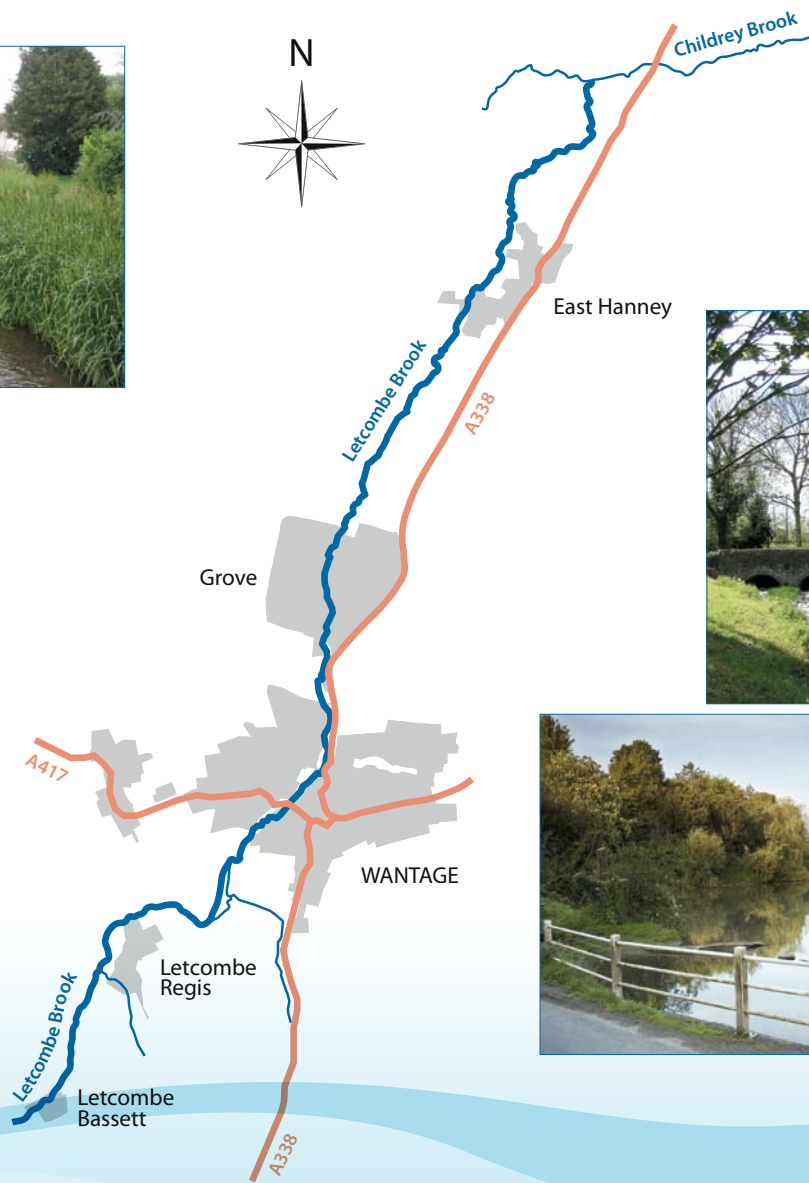


Letcombe - lede in the combe - river in the valley
Wantage - intermittent stream *Grove - thicket or copse*

THE LETCOMBE BROOK PROJECT

Achievements Report Spring 2003 - Summer 2009



Letcombe - lede in the combe - river in the valley
Wantage - intermittent stream *Grove - thicket or copse*

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Introduction

Letcombe Brook chalk stream

The Letcombe Brook is a chalk stream that rises in Letcombe Regis and Letcombe Bassett and flows for 12 kms through Wantage and Grove where it meets the Childrey Brook to the north of East Hanney.

Chalk streams are important habitats, as they are rich in biodiversity and globally rare. The Brook supports a diverse and specialised range of wildlife, some of which are endangered.

Letcombe Brook is a prominent feature running through both urban and rural landscapes in the Vale of the White Horse. People long ago chose to settle along the brook, as it provided a clean and plentiful supply of fresh water and its importance is reflected in local place names. In 1086 there were 10 mills operating on the brook, providing power and prosperity to the area. The brook would have been intensively managed, unlike today. The brook still provides water for local use today for domestic, industrial and agricultural use. It is an attractive feature much loved by local people.

There are diverse habitats along the its floodplain including farmland, chalk downland, cress beds, reedbeds, small copses, veteran willow trees, urban gardens and amenity grassland. Rivers are vulnerable habitats and it is generally recognised that it is important to safeguard them ie: Oxfordshire Biodiversity Action Plans (BAPs), Environment Agency BAPs, Natural England BAPs. The brook contains three County Wildlife Sites, along with protected species such as white-clawed crayfish and watervoles.

The Environment Agency's *'River Corridor Survey of 1999'* noted that in places the Letcombe Brook was no longer a chalk stream in character, that there had been much realignment over the years to accommodate housing, industry, roads and the railway, and it had been over-widened and deepened. Aquatic and marginal vegetation was extremely sparse with some stretches devoid of any plants. They noted numerous negative changes including reinforced banks, numerous low weirs and impoundments. It was heavily silt-laden in places and over shaded with trees, with much rubbish in the brook. Other problems included urbanisation of the environment along with over-tidying of banks and grass cutting in gardens and on amenity grassland immediately adjacent to the brook.



Local people clear out 5 skips of rubbish from the brook.

Letcombe Brook Project

The diversity and character of the brook has been shaped and changed by centuries of human endeavour and changes in land use. Over time, habitats and the river corridor landscape have deteriorated and been faced with many environmental issues and development pressures.

