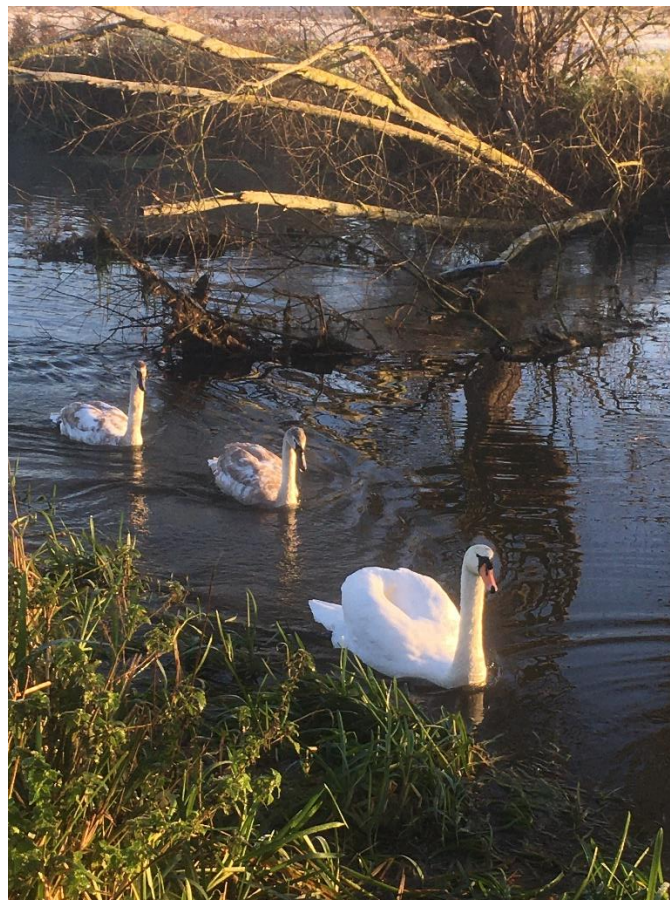


The Cam from Grantchester to Cambridge

A much loved river in need of our care.



Grantchester Meadows- Autumn 2019..

Michael Goodhart

April 2021

Introduction

This document was prompted by the dismay over the damage caused by the crowds who sought refuge and recreation along the banks of the river Cam and in the river during the Pandemic of 2020-2021.

While most respected the river and its ecology, sadly, there were a small but significant minority who indulged in reckless, antisocial and damaging behaviour, showing little or no regard for this precious and beautiful stretch of water.

This document explains the context and importance of the river. It illustrates the entire 2.8 miles length of the “upper river”, from Byrons Pool to Kings Mill Weir in Cambridge, and may provide a better understanding of the river’s rich history and precious ecology. It is hoped that it may motivate more people to want to protect it from damage, now and in the future.

This is the first of the documents that has been prepared as part of Cam Valley Forum’s “Cam Safer Swim Initiative” (CSSI) If you wish to comment on this, please email cssi@camvalleyforum.uk.

You can see more information on Cam Valley Forum on our website here.
<https://camvalleyforum.uk/> Do join us.

Michael Goodhart- Chair of Cam Safer Swim Initiative (CSSI)

Cam Valley Forum

19th April 2012

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1. The sources of the River Cam include Chalk springs, such as those at Ashwell, Bassingbourne, Fowlmere, Melbourn, Hauxton, Thriplow and Horseheath. The filtering and purifying action of the Chalk means that water from Chalk springs should be characteristically 'gin clear', mineral rich, slightly alkaline, with a relatively stable flow. There are only about 200 Chalk streams of which 85% of which are in England. They have a unique and diverse ecology that makes them a globally rare and important habitat. It could be argued that they are our equivalent of Rainforests.



The 'gin clear' Chalk stream at Fowlmere RSPB Reserve just downstream of the Chalk springs.

