



Bluebells and stitchwort
in Grovely Wood.
Chrislockphotography.co.uk



Farmers scheme is crystal clear

A group of farmers in the Chalke Valley are working together to conserve what is described as a 'globally rare' habitat. Mary-Verre Parr finds out why the River Ebbles is so important to those who farm the land it flows through.

WHY WOULDN'T you want to do something for this?" exclaims Andrew Reis as he shows me the river running below his farmhouse at Fifield Bavant in the Chalke Valley. Shafts of spring sunshine glint on the stream's surface as it meanders through the field. Sheep graze bucolically on the far bank. Beneath the crystal-clear water, bright green reeds bend in the current.

This is the River Ebbles in full winter flood. It is a winterbourne, rising around the winter solstice in December at its source just a few miles upstream at Alvediston and running for 12 miles to Bodenham, southeast of Salisbury, where it joins the River Avon.

The appearance of this stretch of water seems an annual miracle to Reis. "What I always find so amazing every year is how, when the rest of the farm is dormant in mid-winter, suddenly the river will come to life," he says.

"In summer this is just dry grass but in winter, as soon as the aquifer is recharged, the river can literally metamorphose into a fully functioning ecosystem in a matter of a few days."

Chalk streams such as the Ebbles support a multitude of species from wild trout, otters, and water voles to plants such as the water crowfoot and insects such as the winterbourne stonefly. The bird life the river attracts is remarkable. "Because the water is spring fed it's always a fairly constant temperature," Reis explains. "In a cold winter snap when the ground is rock hard, the edges of the banks remain soft. The other day, I saw a pair of snipe, three lapwings, a little egret, a heron and loads of pied wagtails."

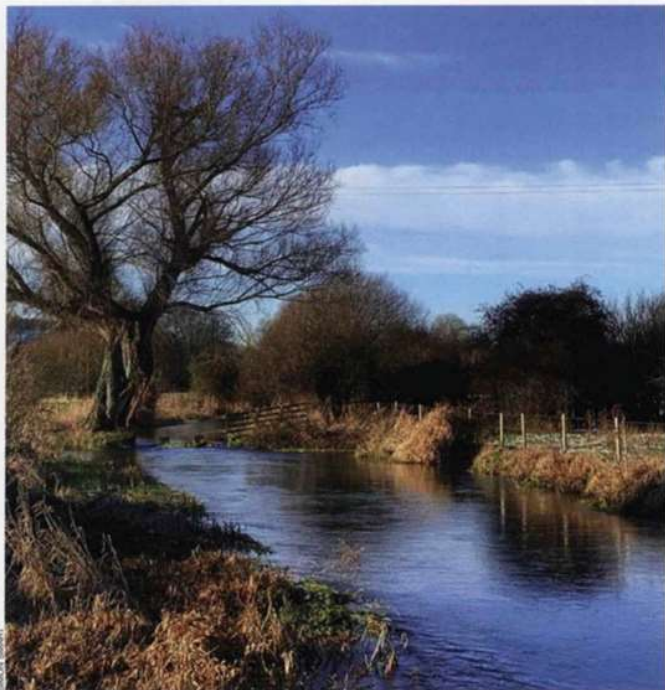
Southern England is home to some 85 per cent of the world's spring-fed chalk streams which are so rare, so environmentally significant, and so threatened that they are sometimes called England's rainforests.

Little wonder then that the Ebbles means so much to the farmers who live and work along its banks. "It means a lot to all of us who live in the Chalke valley," Reis says. "So much of our identity comes from the river. The river is what we are."

When, in 2015, Reis formed the Chalke Valley Farmer Cluster (CVFC), a group of environmentally-minded farmers, cleaning up the river was its number one priority. "It's the jewel in our crown," he says. "Chalk streams are an incredibly rare habitat, but they are under threat from extreme weather, invasive species and sediment run-off."

He has spotted worrying changes to the river's behaviour. "You used to be able to pretty much set your clock by the river's rise and fall," Reis says. "But I have noticed in the last few years that it is dry much earlier, in May rather than mid-June."

Reis tells me that for the first time this winter the river had a false start and froze in December's early cold snap. One year, a wet autumn led to it rising in October, another it never came up, on a third it never went down. "Whether you could attribute this to climate change, I don't know," he ponders.



The River Ebbles, parts of which froze in December's 2022 cold snap.



The River Ebble at Fifield Bavant and the water pit and bund at Manor Farm.

But Reis is absolutely sure about his responsibility to do what he can to help the Ebble. "As farmers, we are in a position where we can deliver for the benefit of the whole community who live here and for the next generation," he says. "We are all aware of being custodians of the river and we are all very passionate about doing our bit."

At Manor Farm, Reis has built a water pit and bund at the top of a field running down to the river valley. Water that used to pour straight off the arable fields up the hill is now held in the pit which acts as a sediment trap. Once the pit is full, the water runs over the sides and into a bunded area made from coir rolls from where it naturally percolates into the soil.

Reis clears the pit every spring, removing 10 tonnes of sediment. "That is just one culvert under one road," he points out. Elsewhere on the farm, he has installed cross drains on farm tracks to stop them acting as a conduit into the river.

"It's really simple but it's working," Reis says. "If you scale what we have done

Lapwing by the River Ebble.



here up to a farmer cluster you can go from making a small difference to making a very big difference." The 20 members of the CVFC cover 9,000 hectares, the whole of the Ebble catchment.

This farmer-led conservation is exactly what the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) set out to achieve when it piloted farmer clusters in 2013. It is now inviting farmers in the 1,750 square kilometre Avon catchment, which runs from south of Marlborough to Christchurch in Dorset, to join an umbrella Environmental Farmers Group (EFG) with the shared aim of improving water quality while boosting biodiversity and cutting carbon emissions.

Since its launch in May 2022, 90 farmers managing 60,000 hectares have joined the EFG. Their involvement is critical because, as Reis acknowledges: "Of all the challenges that the river faces, diffuse pollution from agriculture is probably the biggest one".

Farming is blamed for 40% of water quality failures. **Teressa Dent**, GWCT chief executive, believes farmers are "stepping up" to the 2021 Environment Act target of reducing nitrogen and phosphorus pollution from agriculture by at least 40 per cent by 2037. But she adds that they need to be fairly rewarded for doing so.

"In the Avon catchment, we have six or seven farm clusters doing really good things for conservation," Dent says. "But how are

we going to help them keep going with their environmental work when £37 million is to leave the catchment when the basic payment scheme [the current farm support system] stops in 2027?" she asks.

There are payments promised both by the government and the private sector for delivering environmental goods and services. "But what is also clear," Dent says, "is that it is very difficult for individual farmers to access these sources of income."

So the GWCT has set up a natural capital trading co-operative which helps farmers tap into the world of environmental schemes and trades with developers, water companies and others seeking biodiversity net gain, nutrient neutrality and carbon offsetting.

All these may sound like buzz words, environmental trades are "in their infancy" and government schemes unclear. But the environmental outcomes being delivered by farmer clusters are real and measurable, Dent insists. Working with a range of partners including the Wessex Rivers Trust, the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group and the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust as well as GWCT scientists gives the CVFC the baseline scientific data with which to track improvements and establish a blueprint other farmers can follow.

"We aim to have a workable model to roll out to all the tributaries of the Avon," Reis says. "Half the battle is getting people to understand that you are not just doing this because you can make some money out of it. We are doing what we want to do because it's important." **WIL**

• Watch Farmer-led conservation of the River Ebble [here www.gwct.org.uk/riverebbelfilm](http://www.gwct.org.uk/riverebbelfilm)