

Luckfield Lake – A brief History

Over the past few months I have been gathering together some information and photographs about Luckfield Lake and its origin. The text and photos below are by no means a complete history, but will give the present day DDAS members a view into the lake's history and how it became the place we know today.

Thanks to Cole Falconer whose website anotherangler.net has photographs of the lake from the 1970's and write ups of his visits to lake between 2009 and 2017. He also introduced me to Peter Rolfe.

[Luckfield Lake \(anotherangler.net\)](http://anotherangler.net)

Special thanks to Peter Rolfe for his kind permission to reproduce the pages from his book, The Net on the Garage Wall. A small section of the book tells the story of the creation of Luckfield Lake as we know it today.

Peter's book is available on Amazon (£7.99) and is a good read if, like me, you went fishing in the 1950's, 60's and 70's. I am sure it would bring back a lot of fond memories of those less complicated days. The book was written in 1997 at which time John Aplin (who now manages Casterbridge Fisheries) ran Luckfield Lake as a day ticket water.

[The Net on the Garage Wall: Amazon.co.uk: Rolfe, Peter, Rolfe, Peter, Harrop, Trevor: 9798418788757: Books](https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/0954587875)

If you have any questions or information that you think should be added to this piece then please do not hesitate to contact me.

Gary Biles (DDAS Club Secretary) – July 2022

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Luckfield Lake was originally a clay pit with the clay being used to produce the Broadmayne Brick. Remnants of this industry are still around if you look closely, for example the brickwork in peg 6 is the remains of one of the kilns.

This is an aerial photo of the area taken in 1947. The lake is partly obscured by cloud and the village looks very different to how it is today.



This is another aerial photo of the area taken in 1972. The lake is clearly overgrown with Willow trees.



A Google Earth photo taken in 1997, the lake and Broadmayne more like it is today.



The following pictures are pages from Peter Rolfe's book, *The Net on the Garage Wall*, relating to the creation of Luckfield Lake as a properly run fishery in the 1970's. Peter was Secretary of Gillingham & District Angling Association at the time and instrumental in restoring the lake. The pages from the book are 124 to 130. My apologies for the poor clarity of the text, but the only alternative was retype all of Peter's words myself, taking digital photographs seemed (to me at least!) a much less onerous task.

Our second major achievement was to restore Luckfield Pond, now a commercially run day and season ticket water that features in all the guides to fishing in Wessex.

I suppose that there must be many such places tucked away in the English countryside. It was a disused clay working, about an acre in size, the largest of a string of five marked on the map. They were the last visible sign of a once-thriving local brick industry, although until a year or two before I saw the pond the remains of a large kiln could still be seen in the pasture on the north side of the pond, and broken bricks had littered the ground until the farmer had finally decided to clear the field.

There were still elderly local people who could remember the days when sheep cropped the grass in the abandoned pit. Willows

grew and spread quickly in the damp clay; a pretty spot it must have been when the wind blew the silver leaves on a bright summer day.

Then, one winter, the pit filled with water. Perhaps the sharp hooves of the sheep had at last trodden the clay impermeably above the drain that had kept the area from flooding. More likely, it had gradually silted up over the long years of neglect. Whatever the reason, the pit had become a pond and the next phase of its life had begun.

Soon the water would have swarmed with life. As the good, rich, sheep-cropped turf decayed, nutrients seeped into the water. In the sunlight the water must have turned soupy green with the microscopic algae suspended in it; and then it would have gradually cleared as the *Daphnia* and *Copepods* fed upon the tiny plants and multiplied in unimaginable millions. Midges, mayflies, long-antennaed and weak-flying caddis flies, damselflies and darting dragonflies would have thronged the leafy corridors in the willow copse - now half-drowned but clinging to life as willows do. Shy waterfowl came to the pond, attracted by the rich feeding and the dense cover. Martins, swallows and aerobatic swifts swooped through the swarms of mosquitoes and midges. Bats flickered in the dusk.

