



## **Living by The Ash Tree Waters**

Project Report

October 2022



### **Project Organisers:**

Andover Trees United

### **Project Funders:**

Watercress & Winterbournes Landscape Partnership

Test Valley Borough Council, Councilor Grant

**Other Funders** contributing to the success of the project (staff/ project leaders):

Reaching Communities Big Lottery

### **Project Dates:**

April – August 2022

### Where the project took place:

The Watercress & Winterbourns catchment – Andover and surrounding villages of Appleshaw and Vernham Dean. Workshops took place in local schools and in the community. Achievements include streamside and river walks and choral performances along with the development, trial and use of nature explorer backpacks.



### The core aims of the project:

To engage the local community in an exploration of local rivers and chalk streams and their cultural heritage.

Through physical explorations and traditional folk music, artists and outdoor learning officers from Andover Trees United led local school pupils and residents of Andover and villages on a journey of discovery in celebration of their rare chalk stream waters and the Ash and other native trees that grow alongside them.

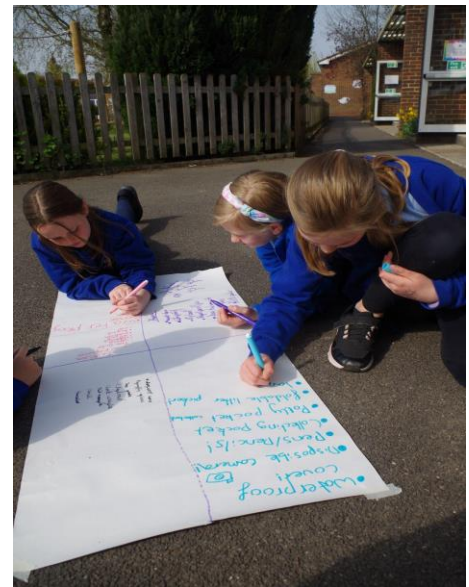
**Andover:** A crossroads for millennia, small groups settled here, creating homesteads and fortifying areas on the hilltops but all that really survives of those pre-Saxon times is the town's name: from 'Onna-dwfr', 'Anna-dwfr', or 'Andefera', 'the river of the ash trees' or 'place by the Ash-tree waters'.



The Project was called “Living By The Ash Tree Waters” to introduce and convey the connection of the local community to its rivers and chalk streams and engage people in how these are steeped in events of cultural and historic importance.

**Who funded the project:**

Andover Trees United, The Watercress & Winterbournes Landscape Partnership Scheme (administered by HIWWT) and Test Valley Borough Council.



## What the funders enabled Andover Trees United to achieve in this project

- Commissioning Place-based Artist James Aldridge to prepare, develop and lead:

James Aldridge	Target numbers	Participant actual numbers
3x whole day school workshops	150 ages 5-11	140 ages 5-11yrs in 3 schools
5x half-day community product evaluation workshops	50	75 all ages
5x half-day artist-led walks	75 all ages	30 all ages
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>275 people</b>	<b>245</b>

3x full-day Workshops in 3 schools – Portway Juniors, Appleshaw and Vernham Dean  
 James worked with 140 pupils (ages 5-11yrs) building on his earlier ATU project ‘Ash Tree Stream’ and the children’s existing knowledge of river ecology, physicality and location. The workshops kickstarted the design of the Nature (Curious) Explorer Backpacks (*stream-related learning and engagement activities for young people*).



## 5x half-day Community 'Backpack Evaluation' Days



## 5x Guided Walks

Using the Nature (Curious) Explorer Backpacks as a starting point to trigger discussion and reflection on people's relationship with the river, participants walked, talked and created along the path of the river (*celebrating the streams through creative community engagement activities*).



The final guided walks alongside ditches, rivers and chalk streams were combined with pop-up streamside concerts celebrating the cultural heritage of the chalk streams.



## 15x Design-Branded and Fully-Equipped Nature (Curious) Explorer Backpacks

Community workshops tested the prototype backpacks that had been designed by the children; guided streamside walks used the final backpacks.

- **Commissioning Folk Musician, Paul Sartin to research music and song linked to the chalk streams, to teach them and lead performances**

<b>Paul Sartin</b>	<b>Anticipated participants</b>	<b>Actual</b>
3x evening community workshops, 3 locations	60 all ages	30 all ages
3x performances linked to walks	150 all ages (90 audience/ 60 performers)	70 all ages (40 audience/ 30 performers)
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>210</b>	<b>100 all ages</b>



*Entertaining in Vernham Dean*

*Pop-up choir with music master Paul Sartin*

3x Evening Workshops in 3 locations - Andover, Appleshaw and Vernham Dean

Local residents from Andover, Appleshaw and Vernham Dean were taught folk songs that were linked to chalk streams and rivers.

