

BALDMORE: THE LAKE THAT VANISHED



P Jennings
Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group

INTRODUCTION

There are many place names in England ending in 'mere' or 'more', the Old English for lake or pond. These include stretches of water in the Lake District such as Windermere, Buttermere and Grasmere. However these, unlike Boldmere, still have their lakes.

Baldmore Lake, as it was known, was a sizeable area of water which lay mostly in Sutton Coldfield, with the remainder in Erdington. Why would such a large lake, which gave its name to the district of Boldmere, disappear? Why did some early maps show the lake in one place while present-day residents firmly point to an entirely different location? Did it really disappear without trace? What was the lake like, where exactly was it and why can it no longer be found?

THE LOCATION

The area of interest covers the land to the south west of Chester Road, north east of the boundary which was the original line of the road before it was turnpiked. The land lies to the south west of the town of Sutton Coldfield and borders Erdington. Very little seems to have been recorded about this piece of Sutton. It was originally part of the Coldfield and known as part of the Waste so we must look to other studies, the findings of which perhaps hold the key.

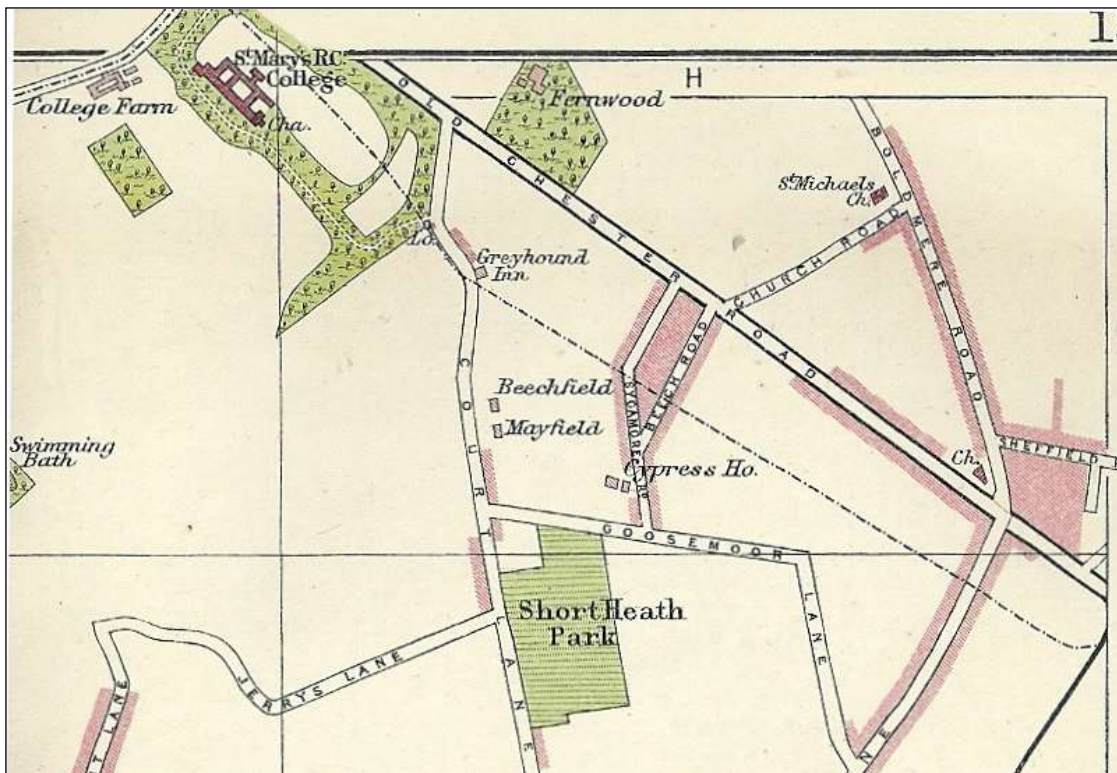


Fig.1: From Bartholomew's Atlas of 1921

THE LANDSCAPE

Boldmere was once part of Cannock Forest. Parks were one of three forms of land management in the Middle Ages for keeping and hunting deer, the others being forests and chases. A Royal Forest was a tract of land in which the king had sole rights of hunting large game – deer and boar. Although they did contain woodland, ‘forest’ was a legal term and does not imply that Royal Forests were wholly or even predominantly tree covered, for they also contained grassland, arable land and settlements. They were bounded by natural features rather than manmade boundaries. Cannock Forest, which was probably created soon after the Norman Conquest, extended from Stafford in the north to the River Tame in the south, and therefore included what was later to become Sutton Park. Chases were similar to forests in that they too had natural boundaries and included settlements and land in a variety of uses, but the right of hunting large game was held by a magnate such as a bishop or earl. Cannock Chase and Sutton Chase were taken out of Cannock Forest, the first for the Bishop of Coventry and the second, for the Earl of Warwick. Sutton Chase was bounded by the River Tame on the south and east, the Bourne Brook on the north and the prominent ridge of Barr Beacon to the west.¹



Fig. 2: Photograph by Robin Stott

As Boldmere and Sutton Park were once both part of the Lord's Chase, it is most likely that the heathland surrounding Baldmore Lake looked very much like some of the wilder parts of the park.

