



# On the Foss

Spring  
2023

50 years on the Foss

News from The River Foss Society

## Let's Party!



Where on the Foss could we find a venue suitable for a 50th Anniversary celebration?

We hope you agree that this is exactly the right place. Stillington Mill is on the River Foss, though even if you have walked the length of the Foss Footpath you may not know it, since the Path at this point is away from the river.

In recent years the Mill has become a venue for outdoor events – theatrical and musical, as well as for parties. The grounds are lovely, so please come and join in The River Foss Society Garden Party, on Saturday 10th June from 3.00 pm.

It will be a wonderful opportunity to look back on what the Society has done in the past, meet friends old and new, chat about plans for the future and have plenty of cake and tea.



The River Foss Society  
50th ANNIVERSARY

## GARDEN PARTY

Where: **in the grounds of Stillington Mill**   
Mill Lane. Stillington. YO61 1NG

When: **Saturday 10th June 3 - 6 pm**

Cake cutting & Fizz @ 4 pm with welcome by  
Professor Alastair Fitter CBE FRS RFS President

Cost: Adult ticket £12  
Family ticket £30

More information and tickets:  
from Michael Alexander 01904 625610  
or Christine Gray 01904 621808 [membership@riverfossociety.co.uk](mailto:membership@riverfossociety.co.uk)

Free Parking  
Light tea  
Cash bar available

River Foss rising near the village of Yearsley flowing south to the confluence with the Ouse near Castle Mills Bridge



You can find us on Twitter  
[@riverfossyork](https://twitter.com/riverfossyork).

And, of course, we are still  
on Facebook





## Springing into action

### APRIL

**Wed 19th April** Talk and Walk. Meet at Folk Hall car park. Tony Berry will show the remains of New Earswick Lock. Limited to 15 members. Contact: Mike Gray to book.

**April to September** River health monitoring. Macroinvertebrate sampling. Volunteers will be trained. Contact: Barbara Hilton

### MAY

**Wed 3 May** 10.00 am Walk from Hound Lounge to Haxby. Meet at the Hound Lounge, New Earswick. Contact: Anne Bednarski

**Wed 3 May** 7.00 pm Strensall Village Hall. AGM preceded by a talk from Prof Alistair Boxall on the Global Problem of Pharmaceutical Pollution. Tea and coffee will be available during the evening. Contact: John Millett

**Mon 8 May** National Volunteering Day. To be decided - ideas Welcome. Contact: Mike Gray

**May/August** Nettle control. Various locations. Work groups to break up the monocultures of nettles found on the riverbanks to allow more biodiversity. Contact: Mike Gray

**Thurs 18th May** 6.30 pm. Walk from Blue Bridge to All Saints Church Huntington – 4 miles. Contact: Derek Chivers. Please let him know if you are coming

**Sat May 20th** 8.30 am. Family event at Woodlands, 147 Huntington Road YO31 9BP. Moth trapping morning – breakfast possible! The light traps will be put out the evening before, so this is your chance to see what is captured. Contact: Christine Gray. Booking not necessary, but indications appreciated

### JUNE

**June/July** Balsam control. Various places along the river. Our annual programme of balsam control. Contact: Mike Gray

**Sat 10th June** 3.00 - 6.00 pm. 50th Anniversary family social at Stillington Mill, Mill Lane, Stillington YO61 1NG. Gathering and refreshments. Contact: John Millett

**Thur 15th June** 6.00 pm. Walk from Stillington Sports Club car park. Circular Walk – 4 miles. Contact: Anne Bednarski. Please let Anne know if you are coming.

**Sat 17th June** 9.00 am. Riverside litter pick. Meet at Footbridge on Foss Islands Road. Contact: Barry Thomas. Please let Barry know if you are coming.

**Mon 26 June** Balsam pulling. Fairy Trail to Ring Road, York Care balsam pull. Contact: Mike Gray

**Wed 28 June** 10.00 am. Meet outside the Highwayman in Sheriff Hutton. Sheriff Hutton circular walk – 5 miles. Contact: Derek Chivers. Please let Derek know if you are coming.

### CONTACTS:

Helen Button hrbutton@outlook.com

Anne Bednarski annebednarski@hotmail.com 01904 764086

Derek Chivers derek@chivers.plus.com

Mike Gray events@riverfossociety.co.uk (preferred) 07596 366342

John Millett johnmillett1@talktalk.net 01904 91290

Tim Rane timothy.rane@gmail.com

Barry Thomas barry1thomas@googlemail.com 01904 490081

Barbara Hilton barbara\_hilton@msn.com

## Notice Board

### Help Needed ...

#### Can you help?

We need help to serve teas and coffees at our AGM on 3 May at Strensall Village Hall. It's not difficult and helps to make this a very pleasant meeting.

