

## Mud, mud, glorious mud - the restoration of a medieval mill pond



It all sounded so deceptively easy. As part of our Countryside Stewardship Scheme we decided to restore our medieval mill pond. However, before starting some imagination was going to be needed - the place looked more like a wet wood than a pool. Once the Defra 'experts' - freshwater and archaeological - had agreed a plan, we started work late the following summer. I was encouraged by a farming friend, Ron, who not only has his own digger but a passion for ponds and its wildlife. Over the years the pond had silted up, almost to water level. A neighbouring farm further up the valley once had hundreds of free range pigs, so their top soil ended up in our pond. Thankfully the pigs are long gone and our new neighbours have planted several thousand trees to stabilise the hillside.

Work on the pond began slowly. First the chainsaw gang got stuck in – literally. It was very squidgy in parts and my efforts to clear the willow and alder that had colonised the mud was difficult and messy. Despite my best attempts to drain the water by installing a bypass pipe, it was still very wet. Also, as



the water level dropped it revealed a couple of natural springs. The yellow 6.5 tonne digger and monster 6 tonne dumper truck in matching colour arrived a few days later. But within hours I was well and truly bogged down. Reinforcements arrived in the shape of Ron and Terry, both experienced digger drivers. A few hours later Terry was going strong and we left him merrily making a mountain of mud in the middle, "so the ooze will dry out quicker".

Next day dawned fine and clear. We were woken early by the sound of the digger, long before a sensible breakfast time. I arrived on the scene just before seven. Terry was working furiously, swinging and heaving great buckets of mud. He had discovered what appeared to be a small sluice gate at the base of the dam wall. Gingerly I climbed down and plunged my hand into the cold brown soup. I could feel a heavy cast iron plate with three large nuts on either side. Remarkably they could be turned by hand! Cautiously I undid each one and then with a little gentle persuasion from a crow bar, the iron sluice lifted clear. But my jubilation was short lived. The water went nowhere. Checking the far side it was obvious that the outlet into the leat had been buried under tonnes of gravel and silt. While Terry took a break I carefully cleared the outfall. A mat was then positioned to catch the sediment and the pond began to empty.



Triumphantly I celebrated by fetching Terry a fresh cup of coffee but on my return I could hear the digger was ominously quiet. Terry was nowhere to be seen and more worryingly nor was the digger. Something was different but it was difficult to see what. Clambering onto the far bank I could see the huge muddy mountain in the middle of the pond had

slid to one side and the digger was pinned against the far wall. Just its yellow arm was visible. Terry could not move the machine or even get out of the cab. In technical terms, he was well and truly stuck!

Scrabbling as close as I could through the trees and scrub surrounding the edge, a telephone number was shouted. Terry could not get any mobile reception from where he was. Steve answered my call. When I explained that Terry was stuck in my pond, he just sighed and said, "not again". He obviously knew Terry! Remarkably, Steve had two diggers available for the weekend and both were currently on their way to another job just 20 minutes away. Would I like the 14



tonne digger or even bigger 20 tonne machine!

The width of our entrance determined the smaller of the two and just 15 minutes later the roar of a low loader with its giant cargo was taking up the entire width of the lane. I could not believe my luck. However, it was still going to be a tight squeeze. The huge chains securing the digger to its transport vehicle would have to be removed before it could even pass between the granite gate posts. Just a few minutes later we were trundling up to the pond. A big smile appeared on Terry's face as the cavalry appeared over his rather limited horizon.



The bright blue monster was positioned high on the bank from where it could reach almost half way across the pond. Once Terry was free the smaller digger fed its new big brother by the bucket full. Enormous loads were dropped unceremoniously into the giant dumper truck or the trailer towed by Ron in his tractor. The mud was then deposited in an adjacent field where it sat quivering like a giant chocolate blancmange.

Two very long, hot sweaty days later the place looked more like the aftermath of the battle for the Somme, thankfully without any bodies! The bomb site took months to clear, the surrounding edges smoothed and reseeded with a conservation grass mix, the banks secured and a jetty and bird hide built. The pond took just one rainy week to fill and tranquillity again returned to the valley. Throughout the works the moorhens could be seen dashing around feeding and the wild ducks wandered happily alongside the tractor wheels and excavator tracks.

A year later the mayhem and mess of the clearance was just a distant muddy memory. We had shifted over 3,000 tonnes of mud, revealed and restored the medieval stonework and repaired the old Georgian sluice. A dipper was soon seen bobbing under the jetty, a kingfisher on a nearby branch and hundreds of damsel and dragonflies dance above the mirror smooth surface on a warm summer afternoon. The scene is now idyllic and definitely worth all the effort.

