

MY BIRDING PATCH AND THE STORY OF MILFORD AND KEYHAVEN'S TWO BIRD HIDES

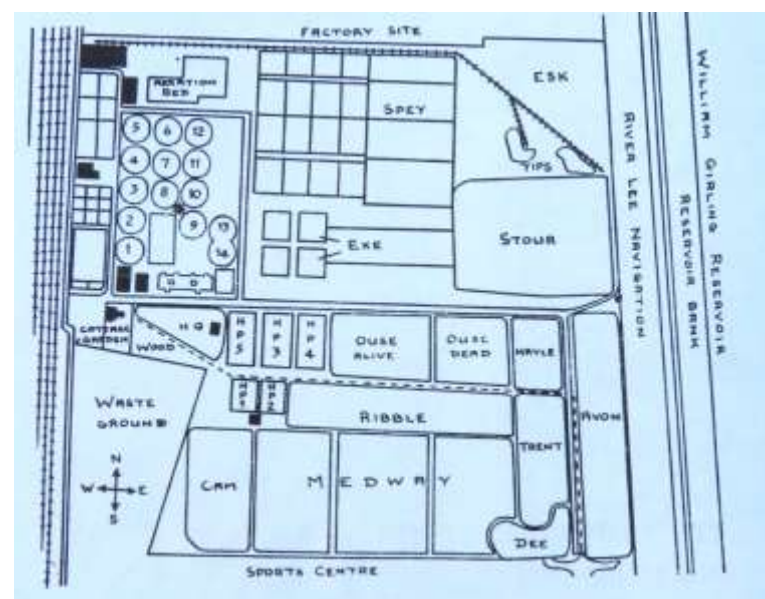
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Milford Conservation Volunteers (MCV)



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My First Birding Patch: Ponders End Sewage Farm - Enfield, Middlesex

Coming from the London and Hertfordshire area, I was used to small pockets of amenity woodland. There were few public open spaces of note, but my favourite birdwatching patch was the Ponders End Sewage Farm, known affectionately as 'Ponders Plonk!' In the early 1970's a friend and I wrote an historical bird review of the sewage works which had been constructed in 1877. Our report was subsequently published in the 1972 issue of the London Bird Report but just a year later pumping ceased, leading to the farms eventual closure.



Left: Sewage Farm and William Girling Reservoir along the right hand side of drawing. Now all part of the 26mile Lea Valley Regional Park – Nature Reserve.
Below: Birding friends at Sewage Farm 1972



Lea Valley Regional Park

The sewage works sat immediately alongside the River Lee and the Lea Valley Reservoirs stretching south up to the River Thames and north into the Hertfordshire countryside. And, by the way, yes, both spellings are often used: Lee and Lea, but which is right I cannot confirm! The redundant sewage farm and the string of reservoirs, now form part of the Lea Valley Regional Park, a linear series of nature reserves stretching an impressive 26 miles long. It was the home of Britain's most memorable sporting achievements when it hosted the 2012 Olympic and Paralympics Games and won 29 Gold medals. Where the sewage farm once sat, a huge marina was constructed. My early birding education was amongst these waterways and the nearby woodlands, where I learned the bird calls from my older cousins. Those woodland bird calls have remained with me for life.

Milford-on-Sea

My family and I moved from the green countryside of Hertfordshire down to the blue coastal location of Milford-on-Sea in 1988. When we moved onto the Swallow Estate, the development was just ten years old. Prior to that, the land had been a chicken farm for many

years. I count myself fortunate to have picked such a location, right on the door step of Sturt Pond which at the time we moved in I didn't even know it existed. What's more, it has a quite remarkable array of waders, geese and other wildfowl, all of which at the time of moving in I was not aware.

Sturt Pond and Milford's First Bird Hide

Sturt Pond has been a key birding location for many years, but despite that, it features very little either in birding magazines, Going Birding website or even in the H.O.S. Annual Reports. In my opinion, Sturt Pond's birdlife features far less than it deserves. Inevitably, it is to the better known Lymington and Keyhaven nature reserve nearby that birders flock to every year and rightly so. Its coastal marshes are a haven for thousands of wintering wildfowl. Nevertheless, overlook Sturt at your peril as it should not be dismissed lightly!

Early Volunteer Management

Despite the New Forest being close at hand, where I would probably have recognised the many familiar woodland bird calls, all I needed to do now was cross the road and walk straight over to Sturt Pond. I now had to learn a whole new set of coastal bird calls with which, even now, I am still only gradually getting to grips.

For many years, the late Bill Smith, Jim Carter and Dave Green managed the footpaths to make it more pleasurable for users. Hundreds of tonnes of gravel were laid, all by hand-barrowing the gravel to its final destination and raked level by the extremely hard working Milford Environment Group (as the group were known before amalgamating with the Wildlife Recording Group to become the Milford Conservation Volunteers (MCV).



