

18th March 2013

**MINUTES** of the **THIRTY-FOURTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE**  
of the **RIVER GREAT OUSE BRANCH** of the  
**ASSOCIATION OF DRAINAGE AUTHORITIES**

held at Prickwillow Village Hall, Prickwillow, near Ely, on Monday 18<sup>th</sup> March 2013 at 2.30 p.m.

**Present**

A.J. Morbey, Esq., in the Chair

G. Allison, Esq.,	Downham Market Group
J.M. Ansell, Esq.,	Downham and Stow
J. Austen, Esq.,	Kings Lynn
C. Beeston, Esq.,	Downham and Stow
R.O. Bennett, Esq.,	Bedford Group
Mrs. F. Bowler	Bedford Group
D. Boughton, Esq.,	Middle Level
P. Burton, Esq.,	Bluntisham
C.J. Butcher, Esq.,	Mildenhall
Mrs. L. Campbell	Downham Market Group
J. Childs, Esq.,	Middle Level
M. Church, Esq.,	Haddenham Level
G. Cirillo, Esq.,	Southery & District
N.B. Costin, Esq.,	Bedford Group
C. Crofts, Esq.,	Upwell
T. Darby, Esq.,	Sawtry
Ms. J. Davison	Bedford Group
Mrs. P. Denham	Environment Agency
Mrs. F. Dunne	Old West
W.L. Forbes, Esq.,	Burnt Fen
C.J. Garner, Esq.,	Padnal and Waterden
A. Gosling, Esq.,	Environment Agency
J.J.F. Graves, Esq.,	Old West
P. Hammett, Esq.,	N.F.U.
J. Heading, Esq.,	Manea & Welney
J. Heading, Esq.,	Warboys, Somersham & Pidley
Mrs. J.E. Heading	Ely Group
R. Hill, Esq.,	Middle Level
C.A. Holman, Esq.,	Burnt Fen/Southery
B.K. Jarman, Esq.,	Mildenhall
Cllr. P. Johnson	Waterbeach
R.H. Lee, Esq.,	Padnal and Waterden
W. Legge, Esq.,	Downham Market Group
J. Lloyd, Esq.,	Cawdle Fen
J.S. Martin, Esq.,	Littleport & Downham/Waterbeach
P. Miller, Esq.,	Environment Agency
Miss S. Moeed	Environment Agency
A. Newton, Esq.,	Ely Group
J. Oldfield, Esq.,	Bedford Group
B.H. Sanders, Esq.,	Waterbeach Level
I. Smith, Esq.,	Middle Level
D.C. Thomas, Esq.,	Middle Level
Dr. J. Venables	A.D.A.
P. Walker, Esq.,	Downham and Stow
S. Wheatley, Esq.,	Environment Agency
A. Williamson, Esq.,	East of Ouse
C.J.H. Wilson, Esq.,	Burnt Fen/Lakenheath
G. Woollard, Esq.,	Swaffham
Mrs. R. Whitlock	Environment Agency
A. Yarrow, Esq.,	Haddenham/Littleport

## **APOLOGIES**

J.A.R. Chrisp (Ramsey), G. Dann (Kings Lynn), J. Fenn (Middle Level), M. Heading (Middle Level), A.L. Lee (Cawdle Fen), W.B. Martin (Littleport & Downham), H. Raby (Bedford), D. Rogers (Lakenheath), C. Smith (Lakenheath), C.D. Wright (East Harling)

## **CHAIRMAN**

Upon a proposition from Mr. G. Woollard (Swaffham), seconded by Mr. P. Burton (Bluntisham), Mr.A.J.Morbey, was unanimously re-elected Chairman of the Branch for the ensuing year.

## **VICE CHAIRMAN**

Upon a proposition from the Chair, Mr. N.B. Costin, was unanimously re-elected Vice-Chairman of the Branch for the ensuing year.

## **MINUTES**

The Minutes of the Thirty-third Annual Conference held on 6<sup>th</sup> March, 2012 were presented as circulated. The Minutes were approved and signed by the Chairman. There were no matters arising.

## **ACCOUNTS to 31<sup>st</sup> MARCH 2012**

The accounts of the Branch were presented as circulated. It was resolved on a proposition from Mr. J. Heading (Middle Level), seconded by Cllr. P. Johnson (Waterbeach), that the accounts be received and approved.

