

Middle Level Waterways Users Committee

Minutes of the Meeting held on 21 October 2016

Present: D Thomas, Chairman, Middle Level Commissioners (DT)
C Carson, Middle Level Commissioners (CC)
J Fenn, Middle Level Commissioners (JF)
B Keane, Middle Level Watermens Club (BK)
R Marson, Whittlesey Angling Association (RM)
C Middleton, Environment Agency (CM)
M Robinson, Environment Agency (MR)
P Separovic, Environment Agency (PS)
S Starr, March & District Angling Association (SS)
Mrs P Syred, Cambridgeshire Marine Industries (PS)
Cllr M Tanfield, Fenland Tourism Board (MT)
D Venn, Inland Waterway Association (DV)
D White, Whittlesey Angling Association (DW)

Apologies: C Allen, HDC (CA)
J Rigney, CCC (JR)
J Walters, Middle Level Watermens Club (JW)
Ms V Whittingstall, Fenland District Council (VW)

Minutes of Meeting held on 15 April 2016

Accepted as a true record of what was said and agreed.

Matters Arising from Minutes of Previous Meeting

These were considered to be dealt with under necessary sections of meeting.

MLC Engineers Report

JF presented a map of the works the Middle Level Commissioners have undertaken and took Committee Members through the works carried out over the period. He covered navigation interests such as the planned start of Phase III maintenance dredging of Well Creek in January 2017 and then went on to talk on other works as detailed below:

Works Progress

Works

Maintenance Dredging



Pig Water Machine Cleansing

Pig Water

Machine cleansing to remove filamentous algae, cott, was undertaken in late June this year, to facilitate water transfer for abstraction from Bevills Leam pond. Further machine cleansing was required following harvest to remove substantial amounts of cott and rigid hornwort from the channel from Horsey Toll inlet sluice to Yaxley Lode overspill.

New Dyke

Machine cleansing works were undertaken during July from Speed the Plough junction to Holme winding hole. The cleansing operation removed emergent lilies and submerged vegetation from the channel.

Monks Lode

Emergent aquatic vegetation was removed from the channel during late summer between Connington Fen Bridge and New Dyke junction

Catchwater Drain

This year's phased programmed machine cleansing works on the Catchwater Drain from the upstream reach of Glatton Road to a downstream extent of Straight Drove Bridge have been undertaken following harvest, utilising a contractor's Long Reach machine.

Well Creek

Phase II Dredging works

Resultant spoil arising from Phase II Well Creek dredging was spread and levelled using a contractor's machine. Extraneous debris was hand-picked from the spoil and removed from site.

Whittlesey Dyke

Whittlesey STW to Bands Paddocks

Dredgings were levelled during the spring months. Debris was hand-picked and removed from the site.

Bank Raising

Kings Dyke

Brigate West

Bank raising works to a low lying section of bank along the south bank of the channel between the Railway Bridge and Brigate West have been completed. Clay material was imported to the site and the adjacent access road raised at the back of the clay works.



Kings Dyke pre works



Kings Dyke post works

Old River Nene
Wrights Farm

A short length of bank raising work was completed during early September along the north-west bank of the Old River Nene. Approximately 200 tonnes of clay material were imported and delivered to site by haulage contractor's lorries whilst bank conditions were conducive.

Old River Nene
Greenvale Factory

Approximately 470m of bank raising work was completed along the east bank of Old River Nene during late summer. Suitable material was available from the adjacent Greenvale factory site free of charge. A contractor was employed to cart and place the material along the newly raised embankment.



Bank Raising Old River Nene (Greenvale Site)

Clay Puddling

Great Raveley Drain

Bank seepage was evident approximately 100m upstream of Green Dyke Pumping Station. It was necessary to employ a contractor to clay puddle approximately 40m of the east bank to staunch the seepage.

Old River Nene

A further short length of bank seepage became evident along the north-west bank of the Old River Nene, immediately following harvest. Approximately 100 tonnes of clay were imported to site and placed into a puddle trench along the bank using a contractor's machine.

