



Botesdale and Rickinghall Footpaths and Streams Community Project

Setting the scene

The two villages of Rickinghall and Botesdale are blessed with a well-used network of footpaths which pass through a variety of habitat surrounding the villages. One such section to the northwest of the villages, at the bottom of the slope behind The Street, is joined by a complex network of streams, at least two of which are fed by freshwater springs. Here the streams run alongside the footpaths until they join a larger stream, which in turn eventually converges with another, this being fed by the lake in Redgrave Park at a junction in Spring Meadow. This enlarged stream then feeds into the Little Ouse River which is not too far distant. To my knowledge neither stream has a name.

In the past, probably over 100 years ago, the path of one spring fed stream was altered by the village inhabitants in order to provide a suitable watercourse in which to grow (it is believed) crops of water cress. A new stream bed was created running parallel to The Street and along the bottom of a number of gardens. As this cottage industry faded from prominence in the latter half of the twentieth century the stream bed has gradually silted up and its banks have become overgrown to the point where in the summer its presence is almost totally obscured from the view of walkers taking the adjacent footpath. The silt in this stream has also blocked the access to an overflow stream. In fact it is this 'overflow' stream that would have been the spring water's original course before they were diverted as mentioned earlier. The stream bed here can be seen to the left of the footpath along which walkers from the village advance toward the bridge at the end of Fen Lane.

A little further North East along Fen Lane another spring fed stream runs down the slope from just below the village while hidden from view by a hedgerow through which it runs. Where the stream meets Fen Lane it makes an abrupt 90 degree right -turn and follows the course of the lane for 30 metres or so. It then passes under the road via a culvert and its waters eventually join the main stream another 30 metres further on. This stream is also heavily silted and the stream bed is being overrun by invading vegetation from its banks.

There is evidence of further stream beds and ditches in the plot of land owned by the Water-board (upon which is sited their pumping station) and these are completely silted up and no longer carry surface water at all. This lack of drainage causes Fen Lane to regularly flood along the adjacent stretch.

The Plan

Having established the need for a degree of intervention management for the streams in question (and the adjoining footpaths), Botesdale Parish Council agreed to sponsor a Community program headed up by Councillor Chris Lambert. The aim of the program was to tidy and manage the area with an eventual target of improving the habitat for both flora and fauna; this without spoiling the

area's natural beauty. Hopefully a by-product of this management would be an improved experience for those walking the adjoining paths.

The Method

In the autumn of 2009 an article in the Parish Magazine called for local help for the project. As a result of this appeal six volunteers started work in mid-January 2010 and continued through to mid-March, meeting on alternate Sunday mornings for two hour labouring shifts. Progress was slow as no maintenance work of any kind had taken place for many years.

During February 2010, Botesdale Parish Council contacted Suffolk Probation Service with a view to utilising labour teams on the project. These teams come from Suffolk County Council's Community Payback program. The Probation Service readily agreed to provide regular visits by their Payback Teams for the remainder of the winter and into the spring. This additional labour was utilised to excavate the dry stream bed which runs down the northerly slope towards the stream at the bottom of Fen Lane and as a result progress quickly gained momentum. A spring and summer break then ensued to allow nature to take its course through the breeding and growing seasons.

Work re-commenced in the autumn of 2010 with working parties of local volunteers and further visits from the Payback Teams. A major landmark was reached with the laying of a new stretch of pipework adjoining the top stream to the freshly excavated dry stream bed. More work remains to be done before the stream bed will see running water yet again.

The Future

For the balance of this winter (to mid-March 2011) the project team has two main goals. Firstly to restore running water to the downhill stretch of 'dry' stream bed, while retaining a constant flow in the upper stream. This will be achieved by removal of silt from the upper stream and the use of sluices to control water levels. The second aim is to finish excavating the badly silted stream bed of the secondary stream which passes under Fen Lane via a culvert. When these tasks are completed the upper stream will begin to receive attention, as will the fencing and footpath it runs alongside.

This work will not restore the stream 'flows' to that prevailing prior to intervention by earlier inhabitants of the village. To do so would be to deprive those whose gardens back on to the path of the diverted stream and leave them with a dry stream bed. Instead, both stretches of stream will benefit from flowing water passing along their length.

For next winter and beyond the area will be subject to on-going maintenance only and could perhaps be brought under the stewardship of other interested local groups, such as Barwoods, the Suffolk Wildlife Trust or the Little Ouse Headwaters Project. Whatever transpires the legacy for the two villages will be apparent when walking these footpaths at any time of year.

