

Battlemead Common, Maidenhead

Nature Conservation Management Advice

Hilary Phillips, Roger Stace, April 2019

Introduction

Battlemead Common is situated at the northern edge of Maidenhead, between the A4094 and the river Thames. It is about 45 hectares in size, and until recently formed part of White Place Farm. The land was purchased in December 2018 by the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead (RBWM) to reopen a missing link on the Millennium Walk route, safeguard for wildlife and as an open green space.

Whilst not formally designated, the property is thought to have been the site of at least two historic battles. References are made to a battle between the Saxons and the Danes, and to a Civil War battle between Royalist Forces and Cromwell's Army.

Roger Stace and Hilary Phillips visited the site on 9th April 2019, accompanied by Jason Mills and Jacqui Wheeler from RBWM.

Description

The site sits alongside the National Trust Widbrook Common and includes areas of floodplain grazing marsh and deciduous woodland Priority Habitats. Much of the land is low-lying and prone to flooding in winter months, which attracts numbers of over-wintering and wading birds.

The northern boundary running around Widbrook Common to the Thames consists of a hedge with a mix of trees including oak, overgrown in some places and gappy in others. One section is open to allow access to the telecoms mast. A drainage ditch runs along part of this boundary from west to north before entering the White Brook (also known as Widbrook) which links to the Thames. The Thames flows into the White Brook and up to Cookham in all except the heaviest rain events, when the flow is reversed. Where the ditch meets the White Brook a sheltered wetland has developed, with trees forming a small copse to one side and a low-lying wet field to the other. The Thames Path runs down the eastern border which is

edged by a narrow line of trees which includes a section of Swamp cypress *Taxodium distichum* towards the southern boundary. At the southern end of the site lies part of the North Maidenhead Bund, a soil bund designed to help alleviate flooding in Maidenhead. Trees bound the site on the south and west, with a line of more mature oaks running alongside the road.

In places new fencing has been erected at a distance from the trees suitable for protecting walkers from dropping limbs and ensuring a gentle transition from grassland to woodland areas. This should result in a rich ecotone providing forage and habitat for many of our smaller birds, mammals and invertebrates such as moths and butterflies.

There are three main areas of grassland:

1. Entered from the A4094 this approximately 13 ha field is divided roughly north to south by a row of mature trees housing a barn owl box. Of the three fields this has the more diverse sward, with patches of bare ground and a good variety of forbs / flowering plants. This is probably a result of over-grazing in the past but is a desirable habitat and should be maintained. Badger setts are visible towards the southern part of the field and may be vulnerable to disturbance from dogs.
2. North of the first field, and adjacent to Widbrook Common, the smaller of the three, is a partially flooded field with scrub and woodland. The grassland here appears to be improved and is less diverse.
3. The largest area of grassland, again improved, runs adjacent to the Thames. On aerial photographs an old paleo-channel is visible, cut across by what is probably a series of land drains. Further investigation would be advised here to scope potential for re-wetting the paleo-channel.

There are two main wetland areas:

1. In the smaller field, surrounded on three sides by deciduous woodland and scrub. There seemed to be fewer birds using this area at the time of our visit, which may be down to its less open nature.
2. The south-western corner of the large field has a more extensive flooded area and provides habitat for overwintering waterfowl and waders. At the time of our visit numbers of birds were present were low, possibly due to the work being carried out,

but reports of lapwing, oystercatcher, woodcock, little egret, snipe, teal, widgeon and shelduck using the site demonstrate its biodiversity value. The area is bisected by a raised road / causeway. Vehicle traffic along this causeway during fence removal and construction work was disturbing wildlife on site. Screening the wetlands from the causeway was discussed but advice should be taken as to whether breaking up the area of water in this way would reduce its value to waterfowl and waders.

The woodland on site comprises mainly deciduous species including willow, sycamore, oak and beech. To the south of the site is a valuable area of old wet woodland, undisturbed and unmanaged for some time it is now a diverse, species rich sheltered area for wildlife. Otter spraint and feeding remains were observed on a bankside tree in this area during our visit.

