

Cuttle Brook Conservation Volunteers - Update

Who says that conservation work can't be fun? What's not to like about letting a bunch of novices loose on a nature reserve with a 6-tonne digger and a surfeit of enthusiasm? What could possibly go wrong? Well, lots *could* go wrong but, actually, nothing did. OK, we had help from an experienced digger-driver but, by the end of the day, phase 1 of the Cuttle Brook improvement scheme was successfully completed, and a big lesson learned; with careful planning and attention to health and safety, there's no reason why volunteers shouldn't think big and use machinery to match.

The Cuttle Brook is the eponymous river forming the spine of Thame's local nature reserve. The 13ha site was designated as a LNR in 1993 and has been managed by a group of volunteers (CBCV) ever since, with great support throughout from Thame Town Council. Efforts had previously focused on the terrestrial habitats but, with the encouragement of RTCT, attention has recently turned towards the river and our other aquatic habitats.

A timely pot of 'Section 106' funding secured through the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment meant that a grand plan for improving the river could be drawn up and actioned. Getting Environment Agency consent was more time-consuming than expected – despite good support from individual officers – but eventually we got the go-ahead to: create two fish refuges; lay a 30metre spawning bed; replace a pond-dipping platform; build two anti-silt dog-entry points, install flow deflectors and divert a ditch into an in-line settlement pond. We also intend to build a pedestrian bridge across one of our new fish refuges and to improve the riverside paths.

With a project of this size, machines are essential. To create the first of our fish refuges we excavated about 40 tonnes of material – in one day. You simply can't do that with shovels and wheelbarrows, but a digger and dump-truck make it relatively light work. Similarly, placing 20 tonnes of gravel to form a spawning bed in the river would take a lot more barrow-pushing than any of us were up for. But a long-reach telehandler made the job achievable and fun. And the results were spectacular.

Making the work fun is one thing, but safety has to be the priority. This isn't the place to go into details of risk assessments and working practices but, of course, thorough planning is essential. On an open site, like ours, the public has to be given major consideration. In fact, if you want to engage with visitors to a piece of public land, I can recommend hazard-taping off an area and bringing in a digger and dump truck. Over 25 years, CBCV has held hundreds of work parties. On most occasions, we get one or two visitors who stop and ask what's going on, every now and again we even get people asking how they can help. But get a digger in and everyone stops, providing a great chance to spread the word about the importance of 'our' river and what we are doing to improve it. But, be warned and be ready to dedicate a couple of people to PR duties throughout the day.

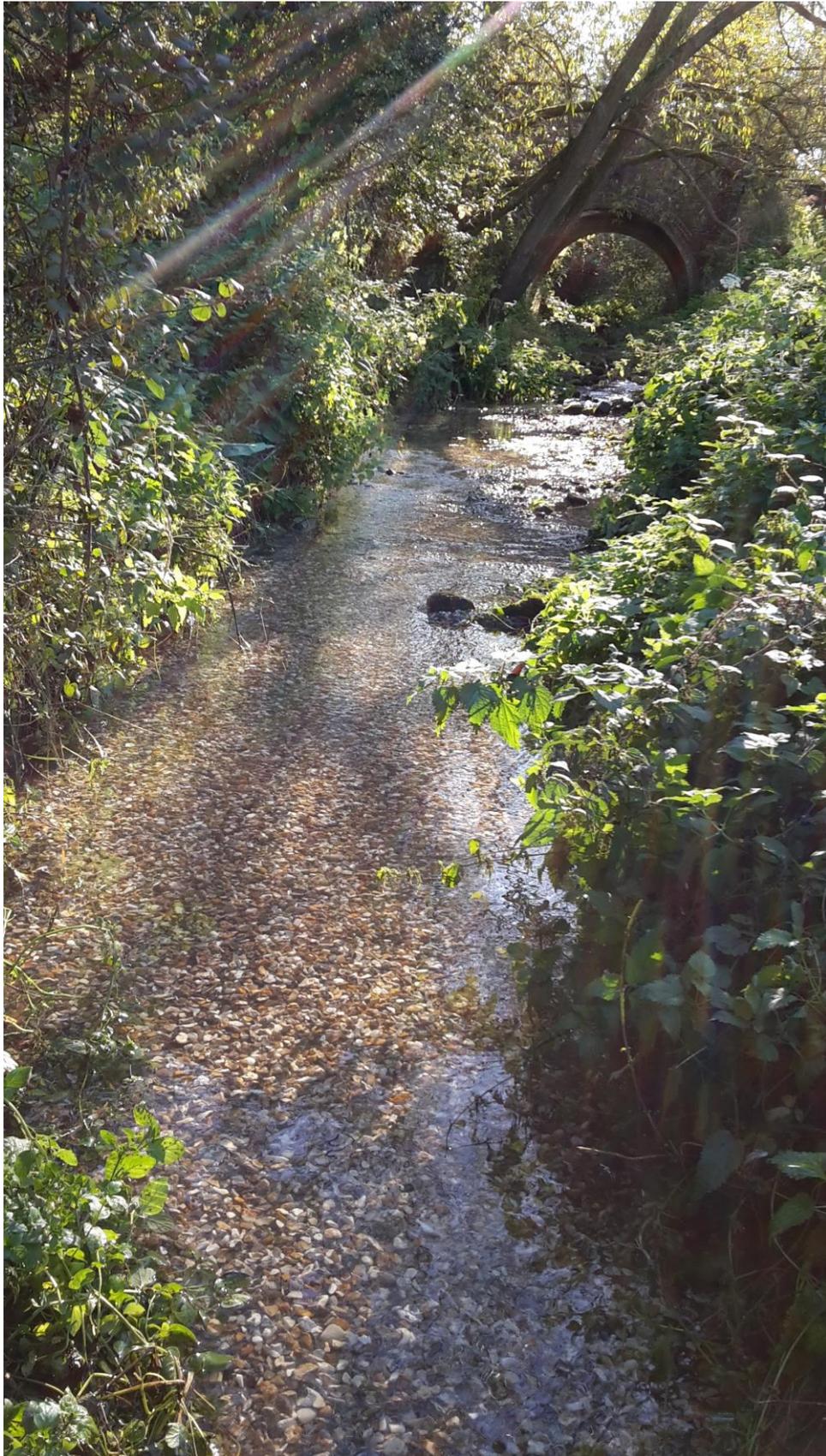
We are now probably about 75% of the way through our work programme and it is still too early to be able to say how successful our measures have been. We did see lots of fish fry using the refuge last summer, and kick-sampling the gravel spawning bed has shown a tremendous uptake by invertebrates. We will keep monitoring to see how the river develops but it is looking good to surmise that the works will really help to develop the biodiversity of the Brook. And one thing we already know, the exercise has developed CBCV as a group, raising our collective sights as to what we can achieve and the equipment we can use to do it.

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The newly-laid spawning bed.



Volunteer up-skilling



A length of the completed fish refuge.