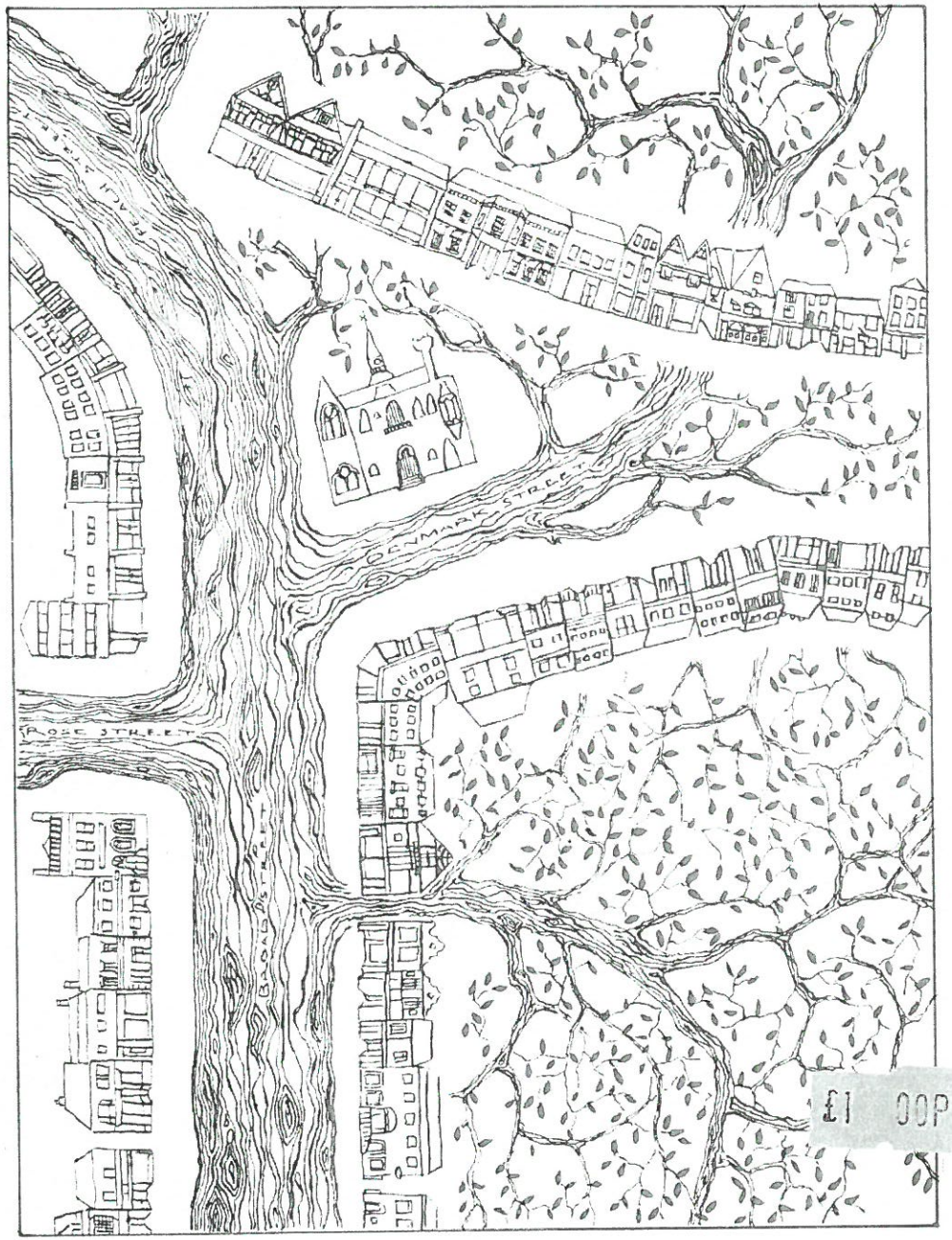
Wokingham Act Wild



This booklet has been written by members of the Wokingham Environmental Resources Development team (WERD for short) who are based at the Wokingham Teachers Centre.

