

NEWPORT RIVER GROUP

PART OF THE CAM UPPER REACHES ACTION TEAM

Our occasional newsletter brings you up to date on our recent activities, ongoing work and initiatives that continue to help and support the river and its flora and fauna, as outlined by group members Adam and Julie, Bill, Chris, Dr Andy and Roxanne, Geraint, Glenys, Keith, Marion and Trevor.

Photo: Kingfisher by Jane Gilbey



This beautiful photograph by Jane Gilbey from Great Chesterford is a wonderful reminder of why our work matters so much. It captures not only the richness and beauty of the wildlife and habitats we're striving to protect, but also the spirit of collaboration that makes this work possible. Under the umbrella of CURAT, River Groups in Littlebury, the Chesterfords, Saffron Walden and Duxford are all working together to restore the Upper Cam, and we're delighted to have recently been joined by staff from the Genome Campus, who care for important stretches of river and surrounding land with potential for wetlands and ponds.

From the river's source all the way through to South Cambridgeshire, every stretch now has dedicated people looking after it. Those of us working in the headwaters have a particularly important role, because what happens here shapes the health of the river for everyone downstream. By working together, we can make sure that impact is a positive one for the whole river system.

In this update, we're sharing some of the core work that supports everything we do, as well as an exciting breakthrough that opens the door to restoring the entire river catchment. We're beginning a five-year plan, and from 2026 onwards you'll start to see real changes around the river in Newport. We want everyone involved to be part of that journey.

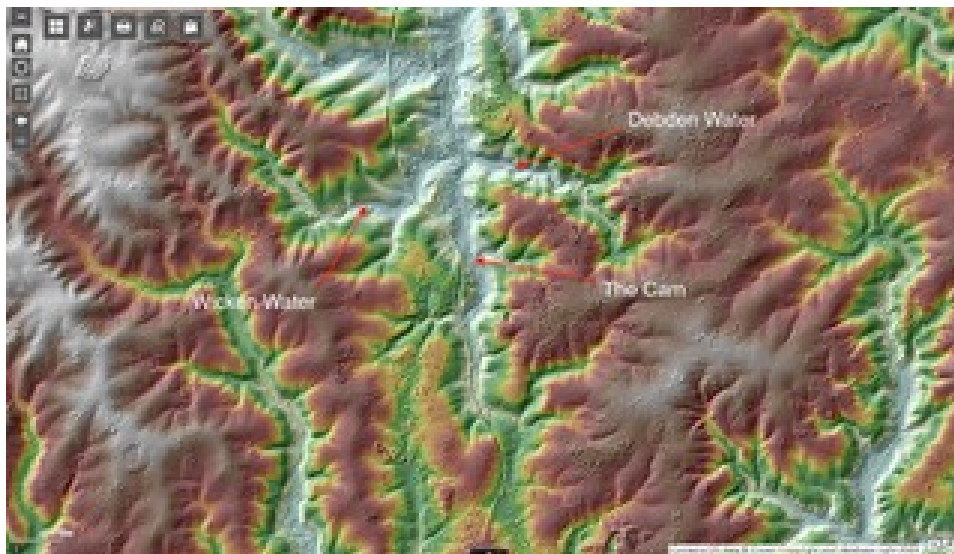
As a supporter or volunteer with the Newport River Group, your views really matter to us as we move into the next stage of rescue and restoration. Please do share your thoughts on anything in this newsletter. We'd especially love to hear if any groups would like a more detailed presentation, where we can answer questions, discuss ideas, hear your suggestions and benefit from your advice.

Keith

The Upper Cam Catchment Regeneration Plan

We feel we are doing good work but for some time we have felt that the long-term solution to the key problems – consistent flow in the river and water quality – was a whole catchment regeneration project.

Newport sits at the centre of the Upper Cam catchment – 28,000 acres of chalk hills and valleys which bring three chalk stream tributaries together pretty much in the centre of Newport. This photo shows the hills and valleys, and where the valleys come together to form the upper reaches of the Cam.



