



On the Foss

The River Foss Society Newsletter

Autumn
2011



Steve Atwood explains the background and engineering of the project.

The lock and island from above; the surprisingly small pile drivers are being used to stabilise the walls.

Keeping Back the Waters

As many members will know, the River Foss has not been approachable from the Ouse for a good part of the summer, due to stabilisation works in the Foss Basin. Luckily, we were able, at fairly short notice, to arrange visits to these essential works

on 25 August and 8 September. Both were fully booked quickly, with a restriction on the number of non members; apologies to any members who were not notified of the visits. Representatives of the City of York Council, Inland Waterways Association N R Branch, the Railway & Canal Historical Society and Friends of New Walk joined us on these visits.

Steve Attwood, Technical Manager of Keller Geotechniques, the contractor working on behalf of City of York Council (the Navigation Authority for the River Foss), gave us an informative talk about the background and engineering of this project. He explained that the 18th century wooden piers were starting to rot and the threat of complete collapse existed, not just for the island, but for all the modern structures above. Steve is a pleasant and patient talker, willing to be interrupted and answer questions, and later to talk with individuals. This is a complicated and intricate operation and the drawings and pictures displayed helped us to understand what's going on. We thank him again.

The highlight following the first visit was an invitation from a couple, RFS members, living immediately above the lock to use their balcony to view the works and Lock. We sincerely thank them for that generous offer. The "highlight" of the second visit was a short and light shower in the middle of the talk!

Many enjoyed the excellent hospitality of the Masons Arms before and after the visit - some both! It made a lovely start and end to an interesting and pleasant afternoon.

The Foss - Naturally!



This stunning shot of a snail is by member Tony Ellis, a wildlife photographer of great ability. Living at New Earswick not far from the banks of the Foss, he studies this wildlife environment with his camera daily. See more inside.

We think that his photographs are impressive and want to share them here. So look forward to seeing stunning photos evocative of the seasons in each edition of *On the Foss*.

The Magic Natural World of Our Foss



Here are more of Tony Ellis' beautiful photographs. We think they perfectly represent the summer past.

Left: Tony caught this photograph of a mysterious looking insect this summer. Does anyone recognise what it is?

Centre left: A busy bee

Centre right: One of the many fish seen in the Foss recently. Notice how clear the water is.

Bottom: A mother moorhen takes her young on an expedition along the Foss. She seems better camouflaged than the little ones.



Foss Walk, 4,
10th September.
Farlington to Lilling.

Out and About

Ten walkers (and a dog), after meeting at Lane/Lilling Low Lane crossroads, drove to the start at Farlington. We walked past Farlington church and followed the



River Foss for a short period before turning north towards Sheriff Hutton, having chosen the more interesting route. At Cornborough, a local man with a pony cart gave us information about the manor, then took our photograph.



At Mill Hill farm *Our photographer and friend* we accidentally went in the wrong direction, so had rather too much road walking to Sheriff Hutton. We went through the village, then headed to West Lilling, arriving back at our cars. At the Highwayman seven of us had a splendid lunch, an excellent finish to the walk.



This team met at Earswick on 18 June and worked hard for a morning removing the insidious Himalayan Balsam - a non-native species introduced years ago, now causing imbalances along the Foss and other rivers.

This was followed by a barbecue lunch at the Flag & Whistle in Huntington.

Walk No 3, 4th June. Yearsley to Crayke
(Dutch House)

A record group of 18 walkers met at the Dutch House, north of Crayke on the Brandsby road. Although closed on Tuesdays, the proprietors agreed to open especially for us to have refreshments at the finish.



Volunteers drove the walkers to the start at Yearsley crossroads. The site of a number of barrows and other ancient earthworks, Yearsley was also the home of the pottery of William Wedgwood - a relation of the famous Staffordshire family.

In Yearsley, we had the opportunity to look round Holy Trinity church, an interesting, well maintained building. The walk continued on a right of way - through a private garden! Most walkers detoured to visit the source of the River Foss and then we all followed the river for a short distance. We picnicked at Pond Head, enjoying the splendid views of the reservoir.



Pond Head - a perfect picnic site

At the viewing platform John Millett gave a short, interesting talk about the reservoir. The walk now followed on and included a few stiles - some very difficult to climb! We reached the small pretty village of Mill Green and then had a very short walk to the Dutch House, where refreshments awaited. Volunteers took the drivers back to the start to collect their cars.

The weather was wonderful - very hot and sunny with good visibility, and our warm welcome from the Dutch House finished the day perfectly.

