

Mere Parish Council

PARISH CLERK - MRS. L. C. WOOD

Mere's Rivers

Minutes of a public meeting convened on 26th September 2011 to discuss concerns over water levels, river flows, abstraction, wildlife and amenity. Meeting held in The Grove Building, Church Street, Mere at 7.30 p.m.

The Chairman of the Parish Council, Mrs. Mary White, convened the meeting, welcomed everyone present and explained that the meeting had been called due to the strength of public feeling and concern relating to the current low river levels in and around Mere. The Chairman introduced the key speakers and said that she was very grateful to them for agreeing to come along this evening to try and help answer questions.

Key Speakers:

Fiona Bowles, Water Resources Investigations Project Manager for Wessex Water

Christopher Greenwell, Senior Environmental Planning Officer for Environment Agency (Wessex Area)

Sarah Williams, Dorset Wildlife Trust

Mrs. Adrienne Howell explained that the residents of Waterside had been writing to Wessex Water, the Environment Agency and anyone else that may be helpful in doing something about the low flows in our rivers. She introduced Jane Batten who would be making a presentation on behalf of the residents and also Dr. Colin Clarke who was a hydrologist and had contacted the residents with an offer of help..

Jane Batten gave a presentation and said that she had lived in a cottage along Waterside for almost 20 years and had noticed considerable change over time. She said that both Wessex Water and the Environment Agency had used the term 'winterbournes' in explanation for the lack of water but stated that Mere's rivers used to provide water for Mills, Sheep Dips, Watercress Beds, Greenhouses, Brewery, Drinking Water and Steam Engines and there was water in abundance all year round, Mere's rivers are not winterbournes. However, we barely have a winterbourne at present and there are businesses and residents that rely on the water supply: Mere Fish Farm, Yapp Brothers, Amenity for tourists and children. Our rivers are our children's heritage, vital for the local amenity and wildlife and we want our rivers back. We are asking Wessex Water and the Environment Agency to help us reinstate our rivers and get the balance right between extraction and the environment so that once again, it can be said that Mere is built upon an abundance and reliability of water

Fiona Bowles explained about the chalk aquifer above Mere which discharges water to the surface as it meets the clay and fault line. The Mere Public Water Supply source intercepts groundwater throughflow in the chalk and upper greensand that would otherwise discharge as baseflow into the Shreen and Ashfield Waters. Wessex Water supply 1.3 million customers with around 360 million litres of water per day throughout the region (not from Mere) to meet public demand. Demand is falling consistently through industrial, domestic and leakage reduction. A pumping trial commenced on 19th June 2006 and ran until 6th November 2006. Wessex Water's licence to abstract water from Mere started in 1909 and currently stands at 9.02 million litres per day. Between 1970 and 1975 their abstraction was significantly higher at 16 million litres per day but was reduced to 9.02 in 1975 and the typical abstraction is 8 million litres per day (approximately 88% of their licence limit), depending on demand. Flows in chalk streams are usually higher in the winter and lower in the summer. Whilst the flow rates, taken from the Shreen at Colesbrook vary considerably throughout the year between 2002 and 2011, the abstraction rates are generally consistent. The water year is taken from October to September and rainfall is given as winter and summer. Low summer rainfall = low flows. IN 2003 there was high winter but low summer rainfall and there were low flows. In 2007 & 08 high

summer rainfall helped to maintain flows and as currently experienced 2011 low winter and low summer rain means that we have low flows. However, during the 1970-75 period, when Wessex Water's abstraction was averaging 14 million litres per day, the water levels at Burton were significantly lower than they have been recorded since 1975 when the abstraction rate was lowered. Both the Ashfield Water and Shreen were recorded as dry in 2005-2006. The wildlife above the A303 is measured as above average and the wildlife measured at Rook Street has species which is sensitive to flow and can demonstrate whether or not the ecology has been damaged by abstraction. In summary, Fiona Bowles agreed that water abstraction does reduce groundwater locally, during the summer but flows usually recover during the winter.

