

# Northumbrian Water fined for County Durham pollution

The company appeared at Newcastle Crown Court for sentence on Wednesday, 19 January, after previously pleading guilty to two offences of polluting Coundon Burn on March 13 and 14, 2017.

They were fined £240,000 and ordered to pay costs of more than £34,000.

The court heard that on two consecutive days in March 2017, a brick appeared to have blocked a combined sewer causing raw sewage to pour out of manhole chambers and discharge into Coundon Burn at Auckland Park, Bishop Auckland.

A member of the public reported the initial incident to Northumbrian Water which attended and officers believed they had cleared the blockage. But when officers returned to clear up the following day, they found a second manhole further downstream was now discharging sewage into the Burn. They cut into the pipe and discovered a brick surrounded by rags and raw sewage.

An Environment Agency officer attended to investigate and discovered a plume of discoloured water entering the River Gaunless from Coundon Burn. Sample results indicated raw sewage – potentially fatal to aquatic life – had entered the Burn with further assessments revealing around 300m of the riverbed covered in sewage material.

Raw sewage enters Coundon Burn

## **Damaged manhole chamber**

Northumbrian Water said that the brick blockage was from a damaged manhole chamber on farmland and said they had since taken steps to protect them.

During the investigation manhole chambers along the sewer route in agricultural fields were checked and some damage was found, but enquiries revealed that the company had no maintenance system in place to periodically check them for damage. Instead, the company responded to any reported pollution incidents.

Passing sentence Judge Robert Adams found the company were negligent by having no preventative systems in place but gave them credit for the steps taken since the incident to remedy the issue.

Sewage in the Coundon Burn.

## **'Officers worked tirelessly'**

Rachael Caldwell, Environment Manager for the Environment Agency in the North East, said:

We take our responsibility to protect the environment very seriously. Water companies are aware that their activities have the potential to cause serious environmental impacts and they have a legal duty to avoid pollution. The regulations are clear.

Our officers worked tirelessly to bring this case to court and we're committed to holding water companies to account.

The Environment Agency has secured fines of over £137million since 2015 with record fines handed down last year, making it clear that polluters will pay for damage to the environment.

In October 2021, Northumbrian Water was fined £540,000 for polluting a watercourse that runs through Heads Hope Dene in Castle Eden, in May 2017.