Ode from the Ouse`

I have been here since times long lost, before you walked, before you talked.

I am the reason you are here.

I am the arteries that spread across our earth. From source to babbling brook, through flood plain to sea. I am the lifeblood, shaping but being shaped in return.

I am complicated, part of an entire water system involving the sky, the land, and the sea.

I am a myriad of impetuous spring fed chalk streamlets. I flow peacefully through rural landscapes. I skirt villages, through, and sometimes under towns. I am vast and wide. I am a busy harbour. I am wetlands, ponds, aquifers, estuaries and marine habitats.

You named me. The Middewinde, the Great River of Lewes, the Ouse, gurgling from the ground near Slaugham, through the tributaries of the lung and out to the beyond.

I measured your wealth in salt, herrings and porpoises.

From Furnace Ponds, the stripping of a landscape wrought iron and fashioned weapons of war for Navies and roar.

Locks and wharfs constructed, choked my rhythm and voice, 11 million bricks in the Balcombe Viaduct rendering this sacrifice futile.

You crossed me at Lewes, the only crossing for centuries. Lewes, celtic for hill or the hand that lies on the water, a gateway for your grain, your cultural weaving, and goods transported by ships, The Wallands and The Lewes Castle.

My waters carried your productivity and transported your vanity.

I used to kiss the sea at Seaford and was once a braided tidal estuary. I tempted in the mist and held whispers in my marshes.

In 1540 a cut forced me to the sea at Newhaven but I will find my way.

So, your engineers designed ever more human-centric schemes straightening me to the will of man. The loss of wiggle and nature to barges carrying wool, lime and cement from the Portland and Ashram works.

I gave my heft to all manner of mills, the water mills, the corn mills, an oil mill and even a mill at Barcombe slicing buttons from nuts, brought from Italy.

I have borne witness to your extractive relationship with me, poisoning my blood and constricting my veins.

But I hold life, the Sussex Tiger, that Sea Trout feeding for two years before entering my channels, battling obstacle and weir to spawn in cool chalk-fed streams such the Northend.

The Eel that journeys 4000 miles from the Sargasso Sea to transform in my waters for 30 years before returning to the sea of their birth, to mate and die.

The Mullet in murmuration where the Winterbourne meets my brackish waters, mesmerising in their patterns and mysterious in purpose.

The Little Egret, the ghostly witness, foot stirring in my waters. Impatient.

Hanging on, reminders of a once rich ecosystem.

Because I hold your shame. I reflect what you put into the water and what you take out.

The effluence, the excretion, the runoff, from roads, from pesticides, the pharmaceutical and chemical pollution.

I gave you life, your very existence as communities defined, repaid with causal disregard and the manipulation of my nature.

But now there is an awakening. There is hope.

A recognition that fearing and holding back my waters by levies and concrete will not end well. That working with nature, slowing the flow, offers regeneration and respect.

You begin to see me as an intrinsic entity in my own right, not as a feature or as an ‘object of varied beauty’ but as inspiration and imagination.

You begin to acknowledge the power of me, to walk alongside me, to find peace and to wonder at my journey to the sea, travelling to wide expanse and endless possibility.

I, the river, have rights, rights to thrive and evolve. I am alive and deserve to be recognised as such, free of vested interests.

The 70% of water in you recognises the kinship and the interconnectedness of our being.

I am a transient entity. I hold your dreams. I hold your nature.

I am the water vole, the kingfisher, the Sea Trout and Damselfly.

Listen to my voice. And hear.

We are the river and the river is us.

Written by Matthew Bird with extracts adapted from included from River Folk Tales, Sussex River, The River’s Voice, whakataukī (proverb) and Natasha Padbury

Love our Ouse