

Minsmere Levels Stakeholders Group. Newsletter No 4. November 2009.

Welcome to our autumn newsletter!

Since our last newsletter in April, we have held another successful public meeting, provided an informed response to the Suffolk Shoreline Management Plan, and held a very useful meeting with local councillors and major land owners' representatives together with the Environment Agency and the Internal Drainage Board to discuss medium term work proposals. The MLSG is now recognised as a useful partner in planning discussions relating to the Minsmere Levels.

This autumn work has already been done by the Environment Agency to clear the New Cut, and work is currently under way by the Internal Drainage Board to clear the land spring drain No 7 from close to the Sluice back to Chapel Road on the way to Theberton. In addition Nat Bacon has undertaken a major land improvement work which includes digging out the drain No 13. The EA are also clearing part of the old river within the RSPB reserve.

1. Stakeholder Group Meeting 26th June 2009

This public meeting was primarily called to inform local people about the new Suffolk Shoreline Management Plan which was open for public comment. The Shoreline Plan provides a long term strategy for maintenance of the coast, and describes the proposed action strategies along the coast over three periods, 15 years, 45 years and 100 years. For the region of interest to MLSG, there are several specified zones, with different levels of proposed activity for each. The detailed proposals were described in the last Newsletter, together with the draft response of MLSG sent to the SMP group. This meeting reviewed those responses and agreed that they were valid.

Stephen Hawes, a consultant civil engineer, presented a very informative review of past coastal defence constructions along the coast, from planting marram grass, to timber or concrete groynes and wave deflectors. The hard groynes caused significant erosion, whereas a new beach defence, using large polymer bags filled with beach material, allowed the wave energy to pass over but retained material on the ebb. Trials of this at Dunwich beach showed considerable beach replenishment over the past two years. He asked :

- Should we not be concentrating on low cost environmentally acceptable beach MAINTENANCE, with an annual budget to meet the cost of work which landowners made their tenants carry out prior to 1939 ?
- Can we afford to oppose nature, when experience has shown that much can be achieved by giving it a helping hand ?
- Could managed assistance be more effective than managed retreat ?

2. Meeting with the Environment Agency together with local councillors, landowners and the Internal Drainage Board on 7th September

Our alarm about the condition of the sluice was such that we were convinced that remedial work was required more urgently than was envisaged in the leisurely timescale presented in the first phase of the SMT process. Mark Johnson, the EA's Area Manager Giles Bloomfield who has day to day responsibility for the EA, Ian Hart (IDB engineer) , councillors from Suffolk Coast, Middleton, Leiston, Westleton councils, and Richard Gilbert (NT) Adam Rowlands (RSPB) joined with MLSG to discuss the medium term strategy for the Minsmere levels.

David Robb set the scene, outlining the history and remit of MLSG, and with the help of a series of photographs and maps outlined the current issues that MLSG see as confronting the levels and in particular the Minsmere Sluice.

Ian Hart then summarised the role of the Internal Drainage Board in maintaining those drains intermediate between the main arteries, i.e. The New Cut, the Minsmere Old River and the Leiston Main Drain (and the sluice) which were the responsibility of the Environment Agency and the smaller watercourses cared for by landowners themselves. He said that later this autumn, he was planning work on No 7 Drain, passing through Eastbridge just by the Eels Foot Inn, for which a budget of £7000 was provided. However, he said that the usefulness of this expenditure was entirely dependant on the effectiveness of the sluice in removing the water. In his recent inspection he had been very concerned at the high volume of sea water apparently entering the New Cut as a result of a fault in the sluice gates.

Mark Johnson began by setting out the four sources from which the EA secured its funding for any work it undertook. These were

1. The Government Grant in Aid, routed via DEFRA, which is currently £700 million per annum, to cover all major projects throughout England and Wales. Competition for these funds is intense, and their allocation is determined by three criteria:
 - The size of the population at risk which will be safeguarded
 - The obligations under national and international conservation laws that will be met
 - The benefits outweigh cost be a ratio of 5 to 1, which created a very high threshold
2. A local levy, agreed in East Anglia with Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire and Southend Councils. At present this stands at £1.2 million per annum.
3. A general drainage charge on landowners, which was raised in areas where there was no IDB (i.e. not in Suffolk)
4. A contribution from the Internal Drainage Board.

With its generally low level of populations at risk, it was difficult for East Anglian projects to meet the criteria for grant in aid funds, although major projects in Felixstowe and on the Norfolk Boards had secured funds. The conservation criteria would improve the chances of any Minsmere project succeeding, despite our low population, as would any joint funding from another source (e.g. Sizewell) which could reduce the benefit/cost ratio to 3 to 1.

