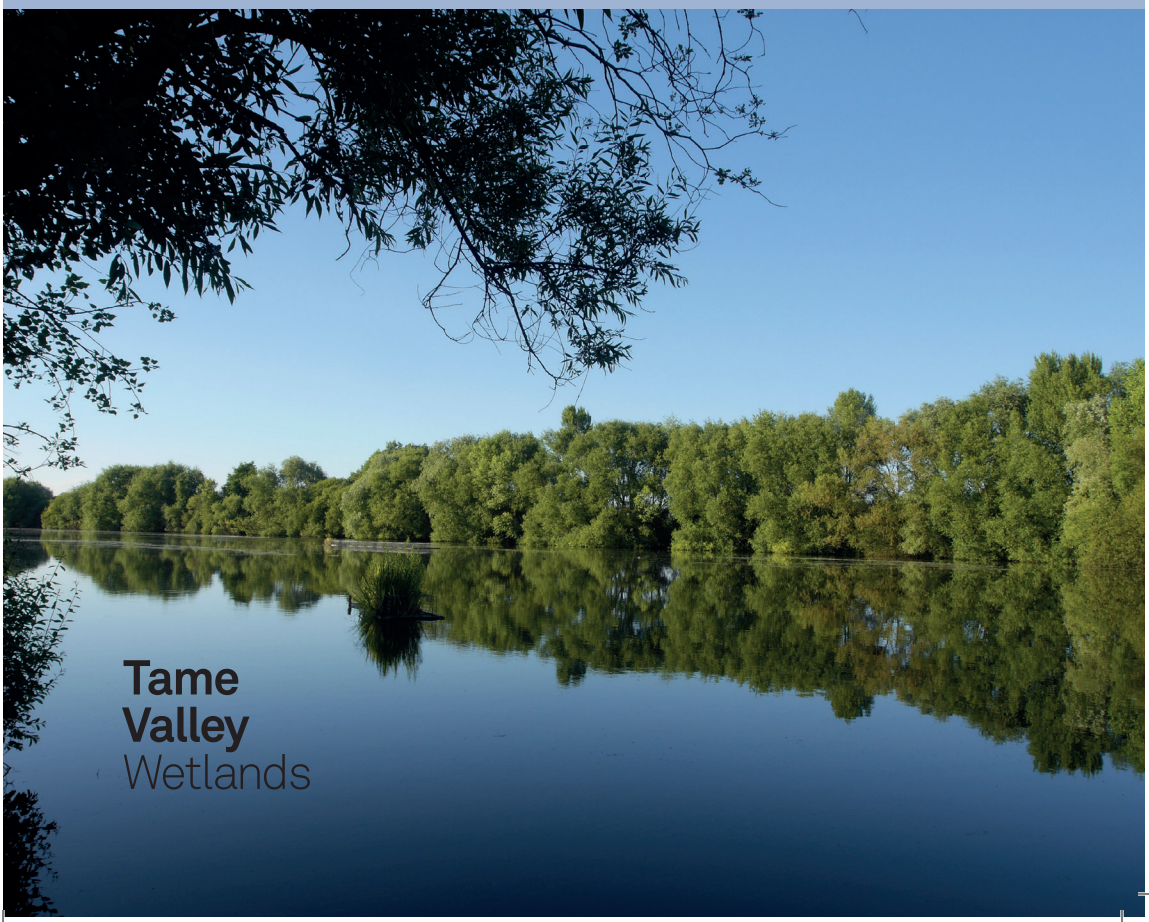
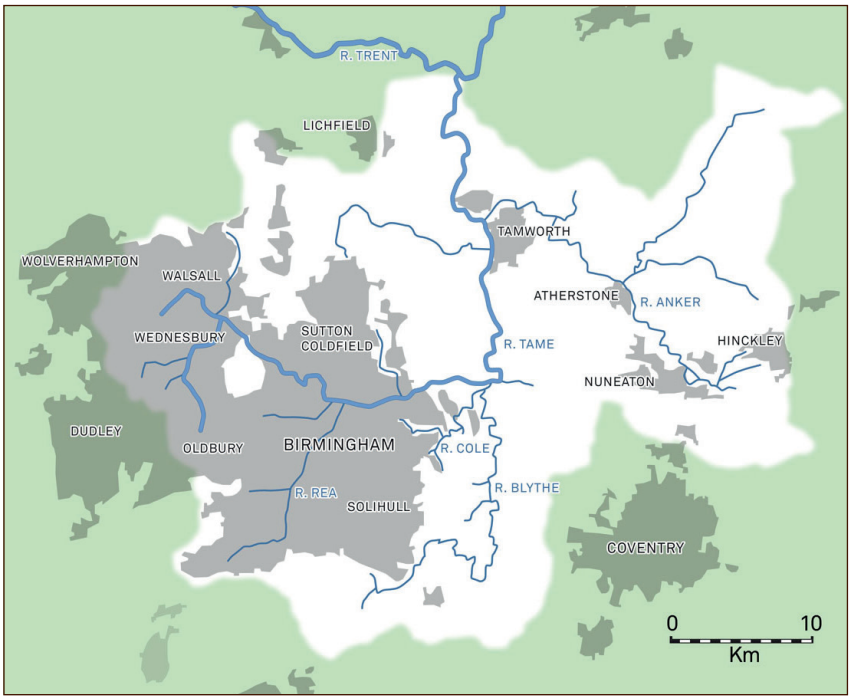
Telling the Tale of
The Tame





