

Test and Itchen Association – Mid-Season newsletter 2016

Dear Members

Welcome to the mid-Season newsletter.

The office

I started as your new Executive Director in June. I have spent much of my first few weeks in the role meeting as many of you as possible and visiting those parts of the Test and Itchen with which I was not previously familiar – I have fished up and down the Meon for 30 years so am better acquainted with it. Do let me know if you would welcome a visit from me. It would be an opportunity for me to let you know about the Board's plans for developing the Association, and I would be keen to hear about any issues or concerns that might be on your mind – and it is always a pleasure just to sit by one of our beautiful chalk streams and swap anecdotes with a fellow enthusiast.

The Board acknowledges that communication with our membership has been lacking in the absence of an Executive Director in the period before my appointment. I am very keen to ensure that you are all aware of what the Association is doing on your behalf. You will hopefully be better informed after reading this newsletter and the other documents we are circulating to you with the hard copy version. Apologies if you feel overloaded with information – but we thought better too much than too little.

In due course, I will be spending the equivalent of two days per week on Test and Itchen Association business, although I have been working pretty much full-time in my first few weeks. I am aiming to spend most Wednesdays at the Test and Itchen Association office in Kimbridge, with the rest of my time spent out on the rivers or working from home. The Association office is manned throughout the working week by Jacqui Williams who is now through the worst of a tough period of cancer treatment. She is making a good recovery. Her commitment to keeping the Association show on the road during her illness was remarkable.

What do we do?

The Board believed this was a question worth discussing and did so at their meeting in June. The answer might be evident to those most intimately involved with the Association, but it was clearly not so evident to at least some of our members. And with a profusion of organisations – not necessarily a bad thing – interested in the issues the Association deals with on a day-to-day basis, respective roles and who does what are not always immediately clear: there are, for example, apparently over 60 organisations with an interest in environmental and fisheries issues in the Itchen valley.

The Board subsequently endorsed a Strategy on a page document (attached), perhaps more accurately described as a What We Do on a page document. Fundamentally, we are about vigorously promoting and defending our members' interests and providing leadership, representation, guidance, coordination and advice where this is required. As was the case at the time of the Association's foundation in 1907, we are the only organisation which can represent the collective interests of the riparian owners and that will remain at the core of what we do.

The one page What We Do document is necessarily broad brush. At the same time, the Board endorsed an Action Plan (also attached) for the six month period up to the end of the 2016 calendar year. This sets out in some detail what we will be seeking to achieve during this period. It is deliberately quite ambitious. Given the limited resources available to us some things will probably not get done in the proposed time frames. But it gives Jacqui and me a clear framework within which we can best use our time on your behalf. We would be delighted to hear any feedback you might have on these documents. We will not be able to satisfy every demand, but we will listen. We are at your service. Do let us know how we can help.

Our rivers

The rivers are generally looking in great shape. Water flows are currently healthy. But we all know that beneath the often glistening surfaces all is not well. In June, we circulated to our members the not particularly snappily titled Test and Itchen Catchment Invertebrate Fingerprinting Study. This was produced by the Wessex Chalk Stream and Rivers Trust (WCSRT) which the Association helped launch and now helps to fund – not many people know that – precisely so it can provide our members with this sort of rigorous, credible information on the health of our rivers. The study showed that whilst the picture varied from place to place and river to river, environmental stressors, particularly sediment and phosphate, are causing catchment-wide ecological impacts as measured by river fly species richness and abundance. These impacts are exacerbated when combined with low flow conditions. In short, the data showed what many fishermen have long known: there are not as many river flies about as there once were.

Partnerships

These problems require a coordinated response. The Association is represented in the fora where solutions are discussed and implemented. At catchment level, the key forum is the Test and Itchen Catchment Partnership, co-hosted by the WCSRT and Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust (HIOWWT). The Partnership includes all those who can play a role in moving things forward, from the Water Companies and the Environment Agency, through fishery and environmental organisations, to farmers and riparian owners. It might come as a surprise with that lot together in a room, but the dynamic is collaborative, with few fundamental differences or irreconcilable agendas.