### Help needed to operate the Castle Mills Lock

Anyone interested in being trained to help operate the Castle Mills Lock should contact one, or preferably all of the following:

Noel Feather "noel.feather@talktalk.net" (Inland Waterways Association), Tim Rane "timothy.rane@gmail.com" (RFS) and Peter Hopwood "peter147haxby@gmail.com" (IWA and RFS) or telephone Peter (01904 768071) and leave a message. [Those already trained and being offered retraining (due to lack of practice in operating the Lock over the last three years) please ignore the above].

### Danger to our rivers

Countryfile on BBC One on 19 March gave an excellent overview of the problems British rivers face from phosphates. This was focussed on the River Wye, but the information is relevant to all rivers. It's well worth seeing and will be available on Catchup or on BBC iPlayer til 15 April.

### On the Foss

Editor: Beth Shurter Tel. 01904 631125  
email: york.beth2@gmail.com

Secretary: Helen Button Tel. 01904 658228  
email: info@riverfossociety.co.uk

Membership: Christine Gray  
Tel. 01904 621808

email: membership@riverfossociety.co.uk



People generally either like or hate leeches – I wouldn't go as far as to say people love them, apart from those who study them for a living. Despite, or perhaps because of, their bad reputation as bloodsuckers, leeches always prove popular when we have a public stand displaying the macroinvertebrates found in the River Foss; children do like to hold them.

Leeches are soft-bodied, muscular, segmented worms, closely related to earthworms but with a very different appearance and way of moving. Leech bodies are flat, often ribbon-like, the segments not visible but those at either end of the body have been modified to form disc-shaped attachment suckers, for locomotion and feeding, the one around the mouth being the smaller of the two. The muscular segments enable the body to lengthen and contract producing a characteristic looping, undulating movement which allows them to swim although they generally use their suckers to move around with most leeches being seen attached to objects by their suckers. Along with their flexible, muscular bodies leeches also have a well-developed sensory system so they are agile pursuers of their prey and all leeches are parasitic or predatory carnivores.



*Erpobdella octoculata*

Photo: W Walas, CC BY-SA 3.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>, via Wikimedia Commons

Like earthworms, leeches are hermaphrodite i.e. each individual has male and female reproductive organs, although they can reproduce sexually and some species have breeding seasons. Young leeches develop inside eggs within cocoons, these being attached to objects in the water or just above the water line. When the eggs hatch the young leeches are small versions of the adults.

# Learning about Leeches

*Barbara Hilton introduces us to one of our river's residents*

In the UK we have 17 species of freshwater leech, living in ponds, lakes and slow-flowing stretches of rivers as they don't survive well in fast-moving water. Most of our leeches are predators feeding on tadpoles, aquatic insects and pond snails. Two species commonly found in the Foss are *Glossiphonia complanata* which is

up to 3cm long and feeds on snails, and *Erpobdella octoculata* which swallows small prey such as midge larvae but also

scavenges for dead and decaying organisms. In the UK there is only one species, the medicinal leech *Hirudo medicinalis*, that will actually feed on human blood, but its usual diet is the blood of amphibians and fish. It is also our largest leech growing up to 20cm in length but it can expand to ten times its weight after feeding, which it needs to do only once every six months. Unfortunately the medicinal leech is now in danger of extinction in Britain initially due to over exploitation for medicinal use with millions exported in the nineteenth century, but to water pollution and wetland drainage nowadays. Once widespread, it is now only found in ponds in Kent, Hampshire and Cumbria and is a protected species under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981). It is, however, now bred in specialist laboratories on behalf of the NHS for use in modern day medicine to promote blood circulation, for tissue cleaning during surgery and the saving of limbs.



*Glossiphonia complanata*

Photo: N Sloth [http://www.biopix.com/glossiphonia-complanata\\_photo-50362.aspx](http://www.biopix.com/glossiphonia-complanata_photo-50362.aspx)

So, despite their bloodsucking reputation there is very little chance, in the UK, of anyone being 'attacked' by a leech. If a person does have a close encounter of the bloodsucking sort, it is most likely to be a medicinal leech providing life or limb saving services under medical supervision!



