



Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group

SUTTON PARK

An account of the creation of the Children's Paddling Stream in 1924



CHILDREN'S PADDLING STREAM, SUTTON PARK, SUTTON COLDFIELD.

A.1002.

(Photo by courtesy of Sutton Coldfield Reference Library)

Roy Billingham

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The Children's Paddling Stream in Sutton Park

Observing the photograph on the title page is likely to create a mental image of an idyllic childhood with young children enjoying a tidy open water feature in safe surroundings with parental company to oversee their recreation. This was surely the intention of the Sutton Coldfield Borough Council when councillors in the early 1920s first came up with the idea of a paddling stream for younger visitors to Sutton Park.

The 1920s were financially hard times for everyone, including local authorities. Following the 1914-18 World War, the country faced up to the cost of that war in the light of the nation's lost overseas markets during a period when Britain had been unable to trade with her previously established customers due to the hostilities. It took time for the shattered nations of Europe and elsewhere to rebuild their infrastructures. In the meantime, with thousands of servicemen returning to civilian life there was inevitable widespread unemployment and resultant low wages which was to bedevil the nation's economy throughout the inter-war years.

The Sutton Coldfield Council were very aware that they had to increase the number of facilities in the Park to attract additional visitors to swell the Borough Council's coffers in order to fund the maintenance of the Park. Also, there was a nationwide feeling that post-war children, many of whose families were experiencing abject poverty as a result of the nation's unemployment, slum housing and social deprivation, should be encouraged to enjoy the outdoors for their mental and physical recreation. Remember, this was an era before child welfare experts existed. The Borough Council took this project on board because it reflected the mood of the general public and this augmentation of the Park's amenities could be achieved at a modest cost. The title photograph illustrates how well the Parks Committee, together with the Borough Surveyor and the Forester, achieved a sympathetic result from so simple a concept.

The birth of an idea for a paddling stream in Sutton Park

The idea of a children's paddling stream in Sutton Park is first recorded in the Minutes of a Park and Estates Committee meeting held on September 25, 1923¹, when, after discussion, it was resolved that the Borough Surveyor report back on the provision of a children's wading stream. This suggests that the Committee liked the concept but really had no idea how or where the wading stream should be built, so they passed the idea to the Borough Surveyor for him to come up with some practical plan to achieve their objective.

The Borough Surveyor set about choosing a site and drawing up preliminary plans for a simple wading stream. He duly reported back on October 3, 1923² stating that he was considering a place in a stretch of the stream known as the Ebrook [a.k.a. Plant's Brook] extending from Blackroot Pool dam southwards towards the old mill-pool field (see map on page 4). This was an area which was close to existing attractions such as Holly Knoll, Keepers Pool open-air lido and Blackroot Pool. It was also near to the Town Gate entrance to the Park, and was a part of what was at that time known as Blackroot Meadow.

¹ Borough of Sutton Coldfield Council: Park & Estates Committee, September 25, 1923: Minute No. 5721.

² Borough of Sutton Coldfield Council: Park & Estates Committee, October 30, 1923: Minute No. 5721

Blackroot Meadow

The site chosen by the Borough Surveyor in which to create the wading stream was within an area previously known as Blackroot Meadow, an area which extended south of the dam at Blackroot Pool to the old mill pool field, now drained, north-west of Park House. The meadow was used for grazing cattle and horses as shown in Photo 1 below. The Ebrook flowed southwards



Photo 1 – Blackroot Meadow c.1900, looking towards the brick bridge over the Ebrook. Using the shadow of the tree in the foreground as a reference, and knowing the brook flows almost north to south, it appears that the Sun is in the south-west. Hence, the path across the bridge runs from Lower Nut Hurst on the right of the photo to the road from Town Gate to Blackroot Mill on the left of the photo. The later paddling stream is the section on the far side of the bridge. Note the horses pasturing to the far right of the photo. The author suspects that this photo was part of the Warwickshire Photographic Survey dating from the 1890s.

(Photograph by courtesy of Sutton Coldfield Reference Library)

from Blackroot Pool in a straight line on a fairly level if somewhat boggy terrain which made it easier to find a section suitable for creating a paddling stream. The chosen section of the Ebrook, as shown on my map on page 4, lay between a stone footbridge to the north with access to Lower Nut Hurst, and a wooden footbridge to the south with access to Keepers Pool. This stretch of the Ebrook Valley was within Blackroot Meadow, the name it was known by in the early 20th century.

