



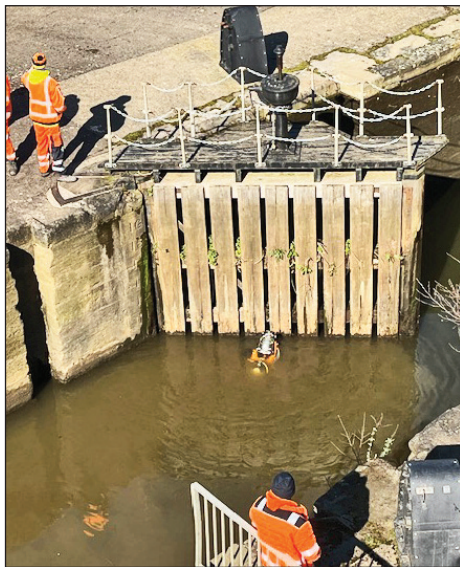
Essential Works for Castle Mills Lock on the River Foss

Plans to replace the ageing timber lock gates at Castle Mills Lock on the River Foss Navigation are moving forward, with essential works now scheduled to begin in April 2026. Unusually the Navigation Authority responsible for the lock is the City of York

Council. The project, estimated at £1.36 million, has attracted public debate, but council officers continue to stress that the works are necessary to protect the river, surrounding infrastructure, and the wider environment.

Aging Infrastructure Reaches End of Service Life

The lock gates were last replaced in 1986 and have exceeded their 25 – 30 year lifespan. Significant leakage has been recorded, and the gates are described as being in very poor condition. While the lock remains



Investigating the gates in spring 2025

operable, continued deterioration raises the risk of sudden failure, which could lead to a rapid drop in river levels, damage to riverbanks, harm to wildlife, and potential impacts on nearby buildings that rely on stable water levels.

The City of York Council has stated

that replacing the gates is essential in order to meet its statutory duties and to prevent a future safety or environmental incident.

Previous Delay and Revised Programme

A planned navigation closure was announced last year, originally scheduled to run from 28 April to 31 October 2025, to allow the replacement works to take place. The new lock gates were made and prepared ready for fitting. Unfortunately, due to the unusually low River Ouse levels last summer, the original plan

to use the Foss Basin for access to install the gates was not been possible. An alternative of using large cranes and a temporary bridge was proposed but proved unacceptable as it would have involved closing the inner ring road for several days and would have caused severe disruption in the peak summer visitor



Gates showing poor condition

period. As a result, the closure notice was withdrawn and the lock remained in use.

A revised programme is now in place, with works due to commence on 7 April 2026 and with a contract completion date of 3 July

2026. It is hoped the full closure period indicated by the Council may not be required and that the lock will reopen to navigation as soon as the installation is complete.

Preparations Already Underway

The new lock gates which were manufactured last year are currently being stored underwater to stabilise the timber prior to installation. This preparatory work is intended to ensure the gates are ready for fitting once site access is established.

Balancing Cost and Long Term Protection

While some critics have questioned the cost of the project and the limited use of navigation on the River Foss, council representatives maintain that the works are about more than boating use alone. The lock plays a critical role in managing water levels through this part of the city and forms part of the wider York Castle Gateway area, where long term environmental management and regeneration are key considerations. Historic properties in this area rely on water pressure against their walls. If the pressure is suddenly removed, the walls will crack.

Officials argue that delaying replacement further would increase the risk of emergency failure, potentially resulting in higher costs and more severe disruption in the future. The forthcoming works are therefore considered being presented as a necessary investment in the resilience and safety of York's historic waterways.

Tim Rane



Stepping into Spring

MARCH

Fri March 27th 6.30 - 8.30 Earswick Village Hall. 'Getting to Know You', an evening social for all members. Christine Gray.

APRIL

Sat Apr 4th 9.00 am - 12.00 noon Footbridge opposite Morrisons. Riverside litterpick in conjunction with Foxy operating on the river. Please let Tim Rane know if you are joining.

Wed Apr 15th 7.00 pm Strensall Village Hall AGM. Speaker Alex Mc Callion "York Minster – A Sustainable Future". Helen Button.

Sun Apr 19th 2.00 pm In front of the art gallery. What the Victorians did for us: Roman York – a stroll around York talking about Victorian discoveries such as those made during the building of the railway stations. NB there are many steps on and off the walls! Led by Alistair Gray. Limited numbers – please let Mike Gray know if you are coming.

