

Still waters

In these times of droughts and floods, it helps to be reminded how water has shaped the Weald of Kent and the lives of those dwelling around it over the years

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Bedgebury Fincton

Walkers in the Weald countryside will often come across little streams, either sunk deep within a narrow bed, or coloured rusty red. These tiny streams or gills (ghylls) have played a significant role in the natural and human history of Kent and East Sussex

The bright red sediments are natural iron deposits, and they remind us of the once vast iron-making industry that brought wealth to the Weald in medieval and Tudor times. For around 200 years, forges and furnaces worked – often day and night – keeping England armed with cannons, particularly during the time when the Armada was invading. Other items were made, including iron grave slabs for churches, but it was mostly armoury that kept the noisy furnaces alight and made the fortunes of many an ironmaster.

The natural iron deposits, along with plenty of woodlands to fuel the fires and those all-important streams, which were dammed to create 'hammer ponds' to power bellows, changed the Weald from quiet farmland and woods to a bustling, less-forested, more-populated region.

Many hammer ponds still remain. Just look on Ordnance Survey maps for 'pond

bays'. They now provide a rich wildlife habitat; some are even homes for otters.

The famous springs in Tunbridge Wells (there are several that can be found, but only one is 'marketed' to visitors) gave rise to the town, thanks to the restorative properties of their iron-rich waters some 400 years ago.



Several Weald ponds were created by the activity of 'marling', which is the removal of a naturally occurring clay and lime fix to use as fertiliser. Marle Place Gardens reflects this in its name, and wildlife-friendly ponds in its woodlands were formed through this activity.

We are familiar with mill ponds from the days when water mills ground corn

and flour, although these are harder to find, except as a picturesque feature of a private home. The best working example is actually across the county border at Bateman's, Rudyard Kipling's home in Burwash, East Sussex, where the water mill still grinds flour twice a week.

The more humble ponds, which ramblers and walkers may quite literally stumble across in farmland, are equally as important as the streams.

These little bodies of water may only hold water for up to four months of the year, but they still support different communities of fauna and flora. Some ponds are fed by natural springs, some dry out naturally in the summer months; and others were created as drinking holes for livestock.

All ponds, however small or hidden, are essential to ecological management, but a shocking decline, more than 75 per cent in the past 120 years, has meant that they have become an endangered species themselves. Whether removed by more intensive farming, dried out because of overuse of the water table by excessive building, built over in the urban sprawl, or even colonised by invasive non-native plant species, these distinctive features of



Formal pond at Godinton



Archbishops' Palace Maidstone

the Weald landscape are vanishing at an alarming rate. Organisations such as the High Weald AONB Unit are helping educate farmers and the public in the best methods of pond management.

Other valuable wet environmental regions are the valleys of rivers such as the Beult, Eden, Medway and Teise. As they wander across the Low Weald, these rivers create either wet woodlands of alder and willow, or valuable wet grazing lands with willow and sallow scrub.

Two walks follow the paths of rivers. The first is the Eden Valley Walk, which runs for 15 miles, begins by following the Eden until it joins the Medway at Penshurst, and then continues along through the Haysden Country Parks,

with its attractive lakes, right to the grounds of Tonbridge Castle on the river bank. Or you can take the Medway Valley Walk in stages. Over a distance of about 28 miles, you can follow the Medway all the way to Rochester.

Boat trips are a great way to see the countryside: there are river trips along the Medway at several points, including

Our ponds have declined by more than 75 per cent in the past 120 years

Tonbridge Castle and The Kentish Lady River Cruises in Maidstone.

But what of the great lakes of the Weald? Bewl Water, near Lamberhurst, which is fed by the rivers Teise and Medway, makes the news every time its water levels drop, thanks to a drought, but the south east's largest lake is also a superb site for trying out water sports, fishing, bird watching, walks and cycling.

Like Bough Beech, near Edenbridge, which is fed by the River Eden, Bewl

combines an essential function – the storing of water – with an ecological function, the maintaining of a water-based wildlife habitat. Both lakes are home to quantities of rare over-wintering and permanent water fowl, including ospreys and grebes.

You can fish, particularly for trout, at either of these lakes, and also at the many fishing lakes across the Weald, from Headcorn and Tenterden to Tonbridge.

Water as a defence may seem unusual, but both Ightham Mote and Scotney are renowned for their moats, originally to protect the buildings, but now as striking features. Even Sissinghurst has a moat, although it runs some distance from the house as it stands today.

Water is used to different effect in gardens today. Where once there was a need to draw drinking water for people and livestock, or to keep fish to stock the larder, now formal ponds, fountains and waterfalls ornament many a landscape design. Visit any great house or garden open to the public, and you'll find water used as a pretty setting.

For further information, visit: www.kent-life.co.uk and click on 'links.'



Bedgebury Pinetum