

# The River Access Debate

An Appraisal of the Government's Policy Response to the Pressure for Recreational Access to Inland Waters, Notably Canoeing Access for Rivers in England and Wales.

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## **1. Introduction:**

The report aimed to critically appraise the policy response to the pressure for recreational access to inland waters, notably canoeing access for rivers in England and Wales. The report is divided into three primary sections; (1) historical background and development of the policy response (2) an evaluation of factors influencing the policy response i.e. lobbying groups, government agendas (3) an assessment of the effectiveness of the current policy response, including case studies of the River Wear and River Wye. As the report demonstrates the river access debate is a multifaceted and complex issue that is struggling to find an overarching solution.

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## **2. The Current Situation:**

Navigation rights are established on tidal waters and approximately 6% of the major and minor canal and river network (Brighton 1, 2001). Above the high tide mark riparian owners hold the access rights, with unauthorised usage constituting trespass, a civil offence. Landowners have the right to lease out or grant licences to allow other people access – such as granting the right and access to fish (Church et al, 2007). The governments' policy response to demand for recreational access is for individuals to seek voluntary access agreements (VAA) with the landowners. To date multiple VAA are in place however their success is debateable. For instance out of the 51 VAA in place, only 5 are open all year round (Brighton 1, 2001). The following section explores the history behind the current situation.

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### **3. Historical Background:**

The history of the current demand and policy response for river access has three main phases; the reduction and/or change of access, the fight to regain access and finally the growth in demand for river access.

Since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when 'the public had rights of navigation on most major rivers' (Wilkinson, 1992:p2), navigational rights have progressively diminished. For instance 13<sup>th</sup> century river tolls and 17<sup>th</sup> century river engineering work were permitted (Wilkinson, 1992).

The industrial revolutions of the early 18<sup>th</sup> and late 19<sup>th</sup> century led to intensive navigable waterways construction, though by the 1830's 'canal mania' was being replaced by 'railway mania' (Virtual Waterways Archive Catalogue, n.d). These eras highlighted the monetary value of owning access rights to navigable inland waters. During this period an array of localised navigation acts were passed, creating a piecemeal approach of inland navigation law. Thus supporting recent research by Rev Caffyn which suggests navigational rights may be established on many rivers, but lie hidden in historical acts (Inside Out: BBC South, 2007). Simultaneously the Enclosure Movement occurred, which reduced common rights to access previously open arable field, resulting in rural displacement (Allen, 1999).

By the late 1800's the consequences of these events on recreational access spawned The Commons, Open Spaces, and Footpaths Preservation Society (1865), the Access to the Mountains (Scotland) Bill and Tom Ellis' Mountains, Rivers and Pathways (Wales) Bill (1888) which would allow the public to...

*have the free right to enter upon, and have access to, mountain land, moor land and waste land, and to have access to walk along the bed of any river, stream or lake, to ride in any boat, coracle or canoe upon any river or lake, for the purpose of recreation, winberry gathering, sketching or antiquarian research.*

[cited by Davies, 2007:p30.]

Over the next 40 years these and similar bills were unsuccessful (Defra, 1998) and in 1925 landowners control over access was stenthened by the Law of Property Act. Part 2, paragraph 62.1 of the act conveys that land included ‘...ways, water, water-courses... easements, rights and advantages what so ever...’. This act included rights to license and lease out their rights to others, i.e. the rights and access to fish (Church et al, 2007).

In 1932, frustrated by access situation, a mass trespass occurred on Kinder Scout in the Peak District ([www.kindertrespass.com](http://www.kindertrespass.com) access 17/05/08). The ensuing media attention and continued demand for access led to a series of acts and regulations, which aimed to somewhat restore and strengthen recreational access to the countryside. For example the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, 1949; The Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981; and Water Industry Act 1991.

