

## 2018 MID-SEASON NEWSLETTER

The sun is shining out of a clear blue sky here at Kimbridge on a late June afternoon. The thermometer is nudging 30 degrees Centigrade. It certainly feels like mid-summer, as well as being mid-season.



*A summer's day at Kimbridge*

### **Weed Cuts**

I started in my role with the Association a little over two years ago. One of the first things I did was accompany the Association's weed cut wardens on their journey down the Test from source to sea. It was a great way of getting to know the river and to meet many of our members, particularly the river keepers. I spent a bit of time this morning reviewing with one of our wardens how the first weed cut on the Test has gone this year – today is the last day of the clear down on the bottom stretch of the river. Things seemed to have gone generally well. As always there have been some frustrations and hiccups, particularly on the Upper Test, but no major catastrophes. The same can be said of the Itchen. Some isolated incidents – in fact, to be precise, one reported incident of cut weed coming down the river late – but things by and large went according to plan. I had reason to delve into the Association's archives the other day. The ill-feeling and anger generated by the weed cuts thirty years ago, as reflected in the correspondence my predecessors used to receive from some of our members, was striking. We all seem to be more compliant, better-behaved and polite these days! For some of our members, coordination of river management issues, particularly the weed cut, is the most important thing the Association does, so I am glad that we appear to be getting it right.

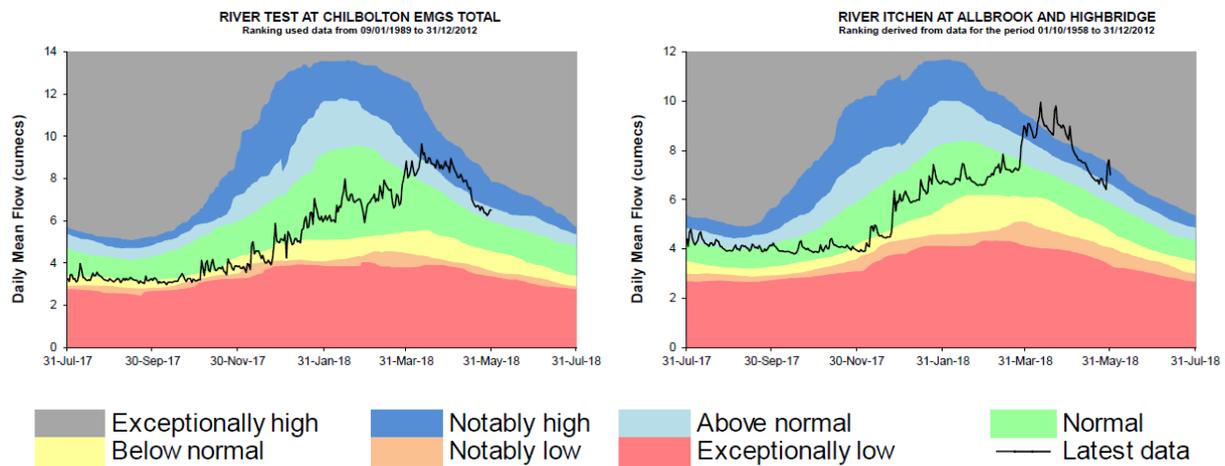
### **Fishing**

The weed started growing later than usual this year following the cold spring, but strong river flows and the warm weather have produced strong growth in many parts of the catchment.

Elsewhere there has been no weed growth or the wrong sort of weed growth. This patchy picture mirrors the reports I have heard about the fishing. I was fortunate enough to have a couple of spectacular Mayfly evenings, one on the Meon and one on the Lower Itchen, in late May, with the trout being cooperative if picky. Some fisheries have reported their best ever start to a season. Others have reported a Mayfly fortnight that started late and never became anything more than spasmodic.

## River flows

This time last year low river flows following a dry winter were a major concern. Not so this year. We had a wet Winter and Spring – rainfall in the Test, Itchen and Meon catchments was about 115% of the Long Term Average over the six months from November to April, with March and April being notably wet. River flows were all above normal or notably high at the end of May, and with groundwater levels above normal too there should be no shortage of water in the rivers this summer. Levels are beginning to drop during the very dry and warm spell we are currently having, but with the aquifers full there is no cause for concern.