2. A chalk stream should be fed by groundwater, both at its source and as welling-up throughout its length, and by natural rainfall runoff. The Cam Catchment is in a high growth, water-stressed region. Increasing demand for water abstraction and land drainage means less available groundwater from a lowered water table, and more runoff entering the streams directly through ditches and drains. This water tends to contain more silt, and often chemicals including nitrate and phosphate.
3. Wastewater treatment works discharge treated water into our rivers, which often constitutes a significant proportion of river flow in our small tributaries. Inputs of residual pollutants in treated wastewater are exacerbated by diffuse pollution from multiple small sources in both rural and urban areas. Silt can smother gravel; phosphate promotes plant growth, which can lead to rivers becoming choked with large plants. Sadly, Wastewater Treatment Works also discharge untreated sewage into our Chalk streams, for example, the Haslingfield Sewage Works, which is about a mile upstream of Byron's Pool, overflowed into the River Rhee on 88 occasions for a total of 1009 hours during 2019, and on 49 occasions for 428.25 hours in 2020. Data on such overflows is published by [Anglian Water](#).

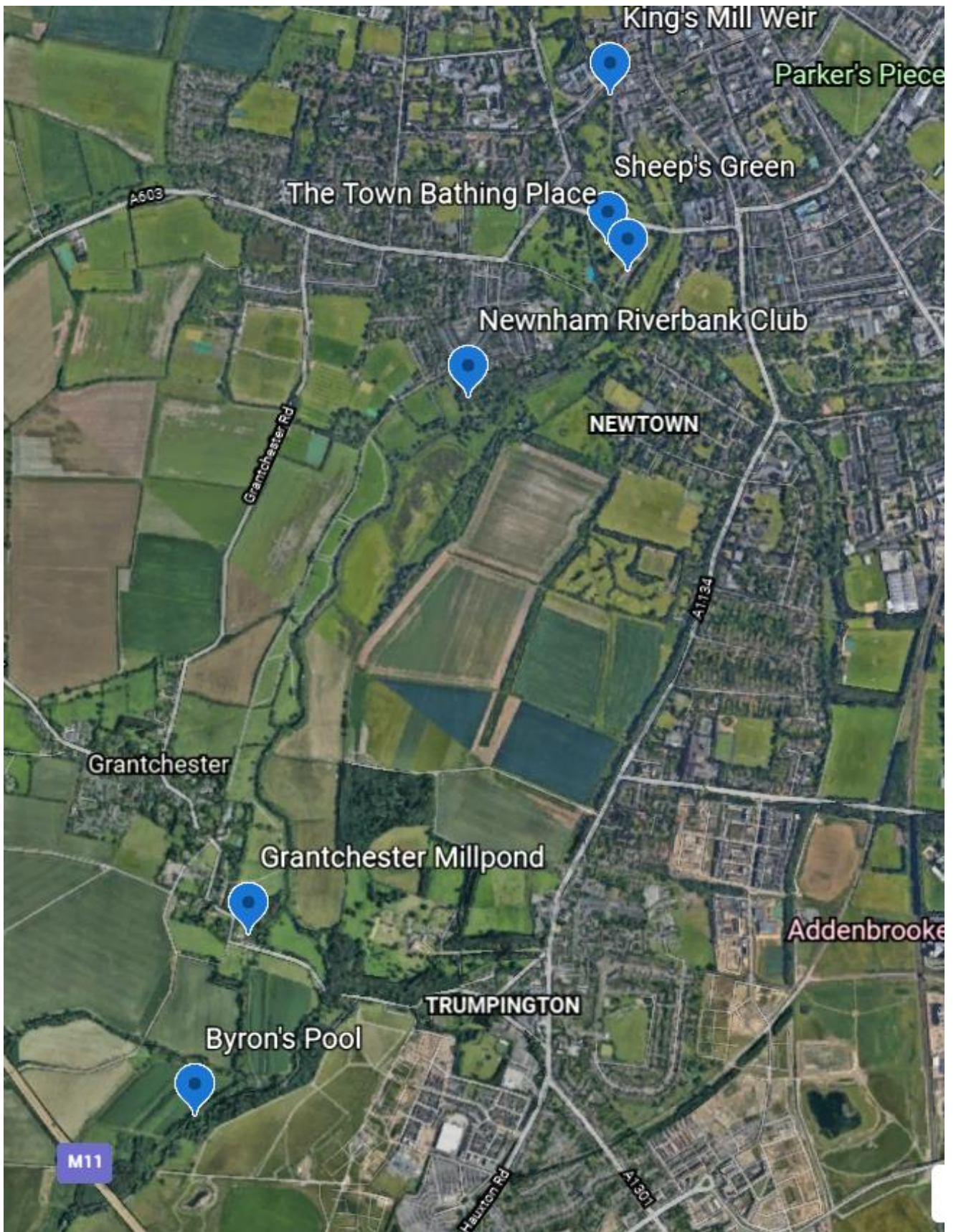
4. The Rivers Bourne, Rhee, Cam and Granta converge just upstream of Byron's Pool. The 'Upper River' starts here and flows for 2.8 miles to Kings Mill Weir. This lovely stretch of river is shared by swimmers, canoes and punts. No motor boats are allowed. The Middle River then flows for less than a mile to Jesus Green Weir and Lock. This world famous stretch passes along the iconic Backs of the Cambridge colleges. On a normal summer's day, the river is crowded with punts. Downstream from Jesus Green, pleasure boats, houseboats, rowers and aggressive swans vie for the river. Eights rowing boats pursue each other in races known as the 'Bumps' from Baits Bite Locks to Chesterton. There are marinas and sailing clubs at Clayhithe. The river passes near the National Trust's Wicken Fen and alongside Kingfishers Bridge Nature Reserve, before joining the Great Ouse and flowing past Ely with its 'Ship of the Fens' Cathedral, and then through expansive fenland to King's Lynn and the Wash.
5. By 2017 the wildlife and recreational use of the river were threatened by Floating Pennywort, an invasive non-native plant. Great rafts of this rapidly growing plant covered parts of the Upper River from bank to bank. Since then, the Cam Valley Forum, Cambridge Canoe Club, Wildlife Trust and Cam Conservators have worked together to eradicate this menace downstream to beyond Baits Bite Lock. Himalayan Balsam is another invasive non-native plant that threatens the river, and the Forum is also working with the Wildlife Trust and Countryside Restoration Trust to muster 'Balsam-bashing' working parties.



