

David Pannett's History of Bickton Part 46

Pools and Ponds in our Landscape

'February fill dyke' was a traditional observation that the accumulation of winter rainfall would fill the ditches, streams and ponds whether that month was actually wet or dry. Certainly the natural hollows and boulder clay soils of Bickton's 'Ice Age Landscape' hold a lot of water just now, including pools in the news: the old village pond near the old church and Oxon Pool down Shepherds Lane.

Around the village each farm once had its own pond for watering stock and keeping ducks. The village pond on the green was similar, catering for passing horse traffic. Significantly, cleaning here revealed a pebble surface on its bed, perhaps useful when wagons were driven into moisten their wooden wheels, as in the case of Constable's 'Haywain'. Elsewhere in the village small lakes were part of the parkland in front of Bickton Hall.

Bickton Heath, was for centuries left as rough pasture thanks to its poor drainage and numerous pools. Many of the shallower probably filled up with peat and had only become pools again when this was dug out in the Middle Ages. Oxon Pool, however was always open water because of the depth of the basin, like one of the Meres around Ellesmere

A survey of the Isle and Uddington estate in the 1580s reported that it was particularly rich in eels and let to a Mr. Mytton. By the 18th century John Mytton of Halston acquired the 'Lordship' of the Manor of Bickton, which gave him some ownership of the open heath. In about 1730 he took advantage of this by raising a dam along Calcott Lane to create his own Eel Pool, which he later retained as an 'allotment' at the 'inclosure' of the heath in 1768. However, his wayward grandson 'mad Jack' Mytton was obliged to sell the Bickton estate in 1824, after which the new owners were less keen on so much water. The eel pool, also known as the 'horse pool' because of its use for drinking at the Calcott Lane end, was soon drained. This then allowed a culvert to be dug under Shepherds Lane to lower the level of Oxon Pool.

The process was probably started by Andrew Spearman and his relations at Oxon and certainly finished by Edward Morris when he bought the estate in 1832 and improved the Hall and its grounds. Recently,

however, the culvert became blocked causing the water level to rise again, drowning the surrounding woodland. In particular, the tall young trees became unstable and subject to wind blow on the wet peat at the margin. Clearly something had to be done!

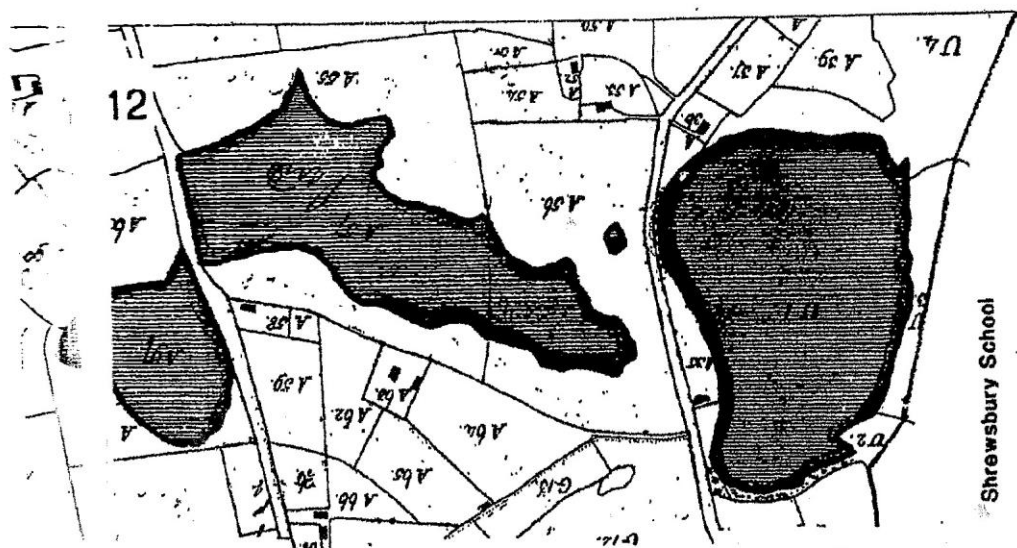
The County Council had acquired the Oxon estate when it was sold off in 1930. It gave them an opportunity to create more Council small holdings, typical of that period, but in modern times they have been sold off again. The council retained the pool area as a nature reserve and therefore found itself responsible for solving its problems. The culvert was easily repaired but the mess which it had caused posed a harder task. In these circumstances the partnership with Shropshire Anglers offered a happy solution. Much work is in progress, weather permitting, which will make the site more of an asset to the local community, not just fishermen.