## **SUBSCRIPTIONS FOR 2013/14**

It was agreed that the subscriptions for the forthcoming year should remain at £1,000, plus VAT, calculated on the same basis as in previous years.

## **DR. J. VENABLES – CHIEF EXECUTIVE, A.D.A.**

Dr. Venables tendered Henry Cator's apologies for the meeting and informed Members of Ian Moodie's move to the NFU as an Advisor in Flood Management and Access Policy. Dr. Venables then went on to comment on the following issues:-

- Lincolnshire Partnership Arrangements. Dr. Venables reported that Lincolnshire County Council (now responsible for consents) had asked IDBs to issue consents for the whole of the county – even extended areas beyond their own boundaries. Although it was early days, the system appeared to be working and it was hoped that similar partnerships would form around the country.
- Welsh Audit Office. Following the Calidicot and Wentlooge IDB's failings with regards to audit, this Board was now under new management and had turned around. However, this has resulted in the Welsh Audit Office, the National Audit Office and D.E.F.R.A. looking very hard at English boards. ADA were being fundamental in ensuring that Boards checked their own Standing Orders and gained ministerial approval to the same. Boards needed to be proactive in "spring cleaning" paperwork before the National Audit Office came knocking at the door. Boards needed to be supportive in approving new Standing Orders, Codes of Conduct etc. and ensure that their websites held up to date information. Lack of transparency was undermining ADA's position and making life difficult – Members needed to have support for the new obligations.
- Environmental Permitting and Consents Workshop. ADA felt that consents within the environmental permitting regime had no benefit. There was a need for environmental permissions and consents in a separate form but ADA could see no sense in issuing consents under environmental permitting. ADA were currently working with DEFRA on this matter as to how the arrangements would work.
- Environment Agency's withdrawal of maintenance. In Cumbria, Lancashire, Kent and Sussex where the E.A. were withdrawing from maintenance – new bodies were being discussed and meetings held with landowner co-operatives with a view to looking at new forms of arrangements in these areas.

- Drought. Following last year's meeting it started raining and was the second highest rainfall (over 9 months) ever recorded. This had caused problems particularly in Somerset where, in June, land was flooded under 8 feet of water for six weeks. Following this, high temperatures had compounded the problem, causing rotting vegetation.
- ADA Executive Committee. ADA's 2010/13 business plan was drawing to a close and the Chairman was now setting up a spring business group for ideas for the 2014/17 plan to be put before the Executive Committee at their July and October meetings. The last business plan focused on getting IDBs known and understood. This had resulted in the formation of e-stream news which had been extremely useful and used by other organisations. The ADA Gazette, issued four times a year, was now available electronically on the website, the Vision for IDBs had been updated and an "Introduction to IDBs" had been published for use by ratepayers, new members and schools etc.
- ADA Demo. The ADA Demo was taking place at North Level on 17<sup>th</sup> July, 2013. This was to be a working demonstration in an open area with a marquee for supplier stands. Dr. Venables asked for people's support and encouraged Members to visit by the "bus load". It was hoped there would be a high profile visit on the day but details could not be released at present.
- The Value of Water Level Management – Electricity Supply. This leaflet had made a big impact at ministerial level. 53% of the generated electricity of the country was produced from within IDB areas. Ministers had been keen to learn what IDBs were, who ran them, what they did etc.
- ADA Gazette. The centrefold of the Spring 2013 Gazette consisted of a poster which could be produced electronically or otherwise onto A4 or A3 which could also be used for schools, exhibitions and similar. It showed a cross section of a typical IDB and what happened in various areas.
- Environment Agency/Natural England Triennial Review. ADA had been given a choice by government on whether they thought these should be separate or joined. ADA felt they should be separate entities but with a joint dipping output. If changes were to be made regulations needed to emphasise on flood risk and water management – there should be no dilution or lack of focus on flood risk assessment. Regulation changes were not supporting the EA as it was – change was coming from the wrong angle.
- BAP workshop. ADA required feedback on whether the East Anglia region felt the need for a BAP workshop and were canvassing support for the same.
- Executive Committee. Dr. Venables reported that Mr. Henry Cator needed new, younger members on the Executive Committee to try and bring the age gap down a little. Open days were being held to try to involve Young Farmers and agricultural students so that best practice could be shared.
- Annual Conference, London. This year's Conference would be held in London on 13<sup>th</sup> November, 2013.