Catchment area of the River Tame.

Introduction

Memories are fragile, and yet they are the way we are able to tell our story. Stories help us understand who we are and how we got here. In a rapidly changing landscape like the Tame Valley, memories of how it once was and how it shaped lives can easily be lost.

'Telling the Tale of the Tame' collected stories and memories from local people living around the Tame Valley Wetlands through memory cafés, local shows, history walks, social gatherings and events. They are stories of childhood, school days, working and family life, and a passion for the Tame Valley, past and present.

The River Tame rises in Oldbury and flows east to Water Orton where it turns north towards Tamworth. Joined by the River Anker below Tamworth Castle, the Tame then travels a few miles further north and joins the Trent. A total length of about 68 miles, but only around 30 miles as the crow flies between Oldbury and the Trent. It is the main river of the West Midlands and North Warwickshire. More than five million people live in its catchment area yet the Tame remains almost unknown and forgotten, flowing through the West Midlands in culverts beneath the concrete pillars of the M6.

Before the industrial revolution in the eighteenth century, there was a thriving freshwater fishing industry on the river, supplying salmon to London. The Tame Valley was rapidly transformed from a quiet rural area to the industrial heartland of England. Population growth was rapid and industry prospered, but little thought was given to the environmental consequences. Sewage and industrial waste was poured into the Tame, transforming it from a salmon river to the most polluted waterway in the world. Culverted and canalised, the Tame had become little more than an open sewer. The rural landscape between Birmingham and Tamworth was transformed into a moonscape in the mid twentieth century by gravel extraction. A dead river slunk through a shattered landscape, reeking and wretched.

Key dates

- Shustoke reservoir opened in **1874**
- Sewage treatment begins at Minworth in the **1870s**
- Hams Hall power station **1928–1993**
- Gravel extraction started in the **1930s** and continues near Middleton Hall
- Minworth sewage treatment works upgraded in the **1960s**
- Lurgi gasification plant built **1963**
- Kingsbury Water Park opened **1975**
- Coal mining ended **1987**
- Minworth sewage treatment works upgraded **1999–2010**

Post-war economic changes caused industry along the Tame to die back, enabling the river to start returning to life. Sewage treatment improved at Water Orton, and exhausted gravel-workings were repurposed as settling pools and reed beds to filter the river water. Today, the River Tame sparkles with life. Fish, bird and animal life all prosper where once there was little but grime. Industrial landscapes are now oasis of relaxation and recreation including Kingsbury Water Park and the many nature reserves. This story of a river's decline, fall and renaissance has been witnessed by the people who have lived alongside the water. Many of their memories are decades old but are as fresh as the living waters of the River Tame.

School days

Maurice Arnold, Botanist and Conservationist, recalling his childhood in Wilnecote in the 1930s

I went to junior school at Wilnecote near Tamworth and fortunately we had a lady teacher that was very keen on botany, a Welsh lady, and she taught us what she could do in lessons and then had a group of children after school and took us around the local lanes, looking at the hedgerows and the fields and finding out different wild flowers. So we learned a lot about wild flowers, and she found various orchids and things we don't get now really at all, a lot have died out, a lot have changed. We used to have in the corn fields a lot of corn cockle, corn marigold, cornflower, very pretty, poppies too, loads and loads of poppies as well as wheat and barley. So I got to know all these flowers and we had competitions now and again. We made an album, a scrapbook, with the wildflowers we found. We were taught how to press them. So, we had to name them, in English of course, didn't have any scientific names, and compared them with those in books and I got most of the wildflower names right. A lot of the children with me weren't very good at it, weren't much bothered and didn't matter to them whether they got a name right or not but I was always keen on finding out what was what: birds, animals, wildflowers.

