

SPLASHY

A RIVER MOLE ISLAND EXPLORED

A RUNNING PLACES PROJECT

By Lucy Quinnell and Jack Hide-Bayne

Designed and illustrated by Cathy Brett

**LEVELLING
— UP —**



FRONT COVER: Traditional local joke
Lost tourist, pointing over the bridge: 'Erm, Leatherhead?'
Dog-walker, rather offended: 'Huh! Same to you, Fishface!'

Cover photo © Lucy Quinnell L&DCPS, Illustration © Cathy Brett 2024



Hello,
My name is Jack.

I was born in Coromandel, New Zealand, although my mother grew up in Ashted, just 4km from Splash Island. In July 2022 I moved to Epsom, here in the United Kingdom, and I currently go to Therfield School in Leatherhead.

As part of the Bronze Duke of Edinburgh's Award, I am completing a three-month period of volunteering working with Lucy Quinnell at the Leatherhead & District Countryside Protection Society, which has culminated in this book!

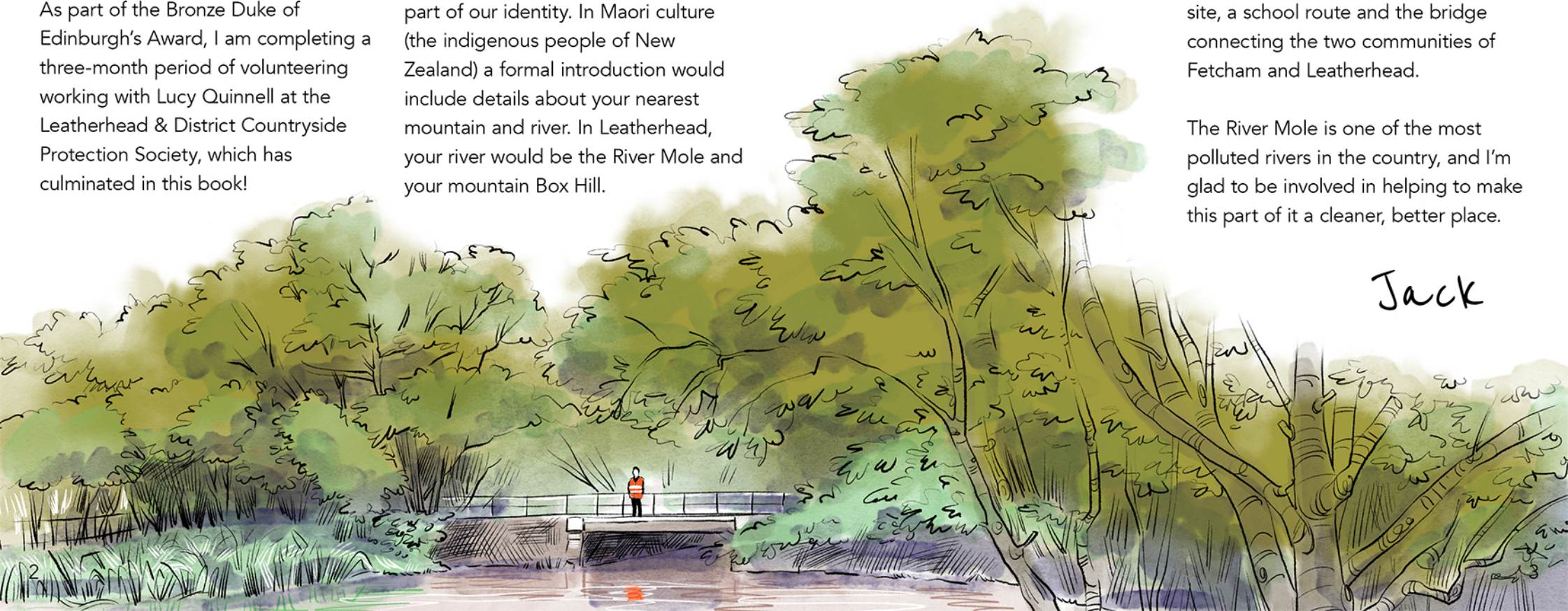
The U.K. is vastly different from New Zealand, even if N.Z. was once a colony. There are differences in the way people interact with nature, particularly in more rural areas like the place I grew up in. New Zealanders are almost forced to interact with their natural surroundings, as there aren't many large cities tarmacking the ground, and we don't have big motorways or an extensive rail network to help us get from place to place. Our communities are more spread out without concentrated town centres, so instead what we have in common is the natural landscape, and that's a strong part of our identity. In Maori culture (the indigenous people of New Zealand) a formal introduction would include details about your nearest mountain and river. In Leatherhead, your river would be the River Mole and your mountain Box Hill.

This book is about part of our local landscape here in Leatherhead and Fetcham: Splash Island. Splash Island is a pedestrian crossing point over the River Mole, just 1.4km from my school in North Leatherhead. The first time I went there by car from my school, however, it meant crossing the M25 motorway four times! It is a place ignored by our car-centric society, but this wasn't always the case. It's possible that this was the start of some of the first settlements in the Leatherhead area, as it would have been an important crossing point from both sides of the river.

Lucy has shown me Splash Island and explained its points of interest and its problems, and to me it now feels lost and forgotten. We talked about lots of ways in which we think things could be improved, including friendlier safety signage and simple changes to reduce fire risk. I'm very interested in how the pedestrian footpath across the island, used by Fetcham students to get to and from my school, floods frequently, which blocks their access. The island is strangely divided into two parishes and between two landowners, and both the river and the island seem to lack the upkeep they require as a historical site, a school route and the bridge connecting the two communities of Fetcham and Leatherhead.

The River Mole is one of the most polluted rivers in the country, and I'm glad to be involved in helping to make this part of it a cleaner, better place.

Jack





*Hello.
I'm Lucy.*

I was born in Leatherhead, and I still live in Leatherhead. "My river is the River Mole, and my mountain Box Hill." (Isn't that wonderful? Thank you, Jack). My ironworking family has been embedded in Surrey for centuries. Like them, I run an ironworks, and I am a full-time artist, curator and writer specialising in metals. My DNA tells of other strands woven into me as my ancestors moved about on this lump of rock that we all call 'home'; people from bigger mountains, in Scotland and the Himalayas, and even the early Polynesian settlers of New Zealand. Connections (my favourite theme) can be found wherever we care to look hard enough.

I grew up in a quieter Leatherhead, in a small blacksmithing and farming family. I walked with my primary school to Nower Wood, where we were given Chalkhill Blue butterfly badges. At the Weald & Downland Living Museum I bought a cardboard cut-out kit of Bayleaf Farmstead. Like Jack, I went to Therfield School, as did my sons. As a leaving gift in 1984, the school asked me to choose a book. I chose David Attenborough's 'The Living Planet'. I still have it. It contains pleas (a staggering four decades ago) about how we must change our interactions with Planet Earth if we hope to continue our survival. The M25 tore up our farm while I finished school and studied Art & Design at Epsom, the Junction 9 section opening the exact day I left home to study English Literature at Exeter University, with modules in theatre costume design,

the history of witchcraft, and 'Land, Landscape & Literature'. A deep passion for ecology and cultural heritage emerged in me, and a fascination with humankind's interactions with its diverse environments.

