

Letcombe Brook Project

Project Officers Report

Apr 2021 to Oct 2021

1.0 Project Administration

Blog still overdue for website. Regular postings on Letcombe Brook Facebook Group (200 members increase since April, now 800) and Twitter (@LetcombeBP) (489 followers).

Limited uptake of the Riparian Owners Group so far but a few more added to group this period. Will promote via social media this period.

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

Website – have many videos and photos to add under a Gallery format, just haven't had time to add.

[Trustees to write Blog and update website or find volunteers for this.](#)

DP/AF/JR/MS

2.0 Water Quality and Quantity

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

May - wettest May since 2007, 172% of the Long Term Average rainfall was received in Thames area.

June – Above average rainfall impacted rivers across Thames area, with the majority having above normal or notably high monthly mean flows.

July - 141% of the Long Term Average rainfall for the time of year was received, with units in the south of the area almost twice as wet as would be expected.

Aug - A dry end to the month meant that rainfall was **normal** or **below normal** across Thames area during August.

September - started reasonably dry, with the majority of rain falling in the last five days of the month.

- 84% of the Long Term Average rainfall for the time of year was received, with all Areal units throughout Thames area receiving **normal** rainfall.
- The majority of river flow sites recorded above normal or higher monthly mean flows for the time of year.
- Groundwater levels continued their seasonal decline at all sites, although several indicator sites showed signs of slowing.

2.2 Water levels in Letcombe Brook

Water levels have held up well since return to natural flow (March 2020) 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 all year for 2nd year running. Projected climate change impacts cause concerns

that flooding will be inevitable at some point, little action by Govt in terms of preparing UK for such impacts and no obvious action locally.

2.3 Thames Water Sewers

Lack of investment in TW infrastructure remains a major concern, as does the frequent use of storm discharge to dump untreated sewage in the brook (2020 data 37 discharges for total of 387 Hrs, increase from 2019 of 194 Hrs)

Further campaigning by LBP needed on this issue as it is presently a very hot topic and opportunity for improvement. PO will brief DP/AF/JR/MS on who to contact. **DP/AF/JR/MS**

2.4 Pollution Incidents

No progress made on issue of pollution via Bryans Brook (outfall under Sainsbury's Car Park). TW did investigate but not when the discharge was occurring. Pollution incidents did soon reduce though following our reporting and TW involvement but not sure why. No further info obtained on this old buried watercourse or what discharges into it. Recent incident indicates still a mis-connection issue with wet wipes visible in brook.

Q. Any comment from EA on this issue?

AA

2.5 Pollution monitoring

Bioblitz Monitoring. Water samples tested for Nitrate and Phosphate in May and September as part of the twice a year EarthWatch project. This years and 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 1.0ppm Readings appear to increase downstream of the STW These values give a score of Poor Ecological Value according to EarthWatch criteria.

We have now secured funds to purchase pollution monitoring equipment so that we can take more regular samples.

Need to develop system for this to be undertaken regularly, perhaps by Riverfly Surveyors when they are out and any additional needed by PO? **DP/AH**

Riverfly Monitoring – volunteers resumed sampling in April, no breaches of trigger levels due to pollution this period

Agricultural Impact – all areas where arable farming adjoining brook do have minimum buffers in place. Concern remains over run off and “wet walks” will be undertaken during winter to keep an eye on any potential impacts

Road run off – some grips installed at Warborough rd, Letcombe Regis which may improve things but further wet walks needed as opportunity arises.

3 Flood Alleviation/ Natural Flood Management

No progress last period on this, will continue to look out for opportunities

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

No update from VWHDC (Leigh Travers)

RB

Concerns have been raised with East Hanney Parish Council over capacity of culvert under main road at Weir Farm – this is an obvious flood risk and compounded by poor state of mill bypass offtake at Weir Farm.

Concerns raised with Wantage TC about silt build up and capacity under bridge at Mill Street, Wantage. Further exploratory work taking place to inform project to improve functioning of river at this location but remains a concern and

Would be good if flooding concerns could be given some consideration in Wantage – perhaps consideration by Climate Emergency Committee and formation of Wantage Flood Group?

