



AFTER



The River Lugg before and after the river bed was dredged and the banks cleared

**ENVIRONMENT**

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# Farmer bulldozed beauty spot 'to save local homes from floods'

# Investigation launched into environmental 'tragedy' as residents claim pleas for flood work went ignored

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By Martin Evans

WINDING its way through the peaceful Herefordshire countryside, the Lugg is reputed to be one of the prettiest waterways in the land.

So when a farmer employed a 16-ton bulldozer to dredge the river bed and strip a mile-long stretch of the bank of trees and bushes, there was widespread dismay and disgust.

John Price, a local potato and cattle farmer, was accused of committing vandalism on a grand scale, as the Environment Agency announced it had launched an urgent investigation.

But last night the 66-year-old, who lives next to the river on a farm in Kingsland, near Leominster, said he had acted to protect locals in the nearby hamlet whose homes were devastated in last year's floods.



Villagers said they had pleaded with the Environment Agency to clear the blocked river, but their appeals fell on deaf ears and Mr Price had acted out of a sense of community spirit.

Last night, Mr Price admitted bulldozing and cutting trees down but claimed he acted with permission.

He said he had been asked to carry out the work for free as he was fixing the erosion of the river bed and was helping solve issues caused by last year's floods.

He said: "I'm a Herefordshire farmer and have lived at Day Farm and was born here at home. I have never moved and have watched this river all my life and no one knows this river better than myself. I have always looked after the river. I was asked to stop the erosion because I'm the land owner so I'm responsible for the river.



“It was up to the Environmental Agency to look after these rivers but they don’t do any work and haven’t got any money to do the work because they spend it all on clipboards.”

He added: “I have not pushed any trees out and I haven’t knocked any trees down I have only cleared what ones came down in the flood.

*'It was up to the Environmental Agency to look after these rivers but they haven't got any money – because they spend it all on clipboards'*

Mr Price went on: "The flooding has been getting substantially worse over the last 10 years and will continue to get worse if a certain amount of work is not done like I have been allowed to do by the Environment Agency.

"I have got the support of the village and parish council and they had a meeting especially about the work being done. They all said what a wonderful job John Price has done and recommended that they send me a letter thanking me for that work and saving the river and helping the flooding."

The Environment Agency said it was taking the matter "very seriously" and had launched an urgent investigation.



Police, forestry and Environment Agency officials descended on the Lugg after the bulldozer had already done its work

The local wildlife trust said the actions would devastate animal life along the river, including otters, kingfishers, salmon and trout.

Residents of the area leapt to Mr Price's defence and said they had been appealing to the Environment Agency and council for years to tackle blockages in the waterway, but had been ignored.

Kelly Flook, 40, who lives in one of the houses flooded during Storm Dennis last year, said Mr Price acted because their pleas had been repeatedly ignored.

She told *The Daily Telegraph*: "I have spent the past 10 months living in a mobile home on my parents' driveway with my children because our home was flooded in Storm Dennis. I have spent a fortune rebuilding our home and we are still not back in it yet. All the locals have been petitioning to have the river cleared but we have been ignored."

She added: "John has acted in the best interests of the local community."



Local homes were flooded in February during Storm Dennis

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Dave Throup, the Environment Agency area manager, said: “We are aware of reports of damage to the River Lugg, which due to its environmental importance is protected through Site of Special Scientific Interest status.

“We are treating this very seriously along with Natural England and the Forestry Commission who have taken immediate action in an attempt to prevent any further works at the site.”

Helen Stace, of the Herefordshire Wildlife Trust, said: “This is nothing short of a tragedy that will have dire consequences for the wildlife and water quality downstream. This is not about protecting the local area from floods, in my opinion the work that has been done will actually have the opposite effect.”