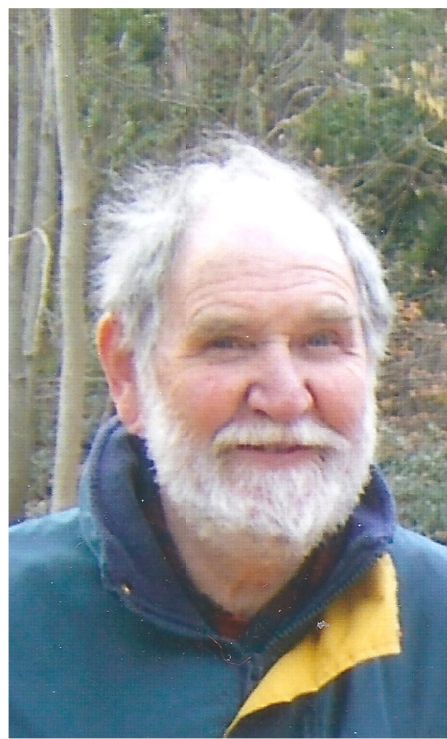
Michael Fife's father served in India, and during a leave Michael was born in Devon. After the early years in India, the family, including Michael, an elder brother and his sister Felicity, returned to England and lived in West Sussex. Michael chose an Army career, and after Sandhurst had many overseas postings, including Germany where he met Sunhild, whom he married in 1961 in Berlin. He was posted to Strensall with his family, which by then included Thomas and Juliette. On retiring from the Army, the family settled in Poppleton, where Michael delighted in cultivating his long garden.

A new chapter in Michael's life then began when he became a mature student at the College of Ripon and York St John, studying history and producing a thesis on the River Foss. He also joined the Sealed Knot and grew his legendary beard.

After graduation he began a successful career at Nunthorpe Grammar School. He later seized the opportunity to retire early to pursue his many interests and community involvement. He had earlier approached Sessions with a proposal that his thesis could be published. William Sessions thought that this would be a good idea, provided that the book contained a major section on the flora and fauna of the Foss basin. Peter Walls was known to be working on such a study and he agreed to provide this material. The excellent book – *The River Foss – Its History and Natural History* was the result.

This publication stimulated the setting up of the River Foss Amenity Society ('Amenity' was dropped after a few years) in 1973. William (Bill) Sessions was the first chairman. He envisaged many objectives: opening the lower reaches of the river to barges and

Michael Fife - a Memoir



pleasure craft, clearing little used footpaths, planting of trees where appropriate, setting up nature reserves and establishing a harmonious and constructive relationship with all concerned. These continue to be the aim of the Society.

Michael Fife became the second Chairman of the Society, finding time to enhance the Foss Walk. He formed working parties to develop the riverside footpath. This included clearance of vegetation, encouraging stile repair, provision of signposts, production of a descriptive booklet (*The Foss Walk* by Mark Jones) and involvement of schools.

Once Michael determined on a course of action, he would relentlessly pursue this as only an ex-military man and schoolmaster can. On one occasion, alone and methodically cutting plants back

to clear the footpath, an irate farmer attempted to stop him. Fortunately no blows were struck, and Michael completed his task.

He was the innovator of the New Year walk from Crayke to Pond Head, taking place whatever the weather. One year thick snow meant that walkers had to eat their sandwiches standing – at his command!

After leaving the Chair, he continued to take an interest in the Society, but also developed other interests and travelled frequently with his second wife, Hanna, to South Africa, Canada and India. He died in May 2011, aged 83.

Under Michael's leadership the Society made great progress towards achieving its original objectives and we owe him a deep debt of gratitude. His memory will be cherished.

John Hampshire



Community Service

The Society was invited to show archive photographs at the Huntington Community Centre Open Day on 3 September. Our stand was popular, and we even recruited new members.

Helpers on the day included, left to right: Marjorie Burton, Doreen Agar, Anne Lang, Hilary Shephard and John Millett (back to camera). Many thanks to them.

Upcoming Events For Your Diary

Tuesday 4th October

FOSS WALK 6

As this walk ends in the city centre we shall not be arranging the usual car shuttle. Please meet at Huntington Church car park (easily accessible by No. 5 bus) for a 10 am start. If you would like a pub lunch at the end of the walk please let June Card know (Tel. 766196) by Sunday 2nd October.

Tuesday 11th October

OPEN MEETING 7 pm

At Strensall and Towthorpe Village Hall. Tony Ellis' wonderful photographs of the natural world of the Foss will be on display. Colin Atkinson and Jon Knight of the Environment Agency will present an illustrated talk on "Changing River Scenes Within the City Boundary", followed by refreshments. All are welcome.

Sunday 4th December

CHRISTMAS LUNCH

At the Novotel Hotel, Fishergate, York. Lunch will be served at 12.30 pm in the River Room at £17.95 per person for 3 courses, mince pies and coffee, and will be preceded at 11.15 am by a talk, speaker to be announced. Menus will be available at the Open Meeting or from June Card, to whom orders and payments should be given by the end of October.

Walking for Justice

In 1722, John Woolman, an itinerant American Quaker preacher, started to walk through England, advocating against cruelty to animals, economic injustices and oppression, conscription, military taxation, and particularly slavery and the slave trade. His walk of 500 miles started in London, but ended in York where he died after contracting smallpox.

