

Andy Locke

# RIVER OTTER ASSOCIATION

SECRETARY : ALAN KNIGHTS MBE

COTTARSON FARM AWLISCOMBE HONITON EX14 3NR

## NEWSLETTER



## AWARD OF MBE TO SECRETARY

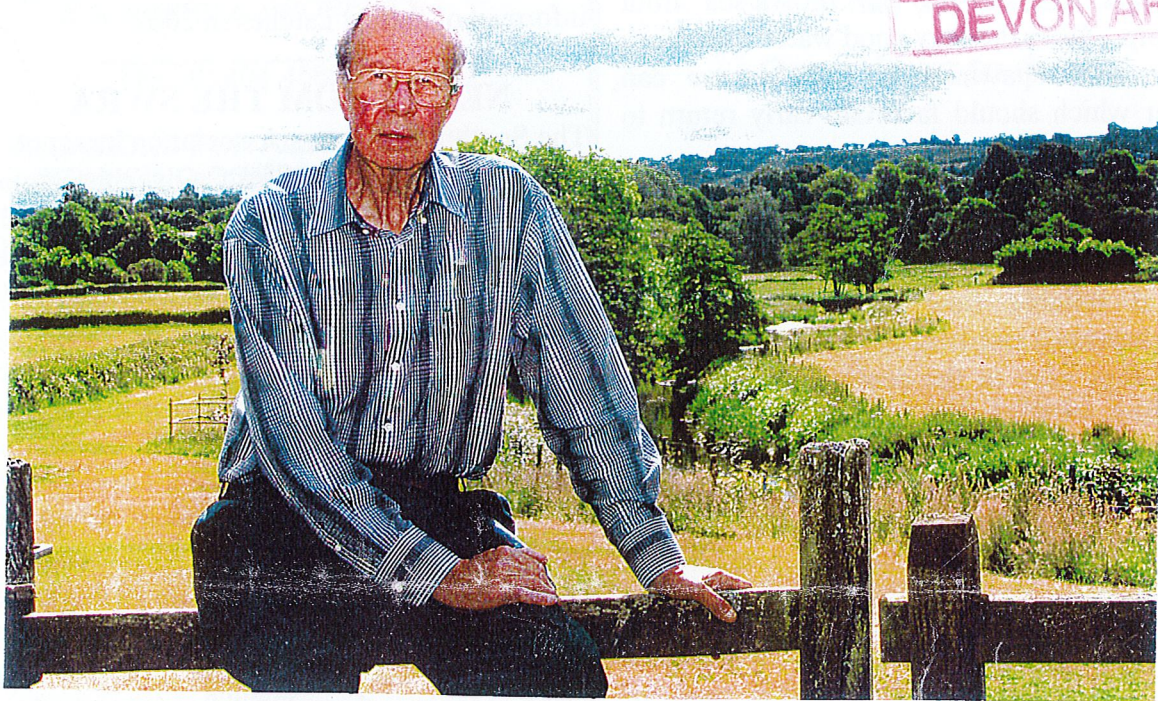


Photo Jon Ryan Midweek Herald

## A TRIBUTE TO THE WHOLE TEAM

The award of an MBE to secretary Alan was a milestone in the history of the recovery of our river to its rightful place amongst the other 17 rivers in the SW region as a full salmon and sea trout river. It is a tribute to the whole team of the last 20 years going back to the days of president Brig Shepherd and the early meetings with Peter Briens and Geoff Bateman. Had we known then the difficulties that lay ahead we probably would have given up. The £75,000 that had to be raised for Otterton Fish Pass against an estimate of £25K. The several attempts to pass Langford Weir. Ongoing work to pass Tipton Weir, Tracey Weir, Head Weir and improvements to Colhayes. Each was a milestone in the recovery programme. The opening of Otterton Fish Pass in 1999, the amazing discovery of 100 sea trout and 5 salmon in electrofishing of Otterton Weir pool and seeing migratory fish once again ascending Tipton Weir.

