



Iain Soden Heritage Services Ltd

Modern living in an historic environment

**Recording the central pond at Bilton Grange
walled garden**

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Bilton Grange walled garden – the central pond

Recording the central pond at Bilton Grange walled garden

Iain Soden BA MIfA

Summary

At the centre of the former walled garden of Bilton Grange, lie the remains of an ornamental pond, the whole part of a design attributed to A W N Pugin. The pond comprised a central well, around which was a hexagonal pool lined in brick, accessed by four flights of stone and brick steps. It has been archaeologically recorded, dismantled and filled in as part of consented development.

Background

In 2012 Bilton Grange School received planning consent to convert the previous walled garden into an all-weather outdoor sports pitch. The high brick walls of the garden, together with an adjacent gardener's cottage and a central pool, may have been built to a design by the celebrated architect of the neo-Gothic movement A W N Pugin in the years 1844-51, the only garden which he possibly ever designed. Only the walls survived, in poor condition, and the central pool was completely overgrown.

The garden was archaeologically evaluated in 2012 and a report produced (Soden and Dawson 2012). Due to the repetitive, destructive nature of its prolonged use, little was found which attested to the garden's original layout and nothing at all in respect of planting, other than evidence for four radial paths which once crossed the garden and are seen on maps from 1855.

The central pond, like the paths, is visible on maps from 1855 and is described in a sale catalogue of 1861 (Soden and Dawson 2014), which also ascribed it a drainage function as well as it being a water source for the garden planting. It was very overgrown and overflowing due to the poor weather conditions of winter and spring 2012-13. Another period of high rainfall delayed works until well into 2014. Accordingly it was not until the dry summer of 2014 that the draining and back-filling of the pond and its surroundings was possible.

Methodology

Earthmoving contractors stripped the garden of its topsoil and other garden debris, also emptying the overgrown sunken garden which surrounded the pond, together with machine removal of the four sets of stone and brick steps which led down to the pond.

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Fig 1: The central pond, overflowing in 2012; surroundings overgrown



Fig 2: The pond and the best-preserved (north) set of steps, during earthmoving, 2014

Archaeological monitoring was deployed to record the central pond, which had not been seen for some years, due to the high water levels and undergrowth.

Following clearance, the water in the pond was pumped out, followed by large quantities of black sludge and rubbish which had been thrown in. The pond had clearly been cleaned out before, as there was no rubbish in the sludge which could be said to pre-date the 1960s, and which predominantly comprised plastic flower-pots and a steel wheelbarrow frame, almost certainly lost when the gardens had been tenanted by a local market-garden and nursery contractor. Most recently the gardens had been tenanted by an archery club, until 2012.

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It had been intended to make the records of the pond primarily photographic. However, an opportunity presented itself to also make a drawn cross-section of the pond after it was pumped out, since there was considerable depth to the structure and access to its base was facilitated by a ladder.

The pond

The sunken area around the pond had originally been served probably by four sets of eight or nine steps (of which three had mostly survived), built of brick with projecting bull-nosed stone treads. Side kerbs followed the 45-degree angle of each flight, into which the ends of the treads had been scribed to hold them in place. The steps lay at the end of four paths aligned on the points of the compass which can be seen on all maps from 1855 onwards.

Circling the sunken area at the foot of the steps and the all-round batter they reflected was a continuous ceramic horse-shoe land drain set on tiles. From this led a series of radial land-drains to the pond, which emptied into it through four grilles in four of the sides of the pond, aligned on each set of steps. This arrangement was intended to centrally-drain the entire garden, which was crossed by a series of other, deeply-dug land drains.