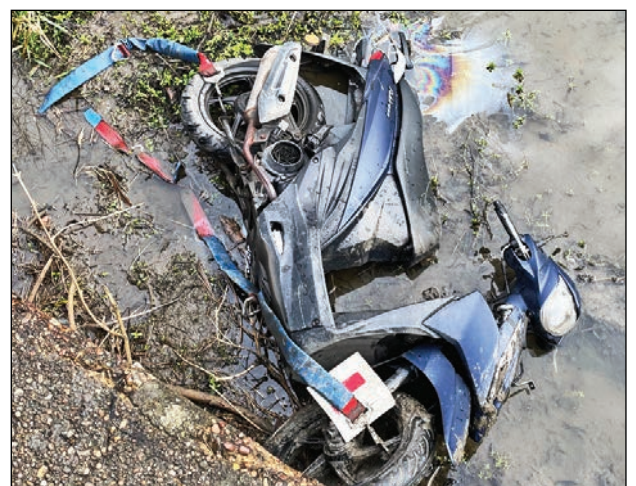
## Found!

Our hard working big litter snatcher, Tim Rane, has added two more triumphs to his list.

He found the motorbike in the river off lower Huntington Road. Does the L plate denote very bad steering?

The push bike was further up the Foss near to St John's Uni playing fields.

Well done, Tim!





# Battling Balsam

This will be our sixth year of balsam pulling, and it will be interesting to see what effect we've had to date when it shows its head above ground in a few weeks' time. When we started our pulling campaign, we debated the possibility of eliminating it, but it has become clear that this is not going to be practicable. Driving around the area near Oulston reservoir, near the source of the Foss, balsam could be seen growing in many of the roadside ditches. Further downstream it's also widespread – one example is opposite the barracks in Strensall. You can see it in the ditch alongside the road, but also all the way down the field towards the river. This raises another problem in carrying out our task – access to private land. In these days of GDPR it's very difficult to even find out who the landowner is.

Our current thinking is that the best we can hope for is to exert some control over its growth to prevent existing patches expanding, and over-growing native species, ultimately leading to bank erosion. Native species such as nettles have a root structure which remains when the vegetation dies back each autumn. Himalayan balsam, being an annual and growing each year from seed, leaves nothing to hold the bank together when the river is high. Some of the cleared areas could also be seeded to encourage local native species to fill the gaps.

We've tried several approaches to controlling it, including hoeing out seedlings, which sounded promising, but probably due to the presence of a significant seedbank in the soil, did not help. Strimming is another approach that has been tried in the old settling beds above Strensall. It's a lot quicker than hand pulling, but can only be done on flattish ground with no major obstacles such as fallen or low hanging branches. It requires quite a bit of care too, as you need to get below the bottom node or else it grows back.

One lesson has been that if we pull too early in the season, we miss a lot of smaller plants which, no longer being shadowed by the more mature ones we have kindly removed, continue growing to their full height.

Much research has been done on using rust fungi, which are natural parasites of balsam, as biological control agents and is now available on a limited basis. As there is a rare native species of balsam (Touch-me-not Balsam *Impatiens noli-tangere*), the researchers needed to find a fungus that would attack Himalayan Balsam but not the native species. The Nidd Catchment Angling Group, which is part of a group trying to get bathing



*Ploughing our way through the growth*

water status for the Nidd, managed to get grants from a variety of sources to try this approach. They have spent more than £40k spraying it as an aqueous suspension on carefully marked out sections of balsam. NCAG have specific bank erosion problems over a smallish area, so this approach is likely to work, but it is not a solution for our widespread problem.



*Getting in deep against balsam, which grows everywhere*

So where does that leave us? Doing nothing does not seem to be an option – the balsam will simply spread even further, reducing biodiversity and endangering the banks. We will be running several pulling sessions from June onwards, but hope to have some assistance this year. York Cares,

amongst other activities, coordinates groups and companies who want to run community days when employees volunteer for various locally useful tasks. They have offered to send out some teams to pull balsam on June 26th which, if they get sufficient volunteers, could give us a real boost. We are also discussing with TCV (The Conservation Volunteers) the possibility of them helping with the beds above Strensall, which cover several hundred square metres.

There will be a series of pulls both in the evening and during the day, at weekends as well as during the week. There's no need to stay for the full session, come along for as long or short a time as you like. It's not only environmentally useful, it's also fun, and a chance to meet like-minded members.

Hopefully the many members who go out to pull balsam when they have spare time, or whilst walking their dogs will continue to do so. Many hands make.....!

*Mike Grey*



The River Foss Amenity Society was founded in July 1973 by a group of people led by York printer William K Sessions. At the Founding Meeting in New Earswick, he suggested that the proposed object of the Foss Amenity Society, as it was then, should be to focus attention on practical ways of improving the footpaths and other amenities of the river for the benefit of naturalists, fishermen, ramblers, and local residents. At this time commercial barges were still using the lower stretches of the Foss. They, as well as pleasure boats, should be taken into consideration.