All these thoughts were with Alan when he attended Buckingham Palace on 10th November to receive the award from Prince Charles. It was fitting that Prince Charles made the presentation as he fully understood the significance of what we had achieved.

The timing of the award was marked by the best ever run of migratory fish with both salmon and sea trout witnessed over Tipton Weir and spawning seen in Metcombe Brook as well as in the Churchinford stream at the very top of the river.

A truly vintage year in the history of the River Otter

## **REPORT FROM METCOMBE BROOK**

On 24 November 2006 David Scott Perry reported a fish of over 18 ins seen in the Metcombe Brook. Later that day he reported the fish cutting a redd and attended by two smaller trout. The large fish said to be "very plump" was almost certainly a hen sea trout of 3lb+ and the smaller fish would be male brown trout keen to fertilize the eggs. This is a perfect example of the brown/sea trout relationship. With the very good water conditions fish have been spawning as early as we can remember which should facilitate early return to sea and high survival rates.

Other fish were reported in the Metcombe Brook which seems to be returning to its important role as a nursery for the lower river. Pollution free water and reliable flow are vital for these spawning streams and it is easy to overlook the vital role they play in the ecology of the whole river system. Effects of abstraction and diverse pollution will need to be carefully considered in the assessment for the Water Framework Directive.

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## **RAINFALL**

Rainfall for 2005/2006 was 966mm. Although a little below average the vital winter total of 640mm was good and restored the vital springs in the upper catchment which maintained flow in the very hot dry period in Jul/Aug. Signs are good for winter rain levels for 2006/07. It is this part of the season that sets river levels for next summer.

Flow in the lower catchment is a concern. GW abstraction in the mid/lower catchment is clearly having a serious effect and confirms the over abstraction/licensing designation. Here the Water Framework Directive will demand restorative action if the river is to reach its classification. If we were to have another year like 1975/76 with present GW levels it could have catastrophic results.

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## **RAINBOW TROUT IN THE RIVER**

There have been numerous reports of rainbow trout being caught in the river. Rods on Deer Park water have caught a number generally in the

12oz to 1lb range. The catches extend all the way down to Otterton and at Cottarson two were landed and others seen. Clearly these were fish that had escaped from fish farming activity and the source was known to the youth of Honiton who appeared in numbers with a variety of tackle and a high degree of success.

The Environment Agency were notified of the situation but had insufficient evidence to take action against the offenders. Please keep Alan informed of further catches in 2007.

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## **NEWS FROM THE SWRA**

The South West Rivers Association has continued to address a number of issues over the region. In the Liaison meeting with the EA we at last had a response on proposals put forward to ease the undertaking of in river work. Humphrey Wood, SWRA chairman described the response as disappointing. We are now seeking to identify work that could satisfy a fast track process for cases where the flood risk and environmental impact would be insignificant.

A survey of all river council members on satisfaction with EA performance on demonstrated widespread concern in this area. The survey was intended to be constructive and lead to more effective partnership on a variety of issues.

Once again the EA is absorbed with "reorganisation". The objective is to Meet DEFRA's target to take £28m out of its cost base (? to meet the cost of the SFP fiasco). Devon & Cornwall are to be merged into one area managed by Martin Weiler and we have asked for an organisation chart. It remains to be seen what the local effect may be on our team.

Working with West Country Rivers Trust plans are being developed for a regional hatchery. This has general support from the EA and is something that would greatly improve our reliability with the egg box project.

One area of concern is the slow response of the EA to poaching and other illegal activities. Reports from our own members are that response is so slow that any chance of apprehending potential offenders is unlikely. The EA says that their target time for responding is two hours which in our view is quite useless. With further cuts in staff in prospect it seems that this element of the EA responsibility is virtually non-existent.