The Letcombe Brook Project was set up in April 2003 to enhance and protect the natural beauty of the brook and to help people appreciate and enjoy the environment. By working in partnership with local people, riparian owners, the district, parish and town councils along with other organisations, the Project has been able to bring about positive environmental benefits for both wildlife and the people that live and work along the brook.

Letcombe Brook Project objectives:

1. To conserve and enhance the biodiversity and landscape of Letcombe Brook.
2. To promote environmentally responsible land management practices amongst landowners and land managers.
3. To increase awareness of countryside and environmental issues through education and interpretation.
4. To involve all sectors of the community in caring for and appreciating the Letcombe Brook.

Organisation

The Project is co-ordinated by the Letcombe Brook Project Officer which is a part time consultancy position for 12 days a month. The Officer regularly reports to the steering group, Wantage and Grove Joint Environmental Trusts and, at various times, to parish and town councils.

The Project Officer's role is to identify and resolve issues along the Brook, design and implement environmental improvements, provide advice to riparian owners on riverside management, raise the awareness of the public through education and interpretation, report to partners and the steering committee and to seek funding for projects and the continuation of the Project Officer's post. Sally Wallington is the current Project Officer and has held the post since 2003.

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Partnership in action

The Project is a partnership project funded and supported by the Vale of the White Horse District Council, Environment Agency, Wantage Joint Environmental Trust, Grove Joint Environmental Trust, and Letcombe Regis Parish Council.

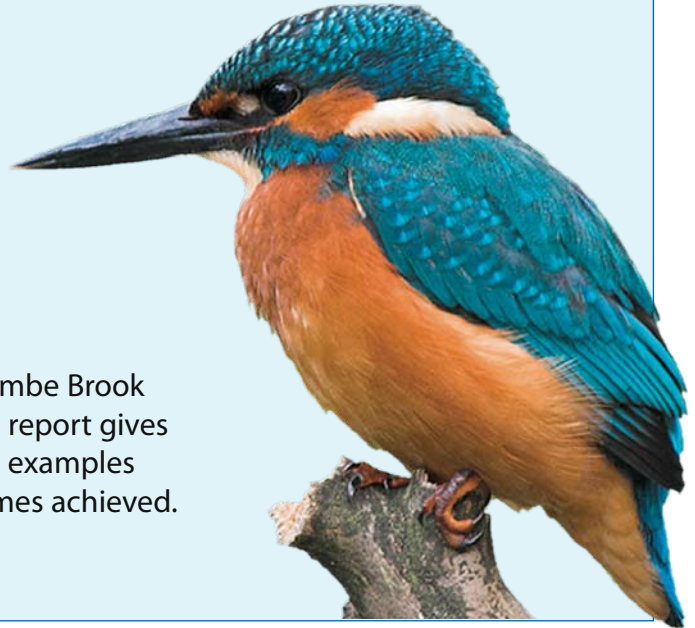


Letcombe
 Regis
 Parish Council



PROJECT REPORT

This report is a snapshot of the Projects' achievements over the last six years. Local people are at the heart of this project and its success is due to many individuals, partners and organisations that are committed to protecting and enhancing the Letcombe Brook now and for future generations. This report gives a summary of work carried out, with examples given to illustrate the type of outcomes achieved.



Objective 1:

Conserve and enhance the biodiversity and landscape of the Letcombe Brook.

Biodiversity and landscape

The character of the river, its habitats and the associated wildlife have been protected and enhanced by:

- implementing environmental improvement schemes on publicly owned land
- working through the planning process on development sites
- working with riparian owners to identify and implement schemes
- undertaking a river survey to identify important sites, followed by Protected Species Surveys.

River enhancement and management

Previously degraded and in some sections unmanaged, the brook has now been improved:

- The over-widened silted riverbed has been narrowed to speed up flows and scour out silt to restore the gravel bed.
- Numerous low weirs have been removed to restore the natural flow characteristics.
- Trees on over-shaded channel sections have been pollarded or coppiced to introduce light, allowing aquatic and marginal vegetation to flourish.
- Reinforced and eroded banks have been sympathetically restored using coir fibre rolls, providing vegetation for trout and refuges for water voles.

- Rubbish has been removed and fly-tipping significantly reduced.
- Local people are reporting pollution incidents more readily to the Environment Agency to enable effective action.
- Duck grazing and erosion has been hugely reduced through a public awareness campaign.

Local people have reported on how much more cared for and attractive the brook looks with more aquatic plants such as water crowfoot and starwort, an increased number and size of wild brown trout and a huge reduction in litter and fly-tipping. Biological sampling of invertebrates at various sites also confirms that the ecology and water quality of the brook appears to be improving.

Public open space improvements

Several projects to improve the habitats and landscapes have been carried out by working with our partners on land in their ownership.

Wantage, VWHDC

The brook corridor through Wantage has been transformed in recent years with developments (on Limborough Road) opening up access to the brook along with environmental enhancement schemes carried out by the Project in Willow Walk and at the Wharf in Mill Street.

- **Willow Walk (2004)**



An over-widened silted riverbank has been narrowed. Dappled shade has been introduced to a previously completely shaded channel. Unmanaged veteran trees have been pollarded, and over-mature willow copse coppiced. New boardwalks and fencing were installed to improve access. Community consultation, guided walks and interpretation boards have raised awareness. Several clean-up events with local residents removed eight skips of rubbish from the brook. The improvements have been very popular with local people and subsequently they care more for the area and continue with litter picking and removing obstructions. The project cost £31,666.25 (excl Vat) and the major funder was WREN (Waste Recycling Environmental based in Norwich) with contributions from VWHDC,



Wantage JET and local company Autotype.