Adam Rowlands gave a brief description of the RSPB reserve, emphasising that it had to operate within the EA/IDB framework. All water drained in or out of the reserve via the Scotts Hall sluice into the main hexagon, although within the reserve area there was a network of about 100 smaller sluices. The reserve staffs prefers relatively high water on the scrape in winter for waterfowl and waders, but risk factors were the intake of sea water, which required constant monitoring of salinity, and flash floods, such as those which had caused damage to bittern nests two years ago. The RSPB had reluctantly accepted the plan to no longer defend the north marsh, but agreed with the EA that intervention by heavy equipment did more damage over the medium term than doing nothing, and allowing a natural rebuilding of shingle banks after sea breaches as was now happening both along the North Marsh and along the coast from Dunwich to the Dingle.

Giles Bloomfield spoke specifically about his plans for the sluice. A report from consultants was waited early next year on the refurbishment of the hexagon, repair/replacement of the faulty sluice gate and a key steel RSJ, also extensive improvements to provide safe working conditions. This work would be undertaken next financial year, funded from the local levy.

Work on clearing and securing the outlet into the sea had taken place after the November 2007 storm surge and installing a new ventilation shaft had proved successful. Previous beach work in 2004, reinforcing the protection to the steel pipes with large granite blocks to prevent scour had so far proved successful. The pipes themselves had an estimated life of 15 years, but he agreed with comments that this could be 5 years either way.

In discussion of the way forward, it was agreed that the EA would produce a simple summary of their consultant's reports and recommendations, and the consequent action that was proposed in 2010/2011 and that this would be made available to all interested parties, including those present.

The EA representatives were keen to maintain a continuing dialogue, recognising the usefulness of the ability of MLSG to bring together all the key interests in Minsmere and its surrounding area. They also noted the opportunities that may be provided for significant third party funding by any Sizewell C and D community dividend.

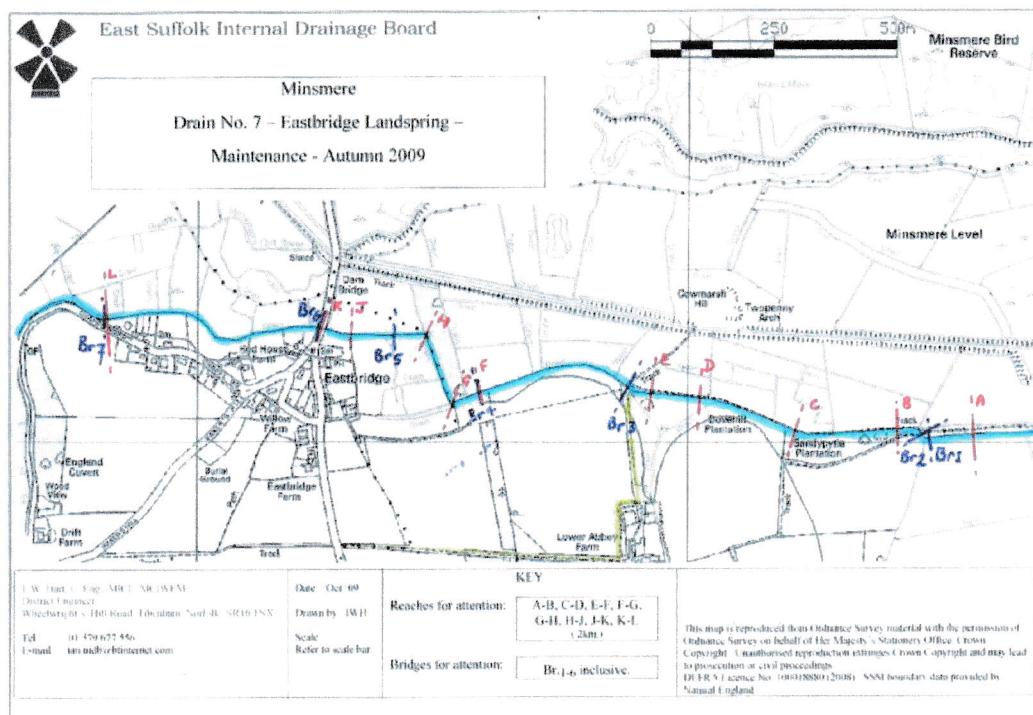
3. Report by Ian Hart, IDB Engineer on the Eastbridge Landspring

The care and maintenance of the Levels is a duty split between the EA and the East Suffolk Internal Drainage Board together with local landowners. We are most grateful to Ian Hart for contributing this note about the work upon which the IDB is about to embark:

'In the prosaic world of drainage engineers, Eastbridge Landspring used to be labelled with the dull title of Drain Number 7. Although to the casual passer-by, the Landspring has little to attract the eye apart from gently-waving reed fronds, it is a popular haunt of water voles, which are a protected species due to their rarity in other parts of the Country. During an ecological survey last spring, the voles were the most notable and abundant finding, although otters were apparently absent, despite their presence elsewhere in the Minsmere valley.

