

## The River Meon

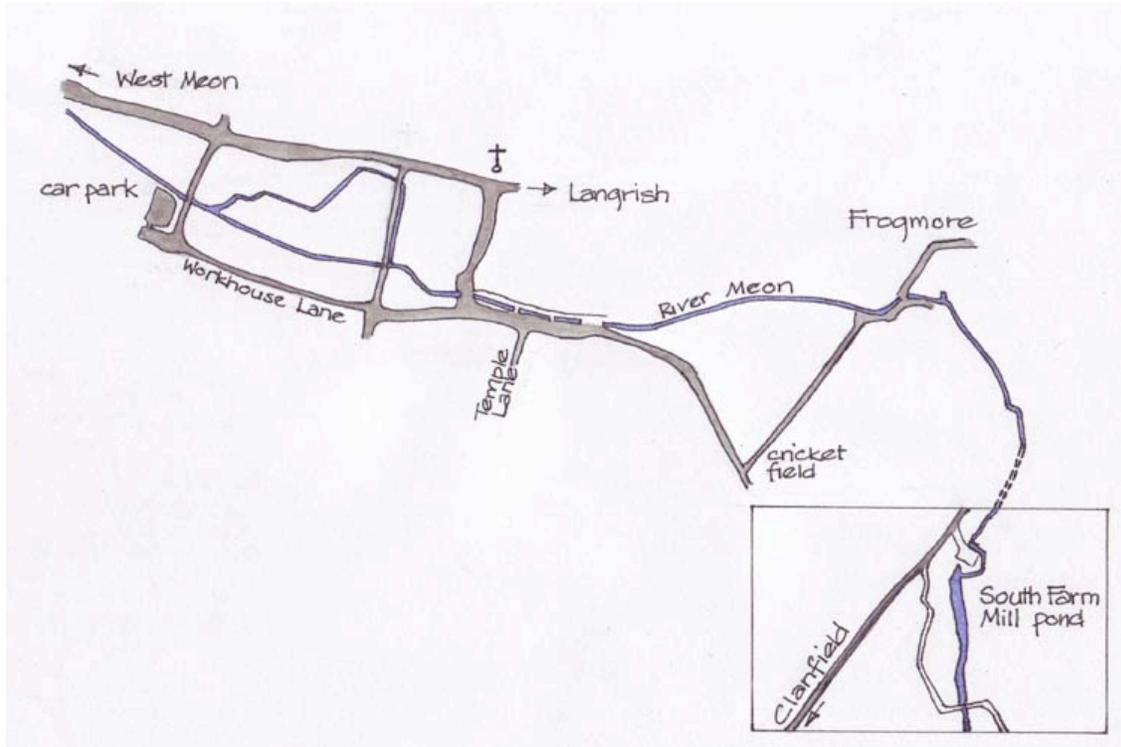


**Rivers can be emotive issues, and the River Meon represents a classic tension as it runs through East Meon.**

Dramatic flooding led to engineering works in the 1950s. Lovers of wildlife worry that there are now fewer natural habitats for fish and birds, because the flood prevention works were constructed in concrete and masonry through the High Street, but suggest that small modifications would deliver great benefits to the environment. Householders whose homes are vulnerable to flooding often prefer not to tamper, or forego measures to protect their property for fear of conflicting with the interests of others in the community.

The village of East Meon and the hamlet of Frogmore both straddle the river and lie at a level of little over 100m above sea level. In the valley of East Meon, the chalk is overlain with mixed soils including a clay stratum which lies under both the village and Frogmore.

## From the source to the village



The River Meon is a typical chalk stream, with well-sustained flow from springs along the valley side. The main spring and the source of the river is located near South Farm at 120m above sea level. There is a lesser spring at Oxenbourne which feeds a tributary joining the river in the water meadows of Lower Farm, where another smaller tributary feeds in from the downs on the southern side of the parish. From its main source the river runs in a northerly direction to Frogmore and then west through the village of East Meon before flowing in a north-westerly direction until it leaves the parish at Westbury.. Its length within the parish is about 9.5 km with an overall fall of approximately 28 metres to give a gradient of 1 in 340. This has proved sufficient to drain surface water away without flooding occurring, although its flow locally is influenced by the river path (meanders, riffles and runs), the density of plants growing within the river and friction from the bed and banks.

