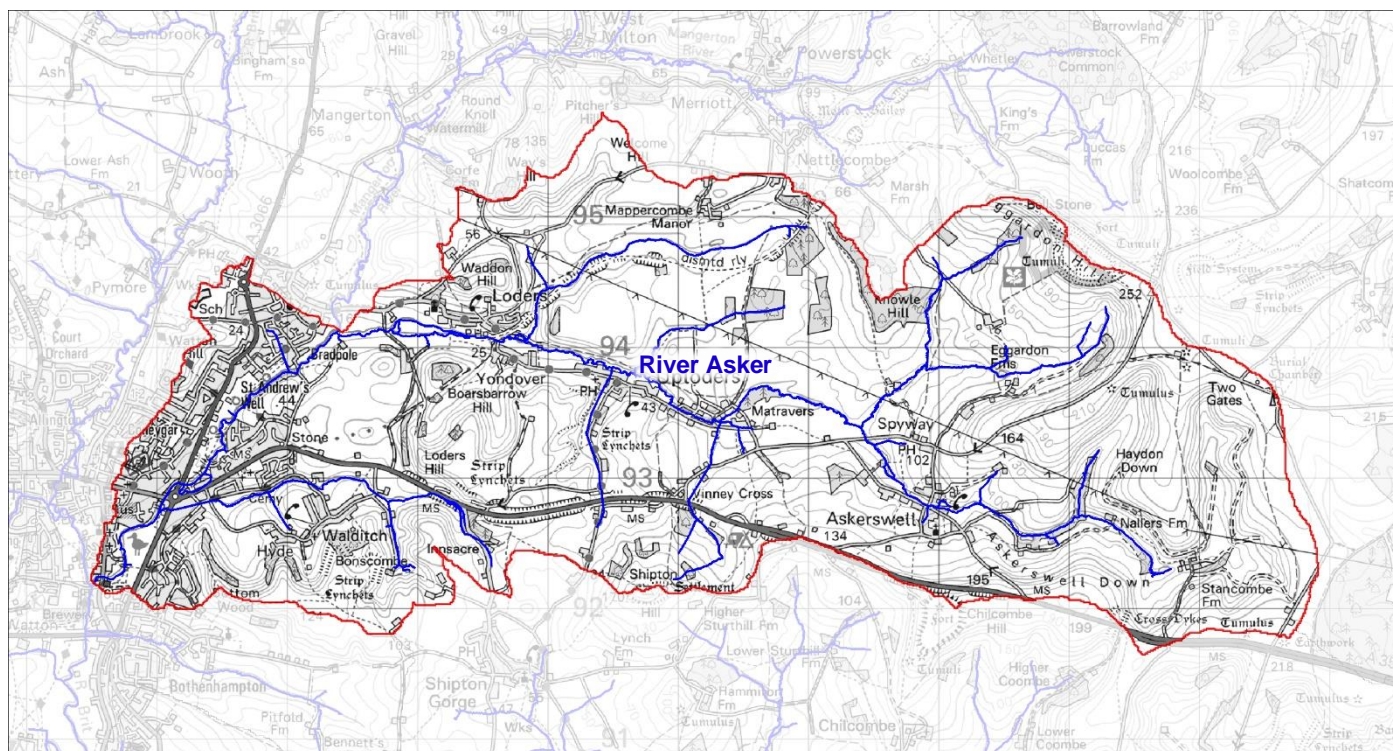




Case Study: River Asker Community Project

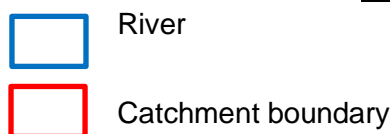
Background

The River Asker is classed as 'Poor' by the Environment Agency, because of issues affecting fish populations and in-stream and bankside vegetation. In 2018, we approached Loders Parish Council and Askerswell Parish Meeting to see if there was appetite to try and address these issues and move the River Asker back into a more favourable condition. It turns out there was. This case study summarises progress over the three years between January 2018 and March 2021.



Map of the River Asker catchment

Key



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Investigation

From the outset, the community was central to the delivery of the project. We did not want to parachute in with a set idea of what was needed, deliver, and then move on. This is not an approach that leads to sustainable improvements in the water environment.

The first step was to get the wider community engaged. We did this through a series of meetings, articles, walks & talks, volunteering opportunities and working with the local primary school. By March 2021, we had 74 people signed up to the wider distribution list.

The first summer was also spent gathering evidence and presenting this in a 'State of the River Asker' report. This was a combination of desk-based analysis and site surveys. The main issues and impacts affecting the river were identified as:

1. **Artificial barriers:** this impacts fish populations and causes sedimentation of the riverbed



2. **Shade from riparian trees:** this impacts aquatic plants and riparian plants.
3. **Catchment land use:** this has the potential to impact the duration and severity of flood waters and is a source of phosphate-contaminated sediment.
4. **Agricultural phosphate from diffuse sources:** this impacts aquatic plants.
5. **Invasive species:** this impacts riparian plants and causes bank erosion, which is a source of sediment.



A trout trying, but failing, to navigate Loders Weir

© Simon Wilmott



Volunteers helping to let light into the riverbank and create instream marginal habitat

Action

1. **Shade management of riparian trees:** six volunteer sessions to manage bankside trees and increase light levels reaching the river. This would allow bankside vegetation to flourish. In addition, we have also installed bankside habitat for young fish. In total volunteers have contributed 320 hours and delivered 1.4 kilometres of improvements.
2. **Agricultural land management change:** we have planted 400 metres of hedging on flow pathways. This will intercept flood runoff and filter out sediment. We have also supported the change from high risk crops to more low risk alternatives over 8 hectares. We are also supporting a trial looking at how to better manage grassland for water quality while maintain nutritional value for farm animals.
3. **Natural Flood Management:** we have installed over 40 structures in the headwaters of the Asker catchment that will slow the flow. These structures cover 2 kilometres of river but will benefit significant areas downstream. 228 hours of volunteer time have helped to deliver this.
4. **Invasive species control:** we have pulled up Himalayan balsam along the entire length of the river upstream from its confluence with the Mangerton Brook. This is a length of over 12 kilometres and will have significant benefits into the future. 168 hours of volunteer time has been spent helping to do this.
5. **Monitoring & education:** we've had over 100 people turn up to various walks and talks. We've put on exciting talks from experts such as the Wild Trout Trust. We've trained eight people in citizen science techniques so that they can monitor the quality of the river. We've worked with Years Five and Six at the local primary school.



The field trial showing herb-rich growth on the left and rye grass on the right



Newly installed woody debris dam holding back the flow in the headwaters

Headlines

- Over 70 people directly engaged with the project, including eight skilled citizen scientists
- 1.4 kilometres of habitat improvements.
- 2 kilometres of natural flood management covering the headwaters of the catchment.
- 15 hectares of improved land management and 400 metres of new hedges for the benefit of the water environment.
- At least 700 hours of community effort.