Meaendering: nature, culture and rivers

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Abstract Alongside science we need a parallel capability of exploring meaning so that intangible, uncountable aspects of our relationships with rivers, especially those understood by local communities, can be expressed. Common Ground has offered the concept of Local Distinctiveness and gives examples from England, including recent projects which they have initiated.

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Preface
The River Meander must be a wonderful sight, its Turkish curves so tantalising that it has given the English language a verb and a noun. King Tantalos, up to his neck in Phrygian water which receded whenever he bent his head to drink, gave us the teasing verb. Intricate language and stories hang in the air condensing when needed to enrich another place. From springs to great rivers, with all those bournes, becks, burns and brooks in between, water-courses provide us not only with our basic requirement for life but understandably have helped us to explain and to share knowledge of the world around us.

The real rivers which may terrify or delight us are intriguing for their particularity. The variegation found in a single river valley and the differences between catchments are part of the great workings of nature, time and geology and the efforts which we humans have made to control and use water for our own ends.

Even in England, where we had learnt to share the power of the stream with wild creatures and plants, leating it to drive mills, diverting it to flood meadows, damming it to pacify and to please, our more recent activities are having profound implications.

Through two centuries of industrialisation we have turned our back on the city river; in the last five decades intensifying farming practices have filled the country river with chemicals; engineering has straightened the meanders rendering the river more, not less, unpredictable. Fashions in fear and development have conspired to push running water away from our everyday experience, increasingly reducing streams to ditches and finally into culverts. The explosion in the working and domestic use of water is depleting aquifers, those banks of ancient water, and causing the drying up of streams. And the selling of common water into corporate hands stands as the retreat of the millennium.

We are united in our need for water, but are increasingly divided by its scarcity, profusion or big ideas for its use. Think of Aral, the biggest lake in central Asia which is now almost dry, and the huge dams along the Hwang Ho. Contemplate the impact of shrinking polar ice caps and retreating glaciers in the Rockies and Himalayas. Then look at the spring, stream or river which is the reason why your settlement is where it is.

At the very moment when we need the closeness of water to feed our humanity and imagination we seem to be denied literal contact and have lost sight and sound of its capacity to enchant us.

Common Ground is working where nature and culture meet, seeking ways of inspiring people by the particularity of actual rivers, their different pacts with nature, their shared and divergent histories: their local distinctiveness.
Local distinctiveness

Rivers wonderfully etch time into place and challenge our ideas of constancy and transience. Our ancestors had both the intimate need and the time to gain insights into their rivers – the variegation from source to mouth, and the long linear edge which juxtaposes two very different worlds, each of which enriches the other.

Climate change, and the deepening unpredictability it is bringing, will rule our watercourses and will change our relationship with them. But there is an even deeper argument for taking our rivers more seriously. We need to invent a new mutuality between nature and culture – sustainability is about living together – and unless we create a culture of wanting to care for water, the basis of all life, we shall never accomplish this.

Starting from an ecological imperative Common Ground is working to excite people with the task of reinventing rivers as places, and widening expectations of access to beautiful running water in our everyday lives. This implies an aspiration of clean water and beautiful places.

Common Ground is focusing on values and meaning – we are trying to help people discover, share and value their own knowledge as the basis for caring better for running water, for demanding decision making which will keep brooks close to us rather than pushing them underground, to reinvent rivers safe to swim in, to accommodate our need for the WILD close to our lives, and to ensure that particularity is encouraged.

Places are not just physical surroundings, they are a web of rich understandings between people and nature, peoples and their histories, people and their neighbours.

Just as nature is always experimenting, a locality too has to be open to change, permeable to new people, ideas, structures and practices. But change may enrich or it may deplete and homogenize.

Common Ground has been developing an idea which links people and locality, culture and nature. Local Distinctiveness is about what makes your place significant to you, the shared understandings of differences and meanings (Clifford & King, 1993).

For it is not simply a question of maintaining diversity. A place must have meaning to the people who inhabit it and use it, or it is unlikely to be cared for. Little things (detail) and clues to previous lives and landscapes (patina) may be the very things which breathe significance into streets or fields. If others try to define these for you, or the scale is too great, the point is lost.

