

Marton Pool: A consultation



Marton Pool is a natural lake that developed in a depression formed by ice sheets some 15,000 years ago. It is one of more than 60 such wetlands spread across the north-west Midlands. The most important of these have been designated collectively as of international importance, while individual wetlands, including Marton Pool, have been notified as both nationally and internationally important Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs).

Marton Pool was once part of a much larger area of wetland which was the source of the extensive peat soils covering much of the adjoining farmland. The Pool with its surrounding wetlands was originally notified as a SSSI for its aquatic plants, its extensive areas of fen and wet woodland, a rich invertebrate fauna and breeding birds. The pool provides a natural and tranquil place for close residents and visitors and for many years has also been a popular place for boating and fishing, most of which now takes place from the Caravan Park.

The Pool, which in places is 8m deep with shallower margins, was recorded as 13.7 ha in extent in 2000. The whole wetland SSSI extends to 17.21 ha and includes the surrounding fen and woodland. The original SSSI also included substantial areas of open fen, marsh and unimproved wet grassland around the Pool, but most of this has been lost to agricultural improvement over the last 50 years. The surviving fen areas are mostly common reed, with a mix of lesser reedmace, bulrush and large sedges. The woodland consists mainly of alder and willow, and some of the alder trees are veterans of great age and size. The main inlet to the lake is the Lowerfield Brook, which drains a 500ha catchment of mostly agricultural land, and the principal outlet is the Rea Brook.



Veteran Alder

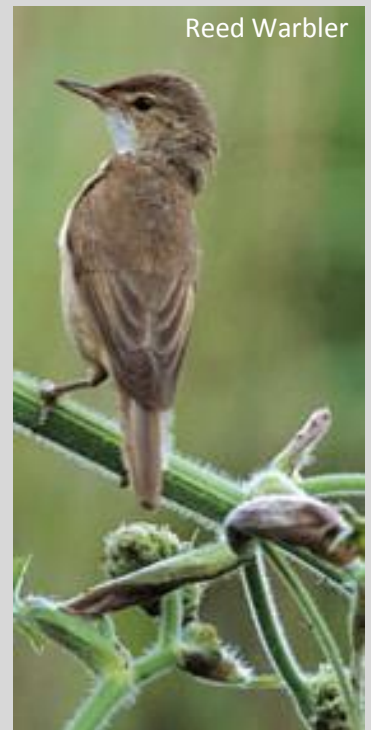
Comparing the area of water at Marton Pool in 2000 with the area recorded in the 1880s suggests that the open water area of the Pool has contracted by some 15% over the last 100 years or so. A more recent measurement of the water based on a June 2008 aerial photograph estimates the open water area at 9.58ha, suggesting an overall decline in water area of nearly 40% since the 1880s.

The true figure adjusted for the time of year and prevailing conditions is probably somewhere between these two figures, but all the indications are that the area of open water has contracted over the years



Fen vegetation around the edge of the water is drying out and is being increasingly invaded by willow scrub and woodland, reducing its value to the lake's important wetland wildlife. This woodland and scrub is reducing the extent of fen habitat for invertebrates and also for birds, including breeding Grebes and Water Rails, as well as Reed Warblers, for which this is probably the most important site in Shropshire. Fen habitat also provides important spawning sites, nursery areas and refuges for fish, sustaining the fishery as an important amenity.

The water levels at Marton Pool have been regularly monitored since 2005, with the highest levels of 101.25 metres (Ordnance Datum) recorded in 2007 and 2012, and the lowest, 99.7 m, in autumn 2011. In almost all years water levels have reached 100.5m and in most years they have briefly reached 100.75m. When water levels drop after peaking or during dry periods they tend to stabilise at 99.85m, the bed level of the Rea Brook outflow. There is an old boathouse on the southern side of the pool, and while the age of the present boathouse is unknown, the site has been occupied by a boathouse since the late nineteenth century. The floor level of the boat house is at 100.54 m, suggesting that the past water level was at, or close to, this level, at least in summer, when the boathouse would have been in use. It has been suggested by the Environment Agency that water levels were historically higher in the past, indicated by the height of the boathouse.



Reed Warbler



There have been various attempts to change the water levels in the Pool. The Severn Trent River Board carried out works to the Rea Brook in 1964 which lowered the Pool by two to three feet, and a structure, presumably intended to hold or raise water levels was installed in the outlet brook in the early 1990s. This was replaced by a more permanent drop-board sluice in 1999 by the Environment Agency, but this too has fallen into disrepair.

Natural England, the government conservation agency with responsibility for nationally and internationally important sites, is concerned at the continuing decline in the quality and area of the fen habitats and the flora and fauna they support at Marton Pool, and is seeking to restore water levels. Raising water levels would not only maintain the area of the Pool itself, but would also restore the declining quality of the transitional fen, marsh, swamp and wet woodland around the water body. However, it is also recognised that the site is now an important amenity for the caravan park, is surrounded by commercial farmland, and that these interests need to be safeguarded as part of any agreement.

At present several options are under consideration including the reinstatement of the existing sluice, the construction of a new sluice, or the construction of a more natural log dam which would raise water levels but allow some movement of fish and aquatic wildlife between the Pool and the outlet brook. Considerations include the need to maintain minimum flows in the Rea Brook at all times, the ability to allow rapid evacuation of water at times of high rainfall, the requirement to avoid any works resulting in unwanted flooding to adjoining land, as well as the objective of contributing to the maintenance and restoration of the biological importance of the Pool by raising water levels. Other considerations of practicability and cost will also be important. These considerations are summarised in a vision for what the Pool and its surrounding wetland habitats might be like in 2030.

A vision for Marton wetland 2030

Marton Pool is a tranquil area of open water at the heart of wetland of fen, marsh, swamp and woodland nestled within the shallow vale through which the Rea Brook gently flows. The Pool has been restored to its historic level and once again reaches the old boathouse on the southern shore, fluctuating naturally in response to rainfall. The water quality is good, allowing a range of aquatic plants to flourish in the open water. In spring, Grebes are seen displaying on the water, and the calls of Water Rails can be heard from the reed and sedge fen lining the shallow water at the pool edges. The fringe of fen is home to a rich invertebrate fauna and the largest population of Reed Warblers in Shropshire. This swampy vegetation grades into wet woodland where large veteran Alders persist among the younger trees, some of which have been newly coppiced. The raised water levels once again allow peat formation and the storage of carbon. The wetland fringe also improves water quality, filtering out sediment. It provides resilience in the face of climate change, storing flood water and reducing peaks in the rivers further downstream. The Marton wetland exists in harmony with its farming neighbours and continues to provide a much valued resource for recreation and quiet contemplation.

As a first step, Natural England has appointed an independent consultant, Footprint Ecology, to carry out a consultation with landowners, statutory bodies and others with an interest in the future of Marton Pool, including local communities and individuals.

Comments and views can be sent to: Fenella Lewin, Footprint Ecology, Forest Office, Cold Harbour, Wareham, BH20 7PA or e-mailed to Fenella at: martonpool@footprint-ecology.co.uk. The consultation will close on January 15th 2017.