The title sums up our aim: WOKINGHAM, ACT WILD! Our beautiful English landscape and its animal inhabitants cannot speak for themselves so let each of us speak on their behalf and foster a balanced and sensible conservation policy for our district.

The following chapters describe some of the area's beauty spots and explain what is being done (or could be done!) to help them. We hope that after reading this you will be able to look at these places with fresh eyes. And we hope that you will get involved; practical suggestions abound especially in the final chapters: "Nurture the Neglected" and "Wildlife Gardening."

One character appears throughout the booklet. His name is WERDO and he has conservation very much at heart. Many thanks are due to WERDO's talented cartoonist, Jenny Russell.

We also thank Renee Grayer, Julie McLaren, Barbara Maskell, Alan Broodbank, Alec Coker, Joyce Over, David Archer, Bob Smith, Ian Coppack, Jill Butler (and others too numerous to mention) for their help and expertise and Dave Johnson for preparing the photographs. Thanks too to Mike Brogden for his constructive criticism and valuable support.

Ever heard of

Crested Dog's-tail  ?

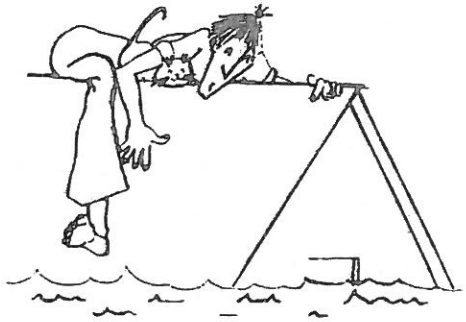
or Yorkshire Fog  ?

If you walk along the

EMM BROOK

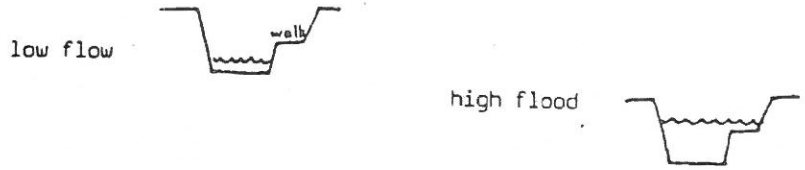
you are likely to see them together with all the other grasses and wild flowers that grow beside the stream. It's true that the water was polluted recently, but nature is taking over again and the banks of the Emm make a very pleasant walk as well as providing a superb habitat for the wildlife of Wokingham. Not always noticed by humans unless their houses border it, we have to thank the local geology for the fact that this area is free from yet another housing development.

The stream flows over a bed of London Clay which is subject to flooding and makes it a less than ideal site for building

