

A walk along...

The Little Stour

The Little Stour starts its journey where the River Nailbourne joins the Silver Dyke at Garrington Farm near Littlebourne. From there it runs for 9 miles, before joining the Great Stour at Pluck's Gutter, where it is tidal.

For much of its course the Little Stour is a chalk stream – a special type of river with clear waters and abundant wildlife. The UK is home to 85% of the world's chalk rivers. They are globally important habitats, but most have been altered by human activity and the Little Stour is no exception.

In the past, when it carried more water, the Little Stour was used to drive water mills. There were four mills on the river – Ickham, Littlebourne, Wickhambreaux and Seaton. The beautiful old mill buildings survive, converted to residential use but, picturesque and historic as they are, they have left a legacy of straightened river channels and weirs, which interfere with natural flow and fish migration.

Here at Seaton, work has been carried out to restore the river to a more natural state. The weir in front of you is a replacement. The old weir had a single, steep drop that made it difficult for fish to pass upstream (see photo). The new 'three-stage' weir has notches to allow a chute of water that fish can swim through. Pools between the stages also aid the movement of fish.



Newly created 'berms' in the Little Stour create a more natural, meandering shape

As you walk downstream, past the ford, look more closely at the riverbed and you will see it has been reshaped by moving the gravel. This technique, called 'dig and dump', has created deep pools, shallow riffles and meanders that make the river channel more varied and encourage natural flow patterns.

Fish, aquatic insects, birds and plant life all benefit from this diverse habitat. In spring you will see swathes of the white flowers of water crowfoot on the water.

Upstream of here, the stretch of the Little Stour between Seaton Mill and Wickhambreaux has also been restored by using 'berms' – small shelves of gravel along the banks – to create meanders. The river now has a much more natural shape and will be better for wildlife. (Please note this part of the river is not publicly accessible.)



The old weir

Common pochard

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Bittern



Snipe

© Alpsdake / CC BY-SA



Water crowfoot



Grass snake



Emperor dragonfly



Jo Taylor

Wildlife hotspots

Here the Little Stour flows past Seaton Lakes. The lakes are flooded gravel quarries, but nature is making excellent use of these man-made features. The combination of open water, reedbeds and wet scrub, together with the river itself and ancient woodlands like Wenderton Hoath, make this whole area important for birds and other wildlife. Wildfowl such as common pochard and gadwall can be seen on the lakes, while Cetti's warbler and nightingale nest in scrubby areas. Declining species like cuckoo and turtle dove can still be heard here and bitterns have visited the reedbeds. Grass snakes, dragonflies and bats also find a home among the rich habitats.

Downstream of Seaton Lakes, the Little Stour is joined by the Wingham River and ceases to be a chalk stream. It then meanders alongside another valuable wildlife site: Preston Marshes is protected by law because it's the last remaining fen in the valley of the Little Stour. The diverse plant life includes many scarce species, and wading birds such as snipe, lapwing and redshank overwinter here.

A special river

The Little Stour is one of only 200 chalk rivers on the planet! These special rivers are found in places with chalk hills, like the North Downs. Rain water filters through the porous chalk then hits impermeable clay and forms pockets of water called aquifers. The boundary between the aquifer and unsaturated ground is called the water table, and where the water table meets the surface, springs occur. Chalk rivers are fed mainly by these springs and have clear water with stable levels and temperature - ideal for wildlife!

Thanks to Wingham Fisheries for permission to install this panel.

Find more information and download a leaflet about the Stour Catchment from our website www.kentishstour.org.uk



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