- **Mill Green, Mill Street (2007 – 2009)**

This area (otherwise known as the Wharf) is very prominent in the town and was very unattractive with nearly a hundred ducks causing severely eroded banks with no vegetation. The grass area was over shaded by trees, which were too crowded along with straggly, unmanaged planting and a broken

seat. Rats were regularly seen with burrows under planting beds and there was a lot of rubbish on the bed of the brook.

The project proceeded in two phases. Firstly the revetment works restored 52m of bank. As the area is heavily used by people a robust solution was needed to prevent future erosion. Stone filled gabions were used, fronted with coir fibre rolls planted with marginal plants. Alongside this a duck welfare



Before

awareness campaign successfully reduced the number of ducks attracted by people feeding them with bread, which had been causing erosion and pollution. The project cost £14,008.97 (excl Vat) primarily funded by WREN and supported by Wantage JET, and VWHDC.

The second phase was aimed at making the area more attractive by improving the design, layout and access and included: the creation of new entrances with decorative block paving, installation of attractive railings to enclose the park and help direct people to safe crossing areas, removal of exotic shrub beds and non-native trees to create more light and reduce overcrowding, re-siting the post box and lamp standard, installing 2 new benches and 3 litter bins. An interpretation board on the history of the area and the ecology of the Letcombe Brook will complete this project. The LBP initiated the Project and applied for funding. The Landscape section at the VWHDC designed and managed the project which cost £30,499.00. It was funded primarily by WREN with contributions from Bill Atkinson, (Bush Buy), VWHDC and Wantage JET.



After

Grove, VWHDC

With less development pressures the Project identified schemes to restore eroded banks and enhance biodiversity and the landscape.

- **Village Green (2005)**
Erosion was occurring at the toe of the bank, and the bank was re-graded and vegetated with marginal plants using coir fibre rolls. Grove JET funded the project: £3146 (excl Vat).

- **Sharland Close (2006)**
The banks were eroded by ducks and children accessing the stream and these were repaired using weldmesh panels backed with stone and vegetated with coir fibre rolls. Local residents were consulted and Grove JET funded the works - £4114 (excl Vat).
- **Mably Way Enhancements (2006)**
The Project commissioned specifications and guidelines for the creation and management of a new wildflower meadow alongside the brook at Mably Way using local native flora. Several veteran willow pollards were pollarded along the cycle way.

Letcombe Regis, Parish Council (2008 - 2009)

- **Millenium Green**
The Project is working with the Parish Council on a small piece of land next to the Brook. Improvements include tree pollarding, re-fencing the brook, removal of weir to improve natural river flows and planting of native marginal vegetation.



Grove JET members

Planning and developments

The Project aims to work in partnership with the VWHDC planning department and developers to secure long-term benefits for biodiversity, landscaping and public access via planning applications and Section 106 Agreements. This role is particularly important, as the VWHDC does not have in-house ecological expertise. In 2004 a Continuing Professional Development event on planning and ecological issues was held in association with the Environment Agency this included raising awareness about the opportunities that could be taken through the planning process. The Project also comments on strategies and policies such as the Local Plan and Grove and Wantage Market Health Check.

The Project welcomes opportunities to work proactively with developers and the planning department before planning applications are submitted. This ensures that habitats and species are protected with the potential impact of

planning decisions on biodiversity being fully considered upfront, thereby allowing appropriate mitigation measures to be put in place. This protects the existing biodiversity and enhances the ecological integrity of the brook, both during construction and for the future, thereby making sure a positive and sustainable legacy is left for future generations.

The Letcombe Brook corridor has been subject to rapid recent change and over the years the Project has been involved as an advisor in assessing 21 developments along the Brook. These have ranged from small applications such as change of use from agriculture to garden through to Environmental Impact Assessments and large housing schemes.

Examples of outcomes achieved through planning applications:

Wantage

There have been several significant developments particularly in Limborough Road including Sainsburys petrol station, Letcombe Park, Willow Grange, Sainsburys store and car parking.



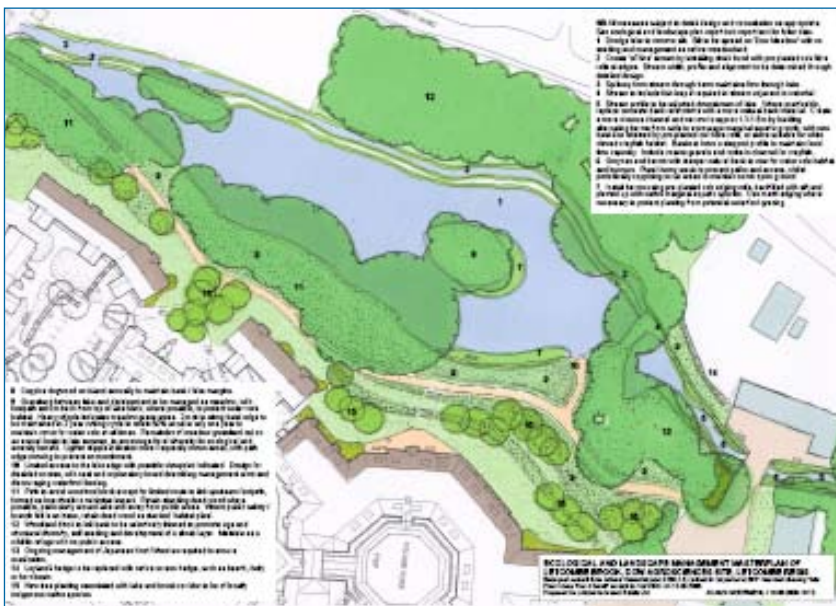
Letcombe Park revetment work

Letcombe Park, Barratt Homes (2003-2008)

After five years of dealing with the architects landscaping plans, numerous changes in development staff and VWHDC enforcement notices the restoration of the Letcombe Brook on this site was completed by the Project. The developer's initial landscaping scheme failed due to vandalism, poor implementation due to bad workmanship, incorrect planting stock and lack of maintenance.

