

Opening the 6th Annual River Rights Festival

Tony Booth, Midsummer's Day 2026

Welcome to the 6th Annual River Rights Festival. We are here today to celebrate our river Cam which flows past us to Ely and on to the sea at the Wash. We are here to recognise its rights which we declare together at 6pm as we have done each summer solstice for the last five years.

We are here today because our river is here, ailing and polluted as it is. We huddle near water, as do most communities around the world. Rivers are life givers. They sustain all living things. Humans are mostly water. We are the river and the river is us.

The Cam is more than water moving from source to sea. It is a confluence, a bringing together of water molecules that have been within the bodies of everything that has ever lived. Tears shed in Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, the Sudan, Myanmar, a few weeks ago now mingle with each other today in the river Cam and in the bodies of each of us.

The Cam is more than this flow of dirty water, polluted with sewage and run off from agriculture and roads. Our river is what it is and what it was and could be again. Like a person it is its whole history and its future. It has been pure clean water. If we want to look after ourselves and our descendants then we must restore our rivers, take action and push others who have more power than us to take action too.

The water companies have failed us. Anglian Water - which manages Cambridge's wastewater - topped the charts last year for both reported and unreported pollution incidents.

Those pressing for the mass expansion of Cambridge are failing us. Cambridge University and its Colleges could take greater responsibility for cleaning up the river and streams that run through them, feeding ornamental lakes, swimming pools, powering heat pumps. The original source of pure clean water to the Colleges and the City at Nine Wells, creating the treasured chalk stream of Hobson's brook, is encroached by building, unnaturally augmented and reduced in flow. The land around Nine Wells is co-owned by the University. It should show greater care for this part of its heritage.

The Chancellor Chris Smith has a particular responsibility for addressing the decline of our river. He was Chair of the Environment Agency in 2008 to 2014 when the quality of rivers was declining, and water companies were writing business plans to deliberately dump sewage in the river to save money even allowing for the substantial fines that they risked for this illegality. After Chris Smith chaired the regulator, he followed a familiar path from regulator to become a director and then chair of the board of a water company - South Staffordshire Water. That revolving door blunts regulation.

There will be a few moments of seriousness today. A few short speeches now, then onto the choirs and bands.

Artists have set up a gazebo for making sewage/wildlife themed hats and medallions. They are also responsible for the wonderful banners and animals creating our festival site.

There will be music into the night. We hope, when it is a little cooler, that you will get up and dance. We want you to enjoy yourselves.

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