Local Distinctiveness is about anywhere, not just beautiful or special places; it is about the things which create identity at the scale of the neighbourhood or parish. It is about assemblages, about accommodation and change, constant shifting, not about simple preservation of the status quo. The invisible is important too: symbols, dialects, names, recipes, spoken history, myths and legends.

Differentiating the ordinary demands close observation, cherishing the locally abundant, appreciating accumulation and small things. It means valuing, not counting the cost.

It also demands much participation by people who know the place intimately. No matter how sensitive the vision, how generous the idea, how accomplished the plan, how right the moment – if those whose lives are to be played out here have no ownership, are left with no touchstones, if nature is left with few footholds, how much longer and harder it will be for this to become a place. If we are merely left to live, work and play on someone else’s blueprint how shall we create a culture of wanting to care? We have learnt much from our project called Parish Maps, which encourages people to come together to chart the things which they value in their own locality and to use this as an agenda for action (Clifford & King, 1996). The profound need which people seem to have is for detail from which they can make sense of their everyday existence and through which they can tell their stories. We must leave room for the unspectacular, the common place, to be allowed to
dramatise the four dimensions of our own lives and to be on speaking terms with nature (see Figures 1 and 2).

We always have to begin somewhere and running water offers a rich angle on the things we thought we knew. While there are many activities which are common to rivers, the assemblage of features of each catchment makes it unique, and along its length a river will hold many aspects of local richness together – each catchment will itself be variegated.

How do rivers give significance to a place? Why are streams so important in the personality of a place? How can we renew our acquaintance? Just a few examples follow emphasizing the cultural (but with no room to include food, drink and health, structures and buildings) taken from Rivers, Rhynes and Running Brooks, our recent publication about how to look at/for particularity (Common Ground, 2000).

Culture

Any river carries a burden of symbolisms, and even in secular societies, holds something of the sacred. A river is more than a body of water with all of its practical importance to us. It is strangely permanent and yet new every minute; it has offered us mythical and legendary
links with life and death; it has embodied the eternal and the ability to purify, to begin afresh; it has reminded us of our own transience. Paradox and contradiction are grist to the river. Most cultures understand and have used the power of their own very particular rivers.

Many of the Indo European traditions focus upon the Rivers of Life which flow, often in the four cardinal directions, from a spring at the base of the Tree of Life. Hindus share this and for them bathing in a sacred river, such as the Ganga, is to ritually purify themselves. In Buddhism the tracing of a path to enlightenment is to seek the source of the river of life. Tantric mysticism differentiates 72 types of flowing water.

Most cultures and religions have water and river related rituals and festivals. For the Parsees the sacred element of water has its festival in April when flowers are strewn on the waters.

Rivers and holy water are still associated with baptism in many cultures. As recently as 1972 near Ely, in East Anglia people were still baptised by total immersion in the River Lark, known locally as the Jordan.

In England our relationship with rivers is utilitarian, aesthetic, spiritual and still filled with pre-Christian affiliations. Many churches dedicated to Mary are situated beside springs, suggesting perhaps that in trying to usurp the powers of the ancient gods Christianity had to use powerful presences.

Language

The richness of our long cultural relationship with rivers is evident in the names we know them by and the clues which linger in our place names. Across England we have all but forgotten that many old languages jostle with modern English. Stratford-upon-Avon recalls a common river name. It is still recognisable as the Welsh word – afon – and when we say river Avon we are simply saying river River demonstrating that the newcomers did not understand the indigenous language.

We have many words for streams. Sike or sick, a name used in the north of England for a runnel or trickle of water has its equivalent sitch in the south. Beck and gill (from Old Norse) are north country words for brook which tend to be used most in Cumbria and Lancashire, whereas burns prevalent in Scotland also flow eastward down from the Cheviots and the moors across Northumberland. The winterbournes of Wiltshire and Dorset are known in the Yorkshire Wolds as gipseys, as nailbournes in Kent and lavants in Hampshire. Rhynes are the names given to ditches made to drain the Somerset Levels; in west Sussex they are called rifes.

