

Some Notes on the History of Bentley Priory Open Space

When the Bentley Priory estate was broken up in 1926, Middlesex County Council bought 90 acres of the site for use as public open space. The land was subsequently transferred to the GLC and then, in 1968, it came into the ownership of the London Borough of Harrow. The Harrow Natural History Society (HNHS) was formed in 1970 and the following year its members began to survey the area and record the flora and fauna. In 1973 they designed a nature trail to guide visitors around the site, at that time known as Bentley Priory Common or Park, which did not include Summerhouse Lake.

The first journal of the HNHS, produced in 1973, contained a map and description of the nature trail. There was also an account of the flora of the common and the first of two articles by Alan Tinsey, describing the results of his survey of Boot Pond. Alan's second article, and an updated description of the nature trail, appeared in the 1974 journal.

A list of the birds that had been recorded in Harrow included observations made on Bentley Priory Common and on Summerhouse Lake. By 1973 plans were afoot to have the area around Summerhouse Lake declared a Nature Reserve. These finally came to fruition in 1975 and an article in the HNHS society journal of 1976 describes how this happened. Here are some extracts from this article.

There had been much controversy concerning the fate of the lake. The lake was just a lake as far as the maps were concerned and it did not possess an official name. It was surrounded by fairly dense woodland and hidden to all but the few who trespassed beyond the barbed wire (and braved the resident scary dog). On the west bank was a very pretty small cottage built of wood and thatch. The cottage was at that time about 200 years old, and it was built originally as a summerhouse within the then country estate of Bentley Priory. The summerhouse was originally built on the island and later moved to the bank because of the damp. It was used by Queen Adelaide, and Sir Walter Scott corrected the proofs of his poem "Marmion" there. In 1976 it was the freehold property of Mr Stedman, a retired RAF Officer, although he and his wife no longer lived there, and his son-in-law Mr Addington was then in residence. Because of the presence of this little cottage the lake became known locally by the name "Summerhouse Lake".

The inaccessibility of the lake and cottage had helped to keep it secret and thus few people knew of this peaceful lake. The only vehicular access was by a private track through Lower Priory Farm which was not suitable for large vehicles. Mr Stedman had permission from the farmers to use this track and the HNHS (which was on very good terms with the Walkers who owned the farm from 1978) used to be able to take their cards down to the lake. The controversy over the lake started in 1973 when the Harrow Council took an interest in it in their search for land within the Borough which could be put to recreational use without conflicting with "Greenbelt" laws and regulations. Obtaining the land around Summerhouse Lake presented no difficulty because although Mr Stedman had the freehold of "The Summerhouse", its garden and the adjacent island (and he also had exclusive fishing rights along the shore of his property), the remainder of the lake and its surrounding woodlands was held by him on a six-month lease from the council. Among the clubs attempting to get a finger in the pie were the fishing and yachting enthusiasts who were looking for waters within the Borough. The battle was at first between these two fraternities and the Council who were considering opening up the lake completely to the general public as a picnic and play area.

Fortunately there was one person on the Parks and Open Spaces Sub-committee who had the foresight to see what was going to happen to this beauty spot. There was also another stroke of luck in the saving of the lake – a copy of Harrow Natural History

Society's first journal (1973) was sold – quite unknowingly – to this same gentleman's wife on the very day that he was going to a meeting to try and drive home his case. The gentleman concerned was Alderman Antony Fawthrop. Armed with this copy of the journal, he stressed his opinion that before anything foolhardy was done to spoil this lake forever, an independent opinion should be sought from various bodies as to what use was best for this piece of land.

Alderman Fawthrop's ideas were well received and advice as to the best use for the land was sought from the Hertfordshire and Middlesex Trust for Nature Conservation (this later became the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust) and The Nature Conservancy Council. Dr R C Fisher was asked to produce a biological survey of the area and to report on its worth for the various uses proposed. All the bodies including Dr Fisher came to the same conclusion. The lake should be preserved, as it was a place of special scientific interest and of outstanding natural beauty. It was therefore suggested to the council that the best way to preserve the lake was to declare it a nature reserve.

