



Some provocative thoughts from our President

We all love the River Foss, but should we call it that? What is a river? The Cambridge Dictionary defines it as “a natural wide flow of fresh water across the land into the sea, a lake or another river”. I’m not sure why they think a river has to be wide (that would certainly disqualify the poor Foss) but the interesting word there is ‘natural’. That is there presumably to distinguish a river from a ditch (not from a canal because that is excluded by the word ‘flow’). In other words, a river is there because the water chose to flow there.

But of course, the water did not choose to flow precisely where the Foss now is. Look at an old map and you will see lots of wiggles labelled ‘old course of the Foss’, because the river has been straightened and deepened progressively over the last 200 years. Is what we have now a river? I think not.

Is there a clue in the name? Ekwall’s Dictionary of English Place Names says that the Old English word Foss “is not evidenced but must have existed” and “no doubt meant ‘a ditch’ but very likely also ‘a canalized stream’.” So perhaps the Foss was canalised very early – Ekwall says it was Fossa in 1210 and Fosse in 1220.



Is this the Foss?

Maybe the Romans canalised it and gave it the name, but clearly most of the work was done when the navigation was created 200 years ago.

Whatever the origins of the name, it is accurate. Sadly the Foss is now really a large ditch for most of its length, with steep banks and long straight stretches. When it is allowed to be more of a river, such as in the section near the Sessions Nature Reserve or in its upper reaches, it begins to resemble a real river, but just like most lowland ‘rivers’, it has really been treated very badly and RFS monitoring provides the scientific evidence for the results of that treatment.



Or is this the Foss?

Can it be brought back? The lower Foss is never going to be a wild river, but there does seem to be a growing recognition that it can be more of a river than a ditch if allowed

to develop more naturally and to reconnect with its floodplain in some places. Perhaps we should rename our society the Foss Society until such time as River Foss is no longer an oxymoron!

Alastair Fitter



Is this the ‘Spirit of the River Foss’?

Most of you have probably noticed this most recent addition to the Foss at Foss Islands Road. She has appeared at the far bottom of the River Foss footbridge. It’s unlikely that she swam to the point.

Surely such a lovely lady deserves a name. Do feel free to let us know any names you feel are suitable.



Springing into Action

APRIL

Sat 5 April 9.00 - noon. Riverside Litter Pick in conjunction with Foxy operating on the river. Meet at footbridge opposite Morrison's. Please inform Tim Rane if you are joining.

Wed 9 April 7.00 pm A talk on "Eboracum. The story of Roman York" by Neil Moran. Followed by refreshments and the AGM. Strensall Village Hall.

Fri - Mon 25 - 28 April Events along the Foss from Monk Bar to Haxby. York City Nature Challenge.

<https://yorkcitynaturechal.wixsite.com/yorkcnc>. A repeat of last year's successful event using iNaturalist to identify the flora and fauna of the Foss. More details from Mike Gray/Barbara Hilton nearer the time.

MAY

Sat 10 May 10.00 am - 4.00 pm Kirkbymoorside Ecofair: 20+ stalls and a variety of talks by environmental groups. The RFS will have a stall and be presenting. Details from Mike Gray/Barbara Hilton

Tues 13 May 10.00 am From the riverside footpath behind Yearsley Baths to Sessions' nature reserve. Foss riverbank biodiversity and management. Maria Gill, St Nicks Green Corridors manager, will lead an amble explaining how the riverbanks are being managed and talking about the plants and animals living there.

Fri 16 May 6.30 pm Blacksmith's Arms, Farlington YO61 1NW. Social meeting. To eat please book with Christine Gray (deposit of £10 required) by 9th April, or just come & have a drink. NOTE, the pub is cash only.

Mon 19th May 10.00 am to noon A walk exploring the hidden landscape of York, along with its pioneering Earth scientists and the stories of the city stones. How old is York? We'll meet the microscopic Lister sisters and get a very different take on York's oldest building. Led by Liam Herringshaw. Cost £7 per person. Contact Mike Gray for more details and how to pay.

Sat 24 May 10.00 am Meet by the phone box on Moor Monkton Main Street. A 4 - 5 mile walk from Moor Monkton along the Ouse, including a visit to the Red House. Fish 'n Chips at the Wetherby Whaler afterwards for those who wish. Please let Anne Bednarski know if you will be walking.

JUNE

June/July Balsam control. Pulling/trimming sessions Strensall to Monkbridge. More details nearer the time from Paul Wilson.

Tues 10 June 10.30 am - 1230 p.m. All Saints Church, Huntington car park. A stroll along the riverbank from Huntington to Earswick village and back, concentrating on identifying and talking about the more commonly found plants. Led by Margaret Atherden.

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You'll doubtless have seen and heard much about the unhealthy condition of British rivers, but where does the river Foss fit into the picture? Your chance to find out will come in July when a group of members involved in monitoring the river's health explain what we've been doing and tell you what we've found out. You'll hear about the various chemicals found in the river water, where they come from, and the effects they have both on water quality and on the many tiny creatures which live in and on the riverbed plus what their presence (or absence) can tell us about the river's health. Also, which non-native species trouble us, and what can be done to improve matters in the years to come.

