

EHER: 9180
Wormingford Mere or Decoy

National Grid Ref: Square: TL93SW Ref: 927328

Although there are no known crop marks in the area directly around the Mere it is felt that such a significant feature, known to have been present in the prehistoric landscape, should be included in this study.

Background

Wormingford Mere is a deep, dark body of water located in the area to the North East of Metlands. The Mere is fed by springs and is joined on the northern side to the River Stour through a small cut. It is currently surrounded by a tree margin of mixed woodland bordering on arable fields. At the time of writing it is securely fenced for use by an Angling Group.

British History Online describes this as a 'natural feature of 12 acres formed by the Stour'. Is Wormingford Mere a collapsed pingo? Given the definition of pingos as 'conical, ice-cored mounds which formed in permafrost regions as a result of frozen ground being forced upwards by the growth of a large ice mass as water under pressure froze below the surface...occurred in clusters, sometimes at a density of one hundred per square km' (Norfolk Wildlife Trust) I do not feel that Wormingford Mere fulfils these criteria. I would however suggest that the mere was formed by some form of glacial erosion at the end of the last glacial period (about 10,500BC).

A fishery is mentioned as existing in the Mere in 1742: (P.R.O., C 139/69; E.R.O., D/DTu 271). The 1838 Tithe Map describes this as a 'decoy or Mere' with an area of 8a, 0r, 18p, in the ownership and occupation of John Joliffe Tufnell. White's Directory of Essex (1848) states that at this time it was owned by Wormingford Hall.

Wormingford Mere appears as the setting for a Victorian historical novel by Charles Whistler entitled King Olaf's Kinsman - A Story of the Last Saxon Struggle against the Danes in the Days of Ironside and Cnut (1898) In this fiction a white lady is said to rise from the Mere!

Previous Surveys

In 1981 University of Cambridge Department of Botany contacted Mrs S J Tufnell of Wormingford Hall stating:

I am currently doing research on the history of the vegetation of southern England over the last 10000 years. This work involves the analysis of pollen grains preserved in muds and peats and it provides a means of reconstructing the composition of the surrounding vegetation since the last ice age. North Essex is a particularly critical area because of the important role lime trees may have played in the prehistoric forests. Lime may have been more important here than enaywhere else in Britain.

To test this idea I would like to be able to collect a small (2-inch) diameter core of mud from your mere at Wormingford. I am writing to ask whether you would allow myself and two or three of my PhD research students to visit the mere and to take a core of mud from the centre of the mere. The mere is uniquely

situated and may be of very considerable scientific importance. The coring would in no way damage the mere.

Below is an extract from a letter from Dr Birks dated 4 June 1981 to Mrs Tufnell, informing her of the results of the coring:

Thank you very much for allowing us to visit your mere and to take a core of sediment from it. I talked to Mr Jackson when we finished, and our findings are as follows. In the centre of the mere the water is 20 feet deep. Below this there is 30 feet of soft dark mud, underlain by a further 17 feet of dry, very compact mud. This lower mud is very difficult to penetrate, and eventually we lost our hole even though we had not reached the bottom.

What I now intend to do is to look at the pollen in the lowermost mud and to estimate the age of the mud. When I know this we can then decide whether it would be possible to try to core again in an attempt to reach the bottom of the mud.

Such a thickness of mud is unusual in English lakes; the record is held by Saham Toney mere in Norfolk with a total of 87 feet of mud. There could thus be a good bit more than the 47 feet of md we found yesterday in Wormingford Mere!

Later, more results are reported:

18th August 1981

We have now analysed the pollen and spore content of the lowermost mud, and at a depth of 47 feet into the mud, the mud is about 9,000 years ago. The forest vegetation then was very different to anything we have today, being dominated by hazel and birch, with small amounts of elm. From our experiences elsewhere in East Anglia, we would expect a further 4,000 years of record to be present in your mere, extending back to the end of the last ice age.

In view of this we would like to revisit the mere for a second attempt at reaching the bottom, perhaps in mid September.

Curious to find out whether this second attempt was ever made, I emailed Dr Oliver Rackham at Cambridge, who put me in touch with Dr Birks. Below is his reply:

Thank you for your message. By coincidence, the owner of Wormingford Mere was in contact with me, via the Department of Plant Sciences in Cambridge about our work at the Mere. As it was such a long time ago, I consulted my former PhD students Brian Huntley (now at Durham) and Keith Bennett (Belfast) about whether they ever did a second coring at Wormingford. The answer is that no-one ever returned and tried to core to the bottom. So the secrets of the history of Wormingford Mere remain buried in its sediments. It has a great thickness of stiff sediment that is difficult to core. It would be a major undertaking to get a complete core and a long and time-consuming study to do a detailed pollen stratigraphy as the pollen concentration is low, probably because of the high sediment accumulation rate. I am sorry I cannot help. (Birks, J 2013)

Analysis and Conclusion

The Mere's Role in the prehistoric landscape.

So how did the Mere fit into the landscape as viewed by prehistoric man? Was it the focal point for sacred or ritual practices; a place of ritual deposition? Was it

the reason why so many barrows were located nearby – a link with the spirit world and life after death? Wormingford Mere is currently Private Property and is used by a Fishing Consortium; there is no public access.

