

River Chess Association Public Meeting No. 6
22nd May 2012, The Garden Room, Chenies Manor

In attendance

RCA Committee Members:

Paul Jennings (Chairman)

Roger Wotton

David Le Neve Foster

Kathryn Graves

Ken Austin

Speakers:

Rob Sage (Veolia Water)

Allen Beechey (Chilterns Chalk Streams Project)

Bill Templeton (Chesham Museum)

And 21 members of the public.

Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Angela Bartlett, Rebecca Lucas, Phil Nixon, Diana Taylor, Cheryl Gillan MP, David Hyde, Scott Horton, Charlie Bell, Andre Galley, John Axon and Gillian Riches.

1. Overview of the Year

Paul Jennings provided a summary of the committee's activities since the last public meeting, including lobbying and responding to consultations (including Chiltern District Council's Core Strategy and the Water White Paper); riverfly monitoring; supporting fieldwork for students; education through school visits and Trout in the Classroom; and providing information through social media, and press and TV interviews.

Paul also showed a slide of an action plan that the RCA is developing for the river, as part of the Colne Catchment Management Plan.

2. Approval of Previous Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on the 24th May 2011 were approved as a correct record. Paul explained that the minutes of all public meetings are available on the web site www.riverchessassociation.org.

3. Chesham Sewage Treatment Works

Paul described the committee's work with Thames Water to reduce the risk of combined sewage overflows into the Chess from the sewage treatment works (CSTW). In April 2011, Thames Water established a text warning system to notify the RCA of any untreated sewage discharges. There have been no discharges since that time. In April 2012 Thames Water began to utilise an existing storage tank on the site, enabling them to double their storage capacity for storm water and significantly reduce the risk of a discharge from the works. Despite the exceptionally heavy rainfall in April and May 2012, no discharges have occurred. Paul extended his thanks to Andre Galley at Thames Water, who has been instrumental in so much of this work.

It was noted, however, that there is an on-going problem with sewage detritus (sanitary towels, for example) regularly getting into the river just downstream of CSTW. Thames Water is now working with the RCA on this issue.

The RCA is also looking longer term at the overall quality of the CSTW effluent that is entering the river.

4. Aquifer Recharge – The Animation

A simple animation was premiered that demonstrates the annual hydrological cycle of a chalk aquifer and the impact that abstraction has upon it. A key aspect of the animation is that it helps to explain why the recent rainfall hasn't ended the drought.

The animation will be posted on the RCA web site in the future.

5. Drought – Questions & Answers

Rob Sage, a Water Resources Asset Specialist from Veolia Water Central explained how two years of below average rainfall have resulted in the current drought and how drought trigger predictions were used to decide when to declare water use restrictions. The exceptional rainfall in April (c. 240% above average) did cause some increase in groundwater levels, but this is expected to decline again soon as we enter summer.

Rob briefly explained the water use restrictions that have been in place since the 5th April 2012 and highlighted that the restrictions cover much more than the historic hosepipe bans. The restrictions are effective, reducing the demand for water by about 30 megalitres per day. However, Veolia are still seeing spikes in water usage at the weekends, which suggests that some customers are flouting the restrictions.

Members of the public were then invited to ask any questions they may have regarding the drought:

It was asked whether Veolia has reduced water pressure to help conserve water. Rob said that Veolia does not reduce pressure for these purposes, although pressure can be reduced to assist with leak management. He advised that the reduction in pressure should be reported to Veolia's Customer Service phone line. By law, Veolia has to provide a minimum pressure to its customers and the company is investing in automated pressure sustaining valves to reduce leakage and manage pressure during off-peak demand.

In response to a query about leakage, Rob said that Veolia Water Central has its lowest leakage levels ever, which are well below the Offwat target. 90% of visible leaks are fixed within 24h of report. Veolia would like to see more customers having water meters installed to assist Veolia in identifying more leaks. The increase in the number of water meters also appears to be reducing customers' water usage and Veolia will be launching a metering campaign in 2015.

Paul expressed his concern that even if customers reduced their water usage locally, this would result in a reduction of imported water into the catchment first, rather than a reduction in the water abstracted from the local aquifer, and that this would mean there would be no benefit to the Chilterns rivers. Rob said that Veolia Water Central would be happy to have discussions with the RCA on this issue.

It was asked whether snow helps aquifer recharge. As only 10% of snow is water and the rest is air, it would take heavy snowfall with a slow thaw, enabling the water to trickle into the ground, to assist recharge.

Allen Beechey, from the Chilterns Chalk Streams Project (CCSP), showed the impact of the drought on local rivers with a series of photographs. Some rivers have longer dry sections than the Chess. For example, the Ver is dry for c.50% of its length. These dry sections can be monitored via the CCSP Drought Watch page:

www.chilternsaonb.org/about-chilterns/chalk-streams/drought-watch.html

Allen said that he is researching historical occasions when the River Chess has dried and would welcome evidence from people of other periods of drying.

6. Mills of the Chess

Dr Bill Templeton from Chesham Museum gave a presentation on the history of 13 mills supported by the River Chess, including common historic themes such as the change from corn milling to paper production, and conversion of the mills from waterpower to steam and electricity.

7. Rickmansworth Bank Enhancement Project

Paul described plans for a multi-agency project to improve the habitat of a publicly accessible stretch of the Chess at Rickmansworth.

8. Call for Volunteers

Paul explained that the RCA is looking for volunteers to assist in the following areas:

- (i) Photography – for volunteers to regularly take photos (between four times a year and monthly) at specified sites to build up an archive of images.
- (ii) Flow monitoring – this would require a few hours per month
- (iii) Watervole surveying – the RCA would like to ensure that the biennial survey on the Chess continues.
- (iv) Himalayan balsam control – manual weed pulling in June each year
- (v) Historical information – if you have any historic information relating to the Chess, such as press cuttings, we would be interested in making copies
- (vi) Conserving water – we are keen for everyone to conserve as much water as possible, from installing water butts to showering with a bucket

Paul also asked everybody to consider supporting the Our Rivers campaign.

9. Any Other Business

(i) Rainbow Trout

A member of the public reported that there is a thriving wild population of Rainbow Trout in the River Chess and at the Latimer lakes.

(ii) Thanks

Paul thanked everybody for attending, for the committee members for their work and to those supporters who get involved with our social media. He also remembered Stephen Webster, a great contributor to the RCA and dear friend, who passed away last year.