Anyone walking the countryside around us (or even trying to drive along the B1383) will know that these tributaries are either in flood, or low/no flow condition. The cause is usually extreme rainfall events or near drought conditions. This pattern is expected to increase in coming years, greatly increasing flood risk within the village and downstream.

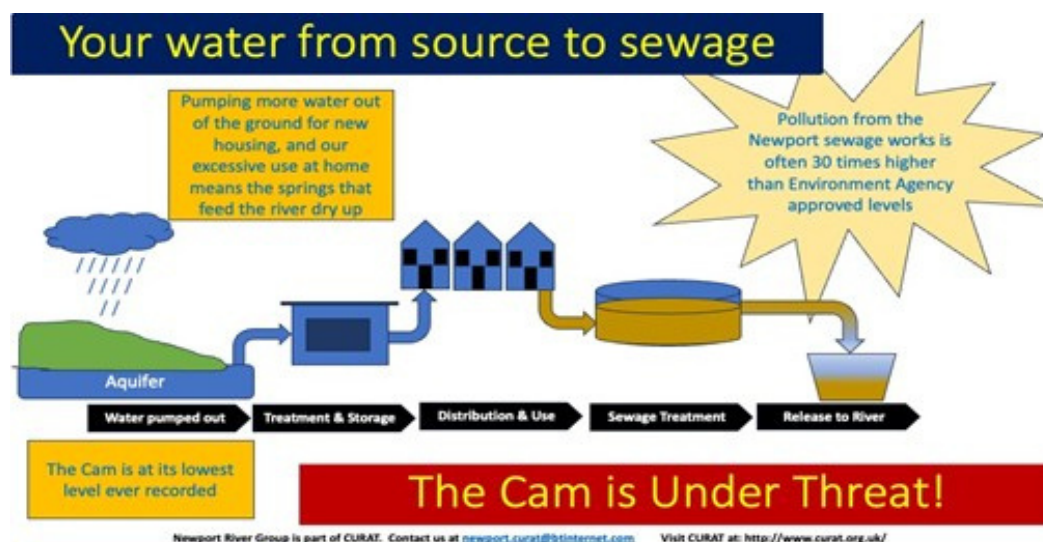
The reason the river and tributaries are overwhelmed is due to man-made reconfiguration of the water courses and surrounding land. What were natural features that held water in the landscape have been engineered to provide the most rapid draining to allow for development or agriculture. This was simply because of a lack of understanding of how these features work. The unintended consequence is seriously compromised biodiversity, carbon capture, drought resilience, pollution and not least, increased risk of flooding within the village.

Pollution of the water has increased significantly due to human activity, mainly the inadequate sewage works, and the community lack of understanding the direct impact of wasting water in our homes and the chemicals we throw down our sinks on our chalk streams. This is compounded by stuff flushed down the loo blocking sewers resulting in raw sewage being discharged into the river.

One other factor to consider is the chalk aquifer – a vast underground reservoir of naturally filtered water where the water in our taps comes from. To get to this water, the companies must drill down 43 metres which means a serious reduction in the water table, which in turn means the chalk springs in the hills around us are drying up. Hence the streams that have historically had year-round flow are now mainly dry.

So how do we solve this problem?

Simply, we try to return to a version of what existed before it was changed. There are proven techniques in the restoration of wetlands, the re-meandering of the water courses, reconnecting flood plains, interventions in drainage ditches, and sustainable farming techniques. Upgrading the sewage works so it has the capacity to process what we produce, and that the effluent is of a high quality before discharge into the river, plus education of the community to reduce domestic waste of water and to be aware of what is going down our drains. No sewage works will be able to remove the chemicals in some of the products we use – we need to encourage people not to use products with the label on the back saying “dangerous to aquatic life with long lasting effects”. It goes straight into the chalk streams, nowhere else.



Rather than try and explain the benefits of every feature we're aiming to restore, we'll use one example, wetlands. Wetlands create extraordinary biodiversity, they capture carbon at three times the rate of equivalent woodland, they store and filter water before controlled discharge to the river, provide drought resilience, aquifer recharge and natural flood management amongst other things.

