

The Naming of Rivers, Brooks and Bridges

A Guide to Procedure Common Ground 2000

These bridges had speaking countenances. Every projection in each was worn down to obtuseness partly by the weather, more by friction from generations of loungers, whose toes and heels had from year to year made restless movements against these parapets, as they stood there meditating on the aspects of affairs.

The Mayor of Casterbridge, Thomas Hardy

Why Rivers , Brooks and Bridges need names:

However often we have looked upon them, it can be surprising how few of us know the names of local streams – ‘the brook’ often suffices in our daily round. Most small rivers and streams are unnamed on maps. Yet if we name something, in some way, we own it, or feel some sense of responsibility. This can be a first step to raising the profile of something we take for granted, understanding it better, cherishing it more. Once our brooks have names, it is easier to tell stories about them, they become more valued. The same is true of bridges and many of them provide ideal spots from which to look at the water and the fish below and to contemplate life’s passing.

Names carry meaning, raising questions about their derivation. The name of a brook usually tells us something about it, the problem may be that it is in another tongue – we tend to forget that English has been forged over centuries from language after language persisting, displacing or welding itself to the next. The name translated may be descriptive of geography, ownership, event or personality.

In north Dorset, for example there are some beautiful chalk streams and many slower moving but volatile streams drain the clay vale. Stour means ‘strong or powerful one’ warning of how a seemingly languid river on clay can become a frightening torrent in just a few hours after rain. Tarrant, on the chalk, seems to imply trespasser – and like the Allen, it often emerges after the rainy season in its upper reaches to flow along the road.... or has the road taken advantage of the winterbourne bed? The word avon (afon) simply means river.

First steps:

Initiating the naming of a river or brook:

Anyone can start the idea of naming – an individual, civic society, local environmental group, community group, parish council. The important thing is to begin by asking others to join in the process of finding out names, procedures, helpers, sources of funds, histories.

Choice of bridge: in selecting a bridge the following questions need to be taken into consideration:

- will etching the name of the river on the bridge enhance or detract from the bridge and the local distinctiveness of the place?
- Does the bridge lend itself to lettering? Are there suitable coping or other stones? Is the stone/brick work worn/soft? Might it need renewing anyway?
- Could the name be put on a stone beside the bridge?
- Would a metal plaque be more appropriate?
- Could the name be etched on to a paving stone, visible to walkers, riders and cyclists?
- Is the name of the river/stream it crosses already well known?
- Is the bridge safe for the letter cutter to work on? What is the volume of traffic?
- Is the bridge listed?
- Is the parish or other local council sympathetic to the idea?
- Do you know of a letter cutter of high calibre who could do the job?
- Is there a letter-form already established for the catchment?
- Do you know of a source of funding to pay for the work?

There is quite a lot of interesting investigating to do. The following may be of help:

1. The Local Council

You will first need the blessing and support of the Parish, Town or Borough Council where the bridge is situated. Talk and write to the Clerk outlining your proposal. Include an itemised budget and how much money you are hoping the Council will contribute, if any. Ask them to consider the scheme at their next meeting.

If the name of the stream/river or bridge is unknown, ask them if they know of any landowners or residents who might.

In Fontmell Magna, the Parish Council and other residents had no name for the bridge we were planning to work on so they decided to adopt the name used by the County Highways Department.

Once you have written support in principle from the local Council, you can approach the County Council.

2. County or Borough Council

Road bridges over rivers and streams are the responsibility of the Highways and Transportation Department of the County or Borough Council. It is their duty to repair and take care of them. A dossier on each bridge will be kept and each bridge will have been named by the engineers. (These names may not coincide with the locally known names or 'official' names given on maps).

You will need to establish if this bridge is suitable in terms of conservation (is it a listed building or ancient monument) and safety. If the letter cutter is going to work on the bridge then his/her safety from the traffic needs to be worked out. Public and personal liability insurance is something to discuss with the various councils, they may be able to extend their cover or include the activity with their own - remember they do this all the time.

3. Listed Bridges

If the bridge is listed (Grade I, II* or II) you may need to obtain Listed Building Consent from the Local Planning Authority. You may contact the Local Council's Conservation Officer for advice.



*Colber Bridge, Sturminster Newton, Dorset.
Linocut by Peter Ursem.*

If the bridge is scheduled as an ancient monument you will need to obtain scheduled monument consent from the Secretary of State. You are advised to contact English Heritage's Archaeological Inspector in the first instance.

