

POOLS, PONDS AND WATERY LANDSCAPES IN SUTTON COLDFIELD

By Mike Hodder

Even the most cursory glance at any historic map of Sutton Coldfield, such as the detailed Corn Rent Map (1824-25) and Valuation Map (1857), reveals many pools and ponds. Some of these are of course known to have been mill pools, and they were thoroughly researched by the late Ken Williams¹. Others have various origins and their uses may have changed over time, but broadly are one of the following categories:

- Pits resulting from extraction of marl, clay, sand, gravel, stone or peat, which were not originally dug to create pools but have become waterfilled.
- Pools created by constructing a dam across a stream to serve as a fishpond or to drive a watermill (or both), or as part of an ornamental garden. The dam may survive as an earthwork even after the pool has been drained or filled in, or the line of a dam may be suggested by field patterns and the former pool by field names. Mill pools would be expected to be located on an estate boundary or at stream confluence because they would need a greater and a more reliable water supply than a fishpond.
- Pools constructed by digging out a hollow, or reshaping an existing natural stream course or man-made hollow, usually as an ornamental feature.

In some cases groups of pools, sometimes accompanying moats surrounding buildings, may have been created or adapted to form a “watery landscape” to enhance the setting of high-status dwellings, in addition to their practical purpose. Such landscapes are known in other parts of the country, such as Bodiam Castle in Sussex and nearer to Sutton at Kenilworth where great meres once surrounded the castle. Rather than describe, and try to account for, every one of the pools and ponds, this article concentrates on probable examples of such “watery landscapes”, three of them medieval and one of later in date.

Peddimore Hall

There are several moats in the Sutton Coldfield area. They were constructed around buildings in the 13th and 14th centuries to keep out unwanted visitors but also, and perhaps primarily, they were intended to show off the building and therefore the status of its owner. Many moated sites were accompanied by fishponds, such as Gannow Green in Frankley².

Peddimore Hall is surrounded by an impressive double moat which was constructed around the medieval predecessor to the existing 17th-century building. The inner of the two moats has a fairly consistent width throughout but the outer is narrow on three sides then widens to become a rectangular pool on the north-west side. This expansive stretch of water served as a fishpond but would also have enhanced the setting of the building.

Sutton Coldfield manor house

Sutton Coldfield’s medieval manor house on Manor Hill was not surrounded by a moat but its buildings lay in a walled enclosure³. William Dugdale said it was “a very goodly Mannour House, with fair pools near unto it”⁴. Agnes Bracken describes how the morass at the foot of the hill on which the manor house stands was formed into two large pools with a raised causeway between them which led into Sutton Park and was approached along the west side

of Manor Hill (Wyndley Lane)⁵. The pool to the west of the causeway is Wyndley Pool, and that to the east can be identified as Cross Pool mentioned by William Leland⁶ which was in the vicinity of the present Leisure Centre and Outdoor Education Centre. The manor house, which was situated within the original deer park⁷, was seen across these pools from the Park to the north-west, and vice versa. Together with a further



The manor house (plot 677) and its surroundings on the 1824 Corn Rent Map

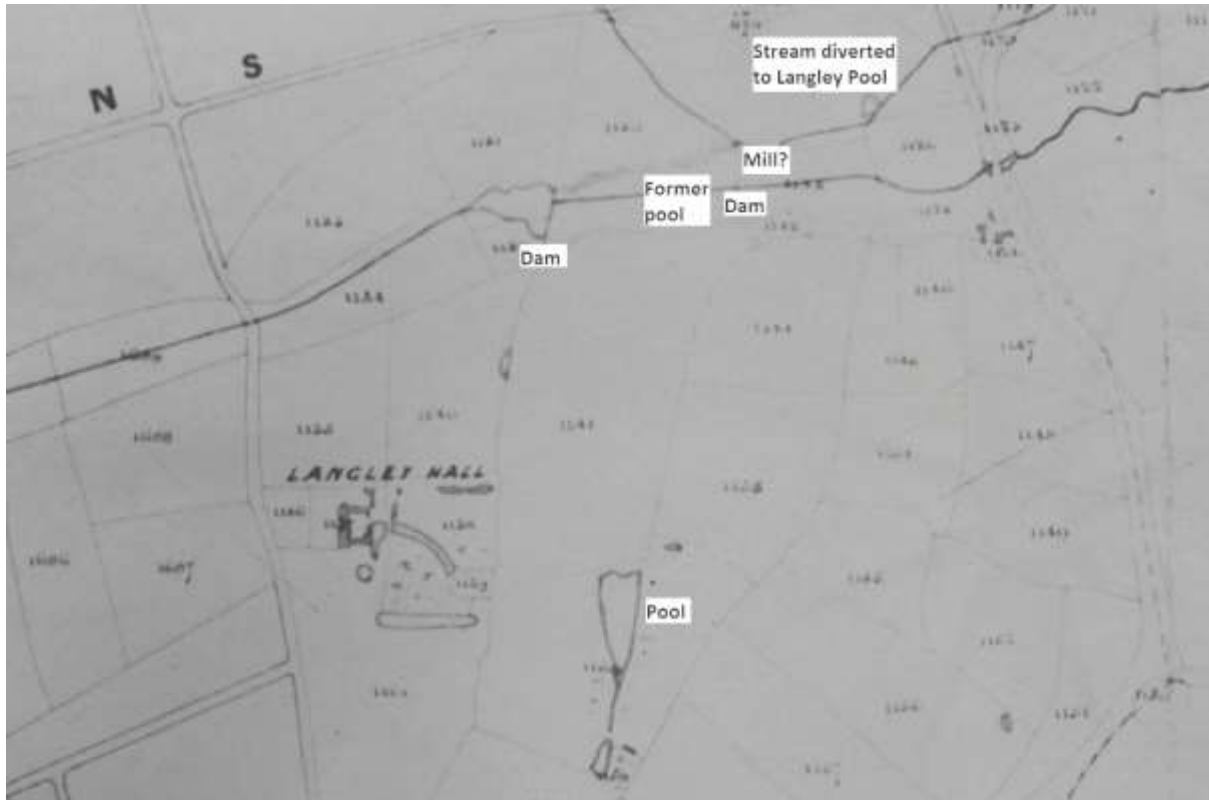
large pool, the Mill Pool, to the north, the pools gave the manor house a watery setting that more than compensated for the lack of a moat around it.

