



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 attractive environment and minimise the damage caused by floods and dangers of drought. When not managed well, rivers cause flood damage to properties, spread toxins into our environment, increase carbon emissions and damages business, crops and natural habitats. Worst of all pollution destroys natural processes. Thus, the management of a river impacts on both the riparian (river banks and river) owners and the community at large.

The Black Bourn and its tributaries, have been fundamental to the historic success of local communities like Ixworth, providing power for water mills, fish, irrigation and water supply. Until the post war period its flow was greater than now with deeper water sufficient for swimming places. Water quality is now frequently lower and more polluted with run off from fields, gardens, farming, industrial premises, roads, septic tanks and “storm overflows” from sewage works. There are twenty Water Treatment Centres upstream of Ixworth, one of which, Badwell Ash regularly and for lengthy periods discharges untreated sewage into the Stowlangtoft Stream.

Access for the public is very limited and fish stocks unimpressive. Banks suffer from fallen trees obstructing the natural flow and in places the river is too wide to provide a sufficient flow rate to clear silt and expose its natural gravel beds. The river has a very low gradient. Some river banks are maintained to prevent the natural response to too much water, flooding. Climate Change is adding further challenges to the health of the river.

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 course and water quality.

The consequence is a range of different interests which may be in conflict, with arbitrary action by any individual riparian owner potentially 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), angling clubs 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 Valley Reserve, between Thurston and Norton and Mickle Mere bordering Ixworth.

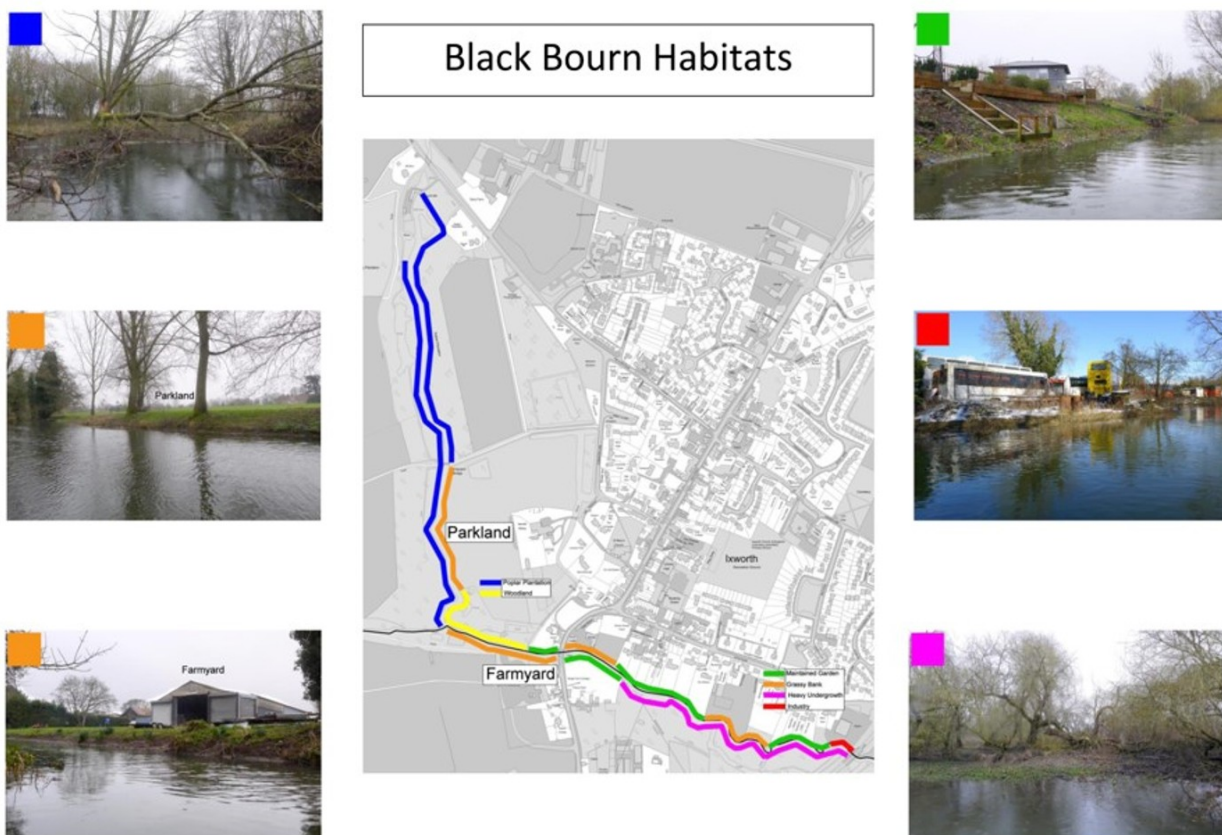
Our desire therefore is to ensure that water quality and volume leaving Ixworth is at least as good as that entering. In addition, the natural environment should be enhanced, as the boundary between different types of habitat, Water/land/woodland, are hotspots for many different species and great biodiversity.

All the riparian owners are private individuals or businesses, private or public, 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 and have so far worked well. 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 with whom we can work on the tributaries is crucial. In periods of heavy rain. Actions upstream such as reducing local soil absorption of rain, hemming in waterways with concrete or releasing large quantities of water, can cause flooding downstream. We must not, individually or collectively, ignore the needs of our neighbours downstream.

In the long run we should therefore be looking at a seamless process of cooperation covering the whole river from before 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, Lark, Little Ouse, in particular the Little Ouse Headwaters Project, and the Suffolk Wildlife trust and others.



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 so enthusiastic about the natural world. Seeking a continuous natural corridor on one or both sides of the river would minimise garden rubbish, soil and chemicals entering the river and provide protection for wildlife. Many creatures particularly otters, which are regular visitors to Ixworth and water voles, require a degree of privacy and cover to thrive so will be most happy and active where both sides of the river have natural cover.

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

Many of the already established consequences of the Climate Crisis are well known and we can anticipate a much drier climate with lengthy periods of drought eg. 2022, and brief periods of very

heavy rain. If the Gulf Stream, so important to providing relatively mild and moist winter weather for the British Isles, further weakens due to melting ice as expected, winter temperatures could drop. Thus, water conservation is going to be of first importance. The design of the river channel can help with this as can areas designated to overflow as flood pastures or washes to accommodate surplus water which can then be released gradually or even better returned to the aquifer. 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 and farmers, 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. Anglia Water is about to pump aquifer water into the river to improve the water quality and flow rate.

All raw water potentially entering the river should be cleaned beforehand. The surface water from roads brings wear products of road traffic, tyres and brakes and de-icing salt. These toxins already present a problem and requires urgent action by local authorities.

After looking in greater detail at some of these issues and also consulting 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 now and some limited work within the channel has already been started.

Firstly, we are recording the present state of the river, a base line from which we can record change and identify the causes of problems and their solutions. We have started on this by commissioning a drone survey of the river, completed during the spring of 2023, the results of which we are now seeking to build onto a multilayer map to be available to the public. In the next few months, we are keen to establish a citizen science project/s to populate the map with sightings of wildlife and the quality of the water. We already have a project using tethered rafts to identify the presence of water voles. All of this should identify the problems we can correct by improving the river, habitats and pollution events. We are seeking enthusiasts, young and old, who can participate in evidence gathering.

First published in 2021 this vision is subject to continuous improvement as those interested are consulted and offer their thoughts. We welcome comments and suggestions from riparian owners having the most direct experience of the river and may already have plans which effect it but also the general public and enthusiasts whose area of interest needs to be represented.

Green Ixworth
07/2023

www.greenixworth.org.uk