

REPORT FROM THE SINGLETON VALLEY FLOOD ACTION GROUP
NOVEMBER 2015

1. INTRODUCTION / BACKGROUND

During the winter of 2013/2104, the river flooded on two occasions. The first was short lived and contained by a boom provided by the Highways agency (HA). Sadly this was vandalised by an as yet unidentified villager. The upshot was considerable ill feeling and the distinct possibility that the village would be left to its own devices in the future.

A far more serious flood occurred on Friday the 14th of February 2014. This followed a period of intense and unprecedented rain and was heralded by an extremely rapid rise of the level of water in the bore holes in the area. In fact it was apparent that flooding was extremely likely in these circumstances but this information was rather diluted and not acted upon in time.

On the day of the flood, the water level in the Lavant rose quickly to the point that it overflowed onto the A286 at the point of the accommodation Bridge (unused) leading to Cowper Lodge. Immediately a number of properties were placed in jeopardy. Luckily it was still light and it was possible to muster quickly a number of able bodied villagers to help place sand bags in strategic locations. Thus serious damage was averted – although numerous houses did sustain damage. The sandbags were made available by the immediate actions of Carol Thompson. Fortunately, the waters rose no higher (the rain having abated) although the river continued to flow at a terrific rate for many days and barely centimetres below the crown of the abovementioned bridge.

As a result of the above near catastrophe it was determined to form a flood action group. This was entirely in line with Local Government Policy where it is encouraged for communities to take care of themselves. This also stemmed from the Government initiative, Operation Watershed. The work that the SVFAG has done has been on the basis of this initiative.

It was properly constituted and decided to align itself with the Parish County council for obvious reasons.

The main aims were, and still are: -

- 1) To prevent flooding in Singleton and Charlton
- 2) To improve early warning of flooding
- 3) In parallel with the PCC to develop an emergency plan for the villages
- 4) To obtain funds for the purchase of equipment to reduce flood damage
- 5) To obtain a confidential list of vulnerable adults in the valley (done in conjunction with the PCC).
- 6) To form a group that could be relied upon for mutual support in times of crisis.
- 7) To empower villagers to protect their properties by providing information and support.

The group was set up under a proper constitution and with its own bank account. However, in the interests of transparency, the funds so far received have gone through the PCC.

Various surveys performed over the years had highlighted the need to improve flow through the villages. A list of 10 desirable works was drawn up. Over the last two years, most of these have been achieved, with the notable exception of the removal of the redundant accommodation bridge leading the Cowper's Lodge.

In 2014, the SVFAG cleared the river both in Charlton and in Singleton by hand. This showed clearly that there were a number of choke points along its route, most notably at the bridges where an amount of silt had built up on the downstream side of the bridge very seriously impeding flow. Whilst we thought about doing this by hand, the amount of spoil was excessive to contemplate this. This was also the case under the bridges. The especial culprits being the road Bridge away from the Leys, the Cowper's Lodge access bridge (this also leading to other properties) and the bridge at the Cricket Club entrance. The main road bridge on the A286 was less of an offender.

In 2014 an extensive survey was performed on behalf of the West Sussex county council by CM2Hill, being delivered in January 2015. It makes clear that the river needed remodelling. This was duly performed during the month of October 2015. Various objections to this work have been raised. These are dealt with in the Annex. The work was requested by the SVFAG but with the endorsement of the West Sussex County Council (WSSCC), the Chichester district Council (CDC) and the Environmental Agency (EA). In fact the work has been signed off by the CDCC engineers and held up as an exemplar of community / local council cooperation.

2. PRESENT POSITION

Now that the work described above has taken place, the SVFAG can concentrate more on developing its resources in the event of flooding. As these resources are effectively the same for any emergency, close cooperation with the PCC is paramount.

Financially we are secure with a pot of approximately £4000 to spend on emergency resources, for instance a secure store of sandbags.

3. THE FUTURE

The SVFAG is still keen to improve flow of water through the valley, in particular the villages of Charlton and Singleton. This will continue to include the accommodation bridge at Cowper's Lodge on the A286. However various circumstances have delayed this for the time being. Fortunately the contractors dug out under the bridge so hopefully flow is improved for the time being. In the next few months it will be meeting to discuss further measures to improve our resilience and to consolidate our emergency plans, in parallel with those of the PCC.

N A HEDGER
Vice Chairman SVFAG

ANNEX

1. DISCUSSION OF THE WORK RECENTLY COMPLETED

Singleton has flooded repeatedly over the years. Well within living memory the village was virtually cut off and the flooding was severe enough for a boat to be launched on Cobbler's row. There is a general consensus that weather is likely to get more extreme as global warming takes effect. Bearing this in mind it is only proper that we do all we can to protect the village from flooding. Backed up by the reports of highly experienced and highly professional engineers, work was undertaken to ease the flow of water through the village. This was completed to an extremely high standard and has been signed off as such.