River restoration

So what is being done? Experience shows that substantial improvements can be achieved, sometimes at surprisingly little cost, to increase water quality and improve habitat for fly life, fish and other species when stakeholders work together. At a micro level, many of our members are implementing river restoration projects. These help provide the conditions in which wild fish populations can thrive. The Association helps organise events at which those interested can find out more. The next one is a practical workshop taking place at Fulling Mill on the Test on 2 September. At the time of writing, there are still a small number of places available (at no cost) on a first come first served basis – contact Jacqui in the office if you are interested. We plan to organise something similar with WCSRT on the Itchen in the spring of 2017.

Even in these cash straitened times for government organisations, the Environment Agency has funding available for river restoration in the Test and Itchen catchment. About half-a-dozen river restoration projects will be taking place in October and November this year, typically funded on a collaborative basis by the Environment Agency and the owner. Many owners prefer to fund fully their own projects, sometimes because of concern at the strings which might be attached to Environment Agency funding, but these strings are not as onerous as some might imagine. The

Environment Agency are in the market for new project proposals. Many of you will know the excellent Heb Leman who leads on this work for the Environment Agency but please ask the Association for an introduction if you do not know him and are interested in finding out more. We hope there will be another opportunity to see the results of river restoration work at the Association's members' meeting in November. Details to follow nearer the time.

Reducing pollution

The Partnership also provides materials that organisations and individuals can use to inform themselves on what can be done to mitigate the problems. We are distributing with the hard copy of this newsletter two pamphlets produced by the Partnership on the steps individual households can take to reduce their environmental impact on the chalk streams. One is on how best to manage a septic tank. The other is on how to put less phosphate into your domestic waste water. These subjects might not set your heart racing, but it is important to know we can all do something about the causes, as well as worrying about the symptoms, of pollution. If you are interested in finding out more, WCSRT and HIOWWT have some additional educational resources available. They might also be able to provide a speaker if you would like to arrange an event for a local community group. Contact them through the Association, if you do not already know them.

Water abstraction

The Association is also active at a macro level. I now know a little more about the science and politics of water abstraction than I probably thought I ever would. Stakeholder meetings on the subject tend to produce more heat than light. It remains a complex, fraught and sometimes impenetrable subject, but at its heart is a requirement for Southern Water to ensure they can always find the 150 million litres of water they require a day to supply their 700,000 customers in our area. They extract water from our rivers and the groundwater aquifer to do so. They have successfully reduced demand through educating (and metering) their customers and reducing leaks. The volumes they are abstracting are not currently on an upward trend. But they are required to plan for satisfying demands during times of drought. This requirement leads to myriad options being considered, plans being drawn up, and abstraction licenses being reviewed. Some of this water company worst case scenario planning can look pretty alarming. And the admittedly small risk of some of the more extreme measures being implemented would indeed have an alarming impact on water flows in our rivers. So this is an issue on which we will remain heavily engaged on your behalf.

At risk of over-simplification, Southern Water are currently pursuing three schemes to ensure continuity of customer supply at times of drought, while attempting to accommodate environmental protection for the River Itchen. Work on the first scheme, a new bulk supply of up to 15 million litres of treated water a day from Portsmouth Water at Gaters Mill, began last month and is expected to take approximately one year to complete. The second scheme is a project at Candover to top up the Itchen with water abstracted from the aquifer. Southern Water say they expect it to be used only about once every 15 years – during drought – to support some continued abstraction from the Itchen at Otterbourne. They plan to build a pipeline to transport the flows alongside the Candover Brook to the Itchen further to the south. The third scheme is to build an 18km pipeline to transfer up to 45 million litres of water a day from the Test at Testwood to the Otterbourne Water Supply Works where it will be treated. The intention is to secure supplies for customers during an extreme drought, if the first two schemes are not sufficient to make up the deficit.

If you think all this amounts to is robbing Peter to pay Paul, you would be right. It is all deeply unsatisfactory, and reflects badly on this country's ability to manage satisfactorily and in a coordinated fashion basic national resource requirements. It might come as a surprise to some that the Environment Agency is essentially an ally on this issue and attempts to mitigate the worst potential outcomes by adjusting Southern Water's abstraction licences where it is able to do so. But they know which way a Minister is going to lean if faced with a choice between 700,000 households without water and a stressed river environment at a time of extreme drought.