But when I first came on the scene, invited by a cricketing farmer friend, the picture was a very different one. Luckfield Pond was dying. It began with watercress waste, dumped there from the neighbouring beds. Then effluent from a badly maintained septic tank found its way into the pond. Year after year the insidious pollution continued. Leaf-fall from the crowding willows and surrounding hawthorn, blackthorn, oak and elm added annually to the decaying mass. A passing local found it a convenient spot to dispose of his leaky wellingtons; another his unwanted bottles and empty tins; a third his grandfather's bicycle; yet another drowned his erring bitch's puppies there. The once-beautiful pond had become the village dump.

Then in 1963, the great freeze had come. The ice grew thick, and the children skated and slid among the willow stems. For three months the relentless ice clamped and squeezed the half-alive trees; and, when spring came at last, they were dead. Skeleton branches creaked over water the colour of sour beer. Broken twigs and branches floated awhile and then sank, water-logged, to lie in the foul-smelling ooze.

We had been offered a long, rent-free lease if we would organize the pond's reclamation. Pessimistically, I tested the water and found it markedly alkaline, rather like Marsh Pond several years before. Slightly encouraged, I looked more closely at the dead-looking water and found a few *Daphnia* on the gravel shallows on the north side. One or two hoglice scrambled over my fingers from the rotting piece of wood I raked up from the bottom. I spotted a stickleback as I peered down from the steep and overgrown east bank.

Perhaps it was not such a hopeless proposition after all, a conclusion supported by John, a slowly spoken cress-bed worker who lived in the bungalow with the offending septic tank and who had noticed me pottering around the pond. Apparently, he quite often caught big eels, three pounds and over he claimed, from the one spot in the pond relatively free from dead willows. I wondered squeamishly if he ate them from that polluted water. Still, it was his own sewage!

The first task was to find out the extent of the problem and to do that we had to get rid of the water. A local contractor laid a pipe, not quite deeply enough as it turned out, from the pond to a ditch some hundred yards away, and most of the area was drained.

When they first saw the almost empty pond my helpers were less than enthusiastic, though I had tried to prepare them at committee meetings. Admittedly, it was a depressing picture: thousands of bottles and tins, festering and unrecognizable refuse, and a forest of dead trees.

Yet after only four hours' work with chainsaws and bowsaws, cutting the willows flush with the pond bed, we had cleared about an eighth of the total area and the workers' faces looked much more cheerful. The wood cut easily and burnt fiercely. The youngsters with us gathered the tins and bottles and rotting sacks into a huge heap close to the bank, ready to be hauled away by the farmer.

The more closely we looked at the pond the more optimistic we became. The four-inch-deep layer of soft leaf-mould by the east bank, now dry, disturbed and oxygenated, suggest the potential richness of the fishery-to-be: not only would it be extremely fertile after several months' exposure to the air; it would also offer an ideal habitat for many kinds of fish-food, particularly bloodworms. The gravel shallows, now clearly visible, meant that not all the pond bed would be of clay or mud and the variety of insect life would be all the greater in consequence. Most encouraging of all, we had seen fish, two or three

monstrous eels, every bit as big as John had promised, swimming, like anacondas in a mangrove swamp, through the willow-crammed shallow water.

The fact that the area was only partly drained seemed likely to present us with awkward problems, but the drought of 1976 came to our rescue. More and more of the pit bottom became exposed, until we had access to the whole area apart from three pools - each about eight yards square - occupied by deep and glutinous mud, about two feet of water and a considerable number of eels. As the hot days burned on and on, the fish showed increasing discomfort and we attempted several times to rescue them and move them to the river at the bottom of the hill. But controlling large, slippery and extremely strong eels is difficult enough at the best of times; covered with slimy mud, they were an impossible proposition. So, we had to leave them to their fate, convinced that they were doomed.

Meanwhile the septic tank problem had been dealt with and the last of the dead willows, except for those few small trees unapproachably isolated in the mud-pools, had been felled and burnt.

In the fierce heat of that summer, the silt of the pond bottom had cracked so that it looked like an acre-sized mosaic floor, the light-brown bed meshed with the dark, intersecting crevices. With access now easy, an ancient but still efficient bulldozer pushed out the largest willow boles from the clay and incorporated them in the bank. With a great deal of roaring and blue smoke, the 'dozer removed three or four high spots and made instead one neat island to serve as a refuge for duck. Finally, it pushed the remaining piles of rubbish out of the pond, climbing the bank at what seemed to me an impossibly steep angle.