View across Sturt Pond



The late Bill Smith laying gravel

Local Nature Reserve Status and Present Management

In 2008, New Forest District Council declared Sturt Pond a formal Local Nature Reserve. I was the Parish Clerk for Milford-on-Sea at the time and thanks to fantastic work from Hampshire County Councils Lymington and Keyhaven nature reserve manager Pete Durnell, and with the added support from the late Phil Gossling (retired Parish Council Chairman) and now retired County Councillor Alan Rice, we were also able to get the landowner (New Forest District Council) to put the reserve into a formal ten year management plan. Pete Durnell was appointed site manager. The project commenced in earnest, on the reed bed, the saltmarsh and Solent Way footpath running alongside the eastern boundary of the Pond.

Milford-on-Sea's First Public Bird Hide

In 2008, prior to the amalgamation, the Wildlife Recording Group put forward a plan to the District and Parish Councils to introduce a public bird hide at the southern end of Sturt Pond overlooking the grazing meadow, reed-bed, scrub, saltmarsh and pond. Having gained planning approval, the group set about raising the £14,000 required to have the hide constructed and its interior fitted out. Raising the funds was quite daunting, especially when our first Lottery bid for a grant of £10,000 was rejected. However, a second bid of £10,000 was made, this time to the 'Awards for All' programme, and was successful. Further financial help was needed to raise the difference between the grant and the total project cost. Various donations and sponsorship funds were received from the County Council, residents and MCV and WRG volunteers, whilst additional 'help in kind' was generously given by Civils UK who laid the trackway from the entrance right the way up to the bird hide steps. The Parish Council contributed by insuring the building each year.



Scrape Construction

Pete Durnell was asked by the Wildlife Recording Group to seek permission from Natural England (NE) to create a small 'scrape' immediately in front of the hide to attract birds closer. Following approval from NE, Pete set about creating a natural looking sunken area to attract waders, geese and waterfowl. Some years on, we can confidently say that the scrape has been hugely successful in attracting a variety of birds close to the hide, including: Goosander, Red-breasted Merganser, Brent Goose, Shelduck, Teal, Gadwall, Little Grebe, Greenshank, Redshank, Common Sandpiper, Black-tailed Godwit, Water Rail, Kingfisher, Snipe, Jack Snipe, Little Egret, Cattle Egret, Spoonbill and Glossy Ibis.



*Scrape Creation by
Pete Durnell*



Filling up for the first time



Scrape today



The fruits of our 'Bird Scrape' labours

Gull Rails and Young Visitors

Other items added at the reserve included 'gull rails' in the pond and in the scrape, which have been helpful to many birders making it easier for them to see the colours of the bird legs and even revealing a few colour-ringed birds. A new fence was erected to keep visitors further away from the important saltmarsh area. Screens were erected close to the hide so that the birds using the scrape were not disturbed when visitors enter or exit. Bird feeders were installed to encourage more common species closer to the hide enabling youngsters visiting the hide to spot them at close quarters. Guides, brownies, rainbows, sea scouts, beavers and the primary school wildlife explorers also enjoy being shown the birds through sponsored binoculars and the scopes set up especially for these visits.



Gull Rails attract numerous birds

12th Year Renovation Work

The hide and its access are now in their 12th year and in need of some enhancements to make the facility more welcoming. A new wider access and gate will be fitted, new and improved interpretation signage installed together with a new gravel-board edged trackway leading up to the hide. The rusting interior gate and wired fence sides will be removed completely, again to make the entrance more user-friendly. The hide itself will be repainted, have a new roof covering fitted and new internal enhancements to make it even

better. A couple of years back someone very kindly wrote in our birding diary that “*this is the best bird hide I have ever visited*”. We want to maintain that high standard by making the above enhancements during 2020/21 to enable it to remain a ‘first class’ community facility that is so enjoyed by the public.

Since formal bird recording began in September 2002, 150 different species have been recorded in the diary (see attached species list).

Weather, and corona virus permitting, the Sturt Pond public bird hide is normally open 365 days a year between 9am and 5pm or dusk if earlier. The hide often stays open later during the summer evenings. Entrance is free, but there is a donations box should anyone wish to part with loose change which helps pay for the bird food and maintenance. (The Walks Map and donation boxes are emptied daily).

The Pans Wetlands and Bird Observatory

Having had success at Sturt Pond with the introduction of the elevated bird hide, in 2017 the Milford Conservation Volunteers decided that it would be great to have a second birdwatching facility in the Avon Water and Keyhaven Harbour area.