The group Bill Sessions led was interested in the Foss for many reasons and promoted well defined all-weather footpaths for walking and a concern for the river's natural environment by, for instance, planting more trees where appropriate. They would establish a harmonious relationship with all concerned, including the local Parish Councils, the Ryedale District Council and the Ramblers Association. A report at the time said "On Saturday 12th July 1975 the Yorkshire Foss walk had a splendid 'launch' with a walk involving close on 100 participants along the Foss from behind Haley's Terrace adjoining The Cocoa Works upstream to New Earswick Lock Cottage. After speeches they set off led by Lord Mayor Jack Birch, Sheriff Gerald Dean and their Ladies, wearing their chains of office. In attendance were the Lord Mayor's butler (a long walk for him) plus policewomen and a special constable. They were supported by Major Blashford Snell who had just returned from conquering the Congo River in West Africa."

Since then, many of those early objectives continue to be met. Tree planting was a major task during the 1980s and 90s and keeping up pressure to clean up the river has always been a challenge. Walks have always featured in the society's programmes, and continue to do so, both locally and further afield.

Today's River Foss Society tries to maintain the river as an amenity and resource for everyone by organising litter picks, monitoring the condition of the river water, promoting improvements in biodiversity, establishing nature reserves by the river, raising awareness of the

Foss by talks, exhibitions and information boards, following and commenting on development and planning applications along the river, and regularly walking rights of way along the Foss.

On July 12th this year we will be commemorating the walk, together with several members who took part back in 1975. Joining us will be councillors from the three adjoining wards of Huntington, New Earswick and Guildhall. We will walk from Yearsley baths to the

## Setting Off



*The initial River Foss Walk led by Lord Mayor Jack Birch (left) and Bill Sessions (behind)*

**RIVER FOSS AMENITY SOCIETY**

The recently published 'History and Natural History of the River Foss' describes the present attractions of the River for naturalists, fishermen, ramblers and local residents, as well as indicating ways in which its amenities could be improved for the future.

It has therefore been decided to establish a Foss Amenity Society with the object of focussing attention on practical ways of improving the footpaths and other amenities of the River, working in close collaboration with other bodies such as the Parish Councils and The Ramblers Association.

If you would like to join in this, please complete the following form.

.....

To the Hon. Treasurers  
Mr. and Mrs. Hugh Shaw, Grey Willows,  
The Old Village, Huntington, York

I enclose £1 membership subscription for The Foss Amenity Society and wish to receive notification of future general meetings of the Society.

CAPITALS NAME.....  
PLEASE ADDRESS.....  
.....  
..... DATE.....

*The original invitation to join the "Foss Amenity Society"*

Folk Hall where there will be refreshments and a chance to reminisce. All current members are welcome to join us on the walk, but due to space restraints we may not be able to accommodate everyone in the hall, so please let Michael Alexander know if you are coming. The walk is around a mile, and if the weather does not cooperate, we may shorten it accordingly, but will let anyone who has expressed an interest know what is happening. Parking is difficult near Yearsley Baths, so it is suggested that participants who wish to come by car park at the Folk Hall and walk to the start or catch a number 1 bus getting off opposite the Cocoa Works.

A word of caution – the path can be muddy and slippery if it's been raining. Whatever the conditions, suitable footwear is highly recommended!

*Mike Gray*



This year's Sheldon Memorial Lecture highlighted the life of Bill Sessions – Printer, Publisher, Quaker, Philanthropist and Founder of the River Foss Society. Bill Shiels, Professor of History at the University of York, gave us a breathtaking coverage of the life works and accomplishments of this man who in his long life became respected as one of York's community leaders.

## Memories of Bill

After a happy childhood in York when he enjoyed playing on the banks of the River Foss, Bill headed to Cambridge in

1933 where he read Economics. At that time, besides his studies, he proved himself a talented footballer.

Following graduation from Cambridge and worldwide travel to learn about the printing and publishing industry, he joined the long-established family firm Sessions of York. The company led in the production of labels, but Bill's heartfelt enthusiasm was always for printing and the publication of 'worthwhile books of an educational, historical, religious or otherwise charitable nature'.

Sessions Book Trust promoted publications combining the environmental with the historical heritage of the

city and its surrounds. A text arrived in 1970 with an essentially historical account of the River Foss, so Bill suggested adding a natural history section, and asked naturalist Peter Walls to add this section. *The River Foss* was published in 1973.

