

UPDATE ON THE NATURAL HISTORY OF DORNEY PARISH

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Preface

At the start of the Millennium, in year 2000, the opportunity was taken to collate all the records of the flora and fauna of Dorney, (a small, rural parish that is situated at the southern tip of Buckinghamshire in the Thames Valley). Past records of the occurrence of the various plants, birds and animals that lived in the area were assembled to provide an insight and a reference source to what lives where.

The total number recorded was over 750 and the richness of the range of species found was gratifying because it served to highlight the importance of the natural environment of the Parish and how well it is managed. Readers wishing to consult the report 'Natural History of Dorney Parish' ¹ will find a full account on the 'Dorney History Group' Website under Dorney Natural History and Archaeology.

The following paragraphs are comments on many of the changes that have occurred and impacted over the last eighteen years, since completion of this earlier study.

It is timely, therefore, to further reflect upon the Parish's environmental attributes. This means not just considering how the 'Natural History', (comprising birds, beasts, plants, etc.) is under pressure but also raises some wider issues -

- a) how well we are using our environment,
- b) where and how it is being modified,
- c) how we are caring for and conserving it for the future.

Firstly, and briefly, the historical context

Namely the river and agriculture of times past. By the end of the last Ice Age, some 10,000BC, the direction and flow of the River Thames was established. Over the next 5,000 years as the climate became warmer, a permanent course for the river became more defined. The original vegetation of alder and hazel was supplemented by oak, ash and beech trees. The Roman invasion encouraged adoption of improved cereal crops, peas, beans and fruits such as plum, cherry and sloe. Now roll on for a couple of thousand years. People had settled on the land, were cultivating crops and tending animals; a gradual process.

Major projects with local environmental impact

The Millennium year 2000, saw the completion of two major civil engineering projects in the Parish, firstly there was the Jubilee River. Secondly, the Eton Dorney Rowing Lake (a 2km long recreational water course). Both were to introduce significant changes.

Simultaneously the initial preparatory works on site for both projects were the subject of detailed archaeological excavations. The findings are of much historical interest and the

results are described in two detailed reports, published in 2002 ² and 2013 ³. The gravel extracted during the construction of the two projects was transferred by conveyors over the River Thames to storage sites in neighbouring Bray Parish.

Agriculture today

Agriculture accounts for forty-percent of land use in the Parish. Our very traditional, unfenced common land is seasonally devoted to raising beef cattle in the summer months and subject to quota allocations to the entitled commoners. Cultivated farmland is rented from the owners and is cropped using contracted labour with emphasis on the production of horticultural crops such as coriander and French parsley.

The yield of these crops is maximised through the use of large irrigation rigs which are self-propelled, drawing water from shallow boreholes nearby. The regime for watering is for it to be little and often, compared to earlier years of wider spaced drenching. Application of nitrogenous fertilizer too is aimed with similar precision thereby lowering the risk of contamination of our streams and rivers. Use of polytunnels is valued as a means of extending the range of crops grown and the length of the growing season. ("Pick your own" used to be important but has been withdrawn for soft fruits and asparagus due to labour difficulties.)

For the same reason, the keeping of sheep on Dorney meadows has been phased out. By contrast the number of horses kept on grass and bred for recreational purposes is increasing.

Trees

Both projects (Dorney Lake and Jubilee River) were also associated with the creation of new areas of permanent water and included extensive plantings of shrubs and trees, including a major arboretum at the Lake. Now, some twenty years later, it is gratifying to see how successful the establishment of trees and shrubs has been.

Nevertheless, the health of trees and shrubs in the Parish warrants comment. It raises concern especially in view of past experience in the 1970's when all the fine elm trees which dominated both the hedgerows and the skyline were decimated by Dutch Elm disease. Now, some fifty years later all that remains are some secondary growth Elm saplings. These may reach a height of five to ten metres, but at this point, they too succumb to the disease. Because reproduction is by new growth from the existing roots (rather than as seeds) there is no opportunity for genetic variation via disease-resistant stock introduced from elsewhere.

The significance of exotic plant diseases has escalated nationally over recent decades. All is not well and there are some very obvious signs of disease and mortality. Also concern is expressed over the fitness of many imported replacement stocks. The causes of sickness are complex because there are many interdependent factors. For example, new stocks for planting are introduced from abroad without critical phytosanitary inspection, Such imports may carry pathogens or they may be more susceptible pathogens already endemic.

