

THE HISTORY OF THE HAMPSTEAD HEATH PONDS

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Fellow Historians, it is not known exactly when the first ponds were dug on Hampstead Heath. London's early water supply relied largely on the River Thames or nearby springs. In 1237 the Corporation of London purchased several springs near Tyburn. In 1245 work began on the Great Conduit, a lead pipe terminating at a large cistern in Cheapside, now marked by a plaque set into the pavement just outside Tesco's store. As demand for fresh water increased, the Great Conduit was extended over time to collect water from springs near Marylebone and Paddington. By the sixteenth century, springs further afield were sought, including those at Highgate.

In 1544, under the mayoralty of Sir William Bowyer, the London Conduit Act empowered the City of London to make use of the springs on the Heath and gave general powers to collect water from springs within five miles of the City. For every spring used, the City was required to pay the Bishop of Westminster a fee of a pound of pepper. However the plan to bring water from Hampstead to the City was not successful. By 1559 another scheme was devised to draw various streams "into one head and course", although it is unlikely that any ponds were made at this time.

Today the Heath has over 32 water bodies, ranging in scale from substantial reservoirs to small ornamental pools. They are in four main groups. Two chains of ponds are on tributaries of the River Fleet. A group of small ponds known as the Seven Sisters are to be found to the north on the Heath Extension and a final group are in Golders Hill Park. This group also includes the Leg of Mutton Pond on West Heath. The Whitestone Pond which flows into the Leg of Mutton Pond lies above the Heath and provides a watering opportunity for horses on reaching the top of the hill.

Today I will talk about two of these groups—known as the Hampstead Chain and the Highgate Chain. As many of the ponds have had several names over time, I will use the names by which they are known today.

First, a few words about the River Fleet. The River Fleet arises on the Northern Heights, a ridge of high ground across North London that caused the early railway builders to take a sharp left turn just to the north of their London termini. Today little of the River Fleet remains at ground level. The two main tributaries join just north of Camden Town, although south of Hampstead it should perhaps be called the Fleet Sewer. From Camden Town it roughly follows Royal College Street, then skirts the east side of the British Library

before heading south-east, crossing under Gray's Inn Road on its way towards the junction of Farringdon Road and Clerkenwell Road. From there it flows due south under Farringdon Street and New Bridge Street, finally disgorging into the River Thames at Blackfriars. But not for much longer—with the Thames Tideway Tunnel project it will be diverted into a vertical shaft to be built on the foreshore of the River Thames just upstream from Blackfriars Bridge and then into a new low level sewer under the river.

Geologically, Hampstead Heath comprises London Clay overlain by Bagshot Sands and Claygate Beds. Rain falling on the upper parts of the Heath percolates through these two higher layers and then seeps out in a number of springs above impermeable London Clay. The Hampstead tributary comprises three smaller streams on an area of Claygate Beds, with the uppermost arising at a height of 105 metres above sea level. On the Highgate tributary, a spring arises west of Bird Sanctuary Pond with other springs in the Kenwood Estate to the north west.

In 1692 an Act of Parliament created the Hampstead Water Company. It is believed that some of the ponds may have been formed by this date, perhaps as early as 1589. The purpose of the Act was to provide fresh water to London and its northern suburbs lying to the south of the Heath, including Kentish Town. The company purchased the existing ponds and over time created four reservoirs: initially the Mixed Bathing Pond and Hampstead No. 2 Pond; then when water from these two ponds proved insufficient, the Hampstead No. 1 Pond and one further downstream, which I will call the Hampstead No. 0 Pond. This was on the site of a malarial swamp noted for its frogs and mosquitoes. Another malarial swamp at a place called Hatchett's Bottom was drained in 1777, creating a further pond. Hampstead can't have been a very healthy place in those days. This previously rather unhealthy location was then rather optimistically renamed the Vale of Health and later become a salubrious hamlet.

A second series of reservoirs, the Highgate chain, was also created by the Hampstead Water Company, probably in the late seventeenth century, by damming the eastern tributary of the River Fleet. The Highgate chain initially comprised Stock Pond, Kenwood Ladies' Bathing Pond, Bird Sanctuary Pond, Model Boating Pond, Men's Pond and Highgate No. 1 Pond. The Company also purchased Millfield Farm on a long lease and built Wood Pond and Concert Pond in the Kenwood Estate. The farmhouse, although much altered, still stands in Millfield Lane and is now called Millfield Cottage.

