

# COUNTRY LIFE

EVERY WEEK

MAY 18, 2022

## Why this Chelsea will be the prettiest yet



Going crazy for lupins  
Catch a nightingale before it's too late  
Pioneer pilots: the first female high-fliers







## Rivers of waste

Simon Cooper traces the history of sewage discharges in British waters and suggests possible solutions

**R**EADING about the state of the rivers of the British Isles, with the destruction visited upon them by sewerage outflows, which are often officially sanctioned as illegal, it is tempting to rail against 33 years of privatisation as the source of our current woes.

I'm no apologist for the water and sewerage corporations and I am happy they are finally being held to account, at least in part, not only in the court of public opinion, but in the courts of law, which have handed out fines worth hundreds of millions. The truth is, however, that the 1989 privatisation was the last in a long line of bad ideas going back centuries. Those ideas have failed to deal with our sewage in a way that protects the rivers that we love, but which our governments and water industry apparently only purport to love.

Even at what is often held up as the high point of waste management, the

Joseph Bazalgette sewer-building programme in the Victorian era, we were indulging in a giant deception—namely, using our rivers and coastline as a giant dumping ground for at best inadequately treated and at worst raw sewage. It has ever been thus. The first recorded British domestic home-sewer system in the Orkneys five millennia years ago did exactly that. Henry VIII tasked Commissioners and Courts of Sewers with hurrying effluent out of the cities, regardless of its eventual destination.

Here is a brief litany of woes that illustrates the folly of the Bazalgette model replicated around the country. In 1870, the six leading British salmon rivers produced 185,000 fish. By 1939, that figure was 50,000. Today, it is almost too few to count. In 1900, one-third of all typhoid cases were traced back to contaminated shellfish harvested in British coastal waters. The oyster industry was dealt a near-fatal blow

**The River Windrush in the Cotswolds has seen a marked decline in fish and aquatic plants. The river offers 'a good case study of the impact of underperforming sewerage systems, sewage pollution and the effects of housing growth,' according to an Environmental Audit Committee report in 2022**

when three guests served English oysters at a 1902 mayoral banquet in Hampshire died, including the Dean of Winchester. Yet our abuse of river and sea as a cheap dumping ground for waste was to continue, until, in 1969, a report concluded that 60% of all sewage-treatment works were failing to meet the standards established at the start of the century. The result was the 1973 Water Act, establishing 10 new regional water authorities, bringing together 1,000 separate public and private operators, which would manage water resources and sewerage services on a fully integrated basis, operating investment on a cost-recovery basis.

The key phrase here is 'cost-recovery basis', which essentially meant the consumer footed all the bills for regular maintenance and capital investment. But the politicians who ultimately ran the nationalised water authorities shied away from raising bills, so capital





## ‘The 1989 privatisation was the last in a long line of bad ideas going back centuries’

investment was merely inadequate, failing to keep up with an increasing population and the changing nature of sewage. The answer? The 1989 privatisation of the water authorities that shifted the burden of investment cost from the public to the private purse.

It could have been a great plan, but for five things: the costs involved were huge and ever increasing—the UK population since 1989 has increased by 11 million with no matching increase in sewerage capacity. Ofwat, the water regulator, has not forced the hand of the industry to do the right thing. The industry itself, in the face of supine regulation, has simply gone for the

money. Politicians, seeing no votes in our waste, largely ignored the issue. Finally, the Environment Agency, with statutory responsibilities ranging from atomic waste to fly tipping, has failed to protect our rivers, with only one in five currently classified as clean.

What is the answer? The easy call is to renationalise, but in Scotland, where it is nationalised, and Wales, where it is not-for-profit, the record is no better than in England and, some might argue, actually worse. Plus, bearing in mind the failure of the 1973 Water Act de facto nationalisation, we'd likely just be setting ourselves up for further failure somewhere down the line. Here's what we should do.

Not everything is bad about the water companies, for they deliver clean, cheap water to 28 million homes with apparently little difficulty. Let us start by separating water and sewerage provision into entirely separate entities. This would allow the water providers to concentrate on leakage issues, explore seriously alternate water sources, such as desalination and the building of new reservoirs (not a single one has opened since 1989), as well as addressing the problem of over-abstraction that is doing damage to sensitive river catchments.

Next, it is time to remove from the Environment Agency statutory oversight for the health of our rivers. The new body—let us call it the Pure Rivers Authority—should be given sufficient funding to test every river in the nation on a routine basis, backed up by a fast-track prosecution service to punish miscreants with swift, effective and expensive justice.

Finally, us, the bill payer should shoulder some of the burden. For too long we have had water and sewerage provision on the cheap. In the totem of household bills, the cost is somewhere in the lowest quartile; the typical family spends more on television-streaming services than it does sewage disposal. Levies are well accepted; the first climate-change levy dates all the way back to 2001. Today, energy bills include about 28% of green levy. If we seriously want to save our rivers, it is time for an equivalent blue levy on water and sewerage bills, with every penny directed at saving our rivers and coastline from a destruction of our own making.

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## Good week for

### Garden gnomes

The much-denigrated gnome is the biggest garden trend for 2022, ahead of urban gardening and pergolas, according to a combined analysis of Google-search keywords and social-media posts

### Bees and butterflies

Frozen-peas giant Birds Eye has pledged to plant 75 acres of wild-flowers across the UK in the next three years, starting with a butterfly-shaped area within one of its pea fields in North Yorkshire

### British plants

Plant Heritage is launching its annual Missing Genera campaign at Chelsea in a bid to build National Collections for 12 plant groups, including argyranthemum, campanula and periwinkle (*above right*).



### New literature

Patricia Lockwood's debut novel, *No One Is Talking About This*, which explores love, grief and the absurdity of internet living, has won the Swansea University Dylan Thomas Prize

## Bad week for

### Disconnected farmers

Poor broadband and mobile connectivity are hampering food production in the UK, according to the NFU



### English Nature

The Office for Environmental Protection has raised the alarm over the continuing deterioration of England's natural assets, urging the Government to 'give this crisis the priority it needs'

### Recycling

Household recycling rates in England have dropped from 46% in 2019 to 44% in 2020, widening the gap from the Government's 50% target

### Climate change

There's now a 50% chance temperatures will rise more than 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels within the next five years, according to the Met Office