In his book, *The Archaeology of Sutton Park*², Mike Hodder writes "heathland is a man-made landscape resulting from clearance of trees followed by grazing at a level that prevents the re-growth of woodland". This would indicate that there was human activity in the area at some time in the far distant past.

THE CHESTER ROAD

The road was previously known as The Ridgeway, a name dating back to 1298 according to R. Stanley-Morgan in his work *Early Settlement in Erdington*.³ Mr Stanley-Morgan also felt that there was sufficient evidence for this route being a pre-Roman track way and was used frequently by the Welsh drovers. The map below clearly shows the road from Brownhills to Stonebridge and beyond as an ancient track way.

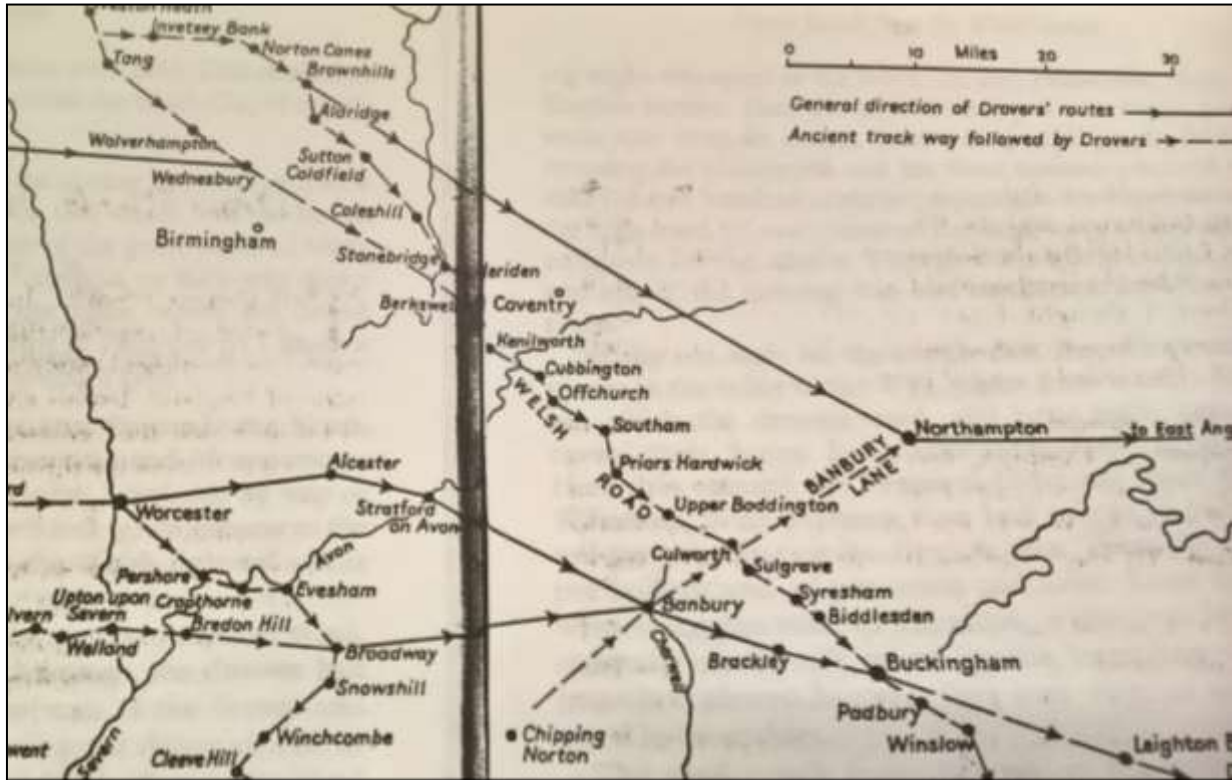


Fig. 3: *The Drovers: Who they were and how they went. An epic of the English Countryside* by KJ Bonser – (p186)

Various names confirm this Welsh presence with 'Druids Heath', 'The Welsh Harp' previously known as 'The Irish Harp' and 'Welshman's Hill' being along this route.

Bill Dargue, in an article entitled *Welshman's Hill/Welchman's Hill*, writes: "It is likely that this name refers to the trade in cattle from Wales which is documented as early as the 13th century. From the 17th century the trade was a major factor in the Welsh economy with many thousands of cattle being brought for sale for fattening on the fertile pastures of the Midlands or driven on to London.

In spring and autumn large herds of cattle were driven from Wales to the Midlands and London. The heyday of cattle droving was between the years 1700 and 1850, as the English cities began to industrialise. Before the coming of the railways some two million beasts were driven south every year.

Some 18th-century drovers avoided turnpiked roads wherever possible as the tolls were a major expense on their journey. The alternatives, however, were often circuitous and longer. Drovers from North Wales would have used the Chester Road Turnpike set up in 1759.



Fig 5: Road conditions in the 18th Century

The records from the turnpike trust for this section of the road (Stonebridge to Stonnall) are listed as 'missing' and no information is available. As most of Sutton's section of the route crossed commons and wastes there were no wealthy residents to appease or take into consideration and no large estates to avoid and therefore, unfortunately, no landowners' records to survive.

