

## Ware to Broxbourne, 25<sup>th</sup> July 2014

This promises to be an uncomfortably hot day, predicting up to 30C in Central London, so suitably prepared with light clothes and a straw hat, I board the train to Ware at Liverpool Street.

Down on the towing path at Ware, the riverside houses and apartment blocks are definitely upmarket a great number of which have their own private river frontage, so plenty of lifestyle on show.



*Riverfront housing at Ware*

At the end of the first reach there is a footbridge and weir leading to a back channel that connects with the River Ash and eventually feeds into Stanstead Mill Stream.



Both stream and pathway are very overgrown, the stream is heavily encroached upon by vegetation, in particular by Himalayan Balsam, which threatens to choke it. The pathway is not a thoroughfare and only stays barely passable as an access

to fishing sites leased to the Ware Angling Club on the adjacent flooded gravel digging. Although coarse fishing rules apply, there are no restrictions to fishing the small back channel where I meet two teenagers who tell me that since early that morning, they had caught two 3lb Trout and a 4lb Pike, all of which they had dutifully returned to the water.



*Himalayan Balsam, Stanstead Stream*      *Poplar Grove, Stanstead Stream*

Between them the stream and the Lee Valley Navigation enclose an overgrown island of flooded gravel diggings and huge mature stands of Poplar. Amwell Nature Reserve occupies one complex of flooded diggings and is home to a project to encourage re-colonisation of the valley by native Water Vole. The diggings were unpopular in the past as a profligate waste of extremely fertile Brick Earth topsoil that formed the basis for the market gardening industry in the Lea Valley; however now they are valued as the core of a biodiverse wetland corridor that reaches right into Metropolitan London. As the land rises from the gravel beds and alluvial clays of the valley bottom, it gives way to undulating chalk upland, now largely devoted to arable production. At the time of this visit, the view up from the river is of lush wheat land.



This detour is a short respite from a monoscape of graveled towpath, canalized riverbank, which the Lee Valley Navigation barely flows by. The immediate wetland of the river corridor, is intimate because the bordering vegetation and tree growth is so lush in Summer that there are few prospects of a landscape beyond its confines beyond those that follow the line of the watercourse. This creates an intimate linear society where ways of life reflect or take advantage of the water environment within which the boating community has a prominent place.

Along the towpath, there are sporadic narrowboats moored up or on the move. Whilst some moorings are emphatically for the brief stop over, others have dug

themselves in; Some of these boats are utterly dilapidated with junk piled high on the cabin top and green mould taking over the folksy paintwork whilst others are obviously cared for. Those with the owner out on the day job are quiet and padlocked but have trustingly left valuable equipment such as generating sets and bicycles out on deck. This is a community of sorts and there is a strong sense of interdependence, they look out for each other. Parts of the riverbank have become cluttered by boatowner's property; bicycles, motorbikes, cars, plastic crates and even the odd clotheslines on cleared patches of grass beside the towpath. There is a blurred distinction between ownership and vagrancy.



*Dilapidated Narrowboats*

Why is a solitary boat moored up in such an unsympathetic place as beneath the busy A414 flyover bridge? It could be that the responsibility for the land and riverbank beneath the bridge falls between authorities with the effect that the owner of the vessel is able to take advantage of the legal vagaries to establish temporary tenure. It could be that it is dry and has a sense of enclosure. Otherwise there is little else to recommend it, the fenced off undercroft is a dingy gravel landscape that tapers to nothing. The rumble of the traffic above is constant and echoes eerily. Maybe, like the internal workings of a strange host it is comforting. The boat floats in limbo, peripheral but nonetheless, secure and contained.



This privilege is shared with those other opportunists who hang around: the kids who possess the concrete pillars with graffiti and today a man with a bicycle, sitting on the river wall, his back to the river, gazes absently into the gloomy recesses under the bridge. It is apparently neutral territory, semi-enclosed and clandestine, perhaps this has an affect upon behavior; people dump stuff. Just across the river there is something ruined, indefinable, not nasty but mysterious, it could be a wrecked and disintegrating boat or it could be an article of furniture, maybe both; junk attracts junk.