I ran the 'Save Teazle Wood' campaign and founded a charity to manage Teazle Wood as a community woodland nature reserve. I was approached to become Chair of the Leatherhead & District Countryside Protection Society (founded to save Norbury Park in 1929). Their current focus was supporting the north section of Splash Island to enable public access and conservation improvements. The Society was due to move on to its next challenge, but as I got to know Splash Island better I felt very strongly that despite so much effort we were not yet ready to bid it farewell.

This gem of a place and the dramatic river and landscapes which surround it are in trouble. Pollution, discarded debris, anti-social behaviour, maintenance challenges, weather changes and a disconnect between human beings and nature threaten the health of the landscape and the people who are part of its story. There is enormous potential for further understanding and improving this rich outdoor classroom, with its extraordinary history, mysteries, ecology and splendour. It is for me a microcosm of the wider world right now. I have never known so many different local groups keen to see positive change, and if in this moment we can collectively show that we are capable of taking the right care of this miniature 'world within a world', then there is surely great hope for the bigger picture. What legacy shall we hand to Jack and his contemporaries? What flow of life and beauty can we all unlock?

Lucy

About

SPLASH ISLAND, also known as 'The Splash', 'Fetcham Splash' and 'Leatherhead Splash', is a small and beautiful island in the **River Mole** in Surrey at the boundary between north-west Leatherhead and Fetcham.

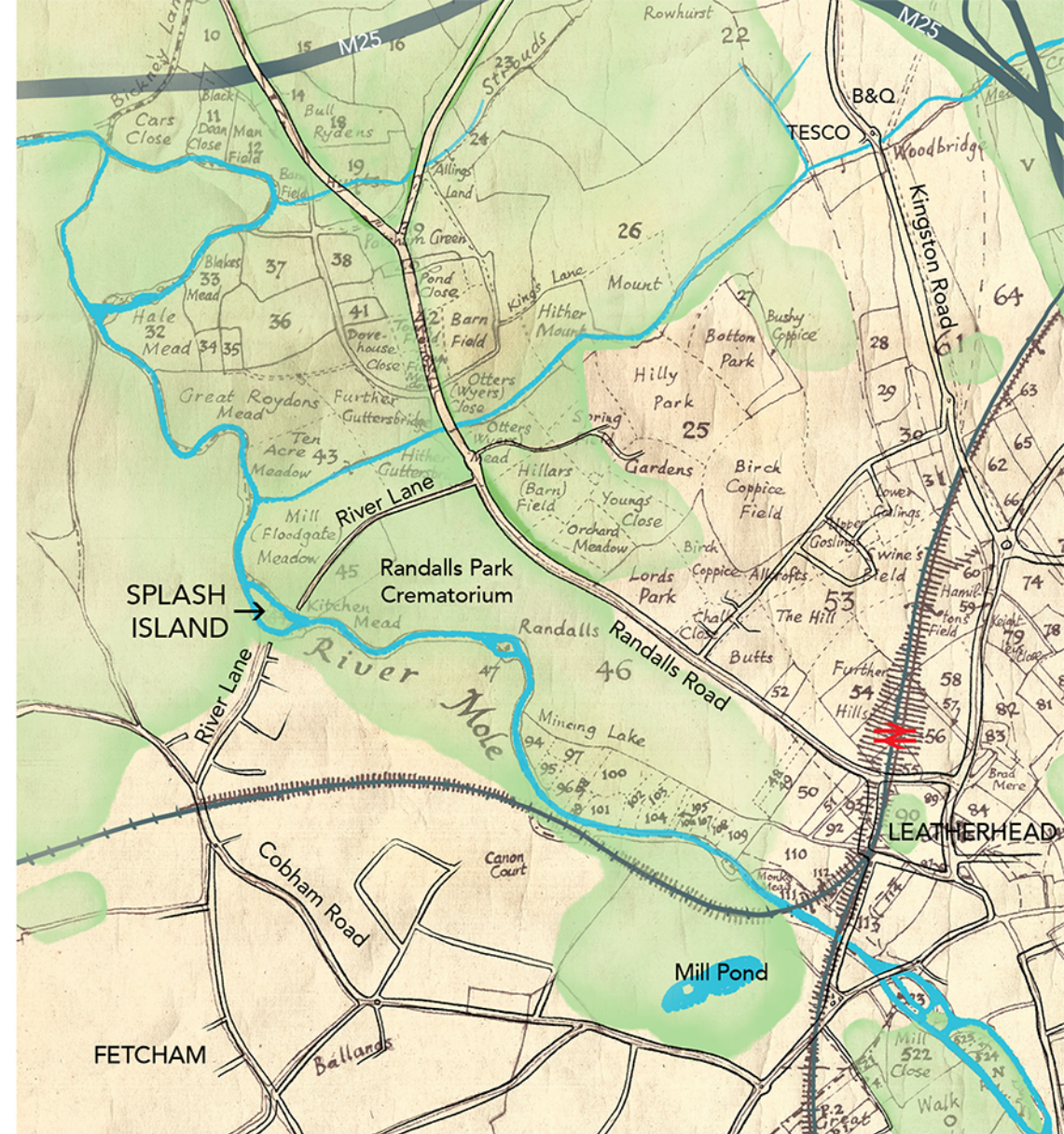
It is popular with local people for short recreational visits on foot or by bicycle, and as a valued **pedestrian river-crossing** for those going between home, school, workplace and shops in the two communities. Pedestrian access is via **River Lane** (Leatherhead) and **River Lane** (Fetcham). Splash Island **floods** when the river levels are high after periods of heavy rain, and at these times it is not possible to cross the Mole at this point.

The Splash is not suitable for long visits, as there are **no visitor facilities** such as toilets or a café. Cars cannot cross the River Mole at Splash Island, and there is no parking on the Leatherhead side (east of the river). On the Fetcham side (west of the river) a small parking bay in River Lane KT22 9XH provides approximately 5 car parking spaces. The entrance to Fetcham's River Lane is opposite Fetcham Reading Room KT22 9RU.

The nearest train station to Splash Island is **Leatherhead** 1.1 miles away - a 25-minute walk along **Randalls Road** and down River Lane (Leatherhead). There is limited wheelchair access to parts of Splash Island (the bridges, for example, which have pleasant views of the Mole), but also uneven pathways, long grass, tree roots and a kissing gate leading to the north end of the island. The River Mole is **unsuitable for wild swimming** (see pages 32,33).

The single island is split into two parts in terms of ownership; the southern section owned and managed by **Mole Valley District Council** as a green space open to the public; the northern accessible by kind permission of the landowners (the local Conisbee farming family), with assistance from the **Leatherhead & District Countryside Protection Society**. This part is closed on 16 December each year and on other occasions for essential maintenance like grass cutting and tree safety work (see pages 36,37).

Countryside, particularly around farms and waterways, is both **hazardous and vulnerable**. Landowners and visitors have responsibilities and should be aware at all times of the **risks** and risk management.