According to Dr. Mike Hodder, “Although the forms of hills and valleys in Sutton Park result predominantly from natural processes, the details of drainage are by contrast the result of people’s intervention. ...All the pools in the Park are man-made, and virtually all the streams in the Park have been artificially straightened, in addition to natural changes in their courses in the

past.” He continues by asking us, “...to picture the Park without its pools and drainage ditches: a landscape of streams, probably with multiple winding channels, flowing in marshy valleys.”³

Photo 2 is a fascinating archival photograph, taken c.1890 as a part of the Warwickshire Photographic Survey, of Blackroot Valley and meadow as seen from Blackroot dam looking southwards towards the old spade mill adjacent to Park House.



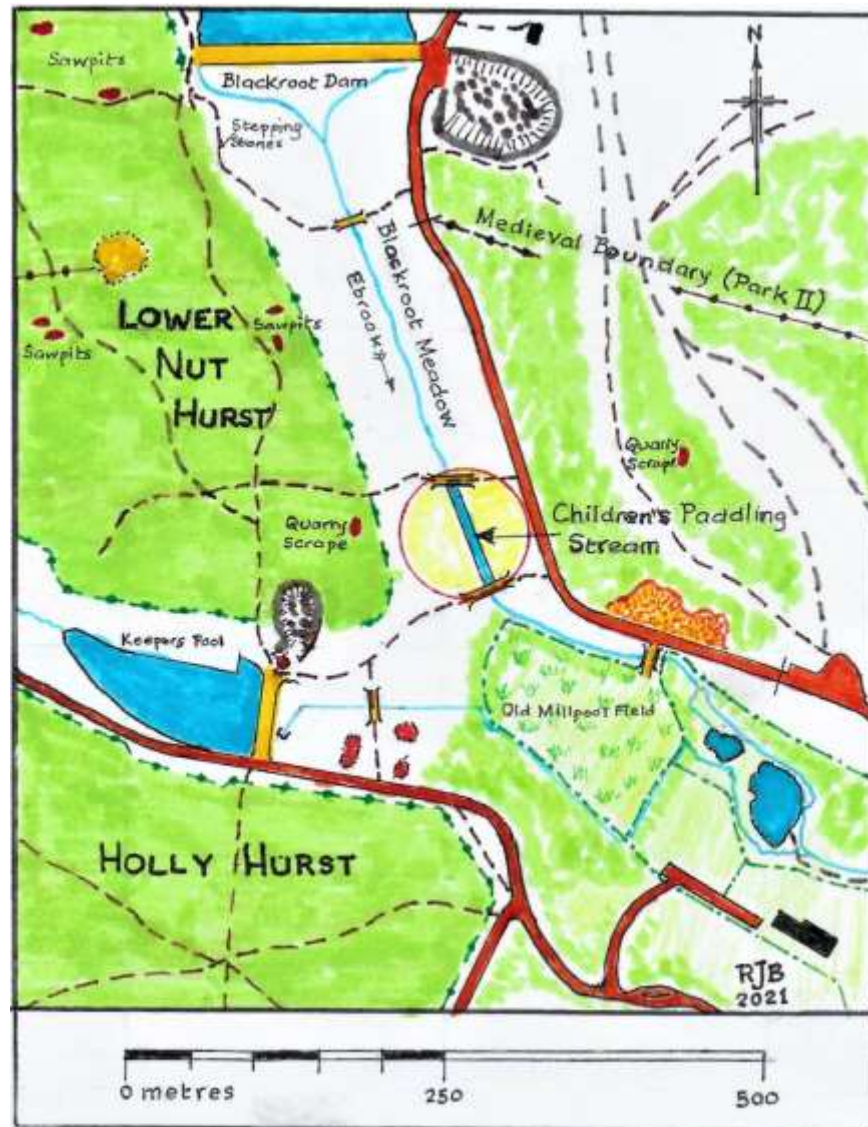
Photo 2 – View of Blackroot valley and meadow from Blackroot Pool dam taken in the 1890s as part of the Warwickshire Photographic Survey [WK/S17/88]. The outfall from the Pool (right foreground) can be seen joining the outflow from the turbine that was once installed at Blackroot Mill to enter the Ebrook as it flows southwards.

