Pond: Mere, Rune and Flint

Mary Waltham

Artistic expression about nature can be far more than an escape from human-centred reality. It can make a pressing commentary on the state of our planet, the politics and policies that shape public debate about our environment, and the questions we need to confront.

My intention is to contribute to this rise in interest and to spark new conversations, by bringing the landscape to life through my work.

After a career in science and science publishing, and as a biologist I bring a distinctly different perspective to 'nature' for inspiration.

Pond: Mere, Rune and Flint is a direct response to the quiet beauty and mystery of the ancient ponds around me in Selborne, Hampshire.

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Pond: Mere, Rune and Flint

Ponds are a common feature of the landscape, and in early human settlements they were a shared water resource for humans and animals. Ponds are not connected to each other or to other water bodies they are only fed by rainwater or groundwater. On areas of common land used for grazing livestock, ponds were essential. The work exhibited includes:-

- Watercolour paintings that explore the luminosity and mystery of ponds peering into a pond from dry land or up to the surface from underwater.
- Acrylic and mixed media paintings that bring colour and texture together using landscape materials to express the saturated teeming-with-life nature of ponds.
- Oil paintings of flints that are found everywhere in the South Downs, and were used to line the base of ponds.
- Photographic documentation of changes in the water levels of one pond on Selborne Common in the summer of 2018.
- Photographic documentation of an installation of wooden runes that represent the early Saxon symbol for water.

The ecosystem that relies on each small pond became especially threatened during the summer of 2018 when there was a drought in Southern England.

One Saxon era pond – Wood Pond on Selborne Common, Hampshire, England - virtually dried up. We do not know what Saxon farmers in the eighth or ninth century would do in such circumstances. They certainly relied on this pond and we may assume they would find a way to signal their need for help as articulated in my installation.

Meanwhile in the twenty first century what are we doing in response to drought (and flood)?

"The word 'pond' does not appear until the Middle Ages, and then in the specific sense of 'dammed' ponds. The Anglo-Saxon landscape was full of ponds, natural and artificial, many of which are still there."

Rackham, O, The History of the Countryside (2000)

Pond, 1 Watercolour on acetate layers, 8.27" x 11.69" (21.0cm x 29.7cm)



Pond, 2 Watercolour on acetate layers,8.27" x 11.69" (21.0cm x 29.7cm)



Pond, 3 Watercolour on acetate layers, 8.27" x 11.69" (21.0cm x 29.7cm)



Pond, 4 Watercolour on acetate layers, 8.27" x11.69" (21.0cm x 29.7cm)



Pond, 5 Watercolour on acetate layers, 8.27" x 11.69" (21.0cm x 29.7cm)



Pond, 6 Watercolour on acetate layers, 8.27" x 11.69" (21.0cm x 29.7cm)



Pond, 7 Watercolour on acetate layers, 8.27" x 11.69" (21.0cm x 29.7cm)



Pond, 8 Watercolour on acetate layers, 8.27" x 11.69" (21.0cm x 29.7cm)



Pond, 9 Watercolour on acetate layers, 8.27" x 11.69" (21.0cm x 29.7cm)



"When you approach one of these small enclosed bodies of water set into the land you might see it as a mirror reflecting the sky or as a gap in the landscape – maybe almost a hole in the earth, an entrance into the unknown. There is a sense of mystery there – sometimes dark and apparently bottomless and full of beasties, sometimes silver, echoing the light of the sky above; with birds flying through it. No wonder these places became associated with the old stories and tales as well as being used as places of offering in prehistoric times. They're both a magnet for life and a home to a world of their own."