All that drainage work in the early 19th century was typical of the period of 'agricultural improvement', which is also seen in the history of the Isle Pool. It was clearly marked on early maps, such as that by Robert Baugh, 1808 and Christopher Greenwood, 1827 relied on some plagiarism, but mysteriously disappeared from the more accurately surveyed Ordnance Survey maps prepared about the same time. The explanation is that Folliot Sandford of the Isle employed miners in 1793 to dig a tunnel draining the pool to the river Severn (perhaps the same gang also dug the tunnel across the neck of the Isle loop to drive a textile mill about the same time). As a relatively shallow basin, it could be easily turned into just another field, listed as the 'Old Pool' in a 1830 survey. However, it did not stay dry for much longer as it reappeared on later maps, although reduced in size. Clearly Humphrey Sandford (VIII) had different ideas on landscape amenities when he inherited the estate and took up residence in 1841.

Pools great and small make a valuable contribution to the 'bio-diversity' of the countryside at a time when more intensive farming is simplifying it. They remain a focus of wildlife activity by supporting both water life and more in the local area. Toads and many flying insects, for example, depend upon water for breeding.

Through all this, ponds can be a useful educational resource demonstrating principles of 'ecology', i.e. how plants and animals live in a community occupying different parts of the habitat, eating and being eaten.

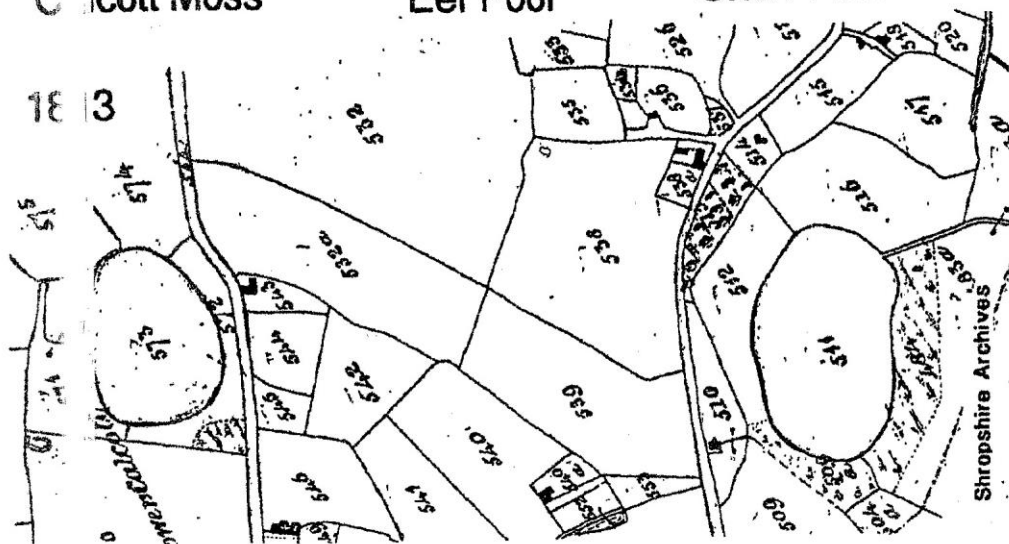
Preston Montford Field Centre makes good use of two ponds in its grounds. Even a simple pond - dipping can open childrens' eyes to the wonders of nature. Otherwise, fishing the large pools can be a great relaxation from the stress of everyday. Either way there is something for everyone around our pond.



Clocott Moss

Eel Pool

Oxon Pool



18 3

Shropshire Archives