3x Lunchtime Concerts in 3 locations - Andover, Appleshaw and Vernham Dean

The resulting pop-up choir was then supported to perform in the same 3 locations to an audience comprising participants in James’s walks and local residents who were ‘out and about’ at the time.

## **What happened during the project:**

3 locations in the Watercress and Winterbournes catchment were used: Andover, Appleshaw and Vernham Dean.

Working with pupils from 3 schools in these locations, place-based artist James Aldridge, supported by Andover Trees United (ATU) staff and volunteers designed, developed and produced 15 “Nature (Curious) Explorer” backpacks specifically for use in explorations along stream and river banks.

There were 10 walks in total, led by James and supported by ATU staff: 5 walks tested out the backpacks, after which participants feedback was used to refine the final design; 5 walks used and enjoyed the final products as part of a combined experience that brought together nature exploration, poetry, prose and music

There were 3 evening music workshops, one in each of the 3 locations. 20 different people filled a total of 30 workshop places, learning and performing specially selected traditional folk songs with musician Paul Sartin.

10 of the singers came to all of the workshops and formed a pop-up choir which went on to perform at James’s walks. The half-hour performances consisted of 4 songs sung a cappella in 3-part harmony interspersed with readings; new harmonies were composed by Paul Sartin, while members of the choir found the readings, researched local chalk-stream histories and used them to write new lyrics.

## **How, with funders support, this project made a difference:**

- 3 community workshops led to 3 riverside performances, which linked to the final 5 walks, providing each location with a day of waterside celebration.
- 105 participants ranging in ages from 14 months - 75 years engaged with their senses in exploring the Ash trees and chalk streams in their locality, thereby fostering a positive habit of looking, sharing, noticing, seeing and engaging with the local environment rather than merely passing through it.
- 140 pupils from 3 participating local schools worked with a professional environmental artist to learn about their local chalk streams and how this connects people to place.
- The school children learnt about an end-to-end process in the design of the bespoke nature explorer backpacks for community use and future connection to the Watercress and Winterbournes.
- The legacy of the Nature (Curious) Explorer backpacks will continue to trigger discussion and reflection on people’s relationship with the river, as they walk, talk

and create along the path of the river (celebrating through creative community activities).

- 100 participants ranging in age from 4 - 80 years came together to learn about, celebrate and enjoy their cultural heritage through chalk stream and river-related folk songs, poetry and prose.
- Preserving and renewing our cultural heritage, and adding to it with newly-created works, the body of music used in the project has created a legacy of song connecting local residents to their rivers and streams.
- The dissemination of traditional folk music to the local community sparked new interest in the genre

### **Feedback from stakeholders and participants:**

ATU evaluation was continuous. Qualitative and quantitative data and event/ activity feedback was collected. This included bespoke feedback forms, questionnaires, surveys and interviews. The artists and ATU officers collated the data to produce the final report.

#### **1. Feedback from artists:**

Artists engaged in pre-, during and post- evaluation processes enabling them to review their aims and progress continuously and to develop and adapt events and activities in line with findings.

##### James Aldridge (place-based artist):

“I enjoyed being able to take my own river research and use this to enhance people’s awareness of their own local rivers...I loved the way that the final walks and streamside choral events came together.”

“This project has helped me to develop new artwork in the form of portable pieces that become activated through use by members of the local community...This has supported the development of my practice that enables me to apply for future related opportunities.”

##### Paul Sartin (leading folk musician and singer):

“The projects have enhanced the participants’ aural, learning and music skills and have helped them to learn about their local cultural heritage. As well as the skills acquired, the participants benefited from group work, social interaction, and the joy of making music.”

“As a creative practitioner, I have learned from the interactive two-way creative process, developing my teaching and workshop skills and taking inspiration from the collection of traditional and newly-composed musical material.”



## 2. Feedback from community participants:

Cllr Tracey Tasker (April 2022), TVBC Councillor for Romans Ward; Cabinet member for Housing and Environmental Health

“...Thank you so much. I loved the backpacks and will share (about them) on my Cllr Facebook page and have asked TVBC to share...”



