

**T**HE Eridge Stream is a tributary of the Upper Medway. Trying to find it on a map may prove a problem as on Ordnance Survey maps it isn't named, and Google Maps has incorrectly named it the Mottsmill Stream when in fact this smaller stream is a tributary of the Eridge Stream.

The Eridge Stream starts at a Redgate Mill near Crowborough in East Sussex where two smaller streams meet, one rising at Argus Hill near the village of Rotherfield, the other the Jarvis Brook in Crowborough. The length of the stream to where it converges with the Upper Medway on the Kent and East Sussex border is about 11km.

As the stream winds its way through fields on either side of the Uckfield to London Bridge railway line, some of which not so long ago were hop gardens, it passes under a surprising number of 14 bridges, nine railway bridges and five road bridges. There are also two weirs, one a relic of the Sussex iron industry at Forge Farm, the other an Environment Agency (EA) gauging weir which was installed in the early 1970s at Hendal Farm about three-quarters of the way down the stream.

In recent decades, as well as the installation of the gauging weir and re-building of the nearby Hendal Bridge, the stream has changed considerably. Two sections of the stream have been diverted, one for the extension of South East Water's pumping station near Groombridge, the other for agricultural purposes.



Two smaller streams that feed into it have also been re-routed, one being the Mottsmill Stream, the other the Hamsell Stream that now feeds two recently constructed fishing lakes.

Otters and the otter hunt that pursued them had disappeared by the late 1950s followed by what had been a large population of water voles, wiped out by mink which had moved in.

Alders and willow which lined the banks on the lower reaches were in the main removed by the Internal Drainage Board over a prolonged period, allowing banks to slip and Himalayan balsam to become established. Thankfully, tree removal has now ceased, and some trees are making a comeback. Invasive signal crayfish are now present as they are throughout the whole of the Upper Medway catchment.

# Eridge stream fish habitat improvement project

by **KEITH GROSE** secretary of Dorset Arms' Angling Club and **ANDY THOMAS** the Wild Trout Trust's southern conservation officer



Today the fish species that inhabit the stream are mostly coarse fish, notably chub, perch, grayling, roach, dace, gudgeon, pike and minnows. Brown trout are also present but in much smaller numbers in the lower reaches where once they were the dominant species.

The Eridge Stream is fished by three local angling clubs. The higher reaches by Crowborough and District Anglers' Association (CDAA), the lower reaches by Royal Tunbridge Wells' Angling Society and part of the middle section by the Dorset Arms' Angling Club (DAAC).



In late May 2019, the DAAC was contacted by the CDAA as their members had reported a drop in fish catches from their stretch of the stream, particularly trout, and were enquiring if DAAC members were finding the same.

The DAAC were able to confirm their members had also experienced a decline in catches and the CDAA indicated they thought there may have been an undetected pollution incident as the stream had suffered pollution incidents previously.



Both clubs contacted the EA and Southern Water who have a waste water treatment works at Redgate Mill that serves Crowborough and discharges into the stream. The DAAC also contacted two of their vice presidents, Nus Ghani, MP for Wealden and Greg Clark, MP for Royal Tunbridge Wells about

their concerns. Royal Tunbridge Wells' Angling Society were also informed.

Both the DAAC and CDAA received replies from Southern Water explaining there had been no recent pollution incidents

so the question remained, was what was causing the problem? Both MPs took the two clubs' concerns up with the Environment Minister.

Site meetings then took place involving representatives from the DAAC, CDAA and the EA, and as a result of this a fish survey was carried out by the EA downstream from Redgate Mill.

The Wild Trout Trust (WTT) was then approached by Andrew Brough from the local EA Fisheries' Team to help identify possible reasons why the fishery on the Eridge Stream might not be performing as well as it used to. In the early spring of 2020, a walk-over survey was undertaken by the WTT's southern conservation officer Andy Thomas to try and identify any bottlenecks in habitat quality and availability and to potentially come up with prescriptions for improvement.

A project proposal report was subsequently produced and shared with the clubs' committees. The WTT report suggested there was little that could be done to improve habitat on CDAA's section of the stream as it ticked most of the boxes in terms of fish habitat.

The key finding was a combination of factors, including decades of maintenance dredging which had led to a long section of river on the DAAC's section being devoid of the necessary spawning habitat required for flow-loving, gravel-spawning fish species.

For key Eridge Stream species such as trout, dace and chub to thrive, outcrops of loose, clean gravel are essential as a spawning medium and were now sadly very scarce. The fact that the reach is also bifurcated by a flow-gauging weir also impacts on the ability of fish to easily navigate through the reach to find suitable sites for spawning.

With a project plan in place, the EA's local catchment coordinator Ben Lord set about bidding for the necessary funding via the Defra Water Environment Improvement Fund and thankfully our collective efforts were rewarded with confirmation that a substantial budget to cover project costs was now in place.

So, with the funding secured, dates were set for DAAC volunteers to work with the WTT to prepare four sites where new spawning habitat could be created. After some research a suitable source of High Weald iron stone was located and ordered and during an extremely lucky break in the wet weather, 100 tonnes of 5-50mm diameter iron stone gravels were deposited into the river.

In preparation for the gravel a matrix of woody tree trunk sections was nailed to the riverbed with driven chestnut stakes to provide increased stability for the imported gravels.

It is envisaged that the four new spawning sites will be utilised by a wide range of different fish species for spawning and when coupled with the excellent well-covered pools that the river already supports, this should ensure a significant boost for the local fish populations and hopefully improved sport for the members of the DAAC.

It will be some time before we can see how much the introduction of the gravel spawning beds will have benefited the fish which inhabit the stream, but all parties involved are confident of a positive outcome. It is also the intention of the DAAC to continue with further improvements to the stream with guidance from the WTT and the EA.

• For information on the Dorset Arms Angling Club visit [www.dorsetarmsangling.co.uk](http://www.dorsetarmsangling.co.uk)  
For information on the Wild Trout Trust visit [www.wildtrout.org](http://www.wildtrout.org)