**History of Aldenham Reservoir**

Aldenham Reservoir is a beauty spot, a recreational amenity, a wildlife haven, and the best-known landscape feature of our town. When and why was it built, and how has it evolved over the years? The reservoir is now 225 years old. It was built in the 1790s, reputedly using the labour of French prisoners of war, by the Grand Junction Canal Company.

Its original purpose was to allow the flow in the river Colne to be replenished when the company extracted water from it near Watford to fill its canal. It was created by damming Tykeswater, a stream which is a tributary of the Colne. The dam is 436 yards long and 28 feet high. The water covers 78 acres and its maximum depth is 19 feet. It is filled by natural inflow from streams, and water is released through a sluice (i.e. tap) in a pipe laid in a tunnel under the dam. There is an overflow weir under the footbridge carrying the public path which runs along its eastern side. The dam consists of clay, which is liable to swell and shrink, and therefore requires constant monitoring.

It has been reinforced at intervals in the past, e.g. by constructing the concrete “wave wall” along its upstream face. Aside from its operational function, the reservoir has always been a popular place of recreation. An 1883 guide book states that it “is well known to ornithologists and anglers. It is a beautiful lake … embosomed in grassy hills, secluded with aquatic trees, and consequently the great attraction of the place.” Charles Dickens’ diary records that he went rowing there after attending a christening in Elstree church. And water from the reservoir was once used to supply world-famous water gardens in the grounds of nearby Aldenham House, now part of Haberdashers’ Aske’s school.

Between the two world wars, a sailing club was established, and a small beach was created. Teas were served from the reservoir warden’s house. But swimming and boating came to an end in 1937 when the local water company leased the reservoir for use as a reserve for domestic supply. The need for this ceased after the new Hilfield Park reservoir was built nearby in the 1950s. In the 1970s Hertfordshire county council decided to develop a country park on Green Belt land in its ownership adjacent to the reservoir, with a rare breeds farm, nature trails, special events and visitor attractions. It leased the reservoir as an extension to the park and developed the perimeter path. But after 40 years the council withdrew from direct management of the park and contracted this to its present operator, a not-for-profit company called Aldenham Renaissance. And when the lease on the reservoir expired in 2016, it was not renewed.

As the reservoir no longer served any operational purpose, it was sold by British Waterways (successor to the canal company) to private developers in 1992, and was sold again in 2015 to its present owner, Liberty Lake Leisure Ltd. This company has made two applications to the local planning authority (Hertsmere) for schemes which would generate income to help defray the costs of maintenance. The first was for a housing development on the south side of Watford Road, and the second was for a “nature retreat” comprising 50 small chalets for rent near the water’s edge. Both schemes were rejected as being incompatible with the Green Belt status of the area. The reservoir is a hugely valued and highly popular amenity, but a large question mark now hangs over its future upkeep and funding.

John Cartledge 2020