

Letcombe Brook Project

Project Officers Report

Oct 2020 to April 2021

1.0 Project Administration

Blog overdue for website. Regular postings on Letcombe Brook Facebook Group (600 members now!) and Twitter (@LetcombeBP).

Limited uptake of the Riparian Owners Group so far but will have another go at attracting further members when time allows.

End of Year Report sent out to all Volunteers, Steering Gp members, Funders and Riparian Owners Group members.

Website - Videos added and will be adding more photos under a Gallery format.

2.0 Water Quality and Quantity

2.1 Environment Agency – Summary monthly water reports, West Thames Area – Ock Catchment

Oct – 4th wettest Oct on record, 2.5 x average rainfall

Nov – Average rainfall and recharge of aquifer taking place due to wet previous month

Dec- Above average rainfall but fell mostly on 2 days either side of Christmas

Jan – 143% of long term average rainfall, river flows above normal

February

Thames Area received average rainfall for February, leaving all rainfall units normal for the time of year.

- While the rainfall was average for the time of year, the affects from the previous months' rainfall can be seen in the majority of river and groundwater levels still being above normal or higher for the time of year.
- However as a result of the drier end of the month Soil Moisture Deficits increased slightly.

March

Thames area received 53% of Long Term Average rainfall during March. The month ended with a dry period with four days of little or no rain across Thames area.

- Monthly mean river flows were normal across most of the area, with only the River Coln remaining above normal for the time of year.
- With dry soils came the end of the groundwater recharge season, and eight indicator bore-holes saw levels decline to the end of March, although the majority of sites remained normal or higher for the time of year.

2.2 Water levels in Letcombe Brook

Thames Water no longer abstract water from the Letcombe Brook, this finished end of March 2020. Water levels have held up well, no doubt assisted by the good recharge of the aquifer due to two wet winters. The spring at Delamere, Letcombe Regis has continued to flow since augmentation and abstraction stopped. **River levels were high over winter with some structures backing up flow which does raise concerns** for the future but no flooding was reported.

LPC

2.3 Thames Water Sewers

The **sewers were damaged in Grove during February**, believed by contractor working on new development site by Bellingers Garage. Resulted in sewage backing up and entering brook at 2 locations near Grove Green. Were fortunate to have high flows which helped dilute the sewage and reduce and harm caused. Sampling took place by Thames Water contractor but results unknown.

2.4 Pollution Incidents

In addition to the above incident, there is a **recent increase in effluent entering the brook** from the outfall under Sainsburys Car Park – this has been reported numerous times since March to both Thames Water and EA. Both have attended and taken samples but is tricky to investigate as very sporadic. Sample taken by EA indicates it does contain sewage, probably due to misconnections entering “Bryans Brook” which is apparently a buried watercourse. **Does Wantage Town Council or VWHDC have any records pertaining to this watercourse and connections into it?**

WTC/VWHDC/EA

Data released by The Rivers Trust has indicated that **Wantage STW did discharge for 387 Hrs during 2020** (up on 194 hrs in 2019) of storm discharge (untreated sewage) into Letcombe Brook. Event Duration Monitoring (EDM) is in place and functioned 100%. This figure is low compared to many STW (Abingdon 1955 Hrs, Appleton 2302 Hrs) but is of cause for concern and there is a drive led by a coalition of organisations to outlaw this common practice. Present licencing allows water companies to discharge in “exceptional circumstances” (such as high rainfall) but this appears to be abused by water companies and “accepted” by the EA. Panorama covered this issue in April, worth a watch!

Q. Any comment from EA on this issue?

2.5 Pollution monitoring

Bioblitz Monitoring. Water samples will be tested for Nitrate and Phosphate in May as part of the twice a year EarthWatch project. Past monitoring indicate that Nitrate levels are high even at the source of Letcombe Brook and remain high throughout its length. Lowest reading obtained 1-2ppm, highest >10ppm.

Phosphate levels varied between <0.02 ppm to 0.2 ppm. Readings appear to increase downstream of the STW **These values give a score of Poor Ecological Value according to EarthWatch criteria.**

No progress yet on developing project to get more regular water quality monitoring by LBP but in light of the above **I feel this should be given some priority** but needs discussion with the EA to ensure any work done provides meaningful and useful data.

EA

Q Do we want to pursue this?

Riverfly Monitoring – this had been halted due to Covid but volunteers resumed sampling in April.