The UK Countryside Code applies at all times. **Respect everyone. Protect the environment. Enjoy the outdoors.**

For more information:

www.countryside-code.org.uk
[what3words ///spent.splash.clay](http://what3words:///spent.splash.clay)

ABOVE: The current local road layout (black outlines and colours) layered over the (brown) 1782 GWILT Map (updated and redrawn with railway and new Parish Boundaries by J.H.H. Del 1947)
 © L&DLHS

River Stories

Fact, fiction & folklore

Any local resident or visitor who takes the time and trouble to seek out the history of the River Mole's winding through Leatherhead & District is in for a treat, if not a huge and mesmerising distraction for years to come.

Just as a river goes on forever, so does its endlessly **fascinating story**, with twists and turns and deep mysteries and light, sparkling froth. One could spend a lifetime establishing the complex background and chronology of the many long-gone mills at and around Splash Island, or just a few amusing minutes picturing **Sir Bulstrode Whitelock** at the time of the Long Parliament succumbing to a **surfeit of trout** during a stay at Randalls on the south-east bank of the Splash. Leatherhead's **delicious trout** had more than a national reputation (as did the Mole's habit of running underground just south of the town).



**"Mole digs herself a path, by working day and night
(According to her name, to show her nature right)
And underneath the earth, for three miles space doth creep."**
Michael Drayton, *The Poly-Olbion*, 17th Song, 1613

There is so much material to excite the modern local **teacher** or student, whatever their particular area of interest – what a tragic waste that this vast doorstep resource remains largely hidden, quietly waiting to **enrich lives** and to make its community proud and glad again.

Where to start? A.T. Ruby wrote extensively about the River Mole – his article entitled 'The Leatherhead River' featured in **L&DLHS Proceedings** in 1964, and thanks to the efforts of those who have ensured **online access**, this excellent overview can be freely enjoyed by us all today:

L&DLHS Proceedings VOL_2_NO_8_1964.pdf
(leatherheadhistoryarchive.org)

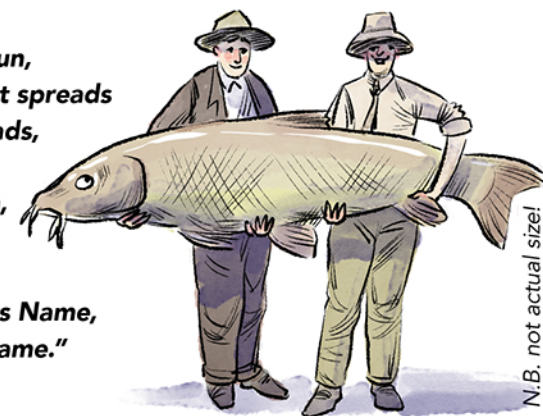


**"And Mole, that like a nouseling mole
doth make
His way still under ground till Thames
he o'ertake."**

Edmund Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, Book IV,
Canto XI; c. 1596

**"Rivers arise; whether thou be the Son,
Of utmost Tweed, or Oose, or gulphie Dun,
Or Trent, who like some earth-born Giant spreads
His thirty Armes along the indented Meads,
Or sullen Mole that runneth underneath,
Or Severn swift, guilty of Maidens death,
Or Rockie Avon, or of Sedgie Lee,
Or Coaly Tine, or antient hallowed Dee,
Or Humber loud that keeps the Scythians Name,
Or Medway smooth, or Royal Towred Thame."**

John Milton, *At a Vacation Exercise*, 1627



In living memory, a famously huge **barbel fish** lived deep in the river at Splash Island. Two men who still live in Leatherhead, and who played at the Splash as children, recall that this was in the 1940s-50s.

Once a year this fish was caught, weighed and popped back in. Accounts that this fish **ate sheep and local children** are, we think, to be taken with a pinch of salt!



**"Leatherhead trout are famous, and the
traveller who wishes to test their
excellence may, if he is a brother of the
angle, throw a line here - or mine
hostess of the Swan [the medieval
coaching inn which stood at the
crossroads in Leatherhead town centre
until the 1900s] will, in the proper
season, supply those who prefer the
fish without the labour."**

James Thorne, *Rambles by Rivers*, 1844

**"The River Mole on the whole
Is a river of the soul.
Runs shallow, runs deep,
All its secrets it will keep.
Fish swim free, ducks paddle wild,
It's been my life since I was a child.
Now I'm old, now I'm grey,
It's still where to be each day."**

My River by John Payne, Fetcham. Published in
the *Leatherhead Advertiser*, 2 December 1999

* Local joke, see back cover



Splash Island today - cocooned by mature trees, with farmland glimpses - has a sense of **tranquil haven**. Technically, a Byway Open to All Traffic (B.O.A.T.) crosses the island, but actually the footbridge prevents cars crossing, resulting in a rare, peaceful landscape.

People pass through or linger for a while, and many have compared the rural river scenery and timeless atmosphere to John Constable's much-loved painting 'The Hay Wain'.

It is hard to imagine it in its many earlier incarnations, with early **mills** and as a major, bustling **route across the Mole**. Now nestling in a strange, fragmented part of north-west Leatherhead, close to the utilitarian aspects of the town (crematorium, sewage works, council community recycling centre, M25, business parks, riding and golf centres, and so on), it was once a **key ford** and major route from Guildford to Kingston.

*LEFT: Sunset on the Mole near Splash Island
RIGHT: Archaeology at a nearby site, all © Lucy Quinnell*

Archaeologists have unearthed finds in the local landscape that tell of **human occupation** going back **several millennia**, and the area is currently getting renewed attention as somewhere that has much to offer and much **more to discover**.





THIS PAGE: Flooded footpaths
OPPOSITE: Welsh castle, all © Lucy Quinnell

Leatherhead is an important Royal settlement ('Leodride') mentioned in the will of **King Alfred the Great** in the late 800s AD, and left to Alfred's son Edward the Elder. It is not, however, in the later Domesday Book commissioned by William I ('the Conqueror') in 1085 AD; a survey of landed estates (referred to as manors, holdings or entries). Its two modern 'halves' feature in Domesday Book as the separate landholdings of **Pachesham** and **Thorncroft** (if you picture current Leatherhead as a rough hourglass, with the Mole running up the left-hand side, Pachesham (more or less North Leatherhead) is the top glass bulb and Thorncroft (more or less South Leatherhead) the bottom one, with the modern town centre between the two and effectively in the narrow neck of the hourglass). The only Domesday mention of Leatherhead is within the entry for the manor of Ewell, where a 40-acre plot of land with the church of 'Leret' (Leatherhead) is listed. Historians have associated the older Leatherhead with Pachesham, and some believe that the missing church and pre-Conquest manor are still to be found, somewhere in North Leatherhead to the east of the Splash.

This was certainly a lively place at identifiable points in history. East of



the Splash and just east of Randalls Road, and clearly visible in the grounds of the riding school north of Springfield Drive, is the site of a major post-Conquest **moated manor house**, ambitiously re-built by **Sir Eustace de Hacche** circa 1290 AD. De Hacche was a major player, having superintended the building of castles in north Wales for Edward I. We know that he actually lived at his Pachesham property, as his daughter Juliana is recorded as having married William Hardreshull there in 1290, and Juliana and William's son John Hardreshull was born there in 1291. A **Gascony jug** was found by archaeologists at the site, and de Hacche certainly went to Gascony on the king's service in the Gascon Campaign, in the company of the king's brother Edmund and later with the Earl of Lancaster. Knights on horseback swashing through the Mole at the Splash are surely a historical reality.