Restoration of a 28,000 acre catchment may seem a pipe dream. Let us explain why it isn't.

Within the parish of Newport there are at least three significant wetland opportunities. Belmont Wood is owned by Stephen and Anne Bulling who bought the wood as "a green lung for Newport". From the very start of our project, they have been unfailingly supportive (and particularly patient) as we've gone through an excruciating series of hoops to get regulatory approvals (14 so far). We've said this for the last three years, but we will be starting this year.

At the opposite side of the village is Newport Marsh, which has been drained and is dry. Very similar in size to the Wood, it will be restored to its natural state providing all the benefits mentioned above.

The other reasons to be positive? Anglian Water are in the process of spending £3.4m on upgrading the sewage works which will result in a vast improvement of the effluent discharged into the river.

So far we have secured £343,500 in cash and 'in kind' funding showing confidence in the catchment plan – people awarding these grants are extremely careful with their money and only part with it when the plans are credible and valuable. We have applications in for a similar amount, and have established positive relationships with all the regulators, local authorities, water companies and the innumerable wildlife conservation groups.

Additionally, the 'Upper Cam Farm Cluster' has been formed to help build on what farmers are already doing to improve the ecology on their farms. This includes cooperating on various projects and finding ways of holding water in the landscape. It is going to be a slow burn as farming is much more complex and any changes take a long time to prove their worth.

As work begins on these first stages of the Catchment Plan, we want everyone to understand in advance why they're seeing large machines working in areas that appear to be small wildlife sites. It isn't about development or destruction, it's regeneration.

It's a long-term project and momentum is building. With continued collaboration between landowners, farmers, commercial organisations and the community, we can restore the health of the Upper Cam Catchment. We would very much appreciate you joining us on this journey.

