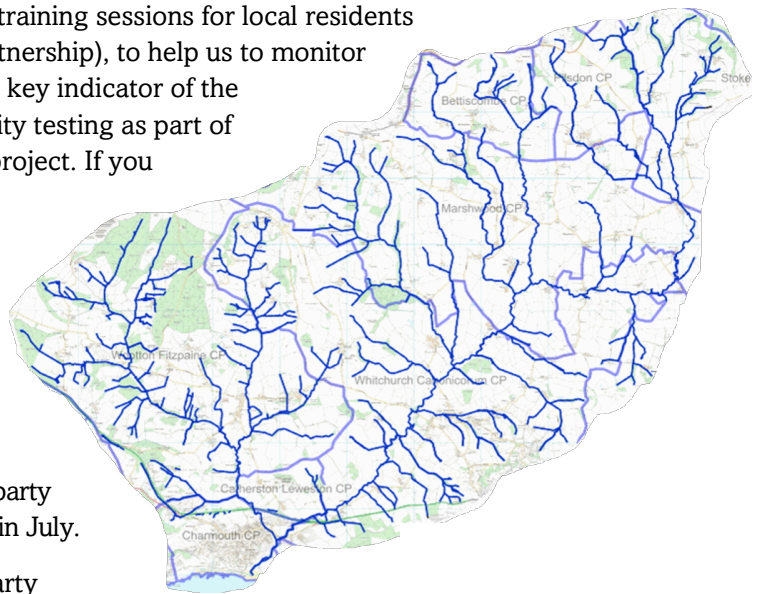


# River Char Community Project

– Update January 2023

*We've been busy with our mission to help clean up our river. If you've joined any of our events over the last year – thank you! If you'd like to know more about the project, these have been our 6 main tasks:*

- 1. Reducing pollution from septic tanks:** We've prepared a new leaflet for residents on Septic Tank maintenance and included these with the April issue of *Char Chat*. The leaflet is available at [www.charvalley.org/sewage](http://www.charvalley.org/sewage). We hope to have a talk on the subject in the new year (see p.4). To join the mailing list for details of forthcoming events, email [charvalley@dorset-aptc.gov.uk](mailto:charvalley@dorset-aptc.gov.uk)
- 2. Water quality testing:** We've run two Riverfly training sessions for local residents (organised by Dorset AONB and the Riverfly Partnership), to help us to monitor numbers of caddisfly larvae and other insects – a key indicator of the health of the river. We've also started water quality testing as part of the Westcountry Citizen Science Investigations project. If you can spare an hour a month and would like to be involved, contact [acarey@charvalleypc.com](mailto:acarey@charvalleypc.com)
- 3. River walks to help residents get to know the river better:** We've held guided walks, led by Nick Gray (DWT) and Ian Rees (Dorset AONB), at Northay Farm, Crabbs Bluntshay Farm and New House Farm.
- 4. Himalayan Balsam:** Nick and Ian led a working party to root out Himalayan Balsam at Stockham Bridge in July.
- 5. Flood management:** We've run two working party sessions doing flood management work at Bafferlands Farm and New House Farm.
- 6. Working with farmers:** Dorset AONB and Dorset Wildlife Trust continue to work closely with farmers to restore river habitat, help farmers better understand the funding currently available to them and address practices that have an impact on the river (acknowledging that where we have restored rivers, it is in partnership with landowners too).



*But the River Char Community Project also has a Foreign Policy!*

**Downstream:** We're working closely with the Lower Char Community Project in their discussions with Wessex Water on reducing the number of engineered releases of untreated sewage into the River Char. (Action is promised for 2023.) We're also supporting their **Charmouth Dragon River Festival** on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2023. It'll have a procession, music, singing, costume and poetry. Do come along with friends and family – there's a meeting to plan the festival: 18<sup>th</sup> February, 2-5pm, St. Andrew's Hall, Charmouth.

**'Abroad':** We're working with the River Lim Action Group to get South West Water to clean up the plastic biobeads at Charmouth Beach. (Action promised for Spring 2023.) We're supporting the Winniford River Action Group in Chideock and have given talks to Charmouth and Symondsburry Parish Council Meetings. In 2023, we hope this will lead to a regular meeting of the 6 River catchments (Lim, Char, Winniford, Simene, Brit & Asker) to be chaired by Chris Loder MP. We've also met with Baroness Jenny Jones to discuss sewage and pollution on local beaches and in local rivers.

