

# The River Dour

Deborah Gasking

Fresh air and exercise have long been recommended as a way to feel physically and mentally better. For many, nature provides a sanctuary, a place to find peace and serenity. Our beautiful river can thus offer plentiful opportunities.

A strong connection with nature can facilitate a close relationship (an emotional attachment) to our natural surroundings. Research shows that those who are more connected with nature are usually happier in life and more likely to report feeling their lives are worthwhile. It can generate many positive emotions, such as calmness, joy and creativity, and can enhance concentration. Nature has a very wide definition. It can mean green spaces like parks, woodland or forests, and blue spaces like rivers, wetlands, beaches or canals.

Pencester Gardens, in the very heart of our town, provides oodles of opportunities to connect with nature. It is the best place in our urban environment to experience our delightful river. Further upstream, at Kearsney Abbey, Russell Gardens and Bushy Ruff, we have possibly the absolute best places in South East Kent to connect with blue and green spaces.

Evidence has shown that natural spaces, especially those within the urban confines, can lower exposure to air pollution, extreme



*River Dour 1906*

heat and noise, increase opportunities for physical activity and social engagement, and decrease stress and depression as people make contact with nature. Rivers, in particular, have been linked to beneficial outcomes for our mental wellbeing. Thus, urban natural spaces are great potential buffers to protect and promote human health, physically, mentally and socially. Additionally, literature suggests that a neighbourhood waterscape is more beneficial for psychological and mental health than a neighbourhood green space.

Researchers are now beginning to look at the health benefits of living near water. So far, studies have shown that this can lower risk of premature death, also lower the risk of obesity, as well as enhancing mental health and wellbeing.

However (yes, there's always a downside), cleanliness, such as the absence of litter, in natural spaces is also a factor in how much our mental health benefits from spending time outside. Cleaner nature areas are linked to lower rates of depression. This demonstrates how effective White Cliffs Countryside's regular litter picks are, not just all about nature, but they enhance our welfare too.

Interestingly, researchers studying the effects of blue space delivered through virtual reality have also found that people see it as restorative, fascinating, and preferable to a built-up environment. This shows how technology could be used as a way of studying how being near water affects people.

Did you know: – in England and Wales, people have access to a network of over 2,000 miles (3,218 km) of canals and rivers.