Academics have speculated that **the name 'Leatherhead'** could have one of several different original meanings, including 'a public ford', 'a sloping location' or 'grey/brown river'. Lucy theorises that if it is the case that 'Leodride' meant **a place where people could ride across the river**, and if the historians are right that the Leatherhead of the time was at Patchesham, then the **key ford** that gave the settlement its name is much **more likely to be the Splash crossing** than the ford at the bottom of Bridge Street which served the later incarnation of Leatherhead. The Splash ford had neighbouring fords, at Common Meadow upstream and at Bickney Ford downstream, so perhaps we are looking at **a cluster of fords** useful enough as crossing places (and enabling travel north-west to Stoke D'Abernon; north to Oxshott, north-east to Chessington, Epsom, Ewell and Kingston; east to the Patchesham moated manor site, Ashted and London; south-east to modern Leatherhead town centre, Mickleham and Dorking; and south/south-west to Fetcham, Norbury, Bookham, Effingham, Guildford, and so on) to have given a settlement its name.

When did the Splash lose its role as a busy main thoroughfare? We know that the **Earl of Tyrconnel** tampered significantly with the landscaping and plumbing of **the Mole** during his time at **Randalls** in the mid to late 1700s. In an era of large and decorative 'designed estates', the rich sought to exclude the inconvenient poor from their views and earshot, and it seems that Tyrconnel didn't want the noise and bustle of busy fords close to his home. He closed roads, diverted roads and **dammed the river** to flood fords. Is the **deep bathing hole** at the Splash a feature deliberately dug by him to prevent wheeled carts attempting to cross the river at that point?

Unpicking what happened and when is like unravelling and re-knitting a Fair Isle jumper, and would form a sensational project for someone. Past interested people have assembled plenty of strands already. We recommend again A. T. Ruby's '**The Leatherhead River**' article in L&DLHS Proceedings.

*RIGHT: Leatherhead/Fetcham, Splash Island, Footbridge (and ford) over the River Mole 1928.
© The Francis Frith Collection*

*PAGES 16 & 17
TOP LEFT: Wooden Footbridge c1955
© The Francis Frith Collection,
TOP RIGHT: Footbridge 2024 © Lucy Quinnell,
BOTTOM LEFT: Main bridge 2023 © C Brett,
BOTTOM RIGHT: Splash Island c1904
© The Francis Frith Collection*

Ruby also addresses the interesting arrangement whereby **Splash Island** is divided into **two parts**, with the north-western section (where a mill once stood) in Fetcham, and the south-eastern section in Leatherhead:

"It will be seen also that the parish boundary passes to the south of the island for half of its length only and then turns across the island to the north stream, along which it continues to the west. So half the island (to the east) is in Leatherhead parish and half in Fetcham parish. Apart from Stump Island just above Leatherhead bridge (where it was necessary to site a boundary mark on the island so as to keep half the bridge within - and therefore the responsibility of - Fetcham) the riverine boundaries

elsewhere keep to the centre of the stream or to one side only of an island. It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that the 'cut' is an original part of the riverbed. The turning of the boundary across the island can only be explained by the 'Old Mill' being on the [north-]west end of the island and so being prior to the fixing of the parish boundary. If the northern stream was not natural but a millstream only, then it seems strange that its east end should have been left in another parish and that the boundary should not have passed along the north of the island to maintain control of the millstream. In the absence of any other evidence the writer conjectures that both streams are natural."

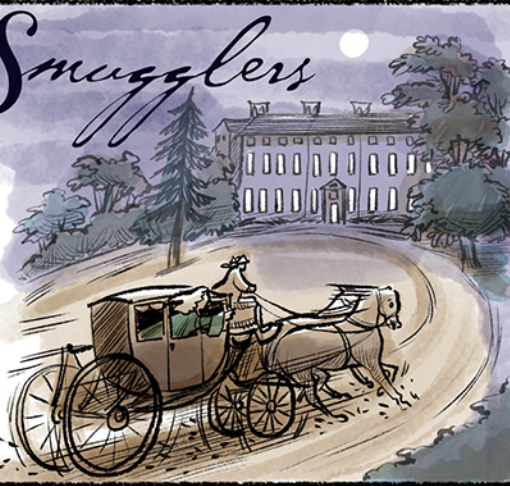
L&DLHS Proceedings, Volume 2, No. 8, 1964.





Zebedee and the Smugglers

Member of Parliament and wealthy owner of Fetcham Park, Arthur Moore, wants to stop the persistent smuggling between Portsmouth and London. The bands of thieves have been using local caves and cellars to hide their contraband. One night Moore is dining in Epsom and hears his home is under attack. Two smugglers he had earlier apprehended have been freed and Fetcham Park is in turmoil.



Moore's youngest daughter has been kidnapped, the study ransacked and his young son lies unconscious.



They wrenched the baby from my arms!



Poor master William!



He tried to save his sister



The smugglers came for our captives, Sir. They took baby Lily and the strong box



full of deeds and money

Call the physician! Search the grounds! Find my child!

But Zebedee is already on the trail...

Though still a teenager, Zebedee is Moore's most trusted servant. His sharp instincts and matchless intuitive skills make him the most useful worker on the Fetcham estate. While others search the Park grounds, Zebedee has followed the smugglers' tracks to Hawks Hill.

