



3 • Our River - The Darent

The villages of Horton Kirby and South Darent have the River Darent to thank for their very existence. From neolithic times, through Roman occupation to the present day, the Darent has provided water - vital for everyday living - firstly for drinking and washing and later for powering the many mills along the river. Now recreation must be added to that list as well as continued domestic use in the Darent Valley and London area.

The name Darent is thought to derive either from the ancient British “Deruentio” meaning oak river or “Dorquent” meaning clear water. Either way it conjures up a vision of clean, sparkling water flowing through a lush wooded countryside. The section of the quiet country river through Horton Kirby and South Darent (when flowing) certainly lives up to its name for it is a lovely place to walk. It is no wonder that Spenser and Whitney in the 16th Century were inspired to write poetry about it.

“... the still Darent, in whose waters clean
Ten thousand fishes play, and deck her pleasant stream”
from *The Faerie Queen* by Edmund Spenser

An early reference to the river was made in 1895 when the Parish Council set up a bathing committee to discuss the question of acquiring a suitable piece of land near the river for bathing. Unfortunately in February 1897 the owner of the fishing rights brought this public-spirited enterprise to a very abrupt end by his curt letter simply stating that he could not consent to any portion

of the Darent (sic) over which he had the fishing rights being used for the purpose of bathing. For the Council to contemplate such a thing the river must have been much deeper then. And as the photo shows, the river has indeed been deep enough to accommodate pleasure boating. The photograph was taken near Westminster Mill where the river had been widened and deepened to impound water for the cornmill which used to exist on the site. Beside it there is a weir and a sluice gate which requires opening after heavy rainfall to prevent flooding. The old water wheel disappeared many years ago but the small



*Boating on the river in the Twenties (The tennis courts in Westminster Fields can just be seen behind). Pictured are Winnie Hedges (left), Lily Bailey (centre) with friends.
Photograph courtesy of Peter Flewin.*

outhouse beside the sluice contains a water driven turbine capable of producing a modest electricity supply. Wally Millen told of many happy days spent operating the sluice gates. The turbine was used to light the Mill and recharge the battery for an old milk truck which was used to collect supplies from the station.



*The river in its full glory at Westminster Mill
Photograph courtesy of Wally Millen.*

In 1964, there were plans by Dartford RDC to develop the waterside area of Westminster Fields as a recreation area with a pavilion and promenade for music and dancing. (Walter Millen had sold the land to the Council in 1937.) There was local hostility to this idea, the fear being that this new development would attract too many outsiders to the village. The vicar at the time stated that if the Council wanted to do something it should be to provide summer facilities or a play area for the youngsters. A quiet, dog-free picnic area was



Two similar postcards from Holmesdale Road which are interesting to compare.



established in 1989 but otherwise the area today is deliberately left in a natural state.

The Darent river corridor through South Darent and Horton Kirby supports a wide variety of flora and fauna, but sadly it is not as rich in wildlife as it used to be. If the Darent was named after abundant oak trees, few remain today although new hedge and tree planting schemes are undertaken each year. Hedgerows support a variety of plant species and wildlife and it was good to note that the sloe hedge near the river at the north side of Westminster Field was described in the judge's report from the Men of Trees Competition in 1991, as one of the best he had seen.



*Early photo of the Mill Pond with Westminster Mill House on the right hand side c 1905
Photograph courtesy of Walter Millen.*

Many birds are seen by the water and kingfishers, though elusive, are commonly seen. A good variety of waterfowl are found in the gravel pits. The Darent and local ponds also support watershrews, frogs and toads - these last are enthusiastically protected by local people who help the toads make the dangerous journey from the fields across the road



The river in flood flowing past Rogers Farm showing the poultry sheds. Photograph courtesy of Walter Millen.

through the river in order to reach the lakes in the Spring. Special warning road signs are provided by the KCC at the appropriate time each year to persuade drivers to slow down not only for the toads' sake but also for that of the Toad Patrol members.

