

bridge

Newsletter of the Sonning & Sonning Eye Society

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Alien Invasion

Prof. Alastair Driver explains the Saga of the Floating Pennywort



The innocuous-sounding, but highly invasive, non-native aquatic plant Floating Pennywort (*Hydrocotyle ranunculoides*) which originates from the Americas, can grow incredibly fast and can completely smother waterways and weir structures etc,

impacting on wildlife, recreation and flood risk management.

It was brought into the UK for the ornamental pond trade in the 1980s and first recorded in the wild in 1991. It appeared on my radar locally about 10 years ago when it turned up on the Foudry Brook in South Reading. As Head of Conservation for the Environment Agency at the time, I pushed hard for resources to be found to completely eradicate the species before it spread on down into the Thames. Sadly, although some localised control was carried out by the EA and other organisations, my pleas largely

fell on deaf ears and the plant continued to spread down the Foudry Brook and into the lower Kennet and the many interconnecting ditches in the south Reading area.

Then on 28th July 2017, I spotted small rafts of Floating Pennywort in the Blake's weir area in Reading, just upstream of the confluence of the Kennet with the Thames and so again I urged the Environment Agency to act fast to eradicate it, before fragments washed downstream. Unfortunately it took the EA a few months to respond with action on the ground, by which time large rafts had appeared in the Thames at Sonning particularly in slower flowing areas downstream of Sonning Lock and in the weir channels near the French Horn and Sonning Mill. It also spread downstream into the Hennerton backwater and the Shiplake Lock area. Bearing in mind that individual stems of this amazing plant can grow up to 20 cms a day and that it can grow out 15 metres from a river bank in one season in warm conditions, this was entirely predictable.

Floating Pennywort blocking the Hennerton backwater in a single season

Photo credits for this article: Alastair Driver



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The Reverend Humphrey Gainsborough

Henley's Minister, Inventor and Engineer

Robert Farquhar

If someone wondered who engineered the first pound lock at Sonning, few would guess it was a Minister of what is now the United Reformed Church in Henley. The same man also built the famous arch bridge (Conway Bridge) on the road from Wargrave to Henley and engineered the long slope down White Hill into Henley from Hurley. He was also a great inventor: an obituary termed him “one of the most ingenious men that ever lived”.

The Revd. Humphrey Gainsborough was born in 1718. His brother, Thomas, born 8 years later, was the famous portrait painter. Had it not been for an untimely death, however, Humphrey could well have been the more famous brother. There is no doubt he made innovations to the steam engine, with his design improving its efficiency. He was probably ahead of Watt in its development at the time but died before his ideas could be fully realised. Thomas, Humphrey's executor, rejected an offer of £1000 from Cornish mining engineers for Humphrey's models, but many believe Humphrey's separate condenser

concept was subsequently incorporated into their compound engine.

Humphrey and Thomas were two of four sons and five daughters born to John Gainsborough and Mary (nee Burrough) in Sudbury, Suffolk. John belonged to the dissenting or non-conformist community in Sudbury. Fortunately Mary's brother was headmaster of Sudbury Grammar School, so the boys obtained a good education despite being dissenters. Moreover, John's brother, Thomas, was a successful clothier and it was he who funded Humphrey's training as a Minister at Moorfields Academy in London. Humphrey's tutor was John Eames, once assistant to Isaac Newton. He taught not only philosophy and theology but also mathematics and the natural sciences, including mechanics. His lectures were in Latin but pupils also had to learn Greek, Hebrew and French. At that time, science was seen as revealing God's work in the universe and worked for the betterment of mankind, so was included in the curriculum.

After four years of intensive study, Humphrey could be considered to be exceptionally learned. He went on to the Northampton Academy where he was apprenticed to Dr. Doddridge, the famous theologian and hymn writer. Humphrey was invited to Henley in 1748. Henley's dissenters had built their first chapel just outside the town borders in 1719 on land donated by the Hall family of Harpsden Court. Thomas Hall was about the same age as Humphrey and they became firm friends: he admired Humphrey's engineering and inventive skills and commissioned him to construct a cupola for his new music room which can still be seen today.

The other major landowner in the area, who also became a friend and benefactor, was Sambrooke Freeman of Fawley Court, who had just returned from a Grand Tour of Europe. He was a member of the recently-formed Society for the Improvement of the Arts and Manufacturers and encouraged Humphrey to submit many of his inventions to the Society:

