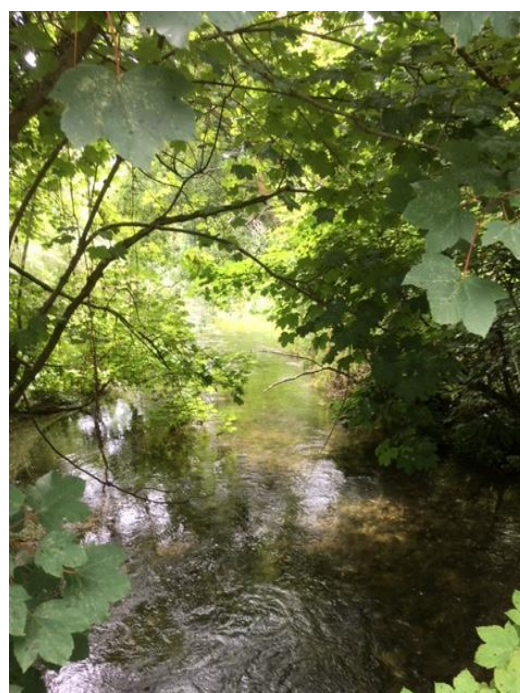


2019 MID-SEASON NEWSLETTER

I have spent the last couple of days moving up and down the Hampshire chalkstreams - walking the length of the Upper Itchen, visiting the Portals paper mill at Overton on the Upper Test and with rod in hand on the Anton at Goodworth Clatford. Despite some record temperatures in late July, the Hampshire countryside is still looking at its verdant best.



River Itchen at Abbots Worthy, July 2019



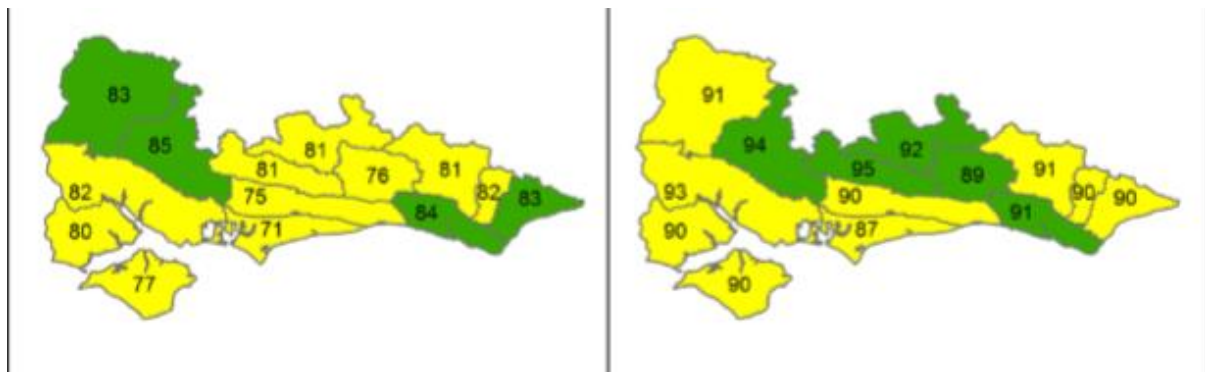
River Test Carrier at Bossington, July 2019

River Flows

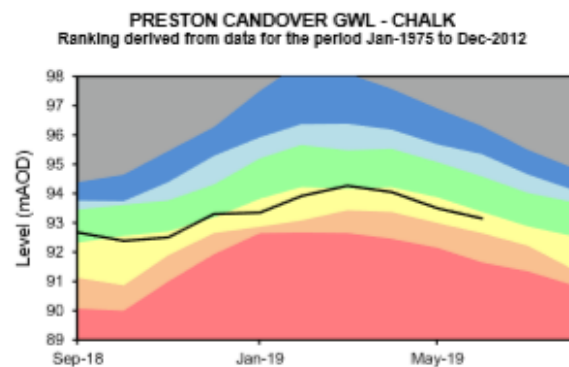
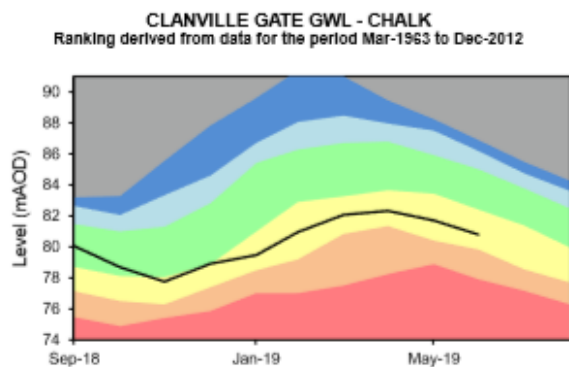
A few hot days in July are not going to have a significant impact on chalkstream river flows, but the Test and Itchen are beginning to show the effects of a relatively dry winter and spring. The chalk aquifer was not fully recharged and groundwater levels stayed lower than average. River flows were consequently below normal when the fishing season started in April and they have continued to drop. By September they are likely to be notably low. The correlation between past rainfall and current groundwater levels and river flows can be seen clearly in the graphs on the next page.