There are reasons to be optimistic about future river flows. Diligent readers of Association newsletters will know that we have been working hard with like-minded organisations to support the efforts of the Environment Agency to restrict future abstraction of water from the Hampshire chalkstreams for public water consumption to more sustainable levels. We can report success! At a Public Inquiry in March, Southern Water agreed to all the changes to their abstraction licences proposed by the Environment Agency. This is a complicated issue and hard to summarise succinctly, but, in essence, the Inquiry outcome means that Southern Water will not be able to abstract more water from the rivers than they have in the past – and less than they have hitherto been licensed to. With the number of water customers growing, this means they are now required to develop the alternative water sources required to meet demand. In turn, this means that they are committed over the next ten years to investing in these alternative sources, the main ones being a new reservoir, a desalination plant and increased use of grey water by their industrial customers. They will also be working on demand reduction initiatives and doing more to fix leaks in the system. The Association cannot claim all the credit for the Inquiry outcome, but we contributed to it by consistently and doggedly lobbying alongside our partners – for the best part of eight years. Partnerships matter. Patience helps! Very little can be achieved when it comes to the long-term health of the chalkstreams without working closely with others on long-term goals.

### **A small success**

Whilst the Association trumpet is out, I can also give it a small toot to mark the success we have had in prompting a change of heart from the Environment Agency on the swingeing increases they were planning in what they charge river owners to permit river restoration and maintenance projects. We made a strong case that by charging hundreds if not thousands of pounds for a licence to undertake projects to improve the environmental condition of the river and riverbank, they were penalising the very people they should be encouraging to undertake this essential work, with no obvious added benefit. The Environment Agency published the response to the consultation exercise in April. They accepted that the increased charges risked being counter-productive and introduced a new category of permit under which the price of a licence for work of environmental value remained unchanged from the past. This change of heart will hopefully save some of you hundreds, perhaps thousands, of pounds when undertaking river restoration and maintenance projects in the future. So, a small demonstration of how the Association can help our members in practical ways. And a small toot on the Association trumpet!

### **Water quality**

Something that remains of real concern to many of you is poor water quality - which directly impacts on the number and range of invertebrates living in the chalkstreams. Where have all the river flies gone? is an often-heard refrain. The Association has been busy on this issue. We have trained a significant number of invertebrate monitors to collect the data we need on river fly numbers. We have paid for the collection and expert analysis of invertebrate samples in the Test, Itchen and Meon to establish clear and scientifically robust base-lines. The Test and Itchen data was captured in a hopefully intelligible format in a Study produced by Wessex Chalk Streams and Rivers Trust (WCSRT) for our members in 2016. We have paid WCSRT to produce a similar Study for the Meon which we hope to distribute to the membership later this year. We have worked with others in the past to call successfully for new phosphate discharge regulations from watercress farms which have now been implemented and are being complied with. We are lobbying hard with others to stop one of the watercress companies being permitted to send harmful chemicals used to clean their washing and packing plants into the headwaters of the Itchen. We have also worked with others on projects to prevent excessive levels of sediment getting into the rivers – we know that excessive nutrient (including phosphate) and sediment levels are the two main culprits. And the many river restoration projects that our members are carrying out create the river habitat invertebrates need to thrive.

The Board discussed the issue at their meeting in June. Whilst there are some encouraging signs – one of the autumn 2017 samples from the Meon had over 8,000 *gammarus* (freshwater shrimps) present against a recently agreed target of 500 for a healthy chalkstream, the Lower Itchen appears to be thriving – there are more causes for concern. The Upper Wiltshire Avon, the exemplar of what a chalkstream might aspire to be in terms of invertebrate numbers when I first started getting to grips with *ephemera danica*, *alainites muticus*, *baetis rhodani et al* a couple of years ago has seen a recent and dramatic decline in invertebrate numbers: small waste water treatment plants discharging into the river course are the main suspects. Closer to home, things clearly “ain’t what they used to be”, and should be, on the Upper Itchen and Middle Test.

