



Millstones, Oxspring

Results of Otter Survey on 7th June 2024

Yorkshire Land Ltd

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Basis of Report

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1.0 Introduction

SLR Consulting Ltd was commissioned by Yorkshire Land Limited to undertake an update otter survey of a circa 0.35ha proposed development site at Millstones, Oxspring (OS grid reference SE 27030 02178), hereafter referred to as 'the Site', illustrated in Plate 1 below.



Plate 1: Aerial image of application site ('the Site')

The survey was undertaken in response to an email from Claire Wilson, the Planning Ecologist for Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council, to Smeeden Foreman, dated 7th March 2024, which reads:

"... the 2020 [otter] survey did not cover an adequate buffer area from the proposal site and there is potential for otter holts/ resting spaces along that section of river. Otter are a highly mobile species, and whilst they were not recorded in 2020, it is not inconceivable that they are now present. If a natal holt was found to be present then the mitigation measures required would vary significantly from those proposed. Whilst the proposal is highly unlikely to directly impact otter, there is potential to indirectly impact the species during site clearance and construction; if a natal holt was found to be present a 100 – 200 m exclusion zone would need to be adhered to, for all other otter resting places a 30 m exclusion zone would be appropriate".

As such, the otter survey and data search will need to be updated".



2.0 Methodology

The update otter survey was undertaken on the afternoon of Friday 7th June by Mr Gary Oliver, Principal Ecologist with SLR Consulting. Gary has over 28 years' experience in ecological consultancy, has extensive experience of otter survey, and is a full member of the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (MCIEEM).

The survey commenced at 13.00 hrs and was completed at 16.30 hrs. The temperature was 16°C, with a light breeze and 4/8 cloud cover. It remained dry throughout the survey, and no significant rain had fallen in Oxspring for several days before the survey took place.

The survey involved a search of the Site itself, the vegetation to the north, the woodland to the west and of the River Don located immediately to the south, which was entered and both banks searched with the aid of chest waders.

The survey involved a search of potential holts and couches, as well as otter field signs, most notably spraints, feeding remains, 'slides', paths and footprints.

The survey extended for approximately 500 metres upriver (west) of the Site and 250 metres downriver (east) of the Site, at which point the water became too deep to safely survey.

3.0 Results

The Site itself was found to support long, damp grassland with no scope to support otter holts, couches or other resting places (Plate 2). The 5-10 metre wide strip of land between the Site and the River Don supports tall ruderal vegetation, with a number of mature trees by the water's edge (Plate 3); however, upon close inspection none of these trees supported features capable of acting as an otter holt or resting place, such as gaps beneath roots and/or hollow trunks. As such the Site itself does not have scope to support any otter holts.