You will also need to seek permission from the County or Borough Highway Authority.

4. Valley Alphabet

Underpinning the idea of naming the streams is a desire to help people understand which catchment they are in and to work to reinforce the particularity of the place. Creating a letterform (font, typeface) for your valley, which can be shared by all others who over time might wish to join in the naming of their rivers and brooks, will need careful thought, discussion and planning. This will be the 'signature' for the whole catchment. Check that this has not already been created – ask Common Ground or the County Council if they know of other projects.

If you are the pioneers for your valley we ask that you contact Common Ground in Shaftesbury – we shall keep a register of catchment alphabets. It is important to ensure that the alphabets are sufficiently different especially in adjoining valleys.

Common Ground may be able to advise on who to approach for help in finding a good typographer, calligrapher or letter cutter.

Take a look at the many different kinds of old and new lettering in the locality – from milestones to gravestones. Take any examples or ideas along to the calligrapher you wish to commission. Ask to see examples of their work, either in their workshop or in situ. Discuss possibilities.

5. Choosing a Letter Cutter

After the valley alphabet has been chosen or 'invented' a letter cutter will be needed to accomplish the work, this could of course be the same person. You may decide on a good monumental mason or a sculptor. The aim should be that the etched names should last for a hundred years and more (another good reason to combat acid rain) so it is important to leave a legacy of work that is of the highest quality.

Ask to look at examples of the work of possible letter cutters. If a letter form has been established, ask if they can work to this.

If there are complications about cutting into the bridge, think about other subtle ways of achieving your goal. Plaques or metal plates may be appropriate, but they are more vulnerable to vandalism or theft and often too bold. People who are walking, riding, cycling spend quite a lot of time looking at the ground. Perhaps a stone could be carved in the ground or pavement – care must be taken, since softer stones will erode more quickly from feet, rain and frost in the horizontal position, seek advice on the robustness of the bridge stone.

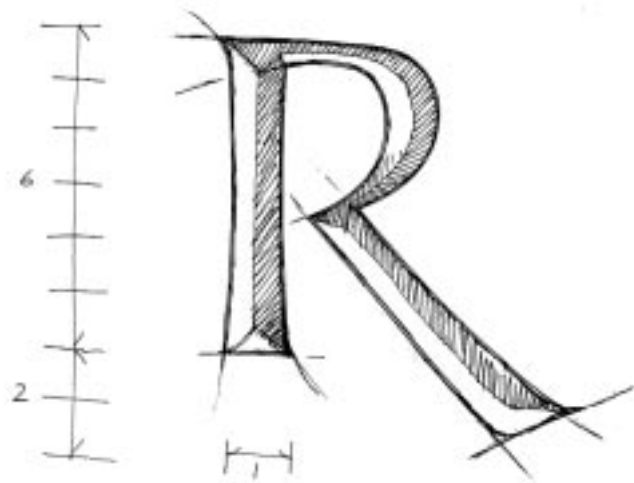
Stones beside bridges are a possibility. It is best to use the same stone or brick as the bridge. The Highways Department often have a supply of replacement stone or they may be able to locate a small quarry from which small quantities can be purchased.



Launching the idea: Angelo Ferrari and Karl Breddy (Dorset County Highways Dept) put into place named bridge stones in Fontmell Magna, Dorset, in October 1999. The letter cutter was Richard Grasby..

Writing a brief: make a list of what you want – the name or names you have chosen, required size of lettering along with the letter form for the catchment (if this exists); where the lettering should be placed; whether the bridge itself is to be carved or work can take place in the workshop; if new stone is needed ask

for the cost of it and of placing it in the bridge; liaison details with the Highway Authority; make sure the letter cutter is insured for on site work.



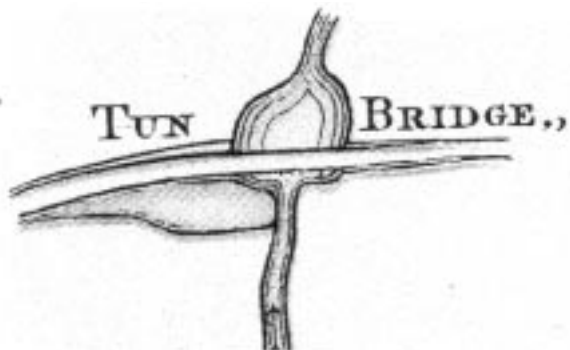
An example of a flourished letter by letter cutter Richard Grasby, who designed the letter form for the Stour alphabet.