The State of the Foss

The society has also been involved in several projects with York university looking at pharmaceuticals in the river, working out how to improve citizen science along the river (that's us and our neighbours), and the problem of litter and how to minimise it. Following the presentations there will be plenty of time to ask questions, make suggestions, and then more informally, to talk about the river and its problems, and if you are interested, how to give us a helping hand, over a cup of tea or coffee.

To be held at 7.00 pm on 15th July at Wigginton Recreation Hall.

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

Leaving Crayke I was treated to bucolic views across the countryside as crops of corn danced in the light breeze. I was thoroughly loving being out amongst nature, and reminding myself of the magnificent Yorkshire countryside. Traditional black and white signs welcomed me into two remote little villages. I stopped to have a look at the small and welcoming church in Marton-In-The-Forest, and then passing the quiet farming village of Farlington, I followed the beck for a short while until the signpost pointed across the fields again.

After crossing a beautiful golden field, and tramping my way through a particularly overgrown section, I arrived at the gate to a farm and my heart sank as I saw a huge herd of cows in the field beyond. Yes, I'm A Coward, my biggest weakness on any hike is cows. I'm a little bit petrified of them. I've heard too many stories of how they can charge at people. Although we usually see them gently munching on the grass and taking their time when they walk, they can really get moving when they want to!

They seemed to be distracted by their lunch, but it would only need one of them to take a dislike to my presence for a potential stampede. I know plenty of other people would have carried on quite happily, but I wasn't prepared to risk it. Retracing my steps, I found my way back to a road to avoid bovine confrontations.

I picked up the path again, but faced yet another obstacle, a stile into a field with an electric fence running around the inside perimeter. It looked as though at one time there would have been just enough space for hikers to walk between the hedge and the fence, but the vegetation had grown since.

The field itself had a slight rise in it, meaning I couldn't see across it. However, I could see that the gap between the hedge and the electric fence seemed to widen out a little near a gate further along. If I could duck under it here, nip diagonally across the field and dip beneath it again by the gate, I should be back on track.

Taking off my backpack, I threw it under the electric fence and crawled after it. I quickly started to cross the

Sally walks the Foss – new experience Number 22

Part 2



Approaching Farlington



The Foss before Strensall

field, but as I crested the small hill-ock, not far in the distance were three big white beasts. I say beasts because I'm pretty sure one of them was a bull. Whatever they were, they were huge and bulky. I didn't hang around to find out.

Feeling frustrated at how stop-start this past hour had been having rerouted due to the cows, I decided to stick to the road. Paths across fields are usually much nicer (unless they've got cows in them!), and they're often more direct, but I wanted to try and get a bit of distance under my belt having taken such a long time to get not very far in the past 60 minutes!

The road to Sheriff Hutton was nice and quiet. The few cars that did pass slowed down, giving me plenty of room whilst I tried to take a step nearer to the hedges so that we could easily share the space.

The track became more of a construction route where work was taking place on the Strensall flood alleviation scheme, and then, after several hours without seeing it, I crossed over the River

Foss! It felt good to see it again after so long, and to know that we were both flowing in the direction of York.

The clouds seemed to be winning the battle of the sky and there was a threat of rain as it turned a bit darker. I suddenly felt quite alone, and began to wonder whether I'd actually be able to complete my challenge.

A rough path looked as though it had been worn into the ground through a small patch of trees. I'm pretty sure I could have just walked around the trees but I eventually spotted an official arrow and obediently went along the path towards Strensall

Coming out next to some buildings and past the sewage works, the route joined a road which ran next to a railway line and was popular with dog walkers. After several hours in my own company, it was nice to say hello to someone.

For the rest of my journey via Haxby I would be next to the River Foss. Hopefully with no more cow incidents!

The final part of Sally's walk will be in the next newsletter.

It was a cold, grey February day when five volunteers followed Monika Smieja of the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust (YWT) and her assistant Laura across a muddy field beside the Foss near Stillington, carrying spades and sacks of whips (baby trees). The left bank of the Foss, the site of the endeavours in my last article, looked completely different from last autumn. Since then YWT and RFS volunteers had planted and seeded the coir matting we'd draped over the re-profiled bank, and it was now coated in green, with native plants poking through (see picture). Below it, the now curving Foss was rippling rather than still, and had created a gravel bank and sandbar on the inside of the bend – a very encouraging step in our efforts to slow the flow and introduce wildlife habitats.

Our mission this morning was to plant 150 native trees on the right bank; some in the field atop the bank, and other water-loving ones such as alder on the new low shelf beside the river. We managed this by noon, and after returning to the cars for lunch, were soon back at the work site awaiting the delivery of three rolls of coir matting, carried from the car park by fork lift truck courtesy of the landowner. Meanwhile two gallant volunteers seeded the very muddy sloping bank – fortunately the rain held off, but even so one of our number had to retire with a soaked and freezing foot after slipping into the river.