Our ancestors described significance and captured meaning in names. Many place names show the importance of water: springs (Fonthill, Telfont – fontana, a fountain or spring); wells (Sadler’s Wells, Southwell, Chigwell); fords – the most numerous descriptive name relating to water (Oxford, Fordingbridge, Belfast – sandbank ford); bridges (Trowbridge – tree bridge, Bristol – meeting place at the bridge, Bridgenorth, or simply Brigg); weirs (Ware – place by a weir, Edgware – Ecgi’s weir); ferrys (Rock Ferry, North and South Ferriby); places by mill streams (Melbourne, Millom) and by waterfalls (Moness).

Many of the names of rivers themselves are descriptive: Thames – dark; Cam, Croome, Wellow – winding; Aire, Taw, Tern – strong/swift; Stour – strong/powerful; Leadon, Lydden – broad; Kyle, Coly – narrow; Cray – pure, clear; Derwent, Darent, Dart – oaklined; Iwerne – yew-lined, and so on.

Along the stretch of the Thames through the City, the new Tate or Millennium Bridge continues the accumulation of names – Old Swan Pier, Nicholson’s Steam Packet Wharf, Irongate Stair, Limehouse Reach, Cast Iron Wharf, Puddle Dock, Pickle Herring Stair, Old Jamaica Wharf.
Customs and stories

We throw coins into wells and make wishes, as our ancestors more seriously threw in offerings to appease the spirits and ensure continuance of the water. Swords found in the Thames and other rivers are thought to be votive offerings as are the golden Roman pins found in the pin or pen wells into which people still drop bent pins.

In the limestone area of Derbyshire well-dressing persists. This may be very old since in ancient Rome at Fontinalia flowers were scattered into the fountains. Tissington, it is said, was fortunate to have flowing water throughout the drought of 1615 and thereafter celebrated its wells on Ascension Day. Another story has it that its well dressings began in 1348/9 when the villagers escaped Black Death and credited their sweet water. In other villages the tradition of creating floral pictures around the wells may be a Victorian creation. Certainly the dressing of taps in Wirksworth and Youlgreave trace back to the first piped water supplies in the 1820s. In Eyam (see Figure 3) the custom was restored or created for the Festival of Britain in 1951.

Stories, legends, myths, still cling to different rivers, some are shared. Witches it seems cannot cross running water.

In English Folklore, Christina Hole tells of the spirit Peg o’Nell who took one life in seven in the Ribble, Peg Powler who claimed victims at Piercebridge on the Tees and Jenny Greenteeth who haunted rivers in Lancashire. The Dart in Devon was said to claim one life a year – “Dart, Dart cruel Dart/Every year thou claimst a heart” – and the Trent three. The Tweed could be appeased by the casting of salt over water and nets. Passed on from generation to generation, these stories remind us of the way our ancestors warned each other about the treachery of the river. Some wells and springs offer prophecy. Marvel-Sike spring at Brampton in Northamptonshire predicted trouble by running over. The Drumming Well at Oundle in Rutland is said to have foretold the death of Charles II.

Figure 3 Well Dressing in Eyam, Derbyshire
These stories are likely to be very old, and well worth the retelling for that alone, but they also give us hints of who has settled here, what preoccupations and rebellious persistence the old gods still have.

Ancient patterns and recent histories

Seeing rivers in terms of the continuity and collaging of history opens up the possibility of discovering ancient cemeteries, causeways, old fording places, Dark Age fish traps, jetties, Saxon boats, medieval fish ponds, from clues in the landscape itself as well as in the names.

Archaeologists use devious means to see into the past. Hart’s Tongue fern prefers high rainfall and lime-rich soils, though it occurs widely. When it is found in profusion in an area where it is uncommon, archaeologists have found it a useful indicator of the presence of remnants of building (rich in lime-mortar). Beside streams they point to old mill workings.