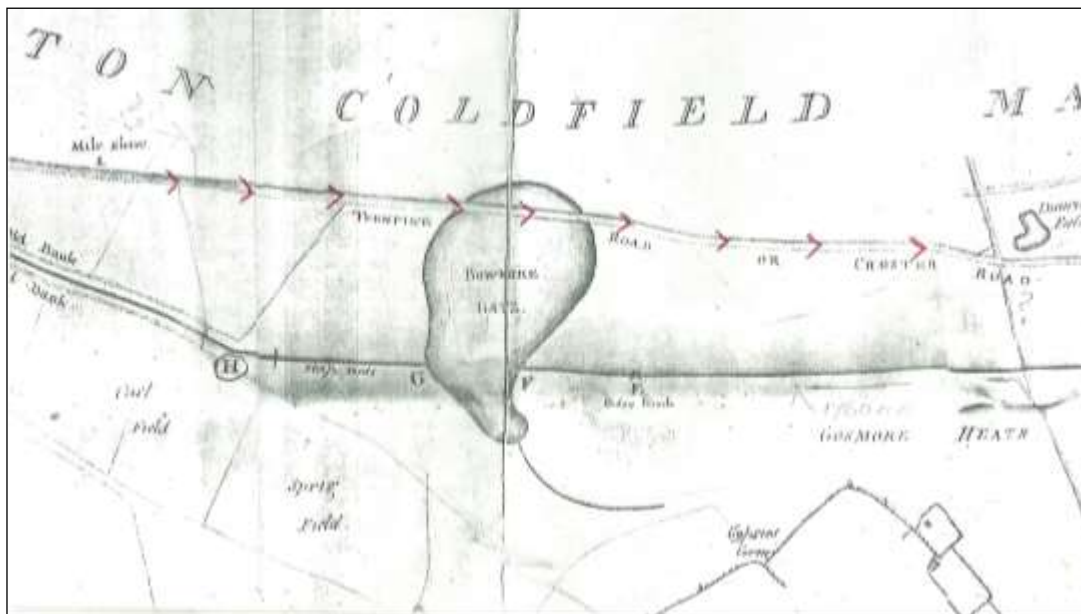


Fig 6: 1804 sketch – Erdington Enclosures.

The resulting, straightened and improved road was re-routed in the early 19th century to cross the lake probably on a causeway. This turnpike road appears, marked by the arrows, on the part sketch shown above (Fig 6). This is a portion of the map drawn to show the holdings of Erdington landowners to settle a dispute with regard to boundaries between Sutton, Erdington and Perry (*sic*).

THE EVIDENCE

In 1841 the census enumerator clearly stated that there was a small hamlet of 10 households living at 'Baldmoor Lake'. This area was close to the present Greyhound Inn. Properties along the Chester Road also reference the lake including 'The Lakehouse', followed by 'Lakehouse Road', built upon the site of The Lakehouse, 'Lakehouse Stores', almost at the corner of Sycamore Road and 'Baldmoor House' on the Chester Road. Next to the Greyhound was 'Baldmoor Lake Cottage'.

William Fowler, in his address⁶ to the members of the Erdington Institute in the Public Hall on 27 April 1885, states that he well remembers the lake in his youth.

He said, "A little to the south of the Chester Road, not far from Oscott College, was formerly situate (*sic*) what, in my younger days, was always spoken of as Baldmoor, or as commonly pronounced, Bolmer Lake. This is now enclosed and drained and more euphoniously called Boldmere. On the Erdington Inclosure Map of 1804, it is shown as a pool of about 7 or 8 acres and it is spelt Baldmore; about two thirds of it being in Sutton Parish."

Both William Fowler and his father, also William, were well known land surveyors from Erdington. According to William Fowler Jnr, the name Baldmore he believed to be from the Anglo Saxon, bald meaning barren and more/moor, a wide open space. An alternative meaning is also from the Anglo Saxon of mar/mere meaning 'lake'.

There is also mention of the lake in W K R Bedford's book *History of Sutton Coldfield*.⁷ Writing about the foundation of a church, St Michael's, in the newly formed parish of Boldmere, he records that the church was to be built "on the eminence above Baldmore Lake upon the Chester Road."

The lake itself would have been very important to those living in its vicinity in pre-historic times as it had gently sloping sides, ideal for encouraging wild animals to come to drink and be trapped to feed the hunter gatherers and their families. By the 18th century the tracks on Tomlinson's map^(Fig 4) show that the lake would have been a focal point for the local community as well as being a stopping-off place for travellers. In his book *The Story of Sutton Coldfield*⁸ Roger Lea states that in other areas "The management of the meadow land had also been improved by a system of flooding the meadows in winter months using timber barriers and simple sluice gates. The deposition of silt improved the fertility of the meadow, pests and diseases were controlled, and a better crop of hay could be taken earlier in the year. This process was known as floating." This may be the reason that the meadows near to the lake, but not actually adjoining it, bore its name.