Floods of River Fleet were not uncommon in the seventeenth century. The book *Old and New London: Volume 2* published in 1878 reported that:

...in 1768 the Hampstead Ponds overflowing, after a severe storm, the Fleet channel grew into a torrent, and the roads and fields about Bagnigge Wells were

overflowed. In the gardens of Bagnigge Wells the water was over four feet deep. A man nearly was drowned, and several thousand pounds' worth of damage was done in Coldbath Fields, Mutton Lane, and Peter Street and vicinity. Three oxen and several hogs were carried off and drowned. A Blackfriars boatman took his boat to Turnmill Street, and there plied, removing the inhabitants, who could not leave their houses for the rising flood.

Bagnigge Wells is in Clerkenwell. Around 1760 two springs were discovered in the grounds of Bagnigge House, originally the summer residence of Nell Gwynn. The Mount Pleasant Sorting Office now occupies the site of Coldbath Fields. Turnmill Street is still with us, running down the east side of the London Underground lines between Clerkenwell Road and Farringdon Station.

In the summer of 1819 John Constable rented a summer cottage on the Heath. A year later he took a longer lease on a house in Lower Terrace and in 1827 found a permanent home in Well Walk. He painted the Heath many times, with ponds appearing in several of his works. Perhaps the most famous is *Hampstead Heath with a Rainbow* painted in 1836, now in the Tate Gallery. This shows Branch Hill Pond with an imaginary windmill and a double rainbow. Branch Hill is to the north of Hampstead Village—the pond was filled in around 1889. Another pond appears in *Hampstead Heath with Bathers* painted in 1821–2. Eight or ten bathers are seen in the foreground, having flung their clothing on the bank. The view looking north is quite possibly that of Model Boating Pond. To check it out, you will need to travel to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

In the 1830s a steam pumping engine was installed by the Hampstead Water Company in an octagonal tower just below the Hampstead No. 1 Pond to increase the supply of water to Kentish Town and Camden Town. This remained until 1907, when it was demolished by the Metropolitan Water Board.

Viaduct Pond was originally a small dew pond. It was created between 1844 and 1847 by Sir Thomas Maryon Wilson as part of his campaign to build villas on the Heath. The Viaduct itself, now a grade two listed structure, took longer to build. Although the foundation stone was laid in 1845, due to problems with subsidence, it was not completed until 1853. Sir Thomas's scheme, after a long campaign of opposition by local and national figures, was ultimately unsuccessful, resulting in the first part of the lands that today form the Heath coming into the ownership of the Metropolitan Board of Works on 13 January 1872.

In 1856 the New River Company purchased the Vale of Health Pond, Viaduct Pond and Hampstead No. 1 Pond. These ponds were still in use providing drinking water. It was noted at the time that the water came from "tolerably clean ponds, but also a large pond in the Vale of Health full of weeds, swarming with animal life, the receptacle of some dead animals, and into which no inconsiderable amounts of sewage passes". Let us hope there were filter beds

somewhere downstream. The use of the ponds for supplying drinking water ceased before the end of the nineteenth century. However, anyone today wishing to sample water from the Heath may do so at the Goodison Fountain at the south end of Cohen's Fields. It has a high iron content, so perhaps should only be taken in moderation.

The furthest pond downstream in the Hampstead chain, Hampstead No. 0, was located just to the north of what is now Hampstead Heath Overground Station. The station was opened by the Hampstead Junction Railway in 1860. In 1892 following a request from local residents the pond was filled in by the London County Council, who had taken over responsibility for the Heath three years earlier in 1889.

The railway became instrumental in the development of the Heath as a popular resort. The Suburban Hotel, later to become the Vale of Health Tavern, was an impressive looking edifice on the west side of the Vale of Health Pond. The owner, Donald Nichol, had taken advantage of the Copyhold Enfranchisement Act of 1852. Copyholders, or rather copyhold tenants, had certain rights including the freedom to pasture animals on common land. The Act allowed copyholders to purchase the freehold of their land compulsorily from the Lord of the Manor. They could then build on, or develop, the land themselves.

After purchasing some copyhold land, Mr Nichol formed the Suburban Hotel Company. The hotel, complete with a tower and a flagpole, overlooked the pond and could accommodate 2,000 people. By the end of the nineteenth century Baedeker's guidebook to London was describing the Heath as "a favourite and justly valued resort of holiday-makers and all who appreciate pure and invigorating air". In 1938 the first A-Z of London, which was also a guidebook, noted: "Always a popular resort, the Heath is crowded with people and children on Bank Holidays come to enjoy the Fair in the Vale of Health".

