</i>
Almond Willow	<i>Salix triandra</i>
Purple Willow	<i>Salix purpurea</i>
Osier	<i>Salix viminalis</i>
Goat Willow	<i>Salix capraea</i>
Grey Sallow	<i>Salix cinerea</i>
Hybrid willow	<i>Salix x sericans</i>
Long-leaved hybrid willow	<i>Salix x smithiana</i>
Hybrid eared willow	<i>Salix x multinervis</i> ( <i>S. aurita x cinerea</i> )

*Peter Marren*

## Salmon in the Kennet

Years ago, when the Thames was clean and the Kennet was a fast flowing chalk stream salmon thrived in the rivers. Darryl Clifton-Dey from the Environment Agency aims to have them spawning again in the Kennet. If the project succeeds, young salmon born in the Kennet would swim down to the sea - passing through central London - and come back after a couple of years to spawn for themselves, giving the Thames a self-sustaining salmon population for the first time since 1833, when the last native-bred fish was caught in the river.

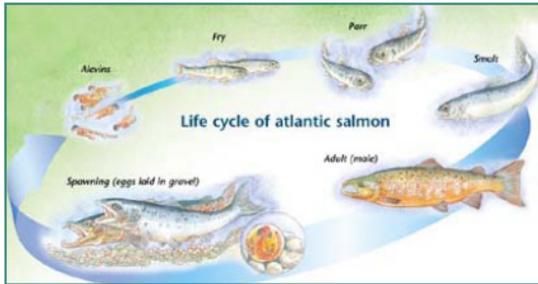


Figure courtesy of EA

The project has begun near Hampstead Marshall (between Newbury and Hungerford) at a location selected for its gravelly bottom. Hen (female) salmon need the gravel of a stream bed, where they dig out their spawning areas, or 'redds', laying their eggs in among the stones. Thousands of fertilised salmon eggs have been placed in baskets and buried in artificial redds created in the gravels of the river bed. There is a danger that the eggs may be choked by the increased silt in the water that has affected the Kennet in recent years; so alongside the eggs in the river bed Darryl has placed incubation boxes, also full of eggs, with river water flowing over them. The boxes are designed to ensure that the eggs will be unaffected by silt. Darryl will be able to count exactly how many eggs hatch and discover whether the silt suffocates the eggs 'laid' in gravel. He hopes that the salmon fry will safely grow up in the river before making their amazing journey out to sea and he's looking forward to their return to the Kennet in 2009. 'I'm so excited about it' he said 'I'm a bit of a salmon-geek and to have them successfully spawning in the Kennet would be fantastic'. CH

## Positive discussions with EA

ARK has had a series of meetings with the Environment Agency's Regional Manager Craig Woolhouse and Technical Specialist Fiona Holmes to discuss the future of the abstraction license at Axford and the wider issue of over-abstraction throughout the upper Kennet. Negotiations have moved forward and ARK is optimistic that an improvement in the current position could be possible.

## State of the river—Winter 06-07

### Rainfall, river flow and groundwater

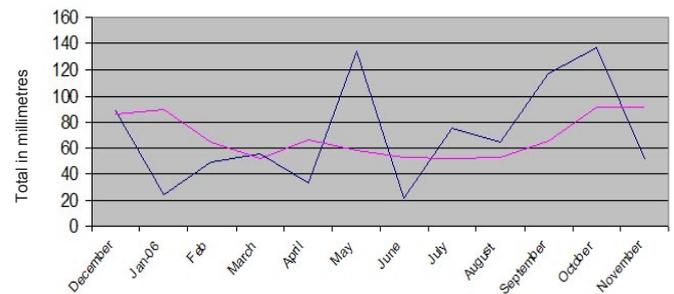
Rainfall since July has been consistently above average. The river is flowing well after prolonged rainfall through the Autumn recharged the aquifers. Water clarity has steadily improved since the sediment-laden runoff entered the river in September and October. In October groundwater levels measured at Rockley reached above average for the first time in nearly a year. This is good news, because it is the water stored in the aquifer during the winter months that keeps the river flowing during the summer.

### Trout

Trout have been seen cutting their 'redds' ready for spawning, which is always a good sign of the river's health.