They split up, two South to Norbury but the larger group went North



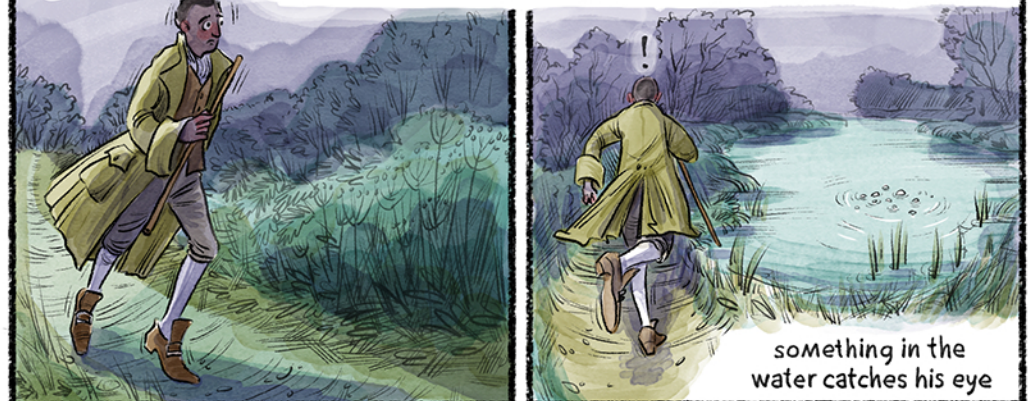
Norbury Park

North to the river

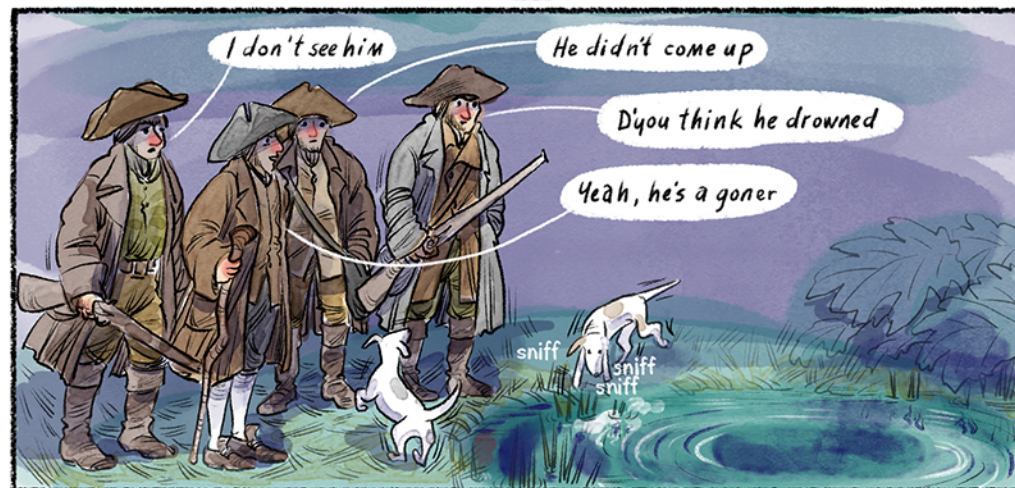
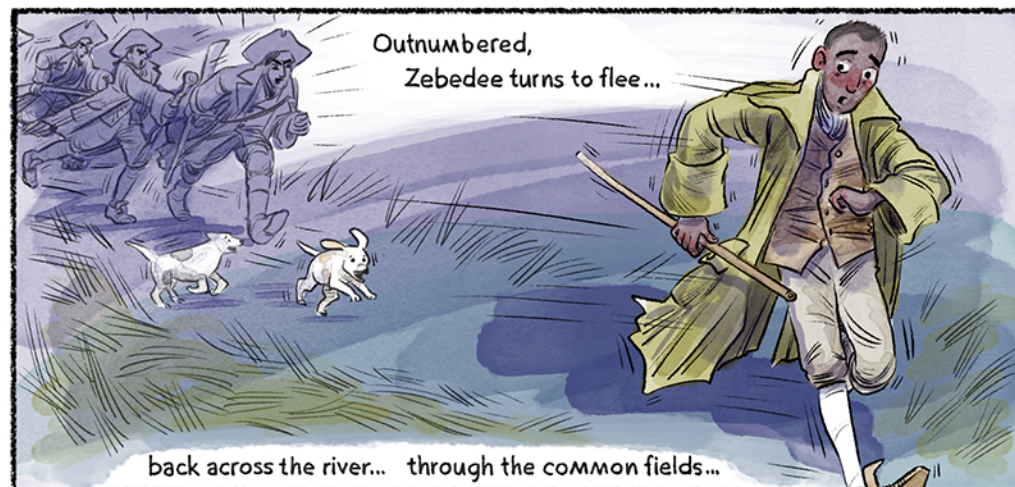
These are armed and dangerous men but still Zebedee decides to go...

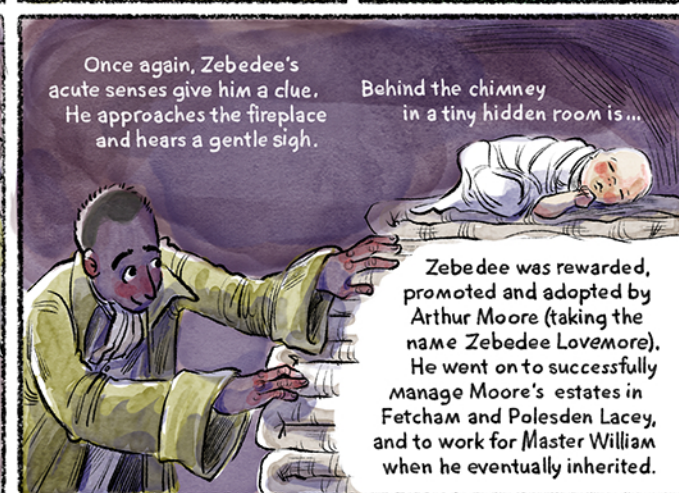
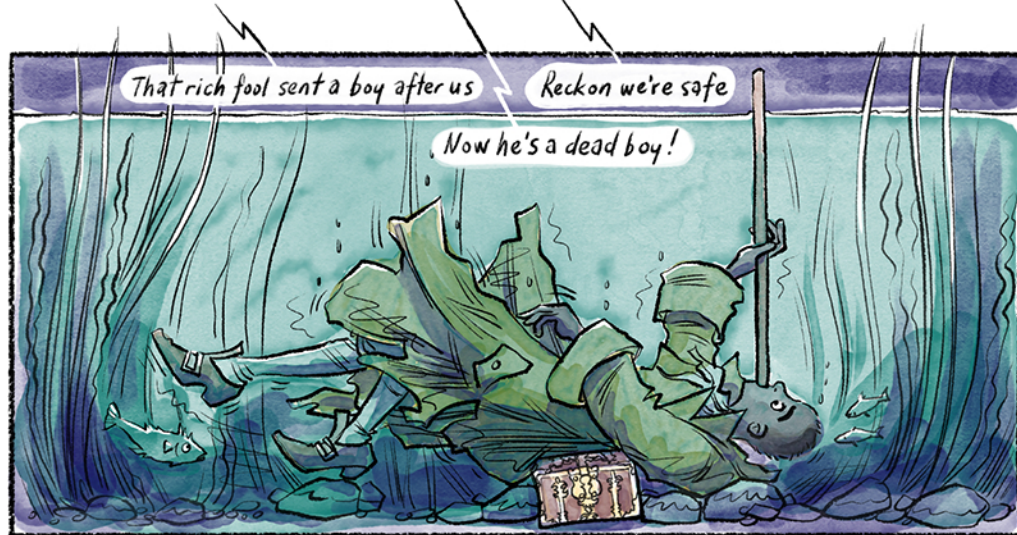


Zebedee makes swift progress along familiar paths, behind Hawks Hill Quarry to the moonlit Mill Pond. He isn't far behind them now...