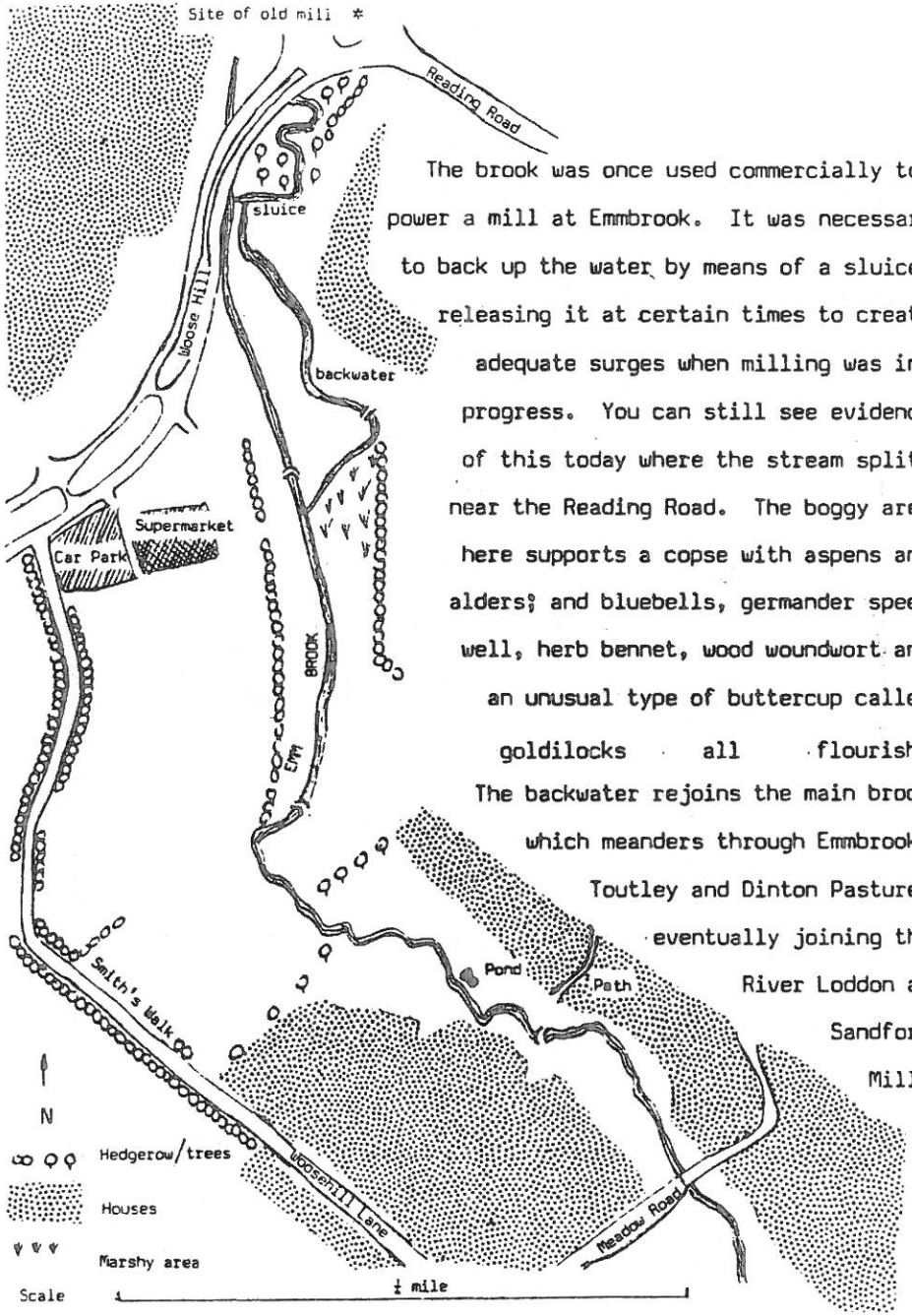


The deep U-shaped channel and steep sided banks of the brook are typical of a stream on a clay bed, coping with low flows and sudden high floods, but this means that often the water is too far away to be visually attractive. A possible remedy which has been tried along part of the Emm Brook involves a two-stage channel.