(Photograph by W. Rooke)

In May 2021, I sent a copy of this photograph to Danny Squire, Senior Ranger of Sutton Park, and Mike Hodder for their comments. Danny Squire responded by expressing what a rare treat the photograph depicted adding that the Ranger Service have renamed this compartment of the site Blackroot Meadow in hope rather than expectation. A new wooden footbridge was installed

³ Hodder, M., *The Archaeology of Sutton Park*, (2013), Stroud, The History Press, p. 14.

in 2020 as part of the old path from the Pool outfall to the road running from the mill to Town Gate. It is hoped to replace benches alongside the Paddling Stream in the near future as finance becomes available. Mike Hodder responded by commenting that the Ebrook may already have been straightened by this time since there are few curves and it does not look like a natural course. He wonders if this was done to improve the drainage of the meadow or might it have been related to digging peat in the valley floor; there is still 0.6m (24") of peat in the northern part of this area near the tributary stream.



Author's map of Blackroot Meadow showing the extent of the Paddling Stream in the yellow, red-outlined circle. To the north is Blackroot dam and quarry (mill), to the west is Lower Nut Hurst and Keepers Pool, to the south is Holly Hurst and land adjacent to Park House (including the Donkey Sanctuary), and to the east is the sand quarry and land between Holly Knoll and New Field at Blackroot. The quarry scrape in Lower Nut Hurst was probably used to rebuild the stone and brick footbridge at the north end of the Paddling Stream.

Progress of the project

The Borough Surveyor wasted no time starting the project because it was recorded on January 2, 1924, that preparatory clearance work had been done on the sides of the brook-course between Holly Knoll and Blackroot where it was proposed to make the children's playground. A sub-committee, led by the Mayor, was set up to oversee the project. This sub-committee visited the site during January of 1924 and reported back to the Park and Estates Committee on January 29, 1924, that they had inspected the sample lengths carried out by the Borough Surveyor and as a result, they suggested the following improvements:

- that the sides should be revetted⁴ with concrete instead of wood.
- that the fence should be a distance of six feet (1.83m) from the water and the recesses two feet (0.61m) extra.
- the width of the stream to be about ten feet (3m), and the water to be kept as near as possible at a uniform depth of six to nine inches (15.2cm – 22.9cm).

The Committee then decided that the Borough Surveyor be asked to experiment further along these lines and be instructed to open up the drains in the vicinity of the stream and have the same cleaned out.

At the meeting of the Park and Estates Committee on March 5, 1924⁵, the following was announced.

"2. Your Committee have considered the question of the provision of a Children's Wading Place in the Stream [the Ebrook] running from Blackroot Pool and recommend that a quantity of Concrete Slabs be purchased at an estimated cost of £34. The other material required will be found from the Park and your own employees will carry out the work under the supervision of the Borough Surveyor."

It was also agreed that a name-change would be made to the project and from henceforth it would be referred to as the Children's Wading Place.

There appears to have been some confusion on the part of the Park and Estates Committee concerning the title of this recreational facility. To the author's knowledge, it has always been known as the Children's Paddling Stream which is understandable, since "to paddle" means simply to walk or play barefoot in shallow water - the Committee were quite specific about the preferred depth (see above) - with the implied emphasis on the word "shallow". This title describes perfectly the purposes of the facility.

On the other hand, a children's wading stream where "to wade" means to walk with the feet immersed in water might imply a different scenario. For instance, it could imply walking in deeper water where, it has an association with the plural noun "waders" a word describing long waterproof boots sometimes extending to the chest like trousers, worn by anglers when fishing in wild rivers. Earlier in this section you will have noted that the facility was referred to as a children's playground which I think most readers would picture in their minds as a completely

⁴ **Revet** (tr.vb.): to shore up an embankment with stones (Collins English Dictionary)

⁵ Borough of Sutton Coldfield Council: Park & Estates Committee Minute, March 5, 1924: p.6495 - Item 2.

different children's facility, similar to the present children's play areas at the Main Gate and at Banners Gate entrances. Finally, the Committee decided in March, 1924, on a name-change to the Children's Wading Stream but, over the course of time, this resolution seems to have been ignored by most people.

