

To: - The Chairman, singleton Parish Council

From: - The Singleton Valley flood Action Group

Date: - January 2016

Re: - **CONCERNING BROOK HOUSE**

On behalf of the Singleton Valley Flood action Group (SVFAG), I would like to clarify our position *vis a viz* Brook House. This may place us at variance with the minutes of the last PC meeting. At the recent Parish Council meeting Mr Cobby, the owner of Brook House, made it clear that he was unhappy with the work performed on the river bank outside of his house. This seemed to centre on his not being warned that the work was about to happen, and that the work had gone beyond that which was necessary, namely that a number of trees had been undermined, that the bank was now unstable and that, in his consideration, a water vole habitat had been destroyed. He claimed trespass on his land and was worried that the work would make the risk of flooding to his property greater rather than less. He quoted the government Publication 'Living on the Edge' as support for his contentions. This is to the best of my understanding and my memory of the event.

In my capacity of both Vice Chair of the SVFAG and the PC I was placed in a very difficult position. My brief was clear and as follows: -

- 1) Mr Cobby had been informed that the work was about to take place
- 2) At least three witnesses can testify the he appeared delighted that the work was being done and, especially, that the trees were going to be removed *gratis* by the SVFAG
- 3) That in no way had trespass taken place – this is made clear in the Enclosure
- 4) That the work was for the benefit of the villages of both Charlton and Singleton and in the best interests of the village as a whole.
- 5) That a significant Water Vole population was unlikely, especially when the river was dry.

It was therefore extremely surprising to be taken to task at the meeting, and in a forceful manner, by Mr Cobby. I did not have a copy of Living on the Edge with me and thus was flat-footed by his assertion that we had trespassed on his land. I was thus obliged to offer an apology to Mr Cobby, feeling at the time that we may have overstepped our duties. I continue to offer my sincerest apologies to Mr Cobby for any misunderstanding that may have arisen.

My recollection is that the PC was given to suggest that we (the SVFAG) would make any damage good and replace the trees that were listed to be felled with mature trees a metre or so further back with a view to 'stabilising' the bank. I do not recollect that any vote was taken formally on this and, crucially, the PC has no *direct* control over the actions of the SVFAG. If you will recall, my original membership was as liaison between the SVFAG and the PC.

Crucially, the PC then can only ask that we do the work.

The SVFAG was thus thrown into some confusion by Mr Cobby's demands. I re-iterate that no trespass took place (see the enclosure). Not being in a position to say one way or another whether and damage or undermining took place we sought advice. This was clear and unequivocal. No undermining of the trees had taken place and the bank had been restored to where it should be in the first place. You will find details of this in the Annex. This is highly complimentary of the work that took place. Seeking further inspections/reports would seem to the SVFAG as a waste of public funds. Moreover it would be extremely difficult to obtain an unbiased report, even if this could be achieved, it is hard to see how it could alter the view of the WSCC. This body, after all, commissioned the work (directly or indirectly) and is extremely unlikely to pass off inadequate work performed under contract by another body.

Therefore, in the knowledge that the work was carried out to a high standard, no further action need be taken. It is not in the interests of the village as a whole or to the SFVAG to comply with Mr Cobby's requests, in particular sandbagging his bank and replacing the trees. In fact, as we have been reassured that the trees are safe, we have withdrawn the offer to remove them using SVFAG funds. In truth, there is a wider argument here – everyone living on the river could demand the same 'landscaping'.

Ms Thompson as Chair of the SVFAG has received a number of emails which appear to suggest that they have come from the PC. I would like to feel that any correspondence, from now on, should go through proper channels. There was also a letter in the Chichester Observer of extremely dubious provenance. It was also factually incorrect in many areas.

In conclusion, we stand by our view that the work was carried out to the highest standard and no further action is either necessary or desirable. I take full responsibility for not keeping the PC as well informed as it might have been as to our activities and once more apologise to those who felt this to be the case.

Neil A Hedger
Vice-Chairman Singleton PC and SVFAG

Enclosure – from LIVING ON THE EDGE

“Your risk management authority
[here the SVFAG – on behalf of the WSCC]
may need to come onto your land to carry
out flood risk management work. Risk
management authorities try to make
sure that they always have access
to riverbanks, so that they can carry
out essential maintenance and other
work quickly and safely.

They have statutory powers of entry
so that they can do their job properly
and without delay. Whenever possible
they will co-operate with you, but they
can obtain a warrant from the courts if
you refuse them entry to your land”

Annex

Briefing
Paper

Operation Watershed

Singleton Valley Flood Action Group

Date: 3 November 2015

Background

In the second year of West Sussex County Council's (WSCC) Operation Watershed Active Communities Fund, five grants were awarded to Singleton Parish Council and Singleton Valley Flood Action Group SVFAG.