Carol (June 2022): “I have loved visiting villages which, even though close to Andover, I haven’t been to before. It has been lovely to sing and to walk in new places and I really enjoyed researching local chalk stream histories for our performances.”

Terry (July 2022): “I learnt a lot about how rare and precious chalk streams are and loved visiting new places on the walks in the chalk stream catchment area such as Appleshaw. James Aldridge, the artist and the ATU staff leading the walks were brilliant and I loved watching the children using the Nature Explorer packs to engage with nature. It was great to see families out in the countryside and exploring together. Personally, I really enjoyed meeting new people and having the time and opportunity to promote my personal well being”.

Tamsin (July 2022): “My spirit feels refreshed after the most beautiful morning! I went on an Artist guided walk around Anton Lakes in Andover with James Aldridge and Andover Trees United. We paddled in the streams, learned about chalk aquifers and Winterbournes, made art with nature, finished up with a beautiful folk singing moment under a young Oak. And everything is better with a little song 100%!”

### **When asked in a questionnaire what attracted participants to these events**

- 60% said the main reason was to learn more about the heritage and conservation of our local rivers and chalk streams
- 80% said because I enjoy walking and being outdoors

Also mentioned:

- Being a local event in the community to meet new people
- Wellbeing benefits

### **When participants were asked what they liked about the trial/ prototype nature explorer backpacks used in community workshops, responses included:**

- They were very thoughtfully equipped. The variety of tools and creative prompts was great.
- I felt like I could learn a lot from using them.
- The fauna and flora identifiers were great
- The activity sheets
- Useful resource to find out more about what we encountered on the walk and stimulate thoughts and activities

### **To re-evaluate the final nature explorer backpacks used in the streamside walks participants were asked:**

“What did you like about the finished nature explorer backpacks?”

Identified as favourites were:

- The tree classification flipbooks
- Good selection of activities supported with nice resources

### **Additional responses informed us that:**

- 100% of participants enjoyed using the backpacks
- 60% of the participants would use the nature explorer backpacks again if available in the community
- 100% of respondents felt that these events had connected them to their local natural environment to learn/ share in cultural heritage and, due to the events, they had learnt something new about local rivers & chalk streams.
- 100% of singers would like to join in future singing events linked to the natural environment.

- 100% of singers, all of whom were Andover-based, valued the opportunity to visit and sing in new places in their local area
- 100% of singers and audience members learned new facts about chalk streams in general as well as about their local heritage

## **Beneficiaries & Impacts**

350 people of all ages (workshop and walk participants, singers, audience members, project leaders and volunteers), including 140 children and young people aged 7-11 who designed backpacks:

- Enjoyed the collaborative experience of creating and performing together
- Benefited in terms of intergenerational sharing and community connections
- Enjoyed positive mental and physical wellbeing by connecting to the natural world through the visual arts and song
- Have benefitted from increased self-esteem and confidence as their contributions were valued and showcased
- Discovered new enhanced existing connections to their local chalk streams and rivers

### **1. How has this project had an impact and made a difference?**

Data collected demonstrates that the project has had the following impact:

- People of all ages from Andover and surrounding villages were persuaded to come out post-pandemic and connect with others from diverse backgrounds.
- These events connected people to their local natural environment to share in/ learn more about its ecology, cultural heritage and conservation
- Pupils taking part were reminded of the importance of connecting to the natural environment, learning about its ecology, cultural heritage and conservation.
- Pupils taking part revitalised their learning and development and understanding of ecology, the environment and, being empowered to learn and make positive contributions that were shared and acknowledged by the wider communities, experienced raised self-esteem.
- Musical workshops and artist-led walks that explored the ecology and cultural heritage of the streams led to new learning about local rivers and chalk streams.
- 75% of singers who participated in the singing workshops/ rehearsals and streamside performances were unfamiliar with and had never sung folk music before and of those, 100% expressed a view that these events have sparked an interest in continuing to get involved in folk music and singing.