The change in name from Children's Wading Stream to Children's Playground and finally to Children's Wading Place seems to indicate a certain lack of direction on the part of the Committee. A playground has nothing in particular to do with water while wading and paddling are activities relative to the depth of the water. Reading the Minutes, one could get the impression that the project was an idea drawn up, as the colloquial expression puts it, "*on the back of a cigarette packet*". However, it is good to learn that they were not short of ideas.

In March 1924 the Committee agreed that trees must be planted along the edges of the stream to enhance the vista of the stream and perhaps afford some protection to visitors in very sunny weather. Nevertheless, no time was wasted because on April 2, 1924 it was reported that the work of slabbing and fencing the Children's Paddling Stream in Blackroot meadow was still in hand, the concrete slabs had been fixed the full length of one side and a post and two-rail fence with recesses for seats was currently being erected, one side being almost completed.

At the next meeting on April 29, 1924 the Committee resolved that a man wearing waders should be detailed to inspect the stream morning and dinner-time for the purpose of keeping the Paddling Stream perfectly clean and tidy. Was this foresight on the part of the Committee or was it decided as a result of vandalism at the site. How long did this arrangement last before it was considered too expensive to operate. The Committee Minutes provide no explanations.

By May 27, 1924, the Borough Surveyor was able to report that the trees had been planted and that the Wading Stream was now ready for use just in time for the great Whitsuntide Bank Holiday in June 1924, traditionally a favourite holiday period in which record numbers of visitors would visit the Park.

Surprisingly, by October's meeting the Park and Estates Committee had resolved that the trees by the Paddling Stream be replanted although no explanation for this was recorded. However, at a Committee meeting held on May 11, 1925, an explanation was forthcoming when it was resolved that the trees, that had died over the intervening winter, be replaced by others and that willows be planted in between. Interestingly, willows still exist at the northern end of the paddling stream near to the three-arch bridge that carries the footpath from the mill road over the stream to Lower Nut Hurst (photo 3).

Mr. Harlond was still the Park Forester in 1925 and, as the willow species of choice, he chose the native British crack willow (*Salix fragilis*). The twigs of this short-boled willow are very brittle (*fragilis* in Latin) and can be snapped off easily, hence its name. This brittleness has proved of great value to the crack willow as it has allowed it to develop a peculiar method of spreading far afield. Usually the tree grows by the side of a river so many of its broken twigs fall into the water to be carried off and lodged in the mud downstream where the buds propagate. Evidence of this phenomenon can be seen near the bridge where willow saplings struggle to survive (photo 7). This willow, which is abundant in wetter ground, is seldom planted and does not rely entirely on its seed to reproduce itself. The seeds, which form from the female catkins, stay fertile for only a

short time and require moist soil on which to germinate soon after they are shed. The seeds are often sterile.

In the following year, the Park and Estates Committee met on October 26, 1926 and the Borough Surveyor submitted a sketch showing the proposed planting and fencing of the Paddling Stream. After discussion, the Committee instructed the Borough Surveyor to carry out the work.⁶ Thus although the Paddling Stream was opened in June 1924 it would be almost another three years before minor problems were corrected.



Photo 3 – Two crack willow trees (*Salix fragilis*) growing on the north-eastern bank of the Children's Paddling Stream close to the three-arched brick footbridge which carries the path from the mill road (off to the right) across the Ebrook into Lower Nut Hurst (off to the left).

(Photograph by Roy Billingham – taken 14/06/2015)

⁶ Sutton Coldfield Borough Council: Park & Estates Committee Minutes: Nos.167 & 168 for October 26, 1926.