The projects and grant values were;

2018 Singleton Flood Works £4,686.00

2030 Flood Action Group start-up costs £1,650.00

2075 Flood resilience equipment £727.28

2100 A286 flood barrier £3,331.20

2110 River Lavant works £13,041.60

The planning and scoping of works were developed in conjunction with WSCC, Chichester District Council (CDC) and the Environment Agency (EA).

In response to residents volunteering to form a formal Flood Action Group under the guidance of the National Flood Forum, Singleton Parish Council supported and facilitated the set-up of this independent group.

Purpose

Following concerns about the recent work carried out within the main river section of the River Lavant through Singleton this paper is intended to outline the findings of inspections of the works by officers of both WSCC and EA and sets out the findings in relation to concerns raised by residents.

Since the commencement of work by contractors commissioned by the Singleton

Volunteer Flood Action Group (SVFAG) a number of specific concerns have been raised by two parish councilors. The concerns drawn to the attention of WSCC, and multiple other agencies, are;

- Lack of consideration for local ecology
- Damage or destruction of water vole habitat
- Damage or destruction of features of historic interest
- Excavation of the chalk bed of the River Lavant
- Damage to river banks
- Damage to a private bridge structure
- Unauthorised or inappropriate removal of tree vegetation

Inspection Assessment

In summary the parish council and residents should be reassured the inspections found no valid basis for any concerns listed above.

Consideration of local ecology

In the preparation and development of the scope of works a number of known local ecological considerations were raised and considered. A report on the flora and fauna for the village pond was reviewed.

The EA was asked to highlight any preferred methods of working and additional considerations.

Water Vole Habitat

There are no records of any known water vole activity in the wider proximity of Singleton village within the county, district or national databases.

The Roberts report of November 2006, "Otter and Water Vole Report for the Rivers Ems and Lavant", indicates much of the upper Lavant environment would not be conducive to providing water vole habitat and significant change to riparian management practice would need to be engendered.

On inspection, the works on river bank elements have not disturbed areas of complex vegetation which could offer appropriate habitat but has been limited to exposed or grass banks.

The river Lavant and the village pond had been dry for some 3-months at the time of the works and no significant body of water was evident to support water vole activity at this time.

Historical Features

The historic maps of Sussex 1896-99 indicate "Sheepwash" located between Brook Cottage and the cricket pitch playing fields.

Claims that there were historic structures removed by the contractors at this point have been unsupported. Feedback from the parish council indicates some structural elements were removed by local residents some years ago.

The contractors have, in carrying out the approved gravel removal, uncovered a red-brick base at bed level which remains intact and may be the remnants of the sheepwash.

The officers are satisfied no structure has been disturbed or removed by the contractors.

Excavation of chalk river bed

In the planning and scoping of these works all parties were very aware of the sensitive nature of the river Lavant. The selected contractor was identified as qualified and appropriately experienced in carrying out such works in this area and has been commissioned for similar works along the Lavant valley.

The inspection carried out by officers of WSCC found the works to reflect exactly what was expected in delivering the approved scope. The removal of silt and gravel deposits has been achieved and the chalk bed remains covered to a large extent ensuring the levels match the invert levels of a number of piped and bridged sections in the area of work.

While powered barrows were used in the bed to transport spoil, only hand tool methods were deployed for actual clearance. Following an initial inspection by an operative of the EA the feedback has been positive and indeed he commented that more river maintenance should be carried out in a similar way.

Damage to river banks

The inspection by officers found the re-profiling of the banks were also exactly how was intended.

From the western limit of the works, at the junction of the A286 and Town Lane, to the A286 road bridge in the village the works have been sensitive and appropriate.

Damage to bridge

The inspection by officers could find no evidence of any damage to the bridges and structures along the route of works. While specific concern had been flagged regarding missing brickwork from a bridge at Cowper Lodge, the engineer could find no evidence of such, either internally or externally, and the bridge is considered sound.

Removal of trees

There remains at least one tree on the north bank between the bus stop and the Coach House which was identified for removal in the scoping exercise undertaken by WSCC and CDC. It is hoped and anticipated this can be removed prior to the river rising.

All trees were found to be as inspected in February 2015. The trees and the substantive root systems have not been compromised or undermined by the bank-work as had been raised as a concern.

The officers are assured that all tree removal is being progressed with the full support of appropriate property owners and in line with required consents and a planning application is being submitted which WSCC fully support.

Conclusions

WSCC fully supports the valuable works being undertaken in Singleton. This, and the provision of equipment to help residents protect themselves at times of increased flood risk, helps to demonstrate a keen community spirit.

The visual appearance of the bed and bank works at this time is exactly as anticipated. Once the grassed banks re-establish vegetation they will rapidly return to their original look. Once the river rises and flow clears sediment and soil from the bed it too will improve the appearance.

The work carried out by the contractor is to be commended.

Peter Smith

Kevin Macknay

Project Manager,

Operation Watershed

Drainage Strategy Lead,

WSCC

