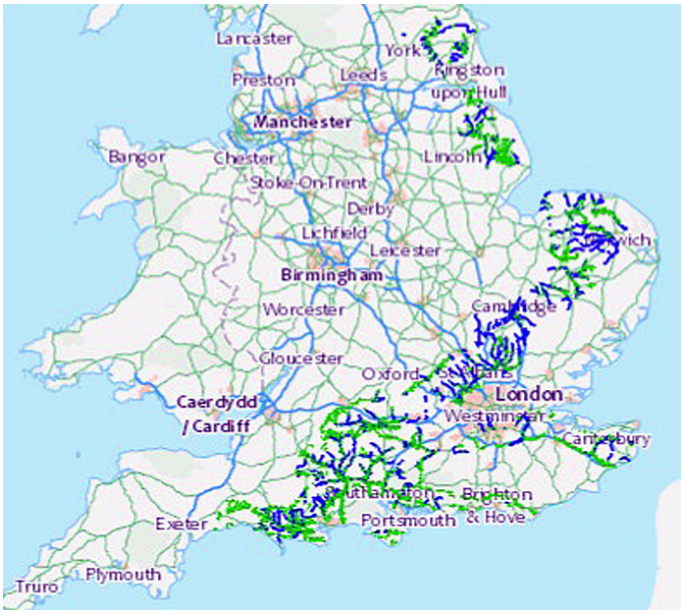
Rob Mungovan and the Wild Trout Trust (December 2023)

Established members of the club will no doubt recall that Rob paid a visit to the club[1] in 2012 when he reviewed the work on the restoration of the R. Shep for which the team, including our Norman Shippey (RIP), won a National award. He also discussed the possible effects of the building of the Trumpington Park estate (alongside the Park and Ride site) on the river.

Rob has since moved on from the post of Ecology Officer with South CambsDC and is now Wild Trout Trust Conservation Officer, with the Wild Trout Trust. His area of responsibility ranges from South Lincolnshire to just north of Heathrow where his function is to restore the habitat using best current practice. Rob would make an advisory visit to the site and possible concepts have to be approved by the Environment Agency and fully funded. Ideally partnerships are sought which is not always that simple as the banks may be owned by different parties. It is worth reflecting that the work on the R. Shep involved the introduction of several hundred tonnes of gravel and several tonnes of chalk. Funding is partly down to a contribution from the Rod License, the Government and private fund raising. Thank goodness there is a significant amount of voluntary labour supplied by local enthusiasts – not necessarily anglers.

What is a chalk stream? We can expect crystal clear water, supplied at a constant rate and temperature through the year. The water should be alkaline and have a high mineral content including carbonates. If this is achieved one can expect the growth of water crowfoot and starwort and a general environment suitable for not only brown trout but all manner of other aquatic loving species including water voles, kingfishers, fly life, native crayfish, bullhead, spined loach, and lampreys[2].

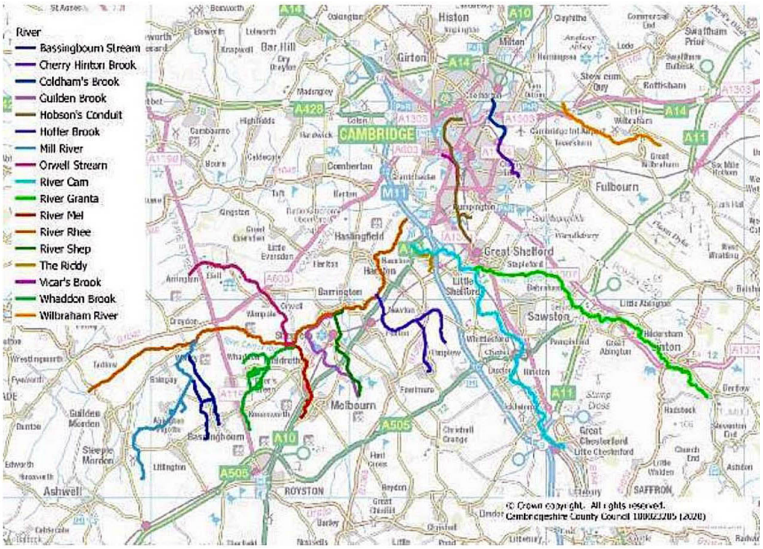
Chalk steams are almost exclusive to England and they are associated with a narrow band of chalk which runs from Dorset to Lincolnshire[3]. Most people reading this report will associate "chalk stream" with the iconic waters such as the Test, Avon and Kennet south of the Thames. Even I was surprised to see a map showing the location of the other rivers including a significant number in the Cambridge area[4]. Mostly these are what we would regard as miniscule for fishing purposes but nevertheless support a significant number of wild brown trout. These are indigenous: stocking is not a policy of the WTT. The major river in our area is the Cam, at least that is the name when in passes through Cambridge, and is composed of three main tributaries. The spine of the river originates near Widdington and flows through Audley End. The Rhee is a significant stream with a source at Ashwell, managed as a nature reserve and worth a visit. The Granta rises to the SE of Linton near Castle Camps and flows through the Abington and Babraham research parks before joining the main river close to Byron's Pool. 60 years ago, the Cam in Cambridge boasted 3 active weirs and a couple of natural swimming pools on Sheep's Green. The water was clear such that strands of streamer weed waved in the current. Today, it is mostly silted and,



according to Rob, at times contains 90% effluent. Anyone for a swim?? The river system is fortunate to have two sites, Fowlmere and Ashwell, which as SSSI's, are legally require to be topped up by an external source of water amounting to 20% of the normal flow in order to keep the water flowing in times of drought.