Photo 3 – The long hairless leaves (up to 15cm) of the crack willow, often twisted, are shiny green on top and grey green below. The bark on the short bole is dark brown and very rugged with criss-cross ridges. The crack willow has wide-spreading branches and an open interior with the twigs not weeping unlike other species of willow. (Photograph by Roy Billingham – taken on 14/06/2015)

One of the problems faced by the Park and Estates Committee was the frequent instances of vandalism associated with the Paddling Stream. The Committee Minutes in the years immediately following the construction of the facility include instances of clearing-up work carried out by the Park staff to repair broken slabs and fencing and to remove dangerous items from the stream, particularly shards of glass. It is likely that the Park Committee gave up trying to maintain the Paddling Stream because of costs and man-power considerations. What we do not know is how popular this attraction remained in later years or at what stage the feature was just left to return to nature. In 2013 tree clearance was undertaken at the sides of the stream to open up the vista but the paths on each side of the stream remain in a dreadful state (see Photo 5). I believe that there are plans to restore Blackroot Meadow to its former state if the Park finances ever allow this to be done.

The Children's Paddling Stream then and now



Photo 4 – A view of the Children's Paddling Stream probably taken in the late 1920s. Everything is very neat and tidy and not a child in sight. Note the lack of trees outside the boundary fencing in 1924.
(Photograph by courtesy of Sutton Coldfield Reference Library)



Photo 5 – The same view taken from the footbridge on St. David's Day, 2014, after a wet spell of weather had swollen the stream to overflow. Note the abundance of birch trees on both sides.
(Photograph by Roy Billingham - taken on 01/03/2014)



Photo 6 – The circular island as it is today with the Ebrook flowing to the left into the grounds of the old spade mill pool at the side of Park House, which is now a restaurant.
(Photograph by Roy Billingham - taken on 01/03/2014)



Photo 7 – A wind-fall crack willow, probably self-germinated from a broken twig, alongside the pathway at the northern end of the paddling stream, growing quite vigorously despite its physical situation. The root system illustrates why the willow is good at anchoring riverbanks and preventing soil erosion.
(Photograph by Roy Billingham - taken on 25/04/2015)



Photo 8 – View of the Ebrook looking southwards with the Children’s Paddling Stream just beyond the three-arched footbridge. This area used to be Blackroot meadow but the self-set trees have grown during the last century. Because of its boggy nature this ground is rarely visited but could, if restored, be quite idyllic. Compare with photos 1 and 2.

(Photograph by Roy Billingham - taken on 18/04/2015)

Conclusions

The idea for the provision of a paddling stream in Sutton Park appears to be one of those schemes that was floated as an admirable idea and like Topsy, grew and grew. Initially, someone on the Park Committee probably thought of the idea and discussed the possibility with one or more colleagues and brought it to the attention of the Committee's chairman. Having concluded that the idea was a "runner", it was mooted formally at the next meeting. Once the Committee had accepted the idea as worthwhile as an added attraction to the Park's social facilities, it was then put to the Borough Surveyor for his comments and preliminary ideas about where it would be feasible to locate it and the likely costs to be incurred. In the 1920s there were no regulations to guide council officials in the design of such a feature, unlike the present day when children's play areas are tightly regulated, and risk assessments have to be undertaken to establish the safety of such play areas.

Having searched the Minutes of the Council's Park Committee from 1926 up to 1976, it is clear that the Children's Paddling Stream does not feature as a subject for concern once it had been finally established. What started out as a fine well executed concept, became in later years a somewhat unkempt and forgotten adventure amenity for younger children. Keeping the stream clear of litter and shards of broken glass and other sharp items was a problem from the very start and the cost of employing labour to keep on top of the problem would become increasingly untenable.

It is now nearly one hundred years since the paddling stream was created in the Park and young children's aspirations have changed radically over that time, never more so than in the last half century. Today's young children, 5 to 10 years old, now derive their pleasures from somewhat more sophisticated activities than the basic pleasure of divesting one's footwear and allowing clear running water to swirl around one's feet and ankles. However, during the current pandemic, when society is in social lockdown and schools are closed, serious questions are being raised concerning the physical and mental well-being of young children and their personal development so there are moves to encourage youngsters to overcome these problems by again indulging in outdoor physical activities.

Children's playgrounds and associated facilities are by their very nature notoriously prone to acts of vandalism. It is therefore likely that this paddling stream was from the very start of its existence subjected to acts of vandalism to a varying degree. Even at the outset of its creation in 1924 the Park could not provide the staff necessary to monitor such a project on a daily basis and it is likely that, as the facility became ever more run-down over the years, children and their parents abandoned it and were attracted to more secure facilities which were run on a commercial basis.

