

Waterworks Pond at Alton Court, Ross on Wye

This Victorian waterworks at one time drew drinking water from boreholes to supply much of Ross-on-Wye, and remains a reserve supply even today. Some of the old pumps have been lovingly restored and are on show at the Waterworks Museum - Hereford, while the overflow ponds are now a wonderful habitat for wildlife.



The old pumping station J. Blake

Pond Restoration

In 2007, pond survey and restoration work was undertaken on the Dwr Cymru Welsh Water pond near Alton Court as part of the Pond Restoration and Celebration Project. This project was developed by Herefordshire Amphibian and Reptile Team (HART) and rolled out in partnership with Herefordshire Nature Trust. It was funded by Herefordshire Rivers LEADER+, SITA Trust and Wye Valley AONB.

Visit the Pond!



The restored pond

R. King

The best way to see the pond is by foot, from the Town and Country Trail near Alton Court, to the east of Ross-on-Wye. It is on the stretch between Penyard Lane and Hildersley. The Ross Wild Connections Walk also takes pedestrians along the trail. It is not possible to go right around the pond because the land is rented to a grazier, and also for health and safety restrictions. There is no parking nearby except street parking on Alton Road and Gloucester Road. Alternatively park at Fernbank Road car park and walk the whole Town and Country Trail!

History

In Victorian times, Ross was a growing town and as pollution of local wells increased there was an urgent demand for clean drinking water. In 1886 local landowner Alderman Thomas Blake of Alton Court took over responsibility for the town's water supply from the Town Commissioners, who agreed to collect water rates from the townsfolk while charging Blake a commission. Blake supplied most of Ross town and some of Brampton Abbas, though the bigger hotels and railway

tended to pump water from the River Wye for uses like toilets where drinking water quality was not necessary.

Blake set up the waterworks on his land at Alton Court Farm to the east of the town. Initially the water came from springs, but later boreholes were sunk and catchment tanks built which were about 12 feet deep with galvanised roofs. Water was pumped up the hill to a reservoir where it flowed by gravity down into the town. Until 1939 the drinking water was unfiltered but then it began to be lightly chlorinated.

The first borehole was sunk near the pond. Initially the water was pumped up by a wind-driven pump of about 40 feet high supported by a steam engine (stamped with the date 1886). In 1912 a gas engine was fitted using producer-gas and this remained in use until the 1960s, backed up by the wind pump. Water was pumped up the hill during the day, and once the reservoir was filled, the engines were switched off. However, demand increased and in 1930 a new borehole was sunk in the pump house and a diesel engine installed driving a submersible borehole pump. In 1960, Blake sold the waterworks to Herefordshire Water Board, and later it was bought by Dwr Cymru Welsh Water, which owns the site today. In the late 1960s the waterworks was still using pre-war equipment but gradually things began to go wrong and spares became hard to come by. The buildings continued to be used as workshop space until very recently, though now they are empty and the catchment tanks have been filled in for safety's sake. Vandalism was occurring at the site so the pumps and machinery were moved to the Waterworks Museum in Hereford where most of it has been restored.

Wildlife



Small copper butterfly on water mint P. King

The water in the overflow pond is beautifully clear and unpolluted. Water levels fluctuate dramatically over the year creating a succession of habitats for wildlife. In winter there's a wide expanse of water with an island in the middle, visited by swans, mallard and other water birds and very visible to passers-by on the Town and Country Trail. With the spring growth, the pond becomes a secret world and the shallower water thick with emergent plants like willowherb, water forget-me-not and water mint. As it dries out, this vegetation grows lushly in the swampy ground alongside the rushes and sedges on the drier margins.

Hidden away in the dense vegetation, birds like Canada geese and moorhen nest, and sometimes a kingfisher or a snipe can be spotted flitting past. In the summer you may spot the stunning iridescent-green mint water beetle on the vegetation.

In the 1920s the pond was known to be stocked with fish and there was a little boathouse so that visitors to Alton Court could go fishing. However the story goes that during 1929, severe weather caused the pond to freeze over for a long period and the fish died, and following that, the boathouse became derelict. The weather must have been inclement that year, because a strong gale blew the sails off the wind pump and they had to be replaced.

Great Crested Newts

Great crested newts are Britain's largest and rarest newts, and the law protects both them and their habitat. Surprisingly they were not found during the pond survey, despite a wealth of good egg-laying plants and what would seem like a good habitat. However they were present in the tussocky grass and woodpiles very nearby and in other local ponds. More unusually the palmate newt was present - while not uncommon, this species is more often found in upland pools with more acidic water.



Moorhen

P. King

Management



Pond before restoration

J. Blake

The management work aimed to pollard some of the surrounding trees and to cut and treat the willows that were encroaching onto the fantastic swampy areas. These would in time dry the pond out and smother much of the emergent vegetation. De-silting work was considered beyond the scope and finances of the project. Work was undertaken by a contractor in October 2007, with all wood being chipped or left on-site. Volunteers picked up willow brush to prevent it re-rooting, and built habitat piles with the logs and chippings.

Acknowledgements

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