The BBC filming Cam Valley Forum volunteers battling floating pennywort at Kingfisher Bridge Nature Reserve for BBC Countryfile in November 2018.

6. The Cam Valley Forum published the influential [The River Cam Manifesto](#) in 2019 and [Let It Flow!](#) report in May 2020. These reports highlight the impacts on the river of over-abstraction from the Chalk aquifer over many decades, pollution and habitat modifications, and promote solutions that should be at the heart of any commitment to live sustainably.
7. The Upper, Middle and Lower Cam and its banks and parks and meadows are vital to the ever-expanding City of Cambridge. They are critically important for the health, wellbeing and open-air recreation of many of its people, who increasingly have to dwell in dense developments and often have no more than small balconies for their outdoor space.
8. It is the water quality, wildlife and facilities for swimmers in the Upper River that are the focus of this document. The following sections consider this precious 2.8 mile stretch of river in detail, going downstream. The course of the Upper River between Byron's Pool and the

King's Mill Weir can be followed in the image below. Except where otherwise apparent all the photos that follow were taken by Michael Goodhart during lockdown in March 2021.



9. Google Earth image of the Course of the Upper River.



10. Byron's Pool is part of a popular Local Nature Reserve run by Cambridge City Council. It adjoins the more extensive Trumpington Meadows that is run by the BCNP Wildlife Trust and complements the ever-expanding high-density housing development of the same name.



