

The Hogsmill in March 2021

A much calmer month along the Hogsmill so there's been less disturbance to the critters as they've gone about their usual activities: "predation, protection and procreation".



"I spy lunch!"



Tolworth Brook Pond

"Diving stations!"

Although a little late, spring highlights, such as butterflies and warblers, have now appeared by the river;



and other residents look to be thriving: an electro fishing survey found a wide range of creatures in the upper Hogsmill, some of which might be encouraging the local witches to dust off their cauldrons!



"Eye of newt....."

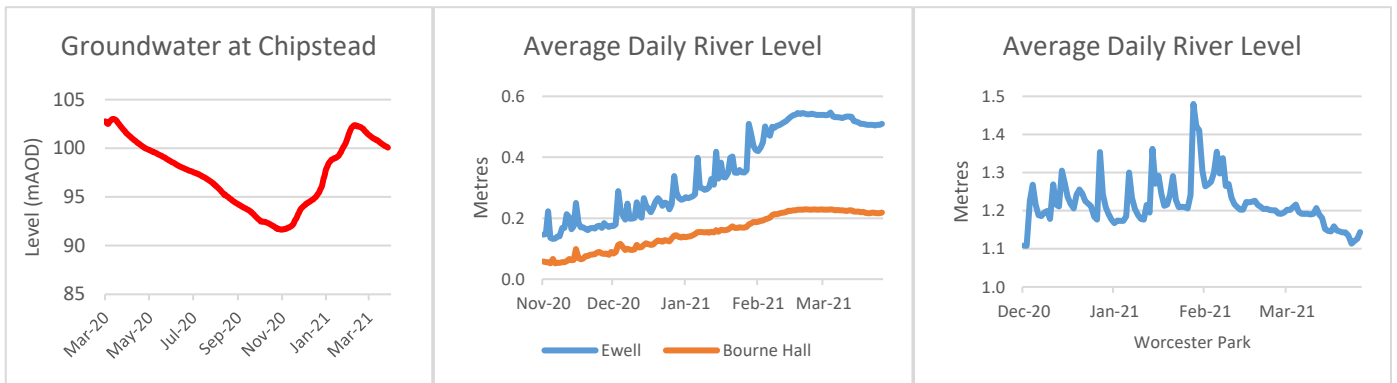


"toe of frog...and (perhaps) tongue of eel!"

This newsletter looks at what is happening to the natural world along the Hogsmill, including the problems it faces and activities to monitor and restore habitat. This month it is 6 years since volunteers began monitoring polluted outfalls on the river so it seems a good time to review progress in tackling this problem.

The Hogsmill in March

With little rain since early February, the pools and mud “fields” in riverside meadows have begun to dry out, though large bare patches remain that could take a long time to recover. So far the water level and flow have held up well upstream showing the benefits of a “well-filled” aquifer: the groundwater level is down from its peak but is still pushing strong flows through the springs and into the upper river.



Further downstream the level has begun to fall as flows down the tributaries have dropped, most notably along the Bonesgate where areas of “static scummy” water, normally seen mainly in a dry summer, are already appearing. Also evident along the Bonesgate is the impact of the downpours and surges in the winter that have led to bank erosion and have deposited silt into the water.



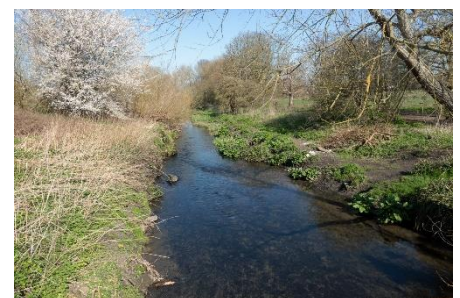
The effect of the strong flows through the springs is continuing to be seen in exceptionally clear water in the main river, albeit punctuated by a brief surge of dirty water as a result of a water main burst in Tolworth.



Ewell Court



Long Meadow



Green Lane Bridge

With the drier weather, there have been increasing signs of pollution at several outfalls this month, though this may be more a reflection of lower “obscuring” surface water flows than of new pollution. More on this below, but notable this month have been indications of pollution, albeit fairly mild, at a number of “lesser known” outfalls along the Bonesgate and Green Lanes Stream tributaries.



Thrigsby Road



Bonesgate



Hollymoor Lane



Green Lanes Stream
Felstead Road

If you see pollution along the river or indications of possible pollution, such as dying fish, please call the Environment Agency Hotline: 0800 80 70 60, and ideally take a photo.

Particularly distressing this month have been a number of attacks on wildlife along the river, including the shooting of a swan in Ewell. Thankfully it is being nursed back to health by Wildlife Aid.