Langley Hall

The site of Langley Hall⁸ is in a prominent location, no doubt carefully chosen, with steep slopes to its west and north. The original Langley Hall was probably built by the Bereford family in the 13th century, and it was surrounded by a moat. The Berefords were a rising family who were bringing new land in the area into cultivation by assarting. In addition to the moat, they obtained a licence to crenellate from Edward III in 1327, which allowed them to surround the buildings with a mortared stone wall with a gatehouse, towers and battlements, and would have shown off their status even more. No remains of the building or its 17th century successor are now visible above ground (except for the fine 17th century stable block), and only part of the moat survives. Two oval hollows immediately to the north-west of the moat are shown as pools on the Corn Rent Map and were probably used to store fish taken from one of three larger pools constructed along streams in the valleys to the west and north of Langley.

A bank still visible to the north of Langley Hall was a dam for a pool which is shown on the Corn Rent Map but had been drained by 1857 because it is not on the Valuation Map. This pool is likely to have been a fishpond because it was fed by the upper reaches of the Langley

Brook only and is close to this stream's source. A second, parallel, bank further north-east must have been another dam, for a pool which was drained even earlier because it is not marked on any of the historic maps. Sandstone rubble and the discovery of a millstone here suggest that it was a mill pool. In contrast to the other pool it would have been fed by three streams - Langley Brook, Churchill Brook from the west and a stream flowing in a valley to the north-east of Langley Hall - which would ensure there was enough water to power a mill. The Corn Rent map shows that Churchill Brook was then diverted to the



Langley Hall and its surroundings on the Corn Rent Map

north-west from the north end of end of this dam to Langley Pool, a mill pool which was in existence by 1604 when it was leased to the Pudseys of Langley Hall⁹. The earlier pool may have been drained, its mill abandoned and the brook diverted when Langley Pool and its mill were built. The Corn Rent Map and the Valuation Map also show a large triangular pool, probably a fishpond, in the valley north-east of Langley Hall, with a small pool to its south-east. In addition to their practical uses as fishponds and mill pools, the pools around Langley Hall combined with the prominent location of the house itself and its moat to strongly declare the importance of its owners.

Ashfurlong Hall and Wheatmoor Farm

Although there may have been a medieval dwelling at Ashfurlong and part of the existing Ashfurlong Hall is a 16th century stone-built Vesey house, the pools around it and Wheatmoor Farm to its south probably date to the 18th century when it became a country house. A long narrow pool shown north of Ashfurlong Hall on the Corn Rent Map follows a stream and is probably an ornamental pool created as part of the gardens and grounds of the Hall. Wheatmoor Farm, with its stone castellated front facing Tamworth Road, itself formed part of the setting of Ashfurlong Hall. Two pools to its east were part of the working

landscape in contrast to the ornamental landscape around the Hall but could also have contributed to the landscape setting. A V-shaped pool north-east of Wheatmoor Farm, now within Wheatmoor Wood, is shown on the Corn Rent map at one end of a narrow belt of woodland. Another, smaller pool is shown east of the farm. Although this is now largely drained, a prominent dam is still visible on its south-eastern side. Both pools were probably fishponds but the larger pool could have contained wildfowl and been used for hunting along with the woodland belt that might have been planted as game cover.

References

1. Reports in Local Studies, Sutton Coldfield Library
2. M Hodder, *Birmingham: the Hidden History* (2004/2011), 123
3. Agnes Bracken, *History of the Forest and Chase of Sutton Coldfield* (1860), 52
4. William Dugdale, *The Antiquities of Warwickshire* (1656), 664
5. Bracken, 52
6. John Leland, *Itinerary*, ed L Toulmin Smith, Part V, 97
7. M Hodder, *The Archaeology of Sutton Park* (2013), 95
8. Philip Chatwin, "Castles in Warwickshire", *Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society* 67 for 1947-48, 28-29
- 9 Ken Williams, "Langley Water Mill", in Roger Lea (ed), *Scenes from Sutton's Past* (1989), 77-83