## 2. Legacy:

As a result of this project:

1. Participants learnt to notice and engage with their river environments, developing habits of 'seeing and sharing' that they can take with them on future walks and explorations.
2. Participants learned about the threats posed by a changing climate to the unique chalk stream landscape and better understood the need to take personal everyday action to reduce their impact (*anecdotal, in conversation*).
3. 15 'Nature Explorer' backpacks, their contents and specially designed activities are available for ongoing use by the charity and can be loaned or hired to local organisations, community groups and residents
4. Children & young people have been acknowledged as leaders and decision makers, raising their self-esteem and self-confidence and earning the respect of significant adults as a result of their participation in designing nature explorer backpacks for the local community to share
5. New interest has been generated in folk music
6. The collected songs and readings are available for future enjoyment, performance and celebration of chalk streams and rivers
7. NEW COMPOSITION! As a result of new harmonies written by Paul Sartin and new lyrics relevant to the Andover area and its watercress growing heritage written for the project by one of the participants, a new folk song has emerged. The following was received by renowned folk musician Roger Watson, whose song was collected by Paul, adapted for the project and performed at each of the walk events: *"Thank you so much, Paul. It looks as if I may have written a folk song there. One of my criteria is for a song to be taken and altered to fit with new circumstances. In the same way Tom and Barbara Brown resited my "Christmas Hare" in their own North Devon location. So thank you and Wendy for your lyrics and harmony"* (Song: 'Watercress-O')

### **Summary and conclusion:**

**The core aims of the project have been successfully accomplished.**

Living by the Ash Tree Waters', connected the people of Andover, Appleshaw, and Vernham Dean with their local chalk streams. Musical workshops culminated in performances of stream-themed traditional songs, and artist-led walks explored the ecology and cultural heritage of the streams while informing the design of engagement resources for young people. ref: [Grants awarded for community chalk stream projects | Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust \(hiwwt.org.uk\)](https://www.hiwwt.org.uk)

## **A Positive Impact:**

Local schools and children engaged with Andover Trees United and the work of an environmental, place-based artist to further their understanding of chalk stream ecology, heritage and the importance of environmental conservation through the integration of geography, ecology, visual and cultural arts.

All who took part enjoyed the walks and singers of all ages enjoyed learning new and traditional songs and performances.

There was a specific focus on listening to participants and encouraging them to play an active role in developing their ideas and connecting with others to showcase and share them, thereby ensuring meaningful and in-depth participation.

When participants were asked “Did you learn something new about local rivers and chalk streams on these walks?” 100% of the respondents said they did.

The series of events and activities referenced and coincided with wider national conversations (*The Waterlight Project*) and media coverage (*Places of Poetry*) about the importance of exploration, conservation and appreciation of our rivers and rare chalk streams.

### **Footnote**

Since completing the project with us, Paul died, tragically and unexpectedly on September 14th 2022.

We are in the process of working with Roger Watson and the singers who participated in the project to produce recordings of the compositions that were created: Roger’s original words with Paul’s new harmonies and the new words with the new harmonies. These will be made public once they have been completed and signed off by Roger and Paul’s family.

## **What have we learned? Some uptake issues and learning evaluation**

- **General**

Although participation was satisfactory and all who participated genuinely enjoyed and learned from the experience, in spite of the extent to which we advertised and promoted locally and further afield, take-up was sadly not as good as we had expected.

Socio-geographically the events were intended and expected to bring people out to share in activities/ events and exploration that connected people from different locations with their own local, natural environment. However, the evaluation demonstrates that, overall, the events were attended more by those participants who came from Andover and further afield rather than resident villagers participating in activities based in their own village. It was really interesting to note the comments of long-term Andover residents about how much they had enjoyed having both the opportunity and a reason to get out and about to explore new rural locations close to home.

In conversation with other event organisers, it would appear that response in general post-pandemic is currently less for events than pre-pandemic. However, as the evaluation of participants' responses indicates that 100% said that, having taken part, they would like to do more of these stream-side and singing walks in the future, we can see that the events *were* popular and could be repeated.

- **Schools**

Whilst this was a great success for the pupils taking part in the school-based workshops, it was disappointing that very few parents and school staff engaged in the full series of events outside of the school timetable.

The main thinking behind our work has always been to provide opportunities for *all* children and their schools to receive/ deliver first class environmental education and an understanding of the environmental crises that we face in a hopeful and positive way. In so doing, we also have the opportunity, through the children and their schools, to reach the community of families and neighbours that the schools serve. It was an assumption that this would be a straightforward process and, although it has been disappointing to find that this was not the case, it has at the same time been a very useful process to have gone through.

Post-pandemic, schools have understandably become more inward-looking. Staff shortages in school and COVID sickness issues are still having a significant impact and it appears that the schools often struggled to make the time and focus their precious resources to champion the out of school events and opportunities for wider learning/ sharing in the community. Over the decade of our work, we have built excellent relationships with almost all of our local schools and the experience of running this project has given us a much better insight and appreciation of the support that we need to give schools to improve communication with their communities so that they become more aware of what is or could be on offer.