



Our member Tim Rane keeps an enthusiastic eye on litter in and around the Foss. He was told by 6-year-old neighbour

Starting young

George Palmer that there was a lot of litter building up by the Foss around Huntington Road. That spurred Tim to get a group of neighbours together to help and they took George, his sister Sophie and mum Clare on their first litter picking expedition. They were not disappointed! Clare tells us: 'George was so inspired by it all and is keen to go again'.

George reported their success to his school, who in turn told BBC Radio York what a good job was done.



This was broadcast on 12 February with a mention of the River Foss Society as well.

The picture shows George and Sophie Palmer with their mum Clare and the impressive amount of litter they managed to grab.



Important Changes

January 28 saw an important part of the improvements to the Foss Barrier. After delays due to – flooding! – the new Foss Barrier has a much taller gate on the site. Craned in, it replaces the old gate as part of the upgrade. Our member Bill Twist caught it on camera.

The Environment Agency has invested £38 million to improve the Foss Barrier. This improves the protection of around 1,200 properties from flooding. Project Manager Mark Fuller said: "This will stop flood water from the River Ouse backing up along the River Foss after heavy rainfall. It means that the upgrade to the pumping station is one step closer to being completed."

Replacement of all eight pumps with bigger capacity in a new building is an important part of the scheme which also includes fully automated control systems. Mark Fuller is positive: "The whole upgrade to the Foss Barrier is expected to be finished by summer dependent on weather conditions".

As most members will be aware, one of the proposals to help alleviate flooding in York was to create a holding area, just above Strensall, for the water that comes off the fields so quickly

when significant quantities of rain fall in a short period of time in the upper parts of the Foss catchment. The details can be found in a planning application by the Environment Agency to the City of York Council (19/02463/FULM) which was agreed a while back, allowing work to start soon.

It's a lengthy and detailed application, as one would expect for such an undertaking, and it demonstrates the depth and breadth of preparation needed these days when planning major schemes. Even during lockdown though, sitting down to read such a document is not for the faint-hearted, so I thought it would be interesting to extract a few paragraphs on topics of interest to the RFS, to give a flavour of what has gone into just one small aspect of the necessary background work. If nothing else, it made me realise why the planning required for these schemes is so costly.

Capita Real Estate and Infrastructure were commissioned to produce a Landscape and Ecological Management Plan for the Flood Storage Area scheme, on behalf of the Environment Agency. The full document can be found on-line as part of the application.

Its purpose was to outline the measures necessary to establish and maintain the required environment within the scheme, including newly planted and existing trees, several areas of created habitat, management of invasive species, and silt accumulation in the new wetlands and ponds, all for 30 years. The extract below is intended to give an idea of the current state of the land as well as demonstrate the degree of detail into which the report delves.

It gives a status report on the land as it is now, for example: "The majority of the site consists of large expanses of arable land with some field boundaries marked by hedgerows, and a network of ephemeral drainage ditches that contain standing or slow flowing water during wet months, and which dry out during periods of lower precipitation. Blocks of deciduous woodland are located on the right bank of the River Foss and along the left bank of the Black Dike with larger areas of woodland associated with Strensall Common present to the south of the site boundary, containing mainly oak and birch. Numerous ponds are scattered across the landscape, within the arable fields, the majority of which remain

wet throughout the year as they are groundwater fed. These ponds are surrounded by areas of scattered scrub and tall ruderal vegetation. The north-west corner of the site is an area of improved pasture and is heavily grazed by horses.

Proposing a future for the Foss



The proposed Flood Storage is on the north east edge of Strensall

The River Foss and the Black Dike are slow flowing watercourses with steep riverbanks and visible signs of modification and straightening. Their banks are lined with swards of species-poor grassland and tall ruderal vegetation.

Other areas, including field margins are also dominated by species-poor grassland. Some of these are also accompanied by dense areas of non-native invasive weeds such as Himalayan Balsam and Giant Hogweed, particularly along the bank of the Foss. The hedgerows within the site are also species-poor and are dominated by elder and hawthorn."

One example of the wide range of proposals made for enhancement of the area, and one which is very much aligned with the RFS's thinking, is a two-year programme of fertility/nutrient reduction for certain suitable areas with the intention of creating traditional hay meadows and grasslands.

The following is an extract which shows the sort of activity proposed – it will be interesting to see just how much of what is suggested really happens. Our government has seen fit to cut funding to the EA by some 40% over the last decade, leaving them with few resources to monitor this sort of project, and one wonders whether they would be able to take any effective action if the plan were not to be followed up as promised.

Sow high-yield Italian Ryegrass in March, and after establishment, mow monthly until October at 30-40mm height, and remove cuttings from site. The frequency and intensity of cutting will depend on soil nutrient levels, which must be checked twice-yearly, until the phosphate level is low enough to allow follow-on establishment of meadows/grasslands.

Once this has been achieved, sowing of the meadow species can follow. All seed will be locally sourced, and should include locally important but scarce species e.g. Water parsnip (*Sium latifolium*).

In the first year, long grass meadow areas should be managed more intensively to prevent the intrusion of invasive ground flora and allow a diverse flora to develop. The first cut, down to 30mm, should be made when the grass reaches approximately 100mm, and should

be followed by subsequent cuts down to 50mm every 6 weeks throughout the first growing season. From the second year onwards it will need cutting biannually in July, and in the autumn, when weather and ground conditions are suitable, with the cuttings left for one week then raked off. This will allow seeds to fall to the soil and maintain species diversity.

Another aspect of the application, and again one that particularly interests the RFS, is a survey of otter and water vole activity, carried out between 2018 and 2020.

