



On the Foss

Summer
2020

News from The River Foss Society

The Foss Blue Bridge appeared in a different perspective on 24 June when it was photographed swinging from a crane high in the air. The footbridge was being temporarily removed to perform repairs that had been needed for some time. Originally built in the late eighteenth century, this latest version of the bridge dates to 1929 and had not been refurbished for about 20 years

Engineers had to dismantle the bridge into two sections before a crane moved it away to a lorry for taking off site for repairs and repainting. Work is estimated to take about eight weeks and will include general painting and steelwork repairs.

A temporary bridge has been installed so that walkers and cyclists can continue to use the crossing. However, whilst the temporary bridge is in place, the navigation will not be usable.

Local resident Anthony Day photographed the work taking place and has allowed us to use the photos, which first appeared in the York Press. Our thanks go to them for permission to use the photographs.

If you would like to see some more images of the Blue Bridge's history, go to the website of the Fishergate, Fulford and Heslington Historical Society - ffhyork.weebly.com. The Local Photos section has a group of Blue Bridge photos.

Up, Up and Away!



Top right: The Middle section of the bridge is lifted away

Middle right: Something seems to be missing!

Below right: The temporary bridge

Left: Engineers working to dismantle the old bridge



A new start

WALKS

We are re-starting our walks programme, albeit in groups of six or less for the time being, and with social distancing as a primary requirement.

If you'd like to take part in a walk, please contact the leader via email well in advance – it'll be first come first served!

JULY

Thurs 28 July 10.00 am Terrington and the Ridge of the Entrenchments. About 6 miles. Meet at Terrington Church. Contact: Derek Chivers

AUGUST

Tues 4th Aug 10.00am Beningbrough and the river Ouse circular. About 3 miles. Meet at main gates of Beningbrough Hall, Newton on Ouse. Contact: Anne Bednarski

WALK CONTACTS:

Anne Bednarski: annebednarski@hotmail.com

Derek Chivers: derek@chivers.plus.com



If this newsletter has been posted to you and you would be happy to receive it in the future by email please let our Membership Secretary know at: membership@riverfossociety.co.uk

2020 Photograph Competition

Prizes will be a £20 book token for the winner and two £10 tokens for the runners-up.

- Entries should be sent to: mikegbw@btinternet.com by 21st August 2020.
- To qualify, photographs must have been taken since September 1st 2019 within 100m of the river.
- Only on-line entries can be accepted.
- Please ensure that they are suitable for printing at A4 as the judging will be done using hard copies. (A minimum of 500kb at 60 dpi is suggested)

The results will be announced in September 2020 and the winning photos will be printed in the next newsletter as well as appearing on the website.



Last year's entries included:

*Top: A dragonfly by Andy Mulholland;
Right: Huntington Church by David Neal and
Left: Bulbs by Tom Fothergill*

This year's competition is now underway!

Entries will close on the 31st August 2020



Don't forget our website:

www.riverfossociety.co.uk

Calling all fisherfolk!

The recent ultra-low water levels in the Foss have shown us just how many fish there are in the river. I've been astounded by both the number and size of what I've seen. But, how many fish are there, what range of species do we have, and how widely are they distributed?

Those are just some of the questions. How are numbers affected by flooding, by high flow rates and by the occasional (?) release of raw sewage and other pollutants into the river? What is the variation in numbers from year to year?

We work with various organisations such as the Environment Agency, St Nicks and The Dales To Vales Rivers Trust, and the topic of fish populations frequently crops up. It is possible, given some funding, that fish numbers would be included in a survey that may be done during the next 12 months, but it would only be a one-off. What is needed is an ongoing survey that would allow us to follow population numbers over several years.

We are seeking the help of everyone interested in fish, whether fisherfolk or not, who could help



A school of unidentified fish photographed by Mike Gray near Huntington Church.



Left: A pike was photographed by Neil Nicholson

us keep a close eye on what is happening to our river's fish populations. Do you know your Rudd from your Tench? Could you undertake a regular survey for us (twice a year would be great, three even better). Catch lists are useful, though not really representative, but local knowledge from those who really know the river would be fantastic. If you could help us, please get in touch with me via mikegbw@btinternet.com or on 07596 366342.

Mike Gray



Anyone going along the lowest stretch of Huntington Road will have noticed that there are two new park benches on Monkbridge Landing – yes, it has a name! - near the River Foss Society interpretation

Enjoy a rest!

board. We hope that a picnic table will soon be installed as well.

