

Case for Local Nature Reserve at Mead Lane



Early winter morning Mead Lane view of the riverbank and Cotswold AONB © Phil Harding 2018

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INTRODUCTION

This paper by Saltford Environment Group (SEG) describes the ecological and geological case for making Mead Lane, Saltford, principally the riverbank but also incorporating within the environmental setting the geological rock exposure alongside the lane that contains within its length a Regionally Important Geological Site (RIGS), a Local Nature Reserve (LNR). The River Avon is designated by B&NES Council as a Site of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI) in the B&NES Local Plan and should be protected for its ecological value. Representatives of Mead Lane residents have made their wishes known to SEG, Saltford Parish Council and B&NES Council for Mead Lane to gain LNR status. As the principal local environmental NGO, SEG would welcome the creation of an LNR at Mead Lane.

Sites chosen for LNRs are locally important for wildlife, geology, education and enjoyment (without disturbing wildlife). Mead Lane, that also provides stunning riverside views of the Cotswold AONB including Kelston Tump, can offer all those features. With an LNR designation and subject to appropriate management and care by B&NES Council and Mead Lane residents, Mead Lane could very rapidly become an LNR that provides the additional benefit of easy access for observing and learning about riverside wildlife habitat whilst remaining a local beauty spot and area for leisure (e.g. walkers and cyclists). The iconic views valued by residents and visitors alike including artists and photographers and featured regularly in the Saltford Calendar can be protected and enhanced by an LNR status.

The length of Mead Lane proposed, excluding the land in front of the Bristol Avon Sailing Club and the private land south-west of Spion Kop, measures 370 metres in length. This stretch of the bank (Saltford) is in public riparian ownership, with B&NES Council responsible for its management.

We understand that on the 22 miles of the River Avon within Bath and NE Somerset, the riverbank at Mead Lane is the only length of river with largely natural banks that are not extensively shaded by trees on one or both banks. Its south-easterly aspect means that it can support rich water-edge herbaceous vegetation and the shallows warm more than typical along this river, increasing local habitat variety. It benefits from easy access. These features combine to make it unique. We also understand that this would be B&NES Council's first river-based LNR. The wildlife and other benefits of Mead Lane are described in this paper.

Local authorities can create LNRs and must control the LNR land - either through ownership, a lease or an agreement with the owner. The manager of an LNR would need to care for and protect its natural features. For Mead Lane to be declared an LNR, B&NES Council should formally declare the LNR under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 by sending a draft declaration document to Natural England (details at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/create-and-manage-local-nature-reserves>). This paper can help start the declaration and application process.

The purpose of this LNR would be to recognise, secure and protect the local ecology with its unusual features within the attractive open landscape setting that makes Mead Lane so unique.

PART 1. WILDLIFE & GEOLOGICAL VALUE (INCLUDING EDUCATION)

Wildlife

The Mead Lane riverbank and adjacent river comprise a mix of habitats well known nationally to support specialist wildlife. An area of the length proposed, 370 metres, is large enough to hold its own importance for plants, invertebrates and some of the smaller vertebrates. Its chief value to large vertebrates is through its being a part of a long river. Although it has been subject to some bank consolidation (a narrow road runs beside the bank), the banks are entirely earthen, with no exposed building material. The plant community contained in the river banks and adjacent shallow water supports a number of special species that only grow in that water/land edge, most richly in sunlit areas, and these support a whole set of invertebrates specialised to these plant species and vegetation structure.

The richness of these habitats is enhanced if the perfect series is present, from open water with submerged plants, through floating-leaved bed-anchored plants like water-lilies, bed-rooted plants emerging from the water like Arrowhead and bur-reeds, to a wide strip of mixed tall grass and other species of similar growth form species growing from wet earth. Richness is further enhanced if the dead stems are left over winter, because many wetland invertebrates overwinter in them, above flood-water level. In densely-settled lowland southern England, it usually requires regulating human activities to retain all these microhabitats.

Plant and animal community richness is also increased by the presence of river-bank trees, but is decreased by complete tree cover. The Mead Lane bank is unusual in the local context in that there are no tall trees on the opposite bank shading out sun from the bank for some/much of the day, and for some of it there are no trees on the Mead Lane bank itself. Some of the invertebrate specialists will use only, or in much higher numbers, the well-warmed sunny stretches.

The close proximity of the lane for pedestrian and vehicle access provides opportunities for local schools and the general public, including the disabled, to visit this area to see and observe this special and now relatively unusual habitat. Many bird species use the stretch and can readily be seen, as, with good fortune, can the Otter. These enrich the wildlife experience of the river, and protection of the riverbank in Mead Lane would provide more opportunities for the general public to observe a natural riverbank abundance of flora and fauna.

