
Changing scenes along Hellifield Beck

Walking down the Beck Fields recently I was surprised to catch a glimpse of a fox skirting the reeded area on the bank of the stream, in what is generally known as the 3rd Beck Field. As it was 3pm in the afternoon the sight of Rufus surprised me. He – or she, seemed to disappear into the boggy area in front of the old bridge which carries the busy A682 Gisburn to Long Preston road. I scanned the area for any more signs of the fox, but it wasn't seen again. Glancing around the edges of the Beck in this field, it was apparent, even in its denuded wintry state, just how much this field has changed over recent years in terms of natural cover and tree growth.



A view along the Beck. Taken about twenty years ago. The right bank has now been planted with trees, with others interspaced along the left bank.

Back in 2017, I think, I was walking the same route, along the banking towards the Village when I came across someone hammering stakes in the ground along the banking. A large part of fencing had already been completed and a regimented line of saplings had been planted within their protective covers all along the Beck's banking. I got talking to the man – who introduced himself as John Milne, a

representative of the Ribble Rivers Trust. John explained that the whole banking was being planted with a selection of trees as part of the Ribble Rivers Trust's ongoing project to rejuvenate and protect riverbanks and streams. The trees used in the project ranged from oak, hawthorn, hazel, birch, and holly. John gave me his card and I communicated with him following my meeting that day – updating him on

how the scheme and condition of the trees were faring down the Beck Field.

On my next visit, the whole length of the banking of this field had been fenced off, and young saplings were in position all along the edges. On that day back in 2017 John's next visit was somewhere up the river between Horton-In-Ribblesdale and Ribblehead as the scheme's project covered a wide area.

Looking at the Trust itself, it seems it was formed in 1998 and is a UK based charity dedicated to improving and protecting the rivers and streams of the River Ribble Catchment Area. The catchment area covers 750 square miles and covers more than 3,479 miles of watercourses. The object of the Trust is establishing new wetland habitat within locations where this benefits water quality, biodiversity, landscape character, and flood risk

management.

Looking down the beckside in the present day you can see that many of those trees that John and his team planted a few years ago are now established on both banks, and going forward to spring and summer there will be a growth of cover, increasing annually, which will benefit our local wildlife plus the flora and fauna of the area.

It remains to see just how much it will change the overall appearance going forward but the banking, along the Beck field as a whole, is now completely different from the area I knew as a child - even going back 5 to 10 years ago. Some trees have been lost due to soil erosion which is a problem, and there have been problems with disease and damage by cattle and other animals. Deer in particular can damage young trees,



A impression of how the beckside may look in a few years, given the continued growth of the trees.



Snell Holme Bridge

The lie of the land rising from the beck and up towards Back Lane has changed little over the years. I have a photograph which shows me and my brother with my father, sitting in the field near the beck. It was taken around 1964. I recreated this photo some years later, when I knelt in approximately the same spot with my step-granddaughter

and the protective casings they are planted in will only go so far to protect them – being less effective as the trees grow taller.

Despite all these issues, and the expected casualties when planting takes place, there is now a substantial increase of tree cover along the beckside, which will become more visible when the spring growth of leaves starts to appear.

Towards the old bridge the trees thin out and there is a bed of marsh bordering the beckside. The bridge itself - Snell Holme

Bridge - was constructed in the 18th century as part of the improvements to the road system. Prior to the bridge the road was forded. William Snell was a resident of Hellifield in 1730. He owned land that adjoined Hellifield Beck. The word Holme, or Holm, is old English and means 'A corner of land between two streams'. The two streams being Hellifield Beck and Gallaber Syke.

So, it will be interesting to see how the beckside view changes as the years go forward and the growth of cover increases, benefiting wild life, insects, and plant life. Unfortunately mink are a problem on all our watercourses, and can have a devastating effect on other wild creatures. Water Voles, once common in our streams and rivers, are vulnerable to these predators. It would be a red letter day for me if any one spots 'Ratty' in our beck. Let me know if you are lucky enough to see one. I will keep my eyes peeled!

Ken Leak - April 2022



Two photographs: both taken in approximately the same place. The one on the left dates from around 1964 (with me on the left!). The second one was taken about 40 years later. Notice the tree in the background on the upper left of both pictures.