

Oxon Pool

Lockdown and a lingering fear of distant travel have been encouraging many people to explore their local areas via footpaths and quiet country lanes. Now, some restricted open spaces are open again, including our local Oxon Pool.

However, there has been no great rush to visit it, as so few parishioners know much about it. Its story featured in these pages almost ten years ago, so perhaps it is time we repeated it and add up to date detail.

The pool has already been mentioned several times amongst the features of our 'glacial' landscape, which make our area a smaller version of the more famous Ellesmere 'Meres and Mosses'.

Its first mention in historical records came in a survey of the Rossall or 'Isle' Estate made in 1587, when it was being forfeited to the Crown because Francis Eaglefield, as a catholic, had gone into exile: "*The lord of Rossall hath a pool there, wherein is a great take of eels, now in the tenure of Richard Mytton Esq., and called Oxon Pool*".

The reference to eels is a reminder that they could reach such pools away from the main rivers because of their ability to 'wriggle' along narrow ditches and over wet meadows. Indeed, early naturalists considered them to be akin to 'serpents' rather than normal fish. Their life cycle includes migration back down rivers in order to reach the western Atlantic where they spawn. The next generation of 'Elvers' then return to live their adult lives in our rivers and pools.

Eels were a very important source of extra protein in the Middle Ages and even later, but in modern times a combination of overfishing in river estuaries, and loss of wetland habitats inland have greatly reduced their numbers. It is rare to encounter one in Oxon Pool today.

By the eighteenth century, John Mytton of Halson, a descendant of that Richard, had claimed the 'lordship of the manor' and therefore owned the 'soil' of Bicton Heath, which bordered the pool. At the 'inclosure' in 1768 he was allotted the 'cottage encroachment' here as well as a block of land where he had recently created another 'Eel Pool'. The map of 1812 shows the resulting pattern.

After 1824, however, things changed: thanks to the wayward life of John Mytton's grandson, his Bicton estate had to be sold and thus the Spearmans of Oxon Hall acquired both cottages and land on the Bicton side of their pool. Then through marriage most of this passed to Edward Morris, who continued to improve the estate, including the pool.

As part of this, a deep culvert was dug under Shepherd's Lane, lowering the water level and reducing its area from 9 to 3½ acres, obviously exposing mud and peat. Later, old cottages were removed and land around the pool planted offering a more private landscape, both for visual effect and extra cover for game. The tithe map of 1843 and later OS maps record this.

Through these years the Morris family had also acquired a 'country seat' at Wood Eaton in Staffordshire and in the end preferred to live there instead of Oxon. The estate here was therefore sold in 1930, when many sitting tenants, including Udlington Farm, were able to buy their homes. The Hall and most farmland, however, was bought by Shropshire County for use as a smallholding. While the Hall was let to Shelton Hospital, Oxon Pool and surrounding woodland was kept 'in hand' and left as a nature reserve.

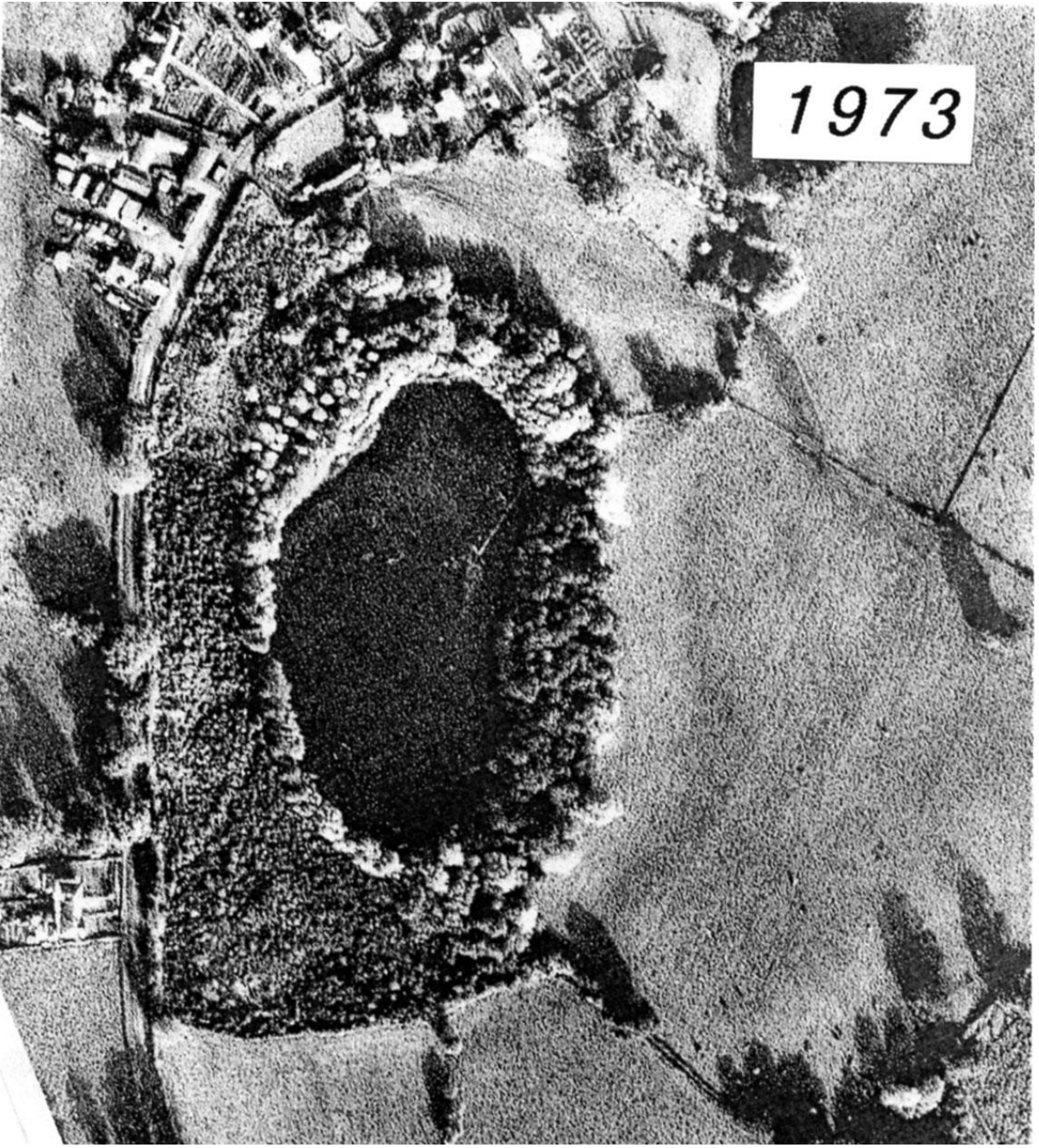
Wartime meant the loss of useful timber, so that replanting and natural regeneration maintained the tree cover during years of neglect mixed with bursts of activity. The 1973 photograph clearly shows planting patterns.

