

Gnosall Parish Council

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Services

Gnosall Village Environment

Information about the Gnosall Village Environment



The Acres Floodplain and Doley Brook

Following unprecedented rainfall last winter and again earlier this autumn, the Doley Brook once more overflowed and inundated the floodplain. Judging by numerous enquiries, many feel the fault lies with the Parish Council. However, the Parish Council has never impeded drainage nor encouraged flooding and

is the only landowner that has actively taken appropriate steps to alleviate flooding problems along the Doley Brook.

The Environment Agency (EA) is the public body responsible for main rivers and managing flooding. A letter from their Senior Flood Risk Advisor this month reaffirmed their “*support for the current approach taken by the Parish Council to flood risk and river maintenance*”. So why are we seeing all this flooding on the Acres?

Acres Regeneration Project 2012

One of the main reasons the Parish Council undertook this project was to ease flooding along the Brook. The other two key aims were to improve public access & facilities and restore wetland wildlife habitats.

Working in partnership with EA, extensive work included:

- Restoring floodwater capacity by reconnecting 6-acres of floodplain with the brook (not the main Acres field).
- Installation of a silt-trap to intercept sediment washed down to block the Doley Brook.
- Creating an overflow channel to take floodwater from the brook to alleviate high levels during flood events.
- Recreating the natural profile of the brook to re-establish wildlife habitats.

Current Management of the Acres

Vegetation in the brook is now cut every 3-years and is due to be carried out again this winter. The Parish Council no longer dredges because EA guidance states that this is not an effective way to reduce flooding. EA state that “*dredging the brook will be ineffective as it’s so flat this would just make the channel less effective in conveying water*”. It is also extremely destructive to wildlife; the brook is a natural watercourse and not a man-made-ditch.

Excessive dredging since 1980 has had a devastating impact on the biodiversity of the brook and significantly deepened the bed. For most of the year when conditions are normally dry, there is hardly any flow or life in this now canalised channel. The Acres Regeneration Project aimed to restore the brook to its pre-1980 channel, with a more natural flowing watercourse all year round – a natural asset to be enjoyed by all.

Adapting to Climate Change

Nationally and globally the approach to river management has changed drastically over the past two decades, with greater emphasis on adapting to climate change. Whether we like it or not, our weather is changing and the UK is experiencing an increasing number of heavy and protracted rainfall events. These have also become less seasonal; with floods as likely in summer as droughts are in winter. This change puts greater pressure on our floodplains and rivers.

The government is looking for different ways to protect built-environments by using land in a way more resistant to climate change. This means slowing rivers down and retaining floodwater at the top of river catchments. The Regeneration Project was primarily financed by EA to help store floodwater on the floodplain to protect urban areas downstream such as Penkridge, Burton and Nottingham. Nevertheless, the scheme was also engineered so it did not impede the flow of the brook or add to flooding upstream.

Other Local Influencing Factors

As if climate change were not enough, there are several other factors from the past 40-50 years which have had a detrimental influence on flood-levels of the brook and floodplain:

- Repairs to the A518 road bridge in 1986 resulted in a new culvert (through which the brook flows) with a raised concrete 'lip' that has effectively created a weir. No matter what deepening of the channel occurs upstream, low water-levels are fixed by the culvert's height.
- Older Gnosall residents will remember the brook and floodplain as it was before extensive drainage. Over millennia we adapted to use floodplains seasonally and Gnosall was no different, with land-use limited to the drier summer periods for water meadows, willow beds and rough grazing. However, in the three decades between 1970-2000, the UK experienced drier weather than normal, which combined with more intensive drainage practices, helped change use of the floodplain through Gnosall. On the Acres, the Parish Council took advantage of this to create allotments and a sports field.
- Intensive drainage has contributed to the underlying peat soil of the floodplain shrinking and compacting; so land either side of the brook is now lower-lying and more susceptible to flooding.

- Over the last 40 years Gnosall has rapidly expanded and a significant part of the brook's eastern catchment is now covered with housing and tarmac. Every time a new development is built, additional hard-surfaces encourage rapid rainwater run-off down onto the floodplain and into the brook.
- More intensive farming and drainage (particularly in the Hollies Brook catchment) results in more water quickly flowing into the Doley Brook. This flow is also loaded with silt, rich in agricultural fertilisers that promote unwanted tall vegetation in the watercourse.

Prolonged Flooding

Concerns have been raised that floodwater seems to be receding slowly. The Parish Council contacted EA to request their engineers inspect the brook and assess whether there are any unnatural blockages impeding flow downstream. An EA inspection was undertaken in late September which confirmed "*there were no blockages observed in or near the watercourse*". In their letter, EA say "*we believe factors such as the very low gradient of the brook course and flatness of surrounding land contribute to slow drainage rates during and following flood events*". However, parishioners are always welcome to contact EA themselves to raise any concerns over the brook and flooding incidents.

The Future

Extreme weather and flooding events have increased and are predicted to worsen. Most of The Acres is situated in the floodplain and the Parish Council is looking to put in place a *Climate Change Adaption Plan* for our public open space. This will include a strategy for management of public access (including the boardwalk), visitor facilities and amenities such as the main field.

This plan will also include the allotments, where tenants have often been at the receiving end of local flooding. There are some difficult questions to consider about our use of the land and for the Parish Council the question may be whether it is still sustainable to maintain allotments on a floodplain in the face of climate change? Likewise we may have to accept that access across the Acres will be curtailed at certain parts of the year.

It is increasingly clear that it's time to stop seeing the brook as a problem, but start appreciating it as a natural asset for our village. The floodplain plays a vital function, not only as a location for wildlife, but as the natural place where all our excess rainwater goes. If that means not being able to cross the Acres

for a few months at a time, then so be it. If nothing else it gives us all a chance to appreciate the breathtaking landscape of a floodplain in full flood, alive with the noise of wildfowl and other wetland wildlife. It is infinitely preferable to flooded homes.

The Parish Council has taken the lead in starting to adapt how we manage the brook and floodplain to try and ensure our continuing use has a sustainable future. We will continue to do this over the coming years as we adapt to the challenges we will undoubtedly face from climate change. To achieve this we will need the wider community's help to do their bit too.

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