Deep U-shaped Channel

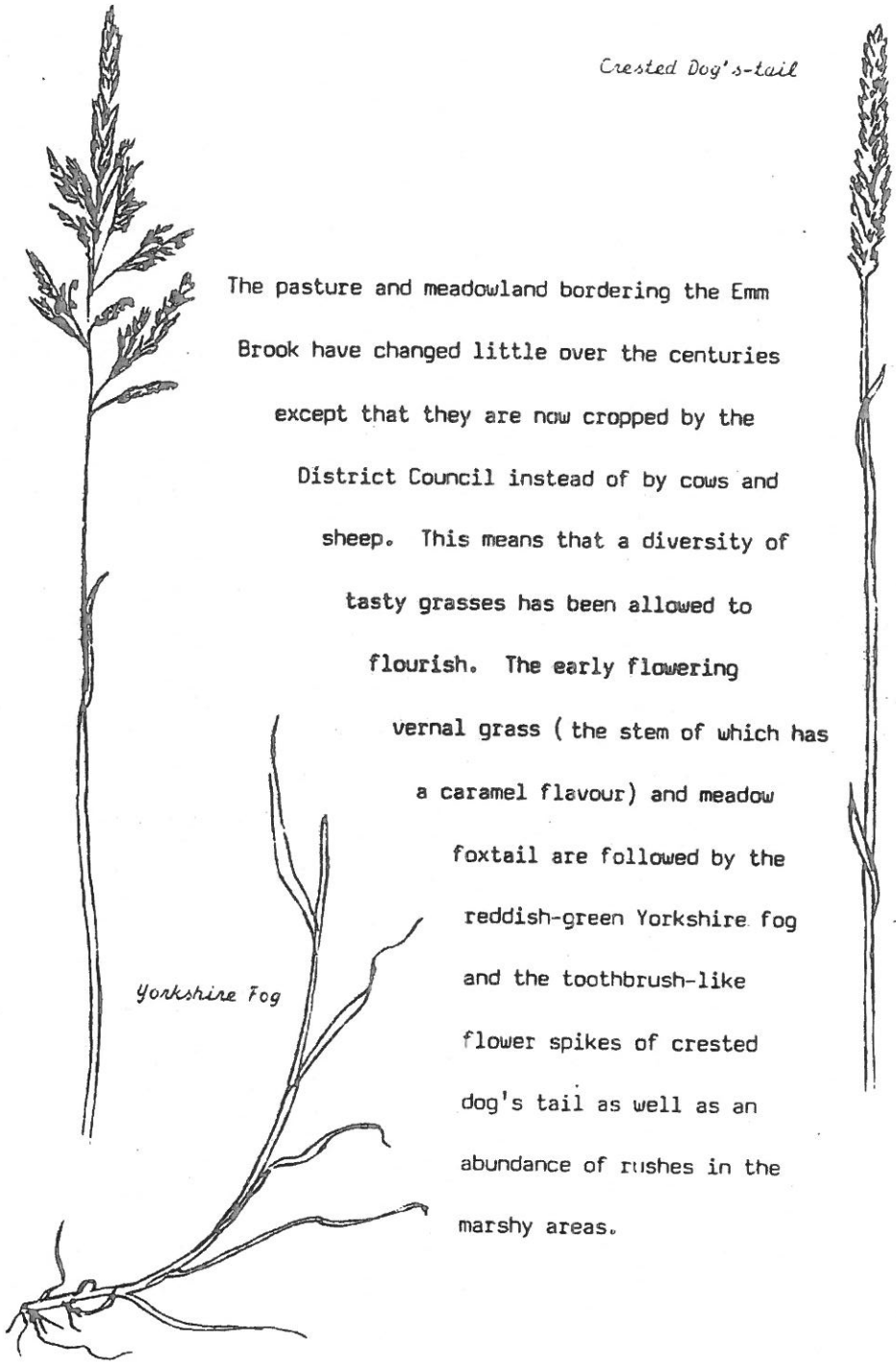


Although today's stream appears to meander aimlessly, it forms an active part in the ever-changing landscape. The Emm Brook is constantly re-shaping its own course and the observant walker will notice on the bends that the fast flow is undercutting and eroding the outer bank while the stream bed closer to the inside bank is being gradually built up with deposits of sand and gravel.



The brook was once used commercially to power a mill at Emmbrook. It was necessary to back up the water by means of a sluice, releasing it at certain times to create adequate surges when milling was in progress. You can still see evidence of this today where the stream splits near the Reading Road. The boggy area here supports a copse with aspens and alders; and bluebells, germander speedwell, herb bennet, wood woundwort and an unusual type of buttercup called goldilocks all flourish. The backwater rejoins the main brook which meanders through Emmbrook, Toutley and Dinton Pastures eventually joining the River Loddon at Sandford Mill.

