

What's going on down at the bridge?!

Any of us who travel up and down Bircham Hill can't have failed to notice the massive works going on at the bridge.

On Saturday 9th September the residents of Burrington and Chulmleigh were invited to a get-together to hear about the work and the aims of the project. Ron Turner kindly provided a mini-bus service to and from the site. Quite a few turned out, in spite of the pouring rain and a membrane had been put down for us to walk on when we reached the site.

The talk was organised by the contractor's site manager, Tim Midgley, who must be the company's number one public relations ambassador! Not only did he talk us through the project and answer questions in a very good-humoured way, but he even ran through it a second time, especially for those of us running on "Burrington time" who arrived too late to hear it the first time! Ron even made a second journey to come back and pick us up!

Seeing the works close up, I realised just how enormous the task was.

Tim explained that when the road bridge was built, two or three hundred years ago, the river approached it straight on and the water ran under all three arches. (It really hadn't occurred to me that the water only goes under two of the arches now, and approaches the bridge almost at right-angles!) At some point in the past, long before the railway was built, the river had probably flooded and created a small channel heading off towards where the line now runs. Possibly the local farmer thought this was a convenient way to get water to his livestock, so he gave the trickle a bit of help and over many years the channel increased in size and became the course of the river.

In recent times, the river has begun to undermine the railway line and the situation was in urgent need of a remedy. In the not too distant future, the road bridge would also have been damaged by the water. Network Rail, who are responsible for the rail track, work in partnership with Construction Marine Ltd (CML) who are the main contractors on site, and they specialise in river and coastal defence projects. CML's task was to re-route the river, back to its original course. Although not the main aim, it is hoped that the work will also reduce the risk of flooding, but all has to be accomplished with minimal impact on the wildlife.

Before work started the river and works area was surveyed by an environmental agricultural ecologist and continues to be monitored throughout the project. Species in the river include lamprey (eel like creature, some of which are parasites on fish), bullheads, river trout, sea trout and salmon. Within the site area are kingfishers, sand martins and bats. Although no holts were found, the staff have seen an otter under the bridge, which appeared to be watching them with curiosity!

Here are a few statistics: the channel dug is 247 metres long and 20 metres wide, 4 to 5 metres deep. Almost 20,000 tonnes of soil and rock has been dug out. The newly-formed river bed and banks have been constructed with 3,400 tonnes of rock,

which includes gabion stone and rock armour, designed to create ripples in the water and keep the flow and volume close to how it was. It is hoped that the new environment might encourage pearl mussels to inhabit this stretch of the river, although they were not found in the original survey.

The situation now is that the new river course has been formed, leaving plugs of soil at either end of the channel. Weather-permitting, the plan is to gradually remove the plugs in a few days-time, allowing the water to run along the new course. To protect the fish, just before this takes place they will be electrofished by an expert contractor. A low current is put through the water which temporarily stuns the fish, allowing them to be collected, boxed and moved to another part of the river.

The nearby colony of bats has not been forgotten – they are roosting in an oak tree on site, so Tim has banned night-time lighting / working, so that they are not disturbed.

CML have also taken measures to prevent silt from impacting the fish downstream, using silt booms and de-watering bags (I didn't go into the technical details on this!).

As a footnote, Tim Midgley, in his enthusiasm for the project, has done some historical research. Apparently, there was a wooden bridge there originally (they have found blackened timbers during their excavations) and it was mentioned in the Domesday Book, along with Colleton Mill. King Richard II is reputed to have crossed the bridge en route to Colleton House where he stayed.

Any inaccuracies or omissions are down to me and I apologise in advance.

Carole Poulton

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