One cannot talk about the Hampstead Ponds without mentioning swimming. Swimming is perhaps the best known leisure activity associated with the ponds, although to some, particularly those who swim all the year round, it is more a way of life. Swimming in the ponds is a long established tradition, but only became formally permitted at the Men's Pond in the 1890s and at the Kenwood Ladies' Bathing Pond in 1926.

In the early 1800s bathing took place in what is now the Mixed Bathing Pond. At this time few people were able to swim, with bathing being more an immersion, rather like taking a bath, than a swim. Following the passing of the Baths and Washhouses Act in 1846, local authorities were allowed to build public baths,

both for washing and for swimming. The first public swimming bath opened in 1849, and within three years there were seven in London. Swimming became more popular, with the ponds on the Heath attracting increasing numbers. Unfortunately there were a large number of deaths, up to one a week in the summer. At this time around 3,500 people drowned every year in inland waters.

Following Captain Webb's Channel swim in 1875, swimming became even more popular. But, with the St Pancras Baths charging a membership fee of two shillings a month, why not use the ponds on the Heath for free? In 1884 the Mixed Bathing Pond was in use for swimming, but without facilities of any kind. Clothes were simply left on the bank. By 1889 the Metropolitan Board of Works had provided a shed for changing. A Christmas Day race was now taking place, a tradition that continues to this day. By the end of the century the Mixed Bathing Pond had its own swimming club, the Highgate Water Rats. The first proper bathing shed was built by the London County Council (LCC) and a boatman was appointed to improve safety. The pond was reserved for women on Thursdays.

The Men's Pond was opened for swimming on 1 May 1893. A bathing shed, diving stage and platform were provided. In 1903 the Highgate Life-Buoys were formed with the aim of promoting methods of lifesaving. The Men's Pond became known for its diving displays, with a board fixed 15 feet above the water. This was the first purpose built diving stage in the country. Today all except a single low level board have gone—victims of the health and safety culture. Ladies were admitted to the pond on Wednesdays.

The Kenwood Ladies' Bathing Pond opened to the public in 1926. This area of the Heath known as Kenwood Fields had been purchased from Lord Mansfield in 1923, although some bathing had taken place prior to the purchase. The LCC installed a new wooden shed, a few cubicles for hire and two diving boards. There were few trees on the Heath in those days and the ponds were unfenced. Crowds of men and children would come to the Heath on their bicycles, lining the banks to watch the ladies bathe. By 1929 naked sunbathing on the meadow above the pond was no longer permitted and dogs had to be tied up outside. Today the Kenwood Ladies' Bathing Pond is the only ladies' natural bathing pond in Europe.

In 2003 the City of London Corporation, who had taken over responsibility for the Heath in 1989, proposed that in winter the opening time for the Men's and Kenwood Ladies' Bathing Ponds be put back from 7.30 am to 8 am. A Royal Life Saving Society Report having highlighted the risks of lifeguards opening the ponds in the dark. This caused a furore. In addition the lifeguards would no

longer break the ice for the swimmers. A Winter Swimming Club was formed and attempted to negotiate a licence to swim unsupervised.

The City of London said no, fearing this would leave them open to prosecution under the Health and Safety at Work Act. At the same time the City was facing a budget overspend. With the Heath now costing over £5M a year to run compared with £500,000 interest on the dowry received when the City took over, the suggestion that either the Mixed Bathing Pond would close or charges should be introduced met with considerable opposition. The cost of lifeguarding the three ponds and the lido had reached three quarters of a million pounds per year.

The swimmers launched a campaign to keep all the ponds open and free of charge. In January 2005 a public meeting at Hampstead Town Hall attracted 250 people with more outside, and at a meeting at the Guildhall the following month a petition of 7,000 signatures was handed in. At the meeting, the City announced that no pond would close, however charges would be introduced on a “self-policing” basis. The campaign had attracted the attention of the international press, including the Wall Street Journal and the Times of India. On 26 April 2005 in the High Court, following a Judicial Review brought by the swimmers with the support of the Heath and Hampstead Society, Mr Justice Stanley Burton ruled that the City of London could not be prosecuted under the Health and Safety at Work Act if it allowed adult swimmers to swim without lifeguards.

