

The Hogsmill in March 2023

There's been a touch of everything along the Hogsmill this month: snow, wind, a little sun, but mostly soggy, often muggy gloom; so it's again been a confusing time for nature. Spring has been slow to take off with the landscape still predominantly winter brown, though new colours and new life are at last now emerging.



Usual early highlights - butterflies and migratory warblers – are also still scarce. But many residents have been carrying on normal spring activities of prospecting and tending nests or even going beyond, while others have been scrabbling around the margins of the water on the look-out for a tasty morsel.

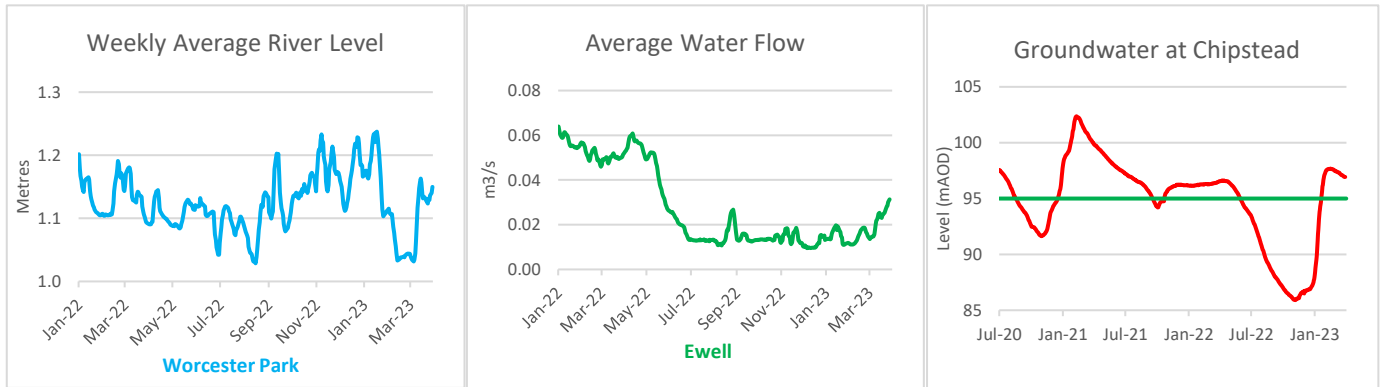


(Photo thanks to Citizen Zoo)

This newsletter looks at what is happening to the natural world along the Hogsmill, including the problems it faces and volunteer activities to monitor and restore its habitat, working with the South East Rivers Trust (SERT) and other local groups and alongside the Environment Agency (EA) and local water companies. This month it also looks at outfall pollution where there are signs of improvement but still much to do.

The Hogsmill in March

There's been plenty of rain this month that has compensated for the earlier dry spell. This has improved the water level and flow all along the river, particularly in the mid and downstream sections. But there's still no sign of a repeat of the strong flow from the Ewell springs seen last year; and the rain hasn't as yet boosted the aquifer where the water level has continued to drift down gradually.



For much of the month the rain has been in short steady spells providing regular top-ups that have given the river a clear and vibrant appearance with fairly stable water level and flow. But a late storm led to a large “midnight surge” that dispersed quickly but left a legacy of brown water. The rain has led to unusually large amounts of water laying in the surrounding areas and to exceptional muddy “morasses” along the bank areas without proper paths. The abnormal conditions over recent months have probably also contributed to the large number of trees that have fallen across the river recently, in some cases causing blockages.



Green Lane Bridge



Ewell Stepping Stones



23 Mar - Six Acre Meadow - 30 Mar



Six Acre “Fen”



Old Malden



Ruxley Lane



Tolworth Court Farm

Pollution along the Hogsmill

Notable this month has been the amount of rubbish dumped in and on the banks of the river. Also one of few plants that is already growing vigorously is the Hogsmill's "bankside curse", Himalayan balsam.



Thrigby Road (Bonesgate)



Elmbridge Meadows



Hogsmill Wood



Long Meadow

The storm on the 29th led to overflows at the Ewell Storm Tanks and the STW CSO; the monitor at Epsom was offline at the time. On past form many of the earlier rain spells may well have been enough to trigger more spills at the STW, but as the monitor hasn't been working for most of the month this can't be checked.

There've been clear signs of pollution at several "ordinary" outfalls not on the "hotlist" of regular polluters, though ones where there has been evidence of pollution on a number of previous occasions.