This proved costly in the end for the developer as the initial scheme failed and had to be reinstalled. The Project made repeated requests to Barratt Homes who ignored best practice advice on implementing the scheme and on protecting the scheme against vandals and ducks. Vandals dismantled an island, exposed footings on the bridge, damaged revetments and used the stone to build weirs and impound the brook raising levels by 300mm. Ducks ate all the bank side plants from the coir fibre rolls and the scheme at that time had not been fully implemented with regard bank works, wildflower buffer strip and tree management works.

After much negotiation and involvement of a local councillor Barratt Homes paid the Project £32,234.50 to renew and complete the work.



Landscape plans

Grove

- **New Barn Elms, Berkeley Homes (2004)**

The Project was involved in mitigation and restoring the banks of the brook after the contractor damaged the bank. The Project subsequently drew up a new landscaping scheme to include a wildflower buffer strip, tree coppicing and pollarding, re-grading of banks planted with aquatic plants and removal of the developer's rubbish.

- **Grove Airfield, Persimmon Homes, (2006-2007)**

The Project was initially involved in the pre-application stage, commented on the Environmental Impact Assessment and attended public consultations organised by the developer. There were many issues of concern regarding the protection of the existing ecology of the site, including issues on water supply, sewage and drainage, which ultimately effect the brook.

Letcombe Regis, Richmond Care Village (2005 –2009)

Richmond Care Village is currently being built to replace the DOW agro sciences laboratory. This project is a good example of how, by working with planners and developers well in advance, major environmental and access improvements can be achieved.

To summarise a long process the biodiversity, landscape and access improvements achieved through this project are:

- Desilting the lake, taking it off-line and creating a new chalk stream channel with fish pass and refuges for trout, bullhead, brook lamprey and white-clawed crayfish. Creating berms and restoring banks providing suitable habitat for aquatic plants, water voles and invertebrates. Planting of marginal vegetation around lake



Richmond Care Village-- desilting the lake and creating a new channel

- and new channel.
- Creation and long-term management of a vegetative swale for treatment of surface water run-off whilst also providing a mosaic of wet grassland habitats suitable for invertebrates.
- Creation and retention of trees, hedges, woodland, and native scrub and long-term management for bats, invertebrates and other local wildlife.
- Creation and management of wildflower meadows, grassland and buffer strips alongside Letcombe Brook.
- Eradication of the non-native, invasive plant, Japanese knotweed.
- Interpretation Board and information pack for residents.
- Public access along Letcombe Brook and lake along to the nature reserve for the general public (including those from further afield). Access is limited to the eastern edge to allow wildlife on the opposite edge to be undisturbed by walkers.
- 20 year Ecological Management Plan along with a monitoring system 2009 – 2029.

Along with the development site, RCV also owns a County Wildlife Site known as the DOW Nature Trail that is an important wildlife site much loved by local people. With this in mind it was important to safeguard this site and ensure appropriate use and management for the future. The Project was instrumental in requesting and coordinating an (additional) 20 year Ecological Management Plan and managing a team to oversee that it was fit for purpose, as the owners had no experience in managing a wildlife site. Finally, the reserve was initially to be transferred to BBOWT but after several false starts the Project, with the help of the local MP, secured a 50-year lease. We look forward to seeing the transformation of this site and the involvement of the local community in managing it. The area is to be known as the Letcombe Valley Nature Reserve and will be freely accessible all year round both to local residents and visitors from further afield.

Ongoing development issues

The Project has been persistent in monitoring and ensuring that developers implement and successfully establish their consented landscape schemes. The Project has requested VWHDC enforcement action of conditions on Sainsburys and David Wilson Homes, as their schemes are still to be completed and successfully established.

Recommendations to Planning Department to improve the protection of biodiversity and landscape

After dealing with many applications the Project puts forward the following recommendations to the Vale of the White Horse DC Planning Department to ensure the protection and enhancement of the natural environment.

- Employing a VWHDC ecologist to ensure that any development and the existing ecology can be assessed properly, and to make sure that the biodiversity is fully protected and enhanced by the planning and development process, both during and post construction.
- Drawing up planning policy guidance for developers such as West Berkshire Council's 'A Guide to developers Rivers Kennet and Lambourn', Wycombe District Councils 'The River Wye - A Riverside Development Advice Note'.
- Draw up planning guidance note on biodiversity. The current planning application form and guidance note does not assist the planning department in identify existing important habitats on site. Specific guidance should be given helping developers initially assess their site and provide information on when to undertake habitat and

species surveys. See West Berkshire Council, Development Control Biodiversity Planning advice.

- Quality environmental improvements can be achieved when the development is discussed well in advance of an application being submitted and relevant statutory advisors are fully involved such as Environment Agency and Natural England.
- Landscaping should be detailed upfront and incorporated initially and not left as a reserved matter. The work is of a specialist nature so it is important that landscape architects with experience of biodiversity and river ecology are engaged.
- Schemes are successfully established when an experienced landscape architect who drew up the plans then oversees the implementation of their design, otherwise corners are cut, unskilled contractors unused to river work are used and schemes fail due to poor quality work or materials.
- Approved plans should be monitored to see that plans are fully implemented and successfully established on the ground. Where necessary, effective enforcement should be enacted by the VWHDC and Environment Agency.

