

# LODDON FISHERIES AND CONSERVATION CONSULTATIVE

## Agenda

**DATE** 9<sup>th</sup> February 2023  
**VENUE** Swallowfield Village Hall  
**TIME** 7.20 pm arrive for 7.30 pm start, 9.30 pm finish.

**Item:**

### **Welcome MM,5 mins**

Welcomed all. Apologies from Trevor Cottam (Civil Service), Bernie Gaynor (Wystaria Ave. Residents Assoc.), Steve Dunbar, Ian Hardwick, Sam Meeuwissen (Twyford & District), James Watson (Gresham) TA will resign in 2023 so we need a new Treasurer.

### **1. Treasure's report**

Two components to LFCC funds, operating and grants/projects, the latter being restricted in their use. Slight loss on operating funds over the last year. Most income is from subs. 19 members have paid. Need to ensure no deficit in the long run. The EA FIP money is still available for projects. Running the accounts is now simple and record keeping is not difficult. Can be done in a spreadsheet.

### **2. Briefing on the Loddon MM**

The aim of this evening is for everyone to get a better idea or picture of what is happening around the catchment – what has happened or been accomplished over the last 10-15 years and what we could possibly aspire to achieve in the future. The primary aim for most of us is probably to see more fish in the rivers and lakes in the catchment – hopefully as part of a better functioning environment.

Many issues are well out of the immediate influence of us as individuals, clubs the LFCC and the Loddon Catchment Partnership. However there are some things that are within the scope of our influence. So what are the problems, what are the challenges, what can we do? There is a huge range of pressures on our rivers and the fish in them. Many, arguably all the ones that should really concern us, are man made. Over time the river channel has been modified, I would say interfered with. Initially this would probably have happened to facilitate the gathering of food, but would have soon been

accompanied by alterations to improve navigation, agriculture and harness water power.

Navigation has probably had little impact but there are historical mentions of a navigational access as far upstream from the Thames as Swallowfield. Additionally there may have been some localised channels modified to assist in transporting bulk materials an example recently flagged to me is on the Whitewater where a channel was apparently established through the fen from Deptford bridge / ford upstream to Greywell Mill.

As mills became established the channel was often redirected and it is possible to see a perched channel in many locations around the catchment today, where the river is actually flowing along one edge of the wider floodplain, whilst the old paleo channel is present as an insignificant barely noticed feature - that may only receive a decent flow of water during times of flood. Even with old maps and aerial photography it is often difficult to make sense of what was originally there before mankind commenced activities.

Hand in hand with these changes would also have been the development of agriculture, which would in many parts of the catchment, have involved the draining of land through ditch systems and almost inevitably resulted in the acceleration of silt conveyance into the river system. The alteration of these flow pathways would have additionally facilitated the run off of unused fertilisers and pesticides, all becoming one source of the diffuse pollution that can be so difficult to address.

The intensification of agriculture increased during and soon after WW2, as we as a country strived to become more self sufficient. This resulted in extensive river works where channels were widened and deepened to improve land drainage. It was certainly not an improvement as far as our fish and the rest of the aquatic environment is concerned, with the loss of habitat. The deposition of the dredged material on the river bank in the form of a levee typifies this work. This material often contains the river gravels that are so vital a spawning habitat for species such as trout chub dace and barbel. This linear heap of material now acts as a barrier often isolating the adjacent floodplain from the river and which as floods recede, traps fish - and not always fry – that often simply become food for gulls and other wildlife.

It is interesting to note that in some locations erosion of the river bank is actually reclaiming some of this material, whilst I do feel that the in channel establishment of extensive beds of reeds and rushes, subsequently trapping silt is almost the river healing itself by re-narrowing its channel, often recovering sinuosity. Farming was often conducted right to the edge of the bank & even into the channel in the form of cattle drinks. There are now increasingly widely accepted moves to re-establish a valuable riparian strip that should act as a useful filter for some of the run off, whilst providing a chance to develop a more diverse flora and fauna both in and alongside our rivers. I hope that we can continue to encourage and support these practices.

We are all also only to aware of the increase in urban development which again has a direct effect on water flows and water quality. Every new house, every new industrial unit, every new road has an impact, indeed we are all effectively part of the problem.