However, by the late 1990’s the government admitted the current system was failing (See box 1). In addition whilst passing ‘the Water Bill that the legal basis of public rights of access to rivers was in need of comprehensive overhaul’ (Wilkinson, 1992;p6)

#### Box 1 : Governments Policy Response for Demand for Recreational Countryside Access

Some have argued that the Government should build on these arrangements and seek to achieve significantly greater access through voluntary means alone. Experience of the last 50 years suggests difficulties with this. The discretionary powers which exist have not been used extensively so that people remain excluded from enjoying some of our finest countryside. Most local authorities, for example, have made no use of access agreements: these are thought to cover fewer than 50,000 ha of land. The reasons for this are not entirely clear, although a common criticism is that the process of entering into, and administering, individual agreements is bureaucratic and resource intensive. Where agreements have been made, most run for a limited period. A change of occupier often ends less formal arrangements while renegotiation of some formal agreements has proved difficult. Use of statutory powers to impose access has been very rare. [Defra, 1998: Section 2:1]

The solution was the 2000 Countryside and Rights of Way Act, granting public access to mountain, moor, heath, down and registered common land, whilst clarifying and enhancing public rights of way. However, the act did not entitle people to use a vessel or sailboard on or bathe in non-tidal waters (CROW Act, 2000: Schedule 2: section 2.1 a & i). The omission of recreational access to non-tidal waters and its subsequent inclusion in the Scottish Land Reform Act (2003) created a feeling of injustice for water users and did little to meet the increasing demand for access.

The BCU's increasing membership, up 12.31% to 57,486 in 2006 (BCU, 2006) and canoeing's position as the most popular water sport for the 5<sup>th</sup> year running (BCU, 2007) are clear indicators of canoeing's popularity. However, the total number of canoeists could be closer to 2 million (Brighton 1, 2001). Not only has the increasing number of canoeists created demand for more water, but so has the advent of shorter boats made out of durable plastic (McGarvey, 1996). Modern canoes have expanded horizons, especially for white water paddlers who, in search for more whitewater are often encroaching onto previously 'inaccessible' and uncontested waters, thus resulting in more conflicts.

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### **3.1 Section Summary:**

To summarize, over the years access to the inland waters and countryside in general has been reduced through a series of parliamentary acts and changing economic pressures. Since the late 1800's people have been campaigning to regain this access for recreational purposes. By the late 1990's the government admitted that the VAA were not working and in 2000's the CROW act was passed. However much to the disappointment of the ever growing canoeing movement it omitted the right to canoe on inland waters. So despite acknowledging the difficulties of the VAA, the government still maintains VAAs are a viable solution to the demand for recreational access to inland waters. The next section will delve a little deeper into this seemingly contradictory policy response.

#### **4. The Governments Response:**

The government's response to the demand for inland water access for non-motorized recreational use is that VAA should be sought with landowners, with downloadable VAA DIY guidelines on the EA website ([www.environmentagency.gov.uk](http://www.environmentagency.gov.uk) accessed 05/05/08). However, there is also a plethora of government policies encouraging local authorities to promote water based recreation and increase access on behalf of their constituents (see table 1). However without specific mandate to carry out these policies action is rare (Brighton 3, 2006).

Table 1: Examples of Government Publications Promoting Water Based Recreation.

<b>Publication Name</b>	<b>Source</b>
Game Plan	DCMS/Strategy Unit. (2002) Game plan: a strategy for delivering government's sport and physical activity objectives. London: Cabinet Office.
PPG 17	Department of Communities and Local Government (2002) Planning Policy Guidance 17: Planning for open space, sport and recreation. <a href="http://www.communities.gov.uk">www.communities.gov.uk</a> (accessed 25/03/08)
Waterways for Tomorrow	DEFRA (2000) Waterways for Tomorrow. <a href="http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/water/iw/tomorrow/index.htm">http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/water/iw/tomorrow/index.htm</a> (accessed 10/03/08)
Your Rivers for Life	Environment Agency (2004) Your Rivers for Life: A Strategy for the Development of Navigable Rivers 2004 -2007 <a href="http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/subjects/navigation/747430/632663/?version=1&amp;lang=e#">http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/subjects/navigation/747430/632663/?version=1&amp;lang=e#</a> (access 05/03/08).
A Better Place to Play	Environment Agency (2006:a) A Better Place to Play: Our Strategy for Water-Related Sport and Recreation (2006-2011). <a href="http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/subjects/recreation/654075/1296722/?lang=e">http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/subjects/recreation/654075/1296722/?lang=e</a> (accessed 05/03/08)

The government commissioned Brighton University to carry out a series of studies into the demand for access to inland waters (Brighton 1 - DEFRA 2001; Brighton 2 – The Countryside Agency 2004; Brighton 3 – The Environmental Agency, 2006). The first aimed to uncover the facts about the current access situation, the second looked at the feasibility of VAA on four rivers and the third was a piece of action research, whereby VAA were attempted on the four. The results of the studies are interspersed in the report, especially when evaluating the River Wear VAA.