TG

Grove Flood Group also appear inactive and perhaps this could be brought back to life, esp. now as more properties in the brook corridor?

Hanney Flood group remain very active in taking practical action to reduce flood risk and raising awareness amongst local community. They provide a great example as to what can be achieved.

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** and engagement by the various stakeholders.

No recent response from Wantage TC.

TG

Grove Green, Grove

LBP Volunteer work party cleared vegetation and dug out drain outfalls Oct 2021. Lots of silt built up under one side of roadbridge culvert which will impede capacity.

Would encourage Grove PC to raise this with Oxfordshire CC Highways.

DP

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.

CM

4 Riverfly Monitoring

Volunteers resumed sampling in April, one additional volunteer recruited and trained so all Grove sites now being regularly monitored.

5 Biodiversity and Environmental Improvements

5.1 LBP Projects

5.1.1 Invasives Project

Mink – no mink signs last period. Extra rafts (supplied by BBOWT) now out as continued monitoring essential to protect water vole, population. Purchased “mink police” automatic monitoring units so rafts can be monitored in tricky locations, but not deployed yet. 2 rafts had to be moved due to people tampering with them, new locations identified and redeployed.

Himalayan Balsam - Stands now much smaller and taking much less time to control but still present in low numbers at many locations. Still very heavy downstream of East Hanney where not yet targeted. 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 but need to add extra material. 188 users in September, a high of 679 in July!

5.1.3 Lower Mill Fish Bypass Project

Reports submitted and project complete. New channel has vegetated up nicely and water voles already active in that area. Some flow through channel all year although very low in early October. **Many thanks to EA for funding this project.**

5.1.4 Love the Letcombe Project

Year 2 of 4-year Biodiversity Improvement project granted EA WEIF funding. Continue work reducing tree cover and scrub to let in light which will enable riparian habitat to recover. Lots to do this period now past bird nesting season.

No progress last period on assessment of possible barriers to fish passage, further feasibility project to be completed this period.

5.1.5 Dandridges Mill Fish Bypass, East Hanney, Funding obtained from EA for 3 year project to create fish passage at this location. Final detailed design and stakeholder liaison this period with construction work planned for next year.

5.2 Wildlife on the Brook

Otter Activity – Female raised 2 cubs on the brook this year (2nd year running). Lots of signs of activity continue to be found along the whole length of the brook, several captures on trail cameras from East Hanney right up to the source at Letcombe Bassett.

Water Vole – surveying completed now 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 upstream of Mill Street, Wantage – this appears to indicate mink decimated the upstream population some years ago (2016/2017) and voles are unable to re-colonise due to barrier created by Mill Street and the Mill.

[Investigating possibility of improving connectivity or re-introduction project upstream, EA interested in partnership project, BBOWT may also be.](#)

AF/AA

Fish – no survey work completed this period and **no progress on questions raised in last report so have left in for further consideration**. Concerns that fishing pressure has increased over lockdown periods with several reports received from concerned members of the public. 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 administer 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.

Can we agree that the Letcombe Brook is a no fishing area?

DP/CM/LL/TG

(Grove and Wantage have indicated yes)

Any advice available from the EA on the issue of permitting and enforcement

AA

5.3 Letcombe Regis

Light management of river corridor will take place over winter and tree work carried out last winter as part of Love the Letcombe Project.

Letcombe Valley Reserve – in-stream work has been on hold as very limited 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 now completed – Will monitor with wet walks over winter.

Update from LPC

LL

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.

Has this been raised/discussed?

LL

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?

DP

Litter pick completed by LBP last period. Domestic waste (full bin bags) being dumped in brook at St Ives/Mary Green area – lots removed by LBP in past month, raised as issue on social media. May need further vigilance/investigation.

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.

Can we get permission to complete further work with EA funding this period?

DP/AF

Management of brooks banks at Mary Green/Bosleys Orchard seems to have stopped completely since guidance provided by LBP

Is work to be completed by Grove PC over this period? 2 work parties this period by LBP have started reducing bankside trees and scrub.

