

The Welsh Harp Reservoir

For many people, the Welsh Harp is a feature they see while passing along the North Circular Road; others know it as a place for recreation, either walking in pleasant countryside along its banks or the enjoyment of being on the water in a canoe or sailing boat. If you have ever wondered how long it has been in this shallow valley between Neasden and Kingsbury, or why it is here, this article will tell you something of its fascinating history.

The Welsh Harp, towards West Hendon.

[Photograph by Philip Grant, 2011]



The Brent Reservoir, or “Welsh Harp”, is not a reservoir for drinking water, but a relic of the Canal Age. Soon after the Paddington Branch of the Grand Junction Canal opened in 1801, the River Brent was identified as a source of extra water for it. In 1810/11, a narrow “Feeder” was built to channel water more than three miles, from a bend in the river north of Kingsbury Bridge to join the canal at Lower Place. By the 1830’s the Regent’s Canal Company, which now owned the branch, proposed a dam across the River Brent to provide a 61 acre reservoir, which would ensure a more reliable supply for their “Feeder”. The dam and associated works were built in 1834/35 by William Hoof of Hammersmith for £2,747- 6s.

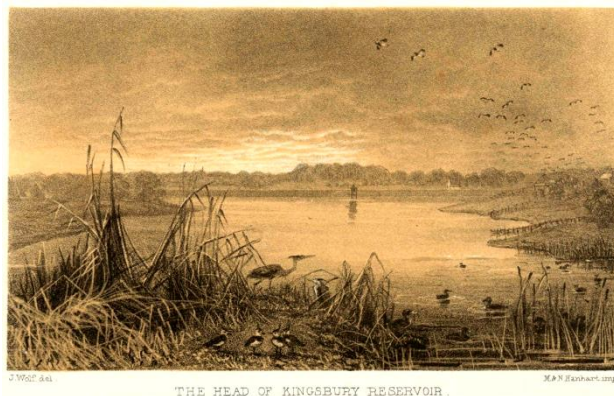


The fact that the reservoir existed by 1835 is confirmed by a memorial in a nearby church to the first deaths by drowning in it (see the article “St Andrew’s Old Church, Kingsbury”).

Kingsbury: St Andrew’s Church and reservoir, 1850.

[Source: Brent Archives – Naimaster collection]

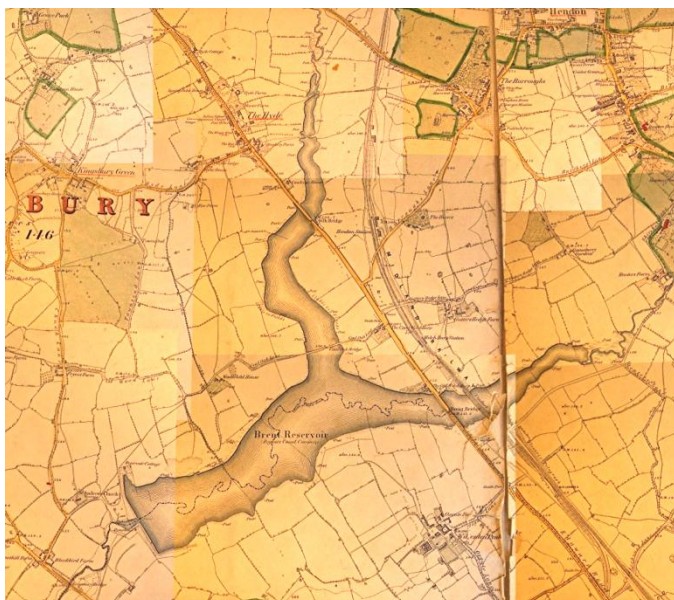
Heavy rain in January 1841 caused a partial collapse of dam, and flooding down the Brent valley which left several people dead and considerable damage in the Brentford area. When the dam was rebuilt by 1843, an attendant’s cottage was added at the Kingsbury end. For the next decade the reservoir appears to have had a quiet time, being used by anglers and visited by naturalists keen to see (and shoot) the rich variety of visiting birdlife. One of these was James Edmund Harting, who lived at St Mary’s Lodge, close to Kingsbury Green. Much of the field work for his 1866 book, “The Birds of Middlesex”, was carried out on or near this Kingsbury reservoir.