Regardless of the findings the government is reluctant to pass legislature that would be contrary to the interests of anglers and landowners as both 'ownership of fishing in particular and private rights of access to watersides in general are longstanding rights under English Law' (Church et al, 2007:p216). Hence shedding light on their contradictory standpoint that VAA did not work (Box 1 ) but will for river access.

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## **5. Stakeholder Responses:**

This section briefly outlines reactions to the VAA policy from the primary stakeholders; canoeists, anglers and landowners (see table 2). These stakeholder responses indicate issues that may have or will inform government policy and also provide and an evaluation of the VAA policy from alternative perspectives.

### **5.1 Landowners and Anglers Responses:**

The governments policy is supported by many organisations such as the National Farmers Union (NFU, 2006), Country Land & Business Association (CLA, 2005; 2007) and Salmon and Trout Association (STA, 2005; 2006). Support arises as VAAs maintain riparian rights and allow landowners to set VAA terms or veto it altogether. Opposition to signing VAA springs primarily from concerns over economic, environmental and privacy impacts; though all are deeply ingrained with property rights and the control it harbours (Church et al, 2007).

However, some anglers see the government's recent research into VAA for canoeing as a discriminatory, conflict of interests. As they pay rod license to the EA, it should represent their interests; additionally having paid for access the government should not promote 'free' canoeing access (Brighton 2, 2004).

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**Table 2 : Stakeholder Responses to Governments VAA Policy**

Stakeholder	Negative Response to VAA	Positive Responses to VAA
Canoeists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited number, range and length of accessible rivers</li> <li>• Seasonal Restrictions</li> <li>• Occupancy Restrictions</li> <li>• Resource and time intensive process for linear access</li> <li>• Piecemeal approach creates confusion</li> <li>• Vulnerability to change</li> <li>• Short term agreements</li> <li>• Market land/lease/rent prices too high for linear access</li> <li>• Fear to negotiate VAA as resulting overuse may result in VAA withdrawal</li> <li>• BCU is too small to enforce regulations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allows uncontested access</li> <li>• Shows co-operation and ability to follow rules</li> <li>• Can clarify rivers status to avoid conflict</li> </ul>
Riparian Landowners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduces revenue if anglers pull out</li> <li>• Reduces privacy</li> <li>• Increases responsibility and infrastructure costs</li> <li>• Increases fear of liability</li> <li>• Creates over-usage</li> <li>• Increases fear of crime</li> <li>• Disturbance of livestock</li> <li>• Lack of enforceable regulations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintains riparian rights</li> <li>• Maintains long standing fishing agreements</li> <li>• Increases Riparian revenues i.e. from fishing and canoeing fees</li> <li>• Ensures privacy</li> <li>• Allows them to set the terms</li> </ul>
Anglers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• VAA can create over usage</li> <li>• Increases disturbance of fish</li> <li>• Reduces in fishing quality</li> <li>• Unwillingness of others to pay</li> <li>• Lack of enforceable regulations</li> <li>• Increased silting and erosion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintains long standing market agreements</li> <li>• Uphold their financial and time investments in VAA</li> <li>• Ensures manipulative economic control over landowners therefore allowing their terms are met</li> <li>• Promotes the economic value of 'healthy' fishing rivers, therefore promoting environmental awareness</li> <li>• Control canoeists</li> </ul>

[Source: Brighton 1, 2 & 3 2001, 2004, 2006]



## **5.2 Canoeists Response:**

The British Canoe Union (BCU) feels VAAs are hard to achieve, unsustainable, insufficient and complex in nature. They note that dynamic linear access is not suited to the static, market orientated VAA system (Brighton 3, 2006). Hence their campaign for legislature granting access rights to all inland waters for 'non-motorised' recreational use ([www.riversaccess.org](http://www.riversaccess.org))<sup>1</sup>. Thus bringing England and Wales in line with Scotland, and many other countries (Williams, 2007). For instance, recreational access to inland water was included in the Scottish Parliament's 2003 Land Reform Act, though subject to The Scottish Access Code (2005).

