

Chair: Stephen Tomkins Secretary: Alan Woods Editor: David Brooks

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Cam Conservators at work in central Cambridge

Human incorrigibility on the one hand.....



The Hoffer Brook, guided by Rob Mungovan

.....and passion for the planet on the other.

The CVF's 20th Anniversary

In the closing years of the last century the late Nevill Willmer, a retired Professor of Histology and fellow of Clare College, convened a group of people who shared his concern that the Cam and its riverside near Cambridge were threatened by rapid urban development. Their mission was sensibly widened to protect and include the river's wildlife and rural landscapes, across the entire Cam catchment, which even then had already greatly lost out to changed farming practice. At the suggestion of Max Walters, a former Botanic Garden director, it was conceived that the group might usefully bring together all those concerned with every strand of river interest and so achieve consensual outcomes that everyone might find were for the better.

It was this vision that led to the launch of the Cam Valley Forum. Jean Perraton, a founder member and former chairman, has been that group's enduring central figure over the last 20 years. Willmer himself left behind two beautiful published sketch books of River Cam scenes, not to mention the brilliant floral artistry in his design of Clare College fellows' garden.

There have been many changes over 20 years. The forum continues to attract enthusiastic voluntary labour, wide-ranging proactive skills, and devotion to its founding principles. These have led to the expansion of its activities.

There has been improvement in farming practices. Some major industrial chemical polluters have gone - though we find their numerous pollutants still present today as traces in water samples from Hauxton. The threat of Floating Pennywort has grown over 20 years. The over-abstraction of water from the Chalk has become a widely-understood and regional emergency though the first Cam tributary augmentations date from the 1970s [see [Let it Flow!](#)]. Discharge of untreated sewage into the Cam system is a major issue.

Rather than merely harangue, the forum has evolved its *modus operandi*, to hold to account and work together with, where possible, the water companies and the cash-strapped Environment Agency, and to call upon help, be it from organisations such as the Wildlife Trust, the Wild Trout Trust, local river groups, volunteers, the Cam Conservators, the commercial punting companies or the Cambridge Canoe Club.

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AGM, March 2021: A National Chalk Stream Restoration Plan. The advantage of our **online annual lecture**, on England's "Great Barrier Reef", was that it reached many more than might have assembled in the flesh. Expectations were high. **Charles Rangeley-Wilson, Chairman of the Restoration Group** (photo, top right) did not disappoint. Those distraught at having to miss the event can experience it on our youtube channel <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC558xi3XIC6NLtDy6afqtg>. Others who wish to be challenged and inspired all over again can give it a second whirl. For his practical work see <https://chalkstreams.org/2021/02/21/update-on-a-new-chalk-stream/>

It is hoped that the Restoration Group will drive the progress of government and the regulators, water companies, land managers, NGOs, and river associations right down to the grass roots, giving impetus to CVF's spearheading action to guarantee a future for our local Chalk streams.

The CVF Chair, Stephen Tomkins, discharged **the AGM business** with aplomb. He paid tribute to the supercharged engine room of the forum in the shape of the secretary Dr. Alan Woods. Floating Pennywort still recoils in the face of Mike Foley's unflagging determination and the website flourishes with Anne Miller at the helm. The boundless enthusiasm for swimming of both Jean Perraton and Michael Goodhart was given vent by a tentative proposal for obtaining Defra Bathing Water Designation for the Upper Cam. More than 75 vigorous consultation responses are bringing about a Cam Safer Swim Steering Group intent on improving water quality.

Appreciation was shown for the contributions made by several retiring committee members. Richard Wells (photo, middle right) withdrew as treasurer after 10 years of unflinching, meticulous, and loyal service for which the committee was indebted. Further, the forum benefited from his wisdom accrued over 30 years as a Hobson's Brook Trustee, 15 of those years as Chair. This was not to mention his lifelong enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, fish. Indeed, it was his boyhood memories of playing and fishing in what he and his mates called The Rush, on Sheep's Green, that triggered its recent re-instatement (and naming) as a working fish pass. Perhaps it should have been named after Richard. We wish him well.