Fieldwork showed the water vole population to be at a very low density and confirmed the desk-top study previously done. The burrow search in 2021 noted only 17 along the Foss and 36 along Black Dike, both comparable to the numbers noted in March 2020. There were no foraging signs reported i.e. feeding remains or droppings.

During the 2020 surveys, mink signs were noted along the river, increasing the likelihood of the water vole population becoming extinct due to predation. Additionally, there is a significant amount of habitat degradation as a result of bank slippage and erosion, resulting in compaction and destruction of any burrows that might have been present. Aggressive and unsympathetic treatment of the river banks by mowing, straightening and general maintenance was noted.

Otters, signs were present throughout the scheme area, and it is worth noting that downstream of the confluence with the Black Dike is a fishery which may provide a food source. A holt and couch (sleeping area) were

found near Ings Lane, together with otter spraint, but did not seem to be frequently used. Although there are several signs along this section of the Foss and its tributaries it is likely that they are foraging, commuting and only occasionally staying to shelter or rest.



Otters (top) are evident along the Foss but there are few signs of water voles (below)

Immediately before works begin, prior to the cutting of the vegetation, each stretch of the river will be inspected by an ecologist for activity signs i.e. droppings, feeding signs and/or footprints, and should signs be found, alterations to the working methods and suitable sympathetic removal of water vole will be undertaken.

One paragraph of note that underlines more general concerns expressed by many members was: "The River Foss is managed by the IDB. It is recommended that future maintenance is undertaken in a sensitive manner. For example, the retention of the aquatic marginal vegetation to ensure that foraging habitat and food source is retained for the water voles. This will also protect the toe of the bank from erosion. The maintenance work that has been carried out, in particular along the Black Dike, since the last site visit in September 2020 has been undertaken in an extremely un-

sympathetic manner that has caused further degradation to water vole habitat and has further decreased the stability of the watercourse bank."

To summarise, this is a lengthy and detailed document which must have taken a lot of effort to compile. If everything recommended does happen, it should add significantly to the biodiversity of the area concerned, as well as contributing to flood alleviation in an environmentally positive manner. Time will tell.

Mike Gray



Welcome visitors

A pair of Goosanders have been visiting the Foss in the Strensall area. It was thought they were a breeding pair looking for a possible nesting site. They are known as a "saw bill" duck as they have a long bill. These birds are typically 57 – 58cm in length and can be found on fresh water lakes and rivers throughout the year; they require mature trees with holes or tree roots for nesting purposes.

Of the two photos attached, in breeding plumage, the male has the dark bottle green head whilst the female has a reddish brown head with a white chin.

Many thanks to John Spring for his excellent photographs.

John Millett

Top: A female goosander and below: a male bird

Hurrah! We are hoping to restart this year's programme of Saturday litter picks on 24 April. There will be a session on 17 July and the final one is planned for 16 October. As always, litter pickers are asked to meet at the Footbridge (opposite Morrison's), Foss Island Road at 9.00 am.

This is all dependent on government rules and the situation at the time.

At the moment, when meeting at one point in the open air a maximum of six persons can join. We are also limited to a maximum of three groups to cover the section of the river from Blue Bridge to the starting point at The Footbridge, Foss Islands Road.

This is necessarily complex, so it is essential that if you want to take part, you must contact Barry Thomas by phone – 01904 490081 – or by email - barry1thomas@

Provisional Litter Picking



We've achieved a lot in the past

googlemail.com

Please remember that this has to be only a provisional programme as no one knows what will happen with the Covid situation. But we hope that we can get back to doing some of the River Foss Society's essential work.

Let's Walk

With the gradual loosening of Covid restrictions, we are making provisional plans for a 2021 walking programme.

Obviously, no one knows exactly what will happen and when, so we will only be able to finalise the programme once we have the news. At the moment, the guide states that after 17 May groups of up to 30 people can meet outdoors. Fingers crossed!

Based on that date, the following is a schedule of evening walks led by Anne Bednarski. Contact her on 01904 764086 if interested. Walkers are asked to meet at 5.50 for each walk to be ready for a six o'clock departure.

Dunnington via Holtby: 4.5 miles. Tues 8 June, meet at the Cross Keys pub

Askham Bryan via Billbrough: 5 miles plus stiles. Thursday 15 July, meet in Askham Bryan village by the church

Sheriff Hutton via Cornlands Manor: 5/6 miles. Thursday 11 August, meet at the Highwayman pub

Castle Howard: 4 miles. Monday 6 September, meet at the Crown and Cushion pub in Welburn.

The walks below will be led by Derek Chivers. If you are interested please email: derek@chivers.plus.com

For all walks please be at the meeting point at 10.20am, so we can make a prompt start at 10.30.

May 25th Bootham Stray, Clifton Backies and the Foss: circular walk of 5.5 miles. Meet Huntington Church car park 10.30.

(Only if people want this to happen)
12th/13th June Foss Way in two stages.

Day 1 Blue Bridge to Farlington -15 miles

Day 2 Farlington to Easingwold -14 miles

July 21st Nunnington and Cawkley's Bank: circular walk of 6 miles. Meet Nunnington Village Hall 10.30.

August 19th Castle Howard: circular walk of 5 miles .

Meet Castle Howard car main car park. 10.30.

The Environment Agency have installed, as a temporary measure, continuous river water monitoring equipment downstream and upstream of Walbutt's Water Treatment Plant. The photograph shows the unit installed downstream on the footbridge, beside the Sheriff Hutton road bridge at Strensall. The upstream unit is being installed at Lilling Green.

Checking the water



The equipment installed is a solar powered compact unit giving a continuous reading of the river water quality, and detecting any contamination from Walbutt's WTP. Any feedback from the EA on river water quality is awaited with interest and will be compared with our own readings, taken monthly for the last two years.

John Millett

On the Foss

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