We understand a range of organisations have views on how this site should be managed, so our comments here are set out in terms that might contribute to shaping a shared way forward.

Vision

A vision is an important part of a management plan as it allows readers to have an understanding of the aspirations of those responsible for managing a site. It should be 'bought into' by as many people as possible, so should be brief, descriptive and free from jargon.

At Battlemead Common, a vision might include:

- The site is a pleasant place to visit for local families and small groups. It gives the impression of a wild landscape, with an accessible track leading visitors to a variety of interesting features.
- The field boundaries and waterways are effective corridors for animal species to move along. Their characteristics are maintained and enhanced and they act as a reservoir for wildlife to spread into the rest of the Common and the wider landscape.
- The river Thames to the east is a well used route for people enjoying a range of leisure activities and an important corridor for wildlife.

- The grassland areas have a diverse sward, are rich in wildflowers and invertebrates and small mammals. They are suitable for sweep netting and picnicking at sites located away from areas where wildlife is most sensitive to disturbance.
- The waterways and wetland areas are rich in wildlife, with a diverse emergent, floating and bank flora.
- The shrub areas have a diverse range of native species. They provide food and shelter for a host of wildlife throughout the year. The structure is diverse, with some short, recently coppiced, areas and some dense thickets.
- A new generation of open-grown trees is developing in the grassland areas, providing future homes for owls and bats.
- Wildlife thrives undisturbed in the wetlands, wet woodlands and swamp areas.

Prescription

The prescription is written after the vision has been agreed, and describes how the vision should be realised. The actions should be achievable and a timetabled programme produced.

As discussed, the prescription for Battlemead Common might include:

- Introduce yellow rattle at the earliest opportunity to maintain an open and diverse sward in the field adjacent to the A4094. This will suppress grass growth.
- Take hay cuts and remove arisings to maintain low fertility.
- Mow paths to guide visitors through the site away from more sensitive areas. Leave other areas of grass and scrub uncut but ensure they are cut on rotation.
- Allow scrub to develop between tree lines and fences. This should be cut on a rotation of 10-15 years to ensure continued age range of scrub.
- Allow reedbeds to develop at wetland edges to provide more cover for wildlife and screening for wetland birds.
- Plant more trees in the open fields or protect naturally growing saplings, especially where they will provide extra screening for owls using the nest box, and allow more hedgerow trees to develop.
- Pollard the willows in the wet woodland area in the north west of the site. This should be carried out over several years to allow continuity of some tree canopy. For

example, pollard one third of the willows each year for the next three years.

Alternatively every other year over the next 5 years.

- Expand wetland areas, especially into areas with no public access.
- Close the causeway to all access except for special occasions such as hay cutting or beating the bounds.
- Temporary [hazel paling] fencing should be considered to reduce access to dogs and walkers from the Thames Path until the newly planted hedge has developed.
- Coppicing shrub coupes on rotation.
- Providing deadwood habitat in the form of log piles and buried deadwood at the north of the site. Ring-bark a few mature trees to provide standing dead wood. Choose areas where there is currently less dead wood but ensure there is no public access as there will be a risk of falling branches as the trees decay.
- Exclude public and dogs from the wet woodland area to the south-east of the site.
- Installing interpretation, paths and benches to make visits more fulfilling and enjoyable.
- Ensure the security of the site and the safety of visitors by clearing unwanted wire and monitoring hazardous trees.
- Install bird and bat boxes.



Ramblers' Association, East Berkshire Group

Battlemead Common planning application comments

1. East Berkshire Ramblers (EBR) welcome the Royal Borough's decision to purchase Battlemead Common and to designate it a public open space. The site has important walking, wildlife, historical and landscape connotations. We feel strongly that all these elements need to be recognised in the design and management of the facility and that no single one of them should dominate to the detriment of others. The papers already circulated by Anthony Hurst are written predominately from the wildlife perspective and we are confident that the Friends of Battlemead Common will take the broader agenda on board in determining the way ahead.