Species action



White clawed crayfish

• White clawed crayfish

White-clawed crayfish are native to Britain and are a protected Biodiversity Action Plan species. They are rare with very few populations left in the South East. The aim for this species is to protect them from Signal crayfish which carry a plague that can kill our British White-clawed crayfish and to improve their habitat thereby increasing their numbers.

Survey (2003/2004)

Following the Project's confirmation of White-clawed crayfish at Letcombe Regis and Locks Lane, Wantage, the Letcombe Brook was surveyed in a catchment survey undertaken by Thames Valley Ecological Record Centre for the Environment Agency. The survey revealed good populations and their report concluded that '... the Letcombe Brook population is probably one of the most important in the Thames catchment generally and as such every effort should be made to protect it'.

2007 A further survey was commissioned at the six sites known to be populated with native crayfish. Unfortunately no live crayfish were found but burrows were present. No dead were found either and no Signal crayfish have been found or reported on the Brook. The result was therefore inconclusive.

Disappearance of the native species of crayfish is a national phenomenon and is not restricted to the brook. There is no obvious reason for the decline and other local watercourses have reported similar declines. Several of the locations on the brook where they were have not changed and have not been disturbed. It is not certain whether pollution or the flood event in 2007 have had any effect. No dead crayfish have been found so it is not possible to do any tests. This example of wildlife decline

highlights very clearly why it is necessary to protect, monitor and manage the environment and wildlife. With further surveys we hope to reassess the situation and if the results are similar try and find an explanation for the apparent disappearance so that we can take steps to improve conditions and the habitat to ensure the survival of native crayfish on the brook.

• **Water voles**

The water vole is Britain's fastest declining mammal. It is a Protected Species under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Following nation wide surveys numbers of water voles are believed to have declined by 90% in the last 20 years.

Locally the picture on the Letcombe Brook bears this out. The cause of this decline is due to changes in land use and management along with predation by mink (an introduced predator). The Letcombe Brook Project is working with landowners and developers to create and manage habitats suitable for water voles. Alongside this the Project is also undertaking a trapping programme for mink, which are voracious predators and endangering our native wildlife. Surveys are conducted with BBOWT through the Water Vole Recovery Project.

Wantage and Grove

During 2003 a water vole and habitat survey was carried out on 7 kms through Wantage to Grove. The survey found that there were

no conclusive signs of recent water vole activity (but there were many old burrows). There were two indications at Kingfishers Road in Grove and at Locks Lane Mill in Wantage. Manor stream, a tributary of the Brook in Wantage, was surveyed in 2005 with no signs. This section is particularly wooded and shaded with no suitable marginal vegetation for water voles.

Letcombe Regis and Letcombe Bassett

The villages were surveyed in 2006 with a tiny population found at the headsprings in Bassett. This area was resurveyed in 2008 and there was an increase in the number of positive signs found, with three sites confirmed with water voles along this section of the brook.

Mink trapping

As a result of the above surveys ten mink traps were purchased and several training events were held with landowners. The whole of the brook is covered with mink traps placed every 1km along the brook. Twelve mink have been caught along the brook, eight females and four males.

The encouraging increase and spread in population in the upper reaches demonstrates that with the correct management and implementation, the Letcombe Brook can once again become a haven for wildlife. However, these improvements take time to have an impact and the positive results are achieved only with constant, consistent management and effort.



Mink raft

Objective 2: Promote environmentally responsible land management practices amongst landowners and land managers.



Green revetments to bank and island

Working with landowners to protect the brook

The Brook is owned by over 170 riparian landowners including local residents, businesses, parish and town councils and VWHDC. The Project promotes environmentally responsible land management practices amongst landowners and land managers. This is achieved by undertaking free visits and giving advice on managing land alongside the river and in-stream. The Project works closely with the Environment Agency and river engineers such as Chris Booth, Riparian Revetments. Landowners are given advice on, their legal obligations and responsibilities with regards the Brook, the consent process, and habitat management. Enhancement schemes are then implemented by the landowner using approved contractors. Landowner events, such as below, have helped to promote the Project and raise awareness of key issues along the Brook:

2005 Riparian Owners Meeting, Civic Hall, Wantage

112 in attendance; discussed Rights and Responsibilities of riparian owners, highlighted issues and solutions along with green-engineering options. Free information packs were provided.

Examples of small scale schemes carried out by local residents

Wantage

Seven projects including: bank works to increase velocity and scour out silt, planting of yellow flag iris to hide unsightly concrete bags in Mill Street, removal of two concrete weirs to improve natural flows at Autotype, restoration of collapsing bank with rolls and gabions to save private car park from falling into the brook, leat improvements in Betjeman Park with restoration of brick work to include air bricks as habitat refuges for native crayfish, managing trees to allow light into the brook.

Grove

Five projects covering: enhancing the banks with native vegetation, coir fibre rolls, pollarding willow trees, planting small section of hedge, green revetments at mill. A Countryside Stewardship agreement with creation and management of wildflower meadows (a Biodiversity Action Plan habitat), pollarding of willow trees, planting new and restoring overgrown hedges and tree planting.

Letcombe Regis

Eight projects to: create natural banks by removing concrete and planting native vegetation, removal of two dams to restore water flow, removal of silt to restore the beds and managing trees to allow light into the brook, translocating cuttings to establish water crowfoot.

Objective 3: Increase awareness of countryside and environmental issues through education and interpretation.

Education and interpretation

Raising awareness of countryside and environmental issues is an important role of the Project. This has been achieved through education and interpretation.