We applied to the York City Council for a grant at the end of last year but the Council has supplied the benches directly. We also hope to apply to plant more weeping willows along the Foss, if grant funding permits.

Local residents and passing visitors will benefit from the extra seating facilities in this small park area and it should help to make this a more attractive area not only for family groups to gather, but for small events to be held as well. An established community group (Monkbridge Landing) already maintain and garden this area.

We are proud to have been involved with improving this area for everyone to enjoy.

Michael Reakes

Left to itself, any patch of land round here will turn into a wood. In our latitude and on our soils, trees grow really well; you don't even need to plant them – they can do that themselves as they have been doing for millions of years. If what you want is woodland, land management is easy. If you want something more open, you have to cut or graze or burn – something that will stop trees. In practice that means cutting in most places.

Cutting grass is easy: everyone knows how to make a lawn. From an ecological standpoint, however, lawns are very dull. The richest sorts of grassland, biologically, are either grazed short turf on chalk and limestone, or tall, wet grassland, and it's the latter that we might wish to encourage on the banks of the Foss.

If we want to see more wildlife in the Foss corridor, we must manage the land to encourage it. Clearly there will be some places where we need short grass, for access or amenity, but for much of its length we might want to encourage the grass to grow tall, providing habitat for a huge range of other wildlife and the opportunity for many colourful flowering plants to grow too. This has been done successfully in Earswick Village, and the opportunity to do the same is widespread.

The model that we should aim at, for maximising biodiversity, is a fen meadow or the classic hay meadow. For centuries, low-lying land near rivers was used by farmers for hay. This land was too wet in winter to be ploughed and used for crops and so a method evolved that made good use of it but was also very friendly to wildlife.

The plants were left to grow until early July, when a hay crop was taken. After a short respite to let the grass grow again, stock were put on the fields to graze the aftermath, and they would be left on until the fields became too wet in the autumn. Then the fields would be left until the next crop. The result was a rich habitat that has now almost entirely disappeared as agriculture has modernised.

It worked because the cut in July, followed by the grazing, made it impossible for the most vigorous and dominant plants to outcompete all the others. If you don't cut, trees will eventually take over, but long

The grass banks either side of the river, enforced by the IDB, lack biodiversity, and we ask 'what could be done about it?' Our President, Professor Alistair Fitter CBE, offers guidance on the best ways these areas can be managed.

When to mow, how to mow ...



before that the coarser tall plants (nettles, false oat grass, cocksfoot grass and nowadays Himalayan balsam) will have excluded almost everything else. Cutting stops them in their tracks.

So the answer to 'when to mow' is in summer and ideally again in late autumn if the land is not grazed after the cut. People worry about cutting when plants are in full flower, but actually you need to do that: the concern is that plants should be allowed to set seed and occasionally that should happen, but in practice very few plants establish from seed in these meadows because they are full of tough perennials which will outcompete seedlings.

Then there is 'how to mow'. The most important thing here is to remove the cuttings, the hay. The worst thing is the ride-on rotary mower or flail mower. These chop up the grass and other

plants and create a mulch. That covers the surviving plants and only the stronger ones grow through it. The result is the same as not mowing: you end up with the coarse grasses (unless of course you cut it too often, when you end up with a lawn – neither outcome is much good for wildlife).

The answer is to make hay and take it away. If there is someone with a horse, a donkey or (in my case) a goat or two, they will be delighted to have the hay. If not, it will have to be stacked up where it can rot down – not ideal, but better than leaving it.

The traditionalist will cut with a scythe, which has the advantage of zero carbon footprint, excellent exercise and the ability to cut in small spaces, on slopes (be careful!) and indeed almost anywhere. Alternatively there are scythe mowers that have a scissor cutter on the front and are excellent on level ground. Finally you can use a strimmer or brush cutter, but they are not good at coping with finer grasses and plants (or at least not good at turning them into hay).

So the recipe is simple. Cut twice a year (July and October) or once a year if you can graze the aftermath, and make hay. Then be patient: over a few years the rank, coarse grassland you started with will turn into a flower and insect-rich fen meadow.

Alistair Fitter

By the time this reaches you, Himalayan Balsam will be going to seed and the pulling season will be all but over. There does seem to be a second crop that matures

River Foss Society v. Himalayan Balsam



Hard at work!



later, but the risk is that it will be mixed in with mature weeds that are already seeding, and it may well be more harmful to pull them and risk spreading more seeds than to leave them.

