

## Living with the Ouse Valley floods

*Bridget Flanagan, Trustee of the Great Ouse Valley Trust, explains how flooding is a natural phenomenon here, why its nature is changing and what we can do about it*

Newcomers could be forgiven for finding it puzzling that there are frequent floods in the Great Ouse Valley – despite the area having one of the lowest annual rainfalls in the UK. Average precipitation is below 600 mm (23.6 in) per year compared to 838 mm (33 in) for England, yet, on a few occasions most years, the valley landscape is transformed with vast tracts of water, and has done so for centuries. Nevertheless, dramatic aerial photos of floods at St Ives regularly feature in the national press - to be followed by other seasonal stereotypes of spring wisteria around a Cambridge college, or punting on the Cam during a summer scorcher.

But the reality of floods is a very serious matter, rather than as subjects for eye-catching and simplistic photos. If, as a layman like me, you read the Environment Agency's *Great Ouse Catchment Flood Management Plan* (CFMP\*), you will begin to grasp the scale of this river and its catchment area. The part that flows past Huntingdon and St Ives is referred to as the Bedford Ouse, stretching from Brackley to Earith. Its main tributaries are the Rivers Tove, Ouzel, Ivel and Kym, plus the Brampton and Alconbury Brooks. The CFMP details how the tributaries show a rapid response to rainfall by gathering run-off which can then accumulate into floods. Between Huntingdon and Earith we are lucky that the natural topography mitigates the potentially disastrous effects of great quantities of fast flowing water – the wide floodplain provides significant storage for the flood waters and also helps reduce the flow. And so it is common for high flood levels to be sustained here for a week or more – and be photographed.

Several days of heavy rainfall on already saturated ground brought a high flood over the recent Christmas period. Waters naturally flowed out over the floodplain meadows; they were also held by man-made defences. Many communities felt extremely grateful for the investment in flood defence schemes. However, these combined systems were unable to cope with excessive run-off overwhelming storm drains, poorly maintained ditches and faulty pumps. Some householders and businesses located away from the river therefore suffered the misery of flooding and sewage.

I think we are all aware that our climate is changing. Storms such as Bella and Christoph (nice names for such unpleasant events) bring increased intensity of heavy rain. The 2020 Christmas floods were of similar height to the 1998 Easter floods - a 1-in-25 year event, but only 23 years ago. The next one may well come sooner.

We are also aware that there has been inappropriate development in floodplains and high groundwater risk areas. And for the future; much of the proposed major development in the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge Arc is in the Bedford Ouse catchment area, so how will it affect us in Huntingdonshire? Floods are not solely natural disasters. Man is closely linked in their making and we urgently need to extricate ourselves from this. There are many more contributory factors to flooding in addition to the two out-lined above - it is a complex problem. How to solve it? Awareness is a start. And then all of us - individuals, communities, public bodies and agencies - need to show concerted effort. We should be aware that we may need to change our way of life, before it is changed for us.

\*Here's the link to the CFMP <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/great-ouse-catchment-flood-management-plan>

**The Great Ouse Valley Trust promotes for public benefit the conservation, restoration and enjoyment of the landscape, wildlife and heritage of the Great Ouse Valley and environs in the county of Cambridgeshire.**

**For more information about the Trust please visit [www.greatousevalleytrust.org.uk](http://www.greatousevalleytrust.org.uk)**



This floodplain meadow is doing its job and looks benign but it is unwise to try to cross it



The run-off implications of new development proposals in flood plains needs careful consideration

Photographs by Bridget Flanagan