As techniques have become more sophisticated, the archaeological evidence of the burial habits of Bronze Age peoples is increasingly showing their round barrows beside springs, rivers and lakes rather than clustered only along ridges. In river valleys farming and building activity has flattened much, but along the Wiltshire Avon and Wylye, aerial observation reveals remnant barrows all along the rivers. Elsewhere groups gather around heads of valleys and the original spring lines such as near Imber in the Salisbury Plain and at Lambourne in Berkshire.

In the early mining areas the drainage patterns have been considerably altered by those trying to stop flooding from holding up their labours. From low down in the valley long adits were driven to the deepest level of the mines to intercept water. This caused long term drying up of higher springs and loss of trees; many legal battles were fought over lost water.

Derbyshire abounds in these soughs. Near Wirksworth Meerbrook Sough was dug to drain lead mines; it is 2.5 miles long, plus a further 2.5 in contributing soughs. Stone cairns mark its path and they “breathe” steam in frosty weather, its water holding a steady 15.3 °C having tapped a thermal supply. It became the water supply for Ilkeston in 1904.

How long have we been challenging and changing plashy places? In the Somerset Levels, we apparently created a structure to traverse the wet land in neolithic times. The Sweet Track, a raised plank walkway over Shapwick Heath is now known from tree ring evidence to date from around 3,800 BC.

Floating paths, soughs and other smaller scale evidence such as pumps and wells, troughs and sheepwashes, are all around us. But some of our interventions have been enormous, we have changed whole landscapes:

“They ceased to be water people and became land people; they ceased to fish and fowl and became plumbers of the land. They joined in the destiny of the Fens, which was to strive not for but against water. For a century and a half they dug, drained and pumped the land between the Bedford River and the Great Ouse, boots perpetually mud-caked, ignorant of how their efforts were, little by little, changing the map of England.”

(Swift, 1983)

Getting close

Walking can give us time to savour, to regain intimacy, there is no better way to enter the subtle world of local distinctiveness. In town and country to walk littoral footpaths and tow paths can be difficult enough, but many streams and rivers seem to have no defined route beside them. In Afoot in England W.H. Hudson is forthright about our deep relations and our frustrations:

“The stream invites us to follow: the impulse is so common that it might be set down as an instinct; and certainly there is no more fascinating pastime than to keep company with
a river from its source to the sea. Unfortunately that is not easy in a country where running waters have been enclosed, which should run as free as the rain and sunshine to all, and were once free, when England was England still, before landowners annexed them, even as they annexed or stole the commons and shut up the footpaths."

We are drawn to water, but are often thwarted by not being able to get near to it. Agricultural land by rivers is much sought after and the best stretches of river for game fishing are jealously guarded by those who own or lease the fishing rights. Water bailiffs are employed to keep the poachers and wanderers at bay.

In creating new paths it is vital to add new layers of local distinctiveness (see Figure 4). Gates, stiles, surfaces, seats, signs, scale – all need to be carefully considered, so that the footpath subtly pays homage to this river or stream, and helps to add to the details of the place.

Angling is one of the most popular pastimes and angling societies have done much to extend access for themselves as well as championing clean rivers. Anglers name each reach and know intimately the behaviour of their rivers in different weathers and seasons.

People who work on boats as well as those who spend their leisure hours on rivers and canals gain knowledge of the nuances of different rivers, tidal and not. Working boats were developed especially to deal with the conditions peculiar to different rivers and the job in hand. For example flat bottomed boats such as the Parrett flatner, the salmon punt of Christchurch harbour, the gun punt of Essex, Fenland barge or Teign keel – each differs in detail. The pontoons, hards, slipways, moorings, jetties are equally particular. Leisure boats abound on the Broads, along the Severn and the Thames, but many small towns and villages had their leisure boating facilities.

Swimming in rivers is something which few agencies feel brave enough to tackle. There have always been favourite swimming places in rivers – mill pools, bridges to jump off, ropes from trees to swing out over the river – which benign landholders have been happy for local people to use. But although rivers are becoming cleaner we are being discouraged from swimming in them because the water might contain coliform bacteria or we may risk getting Weil’s Disease, spread by rats.

