

Effra rising – the return of London's lost river

Stand in the right place and you can see the ghost of the River Effra winding through Herne Hill and across Brockwell Park. You can also catch glimpses of my lost south London youth, which made the journey from Wimbledon, where I am covering the tennis for this newspaper, quite irresistible. The river is there in the shape of the land and in the flow of the water when it rains. It can also be seen in the stink-pipes: lofty metal chimneys that rise inexplicably from the pavement, designed to take at least some of the odour from the underground waterway.

The Effra is one of the lost tributaries of the Thames. That's the way that cities grow: we establish them by a water source, then the water becomes an embarrassment and needs to be controlled. We need natural stuff, we fight natural stuff

for all we're worth. That's modern life for you. So we bury a river that was once an asset.

But then 10cm of rain fell on Herne Hill in half an hour. It all rushed off the paved streets and the roofs and the downpipes, and the sewers backed up. In 2004 the Effra rose again, and floodwater and sewage flowed merrily into people's homes. It's clear, then, that the Effra won't die. And the more extreme climate events we get, the more the lost river will make its presence felt.

London is full of rivers that aren't really rivers; it's also full of communities that aren't really communities, not as country people understand the term. But as rivers rise despite logistical impediment, so do communities, and out in my own lost land of Herne Hill they are trying to do something about the river and its waters.

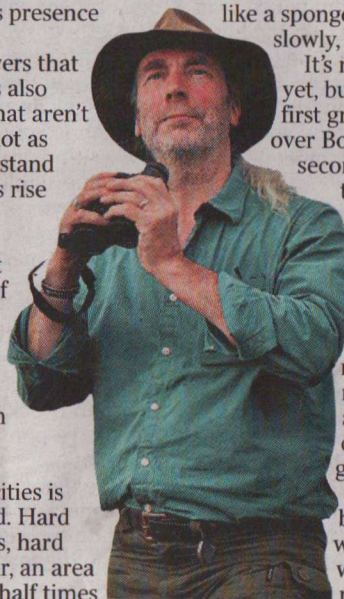
So I went to the fish and chip shop.

The thing about cities is that they're hard. Hard roofs, hard roads, hard pavements. Every year, an area of London two and a half times

that of Hyde Park gets concreted over, as people decide that a garden is less important than a place to park the car. When water falls, it can only flow. It can't soak.

The railway running south from Herne Hill station is elevated, looking down on the flat roofs of 23 shops: Afro Barber, Costcutter, Brixton Cake Shop, Olley's Fish Experience, which has champagne on the menu. And above them, a flower meadow, which holds water like a sponge and releases it slowly, naturally.

It's not actually in place yet, but it's coming. The first green roof one will be over Boki's hairdressing, the second over Olley's, until the whole roofscape will look from the train like an oasis. It's the remarkable work-in-progress of Katy Obregon and Caroline Noble, reinventing the lost notions of both river and community. I climbed on the roof to get the feel of how it will be: high, beautiful, buzzing with wildlife, and dealing with rainfall the way nature does.



At Wimbledon the players wear white but goldfinches display their colours

I walked across Brockwell Park, where I once kissed a beautiful girl called Christine. The park is much more beautiful than it was, wilder, shaggier, softer. On to the Cressingham Gardens estate, to meet a man with tattoos and a dog. Nicholas Greaves is a dog-fosterer, and another unexpected aspect of this community thing.

And he's set up a rain-garden. As it stands, three down-pipes from the roof gush the rainwater on to the estate roads and down the slope into the main road — and off and away towards drains and floods. Soon this will be a soft place that soaks up the cascading water, lovely to look at and

full of flowers for the pollinators and berries for the birds.

It's all part of the Lost Effra Project, which is co-ordinated by the perfectly named Helen Spring, of London Wildlife Trust. It's a small and local and community type-project that drops a pretty big hint about the way we should manage our cities and our water and the way to live with nature — for nature is part of our lives, even in cities, whether we like it or not. I got the train back towards Wimbledon with a feeling that all is not lost.

Passing shots

The Wimbledon bird list has been going well, helped by a visit to the leafy suburb of Court Two. In chronological order: black-headed gull, peacock, feral pigeon, pied wagtail, swift, mallard, wood pigeon, herring gull, chaffinch, carrion crow, goldfinch; and I heard and then briefly saw a robin as I walked towards the press-room yesterday morning.

That's 12 species, though keen observers will have guessed that one of them was actually a butterfly. I saw another butterfly, a small white, and then a white-tailed bumblebee on Centre Court.

This list is a trivial thing, I know — the fact that there is always non-human life around is not.

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