Adam, Chris and Keith





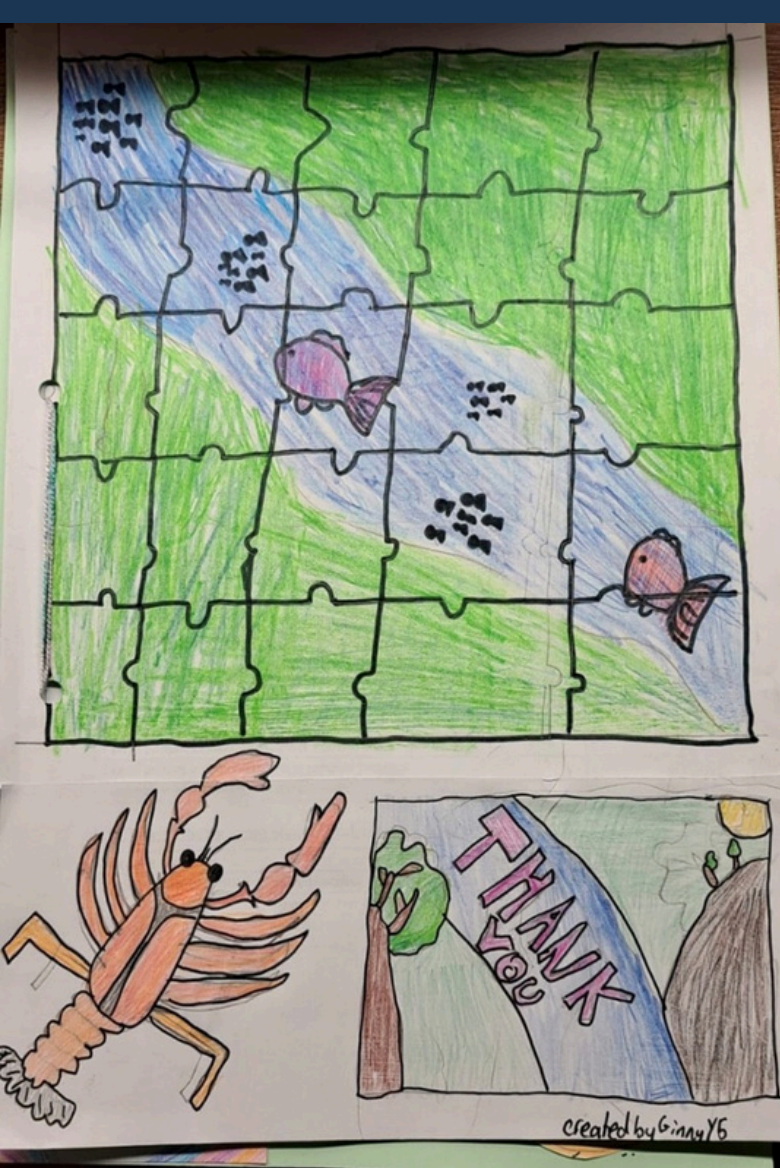
Parish Council

The Parish Council is a hugely important and integral part of our work, and the Committee set up to support us is paying massive dividends. The Committee provides the means to handle any monies and grant funding we achieve and provides assurance for potential investors and funders.

During regular meetings, the importance of Newport Marsh was raised (an area off Bury Water Lane, to the west of Newport) which could be restored to a wetland area and village asset for all to enjoy the environmental and biodiversity aspects that wetlands provide, The marsh is provisionally (landowner approval needed!) included in our 5 year plan.

With a range of partner bodies and organisations there is now a great opportunity to restore the Marsh. Wicken Water (a tributary of the Cam) runs through this area and had previously been straightened and a Poplar plantation established, unfortunately degrading both the stream and the marsh as habitats. We know that Kingfishers and various other species use the area, and with careful improvements more species will be able to use an improved habitat. As could we all – as it presents opportunities for the village to access, explore and enjoy the Marsh; and part of the plan involves holding more water in the Marsh itself, reducing the flood risk downstream. We would love to hear your thoughts – what wildlife have you seen in Newport Marsh? What restoration would you like to see? Please email [**environment@newportessessex-pc.gov.uk**](mailto:environment@newportessessex-pc.gov.uk)

Marion



Education and Community Engagement

For two years running, we've conducted a river education session with Newport Primary School which is now becoming an annual event, involving the children in water quality testing and invertebrate identification as well as seeing invasive species such as American Signal Crayfish and our Source to Sewage presentation. We've also provided sessions at Clavering Primary School, where our Blue Peter type cased caddis went down a storm.

In February, members of the group attended Sustainable Uttlesford's Annual General Meeting, an initiative which aims to support local community groups' sustainability projects and contribute to UDC net-zero ambitions. Following our presentation to their 2025 inaugural meeting this was an opportunity to further raise our profile and learn from other communities about their sustainability and environmental initiatives. For more information, please click on the link below or enter into your browser.

<https://sustainable-uttlesford.org.uk/>

Adam and Julie



Get Involved

There's a great opportunity for you, your family and your friends, to get involved in The Big River Watch taking place throughout the country **between 24th and 30th April**. Run by The Rivers Trust, these week-long citizen science surveys help to build an important picture of river health across the UK and Ireland, and to restore them we need information about how they're doing. The survey should give us a picture across the whole catchment, showing the flora and fauna in each location, as well as helping to identify and locate problems. We hope that many of you will participate this year, to enjoy checking out the river and have fun at the same time. You'll need the Big River Watch app which is on the App stores for Android and Apple phones or head over to www.theriverstrust.org to download it and for more info on the survey.

We have two events at the Coach and Horses where you can come along and talk to us and see first-hand all the stuff we're doing and give us feedback on any of it and our plans. The first is a 'Show and Tell' day on Bank Holiday Monday - 4 May (here's hoping for good weather) and the second is on Thursday 11 June, which is part of The Sustainable Uttlesford Big Green Festival - a week of events and activities celebrating all things environmental-related in the area. Many thanks to Jon and Lucy, our lovely publicans, and Team Coach for supporting us in this way.

Following our 'Beautiful River Cam' leaflet - distributed throughout the village in the Walden Local last year - we are looking at producing a similar one to bring the whole village up to date with our activities. It will be a shortened version of this newsletter.

Geraint and Glenys

In search of the elusive stonefly!