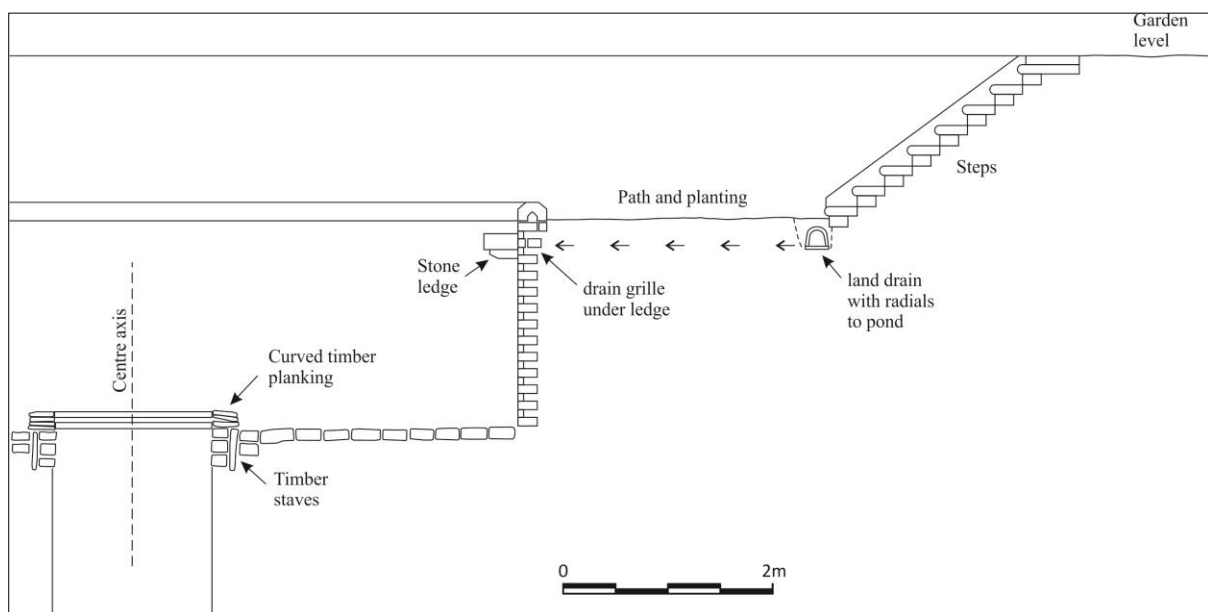


Fig 3: A scale cross-section of (one half of) the pond, central well and the northern flanking flight of steps.

The pond was an imperfect octagon, with an average diameter of 6.7m. The octagon sides were 2.75m, 3m, 2.85m, 2.75m, 3m, 3m, 2.95m and 3.05m. Since it would have been laid out in imperial measurements, the intended side may have been 9 feet (2.75m), although it seems that the geometry employed by the builders was imperfect when trying to create the octagon on the ground.

It was 1.98m deep, lined with 22 courses of brick in alternating courses of headers and stretchers (English bond), using the same brick-type from which the garden wall was created. A top-most course was added laid on edge, while a third line was laid behind this, to support a stone kerb which

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edged the top of the whole structure. The kerb may once have supported a railing, since there were sockets for uprights at intervals. There was no sign of the railing otherwise.

Each of the four sides which lay beneath the foot of the steps also had a cantilevered stone ledge built into the upper portion of the lining. Hidden from view underneath each lay the iron drainage grille mentioned above. The stone ledges may once have been stands for water-loving plants, but also hid the exits to the drains.

The base of the pond was of brick. At its centre was a 1.5m-diameter circular well, lined in brick but with a circle of barrel-type timber staves behind this lining. The edge of this 1.8m-deep well was surmounted by a fitted, curved edge of three superimposed cut planks. Although these had probably been fixed tightly together in a laminate, these had sprung apart and were partly dislodged when viewed.



Fig 4: Stone kerb with sockets for uprights; possibly indicating a former rail, note the uppermost course of brick laid on edge



Fig 5: Kerb removed during pumping, to reveal the uppermost course of bricks and the kerb-support-line of bricks behind, otherwise unseen; scale 1m



Fig 6: View from the centre of the pond, timber-lined and timber-topped well in foreground; one side of the octagon is marked (red dashes), drainage grille arrowed; scale 1m

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Fig 7: The pond, fully pumped out. The central well was augured and found to be 1.8m deep.

Whilst the steps and the former topsoils of the garden were removed, the existing slope down to the pond was machine-smoothed into a batter. The stone kerbs were also removed, leaving the pond itself, which was filled in prior to the laying of the all-weather sports pitch.

Reference

Soden I and Dawson, M, 2012 *An archaeological evaluation at Bilton Grange School walled Garden*, I S Heritage and CgMs Consulting



IS Heritage, 2 September 2014 with revisions of 3 September