

Broxbourne to Tottenham 28<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

An overcast day, drizzling slightly: the intention was to walk from Broxbourne to Ware but due to the labyrinth of footpaths, car parks and watercourses, it turned out otherwise and it was only when I realised that the railway was still to my right did I discover that I was walking South along the River Lee Navigation rather than North.



*Footbridge at Broxbourne*

This scarcely mattered since I have so far not walked at all in the Lee Valley so going in an alternative direction would be equally valuable. It became immediately apparent how complex the landscape is due to the huge range of functions it has had and presently still does have. This means that there are some areas that have a specific purpose and therefore are more or less accessible than others. Biodiversity and wilderness are secured through degrees of wetness and the impenetrability of the undergrowth with the effect that distinct zones have developed catering for a range of usage.



*Dense wetland undergrowth*



*Managed public meadowland*



*Orchid walk*



*Den*

The Lee Valley is unique in that it lends itself to being a richly biodiverse wetland through the historic legacy of an intensively industrial usage. The complex heritage of water utilisation informs the current landscape character where navigable watercourse, gravel pit, reservoir, drain, sewerage and waste management, flood control facility, leisure amenity and habitat sit in very close proximity and are now homogenised as continuous wetland, where the only water bodies that are secure from public access are the major reservoirs.

This will reward some further fact-finding to establish the logistics of control and function that the water asset is put to.

The decision to make a linear walk meant that although there was plenty to observe, the complexity of place could only be touched upon through small diversions down random footpaths. This leads me to the conclusion that unlike other national trails such as the Thames Path, this is a different environment that invites random and serendipitous discovery. Once on the towpath, the rich biodiversity of the place became immediately apparent: I could hear a Cuckoo calling, Reed Warbler and Chiff Chaff in the wet woodland, Green Woodpecker laughing in the distance, a Barn Owl quartering a meadow near Cheshunt. Common Tern patrol the length of the river, sleek Cormorant dive on fish and dry their wings on the opposite bank, Grey Lag Geese and all the other more usual waterfowl such as Coot, Moorhen, Mallard and Swan are in abundance. All of this is within the first half hour from Broxbourne Station without any searching.



*Grey Lag and traffic cone*



*Coot and Crayfish*

At a lock near Broxbourne, I spot a trail of bubbles breaking the surface and a Coot surfaces with a Fresh Water Crayfish in its beak. This was a surprise to me since I had never before considered Coot to be a predatory species, but they are known opportunists, unlike the lugubrious and purposeful Heron flying over. The struggle with the Crayfish was prolonged, dropped and dived on again and again until it was in small enough pieces to be consumed.

It is encouraging that the geomorphology of the Lee Valley does not make it feasible to be given over entirely to a leisure amenity, with the effect that it is feasible to walk directly into a wetland landscape from close to the centre of London and in spite of the concentration of urban infrastructure such as road, rail, electricity, water supply and drainage, it affords a level of tranquillity that could be anywhere.

On Cheshunt Marsh is the White Water Centre an incongruous intrusion courtesy of the Olympics; a chicane of water pumped and gravity fed through plastic baffles and overfalls gives an insight into a water dynamic belonging to an utterly alien topography.



*Whitewater Centre*



*Mixed woodland, Athletics Centre*

In relation to the underplayed and modest mixture of urban and gentle green landscape, this is an exotic intrusion, the only equal in elevation to the King George and William Girling Reservoirs a few miles downstream. It feels and looks like a wet ski run with overhead wires and guide rods, although utterly artificial, water is water and it always holds the same fascination. Here the wave-forms are clean and perfect the eddies and overfalls, remote from their untidy mountain relatives are geometrically pure. I guess this means that competition must be more readily computable, predicated so far as water will allow, upon predictability.

Closing in on London the presence of the urban community and industrial hinterland becomes insistent and the watercourse more drab.



*Derelict industrial site*



*Disused loading bay*

However some effort has been made to soften the steel sheet pile banks with floating planters chained to the side attracting random river growth such as Yellow Flag Iris, watercress or even luxuriant elder bushes. The aim of this, I presume is to introduce an element of biodiversity that does not interfere with the flood risk management role of the watercourse. It is not until I climb up to the nightmarishly busy road complex and retail park at Tottenham do I realise the extraordinary contrast with the green world that I have just left.



*Housing and floating planters*



*Floating planters, Flag Iris*

Some further reflection:

The railway acts as a natural dividing line between the settlement and the wetland. This probably mirrors the purpose that the wetland historically served: once it was canalised, the River Lee Navigation became a safe and reliable means of carrying freight, especially where this was of a delicate, volatile and explosive nature such as from the ordnance factories in the valley. Much of the sand and gravel for building London was extracted here and of course was transported by water. The New River was cut to bring fresh drinking water right into central London during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, ending up feeding the East and West reservoirs near Manor House. Historically the Lee Valley was very busy and it is now a triumph that a post-industrial landscape such as this should become a viable wilderness. Like any other industrial environment, it directly promoted the development of working communities on its periphery and also a transport infrastructure that would in due course exploit the valley as a corridor to the rest of the region and beyond. The balance between community and its hinterland was always there except now the community is no longer dependent upon the immediate environment for its sustenance and is predominately focused upon the metropolis for its *raison d'être*.

The valley has passed through several ages and is now entering another that paradoxically owes a great deal to its time as a polluted wasteland and is now beginning to realise its potential as a model of how urban societies can live in harmony with nature without turning it into municipal parkland.

The Lower Lee Valley supplies water to London via a complex of massive reservoirs; it is also a flood plain and therefore must be managed. It has substantial areas of standing water in the form of redundant gravel pits. These in turn are both habitat and leisure amenity. The Lee Valley Navigation, at present is for the greater part a leisure amenity whilst other watercourses still serve the purpose of water supply and drain. All of these complex relationships need to be further researched to gain an insight into the valley as a holistic system.



*Narrowboat mooring*



*Hire boat centre at Broxbourne*

The landscape could be considered to be a meeting of indifference and intention, where its management happens in a zone of necessity beyond public opinion but responded to by the public and used subjectively in a way that in turn influences the management strategy.



*Herts Young Mariners Base*



*Frisbee Discatcher*

As a strategy for research I am convinced that the Lee Valley cannot be satisfactorily encompassed by just walking: it will be necessary to pick up themes and particular complexes and decode them before gaining insight into a sense of community knowledge and ownership of place.



*Abject armchair*