

River Char Community Project ~ Clean, Revive, Restore



Background

For most of its journey, the River Char (with its tributaries) flows through the parishes of Wootton Fitzpaine and Whitchurch Canonycorum, though it has some of its headwaters in the parishes of Symondsburry and Upper Marshwood Vale and it flows into the sea at Charmouth.

So Char Valley Parish Council (which includes the parishes of Whitchurch and Wootton) produced a detailed leaflet about the project that was sent to all residents, surveyed residents for their views on the river and commissioned Dorset AONB and Dorset Wildlife Trust teams (using grants + Parish Council resources) to do a snapshot study of the River Char. This report was published in December 2021. It gives us a picture of the health of the river, identifies problems and points the way to a comprehensive river improvement plan.

Reports

The Full report and Summary report can be found online at www.charvalley.org/riverchar - but the headline result is that the River Char and Monkton Wyld Stream are classed as failing watercourses by the Environment Agency (EA) and in need of improvement. The report identifies seven main ways we can start to make improvements - from monitoring the quality of the water to getting involved in clearing the banks and blockages, from advising on farming and land management issues to looking after our septic tanks better.

Improvement Plan

In Phase 2 of the River Char Community Project, we are working with Dorset AONB to put their improvement plan into action. This year we have:

- held a number online and riverside events including an evening Zoom discussion attended by 37 people, two 'daylighting' working parties (to clear sections of the river and its banks) and a 5-hour riverfly training session for 10 residents to enable them to monitor water quality monthly.

- produced and circulated a leaflet and written an article in our *Char Chat* magazine about managing septic tanks (almost no houses in our parishes have mains drainage)
- scheduled days to work on rooting out Himalayan Balsam later in the summer
- planned guided river walk/talk sessions and a public meeting on river/water issues including pollution and pesticides.

On Agricultural Land Management, Dorset AONB and DWT have undertaken advisory visits to local farms looking at farm economics and suggesting how to make them more sustainable environmentally & economically, as well as herbal ley site visits and further engagement with farmers to address practices impacting the water environment.

We have also asked Dorset AONB to look for additional funding to allow the project to be widened to include the entire catchment and neighbouring parishes.

Additional Information

A range of films and technical documents are available on our website, covering

- Foam in rivers and still waters
- Evidence of Pollution
- Problem Plants
- Sewage fungus - a field and microscopic guide
- Environment Agency reports
- W Dorset Rivers & Coastal Streams: issues 22/06/15
- Map of the River Char Catchment
- *Is my river fit to play in?* Check the online map at the Rivers Trust
- Watch BBC Panorama's 'The River Pollution Scandal'
- The Guardian's article - *Britain oozes sewage*

Funding

For the financial year 2021/22, Dorset AONB, working in partnership with DWT and FWAG, secured funding for the River Char Community Project from:

- 'Greening West Dorset's Hills and Vales', a Green Recovery Challenge Fund project supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund & Defra.
- West Dorset Rivers & Streams delivery, a Water Environment Improvement Fund project from the Environment Agency.

The Future and Collaboration

All reports and plans have been and will continue to be shared with neighbouring parish councils.

Members of the River Char Community Project are also working closely with the the River Lim Monitoring Group and most notably with the **Lower Char Community Project** (which recently organised visits to the River Axe and to Charmouth Sewage Treatment Works and which is working closely with Wessex Water to look at ways of reducing the number of times that screened but untreated sewage is released into the sea or the river during storm-related 'engineered spills'.

While Charmouth has particular issues of its own in relation to wastewater treatment, recreational use of the river mouth, beach pollution, etc. our strong hope would be to move towards a single project covering the entire river catchment as soon as possible.

www.charvalley.org/riverchar