### **P. MILLER – PROJECT MANAGER of ENVIRONMENT AGENCY**

Paul Miller introduced himself to Members. He reported that he had been on a 6 month assignment (now coming to a close) involved in the East Coast Flood Risk Review. Paul informed Members that he had moved to the King Lynn area 30 years ago and said that flood defences in the area needed improvements. New capital projects were needed in Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex and parts of Lincolnshire.

Sixty years on from the 1953 floods it was time to look at incident management not just in Norfolk Suffolk and Essex but down the east coast extending to Northumberland and Kent and up the estuary.

In Kings Lynn and North Norfolk, 15 and 44 homes respectively were damaged in the severe event of 1953. He said it was a time for better PR communications. During the floods residents of Kings Lynn were drowning but Canvey Island was oblivious of anything happening further up the coast. Mr. Miller

commented that the key risks, although low here were very high in parts of Lincolnshire where evacuation paths would be needed days ahead. Forecasting gave a good indication of a surge coming up to 5 days ahead.

Through various exercises such as Exercise Watermark a couple of things had stood out – there were not enough people to deal with a big flood incident which could last days, possibly weeks monitoring the incident as there were insufficient EA staff on rotas and secondly there was a gap in construction capability – 78 workers in Operations Delivery – and consequently there was not a large enough workforce to deal with repairs.

A strategic over view tool needed to be developed looking at flood risk areas and which were affected most to make the right decisions without getting information from the areas already engaged in flood activities. A map was also required showed coastal risk. Northern area plans show breaches/overtopping – useful for local residents – together with evacuation planning.

It had been decided that a way forward concerning workforce was for one contractor to be responsible for one area. Contractors would meet at highest risk areas and help EA undertake repairs. IDBs would be key as local contacts if they were not involved in repairing of their own pumping stations/operations. Working together was key – the water needed to be evacuated and IDBs needed to help and pull together.

Key to planning was what to do when problems arose. Arial photography was a useful tool and satellite technology through government. Information could be picked off coastal areas and satellite information provided. Meetings had taken place with the RAF who had been very supportive and very pro-active. Flights could take place over coastal areas and provide data within a couple of hours.

Working together would be key in getting things back to normal after a flood event. Maintenance on pumping stations and updating structures was commonsense - Members understood the risks.

#### **FINANCES OF THE ENVIRONMENT AGENCY – Mrs. Rachel Whitlock (Finance – Anglian Region)**

Mrs. Whitlock explained that Mr. Paul Lamb was on another assignment at present and that she was covering for him. She explained that the E.A. had been increasing transparency on where monies were being spent and information on what work was being carried out. Looking forward she stated that finances were tight. £120m. was available for capital schemes but it was proving a struggle to maintain new capital structures from diminishing revenue allocations.

Mrs. Whitlock reported that from the Corporate Spending Review, GIA would be reduced by 4.5% by 2015.

#### **WORKS OF THE ENVIRONMENT AGENCY – Mrs. Peta Denham, Area Flood Risk Manager**

Mrs. Peta Denham informed Members that copies of the E.A.'s February Water Situation Report which contained statistics on the last soil moisture deficit, river flows and groundwater levels were available at the meeting.

Mrs. Denham went on to talk about her recent visit to the Somerset Levels where she saw first-hand the results of the devastating floods that this part of the country has had throughout 2012. Somerset farmers, and others from elsewhere, reacted strongly to a presentation by David Rooke (Environment Agency Director of Flood Risk Management and Paul Leinster Chief Executive at the Environment Agency, when they spoke at the NFU Council on 22nd January 2013. There was subsequent coverage in the farming press about reduced government funding for revenue river maintenance work and the regulatory problems that farmers face when they want to do river maintenance themselves. Since then the NFU and the Environment Agency have met and drawn up an action plan to improve partnership working. The EA nationally is investigating ways of reducing the administrative burden on farmers who would like to maintain their own watercourses and looking at ways to make it easier for farmers to dispose of waste materials from dredging and desilting works whilst ensuring there is no impact on the environment. For its part the NFU is currently following up on a series of actions which include:

1. Asking for a re-balancing in the capital and revenue flood defence spend, so that any increase in budget for capital spend is matched by an increase in revenue to contribute to maintenance budgets.
2. Lobbying Defra to take full consideration of food producing capacity/high value agricultural land as an outcome measure in any flood risk management strategy, as well as considering people, property and habitats.
3. Providing support to local farming groups who are looking to set-up their own IDBs.

