

Paul:

This stretch of the Wharfe in Ilkley looks idyllic, but all is not well beneath the surface. Like most of our rivers, it is in fact, under threat from pollution and the problem is that pollution isn't neon like in the films - it's pretty much invisible. So you've got to look deeper.

Hello, Mark.

Mark:

Afternoon, Paul.

Paul:

How are you doing?

Mark:

I'm all right. Good to see you.

Paul:

Ah, the timeless wonder of the English countryside.

Mark:

Yes!

Paul:

And that beautiful symphony, the rural back drop of, uh, sewage treatment works.

Mark:

England's green and pleasant land.

Paul:

Mark Barrow is on a mission to draw attention to the plight of our rivers, especially his beloved Wharfe, by actually diving in and filming down below. It's a very beautiful river I have to say.

Mark:

Yes, yeah.

Paul:

But there are many problems with the Wharfe, aren't there?

Mark:

There's huge problems with the Wharfe. There's, literally underneath our feet are the two pipes from Ilkley sewage works.

Paul:

Now, Mark. You're- I don't know how to put this. Three words I thought of. Brave, intrepid,

Mark:

Yeah.

Paul:

stupid.

Mark:

I'll go with first two.

Paul:

I think it's a combination of all three. Yeah, cos you don't just get in and wade about and look for evidence of this. You actually you get in and get under.

Mark:

Yeah, it's not uncommon, if had sewage discharge is going on, for me to actually get in while that discharge is happening and I'll film the entire process underwater because you've got to see it to believe it. By the time I get out sometimes I can be literally covered in everything that's been flushed down the toilet.

Paul:

I mean you're quite fragrant now. But, uh, I might keep my distance when you come out.

Mark:

I would, yeah.

Paul:

It's through the actions of foolhardy people like Mark that the grim reality of what is happening to our rivers has been brought to the surface, especially when it comes to the activity of the water companies.

Mark:

There is nothing glamorous about this at all.

Paul:

Mark is literally putting his wellbeing at risk when he does this for the rivers that he loves. Untreated sewage can contain all kinds of bacterial nasties, from salmonella to E. coli.

Can I do anything?

Mark:

No.

Paul:

Good, thank you, that is the correct answer.

Mark:

I'll see you in about ten minutes.

Paul:

Go on, then. Oh, dear. I'll be here. Don't worry. Go on, on you go. All fine.

Crew:

Do you not fancy getting in, Paul?

Paul:

You wouldn't get me in there. Not in a million years. No chance. Anyway, I wouldn't want to upstage Mark, would I?

I mean, what could be more normal than watching a grown middle-aged man flounder around in some sewage? I think it could catch on.

Mark:

And there's plenty of sewage that's just down here.

Paul:

Is there?

Mark:

So, uh, I'll bag a few items up for you.

Paul:

(singing) "I like the way you work it. No diggity. You gon' bag it up.

What Mark is collecting are wet wipes and sanitary towels flushed down the toilet and released into the river. And they're just the bits you can see. It's all part of the great waste water treatment system which works a bit like this. It starts with us as we turn on our taps, fire up the washing machine or flush down the brown. That waste, then travels down pipes into the sewers and off to the treatment works. And then it's either sent off to be cleaned up for drinking water or pumped back into the rivers as treated effluent. With most of the nasties filtered out. But, when the system is under stress from heavy rainfall, the sewers become overwhelmed and therefore the water companies are allowed to release pressure on the system by diverting the flow of waste water and rainwater into the river through combined sewer overflow pipes or CSO. Which means that all kinds of nasties can end up being discharged directly into the waterway, Gentle Knight. What treasures have you got for me?

Mark:

Some of Yorkshire's finest.

Paul:

Oh dear. Oh, my God. I saw something move in there.

Mark:

And this is just five minutes spent on a river bed.

Paul:

Oh, my God.

Mark:

So we've got wipes which is the biggest instigator of sewage litter. But then...it is vile.

Paul:

Yeah.

Mark:

We've got sanitary towels. I mean just, it's shocking.

Paul:

It really is.

Mark:

A lot of people are still unaware that this going on. They're actually under the impression that their sewage is actually being treated properly.

Paul:

Yeah well I did, Mark. That's exactly what I thought happened. I thought, you know, the adult water companies treated the sewage and then discharged, you know, perhaps not drinking water quality water, but you know, water that's free of stuff like this responsibly.

Mark:

Yeah.

Paul:

And we all bear a personal responsibility as well.

Mark:

Yes

Paul:

There's no need for this stuff to go down the loo in the first place.

Mark:

This particular - I saw in 2021 discharge for over nine hundred hours. If you include all the little streams and tributaries, we were up thirteen thousand hours this coming through this river. Shocking.

Paul:

A beautiful river like this. It is a crime. Anyway, hats off to you, Mark. I'd help you out, but I don't really want to touch you.

Mark: Well, judging by the smell of these clothes it's probably a good idea actually, yeah.

Paul:

Untreated sewage can be discharged through CSO's under a permit given to water companies by the Environment Agency to help manage waste water. The rules are they should only release diluted sewage when treatment works are overwhelmed in wet conditions.