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## **THE EGG BOX PROJECT**

2006 was an unmitigated disaster for our egg box. We received a meagre 200 eggs which had been taken from a brood fish on the point of expiring. We nevertheless placed them in our egg box only to find pollution from pig farming activities entering the Churchinford Stream and further reducing the chance of rearing the eggs. That we did hatch out a few was a major triumph and perhaps 50 fry went in to the upper river.

We resolved not to set up the box for 2007 unless we could be assured of a viable number and quality of eggs. In Dec 2006 we received a promise of a minimum of 1000 eggs so on 28 December a working party went up to Churchinford to prepare the box. Desmond Divers, Colin Hayball, Gordon Chaplin & Alan Knights spent the morning setting the water supply and box into action. All had done the job before and by lunchtime the box was up and running. The next day the main supply pipe had detached from the box and had to be reseated.

On 25 January we went up to Exe Valley fishery to collect about 2500 eyed ova in very good condition. By 12 noon they were in our egg box with a good supply of crystal clear water from the Churchinford Stream. The eggs were at 342 temperature days. The official programme is that they hatch at 750 TD but our past experience is that it is nearer 650.

Now that our first releases are shown to be returning to the river we feel confident that our policy of planting out fry sparsely over 2 - 3 km of river and sidestreams is successful. Those who raise thousands must suffer much lower survival rates from fry to smolts as the juvenile fish fight for territory.

We shall be needing a working party sometime in March to distribute the fry into the usual water on the main river, the Churchinford Stream and the Washford Brook. We know these are areas favoured by trout and sea trout with good habitat and relatively good water quality.

We have to record our gratitude to Desmond Divers who has hosted and maintained our egg box since the programme started in 2002. Also to Ben Simpson of the River Exe and Dave at Exe Valley Fishery for their efforts in ensuring we had a good supply of quality eggs this year.

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## **KNACKERS HOLE**

Our evident frustration at the delay in repairing the Knackers Hole culvert seems to have borne fruit. In August we received a message that work was to start later in the month. Having heard such forecasts many times we were surprised when contractors duly turned up on the appointed day. Perhaps our mutterings about the 1976 Salmon & Freshwater Fisheries Act coupled with Health & Safety requirements concentrated the official minds.

Both the twin culverts have been replaced. There was initial dismay when we found that the downstream holding pool had been removed but Andy Lockes frustration with the contractors bore fruit and a new line of rocks has restored the pool. The picture on the back page shows the completed result. Desmond Divers reports fish going through the culverts in November and what he believed was a salmon holding in the new pool below the pipes.

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## **GRAYLING IN THE RIVER ?**

A report from the Deer Park water claimed that two grayling had been caught. As the report came from experienced anglers it must be taken seriously although this is the first time in recent experience that any such catches have been reported. If anyone has further information we should like to know.

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## **WHO WILL CATCH THE FIRST RIVER OTTER SALMON**

Now that we know that salmon are returning to the river someone is going to be the first to catch and confirm a capture. Probably few if any are seriously fishing for salmon but it must now be worthwhile. The best prospect is from OSM down to Otterton following a spate from July onwards. Dont forget you will need a full EA licence to fish for salmon & sea trout.

Should you catch a salmon we need a good photograph. Take a good look at the tail to see whether it is slightly forked and note the alignment of the eye with the scissors of the mouth. These are all distinguishing features between salmon and sea trout.

Before you hopefully return the fish to survive just check that the adipose fin has not been clipped.

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## **POLLUTION ABSTRACTION & THE WATER FRAMEWORK DIRECTIVE**

The targets of the Water Framework Directive are to identify the flow and water quality of a natural river without abstraction or discharges and then to return conditions as close as possible to that objective.

On pollution current emphasis is on diffuse pollution coming off the land. A prime example is the run off from a pig rearing operation into the Churchinford Stream. The effect was graphically illustrated when polluted water got into our egg box and largely contributed to the demise of most of our meagre supply of eggs. We could say "pollution kills 200 salmon" for that is truly the effect of this pollution incident. Advice given by the EA has been heeded and the stream has been clear so far this year. Less severe diffuse pollution arises along the length of the river and welcome any efforts for improvement.

