

Village Echoes



With Goudhurst village pond being desilted for the first time since 1964, it is a good moment to reflect on the part it has played at the centre of village life over the years.

It is now a place to sit, watch the ducks and listen to the fountain play on the water surface whilst trying to ignore the bustling traffic along the High Street, but it was once a place that was far

from tranquil. Although the date of its creation is unknown, it may well be a relic of an early marl pit: in the 13th century Goudhurst was a well-established farming community which used lime as fertiliser on the fields, leaving many pits around the area where it had been dug out. In 1255 it was reported that a John de Hope was found crushed in a marl pit.

In the 14th century the small settlement became a village with a weekly market on Wednesdays, established in 1309, together with an annual fair. Both occasions were mainly used to sell and exchange goods, with entertainments as a side show, and were held in the triangular area of the Plain. This land is delineated by the meeting of routes from north and east Kent and from the Weald in the south. It is probably at this meeting place that the original settlement began, with the church at the high focal point to the east.

Village ponds were usually common 'land', a facility to be used by the whole village, although in the early 1800s ours was recorded as being owned by the Church. It is likely to have provided fish, especially in the Middle Ages, to eat rather than to admire. Other uses included soaking cartwheels to prevent shrinking, washing clothes and as a watering hole for cattle. These animals were either local, perhaps grazing on the Plain, or those being driven to market many miles across country, sometimes to as far as London.

This suggests that the other possibility for the origin of the pond was as a dew pond, an artificial pool usually located on high ground where other surface water is absent due to the underlying soil. They are sometimes known as mist or cloud ponds, circular and up to eight feet deep at the centre. A slight natural hollow in the ground would have been used if available. They were made between September and April by touring workers when it would take four men about four weeks to dig one. They lined the surface with puddled clay or chalk reduced to a powder, which when dry became watertight. It was then allowed to fill naturally with rainwater as is the case at the moment.

Eventually the edges of the pond were strengthened with a concrete wall and railings added. An early picture in the Goudhurst Coronation Book shows the pond before

enclosure. In latter years the historic buildings of the village have become a tourist attraction with the pond as an integral part. In 1879 The London Bicycle Club Gazette extolled the beauty of the village and recommended the 'capital milk' on sale at the butchers opposite the pond.

Of course the pond is a major focal point of Goudhurst village life. To mark Coronation Day in 1953, a model of the Houses of Parliament was floated on it, and again for the Diamond Jubilee in 2012, when our version of London's River Pageant took place on it using model boats. The Goudhurst Festival of 1986 saw members of the Youth Club in a dinghy race on the water, something to be frowned upon these days thanks to "health and safety".

In 1964, Maurice Phipps, who was born in Goudhurst and lived here all his life was involved in transporting replacement blue clay for the floor of the pond from the Rugby Cement Works in Snodland. He drove his lorry into the bottom via a ramp running down from the side. He remembers a lot of mess and that a leak developed afterwards. We shall see what happens this time.

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