2. We agree with the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust that a clear and simple vision statement is a necessary prerequisite of a management plan. Such a statement should act as a touchstone for the way the site is developed. Given that the main challenge in planning the way ahead is likely to be ensuring there is an appropriate and proportionate balance between recreational use of the site and the wildlife/conservation requirements, we suggest an appropriate vision could be "*Battlemead Common - a place that works for wildlife and people*"

3. We have these specific observations on the papers already submitted:

3.1. East Field

The public should not be excluded from this, the largest field, since it has the best views- to the North there is Cliveden and East the river Thames. The land is improved grassland and should be managed as a wildflower/hay meadow.

3.2. The new path

The completion of the Millennium Walk has been given high priority by the Local Access Forum (LAF) and is in the RBWM Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) 2005-2015. The missing link between the A4094 and the Thames Path was included in the Cookham District Plan of 1973 and the Maidenhead Local Plan of 1999. The route also fills in a missing link in the Boundary Walk, which is a waymarked route, not just an annual charity event. The route we desire to complete the Millennium and Boundary Walks (both important permanent Trails) follows the route walked as organised by Anthony Hurst for interested parties on 21 February, i.e. East from the A4094 near SU 8994 8387 following the line of the ditch/trees, past the boundary stone near to SU 9035 8395 (which should be kept clear of vegetation) to the causeway near SU 9047 8375 then north-east over the causeway to beyond the water and then south-east across the field to the Thames Path. The section over the causeway should be suitably fenced to prevent undue disturbance to wildlife. The route to be designated a PROW.

3.3 Wet lands

The area designated SW1, either side of the causeway, is not a permanent pond, it is formed from the flood water from the White Brook when the water level in the Thames is high. It would be better to maintain a good flow along the White Brook in order to fill the Maidenhead ditch which supplies water to the Town Waterways scheme, rather than enlarge the area of standing water. Areas SW2 & SW3 are permanent ponds and should be managed for wildlife, as suggested, and could be fenced off from the public, along with the wooded margins. While the need to avoid undue disturbance to wildlife is acknowledged, preventing any sight of wildlife is counterproductive. Wildlife will not be valued if it is never seen.

3.4 We do not concur with the proposal contained in the report by Wild Maidenhead and Wild Cookham that a trust be established to manage Battlemead Common. Our strong view is that public open spaces such as this are best managed by the Local Authority who have the appropriate legal powers, the necessary management expertise and