In 2011 Margaret Johnson, an American Quaker, decided to retrace Woolman's walk to raise money for Ekta Parishad and Quaker Peace and Social Witness work in India and South Asia. On 1 May, she set out from London, planning to finish the walk in York on 21 June.

The River Foss Society were approached to see if any of our members would accompany her and walk the last 20 miles, starting in Crayke and finishing by the River Foss next to the northern ring road.

After suffering an injury, Margaret could not complete the walk, so another Quaker, Paul Moggs from Banbury, did the last stretch for her from Crayke to York.

David Gray arranged for the RFS to be involved, and took myself and Angela to meet Quakers Paul and James at Hazelwood Farm B&B in Crayke to start the walk. The landlady and her husband, keen cyclists and veterans of the Coast to Coast Walk, welcomed us with tea and coffee. The four of us left Crayke at a steady pace and joined the Foss Walk. Our route took us past Marton Abbey, Farlington, Conisborough, Sheriff Hutton, West Lilling, Strensall and Haxby, eventually finishing at the northern by-pass.



Starting the walk, left to right: Angela, Bob, Paul Moggs and James.

Although we encountered a heavy shower just after Strensall, we carried on to finish in bright sunshine, where a group of Quakers, including Margaret Johnson and David Gray, met us. They continued on, carrying a large banner stating 'Peace and Justice'. They turned off at the Nestlé factory to walk to their destination at the Friends Meeting House in Friargate.

It was lovely walking with these people and we were proud to help raise money for the charities. This walk of 15 miles left us thinking that we should try to do the full Foss Walk in one day. But that's another day!

Bob Jowett

Exploring the Upper Foss

During the summer we made three excursions to find out more about the course of the River Foss above Sheriff Hutton.

The first took us to **two ancient churches** that lie on the Foss Walk. Set on a little knoll above the village of Farlington and the River Foss, the church of St. Leonard remains substantially as it was built in the 12th century. It is a small rectangular structure with no division between the nave and the chancel and has three deeply recessed, round-arched windows at the east end and a small bellcote at the west end to house the two bells that have rung out for four hundred years.

St. Leonard, born in the late 5th century near Orleans was a godson of the Frankish King Clovis who wished him to live at his court. He rejected court life, choosing a life of obscure simplicity and was sought out for his healing powers, taking a special interest in the release and rehabilitation of prisoners.



St. Leonard's Church, Farlington

We moved on to Marton-on-the-Forest where the first church probably had a wooden or thatched roof on a cobble base. You can still see many of the cobbles, believed to have been dumped by retreating glaciers, inside on the south wall and outside on the north wall. The church was rebuilt in stone when nearby Marton Priory served as a quarry after dissolution by Henry VIII. The stepped roof line, the niche above the door and probably the nave arch and the font come from the Priory, as does the slab of marble from Weardale, positioned near the chancel step, which may have been its altar. Our visit ended with a picnic in the churchyard with its hospitable benches and beautiful view over the surrounding countryside.

The Crayke Estate Permissive Walk started at the Dutch House, where, over a cup of coffee, Peter Cliff, the Chairman of the Trustees of the Crayke Estate, introduced us to some of the decisions that have to be made by those actually running the countryside. Should crops be normal, organic or genetically modified? How should pests and predators be dealt with - by allowing fox-hunting, for example? What are woodlands for? A

Trust can use its income to repair farmhouses but not to modernise them, so do you sell off some land to raise capital for double-glazing? As we set off through a landscape that epitomises the best of Yorkshire - abundant farmland, woods, broad views, ancient villages - the debate raged. This was one of the most stimulating, as well enjoyable, of our walks.

The Mills of Stillington. We met at Home Farm, owned by RFS Member John Sparrow, then, under Michael Turvey's guidance, made our way to Stillington Mill where we were welcomed by the present owner, David Thompson. An earlier owner constructed an annexe to incorporate the mill wheel, a large double cast iron circle still retaining some of its original slats. Pressure from water feeding into the centre of the circle from the mill pond caused the wheel to turn. The mill pond,

now reduced in size, lies in David Thompson's garden, our next destination.

Michael brought a most interesting collection of old photographs and maps showing the mill, the adjacent miller's house, now demolished, and the two bridges, over the River Foss and the mill stream respectively, which can still be seen today. The maps

plotted the course of the mill stream, or leat, which was constructed across a couple of fields to divert water from the Foss to the mill pond. It was a substantial piece of engineering and John Sparrow could remember swimming down its length as a boy. The leat was later filled in with earth dug from an adjacent field but unfortunately the removal of the top soil rendered the land infertile, and it was dug out further to form a surprisingly substantial reservoir to provide irrigation for the farm.

We walked to the point at which a sluice on the Foss controlled the flow of water into the leat. From there we had sight of a second former mill, now a barn. We were so absorbed in tracing the history of the first mill that we never did make it to the remains of the third mill at Marton Abbey, but instead rounded off the visit with an excellent lunch at the White Bear, Stillington. Many thanks to Michael Turvey and John Sparrow for the research and memories which made for a most interesting and enjoyable morning.

June Card

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