The first roll of coir was unrolled – all 35m of it – then laid out on the bank. There were a few dramatic moments when a breeze lifted it like a mammoth kite with all six of us clinging desperately to the edge! (No pics of this as I had my hands full.) With a heroic effort, and some laughter, we dragged it over the slope and pegged it down; the seeds would grow through it over the next few months. After repeating with the

Muddy Boots on the Bank

second roll, we left the third for a work party the following week and staggered back to the cars, our boots weighed down with mud. There was general agreement that it had been a lot of fun. In all, so far 280 m of the river channel has been re-



A positive step towards new habitats



Anchoring to coir



Mud mountaineering!

stored, plus an additional low-lying area which will become species-rich wetland. Seven bi-nets have been installed and around 325 native trees and shrubs planted. The newly re-profiled section was seeded with grasses and native wildflowers and another 500 wetland plant plugs will be planted in total.

More work parties are being arranged; if you'd like to take part in a worthwhile task please do contact Monika at monika.smieja@ywt.org.uk.

Alison Scott

Meeting Water Scorpions

One of the more impressive animals we have found in the Foss whilst we have been doing the biological monitoring is the Water Scorpion (*Nepa cinerea*). They are common in shallow areas of still water ponds and lakes and slow-flowing rivers, which probably explains why they are unusual in the generally deep running water of the River Foss as we have only found two in over 100 samples taken.

Water Scorpions are flattened, leaf-shaped, aquatic bugs so insects, whereas true scorpions, which they resemble, are arachnids and related to spiders. Water Scorpions feed by lurking motionless in amongst vegetation, particularly dead leaves where they are well-camouflaged, using their front pincer-like legs to ambush prey such as small fish, tadpoles, basically anything they can overpower, including smaller Water Scorpions. The prey is quickly pierced by the sharp mouthparts, paralysed and the body fluids then drained from it through the short, pointed proboscis which can give a human the feeling of a sting if handling a Water Scorpion without care!

They are poor swimmers and prefer to crawl and walk, needing to be in shallow water as they are air breathers. The 'tail' is not a sting. It is actually a breathing tube, like a snorkel, which protrudes above the water surface to draw air in.

Mating takes place in spring with the females laying eggs at night amongst mud and vegetation, just below the water's surface. When the larvae hatch they have no breathing tube, so they hold their abdomens to the surface to breathe. They go through a series of five moults until they reach adulthood, within around eight weeks, and their scorpion's 'tail' is fully developed.

If you would like to help us try to catch our third River Foss Water Scorpion please contact me on Barbara_Hilton@msn.com to find out more about the biological monitoring of the river, carried out from March to October, and how to become one of our citizen scientists. I can't promise another Water Scorpion but there are lots of other interesting, small but important animals to find in our river.

Barbara Hilton



Water Scorpion juvenile



Nepa Cinerea Water Scorpion



*Water Scorpion with Blue Winged
Olive Mayfly aboard*



A stunning Grey Wagtail photographed in the woods along the River Foss by Paul Thorpe

This year we hope to be working more closely with St Nicks (and YWT) to plan where we need to work and to coordinate our efforts to tackle Himalayan Balsam in key areas.

Ideally, we should concentrate our efforts further upstream in the dikes and ditches to prevent seed flow and subsequent spread/re-infestation downstream.

Himalayan Balsam

Planning this year's campaign

However, this has a number of challenges including access to private and often working farmland, as well as transporting

volunteers to more 'remote' areas. It may be that YWT continue their work in these areas as they have already built contacts and relationships with local landowners & farmers.

Instead, we will target key areas where benefit can be



Himalayan Balsam in full blossom

gained either in terms of bank stability and/or Vole habitat support.

As St Nicks are now responsible for the management of the Sessions nature reserve we expect to be involved in removal of balsam within this area. This was found last year when one of these teams struggled to gain ac-

cess through a dense plantation of balsam to carry out invertebrate sampling.

We are also seeking advice on what to do after we have removed a large patch of balsam and have left bare earth, which undoubtedly is taken over by nettles. So, we are looking at different options to re-seed or plant up with appropriate native species – if these could be nectar bearing this may help ease the criticism regard-



Himalayan Balsam at the beginning

ing removal of balsam flowers which some believe to be a worthwhile and valuable food source for bees etc.

We probably all know that we will not be able to eradi-



After 'bashing' – bare banks offer no cover for voles, a chance for nettles to grow and for the river to erode the bank

cate this plant by manual means alone, but at least we can try and stem its spread somewhat whilst helping to stabilise the riverbank and improving life for our water voles. Besides, what a lovely way to spend a couple of hours; gentle exercise by the riverside chatting to other like-minded volunteers.

So, if anyone is interested in Balsam 'bashing' this year please keep watch for further information.

Paul Wilson

Remember – River Foss Society can be found on X (formerly Twitter) @riverfossyork

On the Foss

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