Plate 2: View of the Site from it's north-eastern corner, looking west



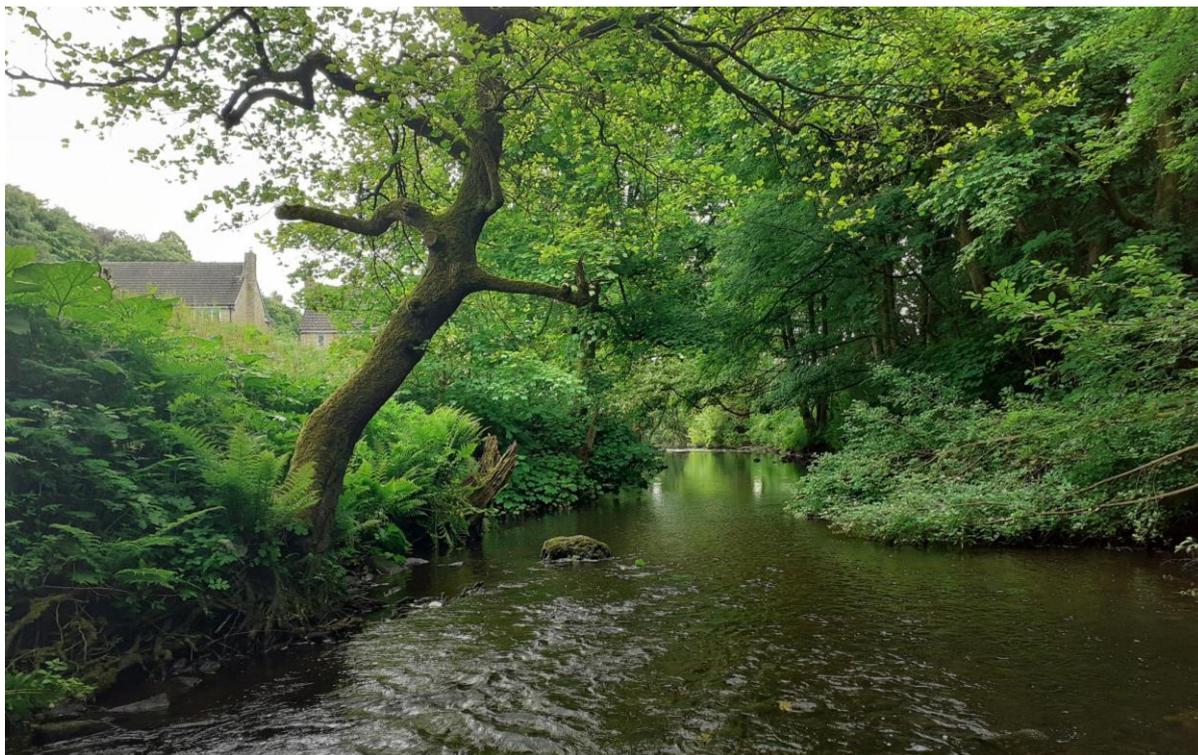


Plate 3: View of the southern Site boundary (on left) from within the River Don

The vegetation to the north of the Site was located circa 65 metres from the River Don; it comprises a belt of tall ruderal vegetation and mature woodland on a steep slope (Plate 4).

No otter slides or mammal paths were recorded running up from the river, through the Site, to this area; furthermore, a search of the woodland did not yield any evidence of otter.



Plate 4: Vegetation to the north of the Site



Land to the west of the Site supports a mix of mostly relatively young woodland, scrub and tall grassland on a gentle slope, along with a relatively infrequently used footpath (Plate 5) which extends as far as the humpback bridge illustrated in Plate 14. No other slides were seen up the river bank, into this woodland, and the trees themselves were found to be relatively young, and do not support features of value to otter as holts or couches. As such, no signs of use by otter was found within the woodland immediately to the west of the Site.



Plate 5: Young woodland, located to the west of the Site

Directly opposite the Site itself, the southern side of the river supports a bank of relatively mature woodland, with no footpath or obvious public access, offering numerous lying up opportunities for otter (Plate 6).



Plate 6: Vegetation on the opposite side of the River Don to the Site



Following the Stie inspection, the river itself was surveyed.

The River Don itself has a wide and largely natural channel, with a mixture of shallow and deeper water sections, supporting riffles and pools, offering excellent foraging opportunities for otter.

Between the south-eastern corner of the Site and the road bridge which carries traffic over the river via Powerhill Road located approximately 185 metres further east, residential properties, and their sloping gardens, line the northern bank of the River Don (Plate 7), whilst relatively mature woodland lines the southern bank along this stretch.



Plate 7: View of the river looking east, with properties lining the southern bank (left), with an unbroken belt of mature woodland on the northern bank (right)

A smaller stone bridge lies a short distance to the east of the road bridge, and approximately 50 metres to the east of this, the river became deeper and slower and eventually impassable using chest waders (Plate 8).

Upriver (west) of the Site, the river was fringed by semi-natural habitats on both sides; it remained comparatively shallow and, in places, was rocky. Plates 9 to 14 illustrate the character of the river, for circa 500 metres up to a stone humpback bridge which carries a pedestrian track over the river.

This section of the river was relatively undisturbed, with woodland fringing both banks, offering ideal conditions for otter.





Plate 8: View of the river looking east, approximately 250m downriver (east) of the Site, beyond the road bridge and pedestrian bridge

