

MELBOURN PARISH COUNCIL

District of South Cambridgeshire

Meeting: 23 July 2020 (Maintenance Committee)

Date of Report: 10 July 2020

Agenda Item: MA008/20d) Update on works to River Mel

Just a brief to thank you the parish council for its support of me in delivering the recent improvement work to the river.

I attach a selection of photos showing some before and after shots, plus how I have left the site.

The work was delivered with no problems or complaints from the public. Those that came across to ask were very encouraged to know that something was being done for the good of the river.

Prior to work commencing I undertook a basic water vole survey. There was minimal activity in the work area most likely due to the extensive shading following several years of shrub and bramble growth. I also suspect that rabbits are now grazing the bank beneath the shrubs right down to water level and are possibly competing against the voles for food. One active water vole burrow was found, plus 2 food piles, 2 latrines and a number of runways. With the shading reduced one would expect the vole population to increase as it makes use of this area of suitable habitat once more.

2 brown trout were seen whilst placing the gravel, many sticklebacks and bullhead were also present.

The weir erected at Esse now completely isolates that upper river from the lower river (and has taken away an important spawning ground, hence one of the motivations for this work). I don't believe the weir ever had consent. It is now holding back such a head of water (50cm +) that it is backing up water that drains Station Rd (which can be seen if one looks over the road bridge). The impounded water is causing algae to grow nr Sheen Mill and fencing erected at the end of the garden property is preventing the swan from moving downstream which could otherwise be useful for controlling some of the emergent growth. I will contact the owner and report it to the County Council as the Lead Local Flood Authority. Ellis visited me during the work and I showed him the weir.

In total 76T of 2mm to 20mm gravel and 10T of rough graded chalk was added over ~100m of river. A small surplus of material has been left in 1 location (amongst nettles) with some smaller piles. This material will be used once some settlement occurs. I can undertake stone picking off the playing field if required.

The previous scrub clearance, followed by an excavator tracking through some parts has opened up an area of river (behind the seat). I am keen that this area does not get disturbed whilst the vegetation establishes again. As such I have fixed some barrier fencing with signage to try and deter people. In future, I think the best approach would be to retain piles of brash material to act as dead hedging to control which parts of the river people can access. I'd have to admit that the "hands off" approach has simply allowed brambles to cover the shrubs which has resulted in dense shading of the river, hidden log jams and a lack of amenity, but protection of the rabbits which are now beneath it. A further review of the bankside shrubs should be undertaken in the autumn to see if it's wise to open up further area once more.

Please don't hesitate to contact me should you have any questions or need support.

Regards
Rob Mungovan

MELBOURN PARISH COUNCIL

District of South Cambridgeshire

Mending the Mel – a selection of pictures



Before - a silty channel with existing ledges not performing properly due to past shade suppressing vegetation growth.



After - the riverbed has been lined with mixed-grade gravel to provide new trout spawning habitat. The margins have been stabilised to aid plant rooting and growth. Yellow flag irises have been planted and margins seeded.



Before - the over-shaded river offered little to sustain water voles and the lack of flow diversity limited the river's ability to cleanse silt from its bed.



After - by raising the riverbed and through careful narrowing, the flow velocity has been increased which enhances the river's ability to transport fine sediment thus preventing it from smothering the riverbed. The presence of clean gravel will increase the river's invertebrate population (food for fish and birds).



Due to COVID19 restrictions community volunteers could not be used for delivery. Instead a team was formed from a local landscape company (Meldreth Landscapes) and gravel was crudely delivered by grab lorry.



A 5T excavator was used to place gravel into tight locations. The labourer (upstream in shot) had the role of raking out gravel under careful instruction.



The work was a pleasure to deliver at the rear of my former college
<https://www.wildtrout.org/news/mending-the-mel>



The river now has depth variation and flow diversity. Small pieces of wood have been fixed in the margins to aid vegetation retention as fragments drift downstream.



The work area was safely separated from the public.



A small surplus of gravel and chalk has been left on site to allow for adjustments once the material settles. If the material requires moving, please do not hesitate to contact Rob Mungovan.



A discrete area has had the barrier fencing relocated try to and offer protection whilst the bankside vegetation recovers. It can be removed at any time upon request.