Read more at [www.charvalley.org/riverchar](http://www.charvalley.org/riverchar)

# 10 Lessons from the Project

During 2022, we've been treated to walks and talks at Northay Farm, New House Farm and Crabbs Bluntshay Farm – as well as working at other sites along the river to clear the banks, let in more light, slow the flow of flood water and create new habitats on the shore. The walks have been led by Ian Rees of Dorset AONB, Nick Gray of Dorset Wildlife Trust (with Tim Bowden, formerly of the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group). Here are some highlights that we've learnt from them and the farmers through whose land the river flows:

**1. An oak tree in the middle of a field** (and we saw many in the distance from Crabbs Bluntshay) often suggests the line of an old hedge. The loss of about 50% of hedgerows since World War II was driven by Government funding to farmers who grubbed them up. Recently, funding has been available to encourage farmers to replant hedges. (In a reminder that fake news is nothing new, a 1969 botanical study estimated hedgerow loss at 10,000 miles per year – as opposed to the then government's estimate of 500 miles per year).



The meandering river at Crabbs Bluntshay

**2.** The Char is a meandering river with a single sinuous channel. But millennia ago, and even now if it were left to its own devices, it would be **an anastomosing river**. That's to say, one that tends to split into multiple channels, forming wide boggy areas and changing course and direction often over time. There are obvious reasons that humans prefer a single channel river:

- It may mark the boundary of a parish or of a farmer's land – no-one wants to lose their land!
- Residents may have invested heavily in building bridges, mill workings and fish ponds. These will all become redundant if the river moves.
- Swampy areas are less use for growing crops or rearing livestock than dry fields alongside a meandering river.

But the river will always want to have its own way.

**3.** If we reintroduced **pine martens** they would help to reverse the decline of the red squirrel and suppress grey squirrel populations, which cause serious damage to trees by stripping the bark.

Currently these mainly nocturnal animals are mostly found in Scotland and parts of Ireland.



*Martes martes*



The orchard at Crabbs Bluntshay

**4. The electricity pylons in the Char Valley have a lot going for them.** The National Grid's Landscape Enhancement Initiative (LEI) is a grant scheme designed to reduce the impact of electricity transmission lines in England and Wales. LEI funding is available for AONBs and Dorset AONB has been able to use its share to support woodland and orchard planting, river management and hedgerow planting schemes on all three of the farms we've visited recently. Without the pylons, those smallholdings might never have received the investment of money and labour.

**5.** A **herbal ley** is a complex seed mixture of grasses, legumes and herbs, which brings many benefits to forage, livestock health and soil fertility. Herbal leys can often include a mixture of up to 17 plant species – at Crabbs Bluntshay Farm they include chicory, sainfoin and birdsfoot trefoil, which are all **anthelmintic plants** – meaning that they provide a natural remedy for animals with parasitic worms (without having to use Ivermectin and other environmentally dangerous pharmaceutical drugs).



*Rhinanthus minor*

**6.** We've lost 97% of our lowland meadows over the past 100 years. These flower-rich fields used to be called 'hospital ground' or 'well ground' because the wild flowers drew up minerals from the soil and helped to treat sick animals. To bring these meadows back, we need help from yellow rattle. An annual that thrives in grasslands, it feeds off the nutrients in the roots of nearby grasses. At Northay Farm, yellow rattle is being used to support the establishment of a range of herbs. Because it tended to weaken grassland and thrives on poor ground, it used to be known locally as '**poverty**' or '**poverty weed**'.

**7.** Whenever Tim Bowden comes along, he brings his spade and, before long, can be found digging a sample of soil from the middle of a field and comparing it to the uncompacted soil that you tend to find at the edge of the field.

He starts by crumbling it and then smelling it – “**you can smell the biology**”, he says, “**the organic matter is the fat of the soil**”.



*Tim Bowden*



*Sylvia's Sheepwash*

**8.** Sylvia Creed-Castle (author of *Dorset's Western Vale*) was keen to remind us that her **sheepwash** (there's another at Stanton St Gabriel) was for washing the wool and was not a sheepdip (for treating the sheep). Local farmer Charles Stanbury told us that, though there were different rates per hundredweight paid for clean and dirty wool, on his childhood farm on Exmoor they preferred to sell dirty wool because it was heavier.

