

Chalk stream water meadows receive Lottery funding

Chalk stream anglers spend a lot of their time amongst water meadows, but few are aware of the purpose and historical significance of these unique and artificial landscapes. Now, thanks to a grant of £28,900 from the Heritage Lottery Fund and funding from Wiltshire Council, the historically and ecologically unique water meadow systems of the Wylde Valley in Wiltshire are to be the subject of an historical research and public awareness project

Local archaeologist, historian and angler Mike Heaton, who is leading the project, said, *“This is a wonderful opportunity to engage local people and communities such as anglers in the investigation and documentation of this unique heritage, and help them to understand and appreciate the historical features and unique habitat”*.

The water meadows of the River Wylde, which cover the whole of the flood plain between Kingston Deverill and Wilton, were created in the 17th century as the first of an extensive system of precisely engineered water channels and meadows that eventually extended throughout the river valleys of southern England. They increased agricultural yields by a factor of five and provided the food and hard cash that underpinned the Industrial Revolution of the 18th century. They are unique to England and form one of the largest works of civil engineering of the pre-Modern world.

The type of water meadows that cover the valley floors of southern England – known as ‘bed-work systems’ - harness the natural characteristics of the spring water of the chalk aquifers that underlie them. The spring water flows to the surface in the winter at a temperature of c. 5°C above the normal air temperature – and especially so during the ‘Little Ice Age’ that affected northern Europe in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries - warming the ground, promoting early growth of the grass and protecting it from frost, as well as fertilizing the soil.

The project will collate existing historical research into the water meadows of the River Wylde, including transcription of interviews with the last generation of ‘floaters’; engage the public in the identification of water meadow systems and their distinctive features; and identify the best sites for future archaeological investigation of how the water meadows were created and operated. It is hoped that a programme of archaeological investigation involving aerial photography, LiDAR survey, geophysics and excavation will form a second stage of the project in the future. A ‘Facebook’ page has been set-up, from which the public can download a ‘spotters guide’ and to which members of the public are invited to upload their own photographs of water-meadow features.

Anyone who would like to know more about the project please contact Mike on watermeadows@hotmail.com