

The Costessey Point Project

A Blueprint for a Barbel revival!

The mention of Costessey on the River Wensum, Norfolk, will stir the memories of many barbel anglers. This fishery incorporates the famous 'Point' swim, a pool which that achieved a very special place in barbel fishing history.

¹It was Stephen Harper who caught the first Wensum and Point double at 11.14 in July 1977, and the rest as they say is history. Throughout the 1980's the writings of Messer's Wilson, Bailey, Miles, West and Harper propelled the fishery to 'cult status'. At the time many experts hailed the fishery as one of the best big barbel spots in the country.



Through the 80's to the early 90's the stretch produced many large fish for some of the top specimen hunters in the country. Dave Plummer in 1984 caught a new river record of 13.6, which at the time set the angling world alight. It's strange to think that a fish of this size would now struggle to even raise an eyebrow, in these times of monster Ouse barbel!

After the early 90's captures of large barbel started to seriously decline, with just a few large warriors remaining. As is often the case when the big fish are around everything is rosy, as the specimen fishing is superb. However these great fish were really masking a general decline in the fishery. Like many other rivers in the country the Wensum had not escaped the attentions of Post War dredging for land drainage in a bid for agricultural self-sufficiency. The roach populations for which the river was nationally famous for had all but disappeared and now, at Costessey, the barbel were in real trouble, with very few juvenile fish to replace the le-viathans as they died off.

The stretch had been dredged and many of the gravel shallows (riffles) were removed in a bid to evacuate floodwater as quickly as possible. Barbel, chub, dace and trout all need gravel shallows to fulfil a large part of their 'lifecycle' requirements, in terms of spawning, feeding and nursery areas. When removed a vital piece in the barbel's ecological jigsaw puzzle is lost.

If this was not bad enough the then Anglian Water Authority relocated it's potable water supply abstraction point upstream from Norwich to Costessey. The angling community was in horror - what would be the effects on a fishery that was already in trouble?

At the time the abstraction threat brought together a band of dedicated anglers who formed the 'Save The Wensum Campaign'. The membership comprised an alliance of anglers and conservationists all with the common goal of trying to stop this massive abstraction from happening. Although this long courageous battle was lost, some good did come out of this with members of the Campaign moving on to form Norfolk Anglers Conservation Association. Since our formation NACA's volunteers have tirelessly campaigned for the future of Norfolk's fisheries, and anglers.

After commencement of the abstraction it was no surprise the volume of flow and subsequent velocity drastically declined, even though Water Authority managers told us, that this would not harm the fishery. Areas that once contained gravel runs and pools were choked with fine silts and sands. Beds of water crowfoot, which were so much an integral part of the fishery, declined and were

replaced by weeds more akin to still waters. Coupled with drought conditions in the early 90's and past dredging the fishery was on its knees.

Life went on and in the winter of 2001 a massive 14.12 fish fell to Chris Turnbull from the Mill Pool in flood conditions. It is the capture of this fish that made Chris think once again, about the decline of this once very special fishery. Chris is also Vice President of NACA, and at that point decided he had to do something to reverse the fortunes of the fishery.

This was not a hard decision for Chris to make being that NACA had pioneered one of the first river restoration schemes run by fishing interests, in Norfolk, if not the rest of the UK, further up the river at Lyng. Through a long and sometimes bitter campaign, NACA eventually completed restoration works on the river. Riffles and pools and backwaters were restored and created. In conjunction with restoration fish stocking the success of the project has been outstanding. This has resulted in some fantastic barbel fishing, with fish now in excess of 15 lbs. With this apparent blueprint for success Chris felt sure it was worth repeating the same at Costessey, only how was the real question?



About the same time landowner Peter Ketteringham's was becoming equally concerned regarding the decline of the river. Through a mutual friend, Martyn Page, a meeting was arranged and it soon became apparent that there was much common ground and consensus about

what needed to be done.

Very quickly a plan was hatched to start a project to restore the fishery. The Ketteringham's asked NACA if they would manage the project on behalf of them, by taking on the management of the fishing rights. NACA accepted this offer and formed a steering group. My involvement with the project was through my then role as Team Leader Fisheries for the EA, taken on board to advise on the technical aspects of river restoration.

A small feasibility study was undertaken by Windrush AEC, which assessed the potential of the site for restoration. It was also an important opportunity for the EA, as the main consenting authority to provide us with their views **before** we commenced the expensive and time consuming design process.