The Board will shape the Association's input to the numerous consultative processes under way on the three schemes currently being pursued. But it seems clear that the medium-term solution is to influence Southern Water's future planning away from potentially bleeding dry our rivers and the aquifer, and towards resourcing more sustainable solutions. They do exist. Neighbouring Portsmouth Water have more water than they need. Large storage facilities – reservoirs - can be built. And advances in technology are making desalination of sea water more commercially viable. But they all require a lot of money. The Association is more likely to have influence through pragmatic engagement than by hurling insults at Southern Water from the other side of the barricade, however tempting that might sometimes be. We have the means to exercise influence: Clay, our Chairman, is a member of Southern Water's Stakeholder Panel; and I engage with Southern Water on a whole range of issues on a regular basis.

Other catchment macro issues

An equally important issue is the discharge of phosphates and other potentially harmful substances into our rivers. It is not all bad news. New Environment Agency controls limiting discharges from cress farms on the Itchen hold out the prospect of real improvements in water quality.

One issue that the Association has traditionally been actively engaged on but has not really featured in my first few weeks is public access to our rivers. A recent threat of possible canoe access to the Itchen Navigation appears to have gone away following an intervention by members. If there are generic access issues out there which we are currently unaware of, please let the office know and we will follow up.

Water quality monitoring

There are limits to what the Association can do to influence some of these macro-level issues, however passionately we might feel about them. But something we can all do is help provide the data on which decisions about the future of our rivers can be based. A few years ago, the Association trained dozens of its members in what is now known as the Anglers Riverfly Monitoring Initiative, ARMI for short.

All the data collected by our members from over 60 sites across the catchment has been passed to the Riverfly Partnership who will be making it available to all on a national website. Our own website will shortly provide details of how to access the information and a link for those interested. Jacqui is contacting those who collected data from sites about which we need more precise information, before the information can be entered into the national database. And in March 2017 we are aiming to provide refresher and top up training for experienced and new monitors. Matt Owen-Farmer, who will be known to many of you, has kindly agreed to provide the training and advise more generally on the reinvigoration of our contribution to this important national effort. We aim to cover the modest costs involved in laying on the training from Association funds. More details to follow in due course.

Weed

One of the great joys of the job is spending time on the river. I spent four days accompanying the Association's weed cut wardens on the Test during the June weed cut. For those of you unfamiliar with the wardens, they are Ron Dadswell and Nigel de Foubert. Keith Fisher joined the team in July. They are all volunteers. Many of our members have offered the wardens a day's fishing to thank and compensate them for the work they do on our behalf. If you are able to help in this way, an offer would be much appreciated. Please contact Jacqui if you are in a position to help.

The role of the wardens is to do everything possible to ensure that the weed cut and clearing off on the Test and its tributaries takes place as smoothly as possible and within the defined time periods. They do this in a variety of ways, but enhancing and facilitating communication between those involved in the weed cut and providing information to those unclear on the requirements, is the bread and butter. They have no formal enforcement powers – and no magic wands, and need to operate through using a combination of charm and natural authority. Although they would certainly consider reporting to the Environment Agency through the Association's office blatant or wilful transgression of the weed cut regulations for possible further investigation and prosecution, that is not the way they would choose to operate.

For the system to work, the wardens need the assistance of our members. At the most basic level, up to date contacting details for those involved in carrying out the weed cut is very helpful. The wardens also need access to the river if they are to carry out their role, although they obviously have no right of access. If they have not previously been given permission, they will always try to contact owners/managers/keepers before going down to the river, but this is challenging without up to date contacting details. And sometimes if there is a really serious problem developing, they need to exercise their judgement about what they can best do to help sort it out. They will always try and encourage those involved in the weed cut to start and finish as soon as possible to prevent rafts of weed coming down the river after the end of the allotted clearing off period, although they recognise that the resources available, and the amount of work required, vary enormously from one stretch of the river to another and from one cutting period to another.