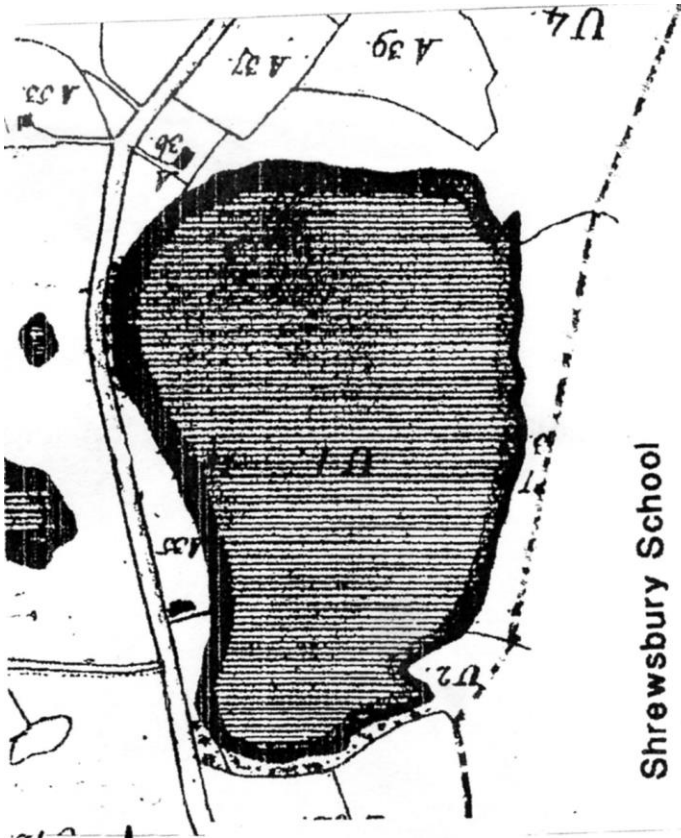
All this time water level was still controlled by that 19th century culvert, but as it began to fail in the nineties, levels rose, drowning bordering woodland. As trees died and the peat softened, wind then wore it down into a tangled mess. Thus the council had to wake up to its responsibilities since even after selling the rest of the estate, it still held the pool.

A lot of effort went into cleaning up, replanting the roadside hedge, improving gates and fixing that old culvert. Council staff, volunteers and Shropshire Anglers made a big difference ten years ago, but what has happened since?

With other country parks to look after, the Council's resources have become ever more stretched, allowing little work here. However, since fishing rather than nature had become the priority, it is perhaps logical for the management of the site to be passed to Shrewsbury Town Fisheries, even though the pool is outside the borough.

Now, under new management, excellent facilities of parking, a lockable gate, gravel paths and waterside platforms cater for fishing ticket holders only, rather than the general public. The rest of us must enter via the wicket gate at the north end and follow the old dirt path through a dense wood saplings and coppice growth, now in dire need of management. By the pool, a rotting bird hide is a relic of those 'nature reserve' days.





1812 Oxon Pool 1843