2. ANSWERS TO QUESTION ASKED CONCERNING THE WORK

1. In the 'Upper Lavant Valley Flood Risk Management Study' final report of January 2015 which was prepared for West Sussex County Council and undertaken by CH2MHILL, there doesn't appear to be any mention of widening the river at Singleton. After the recent works, it appears that it has been widened almost throughout the length excavated. Due to this, it appears the bridge, river bank; trees and wall foundations have been undermined and may lead to householders losing land due to erosion.

Was there permission granted to widen the river and does this appear in the report?

2. As Riparian landowners (a system for allocating water among those who possess land along its path and has its origins in English common law), were the householders whose land backs on to the river informed in writing of the upcoming works and if so, by whom?

ANSWER TO QUESTIONS 1 AND 2: Riparian ownership also implies riparian duties. These include keeping the banks of the riparian waterway clear of detritus, weed build up and the encroachment of the riverbank into the waterway itself. If this is not undertaken the owner is liable for the work. In this instance it was done on their behalf by the WSCC. The owners, myself included, were not informed. My understanding of this is that it was not necessary although I accept it would have been courteous.

3. Reading the aforementioned report, the removal of detritus appears to have been earmarked for the Environment Agency or WSCC to do, why did the SVFAG do it?

ANSWER TO QUESTION 3: The SVFAG did not do it; it was done by the contractors on behalf of the WSCC.

4. The River Lavant in Singleton consists of rare Golden Flint. When it states removal of detritus why did you remove the flint which is not detritus but the River foundation?

ANSWER TO QUESTION 4: The engineers report is comprehensive on this and makes clear that silt removal was the sole objective. My observation of their work and direct questioning of the contractors suggests that the Golden Flint was not removed to any degree.

5. It appears there is nothing in the report which refers to the lowering of the river bed in Singleton. Why therefore has the River been lowered by over a foot exposing previously buried pipes and wall footings?

ANSWER TO QUESTION 5: The aim was always to ease flow of water through the villages. Both by widening and deepening the waterway this hopefully has been achieved. Were pipes were exposed, the contractors took pains to detail these for future repair

6. As work was carried out on the banks and river bed, was a check made for notable species and plants as suggested in the report for such in river works?

ANSWER TO QUESTION 6: The engineers report makes it clear that no such work would have been undertaken if the EA was aware of any notable flora or fauna in the valley. Previous environmental reports (available on request) have looked into this and denied the presence of any endangered species. In fact when clearing the river, a considerable number of rats were encountered. These are generally considered vermin.

7. Have the SVFAG got insurance to undertake this work? Whose liability is it if there are any repercussions?

ANSWER TO QUESTION: No. The WSCC has.

8. Have the SVFAG considered that the recent work they have done will speed the flow in Singleton and how this may affect the situation downstream in West Dean for example?

ANSWER TO QUESTION 8: The SVFAG are confident that the County engineers and the contractors are fully competent in these areas and would not have embarked on the work if flow was not to be improved. The aim of the work was always to get the water out of the village. There is a flood meadow south of the village and it is expected that the overspill, if any, will impact there rather than in peoples' houses. Whist we have every sympathy with any village south of us that is prone to flooding, the survey would not have sanctioned this work if it placed West Dean at risk.

9. In view of the increased speed of the river, has the SVFAG considered making the bus stop area a safer place for children as apparently a child fell through the railings and drowned in the 1930's?

ANSWER TO QUESTION 9: This is difficult to answer. The assumption that the river will travel faster may be wrong – certainly there will be potentially *more* water in a wider and deeper river but that might mean it travels slower. Old photographs of the village (see the book 'All Change at Singleton') show a very different riverbank in the 30's. The bus shelter is new and sits on a concrete platform over the river. I am not sure I can answer for a tragedy that happened in a very different situation and would suggest that crossing the road to get to the shelter is far more dangerous.

3. CONCLUSION

Having witnessed a flooding on two occasions and observed numerous near misses, I feel that the efforts of the SVFAG on behalf of the village as a whole deserve praise,

even congratulation. Reports that will be available to you fully endorse the work that was undertaken and appear more than satisfied that the contractors have performed the work to a very high standard indeed. I quote 'the river looks the best it has done for 40yrs'. High praise indeed.

4. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

I am Vice-chairman of the Parish Coucil

N A Hedger
Vice-Chairman SVFAG