## East Meon Parish Plan

Runoff from rainfall adds to the river volume, and after long periods of consistent rainfall aquifers in the upper and middle strata of the chalk of the surrounding Downs become overloaded and precipitate springs which greatly add to the volume of water flowing into the river. This can cause local flooding, especially in Frogmore, as reviewed under the Flooding section.

The River Meon is classified throughout its course from its source to the sea as a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC). The designation does not carry statutory force, but it informs planners of important sites for nature conservation. Landowners are invited to recognise the value of the site to the environment and to enter into a programme of continuous site management to preserve and improve the quality of the site.



The Parish is fortunate to have a stretch of the river, from its source to Frogmore, which is particularly rich in flora and fauna (especially in bird species) and to have landowners dedicated to maintaining and improving this wonderful heritage.

From the source the river flows through the restored millpond to the old South Farm Mill (above), which has created a delightful haven for riverbank (riparian) birds. 101 species have been observed in a bird watch conducted throughout the Parish during 2004. Four of these species breed there - mallards prolifically.

The river then passes through Lower Farm before proceeding in a shallow meander through ancient water meadows that now sustain a wide array of flora.



A habitat survey conducted in the summer of 2004 identified 10 varieties of trees overhanging the river and 118 other species of fauna, including over 24 different plants growing in the river, 27 types of grasses, sedges and rushes, as well as many herbs and wildflowers. Of particular note were patches of fen meadow. This rich diversity produces seeds and berries and habitats for insects, which, in turn provide sustenance for over 50 species of birds identified in this area in surveys carried out by the RSPB and by local observers in a weekly bird watch throughout 2004. In the management of this special habitat, advice is sought from the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group. Just before reaching the hamlet of Frogmore, the river passes near the site of Frogmore Mill, where the site of the old millpond can still be seen.

## Through the village of East Meon and to the parish western boundary



*The new culvert west of The Cross*



*The river west of the George and Corner Cottage*



*One of the six bridges which span the river during its course through East Meon*



*Running past the allotments, with overhanging trees*

The original, natural, course of the river alongside the Cross and through the garden of Cross Keys was preserved; it provides a habitat for fish including trout and encourages herons to fish. Elsewhere the relief scheme does not provide a diverse habitat and expert advice was sought to establish how this could be remedied without compromising the essential need to convey high water flows through the village without flooding.

In November 2004 a survey of the river was conducted by Dr Nick Giles of the Wild Trout Trust which is reproduced as Appendix 2. His report concludes that much could be done to improve habitats for wildlife, including trout, especially as it passes through the heart of the village. Subject to planning permission since this is a Conservation Area, he recommends cutting back overhanging trees, allowing shallows and pools to develop and water-jetting gravel to allow spawning.

## West of the village

West of the village, the river passes through farmland, collecting further tributaries, and then flows past the site of the third mill in the parish. The low lying fields that abut the river between Drayton and Riplington used to provide an ideal habitat for flocks of winter migrants, including fieldfares, lapwings and redwings, with little egrets appearing to supervise the scene as bird wardens. Sadly wild mink have had a devastating impact on breeding riparian birds, as moorhen and coots, as well as deterring the winter migrants that provided such interest to bird watchers on a sunny, winter's day. Action was taken earlier in 2004 to eliminate this predatory pest with beneficial results, and some riparian birds have seen breeding again in the Drayton area. However, continuous vigilance will need to be maintained to prevent mink causing havoc again.

## Recommendations

1. Agree with SINC conservation policy for River south of the Village and liaise with Environment Agency on proposed improvements to the ecology of the River.
2. Cut back trees and blast gravel, subject to Planning permission for trees in a Conservation Area.
3. Create added physical features such as gravel shallows, modest pools and added cover (small boulders) by allotments and below the car park (with permission of landowner). As the first step, it is proposed to carry out a pilot scheme in the autumn of 2005, in conjunction with a tree pruning exercise in the same area<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> East Hants District Council has pointed out that the Environment Agency can provide information about the most appropriate works to be undertaken on watercourses to maximise their biodiversity, including tree works.