Delight was expressed that Bruce Huett FCCA (photo, bottom right) was elected to follow Richard as treasurer. In the later stages of his career Bruce focused on financial modelling, particularly for the NHS. So the relative simplicity of CVF finances will surely be in the safest possible hands. Like Richard, Bruce has a passionate



Patrick Rangeley-Wilson



interest in local rivers and conservation. He is secretary of Melwood Conservation Group and a member of the River Mel Restoration Group, the stream running close to his cottage in Melbourn. He is treasurer of Meldreth local history group and has written many pages for <https://www.meldrethhistory.org.uk>, including a number about the Mel Chalk stream itself.

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Bruce Huett

Mills on the Mel Walk along the River Mel from Melbourn to Meldreth and imagine it is Doomesday, year 1086. Conjure up a picture of a bustling medieval economy based on nine or ten water mills.



Images of England

These early mills would probably have been small wooden structures, like those I have seen in Tibet. [See <https://www.meldrethhistory.org.uk/topics/watermills>] They were owned by manorial or ecclesiastical authorities and the "common" people had to pay to use them. They also had to give a proportion of their grain to "The Lord", as recorded in the Topcliffe Manorial records. There was a Church Mill, recorded until 1438. Others mentioned in these records are Hale mill and Cagewynnys and there are numerous examples of fines for causing flooding due to blocking water courses at mills. For example: "William Gardyner, miller, blocked the water too high so that the

king's highway at Cagewynnys was flooded".

However by 1696 there were only three, but larger: Flambards, Topcliffe and Sheene, all previously linked to their manors. Flambards became a steam corn mill in the 19th century but had closed by 1900 and burned down in 1910. Topcliffe closed in 1942 and was in ruins by 1947. Sheene ceased operating around 1930. All that remains of Flambards is evidence of the wall of the mill pond. However Sheene has survived as a hotel/restaurant and Topcliffe (photo on left) has been lovingly restored with detailed accounts of mill life. It is occasionally open on National Mill Days and is well worth a visit. [See Newsletter 59, June 2020.] There is also Shepreth Mill just outside Melbourn though not on the Mel. This had been a paper mill.

To drive these mills the river must have flowed with considerable force in deep channels. There might have been problems for mills downstream; an agreement probably existed so that mills operated at different times, possibly using a hooter system as recorded elsewhere.

The Mel channel was straightened and deepened to increase flow. Similarly straight channels were cut in the 18th century to feed the mills in Cambridge. It has been suggested that the general line of The Rush on Sheep's Green indicates an earlier course of the River Cam which already served a mill by the 14th century.

After the Mel mills closed the condition of the river deteriorated and the river silted up because it was unclear who had responsibility for maintenance. The River Mel Restoration Group have done a great job in improving it but sadly the flow is now reduced because of over-abstraction from the Chalk aquifer. In dry summers the flow in the upper reaches becomes very weak.

Charles Rangeley-Wilson* gives a general picture of milling as follows: *The languorous flow of the leat, the deep, swirling mill-pool, the faster flow below and the original, meandering river managed as a relief channel: deep water, fast water, slow water, shallow water – a rich diversity of habitat created as a bi-product of the milling process.....And yet now the mills present a more ambiguous legacy: stagnant leats are filled with silt that we daren't wash downstream and the relief channels have been left to choke up and dry out. The milling era is of unarguable historical interest, but the milling structures left behind often impoverish habitat, when once they might have enriched it.*

Bruce Huett

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The CVF evening visit to the flooded gravel pits of Milton Country Park

was led, under a low June sun, by the personable Sarah Harris, deputy manager. Her knowledge and enthusiasm spoke wonders for the value to urban dwellers of 300 acres of watery, green space. Eyes were opened to the wide range of activities on offer, the incorrigibility of human behaviour, and an abundance of wild life. Standing on the northern edge of the park, and looking across farmland, one could only wonder at the drive and vision of Cambridge Sport Lakes (which manages the park) in their quest to create training and competition lakes extending two miles, all the way to Waterbeach. See the scope of project at www.cambridgesportlakes.org.uk