Roy Billingham, November 2021



Photo 9 - At least the horses enjoy the Paddling Stream
(Photograph by Roy Billingham – taken on 15/03/2014)

APPENDIX

1 Views of the land behind Blackroot Pool dam



Photo 10 left – A view of the footpath behind Blackroot Pool outflow, looking towards the dam area with Lower Nut Hurst on the left.

(Author's photograph taken on 28/12/2013)

Photo 11 below - The wooden footbridge across the Ebrook with the path continuing up the embankment to the road from Blackroot Mill to Main Gate entrance.

(Author's photograph taken on 28/12/2013)





Photo 12 – This is one of several mature English oaks situated in the valley below the dam at Blackroot Pool. Its burrs are a magnificent sight.

(Author's photograph taken on 28/12/2013)

Burrs on English Oaks

The photograph above illustrates a form of dormant bud growth called a “burr”. Growths form from a mass of dormant buds buried just under the bark and create distortions to the trunk or a limb of the tree. The buds lie dormant but develop in the normal manner in the axils of the leaves of the new shoot, but thereafter development is curtailed. The growth enlarges annually and in due course develops into the familiar burr. According to Tyler⁷, trees with frequent burrs and

⁷ Tyler, M., *“British Oaks: A Concise study”*, (2008), Marlborough, The Crowood Press Ltd., pp29 & 32.

ridges on their trunks, as the one shown in Photo 12, are likely to survive longer because they have the ability to produce new boughs late in life, although the timber produced has less value. Despite this, burrs are highly valuable and are peeled to produce veneers. Woodcarvers sometimes find burrs very useful for producing a base for a natural history tableau.

2 Warwickshire Photographic Survey⁸

You will have noted that captions for Photographs 1 and 2 on pages 2 and 3 of this Research include a reference to the Warwickshire Photographic Survey. This Survey was formed in the late 19th century to create a photographic record of the urban and rural landscape of Warwickshire which was undergoing rapid transformation as a result of the Agrarian and Industrial Revolutions.

The survey was founded by two local photographers, William Jerome Harrison (1845-1908) and J. Benjamin Stone (1838-1914) in 1890, the same year that Stone decided not to seek re-election as Mayor of Sutton Coldfield due to “the onerous duties pertaining to public life”.

Born in Hemsworth, historically in the West Riding of Yorkshire and now a town and civil parish in the City of Wakefield, West Yorkshire, William Jerome Harrison was educated at Westminster Training College and afterwards spent two years at Cheltenham College. When in 1880, he first arrived in Birmingham to take up an appointment as Chief Science Master under the Birmingham School Board as a science teacher, he had only just taken up photography. The Birmingham Photographic Society (BPS), founded in 1857, had by this time folded due to the wane in early enthusiasm followed by years of thin attendances. However, by 1884



Photo 14 - William Jerome Harrison, FGS, (1845-1908)

Harrison had helped to re-establish the BPS with himself as vice-president. He sought to enthruse members of the BPS to support his idea of the society’s members making a photographic survey of their local area in order to record local customs and buildings before they were demolished.

Harrison’s idea was not exactly met with enthusiasm; many members of the BPS did not want to be told what they should photograph. On the other hand, Benjamin Stone, a collector of photographs for many years and an enthusiast for photographing local customs, supported Harrison enthusiastically.

Although the two men had never met and Stone, not being interested in the technology of photography was not a member of the BPS, he had been in correspondence with Harrison. In

⁸ **Warwickshire Photographic Survey** – photographs are in the collection at Birmingham Library, https://birmingham.gov.uk/info/50134/archives_and_collections/1592/Warwickshire_photographic_survey, accessed on 09/07/2021.

1899 they set up a meeting at the Grand Hotel in Birmingham to launch their plan for a photographic survey of Warwickshire. Later in the same year Harrison was invited by Benjamin Stone to speak at a meeting of the Vesey Club where he presented a paper on the selection and methodology for obtaining a complete photographic record of the urban and rural landscape.



Photo 15 - J. Benjamin Stone (1838-1914), when Sutton Coldfield's first Mayor. He was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1892 and became a Conservative MP for East Birmingham in 1895.