Intend to carry out more pollarding under Love the Letcombe Project funding – need to meet with clerk to agree.

DP/MB

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. Blockage possibly under “cricket bat field” owned by Elm Farm Partnership. Owner of Grove Mill had been discussing with them but no progress. Nothing heard since reported this issue last period

Williams F1

Discussions started with Marcus Didcock re- biodiversity improvements on their land and ongoing partnership working. Williams F1 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 upstream of Wantage Mill but opposition from Tree Officers as is Conservation Area,

Please can we meet with officers from VWHDC and WTC to discuss and progress this matter as part of greater project to improve this high profile section of brook?

RB/DL/TG

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. This area remains a problem with one youth injured, used condoms found under bridge and high levels litter and anti-social behaviour (human faeces in grounds of Willow Grange) smashed glass, shopping trolleys thrown in etc

Work party reduced vegetation along VWHDC owned bank in Sept and further planned this winter. No work completed by VWHDC last winter to control brambles etc, arisings not removed either.

Will VWHDC be doing some clearance here this winter?

RB/TG

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.

Habitat improvement work continues as part of Love the Letcombe Project. Arisings left on site but was 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 since reduced.

106 money expected to be available during 2022. 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.

Can LBP and EA arrange site meeting to further wetland creation project?

MB/AF

5.6 East Hanney

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

Further habitat improvement work will be completed by PO and assistant during Autumn/Winter as part of Love the Letcombe Project, on land owned by Paul Dyer

Lower Mill Fish Bypass is functioning well, some clearance work completed last period by LBP and HFG, PO will continue to check on occasion.

Dandridges Mill Fish Bypass - Feasibility Study completed and funding received from EA for 3 year project to build fish pass. Detailed design and some preparatory clearance work will take place this period. Intend construction project next year.

5.7 Survey Work

Water Vole Survey has been completed by LBP, results indicate voles present in 19/29 stretches of the brook but that the Mill, Wantage appears to act as an obstruction to recolonisation of upper stretches.

Rapid Assessment Surveys (Habitat Quality) completed in BBOWT reserve, Letcombe and downstream in East Hanney. No more until next period as spring/summer task.

Riverfly Survey work has 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

Bi-monthly Volunteer work parties resumed in May, volunteer numbers remain a little low, probably due to continued concerns over Covid. Tom Page successfully ran work parties whilst PO on leave.

7 Planning

7.1 Richmond Homes, Letcombe Regis – Planning Enforcement

Seems to have been appropriately managed this year.

7.2 Monks Farm Development

No communication this period

No objections to Health Centre extension application.

8 Ock Partnership

8.1 September meeting cancelled, was due to be one in October but no date received. No other contact this period.

9 Funding

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 was successful (£3330) – work starting this period.

EA funding for Yr 2 Love the Letcombe Project confirmed and subsequent application for additional money from underspend also successful – total funding this year £26,500

EA have also funded 3 year Dandridges Mill Bypass project – total of £95,000 with £10,000 for Year 1.

Funding received from Williams F1 towards core costs.

Lesley has been successful in securing further funding, to be detailed in her report.

10 Community Engagement/Education

10.1 Talks

Talk to Hanney Gardening group in October very well attended (45 people), contribution to project received.

10.2 Events

River walk in East Hanney took place in August, well attended and contribution to project received. 6 river dipping sessions were held in partnership with the Vale and Downland Museum – all sessions were booked up very quickly.

2 river walks for Grove brownies also completed and a request for a bat walk for cubs declined as timings did not work out.

10.3 Education

Schools have been very keen to return to activities with several requests for education sessions received recently and squeezed in before the weather changes. Sessions have been held for Millbrook and Grove CE, Charlton and Stockham in Wantage and St James in Hanney, all have been very well received.

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 800 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 489 followers.

11. Training

Volunteers trained to survey for water voles in July, with thanks to BBOWT for free training session. 1 additional riverfly surveyor also trained – LBP paid for this via Chilterns Chalk Streams Project who had organised a training session.