Titchfield Mill on the River Meon

-Meon Valley Partnership Position Statement-

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The River Meon – a global rarity

Rising from the chalky ground on the edge of the South Downs, the River Meon is an internationally important type of river, known as a 'chalk stream'. A product of our unique geology and climate, over 85% of the world's chalk streams are found in southern England alone.

As well as being a home to some of the nation's most iconic wildlife, including the salmon, otter and water vole, the Meon provides us with a source of clean and plentiful drinking water, waters our crops and livestock, carries our wastewater to sea, and provides us with the space to relax and connect with nature.

Past human influence, present day problems

Like many of Britain's rivers, the Meon once powered numerous mills throughout its course to make flour, paper and iron. For the mill to operate effectively, various modifications to the natural course of the river were required, including the installation of weirs, sluices, and the re-alignment of the channel. But as time passed and the milling industry died out, many of these modifications remained in place.

Whilst often considered part of our built heritage, many of the remaining weirs and sluices now present an artificial and impenetrable barrier to the migratory fish (salmon, eel and sea trout). The natural flow of water and sediment is also disrupted, resulting in the degradation of this unique chalk stream habitat above and below the structure. Once famed for their abundance in our chalk streams, including the Meon, both salmon and eel have suffered some of the greatest declines amongst our native wildlife over the last 30 years; during this period, numbers have fallen by over 50% and 90% respectively. Coupled with the risks associated with climate change, these barriers pose a significant threat to the long-term future of these iconic species and unique habitat.

Titchfield Mill

The sluice structure associated with Titchfield Mill on the lower Meon is of particular concern amongst the members and stakeholders of the Meon Valley Partnership. Following the cessation of milling at Titchfield in the 1950's, the structure has become severely degraded and dangerously unstable. Not only does this impact the ecology of the Meon, but also flood risk, with water levels becoming increasingly difficult to manage. In addition, the constant maintenance and repairs required to keep the structure from failing are costly, and present unsafe working conditions for those responsible.

The real implications of these structural risks became more apparent this summer, when one of the sluices at the mill failed, reaching the point of collapse. Once again, water levels became unmanageable, and any fish trying to access their feeding and breeding grounds above the mill were at risk of being stranded below the structure.

Our mission

It is clear the current situation at Titchfield Mill is no longer sustainable, with climate change expected to heighten the risks posed by the failing structure. With the support of local stakeholders, the Meon Valley Partnership have identified funding which can deliver an alternative solution offering a range of benefits for partners and wider stakeholders, and ultimately increases the resilience of the Meon for the future.

What's next?

Whilst there are a variety of different solutions potentially on offer, measures typically include the removal of the structure altogether, or the creation of a naturalistic channel which bypasses the mill structures. Such alternatives can deliver a much more sustainable, climate resilient option for the future, involving reduced maintenance (and cost), stable water levels, and an unimpeded route of passage for fish.

Upon completion of a detailed ground truthing study, we'll have a much better understanding of which options are feasible and most amenable to local stakeholders. We can then finalise our designs and begin the restoration project at Titchfield Mill.