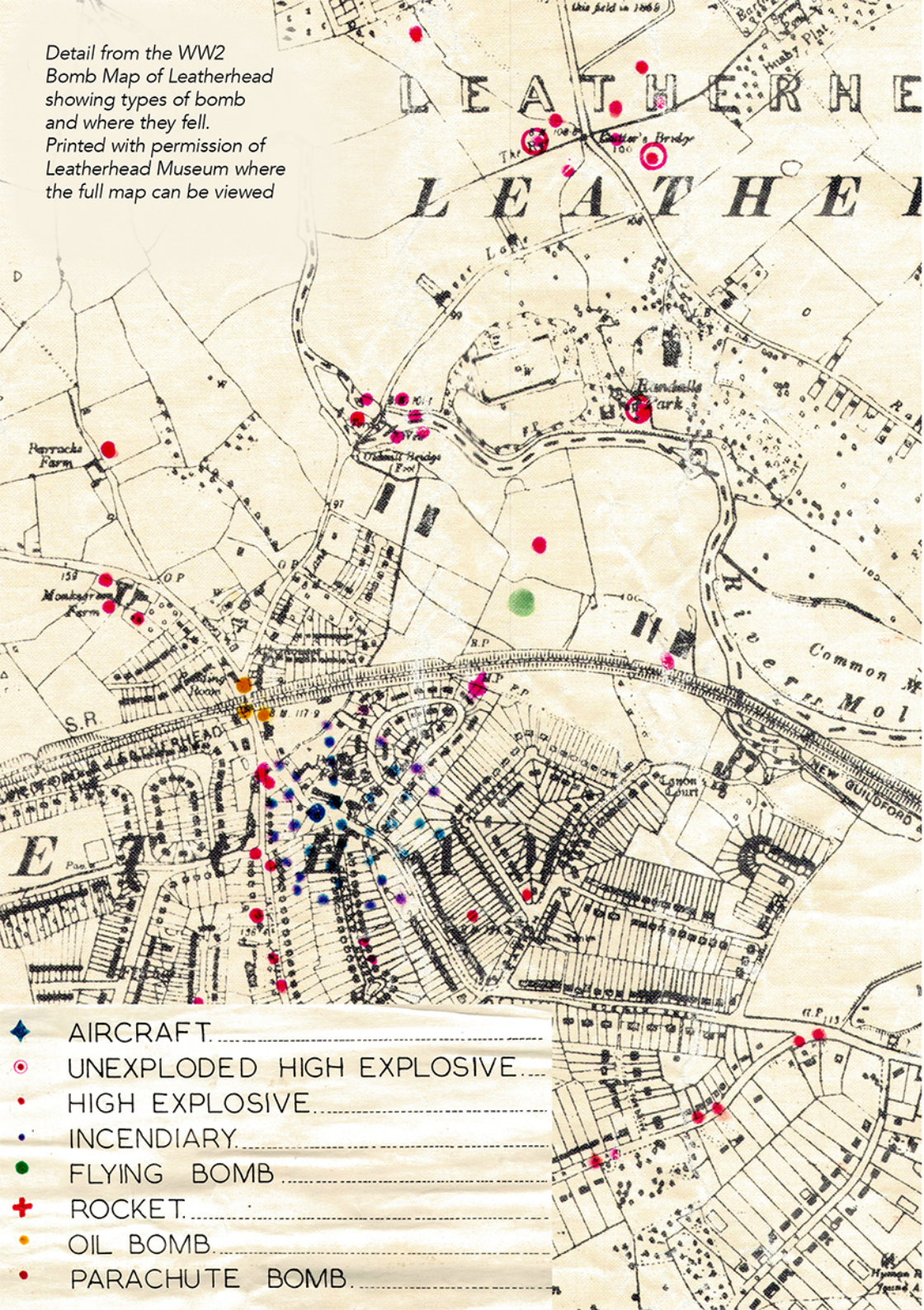


something in the water catches his eye





Detail from the WW2 Bomb Map of Leatherhead showing types of bomb and where they fell. Printed with permission of Leatherhead Museum where the full map can be viewed



Bombs!

Local people often talk about a bomb that dropped at Splash Island in **World War 2**. Some believe that it formed the very large '**swimming hole**' to the east side of Splash Island, and that this deep water is where the **giant barbel fish** must have lived. Is the swimming hole really the bomb crater? Jack went to **Surrey History Centre** to try and find out.

39 bombs were dropped on Leatherhead in WW2 according to 'Bombing Britain', which details more than 32,000 German air raids on the United Kingdom between September 1939 and March 1945. A big oak table survives in a house east of Splash Island, under which we know a **local boy slept for safety** during WW2 air raids.

<https://history-commons.net/search/?q=Bombing%20Britain>

A bomb (identified only as not a V-1 flying bomb) fell near the Old Mill footbridge at Splash Island. A map at the SHC records the bombs that fell on **Leatherhead Urban District** during the Second World War (ref. 6979/1/6). If it is accurate, then the large swimming hole is **not where the**

bomb fell. The bomb location is shown just a short distance round to the south (upstream) end of Splash Island instead. However, **another map** (shown on the opposite page) held at the **Leatherhead Museum**, records **SIX bombs** at the Splash site, so further careful investigation is clearly needed.

To younger generations the World Wars can feel remote and consigned to history, but as recently as **10th December 2023** a huge bang was heard across the local area when a bomb was found and **professionally detonated** in one of the Conisbees' farm fields, not far from Splash Island!

BELOW: Bomb found in December 2023 on the Conisbee farmland





SPLASH
ISLAND →

LiDAR

This is a **LiDAR** map of Splash Island and the area around it. **LiDAR** (**L**ight **D**etection **A**nd **R**anging) is an **airborne mapping technology** which uses light in the form of a **pulsed laser** to measure **variable distances** to the Earth, in order to create **3D representations** of the Earth's surface. It is extremely useful for showing **underlying land surfaces** usually concealed (by vegetation, for example), and for revealing **small elevation variations** which are harder to see with the human eye at ground level.

We hoped it might **clarify the bomb damage** to the landscape at the Splash, but we are not expert enough to be sure. We will seek experts in this field to see if they can identify anything of particular interest.



TOP LEFT: 'The Splash' (as it was in 1940) by Doris Lewer 1991,
ABOVE: 'Jane Austen's Leatherhead' by Cathy Brett 2022,
LEFT: 'Randalls' by John Hassell 1823



LEFT: 'Leatherhead from Across the River Mole' by J.M.W. Turner 1797,
BELOW: 'Kingfisher' sculpture in North Leatherhead by Fire & Iron 2022



Inspiring Art

In 1991 **Doris Lewer**, née Doris Arthur, who was born in River Lane, Leatherhead in 1905, painted a view of the Splash as it would have looked in 1940. Doris's granddaughter, Cathy Lewer, recalls visiting her grandparents in Fetcham in the 1970s and crossing a wooden bridge "with slats missing". Andy Lunn confirmed this state of disrepair, saying that he remembers the bridge being very wobbly, and that local children called it the '**Clickety Clackety Bridge**'.

Jane Austen almost certainly would have walked across Splash Island while she was staying nearby in **Bookham** with her cousins, the Cookes. Another cousin of hers, **Sir John Coghill**, at one time owned the great house **Randalls** which was right by the Splash on the Leatherhead riverbank. It's a short walk between Bookham and the Splash, and Randalls features as the home of the Westons in Austen's novel '**Emma**'. If you stand in what was once the garden of Randalls, you can see the famous slope and chalk path of **Box Hill**, where the picnic takes place in '**Emma**'.

The whole novel can be read with local roads, features, historical residents and buildings in mind, and Jane's nephew confirmed that his aunt had told him that **Highbury**, the town that features in '**Emma**', was based on Leatherhead.