11. The Byron's Pool weir and sluice was constructed in 1949. This prevented fish from migrating upstream, however in 2011 a new cascading channel with pools and riffles was created to bypass the barrier providing an effective and attractive fish pass.



12. The river flows from Byron's Pool beside the Nature Reserve to where the Grantchester to Trumpington Road crosses it at the recently re-built Brazeley Bridge. It then flows between a private meadow and woodland to where it is joined by the leg of the river from Grantchester Millpond.



13. Grantchester Millpond is a beauty spot. The west bank is known as the Village Green and is maintained by Grantchester Parish Council. It is a popular launching place for canoes and paddleboards. The Parish Council use a field to the south-east of the Millpond as a car park that is open during summer weekends.



14. The Millpond viewed from the Mill road bridge. There has been a considerable build-up of silt in parts of the Millpond.



15. From the Millpond the river flows past the beautiful Old Vicarage garden. Immortalised by the poet Rupert Brooke, this has been embellished by the current owners with bronze sculptures, including a full size horse, and other visual features such as a classic phone box.



16. Google Earth image showing Grantchester Mill and the Millpond, the Old Vicarage Garden and the public access spinney beyond (known locally as Guffalo's Wood). Spring Field, the village cricket pitch, is in the field beyond, after which there are two meadows. Red Poll bullocks graze Grantchester Meadows between the months of April and November.



17. Google Earth image showing Grantchester's traditional bathing area. This is accessed from the High Street, which is flanked by the Red Lion and Green Man Pubs.



18. The traditional river bathing place in Grantchester. During the 2020 summer lockdown, the entire length of the riverbank between Grantchester and Newnham became crowded with picnickers and swimmers. While most behaved responsibly, some left their litter behind and a bullock suffocated after swallowing plastic bags. Emergency services had to be called out on several occasions when people under the influence of alcohol and recreational drugs got into trouble while swimming. Residents of Grantchester and Newnham came out to clear up the mess in the mornings after particularly crowded days.