Following the publication of *The River Foss*, Bill launched the River Foss Amenity Society in 1973 'with the object of focussing attention on practical ways of improving the footpaths and other amenities of the River .... along the 30 miles of river northward from York to its source at Pond head in the Hambleton Hills'. At the same time Bill started a campaign to establish a footpath on which walkers could explore the entire length of York's 'second' river. After many negotiations the path officially opened in 1975.

Fifty years later, we of course know the organisation as the River Foss Society, and we are celebrating our half century. Our speaker finished by saying 'Bill's life and work as printer, publisher and philanthropist has supported and helped to secure much of what we value not just in York's past but in what we see as we walk around the city and its hinterland today'.

Christopher Dunn and Tony Berry have a common interest in the history and archaeology of the river Foss. Over the last few years they have worked together to compile a detailed account of what the river used to look like in its "heyday" as a navigation, and what remains to be seen of its structures now. A navigation differs from a canal in that it follows the riverbed as much as possible, so reducing costs, whereas a canal comprises an artificial cut.

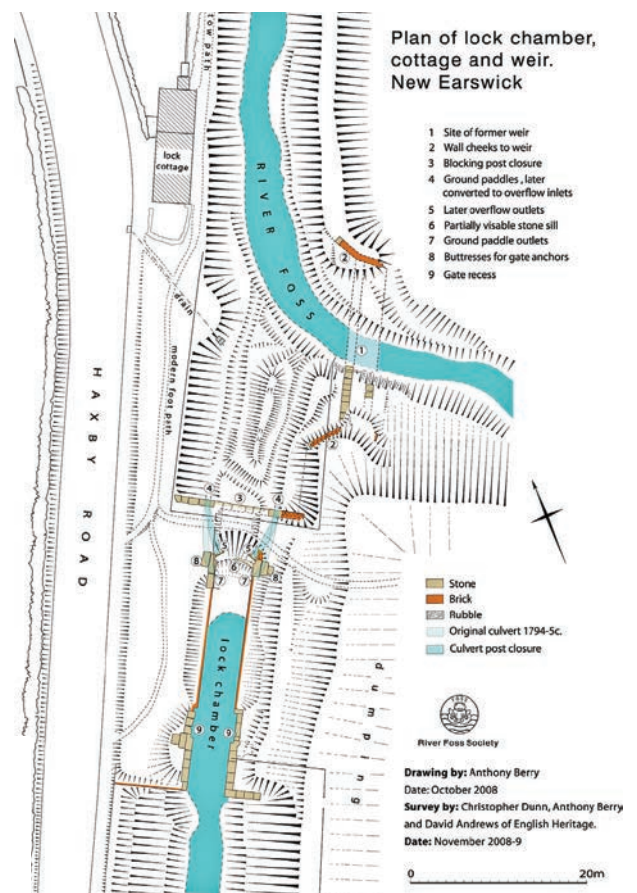
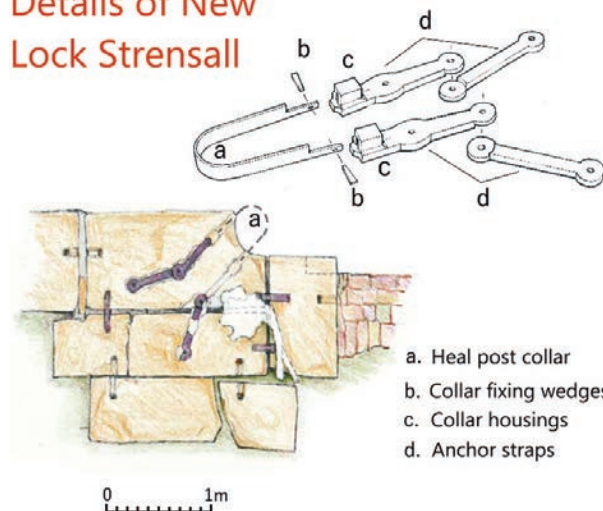
In his introduction to the work Tony says "[Time and human activity] will ultimately obscure or destroy what currently survives, and the only way to chronicle what is still extant, so that future generations can obtain a fuller appreciation of what the navigation was like, is through survey and record."

He has very kindly agreed to allow us to add a summary of

## Navigation unlocked



### Details of New Lock Strensall



A photograph (above) and plan drawing of New Earswick lock (above right); drawing of details of the Strensall lock (below). All by Tony Berry.

their extensive history of the Foss navigation to our website, so that it will be available to anyone interested in the fascinating story of the river. Their work combines detailed drawings of what the locks used to look like, together with photographs of what can still be seen.