

HADRIAN COOK'S REPORT

Dear Friends,

I suspect that 2010 will see unprecedented interest in things environmental. Following the Copenhagen Summit, it is interesting to reflect how Harnham Water Meadows are part of a bigger picture. First, the period of construction during the seventeenth century was during the 'Little Ice Age' and we may infer that the utility of meadow irrigation was greater than it might be today, due to protracted periods of cold that restricted the growth of grass in winter and early spring. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the climate has warmed, yet perversely the value of floodplain meadows may be greater than ever.

Everybody admires an attractive river valley landscape. We may be drawn by anything from rows of willows, aquatic plants, mills and swans to aqueducts, ridges and channels on the watermeadows. Floodplains provide habitats for plants and animals, but what of the utility in modern times? The answer is they detain floodwater – that is just what nature designed them to do. While this autumn experienced an alarmingly dry start, the passage of depressions across southern England soon made up for a lack of rainfall. Actually, at the time of writing, nothing dramatic has occurred around Salisbury – unlike for example Gloucestershire in 2007 or Cumbria last November – but it has brought the river level up to long last.

Drowners are particular people. We do not like too much water, although at Harnham we could do with a tad more coming down the Nadder over much of the year. However, the proportion of flow diverted on to the meadows will help to reduce peak river levels. If the river floods extensively, as happened in 2000, we may be frustrated about the loss of control, even the damage that can ensue to the meadow infrastructure, but once water is on the meadows it is not somewhere else! With the Harnham Flood Scheme protecting the upstream real estate, our Meadows then take some of the slack for Salisbury. We are surely playing a valuable part in flood alleviation.

Back on the ground, we have new hatches on Upper Seven Acres paid for by Salisbury District Council and the Environment Agency. Much valuable spadework undertaken by British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, Harnham Scouts and Friends Provident volunteers should improve our banks and carriers, and with river levels looking to hold up, we are planning to undertake some demonstration drowning this winter. The dates are in January and February and planned to be on Saturdays; dates will be announced on the website. Alternatively, you are welcome to contact me directly.

Together with Jenny Bowen, Jan Fitzjohn and Lesley Wright

we continue our outreach programme to schools and community groups. Tim Tatton-Brown is working with John Vickerman on restoration of certain hedge boundaries, improving our bird population and restoring the historic landscape, and Dr Terry Clayton (new to our Education Sub Committee) is liaising, on our behalf, with the Woodland Trust, who have supplied some saplings towards the hedge re-planting programme.

Pip Baily is now established as website editor and is working with Kirstie Looms and myself in expanding and updating and upgrading www.salisburywatermeadows.org.uk

I have been concerned with producing a photographic survey record of our above-ground structures and I am writing further educational material – all destined for the website.

We can all feel rightly smug in our support for watermeadows. Along with grazing marshes and ordinary floodmeadows, floated watermeadows are capable of detaining water during times of flood – and they provide the heritage landscapes we cherish as well as provide for nature conservation. So please spread the word: Harnham – as other, watermeadows systems – is a very good idea indeed.

Thank you to you all, as ever, for your fantastic support and a Happy New Year to one and all!

Comment by John Vickerman

Work on re-instating hedges and pollarding willows has started. The Goat Willows by the Long Bridge have been pollarded, quite severely, and will be maintained at that height for the views across the Meadows. Fencing has been re-instated in Sammells Acre, and a mixed species hedge will be planted in the New Year. There will be a fuller Report on all this work in the next Newsletter.