One consequence of low river flows is that Southern Water have started the process of applying for a Drought Permit on the River Test. If granted - the process takes up to 60 days - this Permit would allow them to continue abstracting water from the Test when the flow falls below the level that was agreed at last year's Abstraction Inquiry. Temporary Use Bans (TUBs) - otherwise known as Hosepipe Bans - are likely to be introduced beforehand. Southern Water like to suggest that TUBs and Drought Permits will be more regular

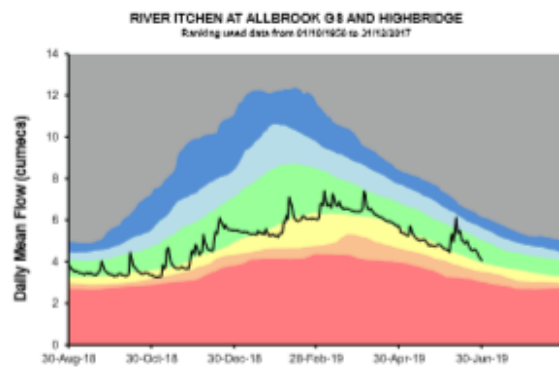
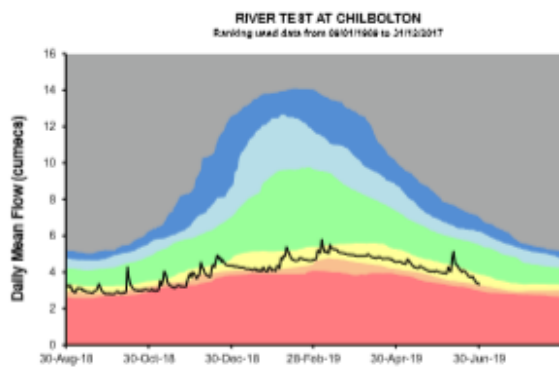
occurrences following the reduction in their abstraction licences. In a sense they are right, but the real cause is their failure to invest in new sources of water – reservoirs, desalination plants, more water re-use etc – despite being nagged by the Association and others to do so for more than 10 years. It does seem they are at last going to make the necessary investments, forced into action by the Abstraction Inquiry outcome, but it is going to take the best part of 10 years for these new sources to become available. In the meantime, TUBs and Drought Permits are likely to be used more often than they have been in the past.



Rainfall in Solent and South Downs area as percentage of Long Term Average over the last 6 and 12 months



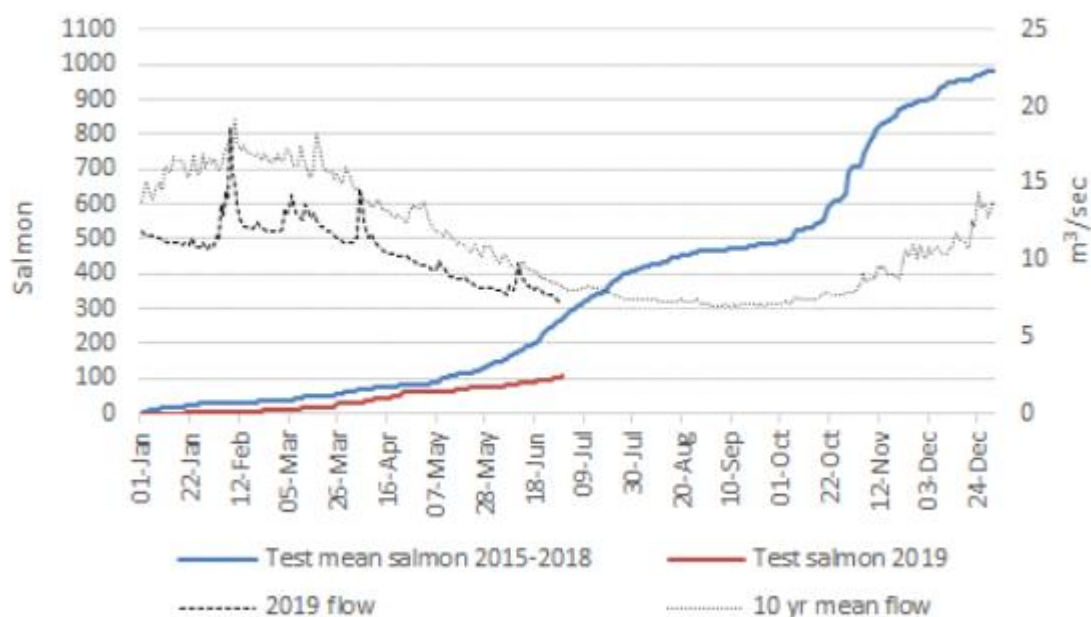
Groundwater levels in the Upper Test and Upper Itchen valleys