The Bristol Avon Sailing Club (BASC) in Mead Lane can provide an auxiliary classroom facility for school visits directly overlooking the riverbank from an elevated position (including covered balcony) whilst the Jolly Sailor PH Car Park can be utilised for school/disabled transport where necessary. The Jolly Sailor PH and Bird in Hand PH at each end of Mead Lane can also provide refreshments for visitors from outside Saltford.

Historically the River Avon at Saltford has been well known for the excellent fishing it provides due to the variety of freshwater fish species that inhabit the waters. This extract from the Bristol Mercury edition of 1 November 1886 about fishing at Saltford and Kelston illustrates this point:-

The long reach from Saltford or Kelston a mile up to the horse boat [in Mead Lane] (used for ferrying across the river horses pulling up the canal boats) is the central spot for the trout fishers, as here, and in the adjoining bend, the largest and best fish can be found.

With reference to the part of the river near the boating station, the Kelston side is more generally patronised by the angler, as it is not so "bushed" as the other bank; but the trout lie on the Saltford side, where the finest fish have been taken; and here the bushes afford good shelter for chub, which are occasionally taken of good weight. There are some excellent roach and dace holes along this reach.

Angling remains popular and would continue to be permitted in Mead Lane, under the usual licence conditions for stretches of the River Avon where B&NES Council is the riparian owner, but within designated areas so that the impact on flora is minimised and managed.

Geology

Saltford has a fascinating geological history with Lower Jurassic rocks seen across ploughed fields and in old quarries and it has been used in many of the older houses in the village. The rocks, mainly limestone, have abundant fossils and provide evidence that this region was once under a warm, shallow, sub-tropical sea, 180 million years ago. Some limestone exposures in Saltford are extremely important in our understanding of local and regional geology and have been protected as Regionally Important Geological Sites (RIGS) in recognition of this. The GWR, the former Midland Railway Path and the River Avon provide

some of the best exposures of these rocks anywhere in the West of England. Mead Lane has Salford's most prominent and extensive RIGS rock exposure.

PART 2. CURRENT THREATS TO WILDLIFE VALUES IN THIS STRETCH OF THE RIVER AVON

This stretch of the Avon has a narrow road and residential housing on one bank (Salford), and commercially farmed farmland on the other bank (Kelston). Within this local context, the potential wildlife value of this stretch is compromised by various factors. This relates in part to recent heavy, often bow-to-stern long-stay (multi-week) unregulated and unmanaged mooring along the Salford bank. This removes most of the water-surface plants and flattens much of the tall emergent and bank-top vegetation. This damage can be compounded by overly zealous regular cutting of what remains by B&NES Council.

Three invasive non-native plants have potential to change the vegetation, but all are readily controllable at this stage (Giant Hogweed, Orange Balsam and Himalayan Balsam).

Reduced pollarding of willows has increased the area of shaded bank at the expense of sunlit bank, whereas it is the latter that is much the scarcer in the Bath – Keynsham stretch. All of these threats are readily manageable with local resources and at no significant inconvenience to legitimate residents and leisure users of this stretch.

PART 3. ROLE & MANAGEMENT OF THE LNR DESIGNATION

Designating the area as an LNR will allow a clear mandate to improve the wildlife habitat values of the stretch. The land's public ownership allows smoother agreement and implementation of wildlife-supporting management than is practicable on a privately owned bank (such as the opposite Kelston bank, although helpfully the farmland there is managed as a long established organic farm, Park Farm, Kelston). As described in this paper, local schools and members of the general public would be able to experience and observe a natural riverbank abundance of flora and fauna with ease of access provided by the lane itself with the added benefits of facilities nearby also described above.

The return of flora and fauna after a period of degradation and/or destruction during the recent B&NES Mead Lane 2017 and 2018 mooring trial should be relatively fast once the LNR is agreed and a new habitat management regime is put in place (see next paragraph).

Mooring would need to be banned from the LNR (excluding the small private mooring by "Waterleet" that is established within that property's deeds). Bank-top cutting of tall plants would be reduced to the minimum compatible with road safety. More regular pollarding of the willows could be reintroduced, but is less of a priority than the other two. Removal of invasive plants already occurs in an ad hoc way by the informed public (e.g. including members of SEG and Mead Lane residents) and this would continue. A revised riverbank maintenance regime would need to be created with advice from B&NES Council's ecologist(s). The process might identify other forms of appropriate intervention.