

INVESTIGATING THE HISTORY OF THE BROOK 2007

Over the last few months in Queens Road we have experienced unprecedented amounts of flooding down in the dip. We have tried to encourage multi-agency co-operation to solve this problem and slowly these efforts are starting to bear fruit. We suspect that the problems have occurred because of years of neglect and we are also convinced that the passage of massive plant machinery down the road in the spring and summer must also have played a part in exacerbating the problem.

We took it upon ourselves to see if there might be any other historical or geographical reasons that might offer an explanation for the flooding and we unravelled two possible connections: a) in 1901 a 150 foot borehole was dug at the bottom of Queens Road which revealed a water supply capable of producing 6,000 gallons per hour; b) problems with the Brook which runs alongside the Pump House on Queens Road, under the road and railway line, surfaces briefly in a piped culvert in Brook Street, and then continues out (in theory at least to the marshes). It has become clear that the Brook and the culvert containing it has become silted and blocked up over the years and we are currently waiting for the Environment Agency to clear this out. They have done some work but they have been lagging behind and we are currently pressing for essential work on Queens Road to be completed.

While looking into this we became fascinated with the story of the Brook, which has now virtually disappeared beneath housing development. We knew that the Brook had been in existence for a long time because 'Brokestrete' is first referred to in the unpublished Court Rolls of 1509 held in the hand of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners and other private hands. There is a reference to the conveyance of a cottage and garden called Honyngtons recorded at the Court held on 9 January.

There is a great deal of anecdotal reference to the Brook: how it once formed an essential part of the town's water supply, with water being fetched in buckets for personal use, or residents buying water from the tank on the water cart, which had been filled up from the Brook. At one point the water must have been fit to drink as there are several references to this both in Nicolas Butler's 'The Story of Wivenhoe' and Paul Thompson's 'Sea-Change: Wivenhoe Remembered'. Later, however the Brook clearly became contaminated and there is a graphic description of this in Olive Whaley's booklet 'The Day Before Yesterday', when a committee was appointed in 1866 to examine the state of the Brook 'from Mr Went's brickfield' to the place where the water carriers get their supply. There are references to the water flowing over 'deep mud full of noxious inflammable gas, and through masses of decaying vegetable matter'. Higher up the water course there are references to the privy at Bobbit's Hole and the habit of the workmen at the brickfield relieving themselves by the edge of a small stream which also is one of its tributaries. It can't always have been this way because there are some idyllic memories of older Wivenhoe residents, in 'Sea Change', of playing by Bobbit's Hole where there was a garden with apple trees and the brook was lovely (Sea-Change).

Nick Butler suggested that the Brook might once have formed part of a wider water course, but there is not a great deal of evidence for this, other than the fact that there are early reference to mills in Wivenhoe, and in particular the water 'mill on the Brook' (Victoria County History of Essex), which was replaced in 1772 by a large post windmill commonly called Wivenhoe Mill. Essex Record Office also refers to an old mill house commonly called Bobbit's Hole which stood on the Brook.

We obtained copies of some old maps and tried to trace the course of the Brook, which first appears on a map of 1777. The geographical markings appear to indicate that it was running through a valley, although this has been disputed. In the 1838 map it appears to be running down from its source behind Wivenhoe Cross. The best map we found was the 1873-4 Ordnance Survey map and Peter Kay helped us to trace out the entire course of the Brook on this.

As we said, much of the Brook is now lost to view, but it is still running under various housing developments in Wivenhoe. Various residents have let us know that the Brook is running under the gardens or driveways. If any other residents have any further information about the course or history of the Brook we would be glad to hear it so that we can pull together as much information as possible about what was once an important feature of the town.

Pat Marsden