It is at least seven years since the Landspring received any attention by way of drainage maintenance work, apart from the reach down from Sandypit Plantation to Minsmere Levels Stakeholder Group Newsletter November 2009 Page 3 of 5

Minsmere Sluice, which was cleaned out by the Environment Agency (EA) four years ago. In the meantime, vigorous stands of phragmites reed, sedge and other water-weeds have encroached to dominate much of the watercourse, with obvious detrimental consequences for its ability to dispense with floodwater. Therefore, the East Suffolk Internal Drainage Board (ES IDB), which has taken over custody of the Landspring from the EA, has engaged a contractor to attend to the watercourse throughout its length from Sandypit Plantation, past the Village, westward to the point where it approaches Chapel Road. The length of drain involved covers roughly 1.2 miles and includes half-a-dozen bridges. The map below shows the area of planned work.



Map of proposed drainage works by IDB 2009.

An hydraulic excavator will be deployed to clear the bed of the watercourse of obstructive vegetation and associated accumulations of silt, which will be deposited in a 'windrow' on the adjacent marsh, where it will be allowed to decompose and be assimilated into the grassland. This sort of work is unavoidably messy and, for a while, unsightly but the signs of disturbance should have disappeared by the onset of next spring. The work has to be timed to minimise the risk of disturbance to wildlife, water voles in particular, whose breeding season has just ended.

The popular Minsmere-to-Eastbridge footpath passes close by the Landspring between Sandypit and Dovehill Plantations and so it has been necessary to impose a temporary closure of the path between now and the middle of November (20th to be precise). Unfortunately, a diversion was not feasible. Although the closure Order is in force for a month, to allow for flexibility in the contractor's programme, work alongside the path should only take a week. This phase of the work is now planned to start on the 9th November and, weather permitting, should be completed before the following weekend. Extra notices will be posted immediately before the work gets under way, at either end of the footpath, at the Eel's Foot, the RSPB Visitor Centre and at the National Trust Dunwich Heath café at the Coastguard cottages. The rest of the work should be finished by the end of November.

Clearance of the Landspring will restore its ability to transmit drainage water to Minsmere Sluice but, because drainage of the Minsmere Levels is dominated by The New Cut and the Sluice, which are managed by the EA, the Landspring has little influence on the control of major floods within the valley. The clearance work may also encourage a modest improvement in the diversity of species growing in the watercourse.

The work will be supervised by the Drainage Board's Engineer, Ian Hart and if anyone has any concerns or anxieties about the project, he may be contacted by phone on 01 379 677556 or by email to ianh@wlma.org.uk.

4.Land Improvement Work conducted by Nat Bacon, Theberton Hall Farm and member of MLSG Planning Group

Nat writes:

Theberton Hall Farm have begun to carry out works on the low lying land adjacent to Church Road and close to the Chapel Road Junction. The majority of work has been associated with clearance of scrub, including Sallow and Alder. This scrub has encroached over the past 12- 15 years and following inspections of the area, which would have traditionally been grazing marshes, Natural England representatives deemed it to be in "Unfavourable Condition".

The chain of events which has lead to the development of this situation largely arises from drainage issues. Reduced ditch and drain maintenance in the past has led to the marshes becoming generally wetter. This in turn has reduced the quality of this area in terms of feed value for grazing as well as making it physically difficult to run cattle over the marshes due to pro-longed water logging. In time the lack of grazing quickly leads to the further de-generation of the marshes, with grasses, reeds and sedges quickly disappearing due to the developing canopy of Alder saplings.

In order to get the marshes back into favourable condition it is necessary to get the drainage system working as it should be. In order to do this, it was first necessary to clear areas of scrub which were hindering access to the drainage ditches. Having removed much of the scrub, the drainage ditches, including drain 13, have now been dug out to their original levels. This is also expected to improve drainage to the area to the south west on the other side of Church Road.

Having completed these works, which have been part of a larger Natural England Conservation Plan for the marshes at Theberton Hall Farm, it is hoped that by next spring, it will be possible to once again get cattle grazing these marshes.

The photograph below shows some of the completed drainage work. This area of land has reportedly not been farmed for some 12- 15 years. The picture shows what can be achieved with determination and how much more freely the Flash river, in particular, is flowing.

Chapel Road junction. This work involved removing many scrub trees and bushes, levelling the land and cutting new ditches to improve the drainage. He has also redug the No 13 drain which feeds into the new Cut. The photograph below shows some of the completed drainage work. This area of land has reportedly not been farmed since the Second World War. The picture shows what can be achieved with determination, and how much more freely the Flash river, in particular, is flowing.



Autumn work on Nat Bacon's land.

5.Future Programme

2010 will mark the bicentenary of the passing of the Minsmere Drainage and Enclosure Acts in 1810, which led to the digging of the New Cut and the construction of the sluice in its present location. We hope to mark this, as well as continue our engagement with more contemporary issues in our spring public meeting.

We are most grateful to you for your continuing support. If you have not yet paid a subscription for 2009/2010, a further membership form is attached.