Of the 224 chalk streams in England, over three quarters fail to meet the required "Good" status: just 12 are described as "protected" but in only 15% of these (by length) was this classification considered accurate!

I was surprised to learn that the chalk streams are not entirely natural and have in fact been managed as far back as Roman times when the stable supply of water was employed to drive water mills used for grinding grain. Come the 20 century, there was an increase in pollution (only just noticed!), an increase in invasive species both plant and animals, and possibly over management (dredging), but according to Rob, the main cause of the deterioration of the chalk streams is abstraction of water from the headwaters. *I recall an event over 70 years ago when, on a school trip to Verulamium (St Albans) to inspect the Roman baths, we walked past what I think must have been the mill pond on the River Ver. The water was crystal clear and there was a shoal of quite large fish (by my standards at the time). I think that they were trout. When I returned about 5 years later, the pool was empty – just a dried-up bowl. I could not believe my eyes, let alone understand what had happened. It was my first encounter with the effect of abstraction. It was the start of the general decline of the Hertfordshire rivers, promoted by the expansion of Welwyn Garden City and Stevenage New Town. I shall refrain from ranting on about the destruction of Offord Mill!*



A local example of the effects of abstraction is Hobson's Conduit. The source at Nine Wells near Great Shelford, dried up in the great heatwave of 1976 and killed off the flat worms for which the source was well known. Apparently, it maintains the level of water in the lake in Botanical Gardens but I always remember the tiny (overflow) stream which ran along the gutter on Trumpington Street. I can't recall the last time I saw any activity!

So, the role of Rob is to modify the remains of the stream and basically increase the pace of the water such that the velocity is sufficient to avoid the deposition of silt. Techniques could include raising the level of the bed, restricting the width of the stream and modifying the path of the stream using natural objects such as fallen trees or artificial gates. The ideal is to generate a series of pools and riffles. The banks may be reinforced with bundles of brushwood but if cattle are likely to intrude then substantial fencing may be required. Local trees provide shelter although anglers may not appreciate wholesale planting and, in any case, restrict access to sunlight. Chalk streams need constant management to adapt to changes in the environment.

Some rivers, which support a game fishery, have their own keeper. *I vaguely recall a local wild life trust taking responsibility for a section of the Itchen I think, deliberately abandoned river maintenance, preferring natural progression. My recollection is that the result was disastrous and abandoned.*

The actions of Rob and team in the restoration of the R. Shep is well documented. The

successful efforts of his team working on the Lower Misbourne where it passes through Denham Country Park are described in Salmo Trutta, vol.22, 2019. He has also been active on the Granta where it runs through the Research Campus at Babraham. The water had a brownish colour with algae on the bed, indicative of the presence of effluent. The R. Mimram[5] was described as the most natural chalk stream in the Herts area. The WTT has been active where it flows through Panshanger Park region (public access), just to the west of Hertford. The R. Rib runs from just south of Royston alongside the A10 before entering the R. Lea near Ware. There is an excellent example of a WTT report[6] following an advisory visit on the www in the Latchford Lakes region just south of Standon. The R. Gwash (Rutland) has also been the subject of restoration[7] near Stamford. Interest was generated in the state of the Lark[8], which some years ago was reported to contain grayling in the Mildenhall area. Alas this could not be confirmed. Stretches were canalised in the 16C to facilitate the passage of wool from the Bury St Edmunds area to the sea via the Gt Ouse. I did not know that but it explains the presence of villages such as Woolpit.

Notes

Fig 1. Rob Mungovan
Fig 2. Distribution of chalk streams in England (Natural England)
Fig 3. Local chalk streams (Cambridge City Council)
Fig 4. Teams working on the R. Lark (River Lark Catchment Partnership)

I suggest following up some of these references and I think you may be surprised how much work is going on to restore and improve our chalk streams.

References

1. Ref: Visit from Rob Mungovan, Invicta Newsletter December 2012
2. The State of England's Chalk Streams https//wwf_chalkstreamreport_jan15_forweb.pdf
3. Chalk Rivers (England) | Natural England Open Data Geoportal (arcgis.com)
4. Cambridge City Council Greater Cambridge Chalk Streams Project Report - Cambridge City Council
5. Mimram restoration: Panshanger Park | Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust (hertswildlifetrust.org.uk)
6. Rob Mungovan: Advisory-Visit_River-Rib-Latchford-Lakes_Feb-2021.pdf (dulavx8rjuiml.cloudfront.net)
7. Habitat restoration and obstruction removal on River Gwash completed | Wild Trout Trust
8. River Lark restoration: About - River Lark Catchment Partnership