

**SHEEPWASH**

**POND  
RESTORATION  
BY PRESTWOOD  
NATURE  
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# SHEEPWASH

## History

The Sheepwash is an ancient pond, once the largest of several on the old Prestwood Commons, which once ran from Lodge Wood south to what is Lodge Lane today. The pond sat beside a drove road leading from the Midlands to London that ran along the western edge of the Commons (now Honor End Lane, Clarendon Road and Wycombe Road). Flocks of animals were regularly driven along this route to market.

This pond would have supplied a welcome watering-place for stock.

It was particularly useful for washing sheep. Sheep-washing should not be confused with sheep-dipping. The latter is a modern process with chemicals to improve the health of the animal. Sheep-washing was an old process using water alone to clean the wool of dirt and grease, either before shearing in May or June, or before selling on.

In areas like the Cotswolds and Peak District with major woollen industries, sheepwashes were usually constructed in streams with elaborate brickwork and these have been restored in some places (there is an example by Ivinghoe Watermill in Bucks). Others, as in Prestwood, are simply large ponds that were most likely used to clean up sheep going to market, as well as shrinking metal rims on cart-wheels and washing carts. Sometimes they had different uses at different times - eg fish-ponds or mill ponds.

Ponds with the name of Sheepwash occur all over the south-east - eg Mill Hill in London. The Prestwood Sheepwash may have been originally created as such, or it could have occurred as a result of quarrying brick-earth for the former brickworks that once existed very close by but disappeared over a century and a half ago. It was there that some of the bricks for Hampden House were made.

Local resident Ron Hatt, who has lived near the pond all his life, says his mother could remember the last occasion, before the First World War, when sheep were washed here. Old postcards in his possession also show that the pond was still of water in the 1930s, although some scrub had grown up around it from disuse. Some of these bushes, left unmanaged, grew into trees whose leaves filled the pond and whose roots soaked up the water. Left as it was the pond would soon have disappeared and a unique part of our heritage would have vanished. Untidy scrub also encouraged illegal dumping of garden waste.

One notable feature of the Prestwood Sheepwash is its shape, which has been constant over the centuries - a backward 'C', the gap in the otherwise round pond being created by a wide causeway on which sheep were corralled so that they could be dipped in the deeper central part of the pond. They were probably held under briefly by men wielding long poles (see old picture of sheepwashing in the Thames), while others

standing in shallower parts guided the swimming sheep to shore. The causeway has been cut through at some time in the recent past, so that it now appears as an island when the water is high.

### **Restoration**

Many trees (mostly 60-70 year old sycamores and ash) have been removed as part of restoring the pond, although a few large oaks have been left. The increased light this gives should encourage water-plants to grow and amphibians and other creatures to return. A century's accumulation of leaf-mould had choked the pond and had to be excavated. For the most part it was found that the pond was relatively shallow, but at one point beside the causeway we found it to descend a couple of metres to the stony bottom. The pond had been deliberately shaped to give a variety of depths for the purpose of immersing the sheep and manoeuvring them out.

Restoration is being carried out by Prestwood Nature, in partnership with Great Missenden Parish Council. The aim is to make it a good natural habitat for wild plants and creatures, to preserve it as an important historical feature with the original vegetation, to make the site a pleasant feature for passers-by, and to create an educational facility. The site is still common land, as it was never incorporated into the surrounding fields when the old common was enclosed.

A dipping platform was built in the winter of 2008-09. This was based on a traditional cantilever design, but incorporated strengthening features such as the main struts connected by metal plates and embedded in concrete deep in the ground, use of green oak for durability, and a bench-seat. A path was laid at the same time, graded and surfaced with wood-chippings. It is wide enough for wheelchair access. Three bird-boxes were fixed high on tall oak trees by the pond. A notice-board was made by local joiners, in which information can be displayed. The completion of this work was marked by a "sheep-dipping" ceremony (using two model sheep) attended by local people, those concerned with the project and the press.

A hedge has been planted by the road, using seven native species. With the restoration, sixteen aquatic and waterside plants surviving there from the past - including water starwort, branched bur-reed, greater spearwort, native blackcurrant, celery-leaved buttercup and at least two kinds of water-crowfoot - reappeared. Some of these plants had not been recorded there before and must have grown from seeds long preserved in the mud. Another 25 species have been planted, some with colourful flowers like marsh marigold and ragged robin, some like reeds and rushes that should help filter out any pollution from road run-off, and others submerged to help aerate the water. Another 90 species of plant

have been recorded from the surrounds of the pond since restoration. Many of these will be temporary, taking advantage of disturbed conditions, but others should survive, such as the gorse shoots that were not recorded there before but were probably part of the original vegetation around the pond, as the soil is somewhat acidic.

As well as plants, 42 creatures have already been recorded using the pond. These included frogs that spawned immediately we had finished digging out, and later, smooth newts. Whirligig beetles new to the area are now common there with a number of other aquatic invertebrates, and dragonflies have been seen ovipositing. Both the plants and the creatures will be monitored from year to year. The first pond-dipping event for children has been organised for May 2009.

### **Funding and assistance**

Initial restoration was funded by the Chiltern Conservation Board's Sustainability Fund and Great Missenden Parish Council. Additional funding came from Buckinghamshire County Council's Community Fund (thanks to County Councillor Michael Colston), Prestwood Nature, Kay Whitnell and local residents Simon Laurie and Shelley Mortimer. It also had the support of neighbouring landowners, Wren Davis Ltd and Mr Priest, and many local residents who have joined Prestwood Nature volunteers in tidying up the pond and planting. Sylvia Bennett acted as liaison between Prestwood Nature and residents. Prestwood Nature surveyed the site, designed the project, secured funding and directed the work. Those particularly involved were Fiona Grant, Tony Marshall, John Obee, Lesley Stoner, Ian Taylor and Ian Waller. GB Garden Services felled the trees. Ian Waller excavated the mud and directed the building of the dipping platform. Local resident Charlie Locke planted the hedge. Paul Moore donated bird-boxes. John and Ann Priest kept a photographic record of progress. Ron Hatt provided valuable historical information. Volunteers will continue to manage the site in the future.

Funding for a dipping platform was raised by the Great Missenden and Prestwood Revitalisation Group. It included some of their own money and a grant from the Stoke Mandeville and Other Parishes Charity.



Sheepwash before restoration November 2007 © John Priest



Tree-cutting December 2007 © John Priest





After excavation January 2008 © John Priest



Volunteers relax after work-party March 2008 © Ann Priest  
Planting 22 March 2008 © John Priest





Planting 22 March 2008 © John Priest



Sheepwashing Ceremony to mark completion of restoration and building of dipping platform, 24 January 2009 © Tina Hillas



Sheepwashing in the Thames 1906



Sheepwashing Dorset c.1900

### Postscript

Beside a well-used road into Prestwood, the pond has attracted a great deal of attention and much admiration. It has now become one of the scenic attractions of the village, remarked on alike by visitors and many residents who had not even realised a pond was there. Local residents keep an eye on it and care for it, and there are a lot of visits by families with children from further afield. It has provided Prestwood Nature with a higher profile and helped to recruit many new members. Most crucially, however, it is developing a diverse ecological community that adds significantly to the quality of the local environment. Plentiful rain has kept water-levels very high so far, and it remains to be seen how well water is retained in a drier period.