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Bodenham Lake's History



Geology

The present day lake occupies the site of old gravel pits. The gravels that were removed had lain on the floor of the Lugg Valley beneath a covering of 2–3 metres of silt. Before these gravels were deposited the valley was deeper than at present. It has been cut by the ancient River Lugg which, at that time, was joined by the River Teme so that it was a much larger river and drained a much wider area than at present. Later, as a result of ice invading the area during the Ice Age, The River Teme was diverted further north and cut Downton Gorge through which it now flows. The Lugg itself was consequently reduced in size.

The gravels were deposited in the valley as the ice retreated during the latter part of the Ice Age, probably between 14,000 and 10,000 years ago. At that time the temperatures were lower than at present, snowfall was heavier in winter and the hillsides were less stabilized by vegetation. Under these conditions vigorous spring floods picked up loose materials and rounded them into pebbles, which were eventually deposited in the river bed and valley floor. Some Woolly Rhinoceros and Mammoth remains have been found in the gravels revealing something of the wildlife of that time.

About 10,000 years ago there was a fairly rapid warming of the climate, which resulted in a decline of spring floods and the stabilization of the land surface by vegetation. As a result the river became more sedate and deposited only fertile silts and mud when in flood.

History

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By the time of the Normans, according to the Domesday Book, this fertile land beside the River Lugg in Bodenham was being managed as hay meadow or pasture and this management continued up to the 19th Century when the meadows near the church were known as Court Meadow, Vernford Meadow and Water Galls. The meadowland was bounded to the north by the West Lane, which ran along the valley floor from Bodenham westwards. Beyond this lane

to the north, on higher ground, was the West Field, one of Bodenham's large open arable fields. Today a small part of the former flowery meadowland survives between the lake and the river.

Most of the riverside meadowland had been part of the manorial farm of Devereux family from whom it descended to the Marquis of Bath of Longleat. The tenant of the farm in 1670 reported that the land was 'apt to be flooded', something that has not changed today.

Subsequently in 1803 Devereux Court became part of the Hampton Court estate. However a small piece of the present site was in different ownership. This land had belonged from before 1540 to the Chantry of St. Mary in Bodenham church when it was described as a 'Our Lady Close next the highway called the West Lane on the one side'. A small timber-framed house and farm buildings were built on this site around 1814 and it was run as a small farm called Lady Close Farm.

It was on this farm that the gravel digging first started in a small way – with wheelbarrows, it is said. This was in the days before planning permission was required and from small beginnings the gravel digging spread out unrestrained. It first took over the whole of Lady Close Farm and then started on the Devereux Court land. The tenant farmer had his best meadows taken from him one after the other and the digging came perilously near to the church. All this time the old West Lane and the field boundaries with their trees remained in position because they were used as trackways for the lorries and in this was, as the pits filled with water, a series of separate lakes of different ages was made. The banks of the older lakes became well vegetated and attractive to wildlife.

The ready-mix concrete and gravel washing machinery itself stood at the east end of the site and the washings from the gravel were back-filled into the first-made, oldest pit, producing a swampy area, dangerous to humans but a valuable habitat for birds. When gravel working finally ceased the old field boundaries were broken through to make one large lake but some parts of them still remain as islands.

Written and researched by Peter Thomson and Anthea Brian December 2003

Today

Up until March 2016, the site was managed and maintained by Herefordshire Council's Parks, Countryside and Leisure Development service, before management was transferred to the partnership of Herefordshire Wildlife Trust and New Leaf Sustainable Development on a 99 year lease..

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