River Chess in Chenies



Living in Chenies we are blessed with the River Chess flowing through our Parish. The Chess is one of 250 chalk streams in the world, a globally rare habitat. The river is why the valley has had a long history of human habitation dating back to the Neolithic. It supplies a reliable source of drinking water and for more than 1000 years it has been harnessed to power the many mills along its length.

More recently the clean water has been used to grow watercress and to flood the water meadows to grow hay for grazing livestock.

In more recent years the river has been under threat from over abstraction to supply drinking water and pollution from sewage and runoff. With this in mind a group of concerned residents established the **River Chess Association** back in 2009 to form a lobby group to address these issues. It takes time to get the establishment to move but we have had some significant wins over the years. The rate of abstraction has been reduced by 7 million litres per day with further reductions planned in the next few years. Recent investment in the Chesham Sewage Treatment Works has seen capacity increased by 40% and phosphate levels in the effluent reduced from 2.00ppm to 0.25ppm.

We are still to be convinced that Chesham Sewage Treatment Works is working to plan but we are moving in the right direction, in recent years flows have been more reliable and an extensive programme of work on improving the river corridor habitat is showing tangible results.

A healthy chalk river requires three critical elements, reliable water flow, clean water and good habitat, much of this has been achieved in recent years.







Fish numbers have improved; water voles are now found along the length of the Chess from Rickmansworth to the Centre of Chesham. Since 2019 we have had a family of otters living on the Chess. On 7th October 2025 we had the Environment Agency surveying fish numbers down at Sarratt. We had a great result, not only excellent numbers of Brown Trout of multiple age groups but also adult and juvenile grayling showing that the reintroduction of this species started in 2020 has been successful.
We still need to work on reducing pollution, improving flow is always key, so we will need a wet winter to recharge the aquifer that supplies water to the Chess and finally working and engaging with all stakeholders is critical.

Paul Jennings