The 'tail' of the lake flows down parallel with Goosemoor Lane and would have crossed those fields called Near Baldmoor, Far Baldmoor, Lower Baldmoor and Over Baldmoor Closes (*Tomlinson's map Fig 4*) now remembered in Baldmoor Lake Road, on the Topcroft Estate in Erdington. 'Goosemoor' has also been known in the past as 'Gosmore' and Gorsemoor Heath. This would have been important to locals as well as travellers as one of the many uses of gorse was to feed animals, particularly calves and horses.

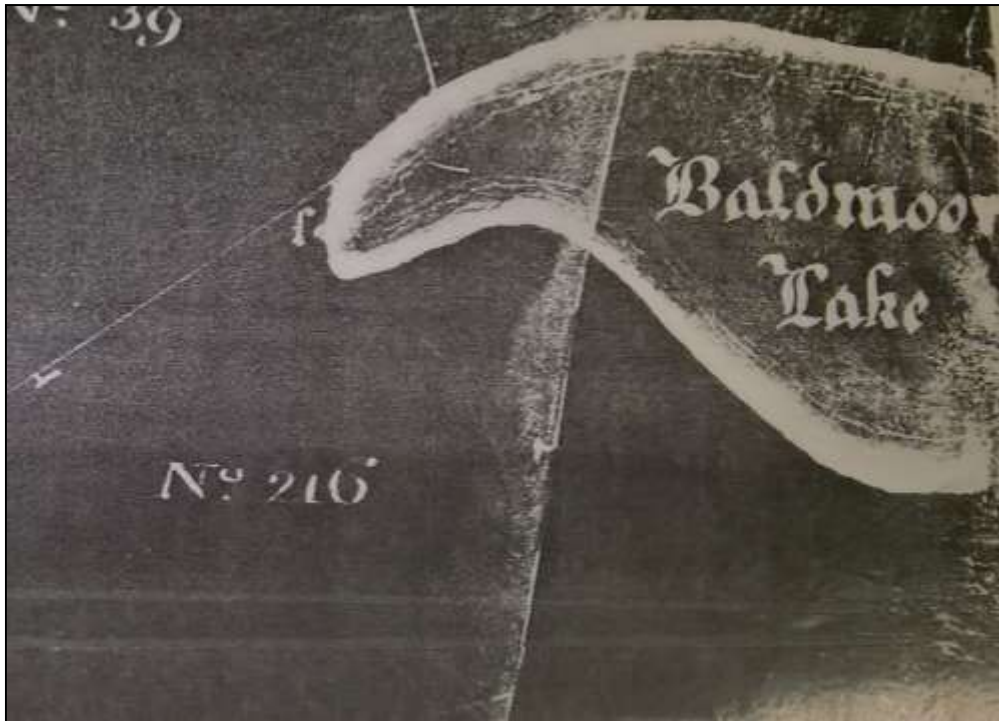


Fig 7: Part of Erdington Enclosure map 1804

The 1804 Enclosure maps for Erdington (*Figs 6 & 7*) show a definite 'teardrop' shaped lake and this, taken together with the ground formation and the hills surrounding it point to the lake being glacial. Sutton Coldfield is on the edge of the area covered by the last glacier.