Agricultural Impact – all areas where arable farming adjoins the brook now have minimum 6m buffer strips to reduce impact of run off and pollution. There is some question as to whether 6m is enough to provide an effective measure but no legal requirement at present on farmers to do more, may change with upcoming Environmental Land Management scheme (ELMS) but this is a few years away.

3 Flood Alleviation/ Natural Flood Management

Although the brook has been high for much of the winter, no properties have flooded but concerns were raised by several residents. I took the opportunity to survey key points at high flow which has highlighted a few potential trouble spots, report will be produced in due course.

Trash screens in Wantage checked on regular basis, problems getting response from one property which now has debris building up and may become an issue – **any update from VWHDC?**

VWHDC

MOD finally carried out some pollarding work near Old Mill Hall in Grove following large blockage of brook over 12 months ago, should improve things.

Various small obstructions cleared over Winter but some material left in place where it adds biodiversity vale or flow diversity and does not increase flood risk.

Siltation/Flood Risk, Old Mill, Wantage

Siltation and structures in this stretch undoubtedly add to flood risk in the centre of Wantage a known flood blackspot. Capacity under Mill St Bridge was very nearly exceeded during high winter flows in Dec and Jan. Feasibility Study now carried out by Cain Bioengineering and paid for by Wantage Town Council (many thanks to them!). **Study indicates this is a complex issue and as it involves several stakeholders, requires further discussion and raising of funds** No silt removal has taken place yet as this needs to be completed in low flow conditions. **Has flooding been considered by the Town's Climate Emergency Committee?**

WTC

EA have confirmed the sluice could be removed without affecting water level monitoring upstream.

Grove Green, Grove

No issues during high flows over winter. Water vole population seem to be doing well but require protection from dogs in this busy spot so signs will be put up.

East Hanney

The culvert under the road that forms the Dandridges Mill bypass channel is very undersized and excess flow due to a failing in the offtake (which is badly undercut and collapsing) or out of bank flows upstream will lead to flooding very quickly. LBP have raised this issue with the EA but **would advise East Hanney Parish Council to also raise this issue with the EA and OCC.**

EA/EHPC

4 Riverfly Monitoring

Still require further volunteers for regular monitoring (Grove and Hanney). Have opportunity to apply for funding from TOE for "TVERC Recorders Grant Scheme" which could pay to train and equip some extra volunteers. Did make bid to Rivers and Wetland Communities Fund but unsuccessful.

5 Biodiversity and Environmental Improvements

5.1 LBP Projects

5.1.1 Invasives Project

Mink – no mink signs on rafts but footprints identified in East Hanney during October. Extra rafts (supplied by BBOWT) to be going out soon as continued monitoring essential to protect water vole, population. Considering purchase of "mink police" automatic monitoring units so rafts can be monitored in tricky locations, technique already used by BBOWT successfully.

Himalayan Balsam - Stands now much smaller and taking much less time to control but still present in low numbers at many locations. Will continue to try and eradicate for next couple of years but good progress made. Many thanks to Hanney Flood Group for their hard work on this project.

5.1.2 LBP Website

Project now complete.

5.1.3 Letcombe Interpretation

All interpretation now in place and project complete.

5.1.3 Lower Mill Fish Bypass Project

Project was completed on time and in budget with additional benefits of wildflower seeding and installation of fencing to keep livestock back from the channel and adjoining section of river. Report needs to be written and submitted to EA. **Many thanks to EA for funding this project.**

5.1.4 Love the Letcombe Project

4-year Biodiversity Improvement project granted EA WEIF funding. Year 1 focused on reducing tree cover and scrub to let in light which will enable riparian habitat to recover. LBP have been able to carry out a fair amount of this work themselves by paying an assistant, Tom Page, who has helped

me with chainsaw work that I cannot carry out on my own. This is cheaper than paying an arborist so provided good value for money. **Many thanks to partner organisations that also contributed to costs of arborists carrying out more specialised work on their stretches.**

Also assessment of possible barriers to fish passage and to improve connectivity and natural functioning of the river carried out in partnership with EA staff. Now need to prioritise structures for adaption or removal but most residents unwilling to remove structures.

Further feasibility study carried out on options to provide fish passage around Dandridges Mill in East Hanney, needs further discussion with EA and other stakeholders.

Awaiting to hear if we have received further funding to continue this project but hope to continue shade reduction work and also possibility of installing Large Woody Debris and/or pre planted coir rolls to add diversity and help recovery in over-wide sections of the brook. Perhaps also some “dog steps” to reduce erosion at busy sections of the brook.