We have to recognise however that the major source of pollution is from the consented 1.4mgd of treated sewage and industrial into the River Otter, much of it to a standard that would now be regarded as unacceptable. Honiton stw has been updated and achieves a reasonable standard for its 600mgd. The same cannot be said of Ottery St Mary Town & Fluxton. Some years ago we expressed concern that not only was the quality poor but with population and industrial growth it was likely that these discharges were exceeding their volume consents. The authority at the time carried out a volume audit. They chose to monitor Fluxton alone saying that they only had one audit set of test equipment ! They also claimed there was no ability by SWW to divert volume to OSM Town whilst Fluxton was being checked ! There was little surprise when the result showed they were within permitted limits. This year when Colin Nice was monitoring the spawning run at Tipton in a moderate spate he witnessed what appeared to be untreated waste being discharged from Fluxton stw. Both the appearance of the stream and the associated stench he described as "disgusting". We challenge the EA to publish a source to mouth graph of the BOD levels shown in the regular water quality surveys and to explain the peaks which will appear at each of the stw discharges. This is not diffuse pollution and is the main reason for failure to meet water quality objectives.

## **FLOW**

The second objective of the WFD is to account for and restore natural flow to our rivers. The Otter suffers from heavy GW abstraction from boreholes into the main aquifer. The licences held are way beyond the capacity of the aquifer to deliver which was recognised by the catchment being designated as "overlicensed" in the CAMS processed. In fact SWW could not achieve their licensed entitlements without moving some of their boreholes which they sought to do without applying for new licences. Following counsels opinion ROA convinced the authorities that such new licence applications were required which gave the authorities the opportunity to include proper environmental conditions on the new licences. This they failed to do resulting in the prospect of us having to pay for compensation when a proportion of these licences have to be cancelled. Copies of letters written to those responsible at the time remain on our file.

Monitoring the effect of overabstraction on the river is relatively simple and we have asked many times for such checks to be standard procedure on an ongoing basis. All that is needed is a flow accretion graph based on existing flow check points which may well show negative flow accretion as water is sucked out of the river at most vulnerable times. Relating such a graph to abstraction volumes would be a very interesting exercise.

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## **THE STUART GARDENER AWARD**

Some members may not realise that apart from work on our own river we have made a full contribution to the regional response on abstraction and water quality through the SWRA. Stuart Gardener was a long time secretary of SWRA in its early formative years and made a significant impact on its infrastructure. It was a great blow when he died from cancer at a relatively young age. An annual award was set up in his memory to be awarded to one who has made an outstanding contribution to our rivers in the region. Alan Knights is very proud to have been chosen for the award this year and it will be presented at the SWRA AGM on 21st March. The award reflects Alans contribution to the River Otter and also the wider aspects of abstraction and discharges through regional submissions to government.

# CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

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Twelve months have passed (with ever increasing speed) since my last report and the past year has been a successful one both for the Association and the river. I would first like to congratulate our secretary, Alan Knights who has been the lifeblood of the Association for many years, has been recognised with the award of an MBE for his voluntary work for the Association and for the regional rivers in general. In addition, which many of you may not be aware of, he has been chosen for the Stuart Gardener Award from the South West Rivers Association which is awarded for a person who has made an outstanding contribution to our rivers. Again this is a richly deserved award and adds recognition to the River Otter. The Environment Agency carried out further work at Tipton weir which was a very good effort and has proved successful in part although further work is required to the top pool to fully aid migratory fish. The year has also seen the best year for migratory fish with sightings of salmon and sea trout through the lower and middle part of the river. The fish egg box project has received a welcome boost with the promise of at least 1000 eggs which will hopefully have been received and in place by the time of the meeting.

We have also welcomed several new members this year and it is good to see that both the membership and the finances of the Association are in an extremely satisfactory state and can now allow us to continue the good work in the future.