Jackson, K (2012) A new genre of landscape painting

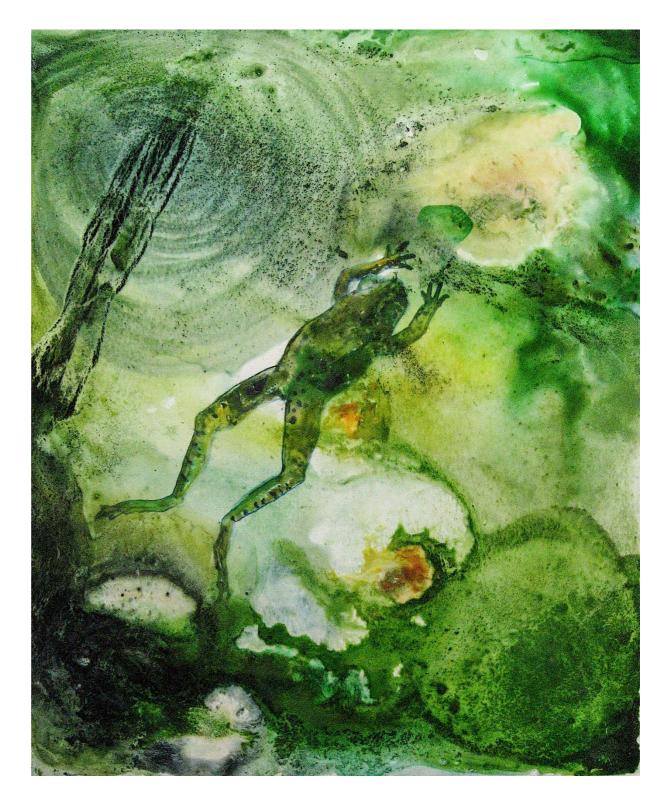
Spangled water beetle. Watercolour on acetate layers, 14" x 17" (35.5cm x 43.1cm)



Dragonfly. Watercolour on acetate layers, 14" x 17" (35.5cm x 43.1cm)



Frog. Watercolour on acetate layers, 17" x 14" (43.1cm x35.5cm)



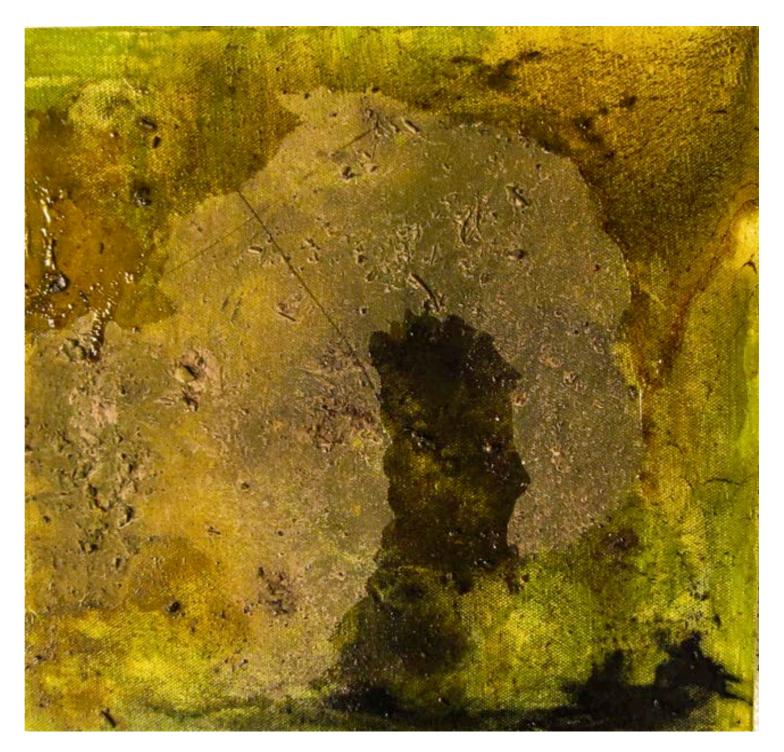
"Meres: The Old English word *mere* meant a pool and many place names ending in –mere or –more derive from existing ponds as much as a thousand years old."