At the end of May, Rob Mungovan (pulling boat, photo above) of the Wild Trout Trust oversaw an **electro-fishing survey of Vicar's Brook** between Trumpington Road and the Cam. No fewer than 10 species of fish were identified, including brown trout fry. This provided a baseline before channel enhancement which followed a couple of weeks later. Flow deflectors, some 60 metres of

brushwood faggots, and 48 tons of gravel were installed (photo of dumper truck, left) to diversify existing habitats.

This gravel installation was a less labour-intensive activity than that relished by the volunteers (bottom photo), in April, who shovelled a mere 20 tons of gravel into the **Cherry Hinton Brook at Daws Lane**, after 27 tons of silt had been mechanically removed (the cost of which was met by the City Council) so that the gravel would rest on a firm channel bed.

These remedial measures can be viewed in relation to the **Greater Cambridge Chalk Streams Project Report** <https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/media/9067/greater-cambridge-chalk-streams-project-report.pdf> which was prepared for Guy Belcher of the City Council and Cambridge Water by Ruth Hawksley of the Wildlife Trust BCN and Rob Mungovan. The work parties were led variously by Rob, Ruth and Victoria Smith, the City Council's Local Nature Reserves Officer.

This spring Rob has also been overseeing similar **channel-restoration work on the River Mel** which was funded by Cambridge Water's Pebble Fund.



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Wild Trout Trust conservation officer Rob Mungovan, man of action not given to beating about the bush, set before CVF members his exemplary, nationally-significant river channel restoration work on the Granta at Babraham, earlier this month. Do take a look at photos on <https://www.wildtrout.org/news/good-for-the-granta-river-habitat-project-in-cambridgeshire>



EA

CVF Chair Stephen Tomkins (above, centre), and Secretary Alan Woods (left), were pleased to be invited to a meeting with John Curtin (right) the Environment Agency's Executive Director for Local Operations, on the bank of the Granta at Stapleford, on 5 July. Also present were the Area Director, Environment Manager, Catchment Coordinator and a senior Water Resources Manager.

It was particularly welcome that the EA wanted to focus attention at HQ level on Chalk streams and to hear specifically about CVF's concerns and the actions we want to see taken to restore and protect the streams.

From 2010 onwards the EA has suffered crippling cuts in its annual budgets. However, the year 2021/2022 has seen a significant increase which gives some hope for the

future. The Forum is very supportive of the EA and grateful for their interest and the practical support they are providing for our work on water resources, water quality and habitats.