Randalls had a long and intriguing history beside the Splash – the house Austen would have known was not the first on the site, and shortly after her death that house was demolished and re-built. Its successor was in turn demolished in the 1930s, despite attempts by the **Leatherhead & District Countryside Protection**

Society to save it. The site became what is now **Randalls Park Crematorium**.

It is also tempting to imagine the artist **J.M.W. Turner** walking across and around Splash Island. He's known to have visited **Bell Lane, Fetcham** – so close to the Splash that he would almost certainly have encountered it while out walking. He also stayed at **Norbury Park** in the late summer of 1797, and stood on the west bank of the River Mole at **Thorncroft** to paint a view of the **Leatherhead parish church** of St. Mary and St. Nicholas.

Supporting Wildlife

Good environmental practice in our modern era is not all about making a semi-natural place like Splash Island look beautiful, although attractive scenery is certainly a wonderful thing for **well-being**, and people tend to **respect** spaces that 'signal' that they are **cared about** by others; setting a visual tone of positivity, pleasantness and **thoughtful management** can reduce anti-social use of an area, such as littering, fly-tipping and vandalism.

The most important aspect of managing such a location is ensuring its **real health** and the **biodiversity** and **resilience of the wildlife** it is capable of supporting.

For the diverse human users of the Splash to **co-exist** not just with each other but also with the precious flora and fauna of the area requires **careful balancing** if it is to benefit all, but when a situation like this is managed successfully and made to work, the rewards are obvious. Loved and fully-understood landscapes tend to thrive, and they are often better protected at a more than local level, too – well-known and **highly-valued places** with substantial archives are

championed much more readily when faced with any abuses, and their problems tend to get prioritised and solved. The increasing **public awareness** of local and national sewerage failures and the catastrophic impact on the River Mole is a good demonstration of this – the **community voice** for its adored river is getting rapidly louder, declaring a re-discovered reverence for our crucial waterways, a much deeper grasp of the science, and a steadfast determination to force better practice.

Despite **major problems** with river pollution, invasive species, dangerous debris, disease, irresponsible pet ownership and ever-decreasing habitat and corridors in the surrounding landscape, Splash Island and its up-and downstream river stretches are tangibly **teeming with wildlife**. Take a camera, binoculars, a sketchbook, a guidebook or a phone - or nothing at all and just take it all in. Apps can open up whole new worlds of interest, and QR codes are discreetly appearing, enabling gems of information to be shared without a clutterance of signage. Those who tread most softly will be treated to glimpses of magnificent **birds** such as Grey Herons, Little Egrets and Kingfishers. Standing still and silent will be



rewarded with sightings of beautiful **insects**, and the thrill of swooping **bats** at dusk. Look patiently into the river water and **fish** can be seen (unless the Mole is in its latte-brown spate), along with the fascinating but problematical **Signal Crayfish** (*Pacifastacus leniusculus* - deliberately introduced to

European fisheries in the 1960s to supplement native crayfish affected by crayfish plague, the larger North American version turned out to be a carrier of the disease, and since 2016 it has been included on the list of Invasive Alien Species of [European] Union concern. Signal Crayfish infect, prey on and out-compete native crayfish, decimate fish populations, and burrow extensively into riverbanks, causing erosion, sediment pollution and bank collapse). Join one of the local groups regularly **surveying** wildlife, **testing** water and 'kick sampling' (deliberately disturbing the sediment on the riverbed in order to collect freed invertebrates to study their presence, absence and abundance, and **building a detailed picture** of the true health of the river using the evidence of these indicator species).

The **sounds** of the Splash are wonderful, too. Did it get its name from the simple sound of the water splashing? Cart wheels in the ford? People washing clothes and themselves in the bathing hole? Flowing water, rustling leaves, birdsong, people talking, livestock on the nearby farm, a bicycle, an owl hooting in the dark, the M25 grumbling away in the distance...

Hazards

Who looks after Splash Island and the surrounding river and landscapes?

This small, hidden and seemingly 'natural' spot requires **substantial input and care** from many different people to maintain even a basic level of **accessibility and safety**.

Local authorities, private landowners, the Leatherhead & District Countryside Protection Society, the Environment Agency, Thames Water, Fetcham and Leatherhead Residents' Associations, the Leatherhead & District Local History Society, the Lower Mole Partnership, the Leatherhead & District Angling Society, Wildlife Aid, the new

River Mole River Watch and residents local to the Splash are just some of the many bodies involved in trying to keep this beautiful location and its ecology **accessible and healthy**.

Places like the Splash don't sleep... **Challenges** crop up 24/7, and the cycle of just one year will see the need to address constant issues such as **flooding**, pollution, litter, drug debris, overgrowth, **vandalism**, fire damage, **irresponsible dog ownership** and hazards to human and animal health. In recent incidents: a brand new **rustic fence was destroyed**; signs were **removed** and thrown into the river; benches and hay bales were **burned**; a large trampoline which blew into the river in Storm Eunice became wedged upside-down in the river channel with its tubular steel legs sticking vertically

up under the river's surface where young people often **jump into the water** (hugely hazardous with the trampoline legs in place, but actually hazardous all of the time – diving and jumping into **shallow waterways**, particularly with **debris under the surface**, is a major cause of life-changing disability in young people, and there is a risk of serious **illness from infections** such as Weil's disease (leptospirosis) or from the **raw sewage** discharged into the Mole upstream); a bird became trapped upside down at the top of a tall tree; an iron railing was thrown into the river; and so on. **Dog and human faeces** threaten the health of wildlife and people. The Splash is very popular in drier months, and people visit, sometimes in large gatherings, without being familiar with the **lack of facilities**

– they need to use a toilet, and there isn't one...

The **litter problem** is huge, disguised by the sterling efforts of those who care enough to clear up the bulk of the mess left by others. The Mole, an innocent conduit, carries remaining **plastic waste** from deep inland to the sea. Litter on land can cause fires and it can be **catastrophic** for pets, wildlife and farm animals. Birds, hedgehogs, foxes and deer have all been **injured or killed** locally by rubbish – and Wildlife Aid has the photos and videos to prove it. Dogs have ingested litter. This can, and has to, stop. Conversations and debates can be had so easily, far and wide, at home, in schools, at workplaces and on social media. There are **no excuses** left.



Solutions

The northern section of Splash Island is owned by **local farmer Steve Conisbee**. He kindly permits access to the public, except on 16 December each year and when routine maintenance requires brief closure for safety reasons. The **Leatherhead & District Countryside Protection Society** assists him with this, funding some cutting of the grass, surveying trees and commissioning tree surgery where necessary, engaging the **Lower Mole Partnership** in occasional conservation events such as clearing back brash and **improving hedgerows** and the riverbank, collaborating with other groups to provide interesting educational **signage**, replacing **benches**, clearing **litter**, removing

debris, **researching** and distributing **history of the land**, strimming pathways, pulling up the invasive plant Himalayan Balsam (not problematical in itself, but it out-competes native flora species and impoverishes habitats), surveying the ecology and encouraging **more responsible use** of the site.