We are seeing the effects of what is now three years of con-

centrated pulling, both above Strensall and by Haxby Weir. There is less balsam, and there are more native species around – albeit mostly nettles by the feel of it. According to the various publications I've read, seeds

in the soil beneath a clump of weeds remain viable for three years or so. As it's virtually impossible to remove every single plant in an area, there will always be some fresh seed spread each year, but experience elsewhere shows that after about five years it can be all but eliminated.

BUT: if more seeds arrive from upstream every time the water level rises significantly, re-infection is a certainty. It was our intention this year to start hunting upstream above Walbutt's to locate the various pockets of weed. There is certainly some around Stillington – they were pulling locally last year, though I've no news about their efforts this year. I've also heard that Strensall Parish Council are going to get some contractors to tackle the lengthy patch of balsam along the Strensall Road opposite the barracks. Our thanks to them!

The Covid disaster has certainly got in our way and volunteer numbers were down again this year, from 40 in 2018 and 27 in 2019, to only 23 this year. Thank you to all who did turn out and pull though, you cleared a considerable area, and with the effect being progressive, we will certainly see another reduction in balsam numbers next year.

This year, prompted no doubt by social distancing, we have seen quite a few members (and non-members it has to be said) going it alone and attacking various clumps of weed all the way along from Huntington to Yearsley Baths. Thank you to all of you too!

In desperation we are thinking of decapitating as much as we can of the balsam we don't have the resources to tackle this year. It's not a good or an enduring solution, but it should reduce the seed production as long as we do it before they go over. They may well regrow, but only time will tell, and if they do, they will hopefully be less vigorous. Hopefully!

Who knows what the situation will be in 2021? It would be nice to think that we will be able to attract a significant number of extra volunteers and attack not just our regular patches, but start to make inroads upstream to prevent reinfection.

Mike Gray

The beauty of Spring

It was a beautiful Spring! John Millet shares his photos of bluebells at Sheriff Hutton and poppies near Strensall with us.



Did you know that the River Foss Society is on Facebook too?

An enemy amongst us

Mink come and go along the Foss, particularly its lower reaches, which they probably access from the Ouse, where they are even more



*Mink kits playing under Ouse Bridge.
Photo courtesy of Carl Nickson*

regularly seen. There are even a couple of videos taken over the last few weeks on the Minster FM Facebook page showing them with kits, so we undoubtedly have a breeding local population. Which is bad news. (link for on-line version only <https://www.facebook.com/minsterfm/posts/10160051312395299>).

Earlier in the year we had sightings reported on our Facebook page of mink hunting along the Foss, mainly close to the city, with one being seen taking goslings. Another post asked where the geese had gone from that lower part of the river – they were still around further upstream though!

Reports were also passed on during our balsam pulling sessions of regular sightings as far upstream as Earswick Village and Landing Lane. What their presence will

mean for the fish stocks will depend partly on how many juveniles stay in the area.

Cute though they look, particularly the kits, they are aggressive non-native top-of-the-chain predators with voracious appetites, and are a significant threat to our native and endangered water voles. Possibly not unconnected with their presence, reports of water voles this year have been few and far between, despite the larger than usual numbers of walkers along the Foss.

Their presence was again reported to the Environment Agency, as the only way to protect the rest of the river's wildlife is to eliminate the mink, which have become considerably more common recently. Their response is still awaited. We had hoped that the parallel increase in otter numbers might have deterred them, but it would seem that they are prepared to co-exist.

Mike Gray

Help improve a footpath

The section of the Foss Walk after Haxby continues upstream from Towthorpe Bridge on the western side of the river towards Old Humpy Bridge at Strensall. For approximately 20 years Strensall residents have also walked on the eastern side of the river, the so called permissive footpath, towards Towthorpe Bridge and returned to the village via the western side of the river, the official Foss Walk footpath, making this an enjoyable circular walk.

Local residents have campaigned for a number of years to change the status of this permissive footpath to a permanent public right of way. If you would like to see this footpath on the eastern side of the river changed to a public right of way, you are invited to contact the footpath authority at rightsofway@york.gov.uk, or by telephone on 01904 551550. You can request an Evidence Statement to support the change in status of the footpath. By completing this statement you will be giving your support to provide an interesting circular walk for local residents and other walkers.

John Millett



This terrapin (?) was seen at the bridge in Earswick. Can anyone confirm this exotic species, or tell us anything about what it's doing in the Foss?

On the Foss

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