THE GEOLOGY

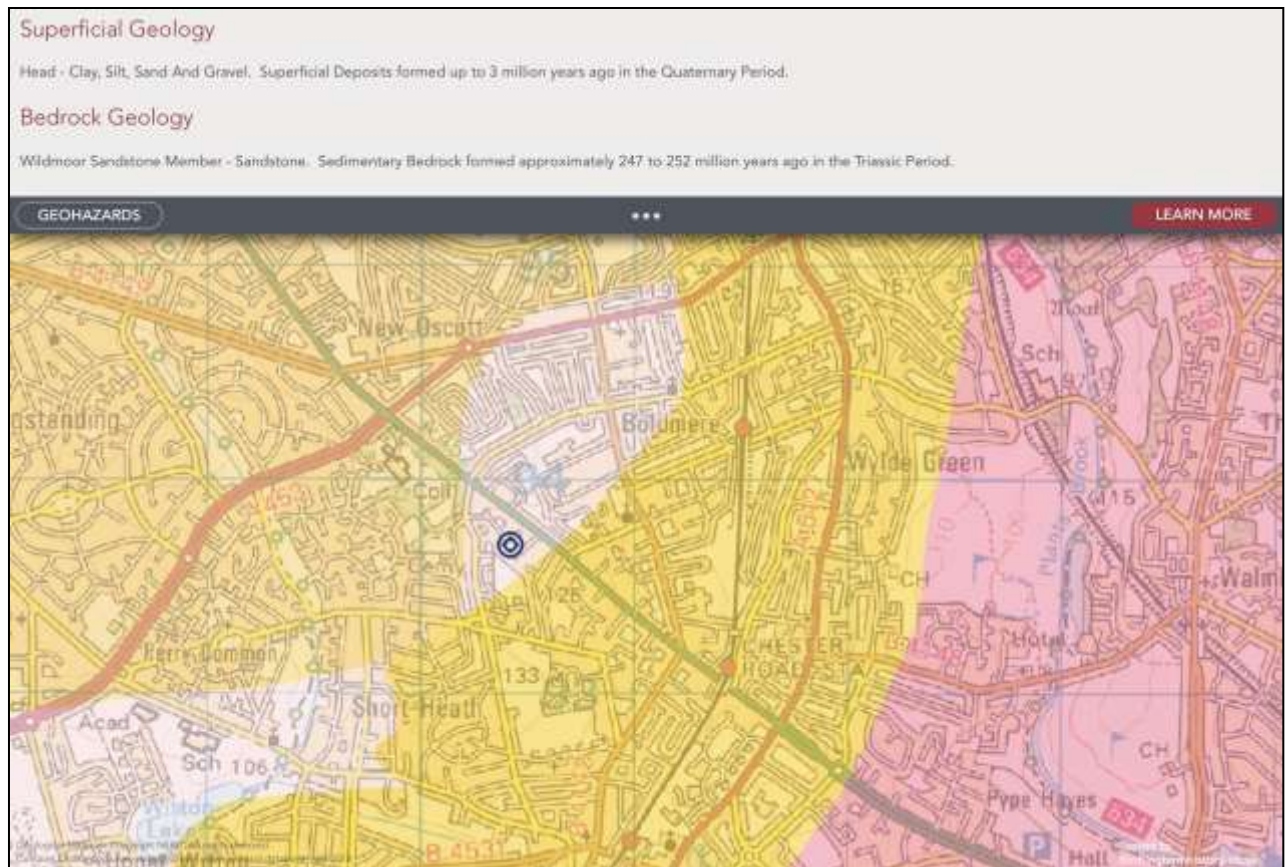


Fig 8: British Geological Survey.

Peter Cutler of www.birminghamhistory.co.uk comments:

“The extent of the Devensian till sheet deposited at the edge by the last ice sheet of 10,000 years ago in the Birmingham area is described by Powell et al. (2000) as a line from north Dudley, through Walsall to Sutton Coldfield, based upon the earlier work of Martin (1891) and Eastwood et al. (1925), although they emphasize that the exact location of the margin is imprecise due to the difficulty in differentiating between pre-Devensian and Devensian tills”.

(Fig 8) shows that, in geological terms, our lake was in the small area surrounded by these tills. It is said that at the edge of the ice sheet it can be, as it retreats, that the till can fan out and the superficial layer may vary over short distances