Bank Mowing

The Main cut commenced in mid-July. A wet spring growing season produced a dense grass sward, and combined with numerous mechanical breakdowns has slowed the operation considerably. It is anticipated that the Main cut should be completed by December.

Weed Control

The Commissioners' fleet of weed boats has been deployed as and where required during the summer months to deal with submerged aquatic weed growth within the Commissioners' system. Weed growth has been generally lighter than has been experienced during the last few seasons, which may be attributable to the generally cooler early summer conditions affecting early season water temperatures.

Roundup herbicide applications were made to emergent water lilies in the Sixteen Foot and Forty Foot water channels. Dense marginal reed stands were treated where they have started to encroach into the centre of the watercourse. Channels treated included Old River Nene, Twenty Foot, Forty Foot, Whittlesey Dyke, Yards End Dyke and Sixteen Foot rivers.

Navigation

Navigation was partially blocked along the Old River Nene through March town centre, when a large overhanging willow tree branch was wind damaged in early August. The broken branches were removed from the watercourse the following day. The works were undertaken by the Commissioners' workforce.

A large willow tree was damaged by strong winds during late August and blocked navigation along Ramsey High Lode. The damaged branch was removed from the watercourse and navigational passage was again restored the next day.

Fisheries

The EA advised that no match reports have been received during the reporting period and that no fish stock surveys had been undertaken this year, but that there were some planned for next year and they would notify the MLC in due course on when and where these would take place.

EA elver traps have recorded the passage of 38,000 elvers. This compares to 80,000 in the previous year, hence it appears that the spike in numbers experienced a few years ago is not being duplicated.

It was advised that there is an EA fisheries improvement programme for fish passage and angling enhancement and that money can be bid for schemes under this programme. It was suggested that the fishing clubs might wish to investigate this further as the funds could be used to improve access for fishing and swims, for example.

CC reported that there had been several instances of low oxygen levels in IDB waters and whilst the impact had been limited it did serve as a reminder of how quickly this sort of thing can occur. Low oxygen levels occur most often in summer when there is a rapid cooling of air temperature which in turn cools the upper levels of a water body. This creates an upward conveyor belt in the water column which draws up silt, and hence the oxygen level drops. The EA has an incident number which can be called if a number of fish are seen struggling for air or found dead: 0800 807060

Environmental Officer's Report

CC gave his report.

CC advised that he is looking to involve more volunteers as these can assist with delivery and are hugely valuable with monitoring and recording wildlife presence, hence facilitating measurement of success.

It was noted that in the last few years birds have been having second or even third broods and hence are nesting later in the season.

CC reported upon the bid which is under development by the Cambs Acre project team – 'Giving Nature the Edge'. This scheme, which forms the basis of a £1.5M/£2.0M bid for Heritage Lottery Funding, is all about expanding the conservation interest at bankside through creation of a shelf within the bank at the water's edge. This also has the potential to increase channel storage capacity and reduce the risk of channel erosion.

It is CC's opinion that Mink are becoming more covert and hence avoiding being trapped. Their numbers have been reduced and work on controlling numbers will continue for the foreseeable future as far as resources permit.

Environment Agency Report

The EA report presented at the meeting only covered 3 months instead of the usual 6 month period; the additional information to be forwarded at a later date.

September rainfall was 43mm and the SMD was normal. River flows were also normal or above as was groundwater recharge. Reservoirs levels were recorded as above normal for the time of year.

Discussions are continuing between CRT and EA on whether or not EA navigation assets should be transferred to the CRT. There was no news at this time however on what the outcome of these discussions was likely to be.

Angling Matters

It was noted that the voluntary bailiffs are with Angling Trust and not EA but are being trained to monitor and report back. In future it is anticipated that they could go on to become warranted officers acting on behalf of the EA. This is already underway in the Thames area.