It might not have felt like it to one or two of our members, but the June and July weed cuts appear to have gone relatively smoothly. We had some reports – and have investigated – some isolated incidents of weed coming down late on the main river in June and on the Dun in July. There has been a recurring problem downstream from Whitchurch. Do report problems, but please remember that the wardens only operate during the weed cut period and the day immediately following it. Outside those times, please contact the office with any weed related problems. We will be reviewing and sending out the Weed Cut Code of Practise with next year's weed cut dates.

It is fair to say that the trial of reducing the weed cut period on the Test by one day has not met with universal approbation, although most seem content or have not voiced an opinion. The Board will be deciding whether to continue with the trial when they discuss the 2017 weed cut dates at their September 2016 meeting. Please let me have your views beforehand if you have not already done so. The one thing I can guarantee is that we will not be able to make everybody happy! We will also be looking at some possible adjustments to the Sector boundaries on the Test to smooth out some of the existing wrinkles. Enough about the weed cut, except to say that we might look at introducing a wardening system on the Itchen in 2017 if there is a demand for it. It is currently unclear to me if this is the case. Do let me know what you think one way or the other.

Fishing

You are receiving at the same time as the 2016 mid-season newsletter the 2015 Rivers Report. Not ideal, but the staff absences at the beginning of the year previously referred to, and latterly some printing hiccups, produced the delays. We will do better next year. I hope potential contributors will not be discouraged. The publication is greatly valued by many of our members and we are committed to producing it.

Until we gather the fishing reports for the 2016 River Report, my evidence on how the rivers have been fishing this year is anecdotal, incomplete and heavily biased by my own experiences. These have all been enormously enjoyable, mainly successful and a reminder if one was needed about how extraordinarily lucky we are to be able to fish these magical waters. New experiences for me have included catching wild brown trout at the top of the Test above Whitchurch, a somewhat surreal but unforgettable all-night sea trout expedition to a tidal pool on the Itchen in suburban Southampton, and tempting a patrolling rainbow trout of impressive proportions to take the inevitable Daddy Long Legs on the Test above Stockbridge. Some equally enjoyable but more familiar days have been spent on the Meon at Holywell where my fly-fishing journey began thirty odd years ago and as the guest of a generous friend on what for me remains the quintessentially perfect Itchen at Martyr Worthy. I am not a salmon fisherman, but I am told that the numbers of salmon entering the Test and Itchen are the best for 25 years, even if there is less evidence of them moving as far up our rivers as we would all hope. I hope the rivers – our rivers – have provided you all with as much fun and satisfaction, whether fishing or through simply enjoying the beautiful environment.

You might have found this newsletter a little more personal and informal in tone than some previous editions. Deliberately so. I hope it might prompt a more personal and closer engagement between you and those at the Association who are here to serve your interests.

Best wishes

Jeremy

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24 August 2016

Dates for Your Diaries

Late August 2016

Weed Cut Dates to Board

Proposed dates and suggested changes to 2017 dates

Friday 2nd September

Habitat Workshop on the Test

Run by WCSRT 9.15am to 4.15pm

Friday 23rd September 2016 – 2pm

Board Meeting

Board directors meet to discuss current issues and ideas, including weed cutting dates

Saturday 1st October

Angling Auctions – run by Neil Freeman

Sale of antique, vintage and modern fishing tackle, cased fish, books and arts. Held in Romsey. For more information email: neil@anglingauctions.demon.co.uk

Mid-October 2016

Request River Reports

Send invite to Autumn Meeting

Send finalised weed cutting dates for 2017

Sunday 20th November 2016 - 10.30am

Autumn Meeting

All members are invited to an all-day event; starting with two speakers, followed by lunch and finishing on the river, looking at some recent restoration work

Thursday 8th December 2016 – 2pm

Board Meeting

Board directors meet to discuss current issues and ideas, to include dates for 2017

Spring 2017

ARMI Refresher course

Spring 2017

ARMI new monitor course

Spring 2017

Habitat Workshop on the Itchen