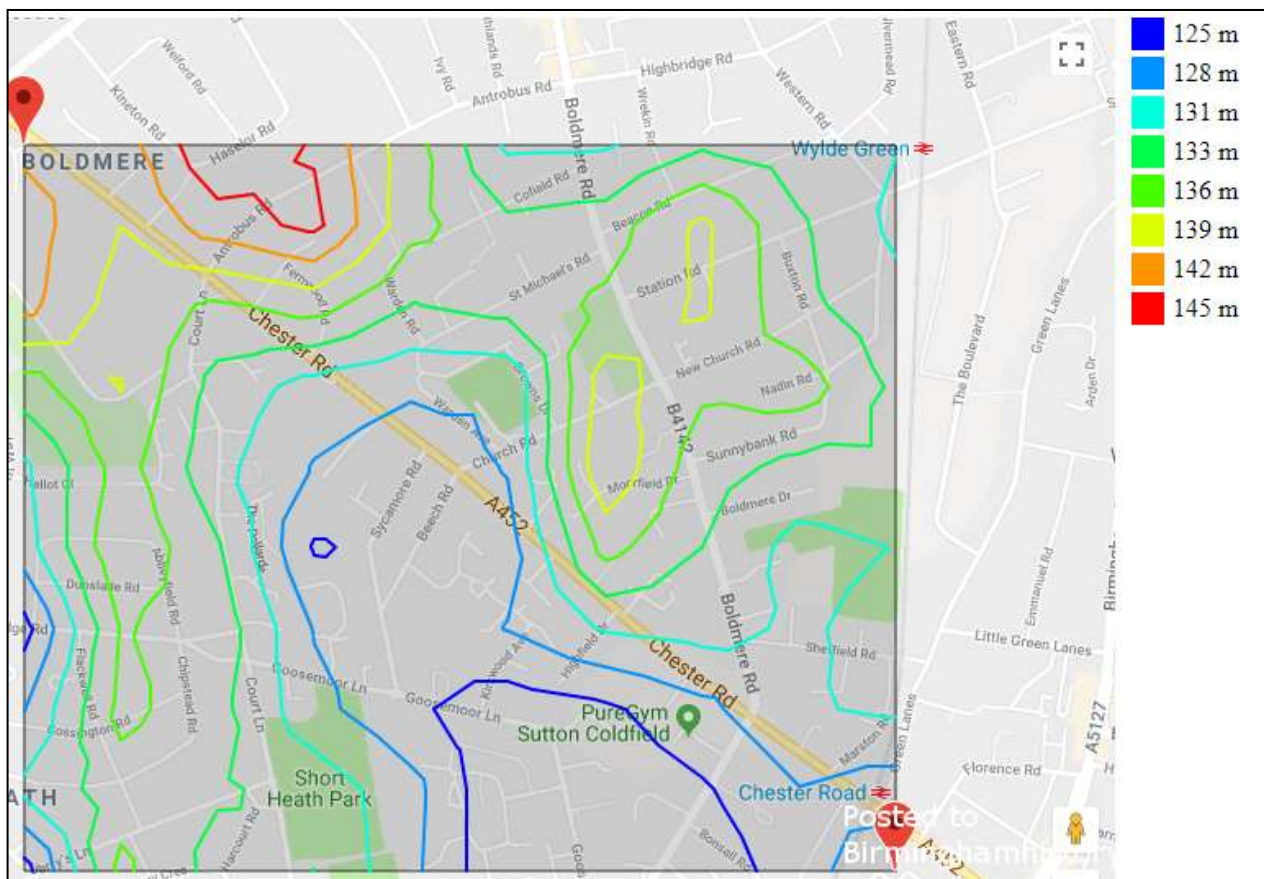


Fig 9: Contour Map

The contour map (Fig 9) supplied by Janice Burns also of www.birminghamhistory.co.uk suggests that the lake once covered the area which today includes Lakehouse Road, Sycamore Road and Beech Road, part of Chester Road and the area towards Warden Road where Boldmere Sports Club now stands. The lake could well have extended as far as Shortheath Park.

Some of the above mentioned roads have been marked to help with bearings on the map shown below. It is very likely that the lake was partly seasonal and may have been subject to increase in size during the winter months.



Fig 10: Geological Survey

(Fig 10), also by Peter Cutler, is a Geological Survey and the area shown in mustard yellow, edged in red, is where the superficial deposits are described as 'Head.' This is clay, silt, sand and gravel, with some organic material which were formed up to 3 million years ago. The pink areas appear to be Glaciofluvial. That is relating to or coming from streams deriving much, or all of the water from the melting of a glacier from the Devensian. Devensian is the name used by British geologists for the last ice age. It cannot be coincidence that right at the top end of the area of 'Head' is the modern Lakehouse Road at the site of what was Lake House. It shows Baldmoor Lake on both sides of the Chester Road as is the area of 'Head' on the Geological map (Fig 8).

There are other areas in the locality which have been excavated for their sand and gravel deposits during the 20th century. Notably, there was a quarry within the land between Chester Road and Goosemoor Lane now occupied by a builder's supplies yard. Residents remember that the craters left by this quarrying frequently filled with deep water during the rainy months.