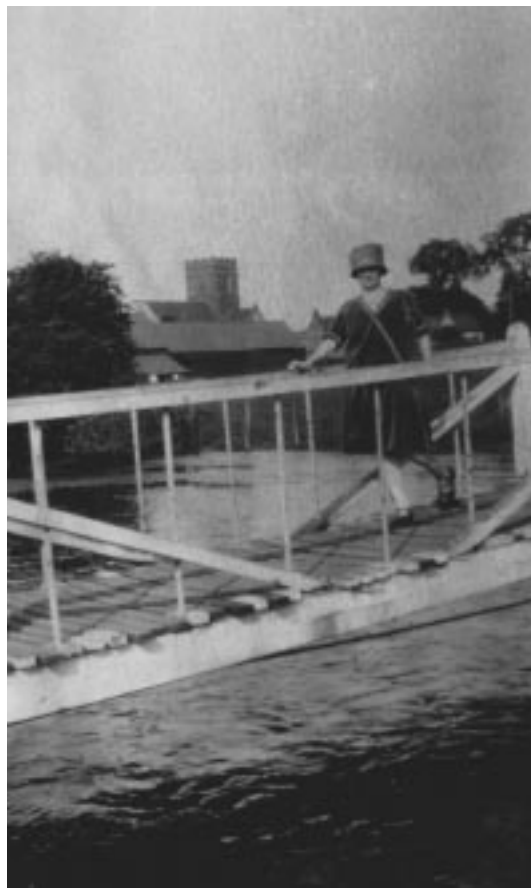
Fishing is also a common pastime not only in the Darent but also in the lakes formed by the disused gravel pits. The Darent used to be a well-known trout stream, ideally suited because of its pure clean chalk water and good specimen fish were often pulled out of the river. Unfortunately it is no longer the thriving river it used to be, mainly because of low and inconsistent flows due to the increasing abstraction of water that has taken place, particularly over the past 20- 30 years. Sticklebacks are therefore much more likely to be found than trout today.

The river is also a valuable teaching resource. Every school day, children from London and Kent come to the two field study centres in the parish. For many it is their first real experience of the country.

The Parish Council Minutes highlight some interesting facts about the bridges that cross the Darent. For example in 1927, it was felt the time had come for the old footbridge at Westminster Mill to be replaced. Plans were prepared for the work to be carried out in the Spring of 1928 by Dartford RDC.

There is also reference in the Minutes of 1927 to a bridge across the field towards Franks Lane which was improved by placing a sleeper in position. (There is no longer a bridge there nor is there any need for one.) In 1929, the Minutes refer to plans that were received for a new bridge at Devon Road, South Darenth which would be made

significantly wider for both road and foot traffic.



Stepping out on the Westminster Mill bridge - Florrie Ingram in 1928. Photograph courtesy of Derek Ingram.



*The old Flour Mill South Darenth looking south.
Postcard collection.*

The original road bridge had been built by Edward Cresy. He stated in his diary of 1851 that the bridge was built, against considerable opposition, at a cost of £130. "The iron trusses", he said "I purchased in the Vauxhall Road and not depending wholly upon them, introduced wrought iron ties and brick arches to carry the roadway". It was not, however, until the 1960s that this single track bridge was replaced by the existing two carriageway bridge.

The issue that is uppermost in people's minds today in relation to the Darent is its lack of water. Locals have been aware of low water levels since at least the early 1970s and the August 1977 Parish Council Minutes record the issue of over-abstraction raised by Wally Millen in a letter to the Thames Water Authority. The drought in the summer of 1976 saw the first serious drying up of the river. In 1987 a number of studies were commissioned, the results indicating that the real problem was over-abstraction while the state of the

river deteriorated so dramatically that it attracted much attention nationwide. Lord Crickhowell, Chairman of the National Rivers Authority, the national media, our MP Bob Dunn and Minister of State David Trippier, all visited our parish to see the devastation and walk the dried-up riverbed.



*Looking south towards the village from Devon Road bridge.
Postcard courtesy of Pete Flewin.*

Elsie Kellett remembered the summer of 1992 when, on the afternoon of the St Mary's Church fete in the grounds of Court Lodge, one moment she was watching a weasel walking across the dry bed and the next moment the river was flowing. The fete was temporarily forgotten as everyone rushed to see the rare sight of water flowing in our part of the river.



*The bridge at Devon Road c 1920.
Postcard courtesy of Kent County Library*

As a result of this national interest, in 1993 the National Rivers Authority (NRA) (which since its formation in 1989 has had responsibility for all rivers) put forward a scheme costing around £12m to try and rectify the low flows. Water would be put back into the Darent in a variety of ways including making artificial springs sited along the bank, and pumping water from the Blue Circle lake in Northfleet. In addition, the package includes a number of environmental improvements to enhance the character and natural appearance of the Darent and its banks. The Scheme will be funded jointly by the NRA and Thames Water, each contributing £6m. In January 1994, after lobbying by local activists and politicians, we heard that our scheme was not to be the victim of Department of Environment spending cuts which had been widely feared. The local campaigning and constant pressure on the NRA and government has paid off.



*A view of the dry river bed at South Darenth.
Photograph courtesy of John Woodhead*

At the time of writing the river is flowing and we sincerely hope that we shall not, as was at one time feared, be losing our stretch of the lovely River Darent. But everyone in South Darenth and Horton Kirby agrees that the Darent must not be allowed to die for then a vital part of the character and life-force of the parish would be lost.



*Westminster Weir in the mid Seventies with
water.....
Photograph courtesy of
Walter Millen.*



*....and without in 1991.
Photograph courtesy of John Woodhead.*