Mayfly



*Ephemera danica*

Iron Blue



*Alainites muticus*

Large Dark Olive



*Baetis rhodani*

The Board have directed that the Association should do more on the issue. Neither they nor I have all the answers – if there were simple solutions they would have been implemented years ago. But it is almost certainly going to involve working with others to collect robust evidence pinpointing specific sources of pollution that are damaging the rivers and then using this evidence to encourage and cajole the regulatory authorities and those responsible for the pollution in the first place to do something about it. This approach is not new. It is the process that led to effective action being taken to limit phosphate discharges from watercress farms. But we need to ramp up the scale and pace of activity. The sort of multi-point, continuous, chemical monitoring that this is likely to involve doesn't come cheap. The Board will support the use of the Association's limited reserves to finance work that has a realistic chance of delivering a clearly identified outcome. And if additional resources would improve the chances of success then I might well approach the membership for donations.

### **Swans**

Along with poor water quality, swan damage to river weed was the issue of greatest concern to you when we surveyed the membership last year. I have spent a lot of time over the last six months collating the evidence and putting together applications for swan control licences for the Middle and Upper Test and Upper Itchen. Thank you to all those who have contributed ideas and information and who have hosted visits from the Natural England officer considering the applications. I had hoped that the licences would have been issued in time for the licensed activity – removal of eggs from nests, leaving two in place – to have been effective this year. But bureaucratic wheels turn slowly and the applications are still working their way up the Natural England hierarchy. A couple of months ago, I had good reason to be optimistic that the licences would be issued in due course. I am a little less optimistic now. The adjusted objective is to have them in place in good time for next year. In the meantime, I will continue the process of consultation and seeking landowner permissions.

### **Members Day at Longstock**

Our members are well aware of all the challenges the chalk streams face, but I am sure most of you still marvel at the beauty and tranquillity of these special places and count yourself fortunate to have the opportunity to fish or enjoy in some other way these world-renowned rivers. If there is a finer place on earth to be in May and June I have yet to find it. Our members day at Longstock on the Leckford Estate on 8 June was a chance to celebrate all that makes the chalk streams such special places, learn a little more about the environment and have some fun. We were blessed with a perfect day. There was a casting competition, a casting clinic and fly-tying demonstrations, as well as fishing on the Longstock lakes, for the fishermen. And guided riverside walks, an introduction to river fly life and an opportunity to visit the stunning Estate Water Gardens for those interested in the natural beauty of the Middle Test valley in early June. We all came together in the middle of the day for a magnificent Hog Roast lunch provided by the Leckford Estate keepers. The day seemed to be thoroughly enjoyed by all who came. It was also a good opportunity for the Association to invite as our guests

representatives of organisations with which we work closely. It is the first time the Association has run such an event to the best of my knowledge. Many thanks to all those of you who gave your time to help run some of the stands and activities. We will definitely aim to do something similar next summer. I cannot think of a better venue than Leckford for such an event, but please let me know if you are aware of a location which can offer the same range of activities in such a stunning, secluded setting.



*Casting Competition*



*River Fly Life Stand*

### **Members day at Sparsholt**

Our next membership event will be at Sparsholt on **Friday 26 October**. The format will be a series of talks and presentations in the morning on subjects of interest to our members, followed by lunch and a river visit in the afternoon. We will send out an invitation with more details nearer the time. **It will help ensure that all our members receive such invitations if we have up to date contacting details. You will be receiving with this newsletter notification of the contacting details we currently hold for you. If some of the details are wrong, please let us know in whatever way is easiest for you – email, phone or snail mail.**

### **and finally.....**

The above will give you a good idea of some of the things the Association will be working on over the next few months. In addition, we will be conducting a review of the weed cut arrangements on the Test with a view to simplifying and improving them: the Board will be looking at the dates for 2019 at their meeting in September. We will be commissioning articles for the next annual Rivers Report – we received very positive feedback on the last one and will aim to produce something of a similar quality. I have become a little envious of the snappily produced newsletters put out by some of the organisations we work with - I am sure the fact they are put together by people half my age with no doubt significantly more advanced IT skills has got something to do it. I will aim to master a software package which should produce a more professional product if it doesn't take up too much of my time.

Jacqui and I hope you have had some time to enjoy the riverbank this summer.

*Jeremy Legge, Executive Director*

*Kimbridge, 27 June 2018*