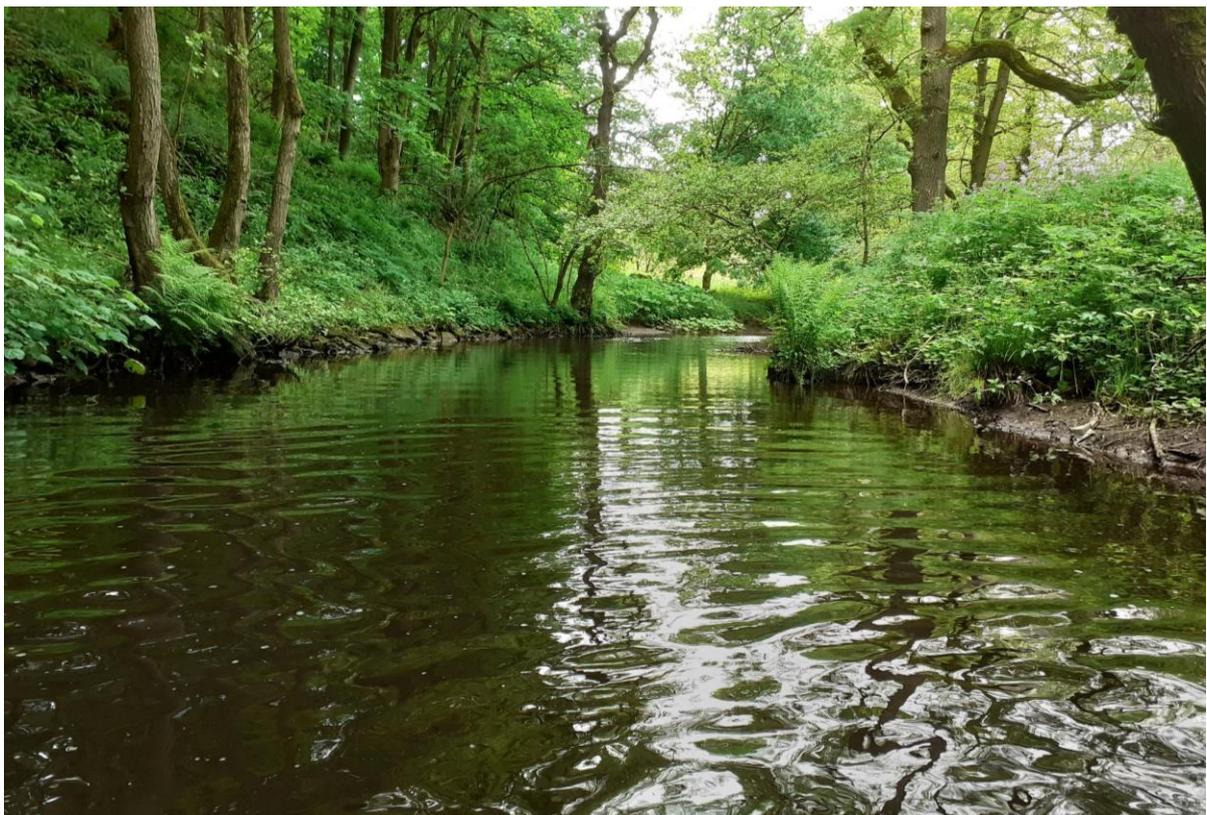


Plate 9: View of the river a short distance to the west (upriver) of the Site





Plate 10: View of the river circa 100m upriver (west) of the Site



Plate 11: View of the river circa 200m upriver(west) of the Site





Plate 12: View of the river circa 300m upriver (west) of the Site



Plate 13: View of the river circa 400m upriver (west) of the Site



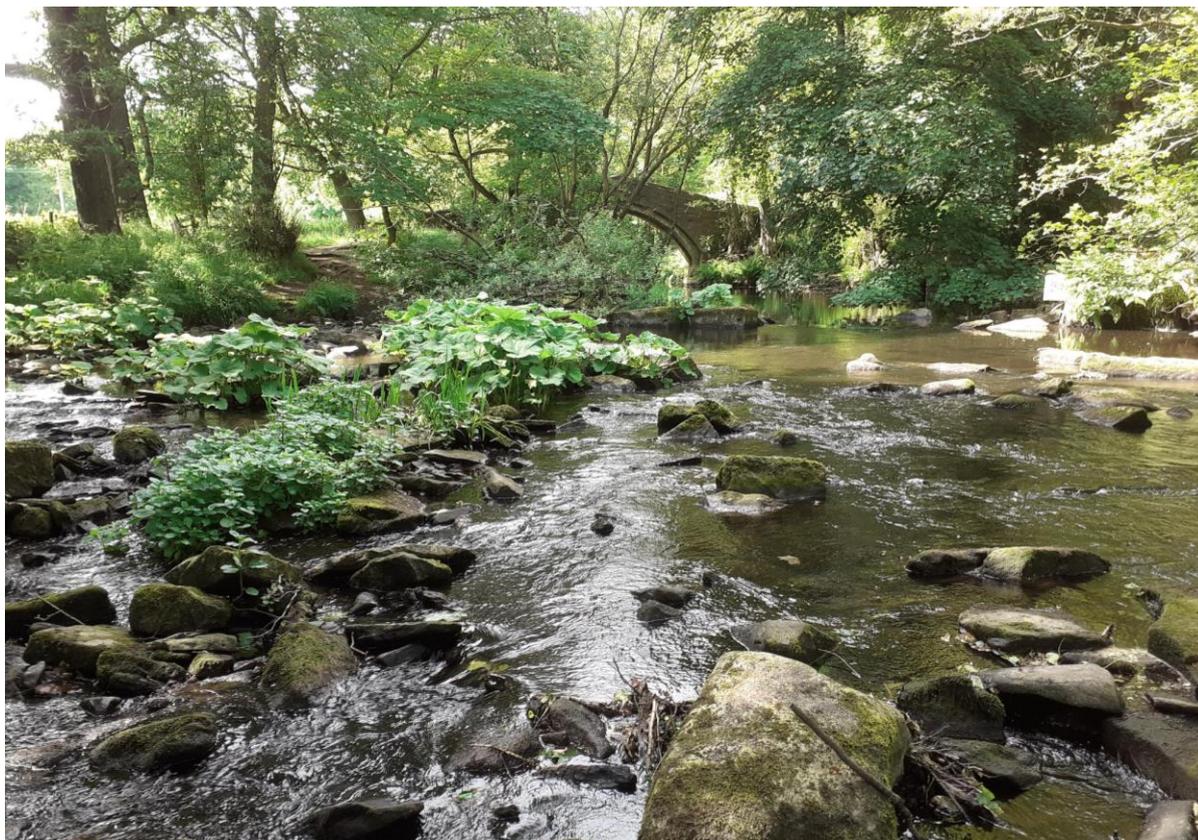


Plate 14: View of the river circa 500m upriver (west) of the Site

4.0 Otter Field Signs

A set of fresh and well-defined otter footprints were found in damp mud immediately beyond the south-eastern boundary of the application site at OS grid reference SE 27056 02145 (Plate 15).

The location of the prints, beside a supporting frame for a large area of raised decking associated with one of the existing properties off Millstones, beside the river, suggests that otters may be lying up beneath the decking (Plate 16), though the structure is considered too open and exposed to be used as a holt *per se*, and no evidence of a holt was recorded beneath this structure.

An otter spraint was also found on a rock near the southern bank of the river, by a small outfall beside the housing, circa 50 metres east of the footprint pictured in Plate 15 (Plate 17).

In addition to this, a large number of fresh otter footprints were found on a muddy bank beneath the road bridge carrying Bower Hill Road over the River Don, circa 185 metres to the east of the Site (Plates 18 and 19). Many of these prints had been slightly eroded by the flowing water, but they demonstrate that otter activity at this location is high. The prints appeared to be restricted to mud beneath the bridge; no otter path was seen leading up the river bank away from the river.

No other otter field signs were found.





Plate 15: Otter footprints in mud beside an area of raised decking immediately beyond the south-eastern Site boundary



Plate 16: Structure supporting decking beside the footprints pictured above, potentially used as a lying up spot for otter, though no holt was recorded