*Understorey*

Continuing downstream, the heat of the day has become oppressive, a thunderhead is gathering and there is distant bass rumbling, distinct from the constant roar of jets overhead on the approach to Stanstead. The abundant vegetation on the bank adds to a sense of claustrophobia, unseasonably ripe blackberries hang unpicked in the hedge.

Approaching Rye House, the numbers of holidaying narrowboats increase; one hire company with a flotilla of foolproof craft has named them after characters in 'The Wind in the Willows': Mr Mole has just emerged from the lock with a party on board, the ladies in the bow, all pink and white with sunglasses, whilst the men congregate aft at the business end. The delegated skipper is identifiable by the sailor hat stacked on top of his Panama. They are having such a jolly time playing the part, expecting to be photographed, they all turn towards me grinning broadly and salute as they pass. The ladies just look quizzical.



*Boat Party*

At Rye House there is a river crossing and a tempting escape route via the railway station, but across the bridge there is an equally tempting pub called,

unsurprisingly, “The Rye House” this however is not the original Rye House, which is or rather was straight across the road where a beautifully conserved medieval gatehouse is all that survives of a moated and fortified manor house dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The pub is much newer, built in the 1600’s as ‘The Kings Arms’, it only adopted the name once the original Rye House had become a memory. Aside from the odd bit of Victoriana, its frontage is dominated by a pair of Jacobean curved bay casement windows taking up the entire two storeys of the building either side of the main entrance.



The original Rye House has had a chequered history: the land was granted to one Andres Pederson in 1433 for his services during Hundred Years War,



subsequently it became the home of the Parr family between 1515 and 1531, Catherine Parr, Henry VIII’s final wife lived there as a child. In 1683 it was occupied by Richard Rumbold, one of the conspirators in what became known as the Rye House Plot to unseat James II, for which he was duly executed in Edinburgh in 1685 after an abortive invasion from the North led by Arhibald Campbell, 9<sup>th</sup> Earl of Argyll and from the South by James Scott, Duke of Monmouth. The house gradually disintegrated over the intervening centuries to become as it is now, according to LVPA’s own guide: an exquisite fragment of 15<sup>th</sup> century “bling”

*Rye House Gatehouse*

Little else has happened of note there except perhaps, between 1870 and 1920, when it was included in a pleasure park on the site, it housed the Great Bed of Ware. Maybe this is fanciful but the shift from privilege to proletarianism signaled by the Pleasure Park at Rye House, led directly to the erection of a Greyhound stadium on the site in 1930’s, which eventually became the Speedway and Go-Kart stadium that it is today. Perhaps this is what is behind the comment on [www.tripadvisor](http://www.tripadvisor) for the Rye House pub “ Big family pub frequented by local pikeys. What can I say? Don’t leave any valuables in the car, which is parked out of sight of the pub! Can be “lively”.”

The Go-Kart Stadium backs directly on to the river; it has a control tower and is festooned with chequer flags. Obviously a popular venue for the sport, but when I pass, a few desultory Karters are doing the circuit and some bored boys throw stones at a floating can, missing so wildly that I have to duck.



Back to another reality, the Gas Turbine Power Station at Rye House looms in that no-man's land between the New River and the Lee Valley Navigation. At 715mw, it provides enough power to service nearly all of Hertfordshire and is the hub for a huge complex of powerlines and substations that radiate outwards and dominate the landscape. It is a reminder that although this may be a regional park, it is also a substantial linear settlement, and a concentration of infrastructure, rail, road, water as well as energy. The uneasy juxtaposition of past and present, urban community and natural habitat, leisure amenity and conserved wetland is all an aspect of the place, it is its heartbeat, characterized by porosity.

Immediately downstream is the lock and weir where the River Stort enters the Lee. At the lock, an old lady adroitly positions her narrowboat in the chamber, a little nudge on the bowthruster and it is just a matter of adjusting a short length of line to hold her against the wall as the level drops. Not a word spoken in a well rehearsed and coordinated procedure.