Costings: Think about the letter cutter's fee, insurance, administration costs and documentation such as photography. When the letter cutter has provided you with an estimate for his/her work you will then be in a position to put together a funding application. Rough costings for letter cutting work in Dorset range from £7.40 for one 3-inch letter to £18.00 per letter.

Contracts: once the funding and all the permissions are secured you can draw up a contract. Perhaps this can come from the Parish Council or other body.

6. Finding out the name of your stream or river:

This, of course, should have happened first! Ask the people of the place – parish elders, the local council, landholders, community groups. Current OS maps tend to include only the names of the main rivers and the larger tributaries. Different and early editions OS maps, tithe maps of the 1840s or farm or estate maps contain sporadic detail, local historians may have spent time researching Saxon Charters, medievalists may be able to translate the meaning of names. Ask for help from your local County Record Office, archivists and the Environment Agency.



From the estate map of Dodderhill, Worcestershire, 1770

Enjoy the time spent finding out what people know – local people and far away professionals all have something to give to the discovery of names. There may be several names for one stream over time and in space, there may be local spellings and pronunciations. You must work to choose the name which many can agree upon, whether it is the oldest, the one in common use now, the important thing is to know why you choose it.

Fontmell Magna has its own Village Archive, containing hundreds of documents, photographs and maps - how wonderful it is to have documentation about the place close at hand. Records often have to be kept in the County Town since specialized conservation techniques may be required, but access to them is not easy from twenty miles away.

7. History of the Bridge

Information about the history of your chosen bridge may be hard to find, especially if the bridge is not listed. Suggested sources are:

Local people, Parish Records, County Council's Highways Department, District Council Planning Department, County Record Office, Local History section of your library, local history societies, retired council surveyors and engineers.

8. Suggested sources of funding:

Apart from putting on local fundraising events it is worth making a first approach to the following: local charities/societies, Community Action Fund; Parish Council; District Council; County Council; Regional Arts Board; Environment Agency; Countryside Agency and the Local Heritage Initiative.

9. Addresses:

Arts Council for England (for addresses of Regional Arts Boards), 14 Great Peter Street, London SW1P 3NQ (0171 333 0100).

Countryside Agency, John Dower House Crescent Place, Cheltenham, Glos GL50 3RA (01242 521381).

Crafts Council, 44a Pentonville Road, Islington, London N1 9BY (0171 278 7700).

English Heritage, 23 Saville Row, London W1X 1AB (0171 973 3001).

Environment Agency, Rio House, Waterside Drive, Aztec West, Almondsbury, Bristol BS32 4OU (01454 624400).

Local Heritage Initiative, Acorn Centre, 51 High Street, Grimethorpe, Barnsley S72 7BB (01226 719019).

10. Suggested reading:

1. *Celebrating Local Distinctiveness* Sue Clifford and Angela King (eds) Common Ground 1994.

2. *English River Names* Eilert Eckwall Oxford University Press 1928

3. *English Stone Building*, Alec Clifton-Taylor & A.S. Ireson, Gollancz, 1983.

4. *Rivers, Rhynes and Running Brooks - Local distinctiveness and the water in our lives* Sue Clifford and Angela King, Common Ground, 2000.

5. *Lettercutting in Stone* Richard Grasby, Anthony Nelson, 1989.