Wed Apr 22nd 11.00 am Huntington All Saints Church car park. A stroll along the riverbank concentrating on identifying and talking about the more commonly found plants. Led by Margaret Atherden.

Sat/Sun Apr 25/26th 10.00 am onwards Lockkeeper's Cottage on Haxby Road + Hound Lounge New Earswick. 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 nearer the time. Mike Gray.

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I joined the RFS in around 2010, having just moved into a house backing onto the Foss. By chance there was an open day at the

Introducing our Events and Environment Lead - Mike Gray

nearby community centre which included an RFS stand, and I was recruited by John Millett. Not long after, I was asked to take over from June Card as events organiser and join the committee, as well as help set up an RFS website. It's amazing how many things there are to do in a small society!

Citizen science was then just taking off, and I got more and more involved in matters environmental which, as a chemist, albeit one specialising in food, I



found fascinating, but at the same time frustrating, as there seemed little we could do to improve things. We have 10 years' worth of results behind us now, and can do a lot more in the way of monitoring the river, as well as investigating incidents. We have developed good relations with York University with whom we are working on several projects both at undergraduate and post-doctoral levels, as well as with Yorkshire Water, the Environment Agency, and a host of other groups.

Fifteen years ago, the RFS was almost the only such group in Yorkshire. Now we are one amongst many as the campaign to improve our rivers is really taking off.

It's only when we all pull together that we can be effective, and this is an area I find most interesting and rewarding.

Mike Gray

Don't forget our website:

www.riverfossociety.co.uk



Photograph courtesy of NatureScot

The return of otters to rivers across the UK, including the River Foss, has often sparked debate among anglers and conservation groups. While they are sometimes perceived negatively, it is important to recognise

Otters: Their Role in a Recovering Ecosystem

otters as indicators of improving river health and as an essential component of a balanced ecosystem.

A Natural Comeback

Otter populations declined significantly in the mid twentieth century due to the use of toxic pesticides such as dieldrin.

With the banning of these chemicals and improvements in water quality, otters began to naturally recolonise rivers, originating from remnant populations in the West Country, Wales and Scotland. The role of captive releases was minimal (117 by the Otters Trust) and the successful return of otters reflects healthier habitats rather than deliberate reintroduction efforts.

Impact on Fish Stocks

As apex predators, otters have a significant influence on river ecosystems by feeding on various species, including fish, birds, amphibians and crustaceans. Large, slow moving fish such as carp and barbel,

especially those stocked in fisheries, are most at risk, with fencing being the most effective protection. Otters also help maintain balance by preventing any one species from becoming dominant. For example, after otters returned to the River Ribble, a reduction in barbel and carp numbers allowed silver fish such as roach and dace to thrive, which subsequently supported the recovery of perch and pike. This has resulted in a more diverse and resilient river system.

Dispelling the Myths

Persistent misconceptions have clouded discussions about otters. It is essential to address and correct these myths:

- The Environment Agency has never released or stocked otters.
- Otters do not kill for fun; this behaviour is often related to teaching young.
- Their decline was caused by toxic pollution, not hunting.
- Otters do not wipe out fish populations in rivers; their territorial behaviour naturally limits their numbers.
- Otters are not naturally wasteful - Part eaten fish are more commonly found in stocked fisheries with large or domesticated fish, rather than being evidence of wasteful behaviour. In natural, healthy ecosystems, otters typically consume smaller fish entirely.



An otter seen in the Foss

Shared Goals for River Protection

Otters inevitably influence river fish diversity as predators, but they are not a threat to river health. Far greater dangers are posed by pollution, sewage discharges, agricultural runoff, habitat loss and inadequate regulation. Protected by law and here to stay, otters are a vital part of a recovering ecosystem. Rather

than opposing them, anglers and conservationists should focus on a common goal: ensuring rivers are clean, healthy and full of fish.

Howard Smith

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

A Photo-journey down the Foss

The Foss is only a short river, something like 28 miles long, though with a myriad of tributaries. It starts in the Howardian Hills, runs through flat farmland, and then via the dormitory villages and suburbs of York finally discharges into the Ouse.

This montage, the first of a series, shows how much the river varies during its short passage. In future newsletters, we'll take a closer look at various aspects of the river in more detail.