Ramblers' Association, East Berkshire Group

Battlemead Common planning application comments

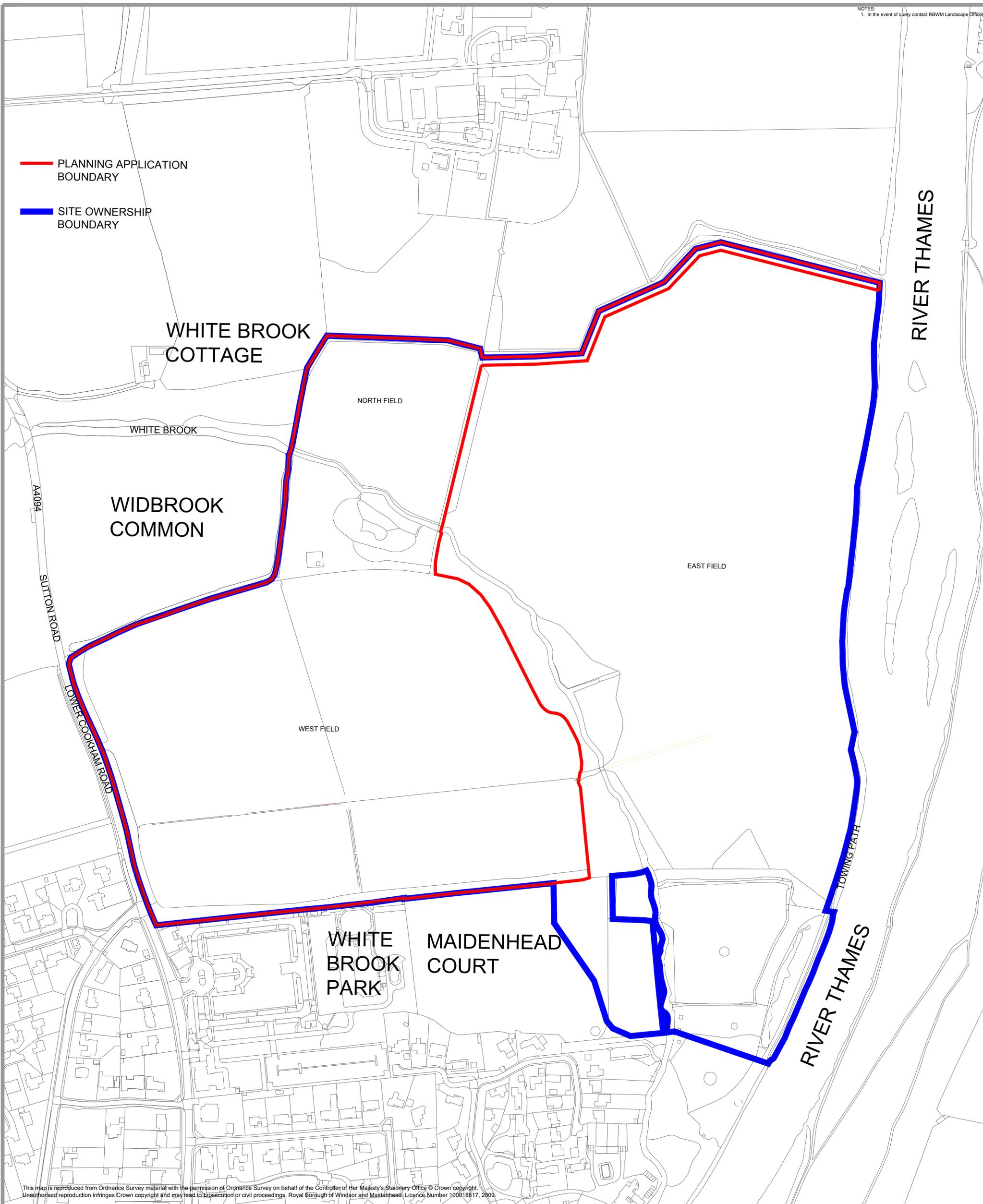
skills; the stakeholder coordination skills and the knowledge of how to acquire independently any service or advisory skills required for effective management. The establishment of a trust would entail unnecessary bureaucracy and raise issues of proportionality. We feel that RBWM's record on countryside matters places it in the best position to manage the site in the interests of all stakeholders.

We feel that there is an imbalance between the 'flora/fauna' issues and the 'people' issues in the arguments/reports put forward - probably inevitable given the organisations invited or contracted to make submissions. It is understood that BBOWT will argue from the wildlife constituency aspect and that Austin Foot are a professional organisation paid to deliver a well-researched report. It is notable that both recognise that Battlemead Common was purchased by RBWM as a public open space (not a nature reserve) and to reopen a missing link in the Millennium Walk and the Boundary Walk.

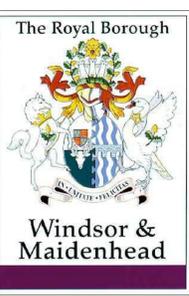
The amended plan shows that a minority of the site is to offer public access. The majority is shown as not being the 'Public Open Space' so often mentioned by the Borough in connection with the purchase. This is not necessary for adequate protection of the wildlife. EBR would be prepared to accept rather more fencing than we would like in order to safeguard wildlife whilst ensuring public access and enjoyment.

Phil Smith
Chairman
East Berkshire Group, Ramblers.

