

Meeting with Giles Bloomfield, Environment Agency 1 August 2008

Present

Steve Brett
Nat Bacon
David Robb

This a brief note to record *of some* of the points that emerged in the meeting with Giles Bloomfield, described on his business card as 'Technical Specialist, Technical Support'. His seems to be a middle manager, very keen and knowledgeable about Minsmere Levels and their drainage and has had responsibility for making the decisions about EA expenditure here for 4 or 5 years.

These duties relate to the New Cut, the Old River and the Leiston Main Drain (and a bit more), together with the sluice. He used to make the decisions on the drains transferred to the IDB (now down to Ian Hart).

The EA's powers are permissive; it could just walk away from Minsmere and leave it to the landowners . In practice this would be difficult in the light of the national and european legislation protecting much of the levels – though much of this relate to maintaining the water levels, not reducing them. However, paradoxically, the EA has statutory powers to require landowners and others do things – a consequence of the untidy amalgamation of the EA with the National Rivers Authority, which always had a contractor relationship with the landowners. The EA has itself to apply for permission (to another part of the EA??) to do work, and the process of getting consent and plans from an ever-increasing number of utilities was very time consuming.

The work on the EA's remit used to be funded by precept, but now comes from a national pot into which the general drainage charge goes. Spending is determined by priority – i.e. The Minsmere Rivers are medium priority because of conservation issues, but planned work can be much affected by sudden crises, e.g. the emergency work that he had to do on the Blythe at Walberswick post Nov 2007 surge which cost £250,000, and had to come from other programmes. Funding is hugely complex, understood by few, and comes from a number of pots – e.g. this year he received a last minute windfall of £600,000 to spend over his area. Frequently he has to bundle up jobs to make the best use of machinery – which is why, when handling the IDB remit, with a rate income of just over £3,500 a year, he used to combine two or three years income.

Most recent work on the old IDB remit has been around Drain 13, previously something around the Flash, and then 4 or so years ago on No 7 (which probably needs re-doing)

On the EA programme there is an annual reed cutting , now done by digger rather than boat because it causes fewer hazards to fish and oxygen less in the water. They are increasingly using some environmentally friendly and effective new sprays. Digging to a lower level is not generally done, because essentially it is ineffective and only of

short term use. However, there is a programme of de-silting every 4 years and work is due on the New Cut Work is due on the Middleton Water Course.

Giles spoke of the emergency work that had been done to repair breaches on the cut on the section which had affected the RSPB reserve and the bitterns in May. Some of the problems had arisen because of a difficulty in agreeing a suitable time for the work with RSPB. The breaches were probably caused by Coypus.

One of the fundamental problems on the cut is the prevalence of asbestos lining. He has £300,000 allocated for asbestos work, which is a drop in the ocean in relation to what is required, but he hopes to start work on the Mumberry Sluice (which has been long deferred) this year. This means that maintenance on the cut is confined to capping weak sections with clay

He spoke at length about the workings of the sluice, and the problems of the blockage post Nov 2007 surge tide. Although it had eventually cleared itself, he had been in discussions with the army at Colchester about them coming to blow the pipe up. He hopes the remedial work on the valve chamber will be effective.....

He was encouragingly cynical about the Catchment Management Plan, implying that it was the work of policy wonks with no knowledge of the ground. He tries in meetings to introduce a sense of reality about the huge complexity of areas such as Minsmere. The plan is written at such a general level that it will make little sense until the detailed systems assets plans are produced. Unsurprisingly, the trial efforts to do these have taken vastly longer than predicted, and he doubted that the timescale for completion of 2011 would be met. It was likely that the whole of the Minsmere and Yox would be treated as one system. There would have to be consultation with all parties (including MLSG) on this

He gave costs of £5000 per km for major work on the river (e.g. desilting?). This could treble if the ground was soft ?£5000 per km for reed cutting

One of the problems is that in normal (i.e. non flood) circumstances the capacity of the New Cut is too great, which means that some of the areas up river, and the Old River itself are almost dry – causing silting etc

Giles seemed very open to continued contact

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