

The Hogsmill in August 2023

It's been a quiet time along the Hogsmill this month as summer drifts to an end. Already there are signs of seasonal change, from morning dew to "fluffy down" and "sticky burrs". But the rain has led to a revival in wildflowers, some usually seen mainly in early summer, though the main beneficiary has been balsam.



It's been especially quiet in the trees as birds hide while moulting or prepare for the journey back to their winter homes. So it's mainly been our water birds that have been seen out and about this month.



The boom in "big number" butterfly species has passed almost as quickly as it started, but it is looking like a good year for some niche species, such as hairstreaks, and there's been plenty of action from the tigers!

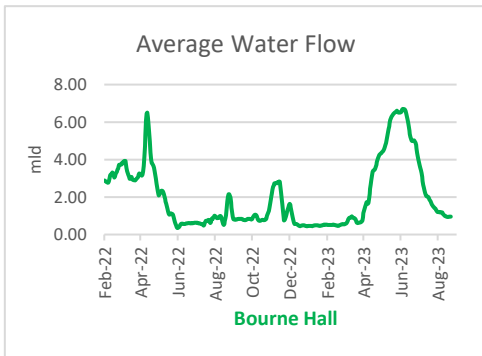


(Photos thanks to Pamela and Robb)

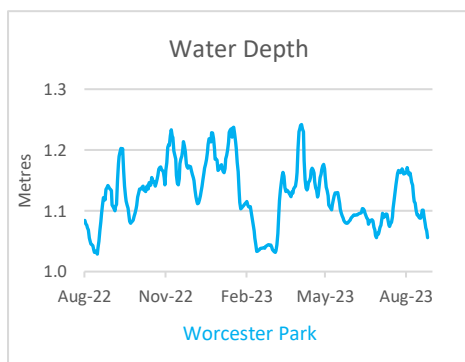
This newsletter looks at what is happening to the natural world along the Hogsmill, including the problems it faces and volunteer activities to monitor and restore its habitat, working with the South East Rivers Trust (SERT) and other local groups and alongside the Environment Agency (EA) and local water companies. This month it also looks at plans to re-naturalise the stretch of the river through Elmbridge Meadows.

The Hogsmill in August

It's been another month with well above average rainfall, though this has not been obvious from the state of the river. The flow into the upper Hogsmill has continued to fall with a large drop in water passing over the Mill "falls". The springs in Bourne Hall Lake looked to have dried up by mid-month, though those feeding into the War Memorial channel may still be flowing slowly. But at least the water in the Lake and Mill Ponds has remained largely clear of algae, perhaps thanks to the efforts of the "Chemical Brothers".



The rain spells have provided some boosts to water level and flow downstream, but these have been short-lived. For much of the month the main river and especially the tributaries have looked shallow and sluggish: at the sampling sites where we measure depth, the levels were close to those in the drought last year.



Aug 2nd

Church Bridge

Aug 29th

Bonesgate

The impact of the rain has been much more noticeable in the areas beside the river; the renewed green in the meadows is a marked contrast to the grey-brown of August last year.



Aug 2022

Rose Walk

Aug 2023



Aug 2022

Long Meadow

Aug 2023

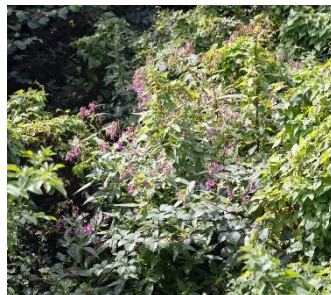
But particularly striking this month is the extent to which Himalayan balsam, now in flower and more visible, is smothering large areas of the riverbanks and surrounds. Despite the great efforts this year, it appears larger and more vigorous than ever. With the rain, it has regrown in areas targeted for bashes earlier in the summer, such as along the Bonesgate and by the confluence. While there are *some* signs that the experimental rust fungus treatment is infecting leaves, the test site is still dominated by flowering plants.



Malden Way



Bonesgate confluence



Castle Hill



Six Acre Meadow (test site)

On pollution, a short spill was recorded at the Epsom Storm Tanks on August 18th following an intense but brief storm. On past form, the rain might also have led to spills at the Hogsmill STW, but the monitor there has either been non-operational or displaying inaccurate information. Thames Water (TW) is planning to upgrade the storm tanks at the STW which hopefully will reduce discharges when this is completed in 2025.

Elsewhere, it has mainly been a month for short-lived “foamy spills” from other outfalls.



Cox Lane



Bonesgate

Moor Lane

(Photos thanks to Robb)



Ewell Railway Bridge

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) or on twitter: [@thameswater](https://twitter.com/thameswater).

The impact on the Hogsmill of such spills from the Epsom Tanks and other pollution from the Green Lanes Stream should soon be greatly reduced as, after 5 years of planning, construction work is set to start on the SERT-led project to transform the Chamber Mead meadow in Ewell. This will divert the Stream through wetlands in the meadow that will filter and clean the water before re-joining the main river further downstream. The main construction work is expected to take about 10 weeks.