This is all very well, but you may still be wondering about crested dog's tail and Yorkshire fog.....

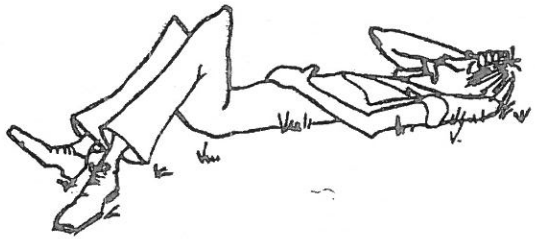


The pasture and meadowland bordering the Emm Brook have changed little over the centuries except that they are now cropped by the District Council instead of by cows and sheep. This means that a diversity of tasty grasses has been allowed to flourish. The early flowering vernal grass (the stem of which has a caramel flavour) and meadow foxtail are followed by the reddish-green Yorkshire fog and the toothbrush-like flower spikes of crested dog's tail as well as an abundance of rushes in the marshy areas.

The flowers along the brook are best seen from June to October, but in the spring the adjacent meadows sport the yellow flowers of gorse and, in the wetter areas, the dainty ½ inch lilac flowers of lady's smock.

Lady's smock

In May the first flowers appear along the stream. These include winter cress, water cress, water forget-me-not, brooklime and yellow flag (a native iris). Comfrey, which bears whitish, pink or purple flowers all summer is widely distributed here and although it has been used for herbal teas in the past, watch out before you try a brew - the plant also contains poisons!

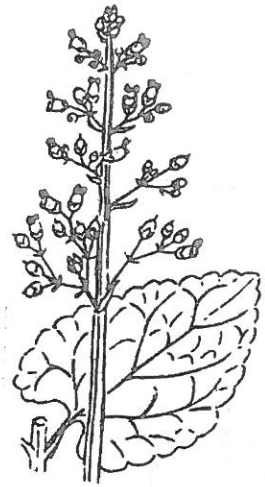


Crosswort

Crosswort, which is quite a speciality of the area, can be found in the grass along the stream. It has groups of four leaves arranged like a cross, and whorls of minute yellow-green flowers.

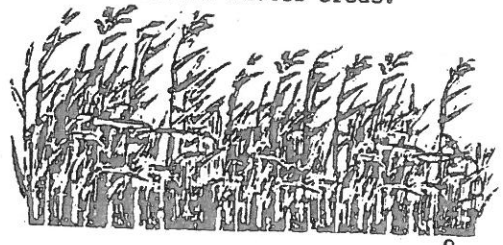
Another rather rare flower of these marshy places is the ragged robin. Unfortunately this has been declining due to improved drainage and may well have disappeared altogether.

In late June and early July the water plants start flowering and the creamy scented flowers of meadowsweet and the tall spikes of purple loosestrife can be seen. They are accompanied by the very poisonous plants, hemlock and hemlock water-dropwort, both of which are tall and bear a resemblance to cow parsley. Hemlock can be recognised by the purple blotches on its stem, and water dropwort was once called the 'five finger death' because of the handlike formation of its roots. Water figwort, common persicaria, great willow herb and great chickweed also flower at this time of year, the great chickweed with its starlike white flowers being quite a rarity.



