

Wilbraham River Protection Society

Chairman's Report for 2021/2022

The Committee have met five times during the year, once to plan for the long awaited meeting with the Environment Agency.

It has again been a busy year for the Committee. Following some extremely dry weather in the winter months there followed a drought in the summer leading to the need for continued augmentation of the river. This was largely successful as far as the stretch of the river between the Temple springs and Hawk Mill was concerned though there were periods when the pump failed and the flow decreased. The same was not true for the Fulbourn tributary as this was dependent on the outfall into the Nature Reserve that was not activated until later in the summer.

Tony Goryn has kindly continued his monitoring of the river levels at both gauging stations in Great Wilbraham and Fulbourn. Through this he has kept in close touch with the Environment Agency to ensure continuity of pumping. We now have valuable records of river levels throughout the year as well as some photographic records of the varying levels.

We have kept in touch with the process of developing the updated Water Resource Management Plan by Water Resources East. At the time of writing the draft plan has just been published for consultation. We will be reviewing it before sending in any comments. This will inform a similar plan for Cambridge Water. It is expected that the Plan in its final form will be approved later on next year. In the meantime initial ideas for the location of the proposed Fens reservoir have been publicised with a possible site to the north of Chatteris, though if eventually approved, this will not be in use till the mid-2030's at the earliest.

Much of the work of the Committee has concentrated on preparing for the meeting with the Environment Agency that had been delayed due to the pandemic and constraints on meeting face to face. The meeting eventually took place in October. Following an interesting presentation giving an hydrological overview of the rivers and showing work on groundwater modelling we were able to pose key questions of concern.

We learnt that the pump at Dungate Farm was as reliable as possible but it was sensitive to weather conditions and, if it failed at weekends, then there was nobody on hand to re-start it till the following week. They had daily access to the water levels at the Wilbraham gauging station and could adjust the augmentation regime as required. The same was not true for Fulbourn as

the outfall was directly into the Nature Reserve and was dependent on requests by the Wildlife Trust for pumping and there is no facility for monitoring river levels at the Coles Bridge gauging station. Online live monitoring is based on the catchment outflow point at Bottisham Lode that often has flow even when the Wilbraham River is dry. We consider this unsatisfactory.

We were disturbed to discover that the impact of public water supply abstraction is the equivalent of a 3 metre drop in groundwater levels at the Temple (and presumably also at Shardelowes' well Fulbourn). Decisions on the level of augmentation at any one time seemed to be based on a range of feedbacks but appeared ad hoc. We were assured that abstraction from water supply boreholes would be capped at current levels based on a previous average and actually reflect a 30-35% reduction on current year levels. However we do know that the water companies always have a let out by applying for 'overriding public interest'. We were not able to obtain a satisfactory answer to the question of the interim water supply regime prior to the operation of the Fens reservoir.

The possibility of augmenting the stream at Fulbourn which skirts the Nature Reserve was raised in an attempt to raise water levels on the river system locally as well as further downstream. Currently the outfall in the Nature Reserve is at a higher ground level and augmentation water is retained in the peaty soil before finding its way back into the river system. This was the prime reason for the original augmentation scheme to safeguard the hydrological regime of the SSSI. Augmentation at the Temple Springs can be increased when the Nature Reserve is saturated. A modelling project could be employed to see if it is feasible to increase augmentation volumes and allow greater run off into the river, a paper solution.

Altogether we found the Environment Agency responsive to our questions and concerns and we will follow up any outstanding matters.

A new WRPS notice board has been purchased and will be placed near Hawk Mill Farm to give publicity to the aims of the Society and to provide up to date information on sightings of wildlife along the river corridor. We are grateful to the common rights holders of Little Wilbraham Fen for their gift of the noticeboard.

The Society's website (thewrps.org) has been updated thanks to David Lomas and is well worth reviewing to keep up to date with the work of the Society.

Around the time of last year's AGM I exchanged correspondence with our MP, Lucy Frazer, on the need for restraint by the general public in the use of water. This had been raised in one of the consultative sessions with Water Resources East and Cambridge Water. I coupled this with our concern for the level of abstraction and its impact on our chalk stream.

We continue to look for further members of the Committee. It's a very interesting time with lots going on and there is renewed national interest in chalk streams – so please come and join the WRPS and help protect our local river and wildlife.

Richard Townley (Chairman)