Our population has expanded at - for me – an alarming rate. In the mid 1800s the population of the catchment was put at around 95000. We now have at least 400,000. The impact of this population is further compounded by our increased mobility and all additional pressures that this puts on our environment. For me one of my pet hates is the way we treat our roads. Run off from highways is undoubtedly a significant source of diffuse pollution, and probably one that is a greater challenge to address than the impacts from farming. Road verges which could again be a useful buffer between the transport system and our watercourses are often poorly managed. Aside this management is often a badly timed brutal assault by machinery that seems incapable of any subtlety in its use. This leaves many verges not simply mown , but the ground and plant roots exposed with not only the loss of the filtration that the vegetation could provide but increasing the chance of soil or silt conveyance to the rivers. Larger and particularly wider vehicles further destroy the verges.

In addition it is not unusual to see our roads reduced to rapid run off routes for water during times of flood – water that is not only washing off the vehicle contaminants, but water which is in some cases also containing untreated sewage from an overloaded system. My one relief during such events is that they at least normally accompanied by a significant dilution of the run off, often during the colder months when lower temperatures can further reduce the impact.

I have also touched here on the problem of an over loaded sewage system, and I would be surprised if not slightly disappointed if any of us were not aware of this well publicised issue. I am sometimes relieved but not complacent that we are fortunate in the Loddon catchment, where we appear to generally have STWs that are performing better than those in many other parts of the country. I don't want this to sound like a defence of the water treatment sector but I do believe that we all bear some responsibility for what we ask the water industry to cope with at the treatment works, as we pour & flush all manner of detergents, drugs and other matter down our drains. However, what can we do to make things better? As individuals, as clubs and landowners, as a nation, as mankind?

The LFCC is only a small body. Yes we have had the chance to sit in on meetings and join with consultations that can feed our opinions and views to national sometimes international bodies.

But undoubtedly our main sphere of influence is to assist in addressing local issues, and we have over the years attempted to do this in a non-confrontational way. We don't have any powers, we have to rely on cooperation and negotiation to help get things done. It is why we were decided on the use of consultative in our name. We could perhaps take a

more vociferous stance but I would argue that there are plenty of groups out there filling that role, groups that we sometimes loosely support, whilst we do not obstruct any of our membership from resorting to this more direct route.

To return to the main aim or theme of this evening, what have we achieved over the last 10-15 years, at least in terms of projects and what more could we be aiming to do? I will list some projects in no particular order. I hope that these examples may stimulate ideas and motivation for future work.

One of the largest completed projects was the digging of the backwater at Charvil. As with many of these projects it was a multi partner initiative. The LFCC were able to manage the funding obtained from Thames water through an enforcement undertaking following a pollution from Arborfield STW. The site was on Wokingham council owned land. The EA had identified the site potential and helped with the project design. SERT carried out the actual work managing to secure co-operation from a neighbouring landowner to facilitate access, whilst we have jointly with SERT conducted some follow up surveys and planting work as part of rivers week. Not the cheapest project at over £40,000, but it could easily have cost more.

At the other end of the financial scale is the work carried out here at Swallowfield – see presentation by Russ.

As mentioned earlier one of my concerns is the loss of gravel in the system. Like water gravel actually flows – rolls downstream. In a healthy system this mobile gravel does not get compacted and provides an important spawning medium for some species of fish whilst it is also a vital home for many species of aquatic invertebrates – animals that not only feed the fish but also support much of our other wildlife. Dredging, channel widening, weirs can often interrupt this process.

There have been projects to introduce gravel in a range of locations around the catchment including Bassetts Mead on the Whitewater, here at Swallowfield not just the location mentioned by Russ but also on the side channel just up the road. Some gravel was also introduced during construction of the Arborfield by-pass channel whilst Twyford managed a great project at Sandford. Funding for this came from the same Thames water enforcement undertaking route that paid for Charvil. Further upstream the Gresham Greywell clubs have been and are involved in a couple of projects:

Twyford are also currently in the process of further work on St Pats:

There have been some initiatives regarding reconnection of reaches. We have many barriers – weirs and dams are the most obvious (over 20 spring to mind without any reference to maps), whilst it could be argued that fords and bridges may also disrupt natural fish migrations in a more subtle and sometimes little understood fashion. The best known reconnection and one that has received national recognition is the Arborfield by-pass which is as near to a natural channel that we are likely to get. Arborleigh angling club

have recently tweaked this project by re-establishing a sweetening flow through one of the weirs that had been totally isolated as a result of the main project.