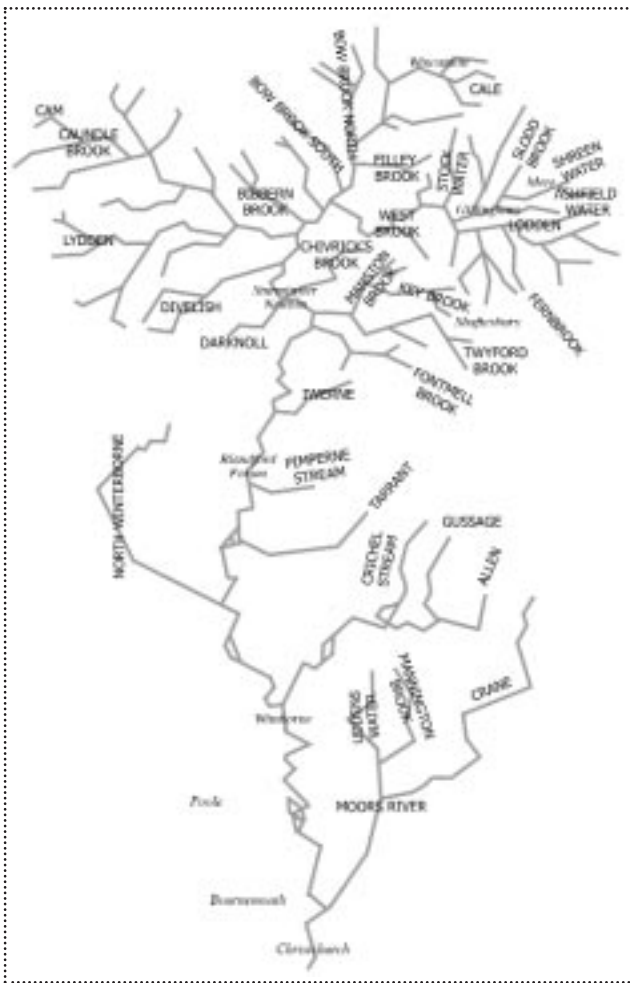
County books, eg:

Discover Dorset Bridges, David McFetrich & Jo Parsons, Dovecote Press, 1998.

Dorset Bridges: A History and Guide, A.J. Wallis, Abbey Press Sherborne, 1974.

English Place Name Society County Volumes.

Common Ground is starting a register of Valley Alphabets - catchment letter form 'signatures'. Please keep us informed of your activities.



A catchment map of the River Stour with the names of just some of its tributaries in Wiltshire, Somerset and Dorset. Common Ground, 2000.

The Naming of Brooks and Bridges is a national project has been launched in Dorset as part of Confluence. Confluence is a pioneering project encouraging people to join in making music for the River Stour as it rises in Somerset and Wiltshire and flows southward through Dorset to the sea at Christchurch.

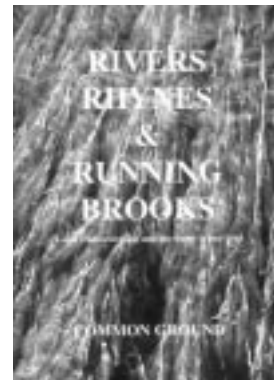
Between 1998 and 2001 Confluence, which involved a composer in residence, Karen Wilmhurst and music animator Helen Porter, worked with existing music groups - choirs, classical ensembles, silver and jazz bands, school and youth groups - and encouraged new ones, helping people of all ages and musical abilities, especially young people, to compose, sing and perform their music for the river.

LOCAL DISTINCTIVENESS

Rhynes, Rivers and Running Brooks is part of our national pioneering work on Local Distinctiveness. We are trying to help people discover, share and value their own knowledge as the basis for caring better locally for running water, for demanding decision making which will ensure that particularity is encouraged, keep brooks close to us rather than pushing them underground, rivers safe to swim in, and which will accommodate our need for the wild close to us. We need

to reinvent rivers as places, and to widen the expectations of access to beautiful running water in our everyday lives.

Common Ground has recently published a 48 page pamphlet which explores the nature and culture of running water. It offers ways of looking, and ideas for action for conserving and celebrating our springs, streams and rivers. It stresses the importance of river catchment management and catchments as physical and psychological areas which can help us to understand our own places and responsibilities in the water cycle.



£4 plus £1 p&p from the Confluence office: Gold Hill House, 21 High Street, Shaftesbury, Dorset SP7 8JE.

Common Ground

Common Ground is a national charity recognised for playing a unique role in the arts and environmental fields, distinguished by the linking of nature with culture, focussing upon the positive investment people can make in their own localities, championing popular involvement and by inspiring celebration as a starting point for action to improve the quality of everyday places. We offer ideas, information and inspiration through publications and projects such as Field Days, Parish Maps, local Flora Britannica, Apple Day, Community Orchards and the Campaign for Local Distinctiveness.

Common Ground
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www.commonground.org.uk
www.England-in-particular.info

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The Esmée Fairbairn
Charitable Trust