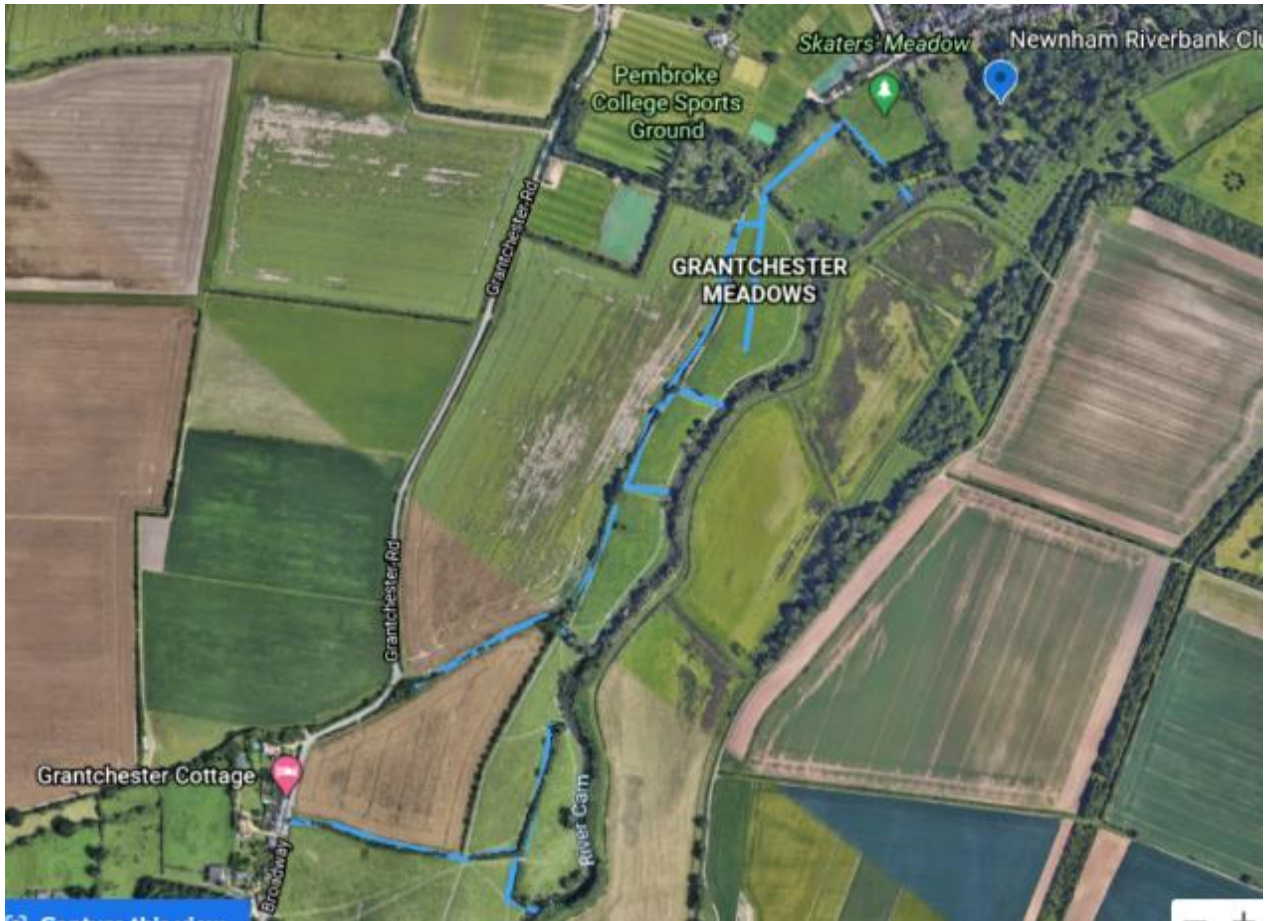
19. The start of one of the four waves of the organised 'Slow Swim' from Grantchester to Sheep's Green that takes place each year in July.



20. The riverbank has been damaged in a number of places by cattle, dogs and people. For several years some parts have been steadily eroded by cattle wading into the river to drink. Damage was exacerbated during the summer of 2018 because the three water troughs were out of use.



21. An example of erosion to the riverbank and riverside path.



22. On the east side of the river, set-aside land without public access provides a rich natural habitat. To the west, the fields have long been under intensive arable cultivation. Soil conditioners, such as treated sewage sludge, are applied in autumn and synthetic fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides are spread in the growing season. There is a risk that sediment and pollutants in run off and from field drains may enter ditches that feed into the river (e.g. those highlighted in blue on this Google Earth image).



23. The riverside path



24. A bridge over one of the drainage ditches that crosses Grantchester Meadows



25. A swimmer dries off after a swim at Deadman's Corner, the sharp bend in the river between Grantchester and Skaters' Meadow.