This has been accompanied by further projects at Stanford end at the lower end of Stratfield Saye, whilst the gauging weirs at Swallowfield – both on the Blackwater and Loddon have been fitted with baffles. The barbel marking project at Swallowfield has confirmed movement of at least one fish in an upstream direction over the Blackwater weir, whilst there is further evidence of upstream and downstream movements at Arborfield. There is also technical pass on a weir at Sindlesham but we currently have little evidence of fish movements at this point except some anecdotal reports of sea trout being caught at Arborfield, which would suggest that this pass is at least being used by one species. There are further plans to improve connectivity on the Emmbrook in Wokingham although this scheme has currently stalled due to funding being withdrawn. The possible value of such a project is uncertain but surveys do demonstrate the presence of significant fish populations in this tributary.

The annual event of Loddon rivers week has driven a wide range of projects around the catchment and regularly attracts some funding. Projects have included work on the upper Loddon at Basingstoke, Charvil and Arborfield on the lower Loddon Tices Meadow, Lakeside, Hawley Meadows and at Swallowfield, Potbridge and Bassetts Mead on the Whitewater. These projects normally involve introduction of woody material and or gravel.

Currently there are more projects at various stages being developed on the upper part, the Petty's brook and the Emmbrook.

What is the ultimate aim and I will not deny the chance of this happening in my life time is less than someone spotting a dinosaur (real) wandering the banks of the Loddon?

My answer to that question would be returning the rivers as close as possible to a properly performing ecological condition, with a diverse and flourishing self sustaining fish population that is not resilient on regular hatchery reared top ups. How may this be achieved – what do we want?

my simple answer would be: 1 good water quality, 2 good physical habitat.

Some may rightly argue that these are what the EA should be doing. However there is no doubt that they are drastically under resourced and whilst the EA could undoubtedly be better run and structured there currently appears little political resolve to rectify this situation. So, what can we do? We could jump up and down and make a lot of noise undoubtedly many of us already do this but as my wife regularly observes the radio does not have ears. The alternative is to get out there and do our bit.

So, what about water quality? The current angling trust monitoring scheme is something that we can all support. It will provide evidence albeit basic evidence for those who are lobbying on a national basis. See Russ

Hatchett's summary. Riverfly monitoring can further strengthen this evidence, although collating and better understanding the data is a major challenge.

As far as habitat goes we should be looking for further opportunities to introduce more gravel, to open up backwaters –

Farnhams Mill Lane lagoon  
Twyford's Blackwater fishery  
Arborfield restoration of an old site  
R&DAA Whistley Mill

Encourage farmers to establish riparian habitat grants can be obtained to help with fencing

Levee removal – currently being looked at at Arborfield but this will be another multi partner project.

And finally, I just have to mention invasives.

Signal crayfish are undoubtedly an issue. We are trying to get some work done on spawning gravels at Arborfield and Robert West is hoping to start some work this summer. Invasive plants undoubtedly can impact the water quality and the physical habitat. We have so far managed to keep floating pennywort at bay in the catchment and I for one will continue with my obsession in that area, not in the least because it is something that I am convinced is achievable. Himalayan balsam is a bigger challenge but results are not technically difficult to achieve, they just require a bit of persistent work.

The one thing that we will need to achieve such aims apart from our enthusiasm and motivation is funding: see Section 6.

### **3. Reports from clubs – problems, solutions, failures and successes, please tell us your stories.**

RH – Swallowfield projects. Backwater 2019 and gravels. See on the LFCC website for his presentation SFC presentation link - <https://www.lfcc.org.uk/downloads/20-lfcc-documents/2-other-lfcc-documents?download=242:sfc-project-cost-presentation>

Mike Wharmby – Greywell and Gresham. Gresham AS has river running through woodland in area with perched channel. Lost water through crayfish burrows so needed to prevent this. Had to be repeated 2021. Keep the FRAP (Flood Risk Activity Permit) simple, do not overcomplicate it or it gets to be much more difficult and much more expensive. Gresham stretch of River Lyde badly poached and became a ditch with weeds. Wanted to improve spawning habitat. 120 tonnes of gravel went in; had to use tipper trucks to carry it to the river, the used digger to reprofile banks and put in gravel. Good advice from Wild Trout Trust on how to reprofile river. Now looks established

and has good *Ranunculus* growth. Hard to see if trout had spawned as river gets run-off. Whitewater project similar, put 30 tonnes gravel in. Got FIP funds for this. Problem as part of the river is not "main river" so had to get approval from Hants CC. Entire areas SSSI so had to apply to Natural England. Hope to complete this in September 2023.