**ANDREW LUXTON**

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## AUCTION OF FISHING DAYS

TO TAKE PLACE AFTER THE AGM ON 21 MARCH 2007

LOT	LOCATION	FISHING	SUGGESTED MIN BID
			£
1	DEER PARK	A DAY ON THE DEER PARK WATER	15
2	OTTERY FLY FISHERS	TWO DAY TICKETS ON THE CLUB WATERS	12
3	COMBE ESTATE WATER	ONE DAY - BELOW WESTON BRIDGE	10
4	GOSFORD FISHING	A DAY ON PRIME BEAT BELOW GOSFORD Br	12
5	COLAFORD SYNDICATE	A DAY ON THE PRIME UPPER BEAT	12
6	DEER PARK	A DAY ON DEER PARK WATER	15
7	GOSFORD	WOODFORD BARTON LOWER BEAT	10
8	OTTERY FLY FISHERS	TWO DAY TICKETS ON THE CLUB WATERS	12
9	COTTARSON FARM	ONE DAY - ALL WILD FISH	10
10	AN ESCORTED NIGHTS SEA TROUT FISHING WITH COLIN NICE		20
11	COLAFORD SYNDICATE	A DAY ON THE LOWER BEAT	10
12	GOSFORD	WOODFORD BARTON UPPER BEAT	10
13	DEER PARK	A DAY ON THE DEER PARK WATER	15

Auction will take place after the AGM. Postal bids may be made if you are unable to attend the AGM and should be sent to Alan Knights Cottarson Farm Awliscombe Honiton EX14 3NR. Successful bidders will be put in touch with riparian owners to make arrangements for their fishing.

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**THE AGM IS ON WEDNESDAY 21 MARCH 2007 AT THE DEER PARK HOTEL WESTON AT 7.30pm. NO SPEAKER HAS BEEN ARRANGED TO GIVE MEMBERS AN OPPORTUNITY TO RAISE MATTERS THAT CONCERN THEM WITH THE COMMITTEE AND WITH THE ENVIRONMENT AGENCY.**

**SUBSCRIPTIONS ARE DUE £10 PER MEMBER**

## **TIPTON WEIR**

Monitoring the spawning run over Tipton Weir was a very rewarding experience. Numerous reports starting in October saw fish up to ten pounds following each spate up to December. Most sea trout were in the two to five pound range but a good sprinkling were estimated in upper eight to ten pound category. It is always difficult to pick out salmon from sea trout in the moment they leap over the weir but two very experienced members positively identified four fish as definitely salmon in the three to five pound range. One of these fish stranded on a rock face and was beyond doubt a salmon. From the reports received our best estimate was that there was a minimum of fifty salmon and five hundred sea trout running the river this year which is the best in recent memory. The Environment Agency have put a lot of hard work into Tipton Weir and we are very grateful for their efforts. It is a key point on the migration run and the quality of the construction of the pass will ensure our fish can get to the upper reaches to spawn in the cleaner waters above Honiton for years to come.

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### **SEA TROUT FROM R.AXE**

The river Axe have introduced a quantity of sea trout fingerlings into the river during the past year. The fish have been fin clipped on the adipose fin and we are asked to report any such marked sea trout caught in the Otter. Can all our members please inspect sea trout catches to see if they are marked and report findings to Alan Knights.

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### **ALIEN GUDGEON IN BICTON**

The Environment Agency have been very concerned at the appearance of a species of gudgeon not native to this country which have appeared in the lake in Bicton Park. In a spate a number were washed out of the lake into the stream that flows down to the River Otter and quantities were recovered from the stream. These fish are prolific breeders and continue throughout the year without a specific season. Exactly how the fish arrived in Bicton lake is uncertain. Speculation is that they either were introduced in stocking the lake or that someone emptied an aquarium into the water containing the gudgeon. If any fish are seen in the main river please let us know. They will be about 4 ins and silver with no adipose fin.