PLANNING APPLICATION BOUNDARY
SITE OWNERSHIP BOUNDARY



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Project
BATTLEMEAD COMMON

Title
SITE BOUNDARY PLAN

A	Amended planning site boundary	AC	050619
Rev	Amendments	Init	Date

Date	27/12/2018		Scale	1:1750@A1	
Drawn	AC	CAD	Checked	AC	AH
Drg No.	201810-L-01			Rev.	A
Base Ref.	Y:\ARCVIEW\LEISURE\LANDSCAPE\Maidenhead\Battle Mead Cookham				

FRIENDS OF BATTLEMEAD COMMON

TERMS OF REFERENCE

AIM

To provide guidance, advice and recommendations to the Borough Council to ensure the effective management of Battlemead Common for public access and enjoyment, whilst protecting and enhancing the wildlife, biodiversity and landscape value of the site.

OBJECTIVES

- To assist with the development of a 'Management Plan' for Battlemead Common, to be implemented by the Borough Council in conjunction with partners and volunteers.
- To review and oversee the progress and successful delivery of the 'Management Plan' proposals, within the available budget and agreed timeline.
- To identify potential risks and issues that could impact the effective management of the site as they arise.
- To promote open and positive communication between all parties and residents with an interest in the site, and better understanding and appreciation of the project's objectives.
- To provide and consider guidance, advice and recommendations and make non-executive decisions.
- To assist in securing funding to deliver the objectives set out in the Management Plan.
- To monitor and assess the on-going benefits of the implementation of the Management Plan.

DECISION MAKING

This Friends of Group has been established to advise and oversee the implementation of the agreed objectives for the site. The Group will meet to discuss issues, express views and make recommendations, however the Group has no executive decision making powers on behalf of the Council. Decisions shall be made in accordance with the mechanisms in the Council's Constitution.

Title: MW Technical note on White Brook channel maintenance
Date: 13-Jun-2019
Source: Maidenhead Waterways

1. Introduction and Overview

The Friends of Battlemead Common has been set up to provide guidance, advice and recommendations to the Borough Council to ensure the effective management of Battlemead Common for public access and enjoyment, whilst protecting and enhancing the wildlife, biodiversity and landscape value of the site [1]. The objectives include the development of a Management Plan for Battlemead Common, and promotion of open and positive communication between all parties and residents with an interest in the site.

The White Brook flows through the Battlemead Common site and normally flows away from the Thames, across Widbrook Common, via Maidenhead Ditch through Maidenhead, eventually re-joining the Thames at Bray. This contribution provides information to inform the Management Plan on the maintenance of the White Brook, referred to as “running water” in the Battlemead Common Ecological Appraisal for RBWM [2].

2. Background

The White Brook forms the main water supply route for Maidenhead Ditch. Although joined by Strand Water about 3km downstream, the watercourse does not receive any significant additional water supply until the outflow from Maidenhead Water treatment works, which discharges just south of Maidenhead. There has been a history of the stream drying up in the summer [3], and eventually South East Water (SEW) commissioned a study by Jacobs, under Environment Agency guidance, to investigate whether groundwater abstraction was affecting flow in Maidenhead Ditch. Outcomes of the study were produced in [4] and [5].

The relevance to Battlemead Common is that the outcome of the study in [5] as agreed by the EA includes a recommendation for regular maintenance of the White Brook channel. This should be incorporated in, and compatible with, the Management Plan for Battlemead Common.



White Brook and Maidenhead Ditch



York Stream in Maidenhead, October 2002

The stream has dried out in Maidenhead in 1988 to 1994 (7 consecutive years), 2002 to 2005 (4 consecutive years) and in 2014.