Twyford club has 40 tonnes gravel to go into St Pats. AB has advised where it should go. Also some tree work to be done to improve habitat.

RH It's been 29 weeks since we rolled out the Water Quality Monitoring Network nationally and I just wanted to give you an update on progress so far.

Here are the highlights:

266 volunteers are involved in the national roll out so far.

117 clubs/organisations have signed up, far beyond expectations 5 in the catchment with another couple considering

17 further clubs have expressed interest in joining the roll out

672 samples have now been recorded on Epicollect by 122 volunteers on 246 sites across 81 rivers

Electrical conductivity results range from 57 to 2730 ( $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$ )

Temperature results range from 0 to 25.60C

Phosphate results range from 0 to 2.50 (ppm). 255 samples exceeded the upper limit for Phosphate, 38%.

Nitrate results range from 0 to 50 (ppm). 277 samples were 5 ppm or over, 41%

4 results exceeded the upper limit for Ammonia with 23 observed algal blooms and 24 observed pollution incidents.

Three clubs have already escalated their results with the EA and local water company.

### **Ammonia Checkers**

*Ammonia Checkers are now available as an optional extra. If you want to add an ammonia checker to your monitoring kit please email me - kristian.kent@anglingtrust.net*

MM We could make an LFCC purchase of one or two of these Ammonia checkers and make them available for participants in the catchment.

From James Watson, Gresham River Manager

*My apologies, but unfortunately I cannot make tonight's meeting, due to childcare reason's, however I will catch up on the topics from Mike Wharmby and study the minutes.*

*With regards to projects and initiatives, the Gresham Society will start the following in 2023:*

*a) Angling Trust Water Quality Monitoring Network (due to start in March)*

*b) Riverfly Monitoring Led By Paul Wyatt*

*c) Apply for English Nature funding for cattle fencing on Lower Loddon & Upper Lyde in consultation with Lou Sykes from SERT.*

Break 20 mins

#### **4. Funding sources IW**

There are many sources of funding which are local and specific which it is not possible to cover here. They may be available through charitable trusts of local authorities. Widely available sources include:

Angling Trust which has 2 funding streams:

The Angling Improvement Fund will be available from 17<sup>th</sup> March 2023 and will be focused on predation. In April, funding will be available for biosecurity and non-native species control. See the AT page for full details;

The Fisheries Improvement Programme is open for bids and will close on 5<sup>th</sup> March. Check the AT pages for full details. Check the Guidance Notes carefully and note that you can use the table for the value of volunteer labour for other projects as match funding "in kind".

The Rivers and Wetlands Community Fund is available through the Wild Trust Trust among others but it does not have to be used only on trout streams. It will fund larger-scale projects, each up to £15K-£20K and small-scale projects up to £5K. the deadline is 13<sup>th</sup> March 2023.

Funding via local authorities should be available through the Biodiversity Net Gain source which should be available from November 2023. The detail are not yet clear but it seems likely that organisations may be able to access this funding through local authorities or at least in partnership with them.

Funding from the EA through the Water Environment Investment Fund should be renewed on 2023 but details are not yet available. It is reported that funding has been reduced but it should still provide funds for more substantial projects.

#### **5. Members' project proposals**

IW – funding sources. Be aware that there may be many local sources of funding to specific purposes.

RW – fish surveys. RAEAC Applied to BVCT (Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust) for funds to check fish populations on upper and lower Blackwater. Used match results to act as proxy for fish populations. Show a consistent fall in catch, mirrored by EA fish surveys. Varies a lot, chub seem to be holding, roach have declined sharply in some areas. Kick sampling for inverts (not much difference between Fawley Meadows and Swallowfield). Crayfish may be a factor. Could be predation or competition for food. Will also be carrying out water quality monitoring using AT test kits. Doing some crayfish trapping.

**6. AOB –**

Litter pick at Swallowfield 25<sup>th</sup> March. Covers all of WDC area.

**7. Date of next meeting and AGM 20<sup>th</sup> April 2023**

Future meetings

Beavers visit to site where they have been introduced or Graham Scholey talk, fishing methods, water chemistry, fish diseases, stillwater management, fishery legislation / enforcement, heat wave support, fish passes - Steve Sheriden.

**END**