There is a small, settlement of moored boats at the confluence of the Stort and the Lea; each has its own, garden and gate "beware of the dog" and all the paraphernalia of domesticity. Some sites are more cared for than others; one in particular, well inside the Stort, has a very well tended vegetable garden sloping down to the mooring. Everything is spick and span, including the boat itself with a smart little wheelhouse. Taking pictures, I was challenged by the stocky owner who asked whether he could help me, in other words a challenge: "what do you want?" To which my answer was, no unless he minded me taking photographs and how beautiful his garden is. He shrugged, said that I was welcome and disappeared below. This is the same everywhere for a marginal way of life: secure insecurity or insecure security, always under scrutiny, never certain, always on your guard. Own a piece of land and keep a boat on it and you are rich. Own a boat and have the use of a bit of land and in popular opinion you are a vagrant, tolerated out of goodwill until such a time that the owner or authority finds your presence inconvenient.



*A garden at the confluence of the Rivers Stort and Lea*

The River Stort also marks the re-emergence of the Lea Valley Flood Relief Channel that ducks, dives and meanders around the River Lea Navigation from Ware to Stratford. Here the channel passes into the North Lagoon of Nazeing Mead and passing out again at the bottom of the South Lagoon to link through and around the chain of lakes to become a concrete drain that eventually emerges via Prescott Channel at Three Mills into Bow Creek. Work was commenced upon the channel in 1947 and it was not completed until 1976. Since then, its capacity has been under pressure three times: in 1987, 1993 and 2000.

Here, the rain that has been grumbling in the background all day starts in earnest and soon becomes very heavy indeed. In some respects it introduces another aspect of waterscape, it is another dimension that chimes with the river and its vegetation, all vertical and horizontal. It brings to mind those paintings by Jakob Van Ruysdael of supine landscape played upon from above by dramatic weather systems. Where for the Dutch this was a symbol for resilience, for me right now, at the best it reasserts the continuity between above and below, but otherwise it makes me very very wet.



Regrettably, my elegant panama hat is now a bucket with a very narrow brim. But at this stage I am pleased that I am not yet wet enough to give up and believing it best to keep moving. With the slackening rain I can leave my dubious shelter under the bushes in the belief that it will not get much worse. In those thoughtful pauses after a rainstorm there are small glimpsed vignettes along the way:

The huge scrap yard cheek by jowl with a Sainsbury's Distribution Centre in the industrial wasteland between the watercourses.



A new development pegged out with bright yellow spikes, a newt screen surrounds its single bit of standing water is a concession towards habitat protection

A derelict dock, perfectly square, its walls are of perpendicular steel piling. Now it is overhung hung over with trees and brambles dripping into the still water, a forlorn elegy to the once-busy waterway.



Dobbs Weir is an unusually complex piece of engineering: the vertical overfall is not the usual straight span but in plan is closer to what is known as a ducks bill weir, where the water falls into a series of slots, making the surface area that it drops over greater. The purpose of this could be to facilitate higher volumes of water when the river is in spate. This is hugely overgrown with semi-mature

trees clinging to the weir structure, whether this is intended is questionable but as such it looks like a gothic ruin with a modern maintenance gantry running above it. Immediately downstream is a stonework apron that directs the overflow into the weirpool below. Aside from this there are two further sluices in such poor condition that they are presently out of use and padlocked shut.

At this stage since the rain had not appreciably slackened, I decided to take a short cut beside the road to Broxbourne station. This was not a good idea; the storm had left a large amount of standing water level with the pavement and it only took a speeding van to push up a huge wave from which there was no escape. Having avoided a complete drenching out on the river I ended up wringing wet in sight of the station.

### **Some further reflections:**

The theme of the day seems to have become the juxtaposition of dissimilar functions within a confined landscape. Rye House is a good example of extreme

hybridity: contradictory features such as the gatehouse, the pub and the stadium are integrated into an environment that also includes the major infrastructure such as the power station, a substantial sewage works and the railway. Combined, this should create a discordant, degraded landscape but somehow these functions manage to remain discrete.

The boating community is complex and would reward further research, people end up on boats for all kinds of reasons, some even because they want to, others because it is affordable and has subsequently become a way of life. Many are single men of a certain age, possibly with a great deal of personal baggage, who perforce have found themselves living solitary lives afloat, for whom loneliness and independence are their only close relations.