Like Indiana Jones, your happy gang of river fly testers are always seeking the rare and unusual. In more than three years of monthly testing at 4 different sites, we have always found freshwater shrimp (Gammarus), nearly always found cased caddis, uncased caddis and olives; less frequently blue-winged olives, and mayfly, but only twice have we found the elusive stonefly! So, why do we keep looking? Because the stonefly is so sensitive to pollution that finding it indicates a significant improvement in water quality. The recent downpours in January and February have scoured the rivers clean, so we will be keeping our eyes peeled for stoneflies- our goal is to make our rivers a permanently safe place for this choosy invertebrate!

The testing team monitor 4, occasionally 5, sites around Newport every month. We do this to make sure that we stay on top of any changes in the health of the waterways that flow through our growing village. It's not always a straightforward task. The beginning of 2026 was a case in point, when the persistent heavy rainfall made it impossible to access the streams and rivers until late February.

It wasn't all bad news though, as the constant scouring of the river beds exposed the chalk beds and fed clean, fresh water into the rivers and hopefully recharged the aquifers that we rely upon to supply our taps and showers. When we were finally able to test in mid-February the Phosphate and Nitrate levels were noticeably lower than before the downpours. How much of this is because of the rain, and how much to the newly installed phosphate stripping kit installed by Anglian Water in our sewage system will not be clear for some time, but any improvement is greatly appreciated, not least by the creatures that live in our rivers. So, will we find any stonefly? Watch this space, or better still come and help us look for them.



Both phosphates and nitrates encourage excessive algae growth which is particularly harmful to the life in chalk streams, so the introduction of phosphate stripping is a significant step forward. Unfortunately, it is more challenging to reduce nitrate levels than phosphate levels. It is estimated that 60% of nitrates originate from intensive agricultural methods using fertilisers that contain nitrates. Our regular testing shows a strong correlation between peaks in nitrate levels in the river and heavy rainfall following fertiliser spreading.

Our growing populations need food and until someone finds a less damaging kind of fertiliser we need to find ways of reducing the amount that gets washed into our rivers. Some of the wetland work that we will be undertaking around the village is designed to do just that.



We have a new “friend” helping to monitor the state of our rivers. Water Resources East (an independent quasi government organisation) is tasked with developing sustainable water supplies in the East of England. They have recently installed remote monitoring equipment using telemetry to track the condition of the Cam in Newport every day of the year. This augments the work that we do at different sites, adding criteria such as flow rate, depth, discharge and rainfall, to our database. Armed with this information we will be able to keep the pressure on those organisations that neglect the rivers in our “severely water-stressed region”.

Critters at Christmas

Many of you will know about the lovely display of Christmas Trees by village organisations and businesses in the Church during December. Our River Group Tree was decorated with pictures of river animals, litter picked from the river (ugh, shame!) and particularly Roxanne's amazing range of pipe cleaner 'critters'. She'd originally created a few to help entertain small children during one of our river fly tests. This included a blue-winged olive and a caseless caddis fly, which were joined by more Gammarus and olives, a stonefly, flat-bodied heptigeniidae, mayfly and cased caddis – real ones are shown in the pictures below. Roxanne told us – 'I tried to make them as realistic as possible' – see what you think, just brilliant!

Lyndsey and Roxanne



Trail Cameras – The Seasonal Watch

It's been a busy few months monitoring the hidden lives of our neighbours by the river. By using trail cameras, we've moved beyond guesswork to gather real metrics on local wildlife. The footage has been fascinating, particularly watching the seasonal shifts: our fallow deer populations peaked in the autumn, while our resident badgers have shown much more erratic activity as the temperatures dropped.

These recordings are more than just "nature's greatest hits"; they provide a vital baseline for the health of our local ecosystem. Seeing these animals return month after month proves that Belmont Wood remains a crucial sanctuary. It's a privilege to see what happens when the woods are quiet, and these numbers help us understand exactly how we can better protect their habitat.

Looking ahead, we'll continue to track these trends as we move into spring. Whether it's the reappearance of more active badger clans or the changing grazing patterns of the deer, every clip helps tell the story of Newport's wild spaces. We're excited to see what the next season brings to our screens!