5.2 Wildlife on the Brook

Otter Activity – Female raised 2 cubs on the brook last year. Lots of signs of activity continue to be found along the whole length of the brook with a few sightings right in the middle of Wantage during the Autumn and several captures on trail cameras including the centre of Wantage and right up to the source at Letcombe Bassett.

Water Vole – surveying has started this spring with population appearing to be doing well in the section between East Hanney and Grove and the downstream section of Wantage. No positive signs were found between Mill Street and Ickleton Road – this may well be due to the loss of natural bank and obstruction to movement provided by Mill Street, the Old Mill and the banks of the brook upstream from here making repopulation from downstream populations unlikely. Upstream populations may be more likely to be successful but still have to navigate Ickleton Rd Bridge.

Fish – no survey work completed this period. Concerns that fishing pressure has increased over lockdown periods with several reports received from concerned members of the public. **Q Can we agree that the Letcombe Brook is a no fishing area?** Any angler requires a rod licence and either a fishing permit or permission of the landowner. No permits are issued so if its agreed permission will not be granted by all of the partners here that would be a great help in tackling fishing pressure. The brook is not stocked by anyone, the trout are part of a wild population that will soon be impacted with a much larger population now present along its banks. The alternative could be to allow fishing with a permit but we would need to agree how we would administrate and enforce such a process and agree on a price for the permit. Enforcement would take considerable time given its 12km of river. This may make any permit prohibitively expensive. **Q – Any advice available from the EA on the issue of permitting and enforcement?**

ALL

5.3 Letcombe Regis

Millennium Green – interpretation installed. Light management of river corridor over winter and tree work carried out this winter as part of Love the Letcombe Project.

Letcombe Valley Reserve – in-stream work has been on hold as no volunteering due to Covid. Small dam still not removed. **Could pursue option to complete fish bypass** as BBOWT giving no response in respect of dam removal. Also option to create backwater/pond in upstream section of reserve –

just need VWHDC permissions (not EA) as not main river. Could be projects that might attract funding from TOE or River and Wetland Community Days Fund.

OCC agreed to put “grips” in on Warborough Road following work by a local Councillor, work not completed yet – update from LPC?

LPC

High flows for second winter again highlighted fact that the road bridge at Bassett Road and footbridge just upstream are undersized and impound the flow increasing flood risk in this area – **suggest this be discussed with OCC** in light of predicted more extreme rainfall events due to the Climate Emergency. Probably risk of Warborough Rd culvert under Main Street also being unable to deal with capacity leading to flooding in this area.

LPC

5.4 Grove

Litter starting to become an issue in the area of the new developments close to the brook and some bank damaged due to extra visitor pressure. **Access control measures don't seem to have worked or been implemented properly – can this be followed up?**

GPC

Collapsed trees on Mably Way/Wolage Drive stretch an issue – LBP have carried out what pollarding work we can to reduce the risk but further work needed. **Needs action by VWHDC** but they state they have no budget

VWHDC

Management of brooks banks at Mary Green/Bosleys Orchard needs to be sensitive to avoid damage to water vole colony in line with guidance provided last year on appropriate management. Tree work completed as part of Love the Letcombe Project near Marygreen footbridge.

Autumn work party completed at Grove Green last year. Also attended during sewage spill to try and ensure was being dealt with properly. Work also completed at Sharland Close to pollard willows, paid for by Grove PC.

Possible obstruction to leat that goes around Grove Mill via “Caldecote” on Grove Bridge – still unresolved and may increase flood risk as acts as flow relief to Grove Mill at times of high flow. The fact that Caldecote garden flooded in winter 2019 and again in 2020 with minimal flow coming out far end of culvert appears to indicate a blockage somewhere in the culvert. Contacted EA for advice. Blockage possibly under “cricket bat field” owned by Elm Farm Partnership. Owner of Grove Mill had been discussing with them but no progress.

Williams F1

Contact with Marcus Didcock re-established and sale of Williams F1 has not impacted on this relationship. Williams are carrying out some biodiversity improvements to their grounds following advice from LBP and continue to monitor a mink raft for us. **They have also contributed further funding which was gratefully received.**

5.5 Wantage

See comments re Old Mill under Flood Alleviation section.

Would like to reduce tree cover on same section but opposition from Tree Officers as is Conservation Area, need to pursue possible work at Vicarage and removal of large laurel.

Several litter picks carried out along various stretches but particularly Limborough Rd stretch as gets very bad here and under the bridge at Smiths Wharf where youths gather on a regular basis, police informed due to concerns over under-age drinking.

