



On the Foss

The River Foss Society Newsletter

**Autumn
2014**

Until 1989, when the Foss Barrier was installed and commissioned by the Environment Agency (E A) on the River Foss, flooding in York was frequent during wet weather in the Foss catchment area. This was often accompanied by wet weather in the River Ouse catchment area backing up the usual 2.5m height difference in normal water levels in both rivers. Now, when the Barrier is dropped, water can be pumped from the River Foss into the River Ouse with negligible effect on the latter but providing relief for a large area previously threatened with flooding.

The opposite problem of low water level in the Foss often still remains and has a number of causes, one obviously being a long, dry spell of weather. Other causes have been leakage through the Castle Mills Lock gates needing attention from the navigation authority, City of York Council. Occasional vandalism can also cause this. For many years there has been an E A guillotine sluice gate adjacent to the lock, which by 2013 was coming to the end of its life with leakage underneath becoming worse.

In November 2013 River Foss Society members heard a fascinating talk by Vanessa Collins, the E A's Design Engineer, about the new tilting weir sluice which



Holding back the water

The new sluice is in full working order

tilting weir sluice as well as the Foss Barrier, gave a talk (again in the Masons Arms) about it. The angle of the sluice plate is computer controlled to give a weir height which Mark showed as giving a much more constant water level in the River Foss. An eel pass may be fixed later; the question of a fish pass is under discussion. Visits to the sluice and the Foss Barrier followed the talk.

The maximum flood flow in the River Foss is about 30 cubic metres per second compared to a maximum in the River Ouse of about 600 cubic metres per second. When the River Ouse has risen over 2 metres (the typical variation) above the normal level of about 5



E A's Mark Fuller explained the new set-up

had been fitted, but not yet commissioned, by the E A adjacent to the Lock. The sluice incorporates a plate at the bottom of the channel with a hinge on the downstream end to another plate whose angle can be raised so that the non hinged end can form a varying height weir. This new set-up would also give a much better visual impact.

On 24 September 2014 Mark Fuller, who since commissioning is responsible for the operation of the



Roof above submersible pumps at the Foss Barrier

metres ordnance datum (sea level) the Barrier goes on "standby" for flooding. If and when lowered and all 8 submersible pumps are used on the River Foss side, the barrier can cope with up to 10.4 metres ordnance datum head on the River Ouse side, at the same time preventing flooding in the River Foss catchment area. This level was almost reached in 2000 when water was close to topping the Barrier.

Mark gave us a fascinating talk, supported by technical data and was bombarded with many questions! He willingly answered all our questions and provided us with a much deeper understanding of how York's two rivers are so skillfully managed.

Peter Hopwood



Coming Up

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last minue alterations

OCTOBER

Thursday 9th Foss Walk 8 Mill Green to Pond Head circular 5 miles. Meet at 9.30 am in the car park of the Dutch House, Mill Green, near Crayke. Contact Bob Jowett 01904 764702.

Wednesday 15th Open Meeting (i.e. non-members also most welcome) at 7 pm at Strensall & Towthorpe Village Hall, when Terry Weston, Warden of the Dunnington Hassacarr Nature Reserve, a community enterprise, will talk about his work. The Village Hall is on the No. 5 bus route. If you need a lift phone June Card 01904 766196 who will try to arrange one.

Saturday October 18th Morning 'cruise' on the River Foss (you work your passage by fishing rubbish out of the River as you go!) and litter pick along the banks. Meet at 9.30 am at the little footbridge next to the Defra building on Foss Islands Road, wearing suitable clothing and footwear. Contact Barry Thomas 01904 490081 if you are taking part.

DECEMBER

Sunday 7th Christmas Lunch at 12.30 pm in the River Room at Novotel, Fishergate. This will be preceded at 11.15 am by a talk on Eoforwic, the Anglian trading settlement that once prospered on the banks of the River Foss where Novotel now stands, given by Nicola Rogers of the York Archaeological Trust (see page 6). The cost for the 3-course lunch plus tea or coffee has once again been held at £17.95 and there is free parking. Payment and menu choices required by 31st October, please. Sign up at the Open Meeting or contact June Card 01904 766196.