Christopher Greenwell explained that he was the RSA project manager and that RSA (Restoring Sustainable Abstraction) is a programme of work which aims to improve water levels in some rivers, streams, lakes and wetlands – helping to keep important wildlife habitats alive and thriving. In practical terms, the Environment Agency identifies areas where licensed water abstraction over many years is now damaging the environment, or may pose a risk to the environment in the future. The Environment Agency works with abstractors to find solutions that will increase flow in certain rivers or streams and the goal is to allow water abstraction to continue in a way that is environmentally sustainable. There are concerns locally that abstraction has unacceptably reduced water flows in the Upper Shreen and Ashfield Water and might have a detrimental impact on local rivers and streams. In addition, members of the local community have also raised concerns about fish kills. Our aim is to take preventative action to avoid fish kills, as generally we do not undertake any form of fish rescue(s) or relocation. Fish tend to be opportunistic in nature and will tend to colonise any flowing river or stream – but this can sometimes lead to them becoming trapped in drying watercourses. Public Water supply abstraction initially began at quite low levels, but in line with growing demand, abstraction has also increased. The current abstraction licence at Mere, granted in 1970, allows Wessex Water to take up to nine million litres per day. Current rates of abstraction are typically eight million litres per day and have remained broadly steady for the last ten years. In addition to increased abstraction, other changes have occurred within the catchment – including shifts in farming practice and the development of the A303 Mere bypass, all of which may affect the quantity and quality of the watercourses. In 1994 a detailed “river corridor survey and management plan” was carried out on local rivers which showed that conditions were very similar to those experienced today, with issues relating to sedimentation, channel management and flow. In 2005 we were investigating 119 RSA's and only 42 sites remain open. 50 sites were closed without any change to an abstraction because the abstraction rate was deemed to be sustainable. Some modification to abstraction rates occurred on 27 sites. The investigation on the Shreen and Ashfield Water was closed ‘without any change’ and this result was based on the final AMP4 report which identified:

- Limited additional drying
- Changes very localised
- Notable reduction in flow (especially Ashfield Water) but not linked to any identifiable impact on ecological indicators.

The EA considered that the ecology was not shown to be detrimentally impacted and didn't justify amending abstraction.

Mr. Greenwell said that lots of residents have written to WW and EA and the turn-out tonight would suggest the level of concern. We did monitor ground water levels and what we have been experiencing is very close to a drought condition (environmental drought). This is a condition that has been across the whole of England and East Anglia is currently in drought status. If we do go into drought there is not a lot the Environment Agency can do, we can advise people to use water carefully.

It is the 2nd driest period since 1961 (driest was 1975-76). Equally it is probably one of the driest Aprils on record and we had record temperatures for April. We had poor rainfall last year and an extremely dry spring this year and these

dry conditions are something we are feeling throughout the whole of Wessex and throughout the whole of South West England. The Environment Agency does provide a lot of information online with river level data and a monthly water situation report. However, I will admit that there has been a failing with our public relations for the people of Mere and we will try and improve communication, probably by using the Parish Council as a point of contact.

Dr. Colin Clark introduced himself as a hydrologist and said he had not come here to take sides but to comment on some of the information we have been sent. He said that the hydrological report presented by Fiona Bowles of Wessex Water had been badly researched and there were several inaccuracies and he pointed out some specific issues and said that the changes in Ashfield Water and the Shreen may be influenced by factors other than rainfall. Dr. Clarke said that tests conducted were unreliable and there was insufficient evidence on which to base the interpretation that the full impact of change in abstraction regime has been achieved. Dr. Clark had found that, from the records of abstraction on a daily basis, on one or two occasions, the abstraction had exceeded the licence limit. There were also several abstractions from Burton stream. He also said that from checking the history books and Parish Council Minute books, he could tell that the lack of rainfall over the last 11 months was not that rare and it occurred roughly every 10 years or so. He said that a lot more research needed to be done to determine the effects of abstraction.

Sarah Williams, Dorset Wildlife Trust explained how she manages a project in Dorset that helps to maintain the wildlife and amenity of the streams. She explained the benefits of good management practises and said that a lot of communities just wanted to pull everything out of the river which was not a good thing and it was far better to allow flows to restrict in the summer. Ms. Williams said that the fringe of vegetation on either side of a stream and the in-channel vegetation is extremely important to a whole range of wildlife and fringe vegetation also helps to strengthen the banks of the stream. Weed cutting can be necessary to prevent invasive species taking over and preventing potentially harmful debris being trapped by in-channel vegetation and ideally, you should try to keep 1/3 of the channel clear throughout the spring and summer and ½ of the channel clear of vegetation in the Autumn and Winter.

Questions & Answers

Mr. Peter Manning from Waterside said that the audience had seen lots of impressive graphs and data tonight but he has lived on the river for 48 years and his parents have lived there 84 years and he has never seen it dried up before. Everyone was here tonight because they were concerned about something that had not happened before. Allotment holders used to go down to the river with their buckets to collect water, we used to make little dams and try and rescue fish but something has changed and it has never been this bad before. The river bed seems to have been taken over with some kind of watercress. I hope something is done to get this problem resolved.