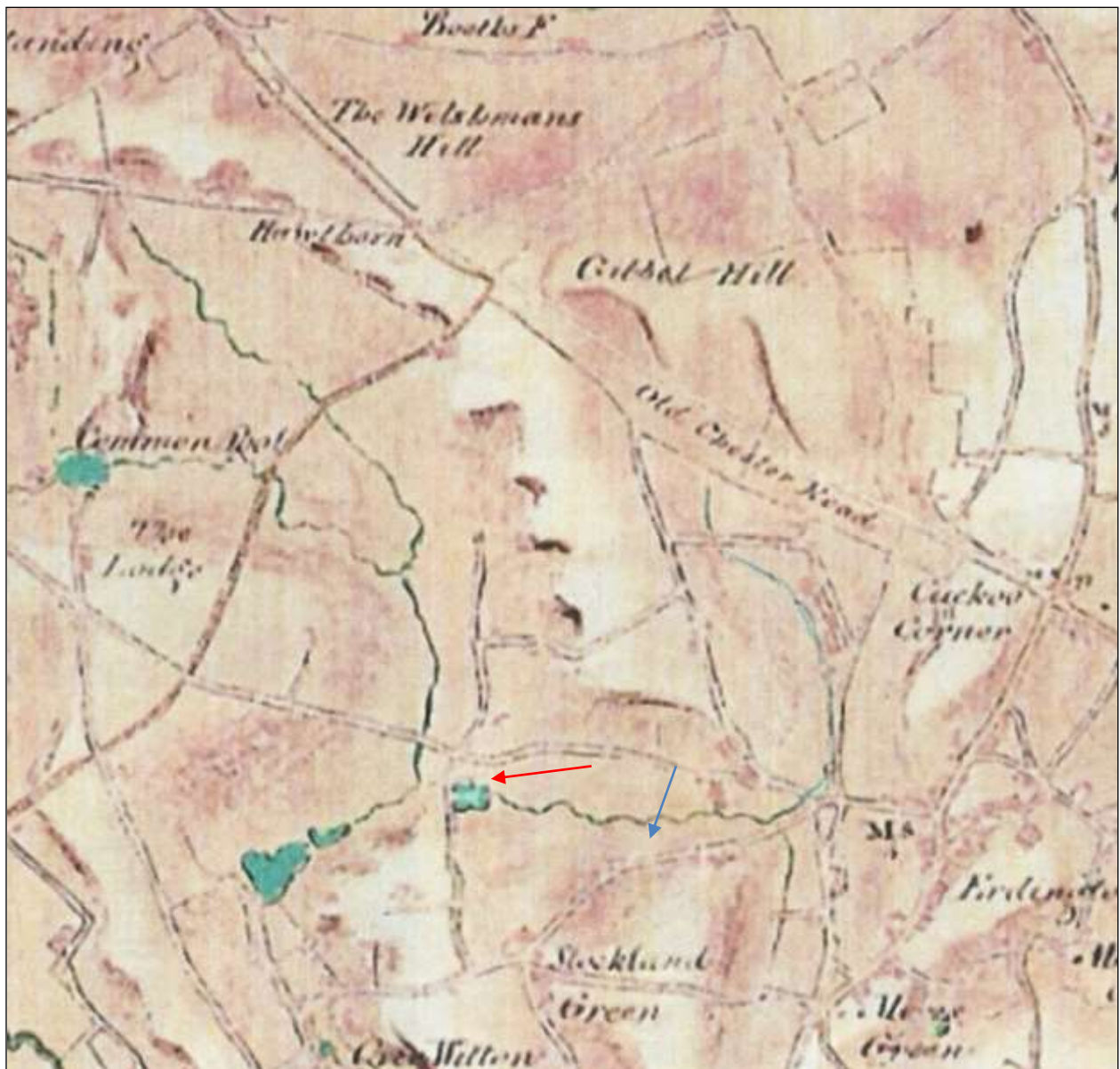


Fig 11: Section of map Birmingham North 1815 OS 1 in.

WATER SOURCES

Rivulets, probably underground, coming from the Coldfield, would have fed the lake together with surface water from rainfall. The water course leaving the lake continued to flow above ground down to the marshy area which we now know as the recreation ground in Marsh Lane, Erdington (blue arrow) joining the stream there and continuing along to Witton Lakes. In the past there was a sizeable lake at the lowest point of Bleak Hill (red arrow) and this is shown on the Birmingham North OS map of 1815 (Fig 11).

A Neolithic hand axe was discovered in 1968 in Hawthorn Brook Way off Court Lane, only yards from the original Ridgeway. Was this lost by a farmer clearing the land, dropped by a passing trader en route for the south east, or was it brought down by the same movement of ice which gouged out the lake itself? Flint cores and flakes were also discovered by field walking at New Oscott College.² Early settlements have been unearthed at both Stonnall and Castle Bromwich and so we can believe that activity, if not settlement, existed along the route which connects them. It is understood that at the time of enclosure the surface

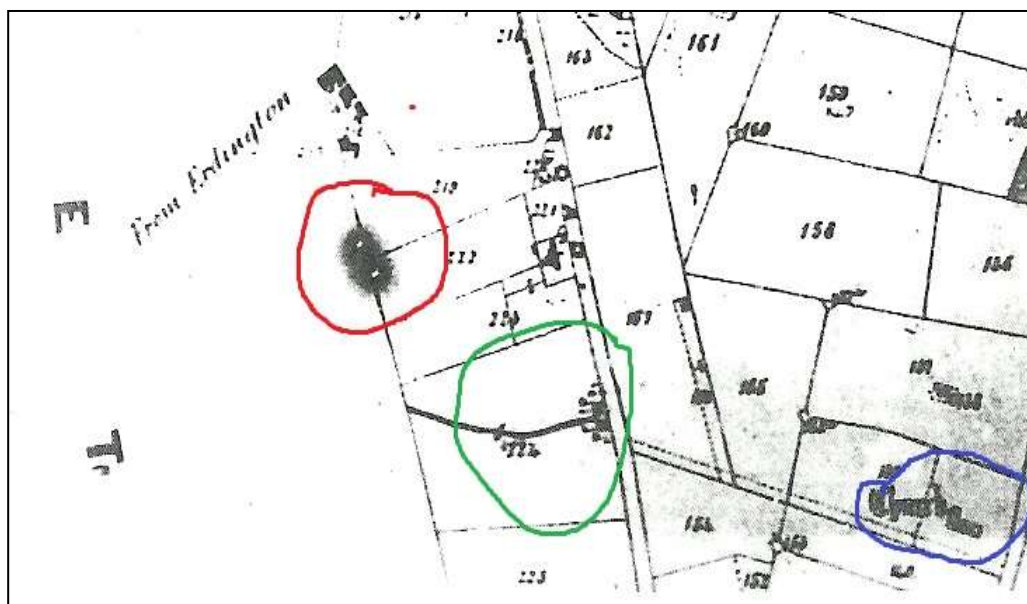
vegetation and top soil, to a depth of at least two feet, was removed by labourers brought in especially for this task. Was proof of previous occupation also removed at this time?

With the building of private houses and the agricultural decline in the area, the landowners probably considered that the lake was standing in the way of progress. The Warden and Society had turned down an earlier suggestion in 1778 from Joseph Scott (later Sir Joseph) of Great Barr, that the commons and wastes should be divided up amongst the landowners whose property already adjoined the commons (including his own). The Warden and Society did however accept a later plan for the enclosure of the area with the land being sold to various wealthy purchasers. Those who had been in residence for more than 20 years were allowed to remain on their properties for the rest of their natural lives, paying rent to the new owners. All other occupants were given notice to quit. By the middle of the 1800's the land around the lake was parcelled up and sold for development, the lake was drained, the streams which fed it culverted and the lake itself disappeared (*Fig 12*).

Roger Lea comments: "The Rector, John Riland, opposed enclosure of the commons, partly on the grounds that it would be unfair to the poor, but one of the most drastic effects of enclosure does not appear to have been articulated at the time. The poor cottager enjoyed rights on the commons shared with all his neighbours, rich and poor, and he had the option, if no satisfactory work was available, of scavenging on the commons for fuel, tending his sheep or tilling his lot acre. After the commons were enclosed, he had no option but to work for a wage, on the land or in a factory. From being a free man he had become a wage slave."⁹

It cannot be a coincidence that all of the residents of the hamlet of Baldmore Lake appearing on the 1841 census had moved on to other addresses by the time the 1851 census was taken.