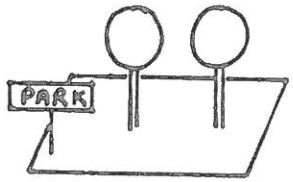
Water figwort

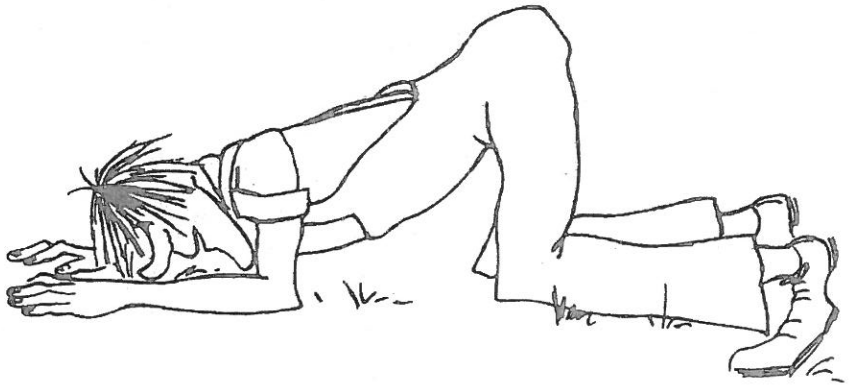
Most prominent along the brook in summer and autumn is the pinkish himalayan balsam and the orange balsam or jewel weed introduced recently from Asia and spreading rapidly throughout the country. The sickly sweet smell and 'exploding' seed pods distinguish these plants that are threatening our native species along the banks of streams and rivers. Spearmint and, Britain's tallest grass, the common reed, flower on the banks and in the wetter meadow areas.



Great Chickweed

The abundance of flowers are a heritage from farming methods of the past when the meadows bordering the brook were cut for hay after the flowers had grown tall and set their seed. Perhaps there is a case for similar management today. Public open space need not be cut like a billiard table with lollipop trees. It can benefit from longer grass both to help preserve the flora and to provide greater cover for wildlife like field voles to make their runs. You might even find evidence of a fox - another animal that re-uses the same path over and over again - and one who leaves a distinctive rank smell behind!



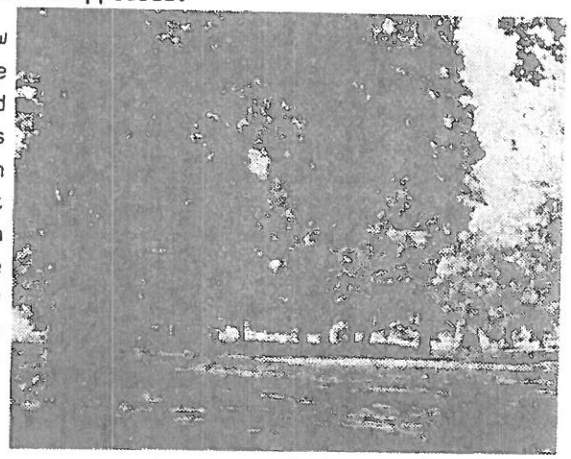


Birds, especially finches, enjoy the grasses and thistles that are allowed to seed and half a dozen varieties of butterfly appreciate a neglected crop of stinging nettles on which to feed and lay their eggs.

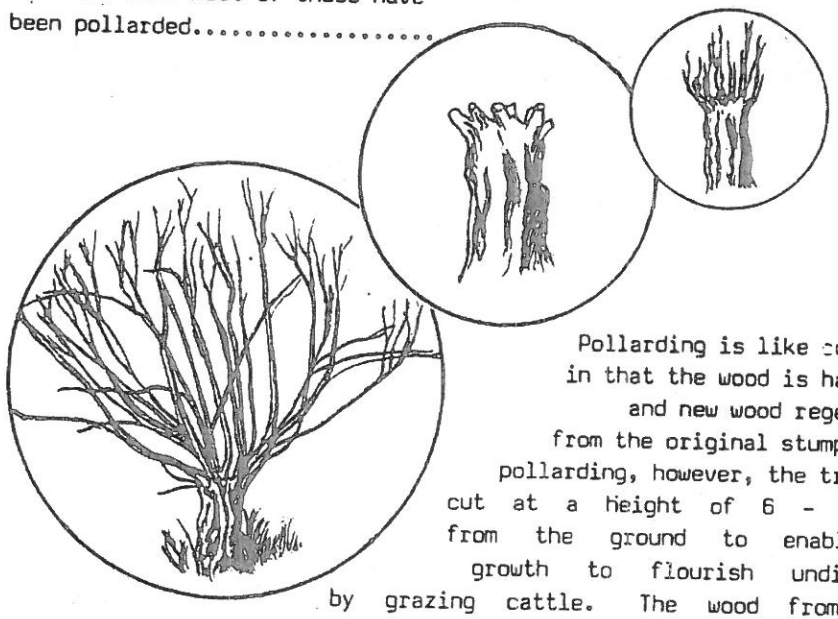
A few patches of longer grass might make the Emm Brook more interesting to walk along even if we do need to wear wellies!

