

Withey beds talk

History of the land

The Manor of the Mor (More)

The Romans in England settled in St Albans and the surrounding areas including Moor Park. The Anglo- Saxons arrived late to the Watford area settling in Hemel Hempstead, Aldenham and Berkhamstead which were on the sides of the valley. The population increased and expanded into "less agreeable" sites one of which was Rickmansworth! Here there were 2 communities- to the north of the Colne (Rickmansworth) and to the south (Batchworth). The word Mor or More is Anglo- Saxon in origin referring to flat marshy land. The area was apparently a site chosen by Anglo-Saxon settlers because of its proximity to the river. The Manor of the Mor was not mentioned in the Domesday book of 1086.

The land has had interesting ownership

- (King Offa) The King of Mercia whose land extended southwards and included the Thames Valley, gave the site to the Abbey of St Albans in the late 8th century (794).
- 1154 small medieval manor existed- probably the first Manor of the More
- C 1182 Manor of More was granted to the Abbot of St Albans Adam Aignel and held in his family for nearly 200 years with later evidence of a moat and courtyard.
- 1364 John Aignel died and his widow married Andrew Bures in 1366 a new timber house was built.
- Early 15th century William Flete, a wealthy London citizen, acquired the estate due to a non payment of debt owed to him.
- 1426 Henry Beaufort (Bishop of Winchester), Thomas, Bishop of Durham, William Flete and others obtained a charter to extend "their"

Manor of the More in Rykmersworth. Flete also bought other properties locally.

The Manor of the More had a gate house with a drawbridge on south side. The moat surrounding the house was 17m across on all sides of the building. Chalk was used to dress the brick walls. It was a castle like house with crenulated walls, battlements, turrets. Corner turrets have been found following excavation work. The surrounding land included 600 acres of parkland – some of this was possibly used for pig farming in woodland and fisheries near the river.

Moat was fed by river and breeding of fish has been recorded . The channel is placed probably where the new backwater from the river is now!

- From 1456/7 various other owners included the Abbot of St Albans, the Archbishop of York and Edward IVth, then the Canons of Windsor , Earl of Oxford, the Abbot of St Albans and then back to the crown.
- 1522 into hands of Thomas Wolsey who greatly embellished the manor with new brick built wings, corner towers, gatehouse and a second moat.
- 1525 a Treaty between Henry the VIIIth and France was signed at the More. The Manor was said to be more splendid than Hampton Court. Henry VIIIth visited often and in 1529 when Cardinal Wolsey fell from the king's grace the manor reverted back to the next Abbot of St Albans and continued to be renovated further. Catherine of Aragon, Henry VIIIth's first wife, lived here for more than 2 years while Henry attempted to divorce her in favour of Anne Boleyn. Falconry and deer hunting in the park has been documented-with about 400-500 deer kept there.
- 1547-1552 the manor fell into disrepair – probably due to the weight of the property and the fact that it was built on a flood plain.
- 1560 Queen Elizabeth 1st was granted the Manor together with the park- Moor park
- 1576 leased to the 2nd Earl of Bedford
- 1598 demolished and materials were sold off or stolen.

- New House (Moor Park Mansion) was built on higher ground in the park of the Manor of the More.
- 1754 Moor Park Mansion park grounds were renovated by Capability Brown
- 1766 A map shows the southern boundary ditch as a mill stream serving the mill at Batchworth and flowing under Moor Lane. Historic maps show that the western half of the site contained trees in 1880- possibly withies and willows, and a second parallel ditch had been cut through the site. Water levels may have been controlled using sluices from the river Colne possibly for production of Withies.
- 1887 Metropolitan Railway reaches Rickmansworth

1910 Northwood Prep School now Merchants Taylors Prep School was built with the playing field over the site of the manor.

1939 Clay from Moor Lane was excavated and placed in the area of the Mor.

1950's an excavation took place on the Manor of the More site

1957 More clay placed in the Mor from Moor Lane.

2013 The TV programme Time Team excavated in the prep school fields. Ornate stone pillars of Italian renaissance style were found in undergrowth at school. The Gatehouse was confirmed having octagonal towers rising from the moat. "Difficult to prove that the Base Court existed".

Time Team Season 20 Episode 10 shown 3/3/13

Tolpits Lane replaces the road formerly known as Thomas Wolsey Road- although reference is made to Wolsey today in the Wolsey Business Park to the north of Tolpits Lane.

Refs: The Ricardian. Journal of the Richard III Society Vol IX no 118 Sept 1992
Heather Falvay

Historic England: The Manor of the More Scheduled monument 1015595
11/7/97

2 Withey Beds now

In 1919 **A USEFUL OSIER BED** came up for sale. It was described as a small pasture enclosure and 2 coppices next to Tolpits Lane and lying between it and the river. It does mention the Parish of Watford so presumably this was further upstream but it does suggest that more than one area was historically used for growing withies along the River Colne.

The Three Rivers District Council bought the Withey Beds under a compulsory purchase order in 2001. It covers an area of 7.6 hectares (18.78 acres).

Withies is an old English term used to describe the growing of different species of willow for coppicing and use in basket making, thatching and firewood etc. The Withies currently occupy part of the southern area of the WB site.

Within the site there is the river Colne to the north areas of wet grassland, swamp, wetlands, carr, ponds, a scrape and ditches. There is also a WW2 pill box and tank traps although I have no idea where the latter are! Of course the site is within the Colne Valley floodplain and some years are wetter than others and sometimes not very wet at all.