The BCUs' campaign has included raising public awareness and political lobbying, such as the 2002 Early Day Motion (EDM) 978, 2005 EDM 957, e-petitions (<http://www.pm.gov.uk/output/page14435.asp>, 2008), the recently lapsed 2007 Private Members Bill 52 'Access to Inland Waterways Bill' with the new 2008 EDM 1331. The campaign has gained support from other recreational water user groups such as the Inland Waterways Association (IWA, 2008) and the River and Lake Swimming Association (<http://www.river-swimming.co.uk/index.htm> accessed 20/05/08).

However in the short-term they are still attempting to achieve VAA. It's a catch 22 situation whereby success in VAA would undermine the long-term goals of legislation, whilst violating VAA would show irresponsibility thus harming the navigational rights claim (Church et al, 2007).

Subsequent, to additional powers being levied to the Welsh Assembly, by The Government of Wales ACT (2006) the Welsh Canoeing Association (WCA) and their campaign 'Canoeing is Not a Crime' ([www.kaykakingisnotacrime.org.uk](http://www.kaykakingisnotacrime.org.uk)) have opted out of negotiations. Instead they have turned the debate on its head, arguing that there are over 300 Welsh rivers with navigational uncertainties so they are assuming a right to paddle until someone challenges them otherwise. With some hoping an ensuing legal trial will provide much needed precedent for the case law system. However, the House of Lords unfavourable ruling in the Yorkshire Derwent Water case does not bode well for this method (Wilkinson, 1992).

**5.3 Section Summary:**

As the aforementioned responses illustrate a mixed evaluation of the governments policy response, with those in advantageous positions in support of maintaining the status quo whilst those disadvantaged requesting change. This is hardly a surprising outcome, as an angler there is little to be gained from allowing a sport that they deem detrimental to their own (despite evidence to the contrary, Hendry et al, 2000), especially after spending considerable time and money negotiating their own access. Though the EA (2006:b) report 99% of landowners would consider VAA, there is no merit in this statement – as the circumstances are absent. In conclusion the asymmetrical power relations demonstrated in stakeholder responses emphasize the major flaw of VAA (Church et al, 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> The Rivers Access Campaign 'is funded by Canoe England to raise awareness of the access issue on inland waterways in England (and Wales) and to bring about a change to the access situation' ([www.Riversaccess.org](http://www.Riversaccess.org)). Canoe England is the result of the British Canoe Unions federalization in 2000. Therefore it is difficult to differentiate who the campaign is truly attributable to; as such the opinions of the Rivers Access Campaign are viewed to be interchangeable with those of the BCU and Canoe England.

## **6. The Case Studies:**

To aid policy appraisal two VAA were selected, the first a failure, the second a success; The River Wear (Brighton 3, 2006) and the Upper River Wye ([www.wyeuskfoundation.org](http://www.wyeuskfoundation.org)), see table 3 for overview. The rivers were chosen for their differences as it highlights the range of variables present when negotiating VAA, namely in this case to highlight the variable of water level characteristics. The Brighton studies divided rivers into 3 clusters; near urban centres, rural and environmentally sensitive, then when at the river determined its physical characteristics. However, this report argues that the water level and angling characteristics of a river are more likely to determine the feasibility and type of VAA considered on any particular stretch.