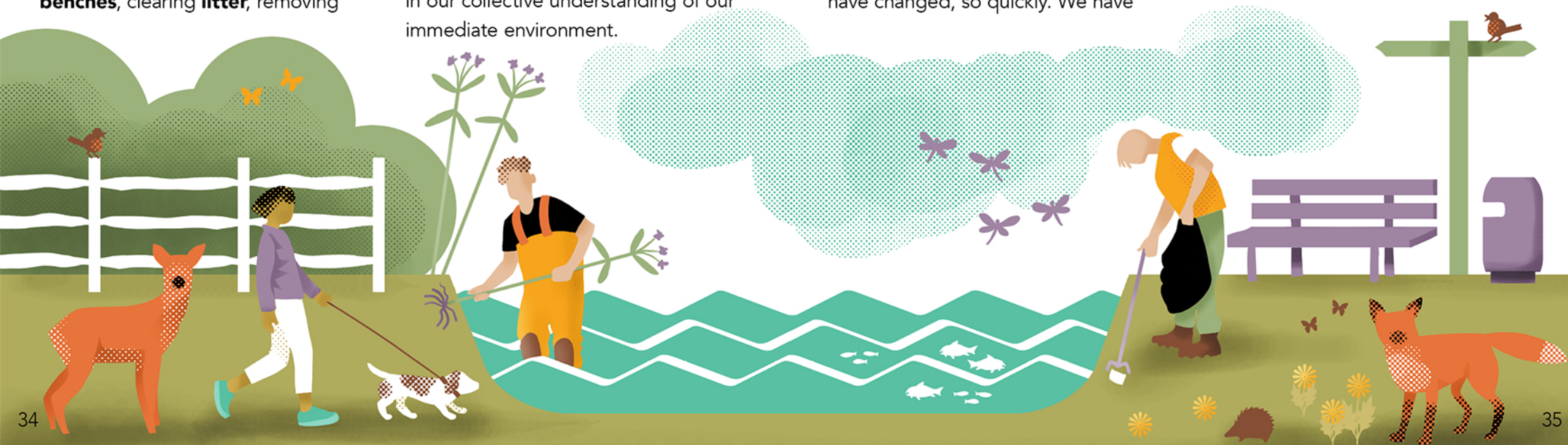
Our community, sitting as it does on the fringes of London, is very lucky indeed to still have rural edges and a very real farm presence producing high-quality **local food**. In an era where people are famously ever more disconnected from food production, to have a **community-minded** farming family on the doorstep is a precious gift. The Conisbees know about farming, and they are a crucial partner in our collective understanding of our immediate environment.

Farming is a tough job. In addition to the huge direct demands of the profession, a modern farmer faces **extra burdens** such as dealing with **fly-tipping**; the harming (and often killing) of livestock by **out-of-control dogs**, dog faeces **contamination**, sky lantern and helium balloon **debris**, and other **litter**; **damage** to fences and gates; **theft**; and **arson or accidental fires**.

The **Countryside Code** is important but obscure. There is an urgent need to **re-connect** the entire general public with the fundamental notions of **mutual respect** and responsible space-sharing. It is not so long ago that local young children had shotguns and could exchange squirrel tails for money from local farmers. How times have changed, so quickly. We have

detached ourselves from the age-old flow of understanding rural life. Great benefit to all would arise from **truly valuing** and appreciating our valleys and our farms and the people who work in them. Farmers and other landowners help to keep **public rights of way** and permissive routes open and managed, for the benefit of others; this is not a one-way arrangement, and users can do a great deal to help by treading lightly and consciously ensuring that they **do no harm**.

A tremendous network of people wanting **positive outcomes** has built up around the Splash, providing a golden opportunity to reach out just a little further and push for **all generations** to fully grasp the import of cherishing such places.



Conservation Management

The **Leatherhead & District Countryside Protection Society** helps to manage Splash Island in a way that is **sympathetic** to the riverine landscape, its flora and fauna, and the community that lives and works around it. Great **sensitivity** is needed to get the **balance** right, and every season features a variety of **routine maintenance** jobs as well as occasional **emergency tasks**. In February 2024 the **Lower Mole Partnership** joined the Leatherhead & District Countryside Protection Society's '**Running Places**' project at the Splash, to lay hedges, clear brash, remove man-made rubbish and replace rotten benches. Signs were refreshed, a tree survey was carried out by David Challice and the year's ecology-biased meadow cutting programme was commissioned. Splash Island has **unpredictable** accessibility because of flooding, so it is accepted that each task 'date in the diary' is subject to **water levels** of the River Mole.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Tree survey, clearing brash, controlled bonfires, cutting and clearing, muddy boots, a laid hedge and signs, © Lucy Quinnell and L&DCPS



Last Words...

Looking in some detail at Splash Island, so **rich in history, literature, images and ecology**, has resulted in more questions than answers.

The precise chronology remains elusive. How could this be better-established? A combined effort from local historians, history organisations, local residents and archaeologists would almost certainly be rewarded with a lucid and gripping timeline. We would love **local schools** to be more aware of the **splendid history of this location**, and how these events that happened right on their doorstep can inspire by fleshing out the more remote bones of the **national curriculum**.

Our community is generally **unaware of the hazards**. How can these become **better-communicated**? A social media campaign, stronger awareness among local teachers, liaison with local GPs and well-designed, engaging signage would be relatively easy to achieve and would make people of all ages **safer** not just on this stretch of the river but anywhere else in the countryside.

Walking routes in the area are disjointed. How can we create better and friendlier networks for those **on foot**, in **wheelchairs** and on **bicycles**? Is it worth looking at ways to join a path from Splash Island through to Common Meadow and Leatherhead town centre, for example? It is so close, and the town has the facilities and toilets that Splash Island doesn't have. Might this improve **anti-social behaviour** and the pressure on the Splash? Or might it be a negative, given that wildlife between the two zones currently has privacy and protection?

Maintenance of Splash Island remains challenging. How can we create a more effective timetable of **monitoring** and **routine works**? Would a **handbook** be a solution? How can this be made **sustainable**? Who will fund it all?

Flooding is a major problem, for those who use this as a **commuting route** and for neighbouring properties including the crematorium. Must it just be accepted that the Mole is uncrossable whenever it floods, and that local properties will occasionally flood? Or **could we be more ambitious** and aim to **connect up** the bridges to a world-class standard that solves problems, leaves a terrific legacy



and honours the **beauty and biodiversity** of the place? How could a major project like this be funded?

The **human impact** on the area is **doing harm**. How can we turn this impact to an entirely positive one? Can we encourage conversation and **awareness** throughout the **entire community**, and foster **pride of place**, so that everyone is glad to truly understand and to be responsible for their river, as it leaves its 'mountain' of Box Hill majestic behind it in the distance, and winds onward past us towards the Thames?

"I think cities have weakened us as a species. There are no consequences there. Step into the streets without looking and the carriage merely stops or swerves; the only consequence an angry driver. But here? There can be no mistakes. Because here doesn't care. The river doesn't care if you can swim... The dirty hand of man can go unnoticed in a city, because his hand made the city. But in this place, where innocence is a mineral in the soil, the filth of our touch is an apocalypse."

Edward A. Freeman, 'Some Impressions of the United States', 1883