River flows on the Test and Itchen

Salmon numbers

Low river flows are concerning for all sorts of reasons. Of particular concern is the impact of low flows on migratory fish: salmon and sea trout need decent flows to encourage them to move up river. Declining numbers of salmon and sea trout entering the Test and Itchen were already a concern: 683 salmon were recorded entering the Test in 2019 which was about half the number in 2018. The Itchen saw similar declines. The graph below shows that up to the beginning of July this year only 100 salmon entered the Test (compared to an average of 300 by the same time over the last three years). The graph also shows clearly the likely contribution of low flows to this reduction in numbers. The recent heavy rainfall will hopefully encourage more salmon and sea trout to move up the rivers, but I write that with my fingers firmly crossed.



River Test salmon numbers and river flow

What can be done for salmon and sea trout other than keeping our fingers crossed? There is no magic wand, but there are things that can be and are being done. One of the main justifications for the reduced abstraction licences was to improve the chances for migratory fish by maintaining river flows. The Association and others have lobbied for further restrictions on coastal and inshore netting. The creation of more and better spawning habitats, river restoration projects, the removal of obstacles to upstream migration and the creation of fish passages are all happening. Southern Water, to give credit where credit is due, have made available millions of pounds to fund some of these projects.

In this International Year of the Salmon we should be doing more to conserve the chalkstream salmon and sea trout populations. With this in mind, the Association will shortly be writing to all river owners, not just those with salmon fisheries, encouraging them to sign a letter supporting efforts to conserve salmon and sea trout stocks. The reason for this is that to some the Association might be perceived to be acting on behalf of a small number of salmon

fisheries with a vested interest when lobbying for measures to support migratory fish. The truth is that supporting migratory fish is in all owners' best interests – one rather astonishing fact I learnt on a visit to the Game Conservancy and Wildlife Trust research facility on the River Frome is that more than 70% of the wild brown trout in our chalkstreams are the progeny of sea trout.

Southern Water

Many of you will have been as shocked as I was to read in the news recently why OFWAT fined Southern Water millions of pounds and required them to reduce customer bills by over £120 million over the next few years. In short, Southern Water deliberately misled the regulators on the operation of their sewage treatment plants, suggesting that they were meeting discharge targets when they were not. Southern Water are still the subject of a criminal investigation by the Environment Agency (EA) so the details of exactly what happened where in their large waste water network remain unclear. If there is any solace for the chalkstreams, it is that I understand that the worst cases of effluent disposal were at some of their direct-to-sea facilities as opposed to those that discharge into the Test and Itchen. The OFWAT investigation was prompted in part by admissions from Southern Water's new leadership team that they had found some smelly skeletons in the cupboard. And there are other signs that Southern Water are determined to do more to live up to their environmental responsibilities. But this sorry saga does show the limitations of a regulatory and monitoring system largely based on self-reporting by the big industrial water users.

Water quality

Water quality and its impact on river invertebrates continues to be the issue of greatest concern to most of our members. Two stories, one from the Upper Itchen and one from the Upper Test, which say something about the scale of the challenge and provide some reasons why one might be cautiously optimistic about the future.

Bakkavor and the Watercress Company run large salad washing and cress production facilities at Bighton on the Arle, an Itchen headwater. These were the subject of a recently concluded Environmental Damage investigation by the EA. The headlines of the Investigation report were that the facilities were not causing environmental damage. This was somewhat baffling to anybody who had read the evidence submitted to the EA about the state of the Arle downstream of the facilities. The EA presented 80 pages of their own evidence to justify their conclusions. I think the key points are that the EA are bound by the relevant regulations and directives as to how they define the required environmental standards, what constitutes environmental damage and over what period they are investigating whether the river is declining or improving. This investigation methodology results in conclusions which appear to fly in the face of what people who know the river best know to be the case. So a bit depressing. The cause for optimism is that the investigation will be followed by the imposition of new discharge permits for the sites concerned and it has encouraged the companies to change voluntarily how they operate and clean their facilities, for example by no longer using chlorine-based products. This will lead to improvements in water quality in due course.