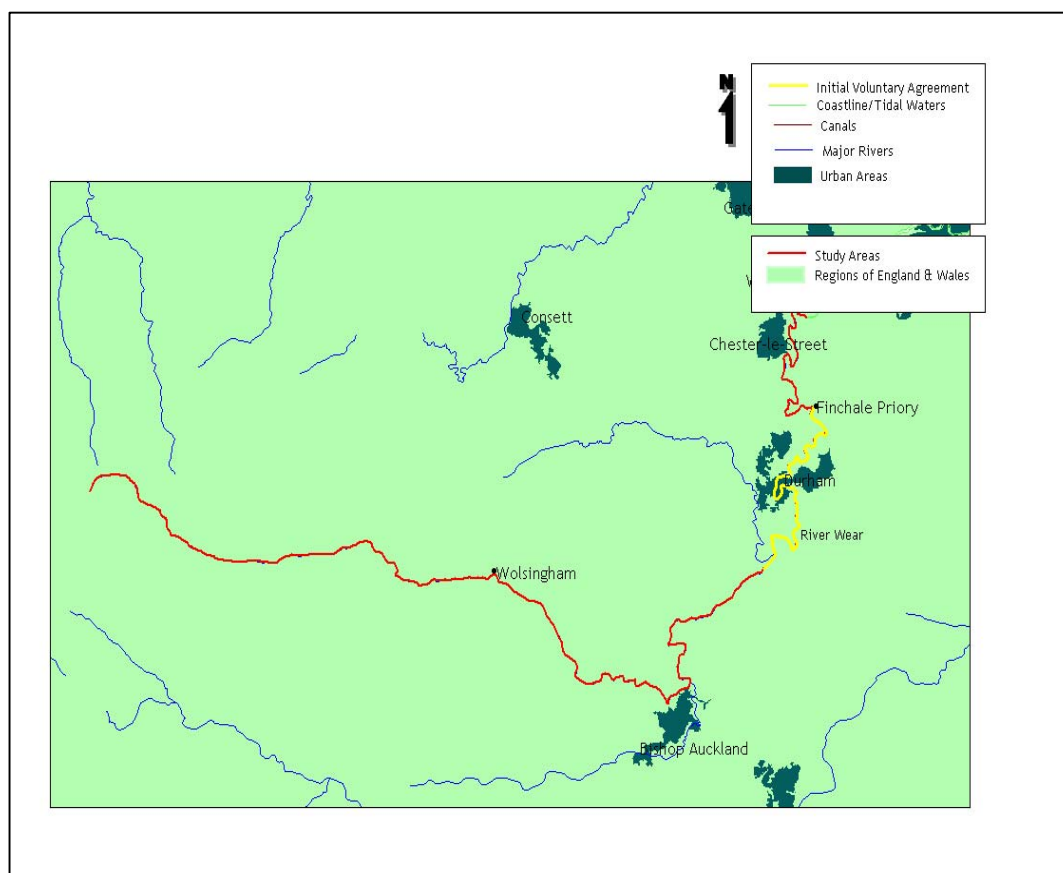
Table 3: Summary of Case Study Rivers

<b>River</b>	<b>River Wear</b>	<b>River Wye</b>
<b>Case Study section</b>	Wearhead to A182 near Washington County Durham 120km Grade I-III	Llanwrthwl to Hay-on-Wye Mid – Wales 67.8km Grade I-III
<b>Fishing Season</b>	Year Round	March - October
<b>Paddling Season</b>	Year Round	Water level dependent
<b>Access Coordinator</b>	Environmental Agency	Wye Usk Foundation
<b>Access agreement</b>	Only draft versions available – therefore technically no agreement is in place.	Oct 18 <sup>th</sup> – March 15 <sup>th</sup> When levels exceed thresholds
<b>Special Features</b>	Upgrade of Weirs for safe portage. Use of Rowing Club Facilities.	Web cams of river gauges. Access to river through private land agreed.
<b>Feedback</b>	Disappointment as previous tacit access agreements have been revoked, therefore reducing accessible river. No agreement was ever signed, therefore no progress made despite 'success' label of the EA.	Positive feedback, though some concern over larger school groups. Web cam beneficial to avoid unnecessary travel to check water levels.
<b>Reference(s)</b>	Brighton 3: Environment Agency 2006 BCU: River Access Campaign Friends of Durham University Canoe Club (2008)	Wye Usk Foundation

## **6.1 The River Wear**

The river Wear was one of the case study rivers for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Brighton reports (2004; 2006). It was decided that studying the entire length (120km) was unfeasible due to too many riparian owners around the upper Weardale area, therefore a smaller section of 51km was suggested (Thompson, 2003). At some point this became 21km around Durham (Brighton, 2) and 19.5km at implementation (Brighton 3, 2006), as illustrated in figure 1.