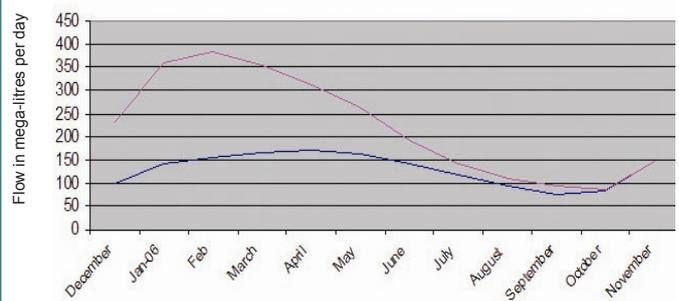
### Rainfall at Marlborough Sewage Treatment Works December 2005 – November 2006

Blue = recorded Red = monthly average 1990–2005



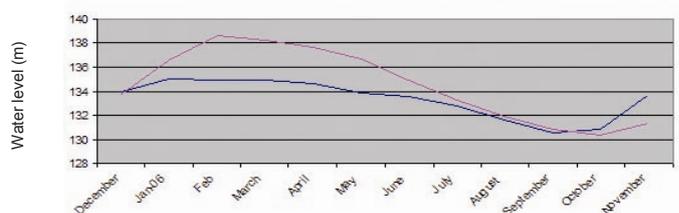
### River Flow at Knighton December 2005 – November 2006

Blue = recorded Red = monthly average 1990–2005



### Groundwater Levels Rockley Observation Borehole December 2005 – November 2006

Blue = recorded Red = monthly average 1990–2005



Data source: Environment Agency

## Autumn River Walk

ARK's Autumn 2006 river walk took in an unexplored stretch of river downstream of Ramsbury, passing through beautifully-managed estate land. The river, although still low, was full of trout and several walkers spotted kingfisher as well as ducks, moorhens and coots. Three river keepers were on hand to chat to walkers. ARK were delighted to be able to make this very private stretch of river available to its members for an afternoon, and many thanks must go to the local river keepers, estate managers and landowners for their help in organising the event. Thanks also to



Photo: Ian McColl

Mike Matthews and the Ramsbury Flyer who ferried those who preferred a shorter walk, back to the start.

CH

## Roger de Vere's Kingfisher

This Kingfisher (right) sits on the wing mirror of my car and admires him (her?) - self in the window glass, off and on



morning and evening. Capturing this picture involved considerable dedication and consequent suffering on my part as I had to get up very early (6.30!), when I could be sure that he would be there, for several mornings to catch the little blighter before the newspaper man frightened him off.

*Roger de Vere, Durnsford Mill (Vice-chairman—ARK)*

## Marlborough River Restoration Scheme

ARK is delighted to be part of the [Marlborough River Restoration Scheme](#)—a group of organisations working to improve the River Kennet in and around Marlborough. Other partners in the scheme include Marlborough Town Council, Kennet District Council, Marlborough Area Development Trust, Manton Resident's Association, the Kennet Valley Arts Trust, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, BTCV, the Richmond Fellowship and the Environment Agency.

## New Oxford Reservoir

Thames Water have put forward new proposals to build a new reservoir near Abingdon to meet their forecast water demand in 2020. Although the reservoir's main function would be to supply London during dry periods it would also pipe water to Swindon and Oxford.

At present the Kennet aquifers supply around 30% of Swindon's water and whether or not the reservoir is built it's unlikely that this would reduce. It could however prevent an increase in the quantity of Kennet water being piped across the catchment boundary to Swindon.

The Environment Agency are not however satisfied that Thames Water have proved that a large reservoir would be the best solution to meet future water demand. They would like to see more consideration given to options including water-demand reduction; leakage reduction, and collaborative use of reservoirs between water companies. Even if the reservoir goes ahead it will not be operational for at least 20 years, so for the moment at least, this won't be a solution to the Kennet's over-abstraction. For more information see: [www.environment-agency.gov.uk/utmrtd](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/utmrtd) and [www.thameswater.co.uk](http://www.thameswater.co.uk).

## Pipeline in progress

Thames Water plans to boost water supplies in parts of Wiltshire by installing a 22-mile (33km) pipeline between Cleeve and Fyfield, near Oxford, and to upgrade Cleeve Water Treatment Works. The new pipeline will allow 120 million litres per day to be pumped into supply, enough for 240,000 homes. This will be an increase of 50% over the amount of water the company currently takes from its borehole sources at Gatehampton and Cleeve. The pipe will connect with the existing Farmoor to Blunsdon main, allowing the additional water to feed Swindon and Oxford. The project is expected to be completed by the end of March 2008. The extra supplies are needed to meet growing demand, but ARK would like to see some of the extra capacity used to replace water currently taken from the environmentally sensitive Kennet catchment, particularly in the light of negotiations to reduce permitted abstraction from Axford.

This newsletter is published 3 times a year. We welcome articles from readers. Please contact Charlotte Hitchmough at [info@riverkennet.org](mailto:info@riverkennet.org) if you have any suggestions.