Notwithstanding this partnership working with the NFU, there is no doubt that in the current economic climate, undertaking river maintenance has become even more challenging for the Environment Agency. The challenges are:

- i) Reducing FCRM GiA revenue funding.
- ii) Distinguishing between flood risk management and land drainage.
- iii) A legacy of significant investment in assets that provide agricultural benefits yet are reaching the end of their design life.
- iv) Stakeholder concerns about the reduction in river maintenance and the fact that the E.A. are having to stop where it is uneconomic or unaffordable, which came to a head at the NFU council meeting.

Revenue FCRM GiA reduced by 18% over CSR 10 and there are likely to be further cuts in the next CSR period. The EA is having to reprioritise what it spends the money on. It is investing where it can do most to protect people and property as well as meet its environmental obligations and it is reducing maintenance where benefit is lowest and where it is uneconomic. The EA is have to mitigate against the reduced funding in a number of ways: capitalising as much as possible, applying the partnership funding model for revenue maintenance, reprioritising other revenue funded activities e.g. staff cuts – The FCRM Review restructuring will see FCRM posts in Anglian Region reduce from approx 600 to 500 by April 2014. The Agency is also working hard to enable others, like IDBs and landowners to do maintenance on rivers themselves. It will also have to more widely apply the ‘Maintenance Protocol’ (withdrawing from uneconomic assets).

In the Gt Ouse catchment, especially in the Fens, we have a legacy of land drainage assets. During the post war period Government policy was to promote and support agricultural production at a time of food rationing. A significant number of land drainage infrastructure projects, supported by the Government were aimed at increasing the productivity of agricultural land. The Fens are a prime example of grant aided pumping stations, field drainage and flood defence embankments. This infrastructure has a legacy of maintenance work and is primarily, but not exclusively, benefitting sparsely populated, rural land. The flood risk ‘benefit to cost’ of this work is often lower than maintenance in urban areas and budgets for this lower priority work are under increasing pressure. The Environment Agency and other flood risk management authorities have a number of ageing land drainage assets that will require replacement over the coming years. When the asset replacement cost is considered, there are many cases where these investments will not be affordable without significant contributions from third parties.

There were tough economic times ahead but Mrs. Denham said that it was in all our interests to work together as partners to find the solutions and to generate the partnership funding that is undoubtedly going to be needed. The Great Ouse catchment and Anglian Region was fortunate in that it receives local income streams which help to address some of the shortfall in revenue FCRM GiA. e.g. Local Levy, IDB Precept and uniquely General Drainage Charges. The Environment Agency can still do some river maintenance work and asset refurbishment.

Mrs. Denham then handed over to Adrian Gosling – Area Operations Manager, to highlight some of the work his teams had carried out last year and what was planned for 2013/14.

**WORKS OF THE ENVIRONMENT AGENCY – Mr. Adrian Gosling, Area Operations Manager**

Mr. Adrian Gosling said that “we were faced with what we are faced with and had to make best use of the little we have got”. He said that 80/90% of weedcutting and grass cutting had been carried out but some works had stopped because of the weather conditions which were putting operations behind.

Mr. Gosling said that the EA would be extending its weed spraying programme next year and in the southern part of the catchment improvements would be made for boat access.

Mr. Gosling reiterated that works were carried out in areas where they got the best benefit cost ratio. He pointed out that there was a gap between identified need and the amount of funding obtained. He had been informed that this was the first time this had happened but the EA had managed to reduce the gap to almost nothing.

Members were informed that capital spending was awash with money – there had been a lot of success in obtaining capital money over the year. However, it was necessary to maximise revenue funding as there was insufficient to do everything the EA would like to do.

### **PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED BY MEMBERS**

Mr. D. Thomas (Middle Level) expressed his concern, again, over the amount of money having to be spent to get grant aid approval for the release of money for capital schemes. He said it was a “broken system” and applicants were having to spend far more than they needed to be passed up a chain and driven back down again. Millions of pounds were being wasted on consultants’ fees. He said he had spoken to people with the Agency and it was not just IDBs frustrated by the system.