Frank Marshall, Mill Lane – it is anticipated that we will have drier winters and warmer summers. Is the Environment Agency going to re-open the investigation at Mere?

Chris Greenwell – the aspect of climate change is not that easy to build into how you would address a licence regime. When we are more aware of the way the climate is changing we will have more information on which to make judgements.

Cat Layard – you say abstraction is sustainable but how much of this is based on money?

Chris Greenwell – we stand by the fact that we believe climate is the main driver but abstraction does have an impact. In terms of the cost, it might affect other people if we were to look at alternative sources. If we were to reduce the abstraction licence then we would be creating a problem for the water company.

Valerie Norris, The Pound, Mere – when she moved in to her house she found that she was responsible for keeping a water well clear within her property boundary. However, in the last 3 years she has stopped hearing the water and there has been no water in the river since August. She said that she had lost an amenity that is hers by right.

Keith Maidment said that he was born at Burton and his granddad used to liver their also and there was water in the river, nearly all the year round. His father thinks that the water board has been pumping out far too much water.

Mary White, Mill Lane – where does our water go?

Fiona Bowles – some of it is used locally, some of it goes back into the stream but down stream but it is mainly used to supply the Wessex area in part, although we do buy in water from Bournemouth also.

Kit Stallard – what triggers the Environment Agency into acting against Wessex Water?

Chris Greenwell – we have had the investigation and we have reached a conclusion. Perhaps the best thing to do is for the parish & parishioners to get together and if you wanted to take this further you would need to write and ask if the investigation could be re-opened - it is your right to do so.

MW – the aquifer in Mere is not only very large but also of a better quality and presumably cheaper to process and distribute?

Fiona Bowles – yes, we use the most cost-effective source first but if we go into a drought condition then we move to the most abundant source. We also want to use the most sustainable (some sources will require the use of energy to clean the water)

Diane Pringle – the gentleman from the EA said that we are very close to a drought situation. Would it not have been a good idea to impose measures to conserve water. I do not think we would have been in this situation if a drought situation had been operated in April/May like they did in East Anglia?

Fiona Bowles – in general demand is going down. The regional impact of people watering gardens has not been that large.

Chris Greenwell – some farmers have historic licenses. Spray irrigators can be controlled and other licences can be controlled.

A. Howell – when we were filming for the TV regional news, Dr. Leonie Renee, an Australian geologist, was passing through Mere and said that she thought the abstraction was wrong and that in drier spells, Wessex Water should abstract less water. Mrs. Howell also asked why the gauging station was situated in Gillingham. We used to have one at bottom of Steep Street in Mere?

Chris Greenwell – we did have a gauging station in Mere but it was near a sluice and we did get anomalies. We are de-commissioning gauging stations. I am not entirely sure that it would give you a huge amount of additional information.

Fiona Bowles – we are obliged to supply anyone who wants water. The Water Resource Management Plan can plan for water requirement in non-drought conditions.

Peter Marks – about 8 – 10 years ago, Wessex water put in a huge pipe from Mere to Brixton Deverill and after that pipe was put in levels in the Wylde went up a huge amount.

Simon Hingley – One third of the water from Mere is put back into the stream before Cloesbrook, you then measure the water at Colesbrook and tell us that everything is fine but you have taken the water from our river and put it in there?

Fiona Bowles – we are well aware of the return rate and that is taken into account with Colesbrook readings.

Cat Layard – is ecology considered?

Fiona Bowles – yes. The next Water Resource Management Plan is 2013 and our next Business Plan is 2014. At the moment we are working on our drought plan and consultation will be out in October.

Has Wessex Water got a reaction plan for when things do go wrong. Where is investment in collecting water?

Fiona Bowles – there is a lot of work being done by the Environment Agency regarding surface water run off.

Ian Gillbanks – if another run for profit business caused this amount of environmental damage – would you prosecute?

Chris Greenwell – of course, we would investigate any reports of environmental damage.

At 10.00 p.m. the Chairman interrupted proceedings and said that she was well aware that there were a lot more questions to be asked but the meeting needed to close and she hoped that there would be due consideration given to the concerns raised tonight. She confirmed that the Parish Council would again raise the matter on the agenda for their meeting next week and thanked everyone for attending the meeting.