

Green Ixworth

A vision for the Black Bourn.

Our rivers are a natural resource which when well managed provide a source of energy, a carbon sink, water supply, wild life, recreation and a pleasant and attractive environment. It can also minimise the damage caused by floods and dangers of drought. When not managed well, pollution destroys natural processes, introduces poisons into our environment, increases carbon emissions and causes flood damage to properties, business and crops. Climate Change is adding further challenges to the health of the river. Thus the management of a river impacts on the present and future riparian owners and the community at large.

The Black Bourn and its tributaries, have been fundamental to the historical success of local communities providing power for water mills, fish, and a water supply. Until the post war period its flow was greater than now with deeper water sufficient for swimming places. Water quality is frequently lower and more frequently polluted with run off from fields, gardens, farming, industrial premises, roads and “storm overflows” from sewage works. Access for the public is very limited and fish stocks unimpressive. Banks suffer from collapsed trees obstructing natural flow and in places it is too wide to provide a sufficient flow rate to clear silt and expose its natural gravel beds. Some river banks are there to prevent flooding which is the natural response to too much water.

Dealing with the ravages of the past and present is important but dealing with what the future holds is vital. Many of the already established consequences of the Climate Crisis are well known from which we can anticipate a much drier climate, lengthy periods of drought and brief periods of very heavy rain. If the Gulf Stream, so important to providing relatively mild winter weather for the British Isles, further weakens due to melting ice, as expected, winter temperatures could drop. A policy for water flow and levels will be important for many reasons set out below.

Within the Ixworth area there are enormous benefits to be gained from improving the river for wildlife, both for its own sake and to enhance the lives of residents many of whom, especially children, are very enthusiastic about the natural world. Carbon sequestration should be a crucial part of the management of such a resource. Seeking a continuous natural barrier/corridor on one or both sides of the river will minimise garden rubbish, soil and chemicals falling into the river and provide protection for wildlife. Many creatures particularly otters and water voles which can sometimes be seen in Ixworth, require a degree of secrecy and cover to thrive so will be most happy and active where both sides of the river have natural cover. Water quality and flow rates will determine whether existing colonies of fresh water mussels thrive, an important indicator of water quality and general cleanliness.

Our desire therefore is to ensure that water quality and volume leaving Ixworth is at least as good as that entering. In addition the natural environment should be enhanced as the boundary between different types of habitat are eg. Water/land/woodland, are hotspots for high levels of different species.

The lack of funding for Statutory Authorities, the Environment Agency especially, have reduced their ability to implement the existing legal requirements designed to maintain the

water way and water quality.

The consequence is a range of different interests which may be in conflict, so that arbitrary action by any individual riparian owner may therefore be damaging to others. The Rivers Trust, the Environment Agency and Anglia Water have responsibility overall but experience shows they have limited objectives. Non Governmental Organisations such as the Suffolk Wildlife Trust (SWT) and ourselves however have an interest, and wish to make improvements to the Black Bourn. SWT already have two reserves on the upper part of the river the Black Bourn between Thurston and Norton and Mickle Mere bordering Ixworth.

All the riparian owners are private individuals or businesses who have legal rights to the river and bank as well as responsibilities for them. Whilst the statutory bodies have powers of compulsion we do not, thus little can or should be done without the cooperation and consent of the riparian owners. So discussion and consultation with them and the statutory authorities is the starting point. The larger riparian owners have opportunities to both exploit and enhance the natural environment. Some have already taken sensitive and effective ways of improving areas alongside the river for wildlife and are to be congratulated. But we can do better by joining up individual efforts to make something better than the sum of the parts.

What happens upstream determines the quality and volume of water arriving at Ixworth so establishing similar groups we can work with on the tributaries is crucial. The SWT has resource and experience which we are sure they will use to advise us because they have a background of establishing local connections and consultation.

Neither should we ignore the needs of our neighbours downstream.

In the long run we should be looking at a seamless organisation covering the whole river from Drinkstone Lake to the confluence with the Little Ouse. It makes sense therefore that we should be working within the CamEO organisation, sponsored by Anglia Water and The Rivers Trust which covers the basins of the Rivers; Cam, Ely Ouse, Little Ouse.

Public access to the banks and the water, needs to take account of the needs of all users especially wildlife. Whether bathing is possible or desirable needs to be established but access to gravelled shallows for younger residents to learn about their natural world is important.

Climate Change impact requires significant water conservation. The design of the river channel can help with this as can areas designated for overflow as flood pastures to accommodate surplus water which can then be released gradually. There are also natural solutions to this. Critically, maintaining sufficient flow to remove silt from shallow areas helps expose gravel which is important to breeding success of invertebrates (flies) mussels, fish, etc.). Extraction of water by riparian owners will almost certainly have to be more strictly controlled than now, for if water levels are very low it encourages unwelcome insects and very nasty smells as well as destroying the ecosystem for wildlife.

All raw water potentially entering the river should be cleaned beforehand. For example the surface water from the four roads is presently directed into the river bringing with it the wear products of road traffic, salt from de-icing and spillages of chemicals, diesel, etc. This already presents a difficult problem and will require action by local authorities to clean water before going into the river.

After looking in greater detail at some of these issues and having consulted widely we can envisage drawing up proposals to be agreed by all those with an interest in the river and its banks and then the process of implementation can begin. Some issues such as existing or new sources of pollution can and should be actioned soon and some limited work within the channel has already been started.

If implemented we can envisage a river bounded by green planting full of wildlife, sweet water nurturing creatures vital to our surrounding ecosystems and filled with plants of many varieties. The seasons will need to be allowed to work their magic without too much human intervention. In some places there are hides where people can quietly watch the river and river side activity of wild creatures, paths on selected banks and wooded areas, shallow gravel beds where children can seek the creepy crawlies of which many are so fond, a source of self or guided education. A place where wild swimming may take place secure and safe, but mostly a place of beauty where nature can be itself. Local volunteers will work together with voluntary organisations, riparian owners and statutory bodies, in cooperation with others up and down the river. A linear community founded on one of our most popular natural assets, a quiet river.

In summary:

1. A clean, healthy river that supports a flourishing ecosystem.
2. Ixworth residents have an understanding of and connection to the river as it runs through the village.
3. Co-operative arrangements are in place with agencies, landowners, voluntary sector organisations and public for good management, monitoring and usage
4. Part of an informed and connected network of organisations up and down stream and throughout the catchment
5. Improved public access to the river for monitoring, learning and leisure
6. Contingency arrangements in place to help manage effects of climate change (cooling, drought and/or rising water levels and flood management)

These are our first thoughts and we welcome comments and suggestions from riparian owners who have the most direct experience of the river and may already have plans which effect it but also the general public who need to have their interests represented.

Roger Spiller
Green Ixworth