In the whole of England under the Bathing Waters (Classification) Regulations 1991, only nine freshwater bathing waters are designated by the Environment Agency – they are all lakes. In order to comply, there must be evidence of traditional use by a large number of
bathers, facilities such as car parking, lifeguards and first aid. The water must be clean enough and be monitored regularly by the Environment Agency.

In Portugal the relevant agency puts up notices about the quality of the water at popular swimming spots and lets people decide for themselves if they wish to swim there. Designations ensure clean water and safe places, but they take the enjoyment out of wild swimming. In the USA the Clean Water Act has been described as having the twin goals of making rivers “fishable and swimmable”.

Surely our aspiration should be for all rivers to be clean enough for us to swim in.

Identity
The importance of the catchment is now well recognized in ecological research and river management practice. But how do we encourage people to think about identifying with and taking care of their catchment or tributary?

In the south west Common Ground is working on a project encouraging people to create music for a river. We hope it will give everyone ideas.

Confluence has already brought into existence: river carols written and sung by a new community choir; watery ballads performed in village hall, library and pub; the Fish Cabaret paying homage to the fish particular to this river and involving a new teenage jazz a capella group, school jazz band, a singing fishmonger; the Rain Cabaret with sketches about foretelling rain, lots of new songs as well as favourites such as Singin’ in the Rain; tales particular to this river researched and told in Stourhead gardens, along the river bank and in local schools by a storyteller; music for bridges written and played by a scratch group – the Cutwater Band (Figures 6 and 7); over 150 pieces of new music all about this valley, its springs, streams, creatures and people.

Our composer in residence on the River Stour, Karen Wimhurst, has collected spoken...
histories to literally interweave with a new composition for wind instruments, an experimental piece mingling the sounds of a working mill with percussion and voice, music based on river bird song played in concert after breakfast and a dawn chorus walk. She plays clarinet with bass and cello in a new trio – Watershed – who are performing their own music and that of first-time composers in the valley. We have brought together musicians with plumbers to create new musical instruments made from plumbing artefacts (Figure 8), for a challenging concert of new music called Pipeworks which is so successful that the Institute of Plumbers wants them to play at their annual conference. And we are trying to bring together the huge body of knowledge about the river which resides in the catchment to compound and share in its richness and add new layers of identity.

In August we initiated The Water Market, taking over a quintessential market town, Blandford Forum in the Stour catchment, bringing together the best people from the valley and across the country to sell watery products and offer advice of many kinds. This included people selling rainwater harvesting equipment and low flush loos, ice cream and organic watercress, beer and water-based paint, environmentally friendly soaps and organic flour milled by water power. It included experts on water mills, local water companies, the Environment Agency, plumbers advising on how to mend a tap, Water Aid, artists, buskers, canoeing, local water historians. And we had local television and national radio with us. Already we have had enquiries from near and far about doing it in other places. The water-
cress grower sold 35 boxes of watercress – on a good day at a farmers market he sells 6. A company selling home water purification equipment had to give people appointments, something it has never had to do even at trade shows. All of the stall holders have expressed great enthusiasm for doing it again despite the deluge which accompanied the day – of course.

Postscript
Common Ground plays a unique role in linking ordinary nature and everyday culture. Philosophy and practice evolve through projects such as Confluence, which are then offered across the country and often beyond. The focus of the local, so important in today’s ever more abstract and globalizing world offers ideas capable of translation into other cultures. Memories and dreams, constancy and catharsis – even looked at prosaically a river is an asset we could never build. We want to encourage people along their own pathways of exploration and expression, for our attachment to place comes through meaning. We are trying to create some new channels through which stories and meaning can travel, as well as moving the debate and the action towards local people standing up for their deeper cultural relations with place, nature and the land.

One simple observation links ancient wisdoms with fractal science, aesthetic observation with the seepage of language and names – “all rivers, small or large, agree in one character, they like to lean a little on one side” (John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing*, 1857). Common Ground’s work is based upon an idea of getting there better in the long run by going the long way round.

References
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