The frontispiece from “The Birds of Middlesex”.

[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley History Soc. Colln.]

An increase in traffic on the Regent's Canal meant that by 1850 more water was needed to replace the loss from its locks. An Act of Parliament was passed allowing the company to



acquire more land, and increase the height of the dam. This expanded the reservoir's area to 400 acres by 1854, the largest it has been in its history. The 1873 map (aside) shows the Brent Reservoir when it extended that far (the water would have covered much of the present day Brent Cross Shopping Centre, and Sainsbury's at West Hendon on the northern arm).

Map reproduced from a hand-coloured copy of the 1873 edition Ordnance Survey 6 inch to one mile map of Middlesex, sheet XI.

[Source: Barnet Local Studies and Archives Centre]

The work to expand the reservoir included raising a new embankment to protect the Old Welsh Harp tavern, on the west side of the Edgware Road, just north of the Brent Bridge, from flooding. In 1858 the lease of this pub was taken over by William Perkins Warner, who had grown up at Blackbird Farm in Kingsbury. He set about creating a large pleasure gardens behind the pub, obtaining the rights to use the reservoir for recreational purposes, and for the next 30 years the "Welsh Harp" became a very popular leisure destination. Part of Warner's legacy is the name by which the reservoir is generally known today.



Old Welsh Harp, Hendon.

Reeves' Series.

The Old Welsh Harp public house, around 1890.

[Source: Brent Archives]

"THE JOLLIEST PLACE THAT'S OUT."

SUNG BY
MISS ANNIE ADAMS

Now, if you want a change, I'll tell you what to do,
Just take a 'bus from Turnham's, and bid London smoke adieu,
On the pleasures of a Rural spot—I have a word to say,
Where anyone, who's fond of fun, can spend a jolly day.

Chorus:—

Warner's Welsh Harp!—Have you ever been there?
Picnics, such tricks, every day are seen there,
You couldn't find its equal, if you walked for miles about,
There's no mistake about it—it's the Jolliest Place That's Out.

There's a Lake, with Boats and Wherries—wherry nice for one who rows,
An Archery Ground, where single girls can always meet with beaux;
An Odeon: for those who a Good Dinner may desire,
And, they only Charge a Shilling!—which the visitors admire.

Chorus.

There are Billiard Tables quite as good, as any have in Town,
With many Games that knock you up, and Skittles you knock down;
There's Tea for those who wish it—you can have it on the Lawns,
With the sweetest bread and butter—oh! and such delicious Prawns.

Chorus.

There are Lovers' Walks, beneath the trees, where silence aids the charm,
For moonney, yes, and spooney folks to linger, arm in arm;
Pants for those who Angle, and sit silent as a church,
Good worthy souls, who use the place, and seldom miss their perch.

Chorus.

But, to tell you all its many charms, 'twould take I'm sure all night,
You'd better go yourselves and see, 'twill fill you with delight;
Just slip away, some leisure day, and give the Host a call,
At Warner's Famous Paradise, there's Welcome for you all.

Chorus.

WARNER'S OLD WELSH HARP

(Near the Fifth Mile Stone on the Edgware Road).

Table d' Hôte on Sundays at quarter to 2 p.m....1/6

Tea, 9d. per head.

Rowing, Bowls, Skittles, Quoits, Cricket, Shooting, &c.

BEANFEASTS AND PICNIC PARTIES PROVIDED FOR.

Annual Subscription for Fishing £1 1 0

Day Ticket..... 0 1 0

Fish, Perch, Tench, Roach, Chub, Bream, Eels, &c.

