

Steeping River

February 2016

Background

The Steeping River is located in east Lincolnshire and drains almost 200km² of the Wolds around the villages of Tetford, Spilsby, Partney and Wainfleet, before flowing out to sea at Gibraltar Point. Upstream of Great Steeping village, the watercourse is known as the River Lymn and flows in a shallow valley with some low defences in places, largely protecting arable land. Downstream of Great Steeping, the watercourse is known as the Steeping River, which has been straightened and embanked as it flows towards Wainfleet over low-lying agricultural land. At Thorpe Culvert, a flood relief channel was constructed in the early 1970s to take high flows around Wainfleet town. This channel rejoins the Steeping River downstream of Wainfleet, and the river outfalls to the sea at Clough House Sluice, adjacent to Gibraltar Point.

Widespread flooding occurred across the country in June 2007, and the Steeping catchment was no exception. A number of localised low spots in the banks allowed water to overtop the defence, flooding land and 10 houses in Wainfleet and Great Steeping. Following the floods, we have carried out various works to reduce flood risk from the Steeping River, including raising the localised low spots in the banks, improving the operation of sluice gates at the outfall and some removal of silt in the channel upstream of Wainfleet.

Wainfleet Relief Channel bank strengthening

In parallel to the catchment-wide investigations, the partnership is promoting a scheme to strengthen the right hand (southern) bank along the Wainfleet Relief Channel. We have concerns over the integrity of this bank and the risk of a breach which could flood significant areas. The current bank is too narrow for modern machinery to safely work on, which is not only impacting on the maintenance of the bank, which has in turn resulted in seepage and other problems, but also the relief channel itself, which then adds to the silt issue.

The works have an allocation in the RFCC-consented six-year programme of £1.3m for 2016/2017, with £0.9m coming from Local Levy. A wide range of options are being considered, including various construction techniques, to achieve an efficient and cost-effective design for a robust defence with improved access for future maintenance. The design of the scheme is being fast-tracked at present, through a dedicated project team and existing consultancy frameworks. At this stage there is no certainty the scheme can be justified according to the current government rules. We are doing all that we can to secure necessary approvals. Construction is likely to be phased over two years, with full completion in 2018.

Badgers

The Protection of Badgers Act 1992 makes it an offence to not only injure or kill a badger but also to disturb, damage or obstruct an active sett.

We continue to carry out routine and reactive maintenance to the embankments, including repairing any damage caused by badgers and rabbits. Badgers are a perpetual problem on the Steeping River and Wainfleet relief channel, with several setts currently being filled in. We have obtained licenses from Natural England for filling in some of the badger setts, although new ones are discovered regularly. Each sett can have multiple holes in the bank. A sett at the downstream end of the relief channel - which has around 20 holes in the bank - has been isolated to prevent badgers using it for the required 21 days and has just been declared inactive. Work will begin to fill the holes in the near future.

We are in discussion with Natural England to find a more sustainable method for dealing with the badgers, while securing the integrity of the banks and safety of our workforce. As part of this we are planning the construction of an artificial sett in a location which will not affect the integrity of the banks, with a view to 'encouraging' the badgers to use this instead of the banks.

Community and Political Engagement

In late January a meeting was held between ourselves, Wainfleet Town Council and Matt Warman (MP) regarding flood risk in Wainfleet and along the Steeping in general. In particular the issue of badgers in the banks was discussed.

We are preparing a full community engagement strategy to work alongside the wider catchment flood risk study and would welcome partners support in this.