A Wonderful Summer

We've had a busy, and rewarding summer on the Foss — June Card tells us more

Himalayan Balsam Pull and Litter Pick Thursday June 19th

Despite widespread publicity there was a disappointing response to the call for volunteers to rid the river bank of this invasive plant which smothers the native vegetation and, when it dies back in the autumn, leaves the earth exposed and prone to erosion. The work is not arduous as the young plant can be easily uprooted from moist soil and provided the seed has not set, can just be left lying to die off. The three teams of four between them cleared the accessible areas of the Foss between the footbridges at Yearsley Grove and Earswick except for the curve of the meadow at Huntington. It was rewarding to see that in the areas we had cleared last year there had been very little regrowth. Also rewarding was the splendid lunch provided for us afterwards at the Flag and Whistle.

A "Curiouser" Walk Sunday June 29th



Mark tells all ...



... and Matthew Hawthorn releases balloons

This joint event of the River Foss Society and the Curiouser project focussed contemporary art on York's lesser-known corners. Mark Gladwin dealt with the history of the River Foss while Matthew Hawthorn from York St John's punctuated the walk from Monk Bridge to Blue Bridge with readings about rivers and marked our progress by the letting off blue balloons each carrying a little umbrella carved with a cryptic message, such as, "How deep how rich the mud that fills everything there is to be known". Hopefully less ephemeral than the balloons, which showed a regrettable tendency to nosedive into the River, was the poem by John Wedgwood Clarke inscribed on the wall of Straker's Passage, there for us and all passers-by to enjoy.

Treasure Hunt Monday July 28th

A fine evening saw more than 30 members and friends setting off in teams on a Treasure Hunt around Huntington devised by Sylvia Jobling to test our powers of observation. "Where will you find a thousand crosses?" was one of the more difficult questions.

Was Had by All!

(Answer: Mille Crux Terrace in the Old Village.) The teams returned to the Huntington Memorial Hall to a display of memorabilia of the First World War and to a delicious buffet prepared by Sylvia and her husband David – to whom many thanks for providing a most enjoyable evening.

Evening History Walk Friday August 15th

Dr. Neil Moran, RFS member, once again informed and entertained us with his deep knowledge of York's history. We set off from Clifford's Tower, scene of the mass suicide of the city's Jewish community in 1190 and journeyed through the centuries as we were guided through streets and snickelways on a circular walk south of Pavement and High Ousegate. Did you know that Lady Peckitt, known for her Yard, wasn't really a lady at all? When her husband was Lord Mayor, she was Lady Mayor-ess and so fancied the title that she hung on to it after his term of office came to an end. The walk finished in Castlegate outside the former premises of the Tuke family who introduced the art of chocolate-making to York; a meal at the Masons Arms rounded off the evening. Many thanks to Neil.

Visit to Humberside Wednesday 20th August

We ventured south of the Humber for a day of contrasts. Our first stop was at the Marina at South Ferriby, the mooring of two former working boats, the Humber Keel "Comrade" and the Humber Sloop "Amy Howson". The term "keel" is misleading as the boat is flat-bottomed with a square sail, enabling it more easily to negotiate the shallows of the Humber Estuary but rendering it unstable in coastal waters. The boats are the pride and joy of the Humber Keel and Sloop Preservation Society, which has rescued them from dereliction and whose members welcomed us aboard and told us about their working past. Then on to the café at the Visitor Centre at Waters' Edge, Barton-on-Humber, where a plentiful buffet lunch had been set out for us. From here there was a walk under the Humber Bridge and along the sea wall (or a short car journey) to our final destination, the Far Ings Nature Reserve. Sitting in the sunshine overlooking a lake, hoping to catch sight of a Marsh Harrier, it was difficult to believe that the tidal surge of December 2013 had breached the sea defences and flooded the Reserve to a depth of 18 inches, so damaging the Visitor Centre that it had not been possible to reopen it until the weekend before our visit.