Litter and fly-tipping continue to be major problems and an eyesore; litter now even seems to be becoming a frequent component of riverside nests. Many volunteers are doing a great job in cleaning up, with the Hogsmill Local Nature Reserve Wildlife FB group being particularly active along the upstream stretch, but more help would be welcome. Epsom and Ewell Council will loan out litter picking kits and a Community Litter Pick is being held on Good Friday: more details are on the ‘Keep Epsom and Ewell Tidy’ FB page. The South East Rivers Trust (SERT) can also provide kit as part of its River Guardians scheme: see their website or email riversguardians@southeastriverstrust.org



“ On the mend”
(Photo thanks to Wildlife Aid)



Elmbridge Meadows



Upper Mill pond
(Photo thanks to Shaun)

Pollution along the Hogsmill

There are about 300 outfalls along the Hogsmill and its tributaries that are meant to allow relatively “safe” surface water to flow into the river but many of which in practice also discharge pollutants: sewage from misconnected wastepipes or cross connections in the sewage disposal system; and various “nasties”, such as hydrocarbons and metals, that are picked up in the water that drains from roads and other surfaces.

In 2015 SERT began a volunteer programme of regular checks on the most polluted outfalls to gather evidence to push for greater efforts to tackle the problem. Then in 2016 ZSL coordinated a comprehensive survey – an Outfall Safari - of outfall pollution along the Hogsmill. This found signs of possible pollution at about a quarter of outfalls and indications of moderate to severe pollution at about 30 “worst cases”.

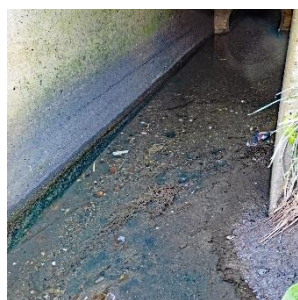
Thames Water (TW) added the worst cases to its programme of pollution investigations on the Hogsmill and with more added later this was expanded to cover 40 outfalls. Many of these involve detailed “detective work” led by the Environment Protection team to try to find the source. Investigations into 22 outfalls have been completed, and the rest are ongoing or on a waiting list for more detailed (SWOP) investigations.

A further Safari planned for 2020 that would have helped to gauge progress had to be postponed. But as conditions for inspecting outfalls have been good this month – low rain and little bank vegetation – a quick check has been made on readily accessible ones, including all but 4 of the 30 worst cases recorded in 2016.

Assessing pollution from “spot” visual checks is far from an exact science, but the results show some significant improvements. A simple comparison with the appearance in the original Safari suggests about half the worst cases would now have a lower pollution “score” than in 2016. Perhaps more notable is that many outfalls that checks showed to be almost constantly badly polluted 5 years ago now look much better.



2016



Green Lane NM

2021

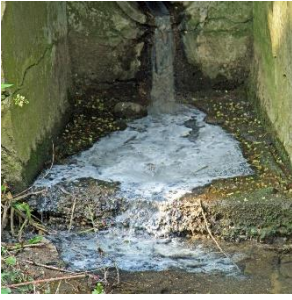


2015



Sheephouse Way

2021



2016



Knollmead

2021



2016

Malden Way



2021

But outfall pollution remains a major issue. Several of these “big improvers” still sometimes have pollution “bursts”, though often just short-lived ones probably from misconnected washing machines. While it is unrealistic to aim to cure all problems, there are signs in dry weather - particularly apparent this month - of rather more significant problems re-emerging at some of these outfalls.

There are also a number of outfalls – probably 5-10 - that still show signs of at least moderate pollution regularly and where there have been no major improvements. These are mostly under investigation or on the waiting list so hopefully it’ll be possible to see improvements soon. But some are also ones where tracking sources appears particularly difficult: the A3 “concrete box” – the one Hogsmill outfall being studied in detail 5 years ago and where investigations are continuing - still looks to have significant pollution.



A240 Bridge



NM Railway Bridge



Surbiton Hill Park



A3 “concrete box”



King Charles Road

The Hogsmill also suffers quite badly from pollutants in road run-off, especially as it passes under 2 major roads where the nearby outfalls regularly discharge “black water” after heavy rain;



A3 Bridge



A240 Bridge

and there is the ongoing problem of discharges of diluted sewage after heavy rain through combined sewer overflows – the Epsom and Ewell Storm Tanks and the Hogsmill STW. They are a crucial safety valve and TW has worked to limit “solid waste” from entering the river and to limit overflows. But the risk of downpours and hence spills is likely to rise with climate change: in 2020 the storm tanks overflowed for 40 hours.



Ewell Storm Tanks
(Photo thanks to Brian)



Epsom Storm Tanks
(Photo thanks to SERT)



Hogsmill STW