Site Selection – The Pump House

Working closely with Simeon and Lisa Morgan Farming (tenant farmers) sites overlooking The Pans on private land owned by J & D Edgar Ltd were considered and following a suggestion by Lisa, MCV was shown a redundant farm building looking north along the Pans and across lower Avon Water. In 1965, the late John Edgar (farmer) had installed a heavy duty pump in a specially constructed brick and tile roofed building. For many years the pumping station had removed thousands of litres of floodwater from his arable farmland. Water was pumped into the adjacent Avon Water and then out into the nearby harbour through two large diameter pipes. The Edgar project was known as the ‘Avon Water Marsh Drainage Scheme’ as depicted on a stone plaque built into the end wall of the building.



The Pump House – We were assured it was under there somewhere?

Farming

Edgar’s 120 strong dairy cattle were then able to graze the relatively dry farmland. At times, the land was also planted with various crops providing a dual purpose for the drained site. At the end of the 1990s, Edgar’s and Simeon decided that dairy cattle and draining the land

for crops were no longer viable and the decision was taken to stop pumping water off the land. At the same time, Simeon Morgan Farming applied to Natural England for a Stewardship Agreement grant to allow the Pans site to revert to the magnificent wetlands that has formed and that we see today, attracting hundreds of winter waterfowl to this site.



Simeon Morgan checking winter bird feed strip Lisa's Zwartbles sheep to the right

Pump House - Conversion to Observatory

By the year 2017, the building was derelict. No roof, four brick walls (without any windows) and no floor leaving an open drop of some 12-14 feet down into the murky stagnant water below. The pumping station had not been used for 20 years. The heavy pump and most of the equipment had already been removed when we viewed the building, although, there was still a huge pump engine cowling protruding above the level of where the floor would have been, if it had had one! The cowling was subsequently lifted out leaving a clear space to fit a new double-skinned wooden floor.



The Roof ?



Original floor would have been level with the top of the ladder!

Although the pump house was generously handed over free by the Edgar family to the group, MCV still needed to raise additional funds, this time to the tune of £8,000 in order to:

- make the planning application for a change of use
- undertake appropriate tree works
- completely renovate the dilapidated building and
- install the access decking boardwalk for visitors to set up cameras and tripods.

Planning - Change of Use, Tree works and other Consents

MCV's 65 page 2016 planning application for the change of use was duly approved in early 2017 by the National Park Authority and permission was granted by the District Council for tree works. The adjacent row of pine trees had caused significant damage to the building's original roof, so to protect the new roof tiles from future problems the trees needed to be sensibly pruned back to stop such damage happening again.



Consent was given by Natural England for the project to move forward and a Licence to Occupy was kindly given to MCV by Edgar's. The only condition Edgar's insisted upon was to say that entry had to be 'controlled' by MCV as the site was on private land. We overcame that challenge by inviting an electronic door opening specialist to advise us. The controlled gate/door access system was installed and has worked really well, especially once we had appointed Julie Hallows (volunteer) to get to grips with the electronic data activation apparatus. We are now in our fourth year of occupancy.



Electronic Gate and Door Access

Funding and Renovation Work

Funding streams and sponsorship ideas were considered and generously given by local residents, with one local family giving a significant undisclosed contribution to the project. The Cameron Bespolka Trust, New Forest National Park and HOS were extremely positive in helping MCV raise the necessary funds to be able to complete the project.

The spring and summer of 2017 were very busy with specialist contracted works being undertaken, e.g. roofing, electronic door system, electrics, brick work and windows, but primarily, all the rest of the labour work was undertaken with voluntary help from MCV

members, friends and family, who constructed the floor, fitted the raised decking, the internal insulation and external guttering.

Access Decking Construction



Formal Opening of ‘The Pans Wetlands – Bird Observatory’

By November 2017 the facility was ready to be formally opened by Alison Barnes, Chief Executive of the National Park, assisted by landowner James Edgar, David Rule, Company Secretary and Keith Betton Chairman of the Hampshire Ornithological Society who had given generous time and effort in ensuring the success of the project.



Official Opening Day 25 November 2017

Left to Right:

Keith Metcalf - MCV Conservation Officer
James Edgar - Landowner Board Member
David Rule - J & D Edgar Ltd Secretary
Alison Barnes - CEO NF National Park
Keith Betton - Chairman – Hampshire Ornithological Society

Evaluation of Facility

So, has the project been worthwhile? We are told by our users that it has been a huge success and has been worth all the time and effort put into it by many individuals. Since its formal launch and official opening on 25th November 2017 we have:

- 1) recorded **123** different bird species (see separate species list)
- 2) commissioned a full 12 month Ringing and Breeding Bird Survey
- 3) held regular monthly public open sessions where visitors are welcomed into the facility to view the birds and to be helped identify what they see, and
- 4) installed night-time trail-cams which have picked up Otter, Roe Deer, Badger, Brown Rat, Fox and an unidentified mouse.

Access to this private site is by application to MCV for the purchase of an electronic key-fob, which can be renewed annually for a small extension fee. Full details of terms, conditions, usage guidelines and how to apply for a fob can be found on MCV’s website at:

www.milfordconservation.org