Environmental education for schools

The Letcombe Brook offers a rich resource for studying the environment and our relationship to it. The Project promotes the Letcombe Brook as the focus for schools' local river studies. Projects are designed to allow children to see what is happening to their local environment and how they can positively influence it. As part of an increasingly urban population it is vital that children experience the natural world and raising awareness of the brook is key to conserving and protecting its future. The study of rivers and the local environment is a compulsory part of the National Curriculum.

- The Project has organised a total of 35 sessions with 970 pupils, aged 8-14, in Wantage and Grove including practical projects, field visits, river dipping, classroom activities and assemblies. Schools included Milbrook Primary and Wantage Primary Schools and King Alfred's Community and Sports College.

Wantage Primary School (2004-2006)

176 pupils, key stage 2, aged 10-11yrs, visited the brook in Willow Walk and undertook activities on environmental issues. Children made a presentation to Wantage JET on the problems caused by



Milbrook Primary School

feeding ducks and how to tackle the issue. Geography, history, and environmental issues on the brook were also discussed in the classroom.

Milbrook Primary School, Grove (2006-2009)

28 sessions held with 240 pupils aged 8-9 years on Letcombe Brook looking at geography, biodiversity and the history of the brook as part of the National Curriculum on local rivers. They included classroom activities such as investigating the food chain, before a field visit, river dipping and measuring in the brook on the Village Green. Children are able to explore the fascinating



River dipping in Grove

underwater world of the brook discovering caddis flies, bullheads, fresh water shrimps and with this information assess the health of the river system.

King Alfred's Community and Sports College - River Revival Project (2007)

The Project worked with pupils from the 'Action Elective' Duke of Edinburgh group in planning a clean-up event of the Edgehill/Manor Road stream, a tributary of the Letcombe Brook that runs through the sports playing field. The students were involved in: planning the whole event, studying chalk stream ecology, project management of clean up, logistics, health and safety, funding for equipment. As a result 22 volunteers including pupils, parents and teachers turned out on the day to fill 3 skips donated by companies Assvogel and Charlton, with litter-picking equipment supplied from VWHDC. The project was also supported by Wantage Football Club and Oxfordshire County Council.

Interpretation



Grove interpretation board

Information boards

The Brook is rich in history and ecology and several interpretation boards are now placed in public open spaces to help raise awareness on environmental issues and to involve the local community in caring for the brook:

- Four information boards on ecology, history and how to help the brook, one at Willow Walk, Wantage, three at Village and Mary Green, Mably Way, Grove
- Six exhibitions have been held promoting the work of the Project and its partners
- 'Go with the Flow – The Story of the Letcombe Brook' exhibition launched with reception with 65 riparian owners and partners in attendance (2006)

Exhibits and displays

Several exhibitions have been held promoting the work of the Project and its partners at Grove Library, and the Vale and Downland Museum. The interactive 'Gone Fishing Game' encourages local people to explore the wildlife of the river and has proved extremely popular.

A successful exhibition with our partners, Vale and Downland Museum, was launched with an evening reception. 'Go with the Flow – The story of the Letcombe Brook' exhibition consists of 7 mobile panels along with display

cases portraying various ecological, geological and historical aspects of the brook and Letcombe Brook Project. Interactive displays on chalk and aquifers, a wish-tree for visitors' comments and 'Use Water Wisely' information from Thames Water were available to take away. The exhibition was loaned to Pendon Museum in Oxfordshire and is available to external groups to display.

Public events and campaigns

Walks and talks programme

Guided walks, talks and river dipping events for all ages prove very popular and are run for local people to a variety of audiences such as the general public, WI groups, parish and town council AGMs, CPRE, Grove Horticultural Club, New Barn Elms (Grove) Residents' Group, Wantage Field Club and Wantage Open Access Group.

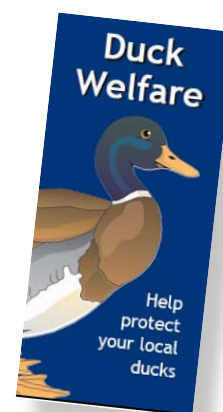
- 12 river dipping events for adults and children during school holidays.
- 7 walks on topics such as river management and wildflowers, 'Majors walk' through Wantage
- 22 talks delivered by the Project assisted by organisations such as BBOWT on a range of subjects including the brook, water voles, and bats.

Duck Welfare campaign (2006)

The aim was to reduce the large amount of duck feeding in Wantage and Grove along the brook. Large numbers of ducks were causing environmental problems such as bank side erosion, attracting rats, water pollution and also creating unnatural behaviour in ducks with overcrowding, disease and poor nutrition.

The campaign included:

- Installation of 'Please don't feed the ducks' vandal-proof signs at hot spots in Wantage.
- 10,000 duck welfare leaflets produced and distributed along the Letcombe Brook corridor.
- Awareness session at Millbrook Primary School assembly to 500 school children on the perils of feeding the ducks. A short play, in duck costumes, about ducks Daffy and Dilly on their holidays and finding out what happens when they eat junk food. Woven in with school lesson plans on 'healthy lunch boxes, five a day, no crisp Friday'. This was written and performed by Margaret Bateman (drama tutor from Friday Night Stage School, Wantage).
- Press campaign in local press and on VWHDC website.
- Environmental Health, VWHDC installed new rat poison distributors.
- Vale and Downland Museum hosted two duck days – a drama, along with creative fun activities for all ages including duck ditty writing, story time, spot the difference etc.
- The Letcombe Brook Project 'Duck Welfare' leaflet is being promoted nationally by the Environment Agency. Organisations such as Coventry City Council are currently using it in their environmental promotions.