Unfortunately, not a completely successful drainage and culverting plan was carried out as at least two of the properties in Sycamore Road have had to be rebuilt owing to subsidence. Apparently, the Water Company denied that there was a problem to do with streams beneath the properties and blame was laid at the door of the builder's faulty foundations.



*Fig 12:
Part of the
Parochial
Valuation
Map of
Sutton
Coldfield.*

Quite recently a resident in Littlecote Drive, Erdington (off Beech Road) wanted to build a garage on her property but was told that piles would have to be driven into the ground as the house was 'built on the mud flats' and it was not possible to build with ordinary foundations.

CONCLUSION

Looking at the contour map (*Fig 9*) it is likely that the second lake, shown with the red circle on the Parochial Valuation Map of Sutton Coldfield (*Fig 12*), was originally concealed within the larger one.

It appears that when the lake was drained, sometime before 1815, it left a smaller possibly muddy, 'pond'. The lowest contour line, shown as a small blue circle on (*Fig 9*) corresponds roughly to the small 'blobs', outlined in red, shown on the 1857 plan (*Fig 12*).

These 'blobs' are probably the remnants of the lake which now appears as the noticeable 'bowl' at the rear of New Oscott Village and the Greyhound public house. (*The green circle denotes the site of the original lake, now culverted, the blue area outlines St Michael's church and the red circle shows the probable site of the remnants of the lake*).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The village of Stonnall also has a 'lost' lake and Julian Ward-Davies' article entitled *The Lost Lake of Stonnall* on his excellent website, proved extremely useful in pointing the way to determining the origin of Baldmore Lake.

See http://www.stonnall-history-group.org.uk/articles/The_Lost_Lake_of_Stonnall.html

A great deal of assistance regarding geology was also given by Janice Burns and Peter Cutler, both from www.birminghamhistory.co.uk

SOURCES

- 1 HODDER, Michael, *The Archaeology of Sutton Park*. Published by The History Press 2013. Pg 69.
- 2 HODDER, Michael, *The Archaeology of Sutton Park*. Published by The History Press 2013. Pg 41.
- 3 STANLEY-MORGAN, R, *Early Settlement in Erdington*. A documentary case-study. The Birmingham Archaeological Society. Sutton Coldfield Reference Library (QSH 91.7).
- 4 DARGUE, William, *Welshmans Hill / Welchmans Hill*
<https://billdargue.jimdo.com/placenames-gazetteer-a-to-y/places-w/welshmans-hill/>
- 5 WILLIAMS, K J, *A History of Boldmere*, published by Westwood Press Publications. Pg 10.
- 6 FOWLER, William, An address to the members of The Erdington Institute in the Public Hall, Erdington on April 27 1885. Sutton Coldfield Reference Library. (SH 91.7).
- 7 RILAND BEDFORD, Rev W K, *History of Sutton Coldfield*. Originally published in 1891, reprinted by Sutton Coldfield Corporation 1968 by Saxton (Printers) Ltd. Pg 63.
- 8 LEA, Roger, *The Story of Sutton Coldfield*. Published by Sutton Publishing Limited in 2003. Pg 67.
- 9 LEA, Roger, *The Story of Sutton Coldfield*. Published by Sutton Publishing Limited in 2003. Pg 93

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig

- 1 *Bartholomew's Atlas & Guide* Published 1921 by John Bartholomew & Son, Ltd. Section of Page 13.
- 2 Colours of late winter – heathland rising to Upper Nut Hurst, Sutton Park
Copyright Robin Stott – Licensed for re-use under Creative Commons Licence.
<https://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/4631593>
- 3 BONSER, K J, *The Drovers: Who they were and how they went: An epic of the English Countryside*. Macmillan proof. (Books, Llangollen. Bookshop owner's copy). P186.
- 4 Section of a copy of A Plan of the Manor of Erdington 1760 by J Tomlinson
Sutton Coldfield Reference Library – Upright map cabinet, (QSH84.9)
- 5 Road conditions in 18thC England.
<http://www.johnhearfield.com/History/Roads.htm>
- 6 Section of the Erdington Enclosure plan. Sutton Coldfield Reference Library.
- 7 Part of the Erdington Enclosure map 1801. Warwickshire County Record Office. QS75/3 with award at Warwick. Copy at Sutton Coldfield Archives.

- 8 Peter Cutler from the British Geological Survey iGeology App. The Superficial and Bedrock Geology near Lake House. www.birminghamhistory.co.uk.
- 9 Map created by Janice Burns - www.birminghamhistory.co.uk. Using <http://contourmapcreator.urgr8.ch/>
- 10 Geological map – Peter Cutler, Birmingham History Forum www.birminghamhistory.co.uk.
- 11 Section of map – Birmingham North 1815 OS 1in.
- 12 Part of the Parochial Valuation map of Sutton Coldfield 1857. Library of Birmingham. Sutton Coldfield drawer.