Winter Swimming Club members now swim in the Mixed Bathing Pond between September and May without lifeguards, when the pond is closed to other users. The other two bathing ponds are open all the year round. Charges of £2 for adults and £1 for concessions were introduced, with pay machines installed at each pond. The percentage of swimmers obtaining a ticket varies across the three ponds. It is as low as ten percent at the Men’s Pond. The City of London does not seek to exclude a swimmer who does not pay.

Fishing is the second most popular leisure activity on the Heath. Anglers are required to have an Environment Agency Licence and a Hampstead Heath Fishing Permit. Whilst licences are given for fishing in six of the ponds, they are not given for the catching of crayfish. Red Swamp Crayfish, native to the south-eastern United States and Mexico, are thought to have been introduced by people releasing them into rivers and ponds about twenty-five years ago. They are now unfortunately found on the Heath and are frequently caught by anglers, as well as having a painful impact on some of the swimmers.

In 2012 three Polish men were fined a total of £790 by magistrates under the Heath’s byelaws for taking crayfish—they were found with two bags said to be teeming with these tasty crustaceans. This left the Heath’s management with a

problem—to return the creatures to the ponds would not be legal, as they are not a native species. They had to be kept alive and then sent off the Heath to be humanely killed, perhaps ending up on someone's dinner table!

The other leisure activity associated with the ponds is model boating. Yes, at the Model Boating Pond, although now much less popular than in previous generations, when quite splendid model yachts would sail on the pond. A print of 1854 shows model yachts being raced. Following the formation of the Prince of Wales Model Yacht Club on the Serpentine, the idea was taken up by the young men of Hampstead. Races were organised in what was to become an annual regatta, with twenty yachts competing for two prizes, a silver cup for vessels over three feet and a gold seal for those not exceeding this length. It was said that ladies graced the occasion. Today rather more mundane radio—controlled electric model boats are more likely to be seen.

There have been two major incidents of flooding on the Heath in recent years. The most serious was in 1975. On the afternoon of 14 August an intense storm formed over North London. Before the precipitation started at 4pm the temperature on the Heath was 29 degrees Celsius. By 6pm the storm had reached its maximum intensity with sheets of hailstones almost 2 cm across. By 6.30pm, when the storm abated, around 170mm of rain had been recorded, although the actual rainfall could have been greater due to hailstones bouncing off local rain gauges. The centre of the storm was to the south west of the Heath.

The effect on the Heath was dramatic. Viaduct Pond overtopped. Water flowed over the dam, and the outlet pipe burst. At Mixed Bathing Pond water was over 200mm deep as it flowed over the dam and at Hampstead No. 1 Pond a 30 metre section of the dam was damaged with half a metre depth of soil on the upstream side of the dam washed into the pond. On the Model Boating Pond overtopping occurred to a depth of around 150mm, with part of the downstream bank slumping into the Men's Pond. A number of other ponds overtopped without damage. The outlet pipe from the Highgate No. 1 Pond, which is normally closed, was opened to prevent overtopping and because of fears that the dam was in danger of collapse.

There was serious flooding downstream. One person drowned. Two people were severely injured as a result of being struck by lightning. Sixty families had to be rehoused on a temporary basis and twenty permanently. Subsequently, sheet piling and additional fill material was used to strengthen a number of the dams. Further sheet piling was introduced at the Model Boating Pond as recently as 1996. These works were carried out to reduce erosion and provide a hard edge for the users; necessary for its use as a model boating pond. In 2010 a lesser storm caused the overtopping of the Mixed Bathing Pond to a depth of 50mm and the Stock Pond to a depth of 30mm with damage to the downstream face of the dam.

As there is a risk that the dams which form the ponds on the Heath could fail in an extreme storm, the City of London Corporation, as owner of dams that lie above a residential area, must ensure that the risk of dam collapse is virtually eliminated. This in a nutshell is what the “Ponds Project” is all about. Following three years of studies, design work and consultation and engagement with the local community, a planning application was submitted to Camden Council in July 2014 for the necessary works.

The Heath and Hampstead Society, who opposed the scheme, brought a Judicial Review in the High Court. This was dismissed by Mrs Justice Lang DBE in a ruling given on 28 November 2014. Camden Council’s Development Control Committee approved the project on 15 January 2015 and work is now well underway. It is not my intention to talk about the project today. Once the Ponds Project is safely consigned to the realms of history, another historian on another occasion will no doubt tell the story.