Grigson, G (1966) The Shell Country Alphabet

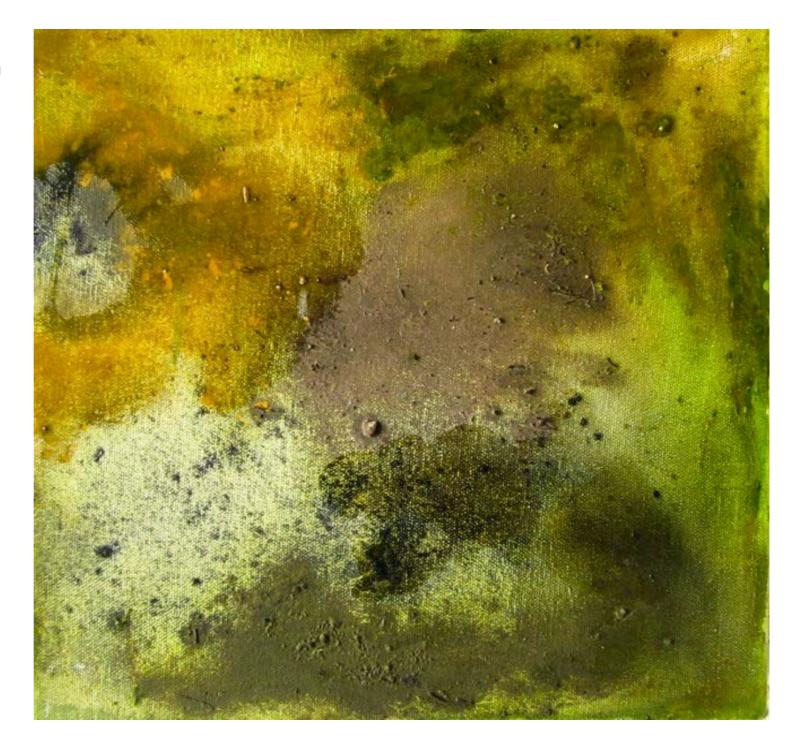
Mere 1 Acrylic and mixed media on canvas. 12" x 12", (30.5cm X 30.5cm).



Mere 2 Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 12" x 12", (30.5cm X 30.5cm).



Mere 3 Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, (12" x 12", (30.5cm X 30.5cm).



Mere 4 Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 12" x 12", (30.5cm X 30.5cm).



"A final coating of stones or other hard material {such as flint} is added, to preserve the clay {lining} from injury by too deep penetration of the feet of the cattle using the pond."

Martin, E. A (1907) Dew Ponds: History, Observation and Experiment.

Flint 1 Oil on canvas, 12" x 12", (30cm X 30cm)



Flint 2 Oil on canvas, 8" x 8", (20cm x 20cm)



Flint 3 Oil on canvas, 16" x 16", (40cm x 40cm).



Flint 4 Oil on canvas, 20" x 20", (51cm X 51cm).



"February 1776. Now we have many such little round ponds in this district; and one in particular on our sheep down, three hundred feet above my house; which though never more than three feet deep in the middle, and not more than thirty feet in diameter and ...containing not more than three hundred hogsheads of water, yet never is known to fail, though it affords drink for three hundred or four hundred sheep, and for at least twenty large cattle beside."

White, G (1789) The Natural History of Selborne

It was believed in many cultures across the world (including Anglo Saxons in Britain) that bodies of water in the form of wells, lakes and ponds might provide access to another world below that of man, a world inhabited by both spirits and ancestors.

Hooke, D (2017), *Rivers, Wells and Springs in Anglo-Saxon England: Water in Sacred and Mystical Contexts*

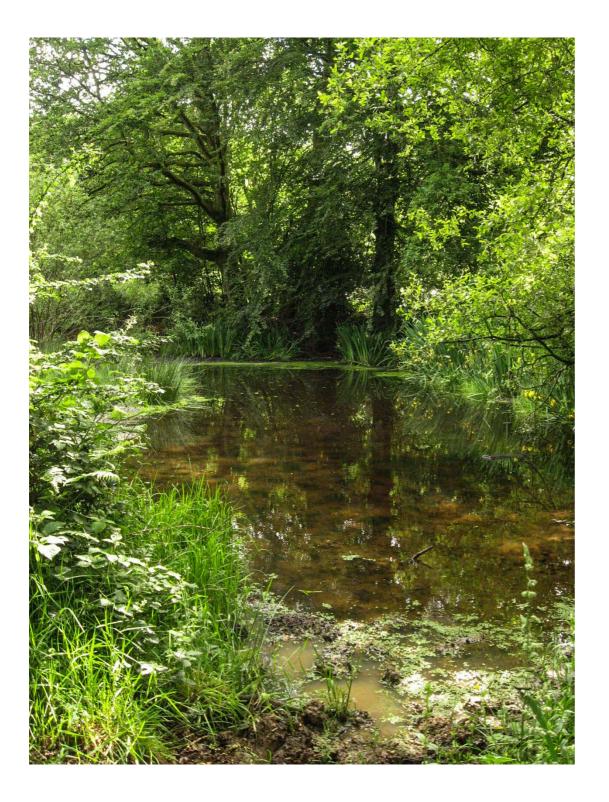


Foxes glewe Foxglove and duck weed floating on Wood Pond Selborne Common, Hampshire. Photograph. The importance of ponds as drinking places for livestock depastured on Selborne Common is recorded from the 13th century (Macray1891, 52), therefore it is reasonable to suggest a Saxon or medieval construction date for the dewpond (Wood Pond).

