

A special edition of 'WBH'

*This 41st issue of **What's Beane Happening** is a special edition to say a huge 'thank you' to Phil Hewett, pictured right, who has edited and laid out the previous 40 issues of this newsletter since its first edition back in 2012.*

Over the past 40 issues, many milestones in the RBRA's history have been reached and reported on: most notably, after years of campaigning, the cessation of abstraction from the Whitehall pumping station in 2017, and the reintroduction of water voles in 2022.

Another key event was the release of the RBRA's award-winning film 'On the banks of the Beane' in 2014. The original music used in the film was written and performed by Phil Hewett and Jim Coombes.

Phil's staying involved with the RBRA, but as more of us turn to social media for our news feeds and with fewer offers of material coming through, he's decided to take a step back from editing and laying out our print-style newsletter.

As we move forward, we'll need to think about how and when we publish our news. It could be argued that in this 'digital age', a quarterly or half yearly newsletter might be a bit 'old hat'. But on the other hand, there is something satisfying about reading



Photo: Peter White

the news all in one place, and it also acts as a valuable archive.

We'd welcome your thoughts on how we keep you up to date in the future, but for now we all thank you Phil for capturing the RBRA's journey over the past 40 editions: its 'Beane' a wonderful record of all our happenings.

Pete, RBRA Chair

Are you following us on Facebook?

Ironical maybe, after the story above, but if you haven't already found our Facebook updates, maybe now's the time to take a look? We try to put something online at least once a week, with items about our volunteering opportunities, the state of the river, and progress of the new restoration project too.

Currently we have just shy of 500 followers online (497 as I type this!), and unlike this newsletter it's a two-way process with readers adding comments or asking questions too, which makes it much more engaging.

facebook.com/RiverBeane



Photos: Dave Ashby

Above: The recent floods made a good online conversation piece.

Phase 3 begins at Woodhall

An exciting third stage of river restoration is underway at the Woodhall Estate, with an extensive new, re-wiggled channel being created. **Turn to Page 3 to read more...**



Photo: Peter White

RBRA out on the road...

Through the year we have taken the 'RBRA roadshow' to village fairs and our first 'Open Farm Sunday'.



Back in May the RBRA took a stall at Walkern's village fair. We had a good number of people come and talk to us about the river, and there was a lot of interest in the riverfly sample of invertebrate life we had in trays on the stand – especially from local children.

We repeated this successful formula for our stand at Watton Church Fete later in the month.

And then again in early June we were amongst the stalls at the Woodhall Estate's Open Farm Sunday – the first time the Estate

had joined in with this national farm open day. Here too we set up our stall and had plenty of river life out on show. One lucky visitor saw a Blue Winged Olive fly hatch out in front of their eyes as they fished around in our sample trays. Our stall had the lovely backdrop of an earlier restoration project, although rather too deep to allow a live demonstration of the sampling technique there.

Our final planned appearance for 2024 would have seen us at the Hertford EcoFest on

22 September. Sadly this event was cancelled owing to the forecast of heavy rain and thunderstorms. As it happened, the rain held off until after the event's planned closing time... but then, boy did it rain, with over a month's worth of rain falling in just 24 hours.

*Left: Our stall at Walkern Fair
Centre: Blue winged Olive hatched out in one visitor's sample spoon
Right: RBRA Chair Pete was slightly distracted during Open Farm Sunday!*

Water voles are spreading fast!

Following the reintroduction of Water Voles to the Beane in 2022, our 'vole-nteer' monitors carry out twice-yearly surveys to chart the progress of these scarce, chalkstream specialists. Rarely do you actually see a Water Vole in the flesh, so instead our teams are looking for the tell-tale evidence that they are around: their poo and feeding signs!

The surveys this spring showed that our population continues to spread. From an initial release along a few hundred metres of channel, evidence of vole activity was found at the very north end of the Woodhall Estate and all the way down to Waterford Marsh – several kilometres of river. A visitor at Watton Fete thought they'd seen voles further north, into Watton itself. Bob Thornton went along to check this out and did indeed confirm there were signs of voles there too. This is great news. We'll be carrying out the autumn surveys around mid October and hope to be able to report an even greater spread in our next results. Watch for an update via Facebook.

BioBlitz is back



After a successful trial last year, a host of experts will be carrying out a BioBlitz at Waterford Marsh on October 12th, trying to identify as many species as possible, on land and in the water. Guided walks, Riverfly demonstrations and much more through the day too.