NACA invited all of its members and the existing members of the syndicate to join a 'Restoration Syndicate'. Very quickly all 60 places were filled, with a healthy waiting list too. A meeting was held for members during which I presented the proposed habitat restoration scheme for approval. I was preaching to the converted, as most of the anglers in the room had seen the good work completed by NACA upstream at Lyng and wanted a piece of the action!

The Ketteringham's offered to kick start the project by kindly donating the first two years syndicate fees for development, design and the restoration stocking of 1000 10-20cm juvenile barbel. This was done to try boosting the fishery in the interim to maintain a viable fishery whilst the restored habitat is settling. By then it is hoped that the barbel will be sexually mature and spawn to create a self-sustaining population.

The Feasibility Study was sent to the EA for comment. After some very lengthy bureaucratic delays and site meetings, they gave us the nod of approval to continue to the design phase of the project. It was now August 2002 and I had now left the EA having set up my own consultancy. NACA asked if I would design and conduct the environmental appraisal for the scheme.

After a few days fieldwork I obtained the data needed to put the design together. The scheme comprises three new riffles, and the restoration another. It is planned to create two off-river refuges for coarse fish fry to 'grow-on' in the summer, and escape being washed down stream during spate floods every winter.

The scheme is not just about barbel and has been designed to be as holistic and sustainable as possible. It compliments both the European legalisation and the Conservation Strategy protecting the Wensum and a multitude of species including fish, plants, mammals and crayfish will benefit from the increase in habitat diversity. Where riffles were needed the old dredging's along the bank would be screened using mobile equipment to minimise the use of unsustainable fresh aggregate from local gravel pits. This would save on capital, resources, and the number of heavy lorry movements on and off site.

Despite all our preparations getting consent for the scheme was not plain sailing. When the design was presented to the EA, the same departments that had encouraged us into the design phase now started backtracking, stating that the project presented an unacceptable 'flood risk'. We had to diplomatically remind those same departments several times, of this fact. However even when presented with these undisputables, we had to yet again 'swim against a tide of bureaucratic treacle' going through another round of site meetings and correspondence before we could reach agreement. This was frustrating as it was the whole point of conducting the initial feasibility study. Eventually after further tweaks, we submitted a formal application for consent to do the works.

Meanwhile as we waited for EA approval we had our fingers crossed regarding a funding application the project made to the Countryside Agency (CA). The funding bid was submitted under the banner of the Local Heritage Initiative being administered by the CA. Our application highlighted the fact that not only were we hoping to restore the ecology of the river, but we were aiming to return a once famous local fishery back to its former glory. By restoring the fishing we were actually restoring a part of Norfolk's famous angling heritage. Added to this we undertook to hold open days for local schools, community and conservation groups to visit the site and learn about the river, its wildlife and the need for conserving such precious and fragile ecosystems.

The application also relied on partnership and matched funding. After a lot of number crunching and consumption of gallons of tea and numerous roll-ups, Chris Basford finally completed the forms, and had the courage to send them off. This really was unknown territory, as never before had an angling organisation submitted an application to the CA for a project of this nature.

To cut a long story short, after long delays due to various points of clarification the CA approved our application – we were all delighted. Coupled with this English Nature approved the scheme as necessary for the conservation management of the Wensum Special Area of Conservation (SAC), the first time they had ever done this on the river. This really was the icing on the cake and showed that NACA was a legitimate conservation organisation.

With a project of this nature and the large investment of cash, the project team and the CA and landowners drew up a legally binding lease that very clearly outlined the future responsibilities over a 5-year period. On paper the landowners were getting a considerable investment into the fishery, and their side of the bargain was to be responsible for the works once completed. After some 'delicate' negotiations the lease was agreed and signed by all parties. This necessary documentation

delayed the project by a further 2 months. We were now into August and we needed to act quickly if we were to complete works before the Autumn wet weather set in and made the banks too muddy and soft for machinery to work on.

Two years had passed since we put our quotes together for the application, and on going back to suppliers and contractors we were faced with some frightening price increases. Gravel had been subjected to an aggregate tax and had risen in price by nearly 20%. Contractor and fencing costs had also risen by similar levels.

This meant that we were looking at a shortfall of cash even taking into account the 10% contingency we built into the project. The time had come for some serious number crunching, but despite some 'extreme calculator action' Chris Basford just couldn't make the figures fit. At this point we felt that we may never get this project off the ground at all, never mind about this year!