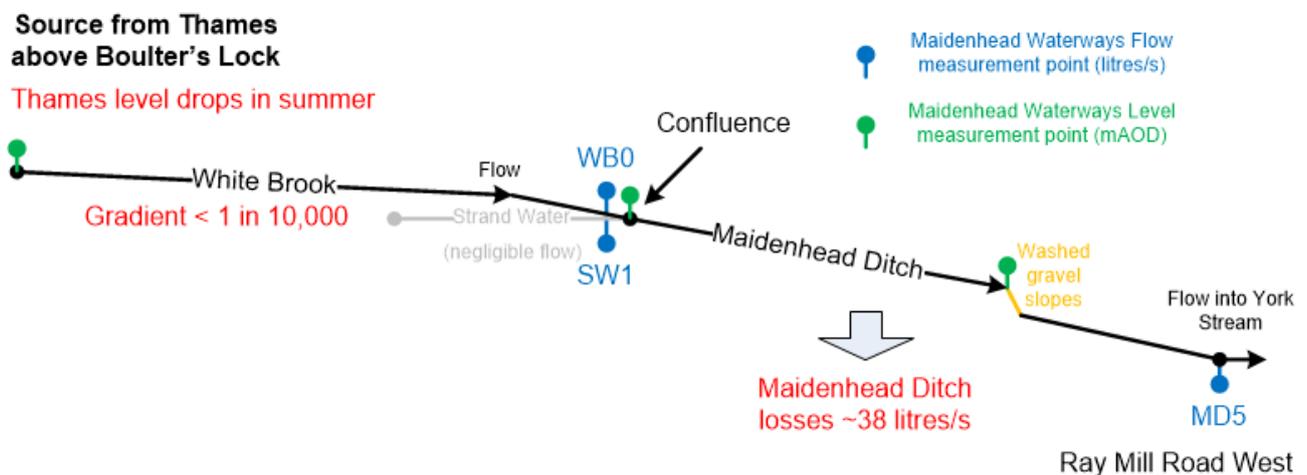
3. Why maintenance matters

Why it matters – wildlife

- White Brook west of Battlemead and Maidenhead Ditch are a designated Local Wildlife Site [6]
- Maidenhead Ditch supports nesting moorhens, mallards, reed warblers and many other birds
- Healthy fish population [7], feeding ground for kingfishes and herons
- Washed gravel slopes on northern edge of Maidenhead, Blackamoor Lane
- Supports healthy bankside and in-stream vegetation
- Dragonflies, Damselflies and invertebrates

Why it matters – hydraulics

- Volumetric flow (litres/s) is seasonal and depends on Thames level above Boulter's lock
- Very low water gradient across Battlemead Common/Widbrook Common, < 1 in 10,000
- Flow in the White Brook is very sensitive to obstructions in the channel
- Loss from Maidenhead Ditch is about 38 litres/s
- Lower Thames levels in the summer, sensitivity to flow in the White Brook, together with losses out of Maidenhead Ditch, make Maidenhead Ditch aquatic habitats quite vulnerable



Flood Control structure, December 2003



York Stream in Maidenhead, July 2014

4. Maintenance examples

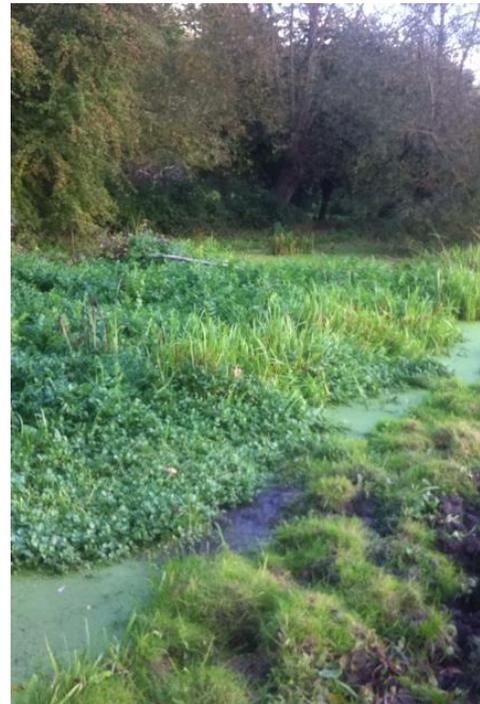
Maidenhead Waterways has been maintaining White Brook and Maidenhead Ditch since 2014, when we restored the flow by finding and removing a number of obstructions. So far, the stream has continued running in Maidenhead in 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018. Some example scenarios are shown below.