So it was that in 1974 Bentley Priory Nature Reserve became established. A Management Committee was set up consisting of three members from the council; two from the Herts and Middlesex Trust for Nature Conservation one from the Nature Conservancy; one from Harrow Natural History Society and Mr Stedman, owner of "The Summerhouse". A preliminary meeting was held in "The Summerhouse" on the 8th May 1975, and oddly enough while the meeting was still in session, two grey Herons circled the lake twice. The committee was granted by the council an initial sum of £150 for expenses towards the work to be carried out. One of the first items on the expense sheet was notice boards to be put up around the reserve to let the public know that the area was now a reserve.

By 1975 the Reserve was included in the Herts and Middlesex's list and they repaired the fence. The Reserve was kept locked but members could borrow a key to enter by contacting the warden Alan Tinsey. The reserve was still not open to the public who on the whole were still unaware of its existence.

Between 1975 and 1990 HNHS held Work Parties on a Sunday once a month. At first there were quite a few Rhododendrons which were removed. Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust arranged for two Silt pits to be installed on the two larger streams at the north end of the lake and these were cleared regularly in spring. In 1978 Peter Parr bought the Summerhouse and became warden of the reserve. (The Parrs also owned a Garage in Wealdstone). He made 21 nest boxes which were installed in the woodland round the lake and these were monitored regularly for many years. Apart from Blue tits and Great tits there were Nuthatches and in 1982 a Tree sparrow was in a box near to the Master Oak. Otherwise the HNHS did whatever was needed to keep areas clear and also monitored the wild life.

By 1980 it was necessary to do some work on the dam (the lake is artificial and was dammed over 150 years ago) and vehicles were brought in by a temporary road from Masefield Avenue and some trees had to be cut down. The general public became more aware of the lake being there and even though the fence was strengthened many people (including the fishermen) began to get into the Reserve and made many holes in the fence.

Peter Parr tried to stop the fishing, but in 1981 the house was burnt down in a wanton attack of vandalism. The site of the old summerhouse was a freehold property and the Parrs sold it for redevelopment. For about ten years a battle went on over planning permission ending with an appeal in 1991/92 which was turned down.

Shortly after this the Council bought the site and in 1993 the whole of the Open Space became the Bentley Priory Nature Reserve and was opened up to the public. Bentley Priory Nature Reserve is the only biological Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in Harrow and is a Metropolitan Site of Importance for Nature Conservation

Meanwhile, Philip Simons had become warden and the HNHS continued to carry out conservation activities at the reserve, under the direction of the Management Committee. Then, in 1988, Peter Peretti became involved, first as an assistant to Philip Simons and then as warden in 1989. Elizabeth Stainthorpe was also involved from the early eighties through the Harrow Natural History Society and as an assistant warden for many years.

About 1996 it was decided the dam was unsafe and it was rebuilt using the same temporary road from Masefield Avenue. As noted before Summerhouse Lake is artificial and is designated as a 'Reservoir' under the 1975 Reservoirs Act and as such this feature comes under the auspices of the Environment Agency.

There was no entrance to the open space from Common Road until the late 1960s when an entrance was put in and the path along the top was made to connect with the Deer Path. At this time many bird watchers used to come as there were so many birds about. You could always hear a cuckoo in May and yellowhammers, linnets, willow warblers, lesser spotted woodpeckers and many other birds which are all part of the general decline could be seen and heard. In recent years some new kinds of birds have been seen. These include mandarin ducks which have bred, a few goosanders on the lake during winter, an occasional little egret and the ring-necked parakeets which can be seen and heard in the trees.

David Angold (who lived at Lower Priory Farm) grazed Longhorn Cattle on the site all year round. When he moved he kept the grazing rights. The Longhorns were eventually withdrawn for good in 2000 and there followed a gap in grazing due to Foot and Mouth disease. New herds were introduced after an enforced delay, but not before the grass had grown really high. Various breeds of Heritage cattle are currently used, replacing the previous Belgian Blues.

The deer park has a managed herd of 30-35 fallow deer, a popular attraction, which also serves a useful purpose in reducing the effects of human intrusion elsewhere.

In 2012 the Environment Agency work began de-silting Summerhouse Lake to clear out the sediment and improve the water quality. This activity needs to be carried out on a regular basis.

Some funding is received from Harrow Council but management largely relies on voluntary work. The Conservation Volunteers (previously the British Trust for Nature Conservation) carry out some work as well as local volunteers and work carried out by Corporate Work Parties. Sue Kabel was an active assistant Warden from 2014 to 2020.