In 2003 it was designated as a Local Nature Reserve and various works have been carried out over the years to include bridges and the boardwalk.

Currently there is short grassland (thanks to cattle and sheep grazing) many flowering plants, shrubs, oaks and crack willow. The bridges and boardwalks takes you to the southern side of the land over the central ditch and past the new ponds and then back to the northern side. The ponds along the boardwalk, the scrape and the backwater from the river are more recent additions. The original pond on the LHS off the main walkway from the entrance was due for management until palmate newts were found in the mud. The new ponds have been quickly populated with reeds (*Glyceria*).

Initial pond dipping of the new ponds and the backwater found little in the way of water creatures- one *Gammarus* shrimp in the backwater- however we were using a not standardised net. Anna has since spotted a fish in one of the ponds and plenty of pond skaters. Incidentally there were some diving beetles

in the cattle water trough. We also noticed that the soil at the bottom of the ponds seemed a bit strange- rather clumpy and did not break up easily – maybe this was some of the clay from the road.

In the near future we plan to set up riverfly monitoring in the river Colne – deflectors, cobbles and gravel were added to the river bed to increase water flow and provide habitat for riverfly larvae and fish fry. Peter and I carried out an initial sample with Rod Cutler and Alan Vincent- we had plenty of Gammarus shrimp plus cased caddis larvae, a demoiselle nymph and an alderfly larvae. The water was rather slow moving and murky which is not ideal.

Over the years surveys have been carried out periodically by county recorders and wildlife sightings are recorded by regular visitors. Jill, Anna and I have carried out some glow worm surveys – most about 10/12 but none recently. I take the opportunity of using my bat detector and have detected common and soprano pipistrelles plus serotine bats over the WB and occasional daubenton's bats over the river. Other bats may be present of course.

Water vole surveys have been carried out by volunteers for HMWT between 2015 and 2018 but owing to the lack of water the ditch has often been dry and because of lack of accessibility to the river this has not been surveyed. There have been no signs of water vole presence.

Locally there are water voles present at Croxley Hall Fisheries and previously at CCM. The latter site on the river Gade was negative in 2013 but there were signs in 2014 and 2015. It was negative again in 2016 and has not been surveyed since then.

Bird boxes have been installed at the Withey Beds with varying degrees of success.

The pill box was found to have evidence of use by bats and was made habitable for bat use with input from the local bat group. Sadly it has been vandalised and there is now a dilemma over whether to maintain its possible use by bats against the risk of more vandalism and disturbance which conflicts with bat protection status. The local bat group are aware of the

situation and I have hopes that we can move forward on this project at some point on the future.

Cattle have been grazing for the last couple of years plus a few sheep this keeps the grass short but the thistles are increasing instead.

The Withey at Withey Beds

We are not sure when willow growing started on the land known as the Withey Beds but potentially as part of the estate of the Manor of the More withies may have been grown to supply local demand in the neighbouring towns and industries and probably the manor itself. With the building of the Grand Union canal it is thought that willow baskets were used to transport water cress to London.

Osier refers to a particular species of willow *Salix viminalis* but there are many species of willow suitable for basketry and all are suitable except goat willow. Different species produce different colours of rod and the way in which they are processed can also alter the colour and robustness.

Willow is prone to hybridisation and this has led to more useful types of rod.

The willows are planted into wet soil from Dec to March. They need lots of water until they are established but after that do not need so much water to survive. They do not like competition from other plants and nowadays are planted into plastic membrane and protection from deer and rabbits. Planting withies close together forces them to compete for light and produce long straight stems. They are maintained by cutting off the side shoots and then harvested in winter after leaf fall.

The species planted in more recent years at WB were initially Lancashire dicks and Whissender but Flanders Red and Green Dicks have been added later.

We have our own Willow expert Hazel Godfrey. She told me that removing all leaf fall is essential as the leaves can rot and produce a sooty leaf mould. She experienced this in one of her plantations although the plants did recover eventually and although a neighbouring plantation was not affected at all and presumably had some resistance.

Early flowering variants are important for early emerging bees and insects. Hazel has mentioned finding lots of ladybird larvae on the hide and has also seen the Giant Willow Aphid too.

The FOWB was set up in 2004 with around 80 members currently. A newsletter is produced twice a year with contributions from Kay and Anna. At the **canal festival** we have an organised walk starting at the Canal Waterways Centre at Batchworth lock, walking along the Ebury Way and through the Watford Piscators site to Withey Beds. We have a stand at the environmental marquee. Hazel Godfrey also attends the environmental marquee and demonstrates her willow weaving and basketry skills.

WB is part of the Colne Catchment Action Network www.colnecan.prg.uk

The WB is currently undergoing consultation for the 2019-2024 Greenspace Action Plan with E/A and CMS. Various work is planned – obviously conservation management and to improve public access.

The Withy Beds forms part of the river Colne corridor helping to provide habitat for flora and fauna. The wetlands need to be protected particularly as further downstream areas of ideal habitat are under threat from HS2, Heathrow expansion, services stations for the M25 and increased water abstraction.

The website is www.thewitheybeds.org.uk

Thanks to Kay, Ellie/Anna/Evelyn/ Hazel/WB committee members and the volunteers at the Three Rivers Museum.