Most of our Horse Chestnut trees are afflicted with disease and the signs are obvious. Leaves turn blotchy and brown and are shed early. The trunks split and exude sap. The

causes are threefold, Horse Chestnut Leafminer (the small moth *Camararia ohridella*) has spread widely since it was first discovered in London in 2002. Also bleeding cancer (the bacterium *Pseudomonas syringae*, a cause of splits in the bark of mature trees which then exude sap. To date the notorious Dieback fungal disease (*Chalara*) of Ash has not been recorded.

The prospect of a village without its large trees is too awful to contemplate, especially for an area which, a few centuries ago, was covered in dense Oak forest. We should be vigilant, look out for diseased trees and seek professional advice.

Wildlife

In 2000 an effort was made to bring together the Dorney observations and records of aspects of the natural history made by amateur groups and individual enthusiasts. This included for birds, plants, animals, insects etc. The results were summarised in the Natural History report.

An examination of this historical material revealed that a total count of 129 species of birds had been observed up until the Millennium. Now some eighteen years later in 2018 species recognition and data recording has continued especially of the birds, Verification of field observations is now common practice, and this helps to ensure collation of all valid records at national and regional levels.

Also, there are many natural history groups to encourage and support keen naturalists. Their established Websites are very useful. Examples included are British Trust for Ornithology, The Mammal Society, Bat Conservation Trust, Froglife, Butterfly Conservation and Plantlife, etc.

Birdlife deserves special mention. Our Dorney Common and the two main watercourses have been highly attractive to migratory and colonising birds. (The river Thames is not listed separately.) In particular the Jubilee River (Dorney Wetland area) was predicted to afford good habitat opportunities and these hopes have been realised, New, verifiable records (for 2000-2018) are many and interesting, Sources of records for birds seen in the locality include the Bucks Bird Club database, Berks Birds Database, Berkshire Bird Atlas 2013, Bird Bucks Atlas 2012, together with personal records of individual amateur ornithologists, especially Brian Clews.

The bird sightings are listed under three locations below:

Dorney Lake, Dorney Common and Jubilee River (Dorney section)

Avocet	Rock Pipit
Cetti's Warbler	Sandwich Tern
Barnacle Goose	Oystercatcher
Bar-headed Goose	Sanderling
Common Crossbill	Peregrine
Bittern	Snow Goose
Black-tailed Godwit	Pectoral Sandpiper
Garganey	Velvet Skoter
Feruginous Duck	Redstart
Common Skoter	Water Pipit

Green Sandpiper	Ringed Plover
Golden Eye	Whimbrel
Glossy Ibis	Siberian Chiffchaff
Hen Harrier	White Wagtail
Red-crested Pochard	Waxwing
Grey Plover	Wigeon
Jack Snipe	White fronted Goose
Spoon Bill	Yellow-legged Gull
Raven	Montagu's Harrier
Littler Stint	
Water Rail	
Red-crested Pochard	
Mediterranean Gull	
Waxwing	

The total number of new sightings between the years 2000 and 2018 is 43 species.

Plants

It is hoped that the results of an initiative to plant Wildflowers in selected areas of Dorney will be successful, although perhaps only on a small scale because of dependency on many external factors,

Plant records, specifically for within the Parish area are added to the wider surveys of Berks, Bucks and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust, and Plantlife.

It is noteworthy that the one small rare plant, the sedge *Cyperus fuscus* or Brown Galingale, continues to survive in limited numbers in two places on Dorney Common. This, despite intense grazing by cattle during summer months.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Smart Motorway

Imminent work on the M4 motorway, to convert it into a 'Smart' motorway with the provision of additional carriageways either side, is likely to cause significant disruption for two years starting in 2019. Indeed, the re-alignment of embankments is going to mean loss of the well-established, forty-year old 'green screen' benefit. Improved sound barriers and a silent tarmac surface are promised.

Crossrail

The commissioning of 'Crossrail', a multi-million-pound project, is scheduled to provide an up-graded London commuter service. Electrification of the line will enable a service with faster speeds and catering for a greater number of passengers. Taplow, the station nearest to the Dorney boundary, has made only minimal provision for additional car parking. Despite assurances, it seems inevitable that this will bring greater congestion into the area.

Aircraft noise

One cannot live in Dorney without being well aware of noise from flight arrivals into and departures from London Heathrow airport. Despite the measures taken to limit noise it is an inconvenience, for which there is no easy solution. A further extension to the airport in the form of a Third runway is bringing fresh challenges and is a distinct probability within the next twenty years. What might be the wider implications in terms of pollution and traffic congestion?