Oulston reservoir: Built in the late 18th century to provide water for the Foss Navigation, it was never sufficient to keep the river flowing in dry periods. Close to a right of way, it is a beautiful sight on a sunny day and well worth the walk. *(Photo: Mike Gray)*

Stillington: Having by-passed Crayke, the Foss runs along the edge of Stillington. Just downstream from the Mill, where there used to be a pond and a race, it is still little more than a rural stream, but soon it will turn into a much modified watercourse used for draining the surrounding fields. *(Photo: Mike Gray)*



Strensall: Following the severe flooding in December 2015 one of the prevention schemes was the Strensall Flood Alleviation Scheme. Put into use in late 2025 it is intended to hold back sufficient water to prevent further instances. This is the control orifice before installation of the regulating plate. *(Photo: Mike Gray)*

Strensall: Perhaps the most iconic feature of the Foss is Old Humpy on the road from Strensall to Wigginton. Built as part of the Foss navigation, there was originally a lock just upstream of the bridge. Its remains can still be seen. *(Photo: Barry Thomas)*



Towthorpe: The sunny day shows the river at its best, but look more closely and you'll not see any hedges or trees. The banks are a monoculture and the fields are ploughed right up to the boundary. Typical of much of the river between there and Sheriff Hutton. *(Photo: Audrey Miller – photo competition 2020)*

New Earswick: Sessions nature reserve was established by the family as a way of keeping a significant plot of land undisturbed and free of building. Now being cared for by St Nicks, it is an undisturbed haven on the edge of York.
(Photo: Barbara Hilton)



Huntington: One of the prettiest stretches of the river just upstream of All Saints Church. A very popular dog walking area looked after by Huntington PC along with a couple of small nature areas. (Photo: Barbara Hilton)

Heworth: The river flows unseen beneath Huntington Road and Fossway. A surprisingly quiet stretch of the river, which shows why the Foss is sometimes called the green lung of York. (Photo: Mike Gray)



Foss Islands: Familiar to all, an industrial sector of York with a rich history going back to Roman times and before. DEFRA's Kings Pool can be seen on the left, once the site of Adams Hydraulics. (Photo: Barbara Hilton)

And finally, Castle Mills Lock where the Foss goes over a final weir and through a lock to join the Ouse. (Photo: Barry Thomas)



Rivers flow into the sea and so what's in that water also ends up there; in fact the major source of marine pollution is river water and Yorkshire's rivers drain about a fifth of England, so our rivers play a large role. Cleaning up rivers will therefore not just help the rivers themselves but our coastal waters too. That's the focus of a new major project just launched by the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust (YWT) called Rivers to Reef, in which they want to enlist people to help monitor pollution in Yorkshire's rivers.

Of course, River Foss Society is ahead of the game; we are already undertaking a large and important programme of monitoring in our river, but members can help with other rivers too. Initially the YWT project is being run on just two rivers, the Aire and the Derwent, and the Derwent is close enough to York for some of us to contribute. You can read more about Rivers to Reef at <https://www.ywt.org.uk/rivers-to-reef>.

The Rivers to Reef project is also supporting the Great UK Water Blitz which is a project run by Earthwatch to get people measuring chemical health of waters in rivers and lakes right across the UK; it is a biannual campaign and the next event is from 24-27 April – the same weekend as City Nature Challenge, which RFS will be involved with as usual. You can learn about the Water Blitz at <https://earthwatch.org.uk/greatukwaterblitz>. However, if you look there, they will tell you that they have run out of water testing

kits, so contact YWT instead because I'm told they have plenty.

The YWT website has lots of useful information about the pollutants that are causing the biggest

problems, including the obvious candidates such as fats, plastics, wet wipes and microfibres. There's also some really helpful guidance for dog owners, since it's increasingly recognised that flea treatments and other veterinary medicines are causing real damage to our waters.

This project is one of the major activities that YWT is launching in its 80th birthday year (the actual birthday is 2 May). At the same time, they have launched an appeal for a fund to help protect Askham Bog, its founding reserve and one that many members know well, from ever-growing threats, including climate change and development.

Our river and marine pollution



Above: Taking a sample during regular monitoring of the Foss



Right: recording data on the samples

The reserve is closed at the moment because the Trust is replacing the old wooden boardwalk with a more permanent structure making this wonderful place more accessible. It will re-open in July, but there is a lot more to be done so if you can make a contribution to the protection fund, please do (<https://www.ywt.org.uk/appeals/action-for-askham-bog>).

Alastair Fitter

**Looking forward to summer –
Full Foss walk in three stages
Socialising
Balsam Control, Litterpicks**

On the Foss

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