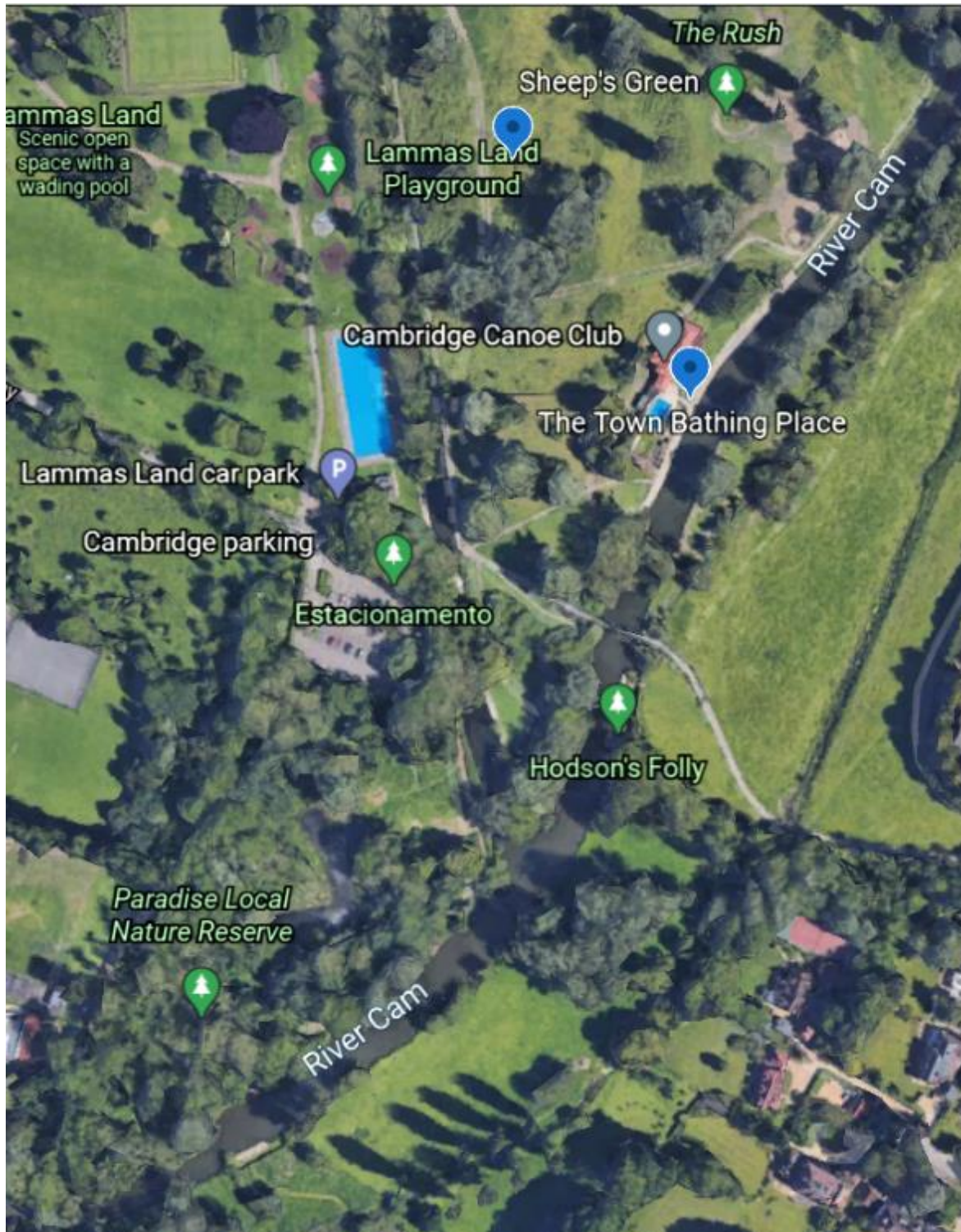
26. In Newnham, Skaters' Meadow used to be flooded and freeze over during the winter. The cast-iron lamppost had a gas light to illuminate the skaters at night.



27. The riverbank at Skaters' Meadow. The fence in the distance is the boundary of Newnham Riverbank Club.



28. Newnham Riverbank Club, a private members swimming club shared with the University Swimming, Water Polo and Canoe Clubs. This was formerly known as the University Sheds.



29. Downstream of the Riverbank Club, the river passes through beautiful woodland and emerges at the Paradise Local Nature Reserve which is bounded by the west bank of the Cam and then by Snobs' Stream, which flows between Lammas Land and Sheep's Green to Newnham Mill.

A30. Goose Triangle is the land between Snobs' Stream and the Cam and the footpath/cycle way known as the Driftway. This had been the Ladies' Bathing Place. Opposite the triangle is Hodson's Folly. The area known as the Town Bathing Place is on the other side of the footbridge where the riverbank is now shared with the Cambridge Canoe Club. To the west of that is the popular paddling pool and playground on Lammas Land, the café and public toilets, and a small car park.