Debris accumulates against fallen wood



Stubble Dam after winter flooding, White Brook west of Widbrook Common, July 2014

Effect of fallen branch



Widbrook Common, East of A4094, fallen Willow branch: March 2016 and October 2016

Principles

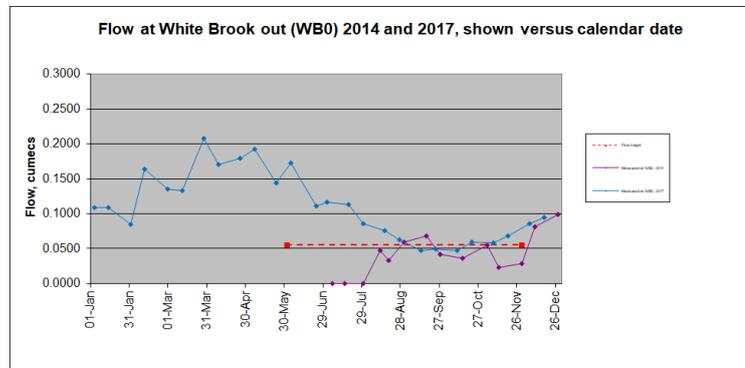
- Maintain channel for both handling winter flood and retaining summer flow
- Maintain taking into account biodiversity and characteristics of whole length

Observations

- In 2014, the western part of White Brook was completely blocked. White Brook was stagnant on Battlemead Common and Widbrook Common, and Maidenhead was dry.
- Trees/branches that fall across the channel accumulate debris, and can form dense barriers. Upstream of the first washed gravel slope, such barriers restrict flow and can starve lower reaches.
- Willow branches fallen across the stream root in the stream bed, and can form permanent barriers
- Dense in-channel growth upstream of the first washed gravel slope restricts flow and can starve lower reaches
- Losses in Maidenhead Ditch are broadly as predicted by the Jacobs report, and unlikely to change
- Experience so far indicates that a clear central channel in sections between the Thames and the first washed gravel slope is required to maintain reliable flow in the late summer
- Regular flow and water level measurements allow both proactive and adaptive maintenance, and wildlife-sensitive timing helps maintain ecology and biodiversity
- Establishing norms of flow and water level measurements over several years allows unusual behaviour to be detected, and guides necessary interventions
- Canoe inspections have been a valuable aid to finding problems

5. Right of navigation

A public right of navigation [8] exists over the whole of White Brook, Maidenhead Ditch and back to the Thames at Bray. In practice the streams north of Maidenhead are navigable only by canoe, but this has proved valuable where no public right of access to the banks exists.



- In 2014, a canoe inspection on 9-Aug started the White Brook flowing again
- The graph shows flow out of White Brook, in 2014 & in 2017 with “clear central channel” approach

6. Way Forward

For the Management Plan for Battlemead Common, the following proposals are made:

- A joint White Brook maintenance strategy is evolved with input from all interested parties
- The Management Plan for Battlemead Common incorporates, and is compatible with, the agreed outcome of the SEW/Jacobs Maidenhead Ditch Options Appraisal [5].
- Maintain channel taking into account biodiversity and characteristics of whole length
- Maintain channel for both handling winter flood and retaining summer flow
- Access arrangements consider maintenance and respect the right to navigation

For the Management Plan for Battlemead Common, include the following additional considerations:

- Technical input is needed to understand the source of water for the standing water (wetlands)

7. References

[1] Friends of Battlemead Common Terms of Reference, RBWM, June 2019

[2] Battlemead Common Ecological Appraisal for RBWM, Austin Foot ecology, June 2019

[3] York Stream: A review of past efforts to keep the stream clear, Ann Darracott, January 2006

[4] AMP5 National Environment Programme, Maidenhead Ditch, Phase 2 Report, Jacobs, May 2014

[5] AMP6 National Environment Programme, Maidenhead Ditch Options Appraisal AMP6/MD/05 Revision 1, Jacobs, 29 March 2017

[6] Berkshire Local Wildlife Site Description, Greenway Corridor Site Code: SU88X06, TVERC, April 2013

[7] Maidenhead Moor Fish Population Survey, Environment Agency, July 2010

[8] Thames Conservancy Act, 1932