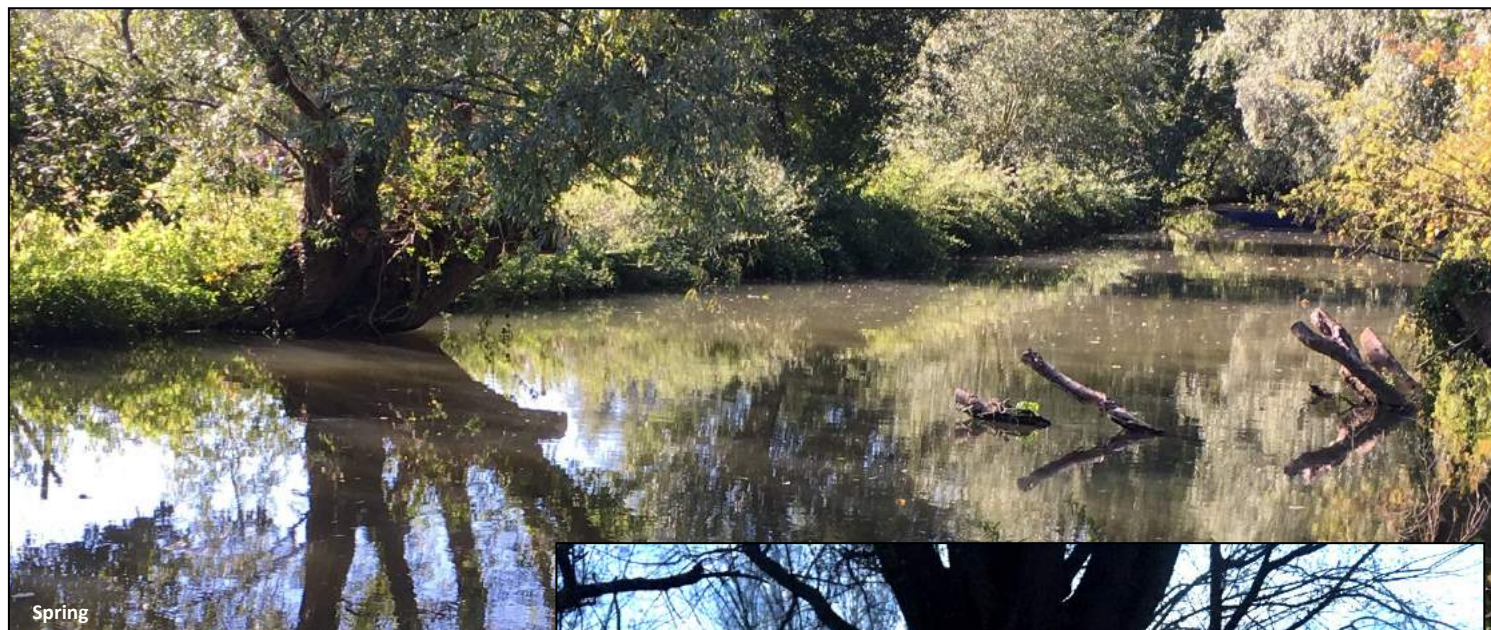
A few of the key points emerging from the discussion were as follows. Especially important is talk of the EA getting a new power to seek to influence development proposals in relation to water resources, as it can do already for flood risk management. This could be very powerful. Developers should not be permitted to build houses which will lead to further depletion of water in the Chalk aquifer.

We were pleased to hear that OFWAT and the EA now work together on performance reviews with the water-and-sewerage companies, such as Anglian, and welcomed the suggestion that similar joint reviews should also be undertaken with the supply-only companies, such as Cambridge and Affinity.

CVF pressed the need for more and earlier action in times of drought thus tackling impacts on the environment, not just on supply. For example, if garden hoses were automatically forbidden every summer the message that over-abstraction is an issue would be clear to everybody. However, OFWAT would need to relax 'service standards' agreed with Cambridge Water for this to happen. Nevertheless, the Cam Valley has just been designated as an area of 'serious water stress', reflecting CVF advocacy and strengthening the case for cutting consumption.

CVF support for the draft National Chalk Streams Restoration Strategy was reiterated, in the hope, for example, that the streams, or their aquifer, will be given enhanced statutory status.

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Spring

Pam Gatrell

Hard by the stately residences of Newnham, not a mile from King's College Chapel, the luxuriant, often-flooded wet woodland of **Paradise (Local Nature Reserve)** is a pleasure to many, a solace for the elderly, and a playground and meeting place for the young.

Olwen Williams has described the superabundance of wildlife in Paradise on the website of the Friends of the reserve at <https://paradisenaturereserve.wordpress.com/> which reads as a dynamic, circadian, and seasonally-changing inventory of much that can be seen of this teeming, precious ecosystem. Copiously illustrated, she describes the diversity of trees, ground flora, mammals, insects, birds, bats, and fish.



Chicken of the Woods

Pam Gatrell

The website also offers a barometer of social change and shifts and differences in public perception. The 'chicken of the woods' fungus (*Laetiporus sp.*) is admired by many, recognised by some, vandalised by others, and foraged by a few.

