

DAISY BANK

(Abbey Fishponds)

THE SITE An area of largely marshy land of approx. 17½ acres lying to the south of the Radley Road about 1 mile from Abingdon town centre.

TOPOGRAPHY The site consists of a shallow valley running roughly n-w to s-e bisected by a stream and crossed by a large earth dam. In summer this bank is covered with daisies and other flowers, which gives the site its old name of Daisy Bank. The ground rises in banks on either side of the valley, clothed with scrub and a few mature trees, narrowing to a point at the s. end of the site. It is fed by two streams, one from the Peachcroft area and the other from Rushcommon, with a high gravel promontory between the two streams at the n-w end of the site.

Current archaeological work has revealed a low causeway constructed in the Roman period e-w across the site, beneath the existing earth bank. Much of the site is marshland, and it may have become a small lake or pond at times of heavy rainfall. In the medieval period, the road from Abingdon to Radley ran across the top of the bank and straight over the fields to Radley church because the land at the north-west end of the site, known as Pond Head, was impassable marshland. The line of this road can still be traced on old maps as a footpath which diverged from the Radley Road in front of Thomas Reade School, crossed the dam and led across the fields towards Upper Radley. At some time after the Dissolution of the abbey, the dam was cut and the site drained. This strongly suggests that the medieval dam was constructed and maintained by Abingdon Abbey to facilitate access to their manor at Radley. When the dam was breached it was necessary to re-route the Radley Road to its present position round the northern end of the site, skirting the existing field boundaries.

The stream which runs down the centre of the site is a feeder stream of the Thames. When this stream was kept clear, the site provided valuable grazing for the surrounding arable farmland, otherwise the site returned to marshland.

ARCHAEOLOGY The area contains some of the oldest and most important archaeological sites in Abingdon. The gravel promontory where Gordon Drive and Cameron Avenue were built contained a Neolithic 'causewayed camp' – a large enclosure surrounded by a bank and ditch interrupted by causeways for access - not a permanent settlement but a place where local clans or family groups may have gathered for special ceremonies. It was the first such site to be excavated in this area, and was occupied on and off from c.4070 BB until c.2500 BC.

Nearby to the north-west was a Neolithic long barrow, possibly connected with the causewayed camp. This area was known as Barrow Hills in the 16th century and maybe even earlier, from the 16 or more barrows or burial mounds of different types which would have been clearly visible to our forbears. They were constructed over a period of 1700 years, from the end of the Stone Age around 2500 BC to the end of the Bronze Age around 800 BC.

There are no traces of Iron Age activity on the site, but excavations in 1983-5 by the Oxford Archaeological Unit, the Abingdon Area Archaeological & Historical Society and the Reading University Department of Archaeology uncovered a large Roman cemetery of the 2nd to the 4th centuries BC, possibly connected to the Romano-British farmstead on land to the west of Daisy Bank, and a settlement of early Saxon sunken huts of c.600 AD.

During World War Two, a group of Nissen huts housed Italian prisoners of war on land to the west of Daisy Bank, and some of the land was used for allotments.

A dig in the 1970s on what is now the Daisy Bank housing estate revealed the Barton Court Roman Villa whose occupants may well have used the Roman cemetery at Barrow Hills. Here a modest Iron Age farmstead developed into a substantial Romano-British villa which continued to be farmed through the Saxon period right up to modern times, until it was developed for housing in the 1970s.

In the area to the north of Daisy Bank known as Rushcommon were two fields called Upper and Lower Wallam. 'Wallam' derives from 'Welshman', the name used to denote the pre-Roman celtic inhabitants during the Romano-British period. Could this mean that a remnant of the Iron-Age inhabitants were living and farming in this area in the Roman period?

THE ABBEY FISHPONDS?

The idea that these were the abbey fishponds was first suggested by James Townsend in his *History of Abingdon* (1910) and has been accepted without question since then. However, recent archaeological work has produced no environmental evidence such as water snails or fish bones, to support this theory. It has also been pointed out that the site is too far from the abbey, making it vulnerable to poachers, so Townsend's idea is now considered to be untenable.

CREATION OF THE NATURE RESERVE

The site came to the notice of BBONT, the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Naturalists' Trust, in the 1950s. It was surveyed and over 200 plant species were identified, including a colony of marsh orchids. The site was rich in bird-life, including the water-rail, and was the habitat of the great crested newt.

By 1985 it had become isolated from its farming context and was under severe pressure from the surrounding housing estates. Children, dogs, BMX bikes, the dumping of builders' rubble and general neglect had all taken their toll, and the death of the elm trees along the western boundary further diminished its appeal.

A concerned group of local residents and conservationists, the owner of the land, Mr Patrick Dockar-Drysdale, and the Vale of White Horse District Council started negotiations to secure the site's future. There were many delays and frustrations, but eventually, five years later, Daisy Bank was designated a Nature Reserve with the name of Abbey Fishponds [sic] under the management of BBONT, with a local Trust member, Mr David Armes, acting as manager. The formal 'opening' of the reserve took place on Saturday 19th May 1990 - five years to the day from the first site meeting.

Judy White
April 2012