Effects of climate change

Climate change exerts effects which are hard to quantify but are obvious to all whereby weather patterns are showing variations from the norm. For example, we are experiencing unseasonably warm winters, cold wet snaps, late frosts and both very dry and very hot months. These factors impose significant stress on plants and trees. The most noticeable examples being failure of fruit flowers to set (due to frost) or early leaf fall due to drought. Perversely the spring to summer months in 2018 are noteworthy for an exceptional period of hot dry weather.

Of major significance is the Jubilee River, a major flood alleviation scheme for the river Thames (flowing past the towns of Maidenhead and Windsor). This is intended to provide a high degree of flood protection, supplementing the River Thames. However, experience now shows that it failed to fully protect riverside areas immediately above and downstream of the new channel of the Jubilee River when there was a flood situation. Indeed, it is of concern that the Buckinghamshire consultancy report on Flood Management (by Jacobs) concluded that there are no flood risk areas on rivers and lakes in the county, The River Thames was not included in the report. However, it concludes that in the long term, by the 2080's, the latest UK climate projections (UKCP09) are that there could be around three times as many days in winter with heavy rainfall, which is defined as 25mm in a day. It is plausible that the amount of rain in extreme storms could pose a 40% risk of flooding.

Buildings etc.

There are several enterprises and commercial businesses of varied nature and size, including two churches, five farms, two schools. One is newly commissioned to accommodate children with special needs. There is also a garden centre, two pubs, stabling for horses and a riding school. Of the properties graded by 'Images of England', three are Grade I listed and fifty-one are Grade II listed. (These can be viewed on the Dorney History Group website.)

Housing Development

Fortunately, the planning authorities have spared Dorney any Green Belt encroachment by new housing developments. Together with the selling of Council houses this has caused a housing shortage whereby our younger generation cannot afford the local housing costs. It also means that employers in the Parish have to recruit labour from outside the Parish.

The erection of extensions to existing properties appears to be a preferred investment.

It is also apparent that many house-owners are finding that having a large garden can be labour intensive and often too demanding. The option of relying on paid assistance is expensive.

Nevertheless, there is need to positively encourage householders to set up gardens where the planting of insect-friendly, cultivated flower borders and naturalised wildflower areas are a more common feature. There seems to be a preference for gardens that are planted only with a few trees and shrubs. Paved patio areas and solid drive-ways are popular although they are hardly environmentally friendly.

Traffic and visitors

Dorney's roads are inadequate for the volume of traffic both attracted to the amenities and passing through the Parish. In addition to vehicles, there are numerous cyclists (in excess of a couple of hundred at weekends) and a number of horse riders. The Rowing Lake, in particular, attracts a large number of visitors to its regular events. Traffic management is hampered by ineffective vehicle speed controls and shortage of adequate parking. (The 2012 Olympic Games' rowing events were held at the Lake and were very well managed, resulting in minimal inconvenience to Parish life.)

Public health and dignity

Reference has to be made about the sickening habit of some visiting dog owners who allow fouling of our footpaths. Coupled with this, is the illegal deposit of rubbish along the roadside in total disregard for the law. People seem to show total lack of care for the environment.

Finally

To conclude, we are the current generation of custodians of the Parish. We have a duty to embrace the past and take care of the future. We must also recognise that we are fortunate to be able to live within Dorney Parish and we should be prepared to share our good fortune with those who, perhaps understandably, feel entitled to escape from the surrounding urban conurbations and enjoy a visit to the Dorney countryside for an hour or so.

Dorney is well-suited for this with its picturesque varied waterways, footpaths and open spaces.

To mention just one thing in particular, this spring, the profusion of wild flowers and blossom, although delayed by cold weather, was delightful to observe.

References

¹ The Natural History of Dorney Parish. Peter Tyler, 2000, 54pp A record of the flora and fauna occurring in the Parish together with comment on the challenges facing the environment. Unpublished but accessible on-line through the 'Dorney History Group' website.

² Gathering the people, settling the land. *The Archaeology of a Middle Thames Landscape Anglo-Saxon to post-medieval*. S Foreman, J Hillier and D Potts, Oxford Archaeology, Thames Valley Landscapes, Monograph No 14, Oxbow Books, 2002, Oxford Archaeological Unit, ISBN 0-904220-31-1, 122pp and CD ROM

³ Opening the wood, making the land. *The Archaeology of a Middle Thames Landscape Mesolithic, Neolithic and Early Bronze Age*, Tim Allen et al, Oxford Archaeology, Thames Valley Landscapes, Monograph 38, 2013, 571pp.