## **WILDLIFE**

Most of our river corridor wildlife seems to be thriving. Herons are plentiful and will benefit from the mild winter. Kingfishers are all in their usual territories and have continued active throughout. White egrets seem to be increasing with small groups of three or four frequently seen well up the river. Otters are now firmly established and benefit from the increasing size of fish with sea trout in the river. In January a dead salmon was reported just below the Budleigh Brook at Otterton. It was a fish of between five and eight pounds and probably was on its way back to sea after spawning. Philip Greenhow went down to check the next day but the fish had gone. Possibly taken by the otters in this stretch but if anyone removed the fish we would like to know any information that was obtained. Swallows and house martins were plentiful in 2006 but sand martins have constantly found their habitat destroyed with erosion. Fly life has been thin and there is increasing concern on the use of new sheep dip which can be extremely toxic to aquatic fly life if it enters the river. We ask all members to watch and report any changes in fly activity as it is the bottom of the food chain for the river.

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### **TALE VALLEY TRUST**

The Tale Valley Trust report a successful year of activity on the River Tale. Clean tributaries are vital as spawning areas for our fish. We do not seem to get reports of sea trout and possibly salmon spawning on the Tale but we are sure fish are spawning on this greatly improved stream. If anyone has seen such activity we should like to know. Efforts are being made to control the infestation of Himalayan Balsam but with the weed rife throughout the river it is going to be very difficult to achieve any control.

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### **NEW SECRETARY NEEDED**

With advancing years coupled with health problems we are going to need a replacement for Alan as secretary. It is one of the most rewarding of jobs and would ideally suit someone who has just retired and has time and energy to devote to the task. A specially rewarding part of the job is the inter action with opposite numbers on the other seventeen rivers in the region. Interested ? Contact Chairman Andrew Luxton.



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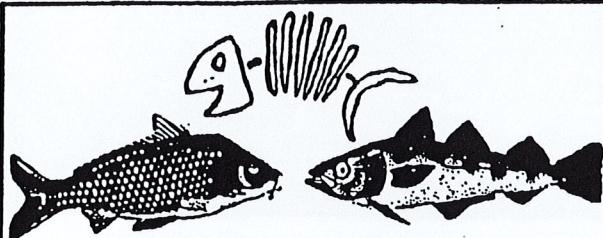
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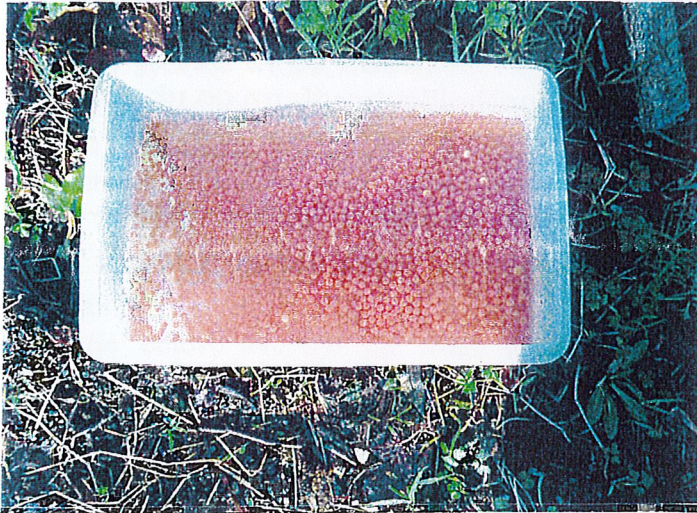
## FURTHER WORK ON THE RIVER DURING 2006



**THE EGG BOX TEAM**  
DESMOND DIVERS GORDON CHAPLIN ALAN KNIGHTS



**PLUMBER COLIN HAYBALL**



**2500 EYED OVA FROM THE R.EXE**



**KNACKERS HOLE CULVERT  
REBUILT AUG 2006**



**PASS OVER COLHAYES WEIR  
RESTORED SEP 2006**



**TOP POOL TIPTON WEIR**