Figure 1: River Wear Feasibility Study Map



[Source: Brighton 2: P 219]

The system of negotiation VAA is supply led, it is up to the landowners to grant access, therefore showing the asymmetrical power relations caused by riparian rights. The flaws of this system were evident in the River Wear negotiations. For instance, one major landowner downstream of Durham, with double bank rights, said no under any circumstances, upstream

landowners with strong fishing interests impeded negotiations (Brighton 3, 2006), plus another landowner was selling their property (Pike, 2008). This left just 5km of river where VAA were deemed feasible.

The remaining 5km is heavily used by rowers, canoeists, anglers plus a pleasure boat and rental row boats in the summer. There was already a tactic zoning agreement on this stretch with the landowners already in a committee; Durham Riverbanks Management Committee (Brighton 3, 2006). To date landowners have signed an agreement but this will not take effect until the necessary risk assessments are completed and their safety measures implemented (Pike, 2008). However another section below Durham has been excluded due to no portage around a dangerous weir (Pike, 2008).

In conclusion the VAA covers approximately 4.5km (3.75%), pending capital works (Pike, 2008). However, the agreement is on a stretch where canoeing and river use in general was already widely accepted. The primary obstacle in this case was landowners and anglers strongholds.

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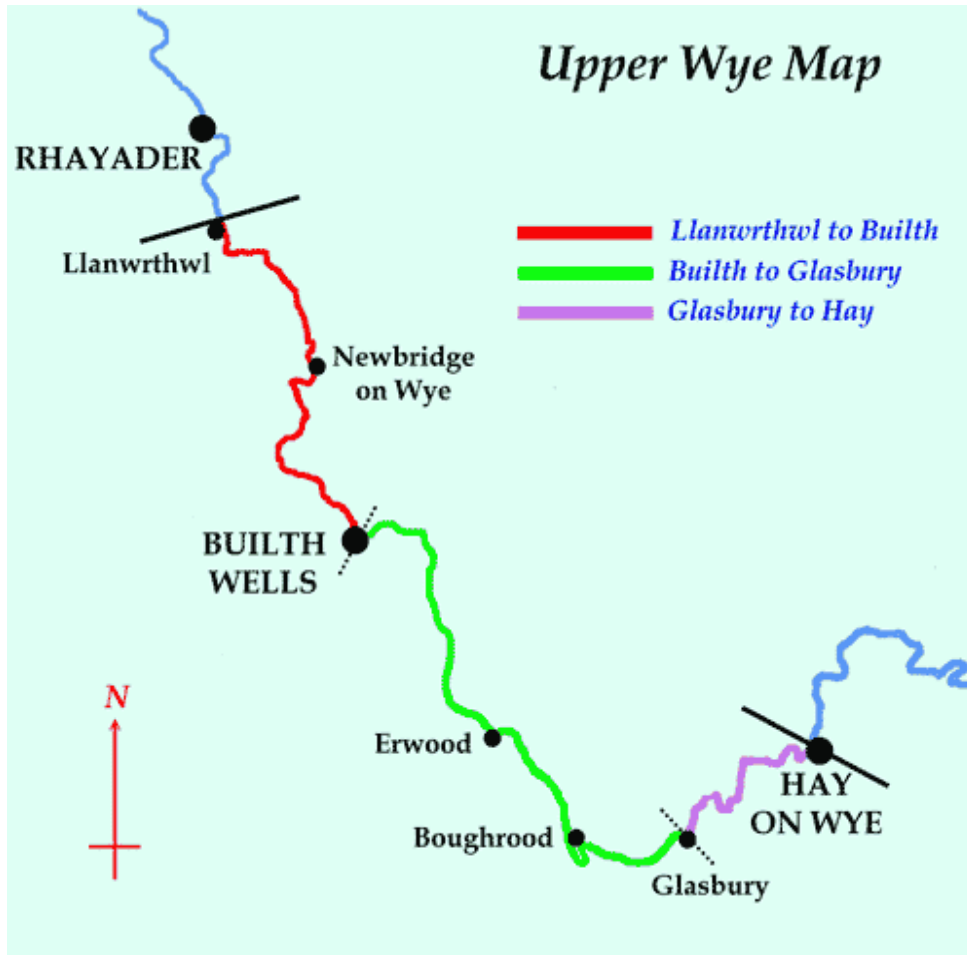
## **6.2 The Upper River Wye:**

The rivers VAA information was taken from one of the access champions, The Wye and Usk Foundation ([www.wyeuskfoundation.org](http://www.wyeuskfoundation.org) a source of the following information unless cited otherwise). A 17<sup>th</sup> century navigation act applies to the lower Wye, however the upper sections were previously inaccessible, due to the steep, rocky gradients but nowadays, canoeists are paddling on previously uncontested waters. A VAA was deemed necessary to accommodate all user groups.