Objective 4: Involve all sectors of the community in caring for and appreciating the Letcombe Brook



King Alfred's Community and Sports College

Community Action

'Friends of the Letcombe Brook'

It is essential to engage with the local community to inspire and involve local people in valuing and caring for their local river. The 'Friends of the Letcombe Brook' was set up to enable local people to volunteer and get involved with the project. It is affiliated to the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV), which enables volunteers to be fully insured whilst helping out. Volunteers help out with practical tasks such as major litter clean-ups and restoring banks of the brook by

planting and managing marginal vegetation such as yellow flag iris, and by carrying out wildlife surveys and helping with administration.

2003 – 2007 Four major river cleanup events in Willow Walk in Wantage, with 76 volunteers, eight skips donated by Assvogel and a contractor Oakleaf who volunteered time and a tractor. VWHDC supplied litter-picking equipment.

2004 - 2009 A 'Litter Wardens' pilot project was set up in Wantage. Local residents undertake litter picking in the brook and VWHDC provide

sacks and collect the rubbish. Local people now undertake regular sessions and up to date 160 sacks a year are being collected.

2007 - 2008 King Alfred's Community and Sports College, Edgehill Springs Clean Up. Two events held with 22 volunteers and 3 skips provided free by skip hire companies Charlton and Assvogel.

2009 Grove Green Flood Group given waders and tools to keep brook clear of obstructions to alleviate flooding after catastrophic flooding event of summer 2007.

Water quality and quantity issues



Augmentation pipe at headwater lake in Letcombe Regis

Pollution incidents

There have been several incidents and issues over the years from leakage of heating oil, collapse of septic tanks, discharge of sewage from Thames Water's foul water system, algal blooms in Letcombe Regis, discharge of large amounts of silt, road and agricultural run-off, and several incidents reported during the construction of developments.

Local people contacted the Environment Agency's Pollution Hotline on 0800 80 70 60 which elicited a quick response, thereby averting more severe problems.

A persistent problem occurs at Locks Lane, Wantage. Since 1982, local people have reported that the Thames Water sewer discharges into the brook during heavy downpours – on average 2-3 times a year. This has since increased to 4-5 times and occurs throughout the year including the summer when there are low flows. This has been a long-standing problem, which we are actively pursuing with Thames Water and the local MP to resolve.

Augmentation

At present the West Berkshire Groundwater Scheme (WBGs), managed and run by the EA, is used to augment the Letcombe Brook at times when water levels in the aquifer becomes low causing the natural springs that feed the brook to switch off. Levels in the aquifer (and consequently the Letcombe Brook) are affected by the abstraction by Thames Water at Childrey Warren and Manor Road. The situation is made worse when drought conditions prevail. When flows are low, water is pumped across the downs via the WBGs to the headsprings at Highwell in Letcombe Regis and Delamere in Letcombe Bassett.

The system is used infrequently and only to supplement low flows. The last augmentations were in 2006 and October 2008 (testing the system).

- Augmentation is around 2ML (mega litres) a day.
- Abstractions in 1998 were around 2.35ML a day, 850ML per annum.
- Abstractions in 2007 were at 4.11ML, 1500ML per annum, an increase of 75%

Source: Thames Water

2007 – 2009 The EA has undertaken a strategic review of water resources including the Letcombe Brook augmentation and what affect it is having on other catchments especially the River Lambourn (SAC and SSSI). The Project is liaising with the Environment Agency on the future and operation of the scheme and the possibility of reducing the amount of Thames Waters abstraction through the licensing process.

The Project also, wherever possible, raises awareness about the need for everyone to conserve water. Locally we use water that is directly abstracted (through boreholes) from the source of the Letcombe Brook. This water would otherwise naturally feed the brook and support the rich biodiversity associated with a chalk stream. Global warming and an increase in demand caused by a growing population signifies that pressures on water can only increase, therefore it is up to us all to reduce our consumption of this vital resource.

Flooding 20 July 2007

An unusually wet May and June with rainfall up to 195% of the long term average combined with an exceptional level of rainfall on 19/20 July, created unprecedented levels of flow in the Letcombe Brook and the wider land drainage system. Water levels and flows exceeded the capacity of watercourses, culverts and bridges, forcing floodwater over and/or around structures, into roads and residential areas. This caused widespread flooding across the catchment, which was worsened by surface and foul water flooding. It is estimated that the equivalent of 650 olympic sized swimming pools of water fell on the catchment. Over 137 properties in Letcombe Regis, Wantage, Grove and East Hanney were flooded and by two to three feet in places.

Flood Meeting October 2007

The Project organised a Letcombe Brook Flood meeting with speakers and representatives from the Environment Agency, VWHDC, Oxfordshire County Council, Thames Water and the local MP. Over 133 residents attended the event.

The Project then worked closely with the EA, VWHDC emergency planning and land drainage departments, local councillors and town and parish councils, on assessing the impact and causes of flooding around the Letcombe Brook corridor.

Local Flood Groups

Several meetings were held in Letcombe Regis, Wantage and Grove with the objective of encouraging the formation of local flood groups along the Letcombe Brook corridor to enable them to protect their homes and communities.



Wantage flood alleviation works

Practical solutions included the use of a neighbourhood watch type approach of flood protection eg flood gates for individual properties at risk with the possibility of getting residents to do a bulk order to reduce costs, local use and storage of sandbags, neighbourhood flood alert system, traffic management (with cooperation from the Highways authority), helping vulnerable neighbours etc.

Within the five areas, two groups formed. Grove Green Flood Group is active with the group helping to clear obstructions using waders and tools donated by the Project. They are also looking at longer-term alleviation with local landowners. Projects are also being undertaken with Wantage Flood Group in the Mill Street.



Grove Green Flood Group tackle overgrown vegetation

The Project has identified several short and long term projects to alleviate future flooding with engineer Chris Booth from Riparian Revetments. Permissions and consents have been given by the Environment Agency. The Project is currently working on the short-term projects.