Plate 17: Otter spraint beside housing circa 50 metres east of the Site boundary



Plate 18: Large number of otter prints beneath the road bridge, located circa 185 metres east of the Site





Plate 19: Mud beneath road bridge supporting large number of otter footprints, as illustrated in Plate 18 (circled)

5.0 Conclusions

Field evidence of otter was found on the River Don, and the river is considered to be well-used by otter as it offers excellent foraging opportunities and many nature places to lie up and shelter.

Prints were found beside a structure supporting decking located immediately to the south-east of the Site boundary, though this structure is considered too open to support a holt *per se*, though it could be used as a lying up spot, particularly at night. The presence of otters in such close proximity to existing housing demonstrates that they have habituated to the presence of riverside properties.

The proposals, as described within paragraph 6.3.25 of the Ecological Appraisal and Biodiversity Net Gain Assessment¹ to retain the river corridor habitat would avoid any potential impact upon otter, along with the precautionary working methods suggested would avoid accidental harm or injury to otter, or disturbance to this species.

Otters in sub-urban areas are active mainly at night, and furthermore, the opposite bank of the River Don to the Site is well-vegetated, with mature woodland and continuous ground cover. Once the development is completed, the strengthening of the riverbank vegetation

¹ Smeeden Foreman (December 2023) Ecological Appraisal and Biodiversity Net Gain Assessment Revision D for land off Millstones, Oxspring (SF project number SF2263/2289)



with additional planting would enable otters to continue to use this section of river, uninhibited.

On this basis, the proposals are not anticipated to have an adverse impact upon otter, or their breeding or resting places, and no contravention of wildlife legislation is anticipated.