Our final task was to build an overflow so that the pond would not flood onto the surrounding land as it had for many winters past. We planned to utilize the four-inch diameter pipe that had partly drained the pond all those months ago. This is where Bill's skills came into use. With the aid of a borrowed surveyor's level, he worked out the correct height of the upright pipe and put it in position, allowing a few inches for an inverted u-piece at the top, by which device we hoped to minimize the amount of floating rubbish escaping down the overflow and possibly blocking it. When we were happy that all the joints were water-tight we added a supporting structure of concrete blocks and waterproofed mortar.

The rains came at the end of August and the drought was over. As I peered through the car windscreen on our way to a wet family holiday in Wales, I thought that at least the eels would be happy. Indeed, we had underestimated their powers of survival. John told me later that as the fresh, clear water spread across the bed of the pond, over a hundred big eels, sharply black and sinuous against the pale clay and gravel, could be seen exploring their changed home. The heavy rains of that autumn and winter filled Luckfield Pond. By January, the overflow was in use and over seven feet of water covered the deepest parts.

I had planned to leave the pond fallow for a year before stocking it, but when a local fish farmer offered us some good mirror carp and tench from ponds that he wanted to clear to make more room for his rainbow trout it seemed too good an opportunity to miss. Thus, ten mirror carp up to four and a half pounds and 15 tench up to three were gently put into Luckfield Pond on a mild day at the end of December in 1976.

It was not until August that I managed to get to Luckfield again, this time equipped to catch the fish put in some eight months previously. For the first time I could appreciate what we had achieved. The pond was a picture. It was somewhat lower in level than we had hoped and indeed this remained a problem for some years, until less water was abstracted from a Wessex Water Authority borehole and the springs began to flow again - an unusual situation these days. But the water was healthily green-brown, and the banks had already been colonised by freshly growing vegetation. Floating leaved pondweed freckled the shallows and a dense stand of yellow flag was beginning to mask the gaunt, thin branches of the one or two low willows we had been unable to remove. Birds were plentiful - two kingfishers were busy all day - and the surrounding trees and bushes enclosed and sheltered the secret pond.

We were the first to cast a line into the re-vitalised pool and there was an atmosphere of tense expectancy as we waited for the first bites, an excitement heightened by the occasional swirl of a good fish feeding in the shallows just to our right and - once - a mirror carp showing head and shoulders thirty yards away towards the centre.

It was a warm, overcast morning, with an intermittent drizzle, and the fish fed until mid-day. First came a tench of two and a quarter pounds, unremarkable in size but in superb condition, one of the most

spectacular fish I have seen. It was a male, yet only about three times longer than it was deep, with flawless fins and scales. Quickly we photographed its gold and olive plumpness before slipping it back into the water. Then came the first of the six big eels we caught that day, three pounds of muscular, writhing energy. I did not bring the fish onto the abrasive gravel of the sloping bank but was able, with the aid of the long forceps, to free it from the barbless hook in the shallow water. I enjoy grilled eel, but it seemed wrong to kill a fish that had endured so much the previous summer.

The carp were very fair to us: each of us had one. Mine, the smallest, came first, hooked on a big piece of flake resting no more than twelve inches from the bank about eight yards to my right, where I had seen the fish moving when we first arrived. It weighed just six pounds and was almost a leather, almost plum coloured but rich yellow between anal fin and tail. Our second fish went six and a half pounds and the last one, appropriately enough, scaled six and three quarters. All were in supreme condition, unmarked except for the middle fish, which appeared to have snapped off a scale in the struggle. All had grown between a pound and a half and two pounds and a quarter in eight months, a very promising rate of progress.