Middle Mill Kingston



St James' Road Kingston



Ewell Railway Bridge



Elmbridge Avenue

Conditions around the start of the month - dry weather and little bankside vegetation - were ideal for a wider check on the condition of outfalls. In 2016 and in 2021 comprehensive surveys – Outfall Safaris – were undertaken to map and assign pollution "scores" to outfalls all along the Hogsmill and its tributaries. In total about 340 outfalls were checked in one or other survey, of which about 50 showed signs of at least moderate pollution. Details were passed to Thames Water (TW) which greatly expanded its work on the Hogsmill, including a large increase in in-depth investigations (SWOP projects) led by the Environmental Protection Team of which 17 were still "active" in the last year.

The benefits of this work were already apparent in the 2021 Safari: of the almost 200 outfalls covered in both surveys the number recorded as showing signs of moderate pollution fell by about a quarter. But access issues meant that some higher-scoring outfalls from 2016 could not be re-checked, while a few "new" polluted outfalls were found on stretches of the tributaries not covered in 2016.

A further Safari is planned, probably for 2024, that will provide an updated assessment of outfalls across the catchment. But this will only be a “spot check” and experience has shown that visible signs of pollution tend to be sporadic, even in dry conditions. Also about 10 SWOP projects have been completed in the past year or so while other outfalls, including those newly-identified in 2021, have been added to the TW list. So it seemed useful to do a check in the meantime. Accordingly in the dry spell of late February/early March a broad-brush assessment was made of outfalls that could be accessed from the bankside.

About 170 outfalls, half the total found in the Safaris, were inspected with results that provided further signs of improvement. Of the 30 re-checked outfalls that had been recorded as at least moderately polluted in at least one of the Safaris, only about 10 still showed indications of pollution. There was no obvious evidence of pollution at outfalls outside the “known list” of polluters, though as noted above a few “intermittent polluters” that had been “clean” in at least one of the Safaris were polluted this month. The appearance of a number of outfalls where SWOP projects have recently been completed was also much improved.



2017 Berrylands Railway Bridge 2023



2017 Southborough Drive 2023

But there remain a hardcore of “habitual offender” outfalls where, despite large amounts of investigatory work, significant amounts of pollution remain. For some, new work has been commissioned by TW. These include the “A3 concrete box”, the first Hogsmill outfall subject to a SWOP study where many misconnections have been rectified, but with a large “catchment” of over 4000 properties pollution has proved very hard to track down. They also include other outfalls, such as Sheephouse Way and Malden Way, that have improved markedly but are still subject to bouts of substantial pollution.



2017 A3 Concrete Box 2023



2017 Portland Road 2023



2017 Sheephouse Way 2023 2017 Malden Way South 2023

There are several other outfalls where projects are still in progress or are on the SWOP waiting list that are also still showing clear signs of pollution, though these are often more sporadic than previously. Hopefully they will show improvements once this further work has been completed.



Surbiton Hill Park Downstream - A240 - Upstream Longford Court Alexandra Park

Many Hogsmill outfalls are on hidden stretches without bankside access for which in-stream checks in Safaris are vital. Most of these are on upstream stretches of the Tolworth Brook and Horton Stream where a few “issues” were identified in the 2021 Safari that are on TW’s waiting list for further investigation but most were clear. Also included are those in the STW where some badly polluted outfalls were found in the Safaris, including by far the “worst-scoring” one at California Road. This was the subject of a TW project last year that led to the rectification of a number of problems and hopefully has improved the situation.

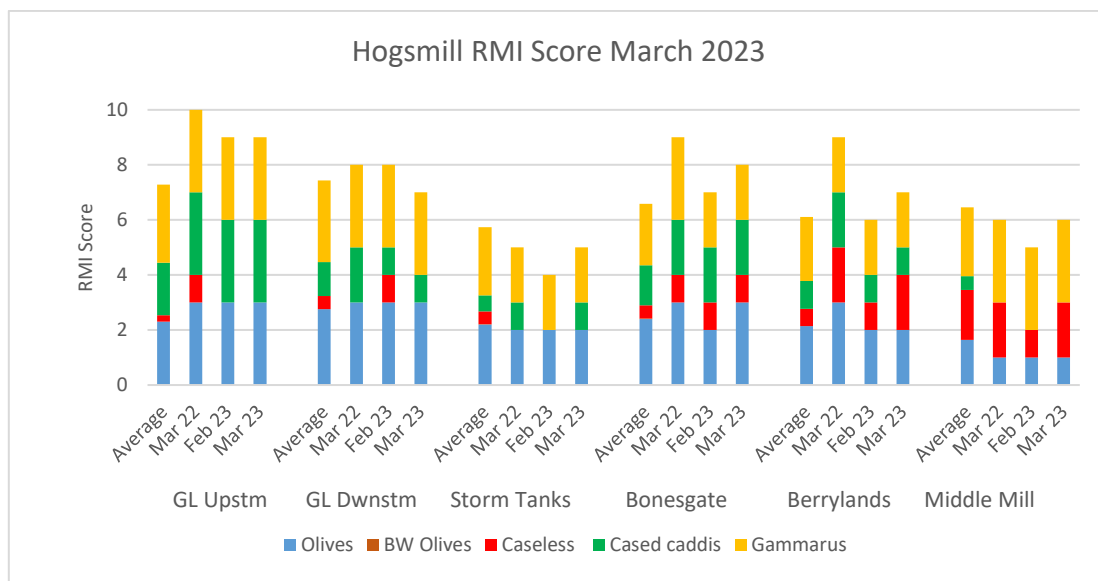
If you see pollution in the river or indications of possible pollution, such as dying fish, please call the EA Hotline: 0800 80 70 60, and ideally take a photo. You can also contact Thames Water on: 0800 316 9800 (option 2); on: www.thameswater.co.uk/help/emergencies/pollution; or on twitter: [@thameswater](https://twitter.com/thameswater).