J. H. WARREN & Co., Printers, Hendon and Finchley.

Warner used the reservoir's potential to the full, with fishing and boat hire, and competitions for swimming in the summer and ice skating in the colder winters. A variety of sports and pastimes were also available, from bowls to cricket, with horse racing events very popular (until banned in 1879 for promoting vice). A Welsh Harp station was opened on the new Midland Railway in 1870, at Warner's request, and special trains on bank holidays brought thousands of people from the crowded areas of the City and Camden to "fairs" in the Welsh Harp's grounds. Warner even built a music hall and restaurant beside the pub as all year round attractions.

A handbill promoting Warner's Old Welsh Harp, c.1860's, including the words of a music hall song about it!

[Courtesy of Geoffrey Hewlett]

The opening of Hendon station on the Midland Railway saw the development of housing and shops in West

Hendon during late Victorian times. The reservoir was a popular place for country walks and bicycle trips by then, not solely for the Old Welsh Harp's attractions, and some of the residents made a little extra money by serving tea to visitors in their living rooms at weekends.

A postcard showing one of the views that attracted visitors to the reservoir around 1900.

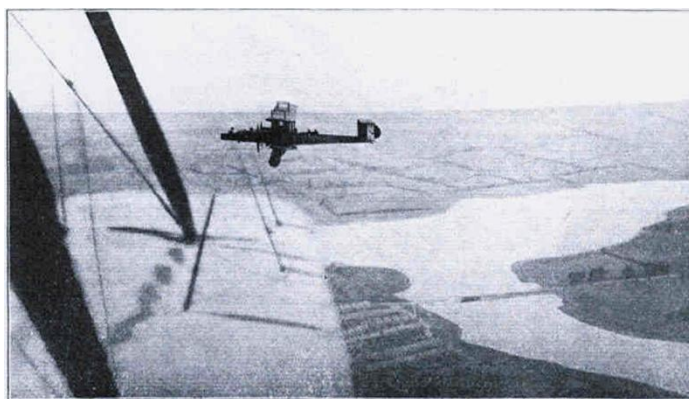
[Source: Brent Archives]



Water Falls, Kingsbury.

Reeves' Series.

By the end of the century, Warner had died and the popularity of the tavern and its pleasure gardens declined, with Welsh Harp station closing in 1903. From 1914 the First World War saw nearby neighbourhoods such as Hendon and Kingsbury become centres for the new aircraft industry. The reservoir played its part in the war effort, and was used in 1917 for the test flight of a Handley Page seaplane, built in Cricklewood. From the summer of that year the fields between the reservoir and the top of Dollis Hill became a testing ground for tanks, with the world's first amphibious tank trialled on the Welsh Harp just as the war ended in



November 1918. Peace meant that manufacturers were left with spare aircraft, and one Hendon company used these to offer pleasure flights over the reservoir, priced at one guinea (£1-1s).

An aerial view across the Welsh Harp, with the Cool Oak Lane embankment and bridge, and the fields of Dollis Hill beyond.

[Source: "Flight" magazine, June 1919]

The 1920's saw the building of the North Circular Road just south of the reservoir, and the development of factories near Staples Corner and housing on the slopes of Dollis Hill. It also saw the reservoir being used for motor boat racing, while by 1930 its first sailing club had been set up and its banks attracted naturists. While this newly-fashionable pastime was popular with its followers, it did not go down well with many local people, as can be seen from the cutting aside.

From the "Hendon Times & Guardian", 4 July 1930.

[Source: Barnet Local Studies and Archives Centre – local newspaper microfilms]

The reservoir was sometimes used by seaplanes for pleasure flights during the inter-war years, and during the Second World War it was rumoured that a seaplane was kept there to evacuate Churchill or other senior figures from the underground bunker on Dollis Hill in the event of a German invasion. The distinctive shape of the reservoir was a landmark for enemy bombers, and West Hendon suffered a terrible attack in February 1941 when a single experimental high explosive bomb flattened homes in three streets near the Silk Stream arm, killing around 80 people and making 1,500 homeless. At the other end of the Welsh Harp, two families were wiped out by a direct

SUN-BATHING WAR.

Riotous Scenes on the Banks of the Welsh Harp.