The name 'Paradise' goes back at least to 1567 but by the 1950s the future reserve was known as 'The Island', and as a haven for building dens and bonfires. In the 1970s the open area at the



A Dawn Walk

Olwen Williams

end of Owlstone Road was called 'The Dump', functioning as a garden refuse tip and gathering prunings, logs, bricks, stones, Christmas trees, and the like.

Now designated a Local Nature Reserve it is owned and managed by the City Council, depending heavily on voluntary labour be it that of the Friends or that marshalled by Victoria Smith, the City Reserves Officer. As well as managing the ecology, volunteers cope with damage caused by, for example, heavy footfall on water-logged ground, not to mention the distressing legacy of antisocial behaviour (photo below).

Young people have always got up to mischief away from the eyes of adults but in the past any damage perhaps healed more easily.

Conflicts now, between leisure and conservation, are more severe. Now the 'environment' needs more active protection.



Olwen Williams

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Canoeing the Cam. CVF Chair Stephen Tomkins (above right) was interviewed by Tom Heap for **BBC Radio 4's** 8 September programme '**Costing the Earth**', <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000zdqs>

The journey started on the bank of the Rhee (just visible in the photograph) immediately downstream from the Haslingfield sewage works, where Tom had played as a boy. Stephen's remarks were inevitably, and indeed predictably, about the **over-abstraction** of ground water from the Chalk aquifer and the **pollution** of the Cam and its tributaries.

In 2019 up to 74% of the Cam's discharge through Cambridge was treated sewage effluent. On 6 September

of this year the percentage was around 40.

Furthermore, at times of high rainfall, such as in 2020 there were 400 hours of combined sewer overflow (untreated sewage plus rainwater from urban tarmac and concrete runoff) discharging into the Rhee at Haslingfield. This is certainly legal at times of high rainfall. In 2019 (probably in the wetter autumn), there were ostensibly more than 1000 such hours.

Mike Foley also spoke on the programme specifically about **pollution**. He is leading a small CVF team engaged in a systematic study of pollution in the Cam Valley the results of which will be available in due course. For listeners he described his sampling method, in this instance for nitrate and phosphate.

Beyond the broadcast, the Cam Valley Forum has a responsibility to engage in dialogue with everyone who has an interest in our rivers. Pointedly, with over-abstraction now conceded, that has required engagement with the water companies. We are doing that and have now established that the proportional Chalk aquifer take between them is Cambridge Water (64%), Affinity Water (22%) and Anglian Water (14%). With the EA now calling for a 60-70% reduction they are all in a tight spot.

Back in **March** your Hon Sec and Chair met **Andy Willicott**, the new **CEO of Cambridge Water**. He acknowledged then that they needed a 'reset' and that the Forum was not just calling 'Wolf'.

This month, in a further meeting with him, it was welcome that a **major acceleration of change is certainly happening** - with plans for a new Fen Reservoir*, water transfers between companies, recharge studies as to why aquifers are so depleted, moves to promote more water-efficient development and OfWAT re-thinking water re-pricing. This is not before time, as all these ideas were paraded by us well over a year ago in 'Let it Flow!' [See 'Latest Reports' on the Home page of our website.]

We must and do openly support these changes, but it is hard to support any large scale future development when we are presently living so unsustainably. We all need to break that link between our own water use and Chalk stream losses. It can be done.

* <https://www.anglianwater.co.uk/siteassets/household/about-us/strategic-solution-gate-one-submission-preliminary-feasibility-fens-reservoir.pdf>

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River Babingley, Norfolk



Charles Rangeley-Wilson

Patrick Rangeley-Wilson

Charles Rangeley-Wilson (photograph above right) delivered the CVF's Annual Lecture in March when he spoke by Zoom on a 'national Chalk stream restoration plan'. He has now issued the monumental CaBA [Catchment Based Approach] [Chalk Stream Restoration Strategy](#).