The trees, especially the oaks that harbour so many insects and therefore attract a multitude of birds, mark the course of the brook. Lines of mature oaks that run at right angles to the stream give an indication of ancient field boundaries even though the connecting hedgerows have often disappeared.

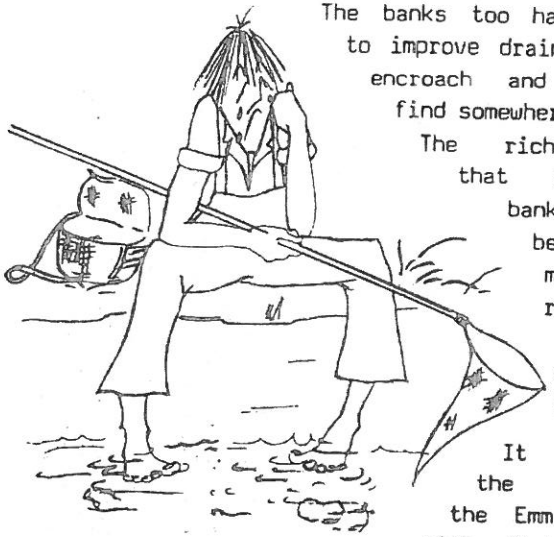
The existing hedgerow along Woosehill Lane (now Smith's Walk) could be subjected to a species count (see A Walk in the Chalk) to find out its age - it's worth looking out for the unusual stone parsley while you're doing this - you will know it by the petrol smell when you crush it.



Willows are another typical tree to be found by the water and you will see that most of these have been pollarded.....



Pollarding is like coppicing in that the wood is harvested and new wood regenerates from the original stump. When pollarding, however, the trees are cut at a height of 6 - 7 feet from the ground to enable new growth to flourish undisturbed by grazing cattle. The wood from trees managed in this way was likely to have been used for thatching pegs and the more substantial branches for repairing hedgerows. In recent years the Thames Water Authority has had to pollard willows to clear the stream and prevent flooding.

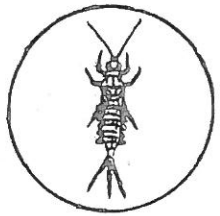


The banks too have to be regularly cleared to improve drainage as housing developments encroach and the surface water must find somewhere to go.

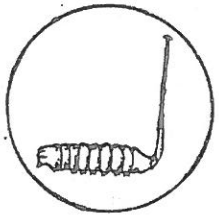
The rich water's edge habitat that is threatened by this bank clearance has also been affected by pollution, making life generally rather uncomfortable for insects, amphibians, and bank-side mammals like water voles.

It will be years before the ecological balance of the Emm is restored. Restocking with fish - chub, dace, roach, perch and eels will not solve the problem until their food supply of water insects and insect larvae has been re-established.

WATER CREATURES ARE USEFUL POLLUTION INDICATORS



Mayfly nymphs will only survive in well oxygenated, unpolluted water whereas



the rat-tailed maggot (which breathes through a long tube) can stand a high level of pollution.

ALL water (including what goes down the drains) eventually returns to our rivers, streams and lakes. It is true that what comes out of our taps has been treated but what we leave for our wildlife is very definitely SECONDHAND. At least that has not worried the crested dog'stail and Yorkshire fog so far!

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