These days finding an Eastern European fishing without a licence is quite rare; in general fishermen are licenced. The biggest problem appears to be three rods being used when only one licence is held (covering

no more than two rods). To help address this problem it will be possible from April to obtain a three rod licence. Licences will also run for one year from when they were applied for, rather than April to April.

There have been several cases of otters being caught in cray fish traps near Bedford.

SS reported that March Angling Association is struggling to get members and income. Cllr MT suggested that they consider utilising social media as this does help with recruitment at the younger end of the spectrum, which is where the focus needs to be. She also suggested that the clubs might wish to consider setting up an umbrella organisation to share management of publicity and recruitment, eg the Fenland Angling Association – this would still allow the individual clubs to run as they always have, but may help increase interest in fishing in the area.

CC reported that a stash of illegal fishing equipment had been found in Pophams Eau.

Tourism

Cllr MT stated that Fenland Tourism would love to advertise events through social media tourism@fenland.gov.uk. SS noted that as it is four months after the start of the season (Fishing season 15th July – mid November) it might be too late this year. It was agreed that a separate meeting would be arranged to explore this further.

Fenland District Council (FDC) gets a page every month in the Fens Magazine. Cllr MT suggested we have a page on the waterways in it. The contact for this is: m.buckton@fenland.gov.uk. If we can provide information then this can be included in the next edition.

It has been shown that whilst pamphlets and booklets generate relatively low interest, maps are always popular. Consequently a new map has been printed and Cllr MT will bring a sample to the next meeting.

Cllr MT pointed out that a Fenland Tourism video had been produced. This encompassed fishing, canoeing, boating, microlights, etc and will be premiered at the Light Cinema (next to Tesco in Wisbech) on 20 January 2017, all are welcome to attend.

FDC is working more closely with Vivacity Peterborough and adopting a Waterspace Planning approach which has proven very successful in other areas. Committee Members were encouraged by this but felt that the River through March was an underdeveloped resource.

Navigation

The local branch of the IWA will again be setting up a work party and will expect works to be carried out around the back end of February. It is worth noting that nationally the IWA is planning its National Festival in Peterborough in 2018, which will bring boaters and those interested in boating to the area.

There is an EA planned closure from 7 November covering Dog in a Doublet, St Ives Lock, Cardington Locke and Houghton. Closures at Denver will be designed to coincide with the MLC planned closure of Well Creek. Notices will be sent out in due course.

DT reported that he had received information that suggested that work on the Ramsey moorings would commence in the spring. He also reported that he had been approached to discuss the possibility of others setting up and running a water taxi service from Yaxley to Frog Hall Bridge as a link between the Fen Edge Route and the Great Fen.

An update was given on the new MLC Navigation Act which is likely to be presented to parliament in November. If passed this will give the MLC powers to licence pleasure boats that use the MLC watercourses and it would be intended that a separate committee is set up to discuss the best way to implement this new charging arrangement.

DT reported that one of the downstream gates at Stanground Lock was leaking and to inspect and repair it a lock closure will be required, probably in early spring.

The EA and MLC met to discuss the River Great Ouse tidal crossing between Denver and Salter's Lode after a boater had reported having difficulties. The meeting covered possible improvements in signage and advice given to boaters, whilst recognising that it is the boat captain's/skipper's ultimate responsibility to understand the risks and to plan and act accordingly. In future the EA and MLC plan to hold joint pre-season and end of season meetings. As an aside several Committee Members observed that it was often the most

experienced boaters who end up getting into difficulties as they are more likely to ignore advice or lack the levels of caution found in less experienced boaters. Also it has been noted that longer boats have issues at Salter's Lode due to the silt bar which exists.

Islip Mill footbridge on the Nene is to be raised.

Rights of Way/Footpaths

A new footpath has been opened in Tydd St Giles.

Any Other Business

None

Date of Next Meeting

10am on 21 April 2017 at the Middle Level Offices.

D Thomas
Secretary/Chief Engineer

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