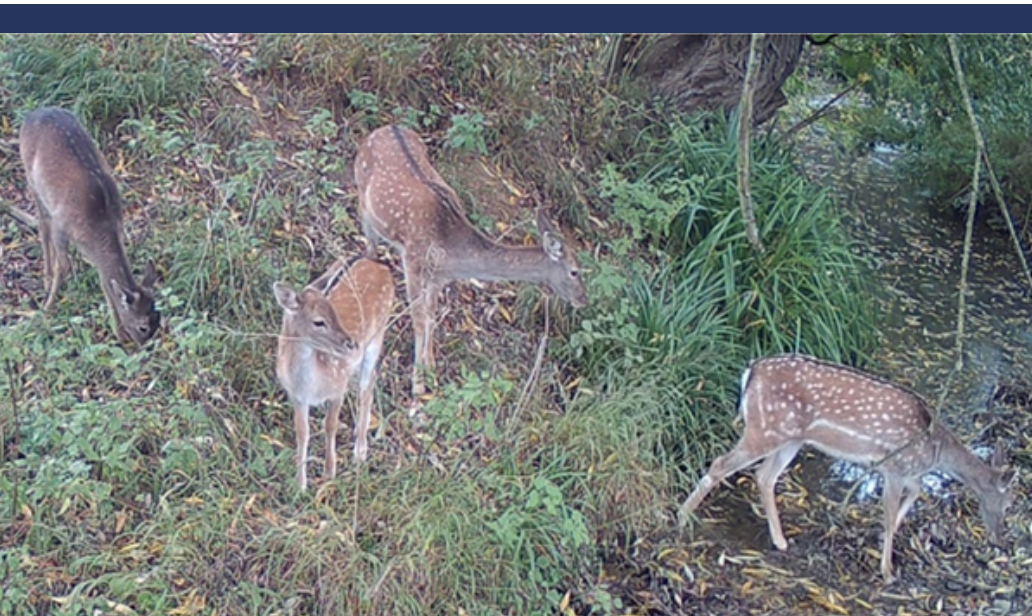


Figure 1 Two regular coloured does, the one in the middle of the shot being the mum of the melanistic fawn on the left. The regular-coloured doe on the right is the mum of the regular coloured fawn.



Sericostoma Personatum (caddisfly), determined by the circular opening at the end of the case and the smooth, rounded corner of the hardened top of the first segment of the thorax

Beneath the Surface

While the larger animals grab the headlines, some of our most important work happens at a much smaller scale. Our recent riverfly tests have focused on identifying the macroinvertebrates that call the Newport River home. These tiny creatures are the "canaries in the coal mine" for water quality, and by identifying specific species, we can get a precise reading on the health of our local environment.

The results are encouraging. By meticulously logging the presence of various nymphs and larvae, we've seen clear evidence of the river's gradual recovery. Finding sensitive species that can only survive in clean, oxygenated water is a fantastic sign that our collective conservation efforts are paying off. It's a slow process, but the data shows we are moving in the right direction.

Every species identified is a piece of the puzzle. As we continue our monthly testing, these metrics allow us to spot changes in the river's health before they become visible to the naked eye. We're committed to keeping this "underwater census" going to ensure our river continues to thrive for generations to come. We continue to get surprised by what nature is producing.

Dr Andy



Sericostoma personatum (caddisfly) - unpigmented, which we believe to be a natural phenomenon

In summary

We would never have thought, four years ago when we held our inaugural meeting (yes, at the Coach and Horses – otherwise known to us as Head Office!) that we would have such a strong, dedicated and passionate team, involved in the whole range of activities covered in this newsletter. Our ambition is big because our river is so vitally important to Newport.

Please use our new email address environment@newportsexsex-pc.gov.uk to give us your feedback on anything you've read in this newsletter, ask any questions, and if you want to get involved in any of our activities. Don't forget the Big River Watch,

Many thanks for all your support.

Newport River Group
April 2026



NEWPORT
RIVER GROUP