Work party reduced vegetation along VWHDC owned bank in Sept but volunteering cancelled before further could be done. Some residents now clearing bits themselves. No work completed by VWHDC this winter to control brambles etc, arisings not removed either.

Willow Walk

Lots fallen willow, some across brook – some cleared others left as not impacting flood risk. VWHDC carrying out no tree management in this area and some trees now in a very bad way.

VWHDC

Habitat improvement work completed by PO and assistant during the Autumn and Winter as part of Love the Letcombe Project with some bigger trees dealt with by an arborist. Arisings left on site but has been a **problem with youths lighting fires repeatedly, plus litter and anti-social behaviour** and fire service and police attending repeatedly, esp around Easter period. Discussed issue with police and raised issue with local community via posts on social media. Problem seems to be declining. **Could consider paying contractor to chip some of the more easily burnt material but cannot and wouldn't want to clear it all.**

106 money still not available as Covid has delayed building occupation. EA and VWHDC in support of plans for wetland creation project, might also be EA or TOE money available to add to pot. Need to develop plans for project with EA. Will need to gain Planning Permission and Flood Risk Permit before construction phase.

Q Can LBP and EA arrange site meeting to further this project?

EA

5.6 East Hanney

Flood Group working parties have just resumed and I will continue to support as many as possible.

Habitat improvement work completed by PO and assistant during Autumn/Winter as part of Love the Letcombe Project, on land owned by Philberds Manor and Paul Dyer

Lower Mill Fish Bypass Project completed and the bypass performed well in high flows over winter with residents at the most flood prone location sure we had prevented them from flooding. Feasibility Study completed at Dandridges Mill thanks to EA funding, further discussion and consideration now needed to progress.

5.7 Survey Work

Water Vole Survey with BBOWT has been started this Spring, early results indicate voles present in most stretches of the brook but that some barriers remain to repopulation, particularly in upper reaches.

Rapid Assessment Surveys (Habitat Quality) will continue this Spring/Summer including in BBOWT reserve, Letcombe and downstream in East Hanney.

Riverfly Survey work has just resumed, many thanks to the volunteers that carry it out.

Continue to add species records for Letcombe Brook wherever possible using the iRecord App. Important to highlight the biodiversity value of Letcombe Brook and its importance as a wildlife corridor and to ensure this is taken into account with any future planning applications.

6 Letcombe Brook Volunteer Group

6.1 Conservation tasks

Work parties will resume in May, initially with restricted numbers but normal activities should be able to resume soon in line with Covid Guidance. Tom Page has now received First Aid Training and will be able to help run some of the work parties.

7 Planning

7.1 Richmond Homes, Letcombe Regis – Planning Enforcement

Seems to have been appropriately managed this year.

7.2 Monks Farm Development

No developments this period

8 Ock Partnership

8.1 Online meeting in April 2021, input from Thames Water and Upper Thames Curlew Project. I asked that a co-ordinated mink eradication project be considered at next meeting, something suggested by Dr Merryl Gelling recently.

8.2 Freshwater Habitats Trust are working with Neil Walker to improve biodiversity and NFM in this catchment, only test pits dug so far. May be other opportunities with other landowners as this work is being funded by Grove Sect 106 money.

9 Funding

£2000 Funding received from Councillor Priority Fund and used for biodiversity and access improvement at Willow Walk Nature Reserve, Wantage.

Bid put into Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment (TOE) to fund Biodiversity Improvement work as part of the Love the Letcombe Project in East Hanney, still awaiting news on this.

EA funded 2 projects last year, Love the Letcombe Project is intended to be a multi-year project but we await confirmation that we have been allocated further funding. Further projects have been put in for consideration for 21/22 but funding is believed to be tight this year.

Funding received from Williams F1 towards core costs.

10 Community Engagement/Education

10.1 Talks

Limited opportunity due to Covid at present but will look for opportunities as things open up again.

10.2 Events

Have received 2 queries about running bat walks for scouts along the Letcombe Brook. Hope to get events offer underway once Covid restrictions are lifted.

10.3 Education

Covid has halted our education programme and we will have to work hard to seek opportunities once restrictions start to lift.

10.3 Social media

In response to lack of talks/events we have worked hard to raise our profile via social media.

Facebook page launched in 2020 now has over 600 members with local residents regularly posting wildlife sightings etc. This has become a very useful way of engaging with the local community and has attracted many positive comments and useful content. On Twitter we now have 443 followers.

11. Training

First Aid Training completed by myself and Tom Page in March 2021. A refresher will be due in 3 years time.