Its 138 pages are an unequalled and potentially transformative **overview of Chalk streams** which cannot be ignored, or recommended too highly. The contributions of the CVF are duly acknowledged. Rangeley's introductory speech at the launch called for an integrated approach to the improvement of water quantity, water quality, and Chalk stream habitats. We now need more exemplars of this, locally. (<https://chalkstreams.org/2021/10/15/launching-the-caba-chalk-stream-restoration-strategy/>).

Michael Goodhart's CVF report, [The Cam from Grantchester to Cambridge](#), highlights the need for action to protect this area. His document was prompted by dismay at the destruction caused by cattle, dogs, and people, since 2018, in **Grantchester Meadows**. His photograph on the right shows some typical scarring of the river bank.

The Wildlife Trust, in collaboration with the CVF and [FWAG East](#) (Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group), is **leading a pilot project**, on behalf of the landowner, to repair some of the damage. Alert readers will have seen the article in the Cambridge Independent, 20-26 October. Work is expected to start soon. Gravel was delivered early, when the soil was still dry, to avoid harm. Two new



Michael Goodhart

"cattle drinks" with bases of the hard gravel will provide gently sloping access points. This will reduce further erosion and the entrainment of silt by the river. Any excavated soil will be used to repair banks and to encourage marginal vegetation as a habitat for wildlife. The project has been offered a total of nearly £10,000 in funding, so long as the community can match this, and so long as the work can be completed before the end of March 2022. **Please donate** through the [Wildlife Trust](#).

The **City Council**, in a joint bid with Cambridge Past Present & Future and the local Wildlife Trust, has secured a National Lottery Green Recovery Fund grant. This will be used in part to repair and enhance the banks and channel of the brook which crosses **Stourbridge Common** along the stretch where it passes under the railway.

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The Conversation CCO

The Cam Valley Forum supported the Countryside Restoration Trust's (CRT) mink trapping project last year (<https://www.countrysiderestorationtrust.com/>) and publicised the need for volunteer 'smart trap responders' in Newsletter 62 (www.camvalleyforum.uk).

Now, Vince Lea of the CRT reports that shortly afterwards the Trust was part of a successful bid to the Green Recovery Challenge Fund for a 15-month £250,000 grant which has brought a step-change to the operation.

The CRT is part of the Waterlife Recovery East (WRE) partnership (<https://waterliferecoveryeast.org.uk/>) whose aim is to eradicate mink entirely from the Core Zone (east of green line on map) and eliminate them as a breeding species in the Buffer Zone (between the red and green lines). Any mink born west of the Buffer is unlikely to reach the Core without being intercepted. In 2021 WRE achieved good coverage across this area except Essex. If successful, the methods and evidence developed will be used to push for a whole GB eradication attempt.

Vince and colleague Emily Coleman oversee Cambridgeshire, supported by over 50 volunteers who attend over 100 traps. Eight mink traps are in operation on the Cam from Chesterton to the Essex border, plus six in the upper Cam Valley tributaries (Granta, Bourn Brook, Rhee etc.). These 14 traps have caught 11 mink in 2021 (as of mid-November); 8 in the spring including two females, and 3 in the autumn were all males. The evidence suggests that no mink were born in the Cam Valley this year; one of the females was pregnant with 9 fetuses which is the closest mink got to breeding in this area. The high proportion of males is indicative of their much greater roaming ability.

Parts of the county where mink trapping has not been undertaken in the past are yielding large numbers – over



Vince Lea

The cage trap (with sensor to alert volunteer) sits inside the tunnel on top of the floating raft. Mink are humanely dispatched using an air rifle.



57 from the Middle Level, 32 from the Ouse Valley gravel pits and a few from elsewhere bringing the total to 129 by late November in Cambridgeshire. South Lincolnshire is relatively new to mink trapping and a small area has produced 40 mink while the long-running operations in much larger counties of Norfolk and Suffolk have produced just over 80 mink despite several hundred traps being in operation. Very few breeding mink are expected in this area next year, with further recovery of water voles and other riparian life anticipated.