Humber Keel 'Comrade' (front) and visit Humber Sloop 'Amy Howson' (rear) were manoeuvred at the docks before we got on board



The visiting party



Humber Sloop 'Amy Howson' (left) and Humber Keel 'Comrade' ready for our visit

Our thanks to Peter Hopwood, who had made all the arrangements for this interesting day but was unable to come with us.

Unfortunately, the visit to Worsborough Mill, planned for Tuesday September 9th had to be cancelled due to lack of support.

Let's Get picky!

This year's litter picking campaign commenced on 12 April with our now traditional Spring litter pick. With the help of the City of York Council boat and skipper, we cleared the river from Castle Mills Lock to upstream of Monk Bridge. On that day the banks were tackled from Blue Bridge heading upstream almost to Haleys Terrace.

We helped with the Himalayan Balsam pull on 19 June, (see page 2); the next litter pick was on 3 July with the now traditional assistance of the Rotary Club of York Vikings - their members almost matched the number of RFS members who turned out. Unfortunately not quite as big a stretch was covered as in April, although an additional area round the Maureen Hume Memorial tree and plaque adjacent to Monk Bridge was tackled.

A big improvement this year has been the pontoon lashed to the front of the CYC boat.

A further litter pick is planned for Saturday 18 October. Obviously more help would enable a larger area to be covered. How about helping? It would also help planning if members likely to help could advise Barry Thomas (tel: 01904 490081, email: barry1thomas@googlemail.com) beforehand – many members have found taking part to be a surprisingly enjoyable experience and the results are appreciated by the CYC and many of the public.

Peter Hopwood



Beauties of the Foss

Top left: a gem-like ladybird.

Left: A toad contrasts well with terracotta tiles

Right: These 'gems' are tiny baby spiders caught in a web on a tree



Foss Walk 5 Thirteen walkers set off from Farlington on Thursday 22 July to do this circular route. With ideal warm weather, the group walked just over 5 miles into Whenby, and then enjoyed the downhill walk back into Farlington, where the Blacksmith's Arms was a welcome lunch venue

Foss Walk 6 Nine walkers met on Monday morning 4 August to do this section from Haxby Landing to Blue Bridge. Bob Jowett led the group, starting at Landing Lane, Haxby and walking south along the River. After the group stopped at our new interpretation panel at Earswick (below) three walkers finished their walk in New Earswick.



The walk finished at the Blue Bridge, York (below), followed by a hearty lunch at the Mason's Arms.

One point of concern was the huge amount of Himalayan Balsam in flower along the river bank most of the way into York - despite the Society's efforts to pull as much as possible.

Bob Jowett



A Case for Recycling

Our banner - made by an RFS team in May - had pride of place celebrating the Tour de France. It decorated the city wall just by the archway approaching Lendal Bridge leading to the station from the south side of Lendal Bridge. (Right)

Now that the Grand Depart has, well, departed the Council has decided to display these wonderful works of community art by hanging them on either side of the York Hospital multi-storey car park. Half the banners will hang on the Wigginton Road side, (to entertain people stuck in traffic!) and the other half will be visible from the hospital, allowing patients to see them from the wards.

The plan is to to hang them on 10th October; they will be up for a couple of months, having been coated with

waterproofing liquid to keep them looking good.

The Arts in York Hospital have generously offered to host an event for the groups involved in the project. Once we know when this is, it will be posted on our website.

Hilary Shepherd



York City Council has told us that a resident of the Burn Estate area in Huntington reported seeing mink stealing her pond fish.

Watch out - there's a thief about!

Mink are not a species native to the UK, and pose a true threat to our water voles, a priority species in the UK

Biodiversity Action Plan. Not as shy as otters, they will hunt during the day and are small enough to get into the burrows of water voles.

Have you seen any mink? They can sometimes be confused with otters, but if you see an animal hunting in daylight, it is likely to be a mink.

You will see from the two photographs that the mink has a pointed face, whereas the otter has a square face. Of course it's very difficult to discern which animal is which at a distance, but we hope that the guidelines below might help.