Hogsmill RMI in March

The River Monitoring Initiative (RMI) is a national scheme that uses “scores” based on counts of a few “water quality sensitive” invertebrates collected in net samples to assess river health.

The 6 main-river sites were surveyed between March 15th and 18th; in deeper and faster flowing water than recently after the rain. The survey at Middle Mill was the 100th since sampling began.

Scores were closer together than recently and mostly up slightly producing the highest average for 9 months. But the rises were based on small increases in counts so they paint a rather rosy picture; and scores were still mostly lower than March 2022:



- The results at the Green Lane Stream sites were close to those in February; the lower score downstream came from the one caseless found last month “hiding” this time! This could be because the samples were collected near the end of a period of rain which produced a strong flow but also a lot of “muck” in the trays, so it is quite possible that some critters were missed;
- Scores at outfalls that have performed poorly in recent months – Berrylands, Middle Mill and Storm Tanks – were all up by 1 “point”, but these reflected increases of 10 or less in caddis counts and numbers of gammarus and olives were low by historical standards;
- The slight dip seen at Bonesgate last month was reversed with counts very close to those in January, so there doesn’t seem to have been any lasting impact from the pollution observed a few weeks ago, though March has generally been a good scoring month so the “8” this time is not unusual;
- Despite the higher scores, the overall count of invertebrates fell with the large jumps in olive and gammarus numbers seen last month largely reversed.

The Hogsmill Catchment Partnership

The Catchment Partnership brings together organisations with an interest in the Hogsmill – SERT, EA, water companies, local councils, volunteer groups, etc – with the aim of co-ordinating work to improve the health of the river and its catchment for wildlife and local people. At its quarterly meeting this month, updates were provided on a number of projects:

- Preparatory work for the Chambermead wetlands project has continued, but inflation has increased the cost creating a funding shortfall. Urgent efforts are being made to plug the gap, but SERT would welcome suggestions for new sources of finance to enable construction to start later this year;
- Following walkovers with partners, detailed designs are being developed for the project to renaturalize the river in Elmbridge Meadows; and outreach to local schools has begun. Further community engagement is planned for the Spring and the hope is that construction will begin in 2024;
- The project to remove the last remaining major obstacle to fish passage, the weir by Kingsmeadow stadium in the STW, and to renaturalize a section of concrete channel has been taken over by TW and is now moving to the detailed design and costing stage;
- Another project to improve flow by the Toby Carvery in Worcester Park is also now being worked up;
- A new site for restoration this year is the Hogsmill Wood Nature Reserve by the banks alongside the A3. This suffers badly from neglect and is a hot-spot for fly tipping. Volunteers from the Lower Mole Partnership (the “Moles”) will be working there from 16th to 18th May;
- Plans are being drawn up for more balsam “bashing” this summer, with the Moles already scheduled to be working along the Bonesgate from 13th to 15th June. They will also be undertaking bankside management work along the Green Lanes Stream from 27th to 29th June.

Enjoy the Spring along the Hogsmill

Hopefully the weather will soon be more springlike making it a good time for getting out and about in the Hogsmill greenspace. Events planned for April include:

- A volunteer day tidying up the Edith Gardens Nature Reserve by the Tolworth Brook on the 19th ;
- A nature friendly dog walk at Elmbridge Meadows on the 22nd; and
- A Field Recorders’ Day at Tolworth Court Farm on the 26th looking for worms and invertebrates.

For more details contact: ben@Citizenzoo.org

Also of possible interest to Hogsmillers is a free online lecture on “Understanding our Urban Streams through History, Geography and Ecology” being organised by the Linnean Society on April 12th. Details are on their website: www.linnean.org