31. Records of people bathing in this area date back to the 16th Century. In 1587, Everard Digby, a fellow of St John's College, wrote the first British treatise on swimming, prompted by concerns about undergraduates drowning in the Cam. The artist and grand-daughter of Charles Darwin, Gwen Raverat, described the Town Bathing Place as 'one of the most beautiful sights in the world' in her book 'Period Piece', published in 1960.



32. Looking upstream- The former Ladies' Bathing Place on the right faces Hodson's Folly and riverbank.



33. During a fleeting moment of personal prosperity, in 1897, John Hodson built the neo-classical summerhouse folly and created the riverbank between it and a small boathouse, for family bathing on common land, which he annexed without permission. The land came back into the ownership of the City Council in 1936, however the bathers' steps have been removed and the area currently attracts anti-social behaviour. Vicar's Brook joins the Cam just behind the Folly. The Chalk springs at the Nine Wells Nature Reserve are the source of this brook. They also supply Hobson's Conduit which channelled fresh water to the botanical gardens, the fountain in the Market Square, to several of the Cambridge colleges and along the runnels beside Trumpington Street. John Hodson should not

be confused with the 17th Century philanthropist and horse hirer, Thomas Hobson, who termed the phrase Hobson's Choice when deciding which horse a customer would take.



34. Hodson's Folly, now sadly neglected and abused, and the confluence with Vicar's Brook.



35. The historic Town Bathing Place viewed from the east bank. The red tiled buildings house the Cambridge Canoe Club. The Learners' Swimming Pool is to the left of them.



36. The riverbank of the historic Town Bathing Place. The Fen Causeway bridge can be seen in the distance.



37. A collapsed part of the East Bank. The pole marks the position of bathers' steps. The Driftway bow bridge is just visible in the distance. A bridge over a parallel ditch gives access to the wooded East Bank area, which used to be a popular place for bathers and is a much loved nature reserve.



38. Swimming in the river in the 1970s. The Learner Pool, behind the honeycomb block enclosure, was built in 1972, and replaced Snobs' Stream as the place where swimming was taught.



39. Google Earth image. Snobs' Stream leaves the Cam upstream of Hodson's Folly and flows beside the path along the Lammas Land Car Park and adjacent to the Paddling Pool. The Canoe Club building and learner pool are also visible beside the River Cam.



40. The 50m length of Snobs' Stream downstream of the footbridge has a concrete base at a depth of about 900mm and was where youngsters were taught to swim before the Learner Pool was built in the 1970s. The Learner Pool struggles with the number of children wanting to use it during peak times. Might this section of Snobs' Stream again be that step between the paddling pool and the river for young families gaining confidence in swimming? The public toilets are visible between the bridge and the signpost and the paddling pool is beyond.



41. The former Snobs' Stream bathing area looking upstream towards the Driftway footbridge.



42. The picnic area and barbecue compound between the Learner Pool and Snobs' Stream



43. The popular café and kiosk. The public toilets are behind, and the paddling pool and playground are to the left.



44. Just beyond the gate that encloses the Town Bathing Place is the fish pass that was installed in 2017. The old sluice gate valve and the riverbank post marks the point at which river water is diverted into the Rush, a stream that follows the original course of the river to Newnham Millpond.



45. The Rush, which in the 1960s was frequented by young families picnicking and catching tiddlers, had become overgrown, silted and sluggish. Cam Valley Forum proposed the reinvigoration of this stream which once again is enjoyed by young families.



46. Google Earth image of the final stretch of the Upper River from the historic Town Bathing Place to King's Mill Weirs.



47. View from Crusoe footbridge looking upstream.



48. Coe Fen where cattle graze on the left and the former Garden House Hotel on the right.



49. The rollers that are used to transport punts from the Middle to the Upper River are just before Bishop's Mill Sluice on the left and Laundress Green is beyond.



50. The King's Mill Weir with Scudamore's Upper River punt hire base just upstream.