Canoe access to the 67.8km stretch of river from Llanwrthwl to Hay-on-Wye is allowed between October and March, with a spate clause allowing additional access outside these dates when water levels exceed marked threshold. Designated access to and from the river has been agreed with landowners and planned signposting will clarify the terms and conditions. The map below

(figure 2) gives an overview of the VAA with the foundation's website providing detailed maps and agreement terms for the 3 sections.

Figure 2 : Map of the Upper Wye VAA



[Source: [www.wyeuskfoundation.org](http://www.wyeuskfoundation.org)]

This agreement satisfies anglers, canoeists and the environment alike; as higher water levels increase canoeing demand and reduces angling demand. Higher water levels coincide with the Angling closed season (October 18<sup>th</sup> – March 15<sup>th</sup>), with the spate clause adding pragmatic flexibility. Canoeing at higher water levels reduces river bed disturbance, therefore alleviating environmental concerns.

Feedback seems overwhelming positive, though school groups cause disturbance. This indicates the VAA is working well. Though tellingly the WCA's access officer who was the chair of Welsh National Access Committee, Usk/Wye catchment RAO and the Usk LAO for 13 years, is now calling for the disbandment of the National Access Committee (Bell, 2007).

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### **6.3 Case Study Conclusions:**

At the outset of this section it was determined that the river categorizations used by the Brighton 2-3 studies (2004, 2006) overlooked the seemingly more important aspect of water levels. The water levels on the study section of the river Wear's allow for fishing and canoeing year round. As angling occurs year round any agreement would be detrimental to anglers and subsequently landowners. In contrast the upper Wye's water levels created separate 'good' conditions for angling and canoeing, thus allowing a common ground to be found. With the angling season still exclusive (aside from spate conditions), landowners need not be concerned over withdrawal of angling revenue. This helps break up the market orientated approach. In conclusion perhaps rivers should be categorized and approach as different resources. The final discussion will broach this issue further.

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### **7. Discussion and Solutions:**

Unfortunately, lessons from the past seem to have been forgotten. The VAA system for countryside access was failing (think back to box 1) and was overcome by the CROW act 2000. The omission of rivers access was partially attributable to longstanding property and angling rights, which the government did not wish to detract from. Nevertheless negotiating VAA around these rights is inherently difficult and often unsustainable.

A list of possible resolutions was proposed by Brighton 1 (2001), a few of which have significant merit based on the examples set by the case studies. A selective increase in statutory rights of navigation on rivers similar to the Upper Wye, during angling closed season and spate. Mandated compulsory (minimum) access orders for contentious rivers i.e the Wear. For static occupancy sites such as play waves, targeted acquisition of land and water rights. All managed in a similar format to the CROW act (2000) with regards to landowners and local authorities rights and responsibilities. In addition, system of visible canoe licensing, paid to the EA would ease landowners, anglers and the BCU's concerns over enforcement.

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### **8. Final Conclusion:**

The appraisal of any VAA policy is determined by its extent, quality, permanency, clarity and certainty, cost, monitoring and enforcement (Brighton 3, 2006). However, targets for each category need to be set in order for a level of success to be determined, along with national targets for specific river types. This will provide a clear indicator to the success of VAA in different circumstances. At present it is an effective policy for those with a long standing foot in the door, but frustratingly exclusive to newcomers and is failing to achieve government policy objectives (see table 1).

As the Brighton Studies conclude VAAs 'can be negotiated on some stretches of rivers in some circumstances' (Brighton 3, 2006:p32 4.1). However, 'negotiated voluntary access agreements alone are unlikely to fully meet the demand and need for canoeable waters' (Countryside Agency, 2004: p4).

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