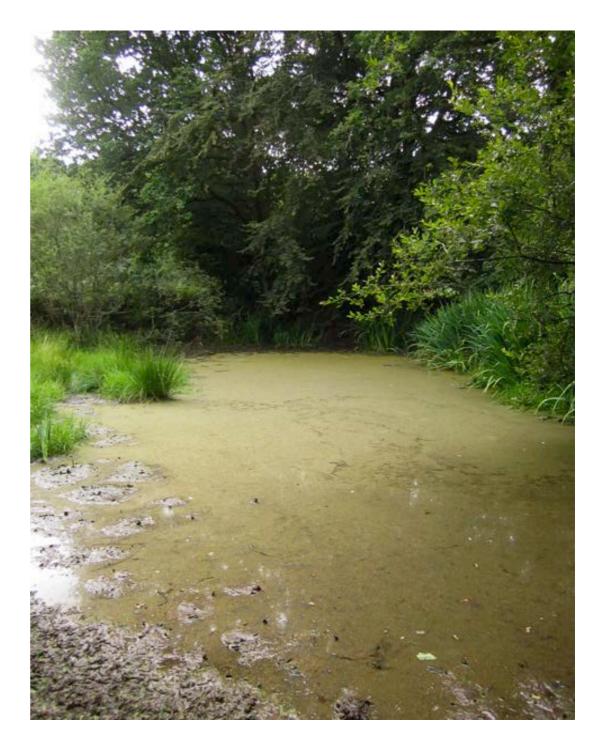
Webb, C (2015) Early field systems and enclosures on Selborne Hill

"But the Prior and Canons and all others who have had animals in his (Robert de Pontelarche's) wood of Selebourne are hereafter to have free entrance and exit and chase, and free drinking rights ("potacionem") at the great mere ("maram") near the highway near the garden of the said Robert in the vill of Niwentowne, but if they are hindered then they may make a free entrance for themselves to the mere called Bosmere."

Macray, W D (1891) *Selborne and its priory* from Calendar of Charters and Documents relating to Selborne Priory Hampshire (1250) Record Society, Winchester.



Wood pond on Selborne Common, Hampshire. June 18th, 2018, Photograph.



Wood pond on Selborne Common, Hampshire. July 20th, 2018, Photograph.



Wood pond on Selborne Common, Hampshire Aug 6th, 2018. Photograph.

Lagusz: A solution to drought?

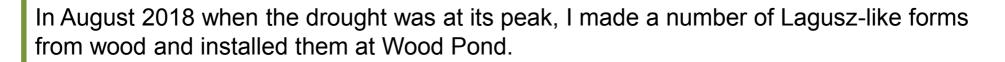
When Saxon farmers relied entirely on ponds for watering livestock, drought conditions like our summer of 2018 would have severe consequences.

What would the people of Selborne do under threat of drought conditions?

We do not know what Saxon farmers did but other pre-Christian cultures would have sent a message to the spirits that they turned to, about the lack of water.

Runes are letters in an alphabet used before the Roman alphabet was adopted in Britain.

The Anglo Saxon rune for water is Lagusz



Within two days of my installation it rained and the pond started to fill.

Of course the rain was not caused by my use of runes – was it? But this coincidence raises a question. If Saxon farmers took some action when faced with drought (or floods), what do we in the twenty-first century have in our power to do in similar circumstances?



Seven wooden runes for water (Lagusz) ranging in height from 0.5m to 1.0m, pre-installation photograph



Lagusz 1 (2018) Photograph of installation at Wood pond, Selborne, Hampshire 11.69" x 16.53" (29.7 x 42.0cm)



Lagusz 2 (2018) Photograph of installation at Wood pond, Selborne, Hampshire 11.69" x 16.53" (29.7 x 42.0cm))

References

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