In the years that followed, Luckfield Pond went from strength to strength. The carp and tench spawned prolifically and grew well, so much so that eventually we were able to sell them in considerable numbers to neighbouring angling clubs. One day I saw a disturbance of small fish in the shallows close to our monk and scooped out over a hundred three-inch mirror carp with one thrust of the net, each one perfect and bristling with health and well-being. They grew fast, to top three pounds in weight two summers later, by when the new generation of tench had reached a generous pound.

Many anglers made the 25-mile journey from our patch of North Dorset to fish the sheltered water of our new acquisition, happy indeed to make big bags of medium sized fish, with the good chance of hitting into one of the original stock. Of these, the tench grew rapidly to about four pounds, but then seemed to stick at that weight, while the carp regularly put on a good two pounds a year.

The eels continued to thrive, though I was not too happy at the tales of fish lost in the two dead willow thickets that remained towards the centre of the pond. The eels lurked close to cover during daylight hours and, when hooked, surged irresistibly back into their fastness,

snapping all but the strongest line. I hated to think of those fine fish possibly tethered and starving to death for want of a little more preparedness on the part of our fishermen, and did my best through newsletters, word of mouth and my reports at AGMs to raise people's awareness of the problem. Too many fishermen, even today, it seems to me, are complacent about being "broken".

As with any water, problems did arise. Water level remained disappointing, far less than the seven feet we had envisaged when we put in the monk. Floating-leaved Pondweed mysteriously arrived from somewhere and threatened to take over the pond. Fortunately, even in the hottest of summers the water stayed deep enough for there to be no fish-mortality; and we were able to keep the pondweed in check with Casoron G - though spreading it from a dinghy was quite an operation. On one occasion two volunteers took no notice of my suggestion that they should be careful to distribute the granules down-wind and suffered severe diarrhoea for a few days in consequence, a reminder that chemicals must be handled with great caution!

Eventually, some years after the end of my time as secretary, the club lost the fishing at Luckfield. For some years it became a bird sanctuary, and there were rumours that the owner planned to remove most of the fish to leave more food for the duck. This threat came to nothing, though, and now it is a flourishing day ticket and night-syndicate water. The water level has improved, as local abstraction was reduced, and swims have been stoned and timbered to minimise wear and tear of the clay banks. All is neat and well organised. The fish, too, are much bigger, with one nine-pound tench recorded, some big roach, and carp to over twenty pounds - things are very different now from the eyesore that the area had been over 20 years ago.

Below are some of Peter Rolfe's photographs from 1976/77 showing the lake being restored and what it looked like after it was full of water again.





DDAS at Luckfield Lake:

John Aplin relinquished the lake in 2007 and 2009 DDAS were offered the rental by Jeremy & Elaine Cater (who still live at the bottom end of Watergates Lane by the “wash ponds”). The rental began in 2010 and a programme of work to open up and restore the lake was started. In 2017 Jeremy offered the club the opportunity to purchase the lake which was quickly accepted and finally fulfilled a long time ambition of many past DDAS Chairman for the club to own its own water.

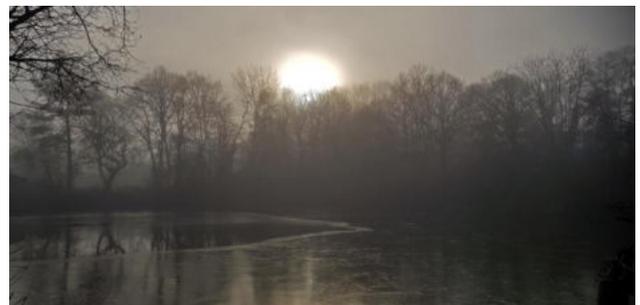
Since 2017 DDAS have been able to do far more work in opening up the lake, improving the water quality, installing our own electricity supply and stocking more fish to make it a first class fishery for all types of angler. Whilst most of our improvements are for fishing it also benefits the local wildlife. Without the work by the club the lake would long ago have been overrun by willows and eventually would have dried out or just become a boggy swamp area. Deer, Fox and Badger are seen around the lake as well as mice, voles and unfortunately a Rat or two! There are a large number of bird species nesting around the lake and Kingfishers are frequent visitors in the summer months. This year I am working with the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) to obtain funding for improvements to the habitat around the lake for the local wildlife. This will include, nest boxes for birds, Bat boxes, fruit bearing trees, waterside planting and a few shallow ponds for amphibians and insects.

