

ENVIRONMENTAL WORKING GROUP REPORT

Prepared by Councillors Hilary Brazier and Nick Pettit
11th September 2023

1 River Colne on The Common , Colney Heath

- 1.1 The management of the River Colne, which flows through The Common, must be regarded as a top priority for the Parish Council. Given its ecological importance as a rare Chalk Stream, it needs to be managed and carefully looked after. Chalk Streams are a particular type of lowland river characterised by clear water and a diverse flora. They are fed by chalk 'aquifers' underground so the very pure water is rich in minerals and remains at a fairly constant temperature year-round.
- 1.2 In mid August, Cllrs Brazier and Pettit did a river walk and survey along the Colne in Colney Heath. It was noted an abundance of overgrown vegetation on both the South and North banks and barely any water flow along the river. There was also heavy algae in the shady areas and litter and debris deposited in certain places. Under both road bridges, vegetation was particularly heavy and overgrown.
- 1.3 The previous Parish Council had began plans to improve the River Colne on The Common by drafting in help and advice from Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust (as well as providing more guidance on the maintenance and management of The Common itself). A comprehensive report on the The Common and the River Colne was subsequently prepared by Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust and submitted to the Parish Council.
- 1.4 Cllrs Brazier and Pettit met with Tim Hill from Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust on September 4th, to review this report and get professional advice as to what action should be taken, in particular the current state and mangement of the River Colne.
- 1.5 Mr Hill gave us a lot of background information on the current state of UK chalk steams / rivers and UK rivers in general. The overall picture is not a good one, but especially here in the South East. A 2019 study, highlighted the worrying fact that only 14% of UK rivers are in good quality.
- 1.6 More worryingly, water in the South East is being used at an alarming rate by residents and commercial premises. Hertfordshire itself is the highest water-stressed county in the UK. It is predicted that at the going usage rate, water by 2040 will be a scarcity! It's a worrying prospect.
- 1.7 Cllrs Brazier and Pettit presented their current findings about the River Colne and asked Mr Hill for his opinion. Although currently looking pretty sorry for itself because of a lack of water flow and overgrown vegetation (not helped by lots of summer rain and bursts of sunshine), he gave assurance that all is not doom and gloom. Many rivers in the county are suffering and are in a similar condition.
- 1.8 Mr Hill advised that the Parish Council's first priority should be to register the 'poor state' of the River Colne in Colney Heath to the 'Colne Catchment Action Network' – a group that contains representatives from the parish's local water provider, Affinity Water. He did this on our behalf on 6th September. Affinity Water has a legal responsibility to the rivers it draws water from, including the Colne, so it is hoped that by registering the Parish Council's interest, we will be able to work with Affinity Water and access 'ringfenced' funds to help with improvements along the course of the River Colne in Colney Heath in the coming months.

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- 1.9 Mr Hill also advised that Cllrs can organise local initiated works along the Colne to help improve the current 'look' and 'health' of the river. These include:
- 1.10 1. Cutting back the bank vegetation – this needs to be done professionally by a landscape maintenance contractor as there is a lot to do. It should be done in late Autumn once bird nesting has ceased and the risk to animal habitats is minimal. Debris needs to be cleared and taken away. Tenders need to be actioned to organise this work.
- 1.11 2. Organising a 'clean-up' along the course of the river. Cllrs Brazier and Petit would like to lead this in the next couple of months, but the task will require resident volunteer helpers. Council and Clerk to advise.
- 1.12 3. The Colne has an invasive plant species called Himalayan Balsam growing along its banks. If left, it could take over all along the river banks. Mr Hill advised that seed samples from the Himalayan Balsam are taken asap along the course of the Colne. These can be sent away to be analysed to decipher the particular plant variety which if applicable, can then be sprayed with a 'rust' liquid to slow down and stunt its growth. It cannot be eradicated totally as it is already established, but we can certainly manage it. Cllrs Brazier and Pettit will be taking the seed samples, liaising with Mr Hill and then sending off the samples.
- 1.13 4. Mr Hill also advised that the Parish Council could buy some 'Tree Poppers' – these are devices that pull out 'baby' tree shrubs by the roots and stop them establishing themselves on The Common. Cllrs Brazier and Pettit would like this to be considered as part of the Parish Council's overall budget. Each popper costs approx £300; a recommended supplier is Nature Conservation Services (NCS). Self seeding trees can become highly invasive and The Common is being blighted in places by them. Managing the saplings via a team of volunteers walking the Common pulling them out would be a cost-effective way of keeping certain tree species under control.

2 The Common, Colney Heath

- 2.1 Works are being organised for the cutting of The Common mid-Autumn which, apart from the pathways, has been left to rewild over the Summer months (and spectacular it has been with an abundance of wildlife and flora growing freely). This will be done in October 2023.
- 2.2 Tenders are being submitted to the Parish Council to cut and clear The Warren. Cllr Petit has been liaising with the Common Ranger to organise this. Currently we have interest from Tylers and Skidmores, but we are expecting a third tender w/c 11th September from John O'Connor Grounds Maintenance. Cllr Pettit and the Ranger will be meeting with Alan Wadsworth from O'Connor's.
- 2.3 Mr Hill has also advised that the Parish Council invite livestock grazing back onto The Warren next Spring / Summer to help with the management of the grass and scrub. As a starting point, Cllr Pettit will contact Willows Farm w/c 11th September to gauge whether this might be of interest. The recommended livestock for grazing is cattle, however sheep or horses can be used. If there is no interest from Willows Farm, Mr Hill advised that we could spread the word locally or maybe place an advert into a local publication.

3 Horseshoe Field, Smallford

- 3.1 Cllr Brazier emailed Smallford Residents' Association in August to arrange a meeting to hear resident's views and to gauge their ideas for the field. As yet, no reply has been received.