Mrs. Peta Denham replied by saying that the corporate answer was that DEFRA required the EA to justify taxpayers money and delivery outcomes that DEFRA requested. Mr. Thomas said the system needed to get down to grass roots and change – he said it would not happen in the private industry.

Dr. Jean Venables asked if Mr. Thomas had attended the workshop concerning grants. Mr. Thomas replied that he had and found it useful to a degree but it dealt with how to complete the process – it was not about changing the process.

Mr. Peter Burton (Bluntisham) reported on streams outside of drainage board areas that flowed into the main River Ouse which the E.A. had declassified and had now become completely clogged up. Areas of land were being flooded unnecessarily. He said that the EA needed to get a grip with this area before it was totally forgotten about.

Mrs. Denham replied that in the context of what she had already said, prioritised maintenance works had to be carried out where there was best return for every £ worth of people and property – small tributaries were things that were not going to get better in the future.

Mr. Burton asked who was going to do the work. He asked if he could do it and put in a bill to the E.A.

The Chairman asked if the landowner could carry out the work and put any dredging on the bank.

Mrs. Denham replied that the landowner could do the work but would need to contact the EA regarding consenting procedures and obtain an environmental permit and receive advice on what to do with waste arising. She said she was happy to get in touch with Mr. Burton and other landowners affected and hold a meeting to discuss the same.

Mr. Geoffrey Woollard said that he first joined Swaffham IDB 30 years ago but that this was his first Great Ouse AGM. He commented on the changes in policy and of funding sources which was not primarily on drainage of land but people and houses. He emphasised that policies had changed too much. In the Swaffham area land raised as much as £10,000 an acre and that land must be safeguarded for the future of people by feeding those people.

Mr. Dick Bennett (Bedford Group) asked Mr. Paul Miller about “managed retreats” and whether they still existed.

Mr. Miller replied that these were not so important to the Anglian region but works still happened as legislation protected conservation sites from the highest international sites down in Essex – salt marshes – protect land. He said it still happened for a positive reason – land to be protected secured high level stewardship but it was not now a “buzz word”.

Mr. Woollard asked if sea levels were rising. Mr. Miller replied that he thought they were but had no figures. He said allowances were made for sea level rise in any planning.

Dr. Venables said that there were increasing problems with ocean salinity and when asked if sea level was rising, felt the question could not be answered easily. Coastal tides and currents were not uniform to sea level rise but generally the problem was getting worse.

Mr. Steve Wheatley (E.A.) said that as far as sea level rise was concerned, in the 1990s it was predicted to rise by 1.5mm per year and the north west/south east dip/tilt inland rose by 1.5mm as well. In the 1990s this was less than predicted but he was not sure on the 2000s but it was rising on the east coast.

Mr. John Oldfield (Bedford Group) asked what the difference was between flood risk management and land drainage. Water levels or local needs had the same accountability, 1:10 or 1:100. Land drainage becoming flood risk management was an excuse not to do things – can we do anything to lobby ministers of our concerns to ensure that more work is carried out to maintain structures?

Dr. Venables replied that we needed to spend time maintaining what we had got – land drainage was for the benefit of land owners, critical power stations, roadways, railways etc. 53% of power generating sites are built inside IDBs – withdraw at your peril.

Mr. D. Boughton (Ransomoor) commented that Boards had dealt with treated water/effluent over years with the same discharge into IDB watercourses for no cost even though we were pumping more water and not getting paid for it. In northern England a case had been made against the canals and it appeared as if it was going to be upheld. Was this not a right for drainage boards, for their efforts; to take this to the House of Lords as it was fundamentally important.

Dr. Venables said that a local authority seminar held recently Mr. Iain Smith answered legal queries and was watching the outcome of the case with care as it would set a precedent for lots of IDBs.

Mr. Woollard wanted to sound out colleagues present at the meeting and send a warning to the effect that the National Trust wanted to take over the whole of the area served by the Swaffham IDB. He wanted to warn Members to watch out for this happening in other areas as this was turning high grade agricultural land into grassland infested with ragwort and thistle etc.

Mr. Burton said it was not just the National Trust but the RSPB and it was also denying young farmers the opportunity of starting out with their own smallholdings. He said he agreed with Mr. Woollard and said that we needed to make a stand.

Meeting closed at 4 p.m.