The Bentley Priory Nature Reserve Management Committee (BPNRMC) used to get a regular grant from the council, then funding was through the small grants scheme but this has now been discontinued. Major schemes have included a Heritage Lottery Fund grant of £59,000 to cut back scrub and young woodland from the top of Furze Heath and the Greensward. The four-year Furze Heath Grassland Restoration Project was largely completed by 2015. Harrow's Green Grid project has also provided finance for projects to link and improve green space. This included a new Nature Trail with 'smart phone' QR codes as well as traditional leaflets and signs. Bentley Priory Open Space also currently receives funding through the Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme (which is administered by Natural England). This pays for management linked to a Management Plan. Management Plans for the Open Space have been produced over the years and a Plan to follow on

from the last five year plan is currently being produced.

Work was carried out on Boot Pond in 2014/15 via Froglife's Dragon Finder project. A new ten metre diameter pond was created close to the "toe" end of Boot Pond dividing the pond with the aim of creating a Smooth newt habitat away from the fish.

In 2016 the Environment Agency put in the Masfield track way to allow access to the lake and new boardwalks were put in for the Bentley Priory Circular Walk. Various leaflets have been produced and updated for this walk over the years.

In 1995/6 a handful of locals, led by Tony and Margaret Wood formed a Steering Committee and set up the Friends of Bentley Priory Nature Reserve and produced the very first *Four Seasons* newsletter. One of the first projects undertaken by the Friends was the uncovering of the overgrown Queen Adelaide's steps to the Dowager Queen's boathouse, which once stood at the north end of Summerhouse Lake. Ron Walker, then tenant of Lower Priory Farm, brought equipment to help remove a heavy fallen tree from the site.

In 1997 the Friends allocated names to the numbered compartments. What became known as Friends Meadow, behind Boot Pond, had been spread with mud from the dredging of the pond. A carpet of wildflowers sprang up, and the Friends erected a new fence to keep out the all-year-round longhorns and their calves. In 1998 a new bench was put in at the top of the Deer Path. This was the first of several benches to be provided by the Friends, followed by a couple of path-side boot scrapers.

The Master Oak is an ancient pollard oak *Quercus robur* that is at least 350 years old and may be older. In 2005/6 Not long after the Master Oak had officially been registered as an Ancient Tree by the Woodland Trust, it was reported that the tree was being damaged. Between 2007 and 2009, as RAF Bentley Priory gradually emptied and finally closed, the Friends had a lot to say during the planning stage of the site's proposed redevelopment, raising concerns about things like tree preservation orders, sewerage infrastructure and access through the boundary fence. As City & Country and Barratts began redeveloping the mansion site, they promised to give the Friends £5,750 to save the Master Oak. In 2014 having secured the developers' money at last, the Friends began the Master Oak Project in earnest, measuring up for the railings and fences, then ordering and erecting them around the mighty tree trunk and an attractive 'interpretation panel' was put in place.

The official decision to dissolve the Friends was taken at an EGM in 2017. Within a fortnight, Tony Wood was taken ill and did not live to see the final *Four Seasons* (his wife Margaret had died earlier in 2011). Linda Robinson who had joined the Committee in 2007, in time took over as Minutes Secretary and also in later years edited *Four Seasons*. For his tireless litter volunteering across the site, Alan Phillips was nominated for the 2009 Harrow's Heroes Awards and received runners up prize.

BPNRMC (currently chaired by Cllr Camilla Bath) continues to meet every two to three months to determine management policy, and to direct the regularly held voluntary working parties. There is a strong interaction between Harrow Nature Conservation Forum (HNCF), BPNRMC and the Voluntary Warden. HNCF manages a number of other important wildlife sites in Harrow. This allows a coordinated approach and continuity of management of the borough's wildlife sites whilst facilitating an exchange of resources and experience. HNCF has produced a new site leaflet for Bentley Priory.

Initiatives continue: work on the Masfield Building, by the entrance in Masfield Avenue, was completed in 2018 and the building can now be used for events associated with the site.

BPNRMC has asked the Council to designate the Glenthorne areas and the grassland area due to be transferred from the former Princess Alexandra Nursing Home as parts of an extended Bentley Priory Open Space Local Nature Reserve. We are very grateful that the site survives and continues to thrive.

Nov 2020 - Margaret Huitson and Elizabeth Stainthorpe