Feb 2018



Chamber Mead Aug 2023

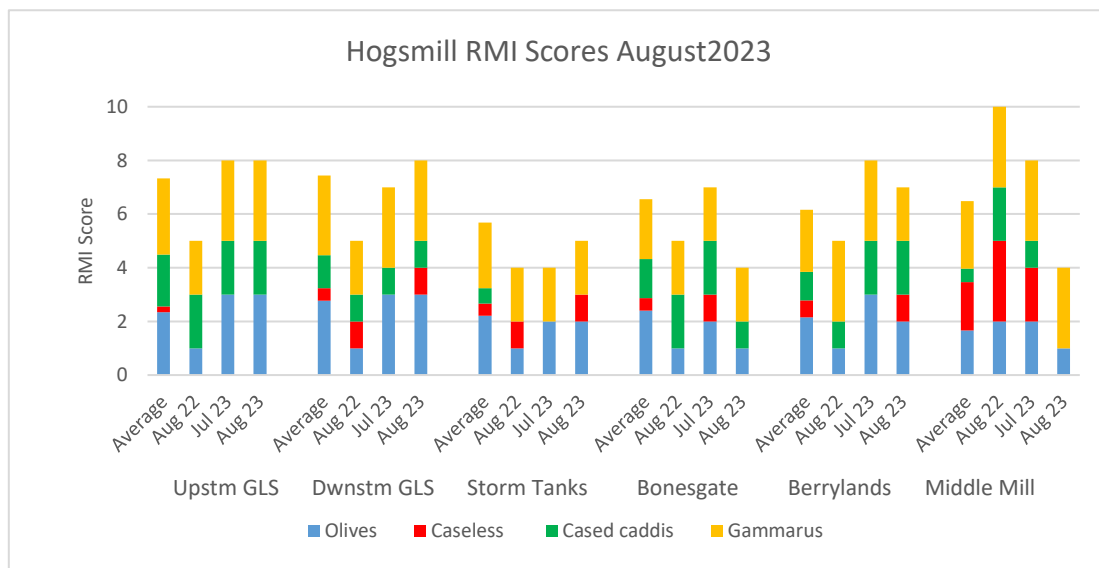


2024

Hogsmill RMI in August

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. Each site has a “trigger” below which scores could indicate problems and these are reported to EA for follow-up action.

The 6 main-river sites were surveyed between August 17th and 25th. The results were mixed and puzzling: scores were sharply down and breached the trigger at 2 sites, but elsewhere they were little changed from July and in some cases markedly better than last August when they were badly affected by the drought:



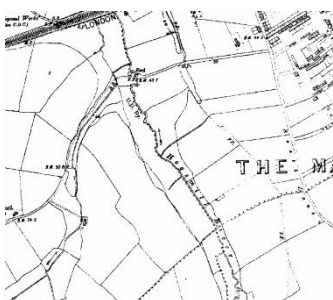
- At Middle Mill the score of “4” was a massive drop from the “8” in July and “10” in August last year. Low scores were once common here and are perhaps not surprising with so much of the water being STW effluent. But scores have been much higher recently and have always been relatively high in the summer. The water flow was very low when the sample was taken, but flow varies widely over short periods with the release of effluent, and daily flow at the gauging station has been similar to July and last August. So any impact on the score seems more likely to be a *sampling-accuracy* effect than a *real* one. Pollution issues at the STW or elsewhere are another possible explanation, but the absence of reliable discharge data or of recent EA invertebrate surveys makes this hard to assess;

- There was also a big fall in score at Bonesgate to “4” from the “7” in July, with the lowest total critter count - 30 - ever recorded here. There have been pollution incidents upstream this month, but it seems unlikely that these were large or close enough to have had much impact. Past experience suggests this site is especially susceptible to lack of water and flow and depth were quite low when we sampled, but not so out of line that such a poor result might have been expected;
- The scores and counts at the Green Lanes Stream confluence, Berrylands and Ewell Storm tanks were all fairly similar to July. But the “8”s at the 2 Green Lanes’ sites were a big improvement on the “5”s in August 2022 suggesting a significant impact from last year’s drought;
- On the individual species, olive and caddis numbers were down substantially from July, even at the sites where scores held up. With cased caddis there is as yet little sign of the late summer boom in numbers of “tiny sticks” that was seen at a number of sites in the last couple of years, though as we found one that appeared to be transitioning to a fly perhaps they’ve already taken to the wing!

Enriching Elmbridge Meadows

The stretch of the Hogsmill from the A3 to the New Malden Railway Bridge – running through Elmbridge Meadows and the Rose Walk Nature Reserve – is a good example of how urbanisation and misguided management can create a poor river environment. But a new project led by SERT is set to bring significant improvements to the river here and its habitat.

Around a 100 years ago this would have been a bucolic scene with the river meandering through a landscape of meadows and woods with a rickety bridge and ford for crossing from one side to the other.



Hogsmill in New Malden in about the 1920s (Photos thanks to Kingston History Centre)

But concerns raised by flooding in the 1930s led to a project to deepen the channel and remove the meanders that was implemented in the 1950s. This has produced a very straight section of river that is heavily silted with high and steep banks and little diversity. It also has trees that overshadow the river and regularly fall creating litter-collecting blockages, all conditions that make it difficult for wildlife.



It is also a stretch that is badly affected by urban pollution. Road run-off from the A3 produces a “black flow” into the river whenever there is rain. There have been major problems with misconnections at outfalls along and upstream, several of which have proved hard to tackle. The sluggish nature of the river makes this slow to disperse. It is also the area where “men-in-white-coats” had to be brought in when large amounts of raw sewage spilled from a manhole in Green Lane Rec in 2026, a spill for which TW was fined £4m.



This spill did though have a (small) silver-lining: as a Voluntary Reparation TW is providing funds to SERT to re-naturalize the river through Elmbridge Meadows. The Enhancing Elmbridge Meadows project aims to enhance bankside habitat by softening slopes and removing overhanging trees; and to improve the river for wildlife by installing deflectors and berms to narrow the channel creating a stronger more varied flow. To protect habitat it is planned to install dead hedges along with a dedicated area for dogs to enter the river. It is also hoped to include a “backwater”, a large pond linked to the river, that will provide refuge for wildlife and water storage during storm surges. Other possible features are a passage under the A3 for wildlife.



Detailed design work is now being undertaken. Following on from this month’s guided walks, further community engagement is planned starting with information boards in September. The hope is that construction work will be undertaken in the later part of 2024.