Read more and sign up to come along and see, help and enjoy (it's free) at hertswildlifetrustevents.org.uk/event/12oct24-bioblitz-waterford or scan the QR code...

River Restoration at Woodhall Park: phase 3

Two earlier phases of restoration have been carried out within the Woodhall Estate in recent years which have brought about significant improvements to the ecology of the river and have bypassed several large obstructions to fish migration. Work is now underway for a third and larger phase of work, due to be completed by Christmas.

Words and photos: Peter White

A recent survey of the whole of the River Beane system concluded, amongst other things, that almost all the river has been extensively modified over the years, with much of the channel being straightened out and deepened, and often moved away from its original course and natural line to provide power to long-gone watermills or to drain areas of land for grazing and farming.



The first dig for the new channel

As well as being highly detrimental to the ecology of the river this also has resulted in the channel being disconnected from its floodplain and so unable to spread out at times of peak flow – which, if this were able to happen, would reduce the risks of flooding further downstream.

A comprehensive design for this next phase was created by consultants cbec Ecoengineering on behalf of Affinity Water; and presented at our Open Meeting back in February. Following stakeholder discussions and flood risk modelling by the Environment Agency, tweaks



Ensuring the levels are correct

were made and a final plan approved over the Summer. Work started on site at the beginning of September and is expected to take around twelve weeks to complete.

The scheme will restore nearly one kilometre of the River Beane to a much more natural state, with a shallower, winding course more typical of a true chalk stream, reconnected with its flood plain and with wetland areas to either side. You may have heard the term 'rewiggling' being used? Here, not only are the wiggles being brought back but the river is being moved back towards its original line as well. In places the channel is designed to be 'braided' – islands between two sections of channel – which again is typical of chalk river morphology (the term used to describe the shape and profile of a river's channel).

Unlike phases one and two, which are both in fairly private parts of the estate (although

visible from nearby rights of way), this third phase has a public footpath running right across the centre of it, meaning that once complete we'll all be able to get up close to see just how impressive this scheme is in terms of habitat restoration.

We must thank the Woodhall Estate for their desire to improve the Beane as it flows through their land. This is a true once in a lifetime scale of river restoration.

We'll be adding regular updates to our Facebook feed, and you can read a little more about the plans and see a CGI rendering of how the finished scheme will look from Affinity Water's website, here:

www.affinitywater.co.uk/sustainability/restoration/river-beane#block5



The photos here are taken from within the work area with permission from Affinity Water and the contractors Salix, and show some of the work underway.

A summer of invasive species management

Our small but growing volunteer team has been out through the late Spring and Summer tackling invasive, non-native Himalayan Balsam and controlling Giant Hogweed



Photo: Alex Sage, Affinity Water

We've reported before about the issues caused by Himalayan Balsam. This plant was introduced as a garden plant by the Victorians but is now taking over along riverbanks across the country.

While the flowers are pretty and the bees love them, Himalayan Balsam is the fastest growing annual plant in Britain, growing from a tiny seed but often reaching 2 metres tall. Because

it grows so rapidly and densely, it shades out native waterside plants. However, it has weak and shallow roots that offer little in the way of soil stabilisation. The plants die back at the first signs of Autumn, leaving the riverbanks exposed to winter floods, leading to bank collapse and siltation of the gravel river bed.

One of the best ways to control its spread is by hand-pulling the plants before they set seed. This year our volunteer team has been working at two key sites – Frogmore Park near Watton and a flood reservoir on the Stevenage Brook – and have cleared huge areas. We were joined at one visit by a large team from the offices of Affinity Water (*pictured with our volunteers above*) under their INNS Out grant scheme. Thank you all!

We'll start this all again in the late Spring 2025: do get in touch if you'd like to join our volunteer team or to let us know of other places we might look to work at.



Meanwhile, our spraying team was kept busy with large infestations of Giant Hogweed at two sites on the Stevenage Brook.

This impressive but very harmful plant has a highly corrosive sap that, after skin contact and exposure to the sun leads to painful blisters resembling chemical burns. The approved method of control is by herbicide spraying but

this can only be carried out in public places or near water by fully trained and EA-licensed individuals. Bob Thornton and Peter White have these approvals.

See more about the dangers of Giant Hogweed and how to identify it from this link: nonnativespecies.org/assets/Uploads/ID_Heracleum_mantegazzianum_Giant_Hogweed-2.pdf



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