It was time to call in some serious favours. NACA also manage Bawburgh Lakes, which is leased from RMC Aggregates. Chris Turnbull runs the fishery and has built up a very good working relationship with RMC – a working relationship he was about to the test to the limit. Chris asked if RMC would supply gravel at £7 per tonne instead of the normal £14, not really believing he stood a cat in hell's chance. There was a silence at the other end of the phone and the RMC Manager calmly said..... "Yes I don't think that will be a problem". RMC were happy to support a conservation project as long as they received due credit – something that we were more than happy to agree to. After calmly thanking RMC and putting the phone down Chris phoned me in a less than calm state to tell me the news. Again we had pulled this project out of the mire, the figures fitted and we were 'BACK IN BUSINESS!!'

In a matter of 24 hours men, materials and machines were organised. Over that weekend contractors arrived set-up and marked out the site and we were ready to go. RMC delivered 300 tonnes of gravel, creating an interesting, although temporary floodplain landscape feature! Landowner John Ketteringham thought we were mad and had a distinct look of worry on his face, as he thought we were going to in-fill the river with gravel!

The mitigation to protect otters and water voles was agreed and implemented with Steve Henson of Norfolk Wildlife Trust. It was late September and works were set to start – we all prayed for dry weather over the weekend.

Monday morning arrived with Chris doing a live bank-side interview with the local BBC radio presenter Wally Webb. Luckily the weather was still dry with the weather forecast being good for the first half of the week, so the pressure was on; there was now the small matter of a 300 tonne pile of gravel to get in the river! I arrived to find our contractors Five Rivers busy preparing the first riffle site. Chris Turnbull had already taken control of the works and with his considerable experience of river restoration he was to provide an invaluable support role when I could not be present due to other commitments.

The next three days were a hive of activity and there wasn't a moment where the machinery wasn't working. Banks were prepared and riffles and backwaters were being created. The old dredging's were recycled back into the river to create the base layer of the new riffles. For me this was one of the most satisfying moments of the project. I felt that by repatriating the gravel once again into the channel, we were undoing a previous heinous act that the bucket of the dredger did all those years ago.

Any feelings of fulfilment quickly evaporated when we treated to a surprise visit from the Environment Agency. Poor old Chris Turnbull had his bacon sandwich rudely interrupted by what can only be described as a 'Shock and Awe' enforcement visit. This officer was armed with a

clipboard, new wellies and a hi-viz jacket so bright it burned the eyes! With all that equipment Chris knew he was in for a little more than a courtesy visit. Orders were barked along the lines of “stop what you are doing” and “where are your papers”. Chris felt like he was a POW undergoing a surprise inspection in the movie *The Great Escape*. This scene went on for some time, with much puffing of chests and posturing. It somewhat reminded me of a cockfight I once witnessed in darkest Indonesia. Anyway, we finally won the day and were ‘allowed’ to continue with the project. Unlike the film we had escaped...at least for the time being.... but we were assured they would be back!!

After this comical, but somewhat depressing incident we carried on at full speed. After five days we had completed the project with creation of three riffles / two stage channels, two off-river fish refuges, a cattle drink, plus the fencing of the whole site too!

As with all projects of this nature the site did look a bit raw, however the next growing season should conceal all traces of the tracks left by the heavy machinery. Over the coming months it will be interesting to watch the ecology of the river react to the changes in physical conditions. Lets hope that our efforts will once again restore the good fortunes of this once historic and much loved fishery.

This project really has been a roller coaster of emotions. One moment we were up, the next we were down. There were times when we honestly thought we were never going to pull it off. However this project has been about the sacrifice, vision and the passion of the volunteers on the Steering Group. But most of all it's been about putting something back, and the desire to return the lifeblood back to a special part of our beloved River Wensum. The Wensum is a river that has been abused and neglected, sometimes by those that should have known better. NACA has witnessed and campaigned to reverse the steady decline of the river over the last twenty years. NACA's campaigns and 'hands-on' conservation projects have attempted to do something, rather than just talk about it. These are not the best of times to be the Wensum, but the river does have its friends.

Lastly, please, raise a glass to all those that have supported us... and to those that didn't, and they know who they are... let's blow them a big fat raspberry!!!

Chris.....now where's the next project!

SIMON JOHNSON 2005

NB: Whilst the above article is freely available for distribution and use in promotion of projects related to the restoration and improvement of rivers similar to that related here, any use should acknowledge and credit the author and the Costessey Point Project fully.