Six projects in Grove include removing obstructions such as trees and encroaching vegetation to increase the capacity of the brook, removal of a small unused footbridge with subsequent repairs to the banks in Kingfishers Road, removal of gravel depositions under Denchworth Road bridge, lowering of ground surface to allow overflow into the brook along with removal of glyceria vegetation blocking the culvert on Village Green. The balancing ponds on Mary Green are ineffective and unmanaged; the Project is pursuing Thames Water as owners to maintain them.

In Wantage behind the mill in Mill Street, 100m of the river is to be narrowed with groynes, and silt and gravel depositions removed under the bridge and for 6m downstream.

Grove projects will cost £8,550 (ex Vat) to implement and Wantage £10,741.36 (ex VAT). Funding has been obtained from the VWHDC £11,577.52, Environment Agency £5000.00, Oxfordshire County Council £1,713.84 along with landowner contributions of £1,000.00 (for Mill Street).

Funding

The Vale of the White Horse District Council, Forward Planning section administers the post on behalf of the partners and acts a treasurer with funds held in a designated account. One of the key responsibilities of the Project Officer's role is to apply for revenue and capital funding. Partners provide revenue funding and the majority of the capital funding has been gained through grant applications to outside bodies thereby providing good value for money for local residents and partners.

Project funding

Income for core funding

Environment Agency – £8,500.00
Wantage Joint Environmental Trust – £6,048.00
Grove Joint Environmental Trust – £6,048.00
Letcombe Regis Parish Council – £600.00

Total £21,196.00

Expenditure

Salary – £19,932.00
Rent for Vale and Downland Museum – £264.00
Expenses of post holder including mileage, stationery, telephone, computer – £1,000.00

Total £21,196.00

Donations and grants applied for capital projects

Over the last six years the Letcombe Brook Project has raised an additional £140,860.08 through donations and grant applications for capital works and enhancements.

Donations

- 2005 £1200 – Downland Housing Association for Willow Walk tree management
- 2007 £1500 – Tanner Trust river dipping equipment and interpretation board
- 2008 £200 – Pendon Museum for loan of exhibition panels.

Total £2900.00

Grants for Environmental Improvements

- 2004 Willow walk, Wantage – Total £31,666.25 (ex Vat). WREN £20,000, VWHDC £6000, Autotype £400, LBP £450. 11% Wantage JET third party funding to lever funds.
- 2005 Village Green, Grove – Erosion repairs, total £3,146.00 (excl Vat) Grove JET.
- 2006 Sharland Close, Grove – Revetment works total £4,114.00 (excl Vat) Grove JET
- 2007 Mill Green, Wantage – Phase 1 improvement scheme Total £ 14,008.97 (ex Vat). WREN £8,997, VWHDC – £2,011.97. 11% Wantage JET third party funding to lever funds.
- 2008 Mill Green, Wantage – Phase 2 improvement scheme – Total £30,499.00 (ex Vat). WREN £21,999, Bush Bye £5,000, VWHDC £2,000, LBP £1,500. 11% Wantage JET third party funding to lever funds.
- 2008 Letcombe Park, Wantage. Barratt Homes revetment works – £32,234.50
- 2008 Grove interpretation boards – £3,000.00
- 2009 Flood Alleviation projects – Total £19,291.36. Grove projects £8,550 (ex Vat) and Wantage £10,741.36 (ex Vat). Contributions from VWHDC £11,577.52, Environment Agency £5,000, Oxfordshire County Council £1,713.84 along with landowner contribution of £1,000.

Total £137,960.08

Contributions in kind

- The Project is indebted to many individuals who have volunteered their free time on practical conservation tasks, surveys and administration work.
- 11 skips provided by Assvogel and also Charlton skips – £1540.00
- Oakleaf, a local tree surgeon contractors supported the Willow Walk work providing free time and equipment.

The year ahead 2010 - 2011

The coming year will see a number of innovative and important projects implemented. But it is important to be aware that the future of the Project is reliant on its partners for its core funding and without the support of the partners it is unlikely that this work would continue. The Project provides excellent value for money, both for the partners and the local community at large. The partners provide a total of £21,000 p.a. and in return have received grants and funding to the value of **£140,860.08**. Added to this we are very grateful to the time (hundreds of hours) and energy contributed by volunteers.

It should be noted that before the Project was set up, that in many sections the Letcombe Brook was degraded and unmanaged. However, the partners' vision and commitment has restored many stretches to an attractive chalk-stream which is enjoyed by thousands of local people. In addition, it has become a vital resource for local schools learning about the brook as a part of the National Curriculum local rivers study. The sense of enjoyment and pride that the brook now engenders in the local community would be completely lost if the project's environmental work ceased.

In a wider sense, the environment in general, and specifically demand for water, is under enormous pressure and the project will continue to work towards protecting and enhancing biodiversity and the river landscape, reducing pollution and improving water quality. Education and raising awareness through schools and general public has been at the heart of this project and popular events such as river dipping will encourage local people to get out and learn about the river so that they take more care of it in the future.

Specific projects for 2010-2011:

- Advising on planning applications
- Implementation of Wantage and Grove flood alleviation projects
- Grove river enhancement study and implementation
- Education pack for local schools
- Resolution of sewage issues in Wantage
- Permanent museum display on the Letcombe Brook
- Practical Conservation work with the 'Friends of the Letcombe Brook'
- Riparian workshops
- Public open space improvements on the Letcombe Brook
- Veteran willow management
- White clawed crayfish leaflet and landowner advice
- Wantage – Letcombe Brook trail



Bullhead



Watervole