A RATEPAYER'S LETTER.

Indignation was rife among local residents during the week-end at the proceedings of sun-bathers in a field near "Sandy Cull," Cool Oak Lane, Kingsbury, and spirited protests by Hendon and Kingsbury householders culminated in riotous scenes on Saturday evening and on Sunday.

The sun-bathers, who are, for the most part, non-residents in this area, are members of the Sun-Ray Club and the New Life Society. They sun-bathe on the grass near the edge of the Welsh Harp reservoir in various states of semi-nudity, while notices are chalked on surrounding trees stating: "Sun-bathing ground. Please keep away." On Saturday a number of nude women bathers were present with the men, and so strong was the objection of a hostile crowd that the followers of this cult were ultimately attacked and found it necessary to seek police protection.

Hostile scenes occurred again on Sunday. The land used for sun-bathing is on the boundary of the districts of Hendon, Kingsbury and Willesden, and at a meeting of the Kingsbury Council on Monday the chairman (Councillor E. T. Ashman, J.P.) stated that though the land belonged to Willesden at the moment, negotiations for its purchase by Kingsbury, with the help of the Middlesex County Council, were in progress. When the land passed into their hands they could make regulations regarding its use, but at present they had no jurisdiction.

The Clerk (Mr. W. Charter Wilson) stated that two or three letters on the subject had been received.

One of these, read in public, was from a resident in Wakeman's Hill Avenue, who wrote:-

"Why is nude bathing permitted in the Welsh Harp reservoir without some enclosure where sexual maniacs can perform out of view of the more respectable members of the community? On Sunday evening last my wife and myself were walking across from Old Kingsbury Church to Edgeware-road, and were half-way over when we came upon a bunch of stark naked men hanging around the water side. Hardly a pleasant sight for a man to have to pass with his wife! We were not the only observers, for there were a number of people around at the moment. To me it seems rather a scandalous state of affairs, and I think something should be done to prevent this kind of thing."

hit on a pair of semi-detached houses in Birchen Close in February 1944, while a V2 rocket which hit Wykeham School in March 1945 killed 7 people and injured 40 in nearby houses.



Both before and after the Second World War some infilling of the reservoir took place, particularly where the Edgware Road crossed both arms of it and near the Cool Oak Lane bridge. Some of this new land was developed, but some of it provided new habitats for wildlife, and in 1950 the Welsh Harp and the land around it was designated a Site of Special Scientific interest.

The Cool Oak Lane bridge crosses the quiet Silk Stream arm of the Welsh Harp reservoir.

[Photo by Philip Grant, 2011]

Although this new status meant some restrictions on the reservoir's recreational use, rowing and sailing remained popular activities, with the Willesden (later Brent) Regatta a popular event up until the early 1970's. Willesden also hosted the European Women's Rowing Championships here in August 1960 (see the article "Welsh Harp Women"). The various clubs using the reservoir came together around this time to form the Welsh Harp Sailing Association at Birchen Grove, and for 40 years from 1964 there was a Youth Sailing Base at Cool Oak Lane.

An advert for the Brent Regatta in 1966.

[Source: Brent Archives – local newspaper microfilms]



Recent decades have seen increasing pressure for development, and the Welsh Harp Conservation Group was set up in 1972 to look after the reservoir



and areas around it. The Group has undertaken practical work to improve habitats, encouraging a wide variety of birds and other wildlife to visit. Their work has helped to highlight how valuable the reservoir is for both people and the natural environment, but there are still big challenges ahead, to stop inappropriate schemes such as the proposed waterside high-rise flats in West Hendon.

Recreation and natural habitats side by side on the Welsh Harp, towards Kingsbury.

[Photo by Philip Grant, 2011]

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For more, beautifully illustrated, information about the history and wildlife of the Welsh Harp reservoir, I would recommend these books:

Geoffrey Hewlett - "Welsh Harp Reservoir Through Time" (2011)

Leo Batten and others – "Birds of the Brent Reservoir – the natural history of the Welsh Harp" (2002)