The work at Luckfield never stops, there is always something that needs doing, clearing paths, repairing pegs, repairing the potholes on the lane, monitoring the water quality, improving the environment for the local wildlife and 101 other things. If you enjoy going to the lake look out for the working party requests that go out via Facebook and e-mail, we always need help and many hands make light work.

Some pictures of the lake showing work we have done over the past 5 years:



July 2022
The new bridge in the south west corner



January 2021
Iced up during a cold spell



February 2021

The south side of the lake with Julie & Mark Ching's summer house in the centre. Many a work party were very grateful for Julie's cups of tea and delicious cakes.



March 2021

Peg 6 at sunset, taken from peg 2



February 2022

Graham Howard and Tom Foyle spreading Microchalk. We do this once a year, during the winter, and it helps with the decomposition of leaf litter and greatly improves the oxygen levels in the lake.



February 2022

The west side of the lake, pegs 5, 6 and 7 during refurbishment, taken from peg 2



March 2020

Steve Sudworth, Jim Roper, Johnny Johns and Jack Johns digging a trench for the new electricity supply



March 2019

Steve Sudworth, Johnny Johns and Jerry Bracey rebuilding peg 2. Refurbishing the pegs is like painting the Forth Bridge; you get to the last one and start again!



2019

An Early Purple Orchid, just one of the many species of flora and fauna that inhabit the area around lake.



November 2018

The overhanging Willows removed from the right side of peg 2, this opened up a whole new area for fishing as previously the branches were down to water level and out beyond the overflow pipe.



January 2021

Coppicing the Willows behind peg 3, 4, 5. During the one of the Covid lock downs myself and Tom Foyle took the opportunity to coppice the Willows behind Pegs 3, 4, 5. They had grown very tall (over 20ft) and spindly. This opened up the north side of the lake to light and wind. They now form a thick hedge along this boundary.



January 2021

Coppicing the Willows on a very cold and misty January morning. The photo of the iced over lake above was taken on the same morning. It took 3 days to cut them all down and move the brush. Several of us benefitted from the logs which warmed our homes the following winter.



February 2021

The fallen Oak tree between pegs 5 & 6 This happened on a very misty morning much to the surprise of an angler opposite in peg 2 who, not being able to see across the lake, wondered what all the noise and commotion was!



February 2021

Removing the fallen Oak. More wood for the log burners.



May 2017

The newly rebuilt pegs 6, 7, 8 and the aerator running to keep the oxygen levels up. The aerator runs over night, but in the summer months (June to August) we also run it during the day.



May 2017

Steve Sudworth taking a break after completing the rebuild of peg 1.



January 2022

Removing dead Ash trees from next to Peg 10
Ash "Die Back" disease is prevalent across the country now and all of the Ash trees at Luckfield have it. We decided to remove these ones before they became a potential danger. This is the before photo.



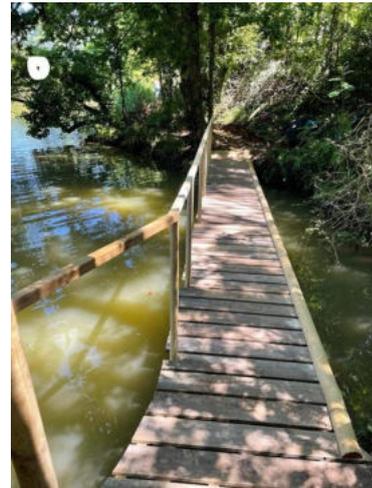
January 2022

After the trees were removed. Much more light and air for the lake as a side benefit of their removal.



July 2022

Building the new bridge to bypass the slippery narrow track between pegs 9 and 10. A great job done in the main by Steve Sudworth and Johnny Johns.



July 2022

The completed bridge. In addition the left side has a barrier to stop fish getting into the corner or getting tangled up around the support posts. This in turn will also create a safe place for fish fry, insects and amphibians.

Gary Biles (Club Secretary)

7th August 2022 (last updated)