



Town Ponds Restored

SHOOTING & CONSERVATION

Just half a mile south west of the Suffolk coastal town of Aldeburgh lie Aldeburgh Town Ponds. Tucked behind the river wall, on the edge of the flat, wide expanse of the Town Marshes, the ponds are just a stones-throw from the tidal River Alde, a place which buzzes in the summer with holidaymakers, dinghy sailors and visitors who have come to enjoy the world-famous Aldeburgh Festival.

In the winter, however, this part of the Suffolk coast is a much quieter place, and it is then that flocks of wigeon line the edge of the saltings and flight out late in the evening to feed on the fresh water flashes which punctuate the grazing marshes after a week or two of wet weather. As darkness falls, you may hear the *peep-peep* of teal as they move up and down the tideline, while later in the winter the whitefronts arrive here and commute over the Alde between the marshes and the arable country further south.

In years gone by, the Town Ponds were always used by local wildfowlers at evening flight, but during the 1970s they became increasingly derelict. Some of the townsfolk regarded them as little more than a rubbish dumping site and the ponds soon filled with disused refrigerators, old cars and other similar debris. A further problem was that of poaching. While the presence of local fowlers was welcomed by the Town Council, which owns the ponds, concern was expressed over the influx of outsiders such as American airmen from the nearby base at Bentwaters who shot without authority or permission. It was principally to regulate the shooting and to prevent poaching that the local fowlers banded together to form the Aldeburgh Wildfowlers Association.

The new club was keen to improve the habitat for wildfowl and its members were soon at work clearing the rubbish from the Town Ponds. They also sought to retain plenty of open water by controlling the growth of reeds and for more than 20 years the ponds were looked after by the wildfowlers – first the Aldeburgh club and when that amalgamated in 1991 with the nearby Leiston and District wildfowlers, by the newly-formed Alde & Ore Wildfowlers Association.

But slowly the Town Ponds changed. Open water was replaced by ever denser growth of reeds, pond areas silted up and the formerly diverse habitat of open water, reed bed and rough marsh was in danger of being lost. In 2008, the Alde & Ore WA decided that action was needed, and the committee approached BASC Conservation Officer Ian Danby to seek advice on how best to prepare a formal management plan for the future management of the ponds.

Ian visited Aldeburgh and took a walk around the site with the club's chairman, Bryan Upson and myself, and it soon became clear that there was much which could be done in order to improve the habitat, both for wintering wildfowl and for breeding waders. But

while we obviously needed to do something about desilting the ponds and removing reed growth, we were equally keen to ensure that sufficient reeds remained to act as a nesting site for summer migrants.

With Ian's support and advice, a Management Plan was prepared and presented to the landowners, Aldeburgh Town Council. The Council has always recognised that wildfowling has a long tradition in the area and was supportive of the club's proposal to bring the site under proper management once more. The legal processes were put in hand, but over the summer of 2008 it became evident that formal approval from the Council's estates committee would take longer than had at first been envisaged and with the onset of autumn, the potential window for site work was lost. The following February, however, the Town Council wrote to the club confirming its acceptance of the management proposals in their entirety: it was clear that once the red tape had been tied up by the Council's lawyers and our own club solicitor, Richard Keane, the work could go ahead.

But how was the club to pay for it? Competitive quotes for the necessary excavation work showed that the work would be costing in excess of £11,000 – far more than the club had available from its own resources. So an approach was made to the Trustees of the Wildlife Habitat Trust, who considered the project and approved a grant to the club of £9,568, with the club paying the balance. Without this generous level of support, the project would have been quite impossible for the club to contemplate.

For two weeks over the summer of 2009 the ponds were a hive of activity as local contractor Tom Harbinson brought two tracked 360 Diggers on site together with an array of back-up equipment and duckboards to eliminate any possibility of the machines sinking into the soft ground. Luckily the summer of 2009 proved to be a dry one and work progressed quickly. Not only did Tom open up large areas of the principal ponds, sculpting islands and bays around the edges as he did so, but he also dug a series of test holes further back on the site where an ancient pond had silted up. The object was to see if in future a further area of open water might be created and if so, whether or not it might fill naturally. Finally, Tom created a network of carriers through which the whole site could be flooded.

With autumn fast approaching, the committee was anxious to raise the water levels once more, and the obvious way to do so was to pump water from a neighbouring drainage dyke. This, however, required more expensive equipment by way of diverter valves and delivery hose, so once more a grant application was made, this time to the Britten-Pears Trust, a local body set up in memory of the renowned musicians Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, whose names are synonymous with Aldeburgh and the nearby village of Snape. Again, the efforts of local wildfowlingers to improve coastal habitats obviously struck a musical chord with the Trustees and the club received a £500 cheque. This enables us to maintain the water levels in the ponds quite independently of the rainfall or the water table, through pumping.

Thus water can be pumped both in the autumn, prior to arrival of the migratory wildfowl and again in the early spring, to keep the ponds full during the breeding season for waders and other bird species. Already teal are using the ponds and otters have been seen in the reeds surrounding them.

It is true that at present the ponds do not look at their best. Bare mud banks and heaps of black peat never are particularly pretty. But nature quickly clothes such things and in the spring, the ponds will soon become green once more and as that happens they will, we hope, produce the habitat for which the club has worked so hard.

Graham Downing 10th December 2009

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