Reductions in the amount of fertiliser used by Itchen cress farms has already led to reductions in phosphate levels in the river which is good news for invertebrates.

On the Upper Test, the biggest single site source of phosphate entering the river is the Portals paper mill at Overton, which also abstracts colossal amounts of water from the aquifer – most of which is discharged to the river so probably the net effect is to increase river flow. A new leadership team at Portals, put in place after the site was sold by De La Rue, is investing over £10 million in processes and equipment to reduce their water use and reduce the amount of phosphate which is discharged as effluent into the Upper Test via a number of lagoons. So hopefully another win for the chalkstreams.

What is the Association's role in all this? As recent events have clearly demonstrated, we should not rely on monitoring data provided by the companies. So the Association has invested in independent monitoring, often in conjunction with other like-minded organisations, to establish the state of the rivers. Invertebrate monitoring is the most cost-effective method of doing this so we will be continuing Salmon and Trout Conservation's River Fly Census project on the Test and Itchen and have undertaken a similar exercise on the Meon with the Wessex Chalkstreams and Rivers Trust. We are talking to Portals about measuring phosphate levels in the Test upstream and downstream of their site to measure the impact of the work they are undertaking to reduce their phosphate discharges. We have trained some of our members in basic and advanced invertebrate monitoring. And much else besides.

Fishing

Water quality has a direct impact on river fly life which in turn has a direct impact on the quality of the fishing one can enjoy on the chalkstreams. What has the 2019 season been like so far? From the conversations I have had with owners, keepers and fishermen, the answer varies enormously depending on where you are, but my overall sense is "So so, not great, not bad." Some fisheries had good early season sport on Grannom and Hawthorn. The Mayfly on the Test was a protracted affair lasting over a month but never really got going. On the Itchen there were some huge but spasmodic hatches. Water clarity has been generally good, but with low flows and some hot weather the fishing has recently been challenging. Blanket weed has started to make an appearance.

Weed cuts

The new Sectors on the Upper Test appear to have had the desired effect: the wardens have reported that there has been sufficient time to clear down the cut weed in the scheduled timeframe. On some of the tributaries and on the Lower Test the June weed cut was more fractious than usual. Low flows were probably partly to blame. Poor communication between upstream and downstream neighbours was often a contributory factor. The wardens can only help if they have access to the river. In the vast majority of places this is not an issue. In one or two places it has become a problem, normally following a change of ownership or management. I will be in touch with the owners concerned at the end of the season if these access issues remain unresolved.

The July clear down on the Test was something of a Herculean task for the keepers concerned given the low flows and the extreme temperatures. The fact that the clear down was completed on time and on schedule without major incident is a testament to their dedication and hard work. They have also been working hard to combat what seems to have been an increase in poaching. Watching keepers on all the Hampshire chalkstreams, the EA and the local police working so effectively together via their Whatsapp group has been heartening.

The office

Ingrid has been hard at work. The Association has leapt into the 21st Century with an online banking facility. We have a new accounts package with a direct feed from our bank which will reduce significantly the amount of time spent on administering ourselves. We continue to have a problem with our landline telephone number (01794 341874). If you ring it you will be directed to a Kimbridge Estate Office answering machine. Do leave a message – it will be forwarded to us promptly. But do call Jeremy (07393195175) or Ingrid (07742104366) on their mobiles if you want to talk directly to us. We hope to have the landline issue resolved shortly.

...and finally

Reading through the above, I think it might be full of a bit too much gloom and doom. Some of our members probably think there should be more gloom and doom. It depends on your perspective. For my own perspective, I should take you back to the Upper Anton where I was fishing a couple of evenings ago thanks to the generosity of one of our members. My journey there took me up the Test valley, glistening in the early evening sunshine after a day of dramatic thunderstorms. On the Anton, the ranunculus was moving gently from side to side in the crystal clear water. Some trout were feeding on the surface. After a very enjoyable two hours which ended in an honourable draw between me and the trout, I sat down to enjoy the last few minutes of daylight, surrounded by purple loosestrife, meadowsweet and other wild flowers the names of which are almost as beautiful as the plants themselves. A mother duck fussed over her ducklings. Mid-stream, a trout continued to sip something from the surface which I had failed to identify when trying to catch it. A kingfisher flashed up the river. A heron on the opposite bank stared as intently at the water as I should have been when fishing. I concluded that whilst the Hampshire chalkstreams have many problems, they remain magical places. We should redouble our efforts to conserve and protect them. Your membership of the Association and your subscriptions enable us to carry on this vital work. Thank you for your support.

Jeremy Legge, Executive Director

Kimbridge, 1 August 2019