This intruder into our wildlife system causes large amounts of damage to our water voles, already a threatened species.



Feral mink (above): Naturally a chocolate-brown colour with more pointed snouts. Their limbs are short and they have fluffier tails measuring about one third of their body length. They measure 42 to 65cm. They will hunt day or night. This photo was taken on a project site, where mink have been removed in cages so as not to interfere with the local water vole population. Photo by Lucie, with thanks to the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust.

Otters (left): A brownish-grey colour, with lighter fur under the chin and belly. The body is 55 to 90cm long and the tail 30 to 50cm, a good half of the animal's length. Their snouts are decidedly square. They hunt only at night.

Don't Forget our website:

www.riverfossociety.co.uk



Another of Tony Ellis's wonderful summer photos - this butterfly seems to echo the shapes of the leaves

A Knotty Problem

In early June the Foss Internal Drainage Board cut down and removed a small clump of Japanese Knotweed from the bank of the Foss at New Earswick.



The remaining stumps were then treated with an approved aquatic herbicide.

This application of herbicide has left a large patch of dead grass approximately 1.5 metres wide, and appears to have killed off the main

stem of the weed. However, within the burnt patch are small shoots of the knotweed about 10cm high; this shows how difficult it is to eradicate this evasive weed.

We are grateful to our member Will Durrant and JRHT's Tom Hepburn for bringing the problem to our attention and will be interested to see the long term effects of this treatment, as these small shoots can grow up to three metres high in just one season.

John Millett

On the Foss

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Our Foss Heritage

June Card reports ...

Comparatively little is known of York's history in the four and a half centuries between the departure of the Roman garrison and the capture of the city in 866 by the Vikings. On June 7th at Novotel, Fulford and Heslington Historical Society brought together a panel of distinguished experts to piece together the fragmented evidence currently available for this Anglian period.

A poem by Alcuin (c 735 - 804) extols York as a magnet, attracting merchants and settlers from far and wide. Recent archaeology has identified the Anglian trading centre, known as Eoforwic, in the area between the River Foss and the present-day Fishergate. The shelving banks of the river would have been ideal for beaching boats and there may even have been staithes for mooring further upstream at Coppergate. If later research reveals that the Anglians had a system for controlling the flow of the river it would have made the Foss an even safer and more usable port than the faster-flowing and tidal Ouse.

The "wic" part of the name Eoforwic links it to a group of undefended ports on navigable rivers near former Roman towns. These included Gipeswic (Ipswich), Lundenwic (London), and Hamwic (Southampton) as well as Dornestadt in the Rhine delta and two Danish centres. The artefacts found on these sites bear a distinct resemblance to each other and argue for a trading network.

The excavations in the Fishergate area have yielded evidence of an artisan community, providing luxury goods for the ecclesiastical market and food for the non-food producing elements of society. Combs, fashioned from the shed antlers of red deer, were prized. Loom weights suggest cloth production; working tools for metal and leather were also found. Of a pair of rotary querns, the upper was of lava imported from the Rhineland, valued because, unlike local stone, it did not produce grit. There were multi-coloured glass drinking vessels, strap ends and buckles and, for clothing, dress pins and ornamental beads. The conference was invited to view and handle – with gloves on – the gold Fishergate ring wrought with a tiny man's head between two mythical creatures. Equally fascinating was the analysis of the animal bones found on the site, far too many to have met merely the needs of the craftsmen themselves, and so indicating the existence of a sizeable meat market as well as offering valuable information about the diet of the times.

Tantalising questions remain. Where were the bridges over the Foss? Who commissioned, built and skippered the ships beached along the river bank? Under whose jurisdiction did the trading community operate: the kings of Deira or the Archbishops of York? Further excavation and research may reveal the answers. Meanwhile, when we sit down to our Christmas Lunch at Novotel on December 7th, let us wind back the thirteen centuries that separate us from our Anglian forbears and imagine ourselves in the Eoforwic beneath our feet.