**9.** West Dorset's **banked Saxon hedges** (like those elsewhere in the Southwest) were probably planted on banks for multiple reasons: the bank helps to make an effective livestock-proof barrier; it provides shelter against the wind for livestock and crops; it helps to control soil erosion and surface runoff; the ditches on either side (dug out to form the bank) help to drain the fields on either side. We saw a newly planted banked hedge at New House farm, put in with help from Dorset Wildlife Trust volunteers and Dorset AONB.



*A buffer strip in action*

**10.** A 5-metre (or wider) **buffer strip** between any ploughed land and the river would be enormously helpful in reducing the amount of soil, pesticides, herbicides and slurry that form runoff from fields in wet weather. Walking the farms, we could often see where this simple precaution was practised on one side of the river but not the other.

The State of Minnesota in the USA by law requires “perennial vegetation buffers of up to 50 feet along rivers, streams, and ditches that will help filter out phosphorus, nitrogen, and sediment.” The law in this country requires only three feet!

## Reflections from Ian Rees, Dorset AONB

Looking back at the first year of the River Char Community Project, I'm proud that we have started to bring about change on the ground. But, to be effective, we need people to be part of the journey too. There's no point in us parachuting in to tackle perceived problems, then disappearing off never to be seen again. The Dorset AONB is in this for the long haul – and that means slow and steady!

It was only last December that the project launched at Becklands Organic Farm. Since then, working with Dorset Wildlife Trust, we've enhanced over 700m of river by raising the canopy to let more light into the bed and banks and worked at three sites installing natural flood management solutions. We've tackled Himalayan Balsam hot spots and pond restoration too. This has been supported by volunteers and thank you to all who have come out to lend a hand. We also ran a series of walks and talks to raise the profile of river and ensure that those who cannot get stuck in on a physical task are part of the project.

We're also working with the farming community on what their future looks like. Change is afoot with public financial support for farming, much of which

remains unclear (unhelpfully for farmers). Combined with the sharp rise in fertilizer prices caused by the Ukraine War and the worsening financial outlook, it makes for uncertain times. We've run finance planning to help put 4 farms on a more secure financial footing. The theory is that working the land to its maximum capacity is not always the best approach – there are more sustainable ways (financially and environmentally) to work the land to produce fine food. We still have funds for sustainable finance advice, so get in touch if you're a farmer and want to find out more: [ian.rees@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk](mailto:ian.rees@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk) Looking at efforts on all West Dorset's rivers, there is hope for the future and momentum to overcome the challenges faced by our rivers. It'll be fascinating to see where we are in another year, building on the efforts of local people as we create a long-term, sustainable movement to care for our rivers.



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### Look out for:

- Thurs 26<sup>th</sup> Jan – DWT / DAONB river working party. Please join us if you can.
- Sat 18<sup>th</sup> Feb – **We are the River**. An indoor community event in St Andrew's Hall, Charmouth to celebrate the River Char, share your hopes and memories and plan for the **Charmouth Dragon River Festival** on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2023.
- Friday 24<sup>th</sup> Feb – An online, evening talk/Q&A on river pollution, impact of insecticides, and septic tanks.
- Thurs 18<sup>th</sup> May – Farm/River walk at Babers Farm (Countryside Restoration Trust).
- Sat 23<sup>rd</sup> May – **Charmouth Dragon River Festival** – Community procession and events in Charmouth.

For more details of all events, visit [www.charvalley.org/riverchar](http://www.charvalley.org/riverchar)

### How you can help:

- To join our River Char Community Project, email our Clerk, Tamsin: [charvalley@dorset-aptc.gov.uk](mailto:charvalley@dorset-aptc.gov.uk)
- To join Charmouth's Community Project to clean up the river, visit [www.riverchar.org](http://www.riverchar.org)
- If you've got a septic tank/cesspit/sewage treatment plant, help keep the river free of sewage by maintaining your tank. See [www.charvalley.org/sewage](http://www.charvalley.org/sewage)
- If you've got an hour a month to monitor the water quality in the river, email [acarey@charvalleypc.com](mailto:acarey@charvalleypc.com)
- Walk the river. It's beautiful and needs our help. If you see anything interesting (kingfisher, water vole...) or worrying (pollution, algal bloom ...) let us know – with a photo if possible. Email: [acarey@charvalleypc.com](mailto:acarey@charvalleypc.com)
- The Wessex Water Guardians initiative is also run by Dorset Wildlife Trust with funding from Wessex Water. Do sign up if you're interested: [www.charvalley.org/cleantheriver](http://www.charvalley.org/cleantheriver)

**Find out more at [www.charvalley.org/riverchar](http://www.charvalley.org/riverchar)**