



AUNE CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

'Conserving the Devonshire Avon from source to sea'

CHAIRMAN'S NEWSLETTER – DECEMBER 2015

I'd like to thank my fellow committee members for their hard work, in their different ways, in helping to make the river a better place over the past year: that is, Ros Brousson (Secretary & Treasurer), Pat Cassidy, Mary Clark, Mike Cooper, Ryan Hooper, Peter Marsh, Bill Starey and Eric White. Pat stood down from the committee at our AGM but, as ever, continues to take an active interest in what is happening around the estuary. The vacancies created by Pat's resignation and John Peters' death last year were filled by Mary and Ryan at the AGM - approved by the membership. Mary lives up-river at Topsham Bridge and Ryan manages the Bantham Estate so we have a fairly good coverage of the river, now.

It has been a year since my last Newsletter and during that period there has been quite a lot of both actual and rumoured change around the estuary as the Bantham Estate has started to implement its management plan. Inevitably, the transition from a state of what might be called benign patronage to one of much more active management has disturbed some local people. For many years, for much of the time, the estuary has been a place of solitude and for quiet reflection on Nature's wonders - whether from the water, in Stiddicombe Wood, or whilst walking along the river bed at low tide. We are all very fortunate to have been able to enjoy that time. Based on the story so far, the change of ownership of the estate will entail a more business-like approach. However, that is likely to bring some benefits for the river and estuary. For example, I am confident that the purchase by the Estate of South Efford House and the 'Blewitt' land at Bridge End, two important properties bordering the estuary, will eliminate the ACA's long-standing concerns about a variety of pollution problems emanating from both those sources. Understandably, some people are disturbed by the increased 'shoot'-related activity around the estuary, some by the occasional unusual craft on the river, some by the probable access changes to the beach at Bantham, some by the changes to mooring arrangements in Bantham, and some by the increased activity in the estuary e.g. recurring 'wild swim' events. Arguably, more public information about the changes would have helped manage people's expectations and concerns. But, I am obliged to state, none of these changes has adversely affected the river or its wildlife, to date, as far as I am aware. Time will tell! Our principle ACA asset is our members' local awareness and knowledge of the river and estuary. Please trust your committee to use that asset wisely and to act appropriately if we consider the river or estuary is genuinely threatened.

Many of you will have been aware of the activities of the 'Swan Man', aka Richard Crafer, over the last few years. Personally, I have experienced only mild, if fairly frequent, nuisance phone calls from him. Occasionally, these calls have even contained some useful or

interesting information about wildlife sightings from around the estuary. More importantly, some of you will have been on the receiving end of his disturbingly anti-social behaviour and, perhaps, will have reported him to the police and SHDC. Anybody using the Tidal Road will have seen the ludicrously high number of swans (70 or more!) that gathered around in response to Mr Crafer's delivery of an artificial feeding regime. However, I can confirm that he has now been banned from the estuary by the police because of an assault at Bantham, which proved to be the 'final straw' in a dossier of cases drawn up by the authorities. As a direct result, the number of swans and the ecological balance of the estuary have been restored to their previous state; swans are once again to be seen at Bantham!

The Devon Avon (Water Quality) Group, set up and chaired by the ACA, continues to meet once or twice a year to promote collaboration between interested organisations and the Environment Agency in understanding and managing the Avon's water quality and ecological well being. It is not yet clear how the relatively new Catchment Based Approach to River Basin Management, which was introduced by DEFRA last year, will impact upon the Avon but we maintain good working relationships with the AONB Unit and the Westcountry Rivers Trust who are jointly nursing the project to life. Updates will be added to our website at <http://www.auneconservation.org.uk>.

The Devon & Severn Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority carried out a review of estuary netting policy earlier this year and I urged anybody responding to the public consultation to support a total ban of netting on the Avon. Poachers otherwise would take advantage of any loophole or confusion in the bylaws, as has frequently happened in past years, to catch any available fish species for financial gain, to the detriment of the river's biological diversity. Subsequently, I have received the following clarification from the Duchy of Cornwall - which owns the fishing rights - *'at a stakeholders meeting in August, all parties (including the Duchy) concurred that there was no basis to reinstate the licencing of netting (other than for sand eel) on the Avon. I can confirm therefore that the policy has not changed and licences have not been issued.'* Other bylaw changes affecting potting and bass fishing around the estuary are either being considered or have been made already. For example, a 'deeming' clause could potentially be created in a bylaw so that any bass found on a vessel while fishing in our Bass Nursery Area could be deemed to have been caught in the BNA. The change would eliminate the enforcement problem of people saying that they had fished for bass outside the estuary before coming to fish from a boat for other species inside the estuary. This change would plug an important loophole and could be included in this bylaw.

Increasingly, the estuary is being used for recreational purposes by people of all ages. Many of these people use Timbers car park at Aveton Gifford as a base and it is of concern that the SWW sewage treatment works discharges into the estuary just below that area -

without warning. Our attempts to set up some form of 'Sewage Alert' for river users, in particular about the 11 permitted by-passes of raw sewage from the treatment works after heavy rainfall, have been unsuccessful but our efforts are continuing. An on-going project to separate rain water from foul water in the AG sewerage system and, thus, to stop overloading of the treatment works might help to relieve the problem in the longer term.

It has been a quiet year for ACA events. We organised a New Year clean-up of the Tidal Road and a couple of beach cleans on Cockleridge, a successful BBQ at Folly Farm and a very interesting AGM at the Fisherman's Rest. The AGM, itself, was followed by a talk by Craig Dunton (Think Nature) and Lynne Kenderdine (Devon Wildlife Trust) about the Avon Valley Project. This project has the aim of restoring habitats for the benefit of biodiversity. The restoration can be achieved by enhancing the connectivity between isolated pockets of habitats – allowing greater movement of species and reducing fragmentation; a key factor in the decline of many species - one might term it "gardening on a catchment scale"! The evening's business was complemented by an excellent buffet.

A programme of events for 2016 has yet to be finalised but details will be emailed to members eventually and added to our website. A New Year clean up of rubbish from around the Tidal Road will take place, weather permitting, on Saturday 2nd January at 2.30pm. The low tide times are a bit awkward (around 5.00pm) but I hope we'll be able to complete our activity before darkness falls! I also hope we shall be able to continue our routine beach cleans on Cockleridge but access for removing rubbish (never easy) has become more problematic owing to the diligence of the Estate's game keepers (who zealously but unexpectedly locked my Land Rover inside a field, last time!). However, I'm sure we shall be able to come to some form of workable arrangement, possibly shipping the rubbish to Bantham for collection by SHDC.

It is encouraging to learn that the separate, burgeoning Neighbourhood Plans for Thurlestone and Bigbury will recognise the existence of the estuary as an important asset and boundary for both parishes. Personally, I have felt in the past that the river has tended to be overlooked by our local councils, other than by Aveton Gifford.

Finally, if you have any ideas for future ACA activities, please let me or another committee member know and do, please, tell us about anything of interest or concern anywhere on the river.

I hope you will all have an enjoyable Christmas and a happy New Year - beside, in or on the river.

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