Wilnecote when Maurice was young

Jean Ward, brought up in Bodymoor Heath

Jean and friend Rosemary Cummings

We used to walk to Kingsbury school from Bodymoor Heath across the fields with farmers growing vegetables. The boys had nearly always got a penknife in the autumn, when the swedes came up, and they'd pull one up and give us a little bit on the way to school. There was what we called a short planks to go over a lovely stream which had the most beautiful wildflowers in, and then there was what they called the long planks and that went on to the river Tame, the big river bridge, and then we would wind our way. There were then 42 steps which we used to climb up to go through the churchyard to the school. There were two sets of 12, 12 was the first one then 3 sixes and then another 12. They've been in mind forever those have you know! But what used to happen there was it used to flood very badly, and we'd go to school maybe in the morning and okay the river would be up. You know, you could tell it was really high, the level of the water. But when we came in the evening, well we used to leave school at 4 o'clock, in those days, it had come right over the fields and the planks, it was quite frightening really because it was all gushing and I mean for a five year old we walked there. But we had some fun, it was lovely really because being a small village everyone knew everyone. We used to go in groups, we didn't go alone, and so we did just have a lovely time really even though, you know, we used to get wet I suppose.

The long planks

Shustoke Reservoir

Dianne Hazel remembers her childhood living by Shustoke Reservoir

From 1957–1983, my father 'Joe' Sedgwick was the Relief Water Bailiff at Shustoke Reservoir. His main job was as a Foreman Water Main Layer at Whitacre Water Works. Known to everyone as Joe, his real names were Charles Ivor Keith, but he didn't like them, so when he moved to Shustoke from Frankley he left the name behind. He had a 'tied' house at No 1, Reservoir Drive, but when he first saw the house on the reservoir, he came home and told my Mum Pam that he'd found the 'house of his dreams'. He couldn't believe his luck when the people living there decided it was too isolated and wanted to move out. They arranged some sort of swap and my parents moved in.

My father's job as Relief Bailiff was to cover on the reservoirs when the Bailiff, formerly Mr. John Freeman, later Mr. Eric Brown had time off. In the winter he had to watch the water levels on the river, clear the screens and maintain the flow of water into the reservoirs. The small reservoir was a settling pool, where water was held to clear some of the silt and mud from the river water before it entered the large reservoir. There were no machines measuring anything, it was all done by eye and knowledge gathered over the years of doing the job.

Shustoke Reservoir boat house

Joe Sedgwick at work

The reservoir was a scene of frequent poaching. Not an easy job trying to apprehend people in the dark on your own. The worse incident occurred when we were teenagers. We woke after a windy night to find old car tyres had been put in place all along the boathouse walls, the two boats adrift on the reservoir, and heaped up net, oars and other equipment on the bank. Whoever it was must have been disturbed to have left in such a hurry leaving valuable equipment behind. It was quite unnerving to think that it had all been going on only yards from our garden gate. After this incident the oars were always chained and padlocked up on the staging, likewise the boats.

Life growing up on the reservoir was very idyllic when we were small, but with no car it was restricting as we got older. Shopping was done in Coleshill using the local bus service on either a Friday or Saturday morning. Mum would push the bike down to the end of the lane, leaving it propped up the wall outside Mrs. Nicholson's. We would catch the bus, do the shopping, then when we got off the bus the heavier bags were put on the handlebars of the bike, the lighter ones were carried. This included library books, as there was always a library visit. Other groceries were bought at the village stores or Post Office. The local stores were run by Pete and Val Simpson. They used their big garage on the other side of the main road as storage, now gone and a house built in its place. The village stores closed while I was still in primary school, leaving just the post office, which was run by two elderly sisters. On the sisters' retirement, the post office was bought by Mr. and Mrs. Ripley. They extended it and turned it back into a grocery store and more. There isn't a shop in the village now.

Hams Hall Power Station

Ray Connolly, remembering his work at Hams Hall Power Station in the 1950s

Bring me to Coleshill? Was civil engineering, mostly on major works like Hams Hall power station and the gas works. I worked on Spaghetti, worked on most of them. Hams Hall C was being built, McAlpine was building it like the main contractor and we started doing this foundation work. So they transferred me up here as foreman/ chippy and I ended up in Coleshill. Went to Chiles fish and chip shop, that was the first meal I had, steps up to it. Always remember Chiles, never left his cigarette out of his bl**dy mouth! There was a railing outside and he always used to lean over (imitates smoking) but he always had a cigarette, it wouldn't be allowed now. I had my blokes so we moved them into the hotel here, the next day we went down that's how I landed. They were demolishing the other one, B station, so I ended up there really quite a few years on it, because I was only interested in the foundation works, not the superstructure. Then I went out from C station, the Lurgi there. The Germans developed the Lurgi, the engineering side of the Lurgi we were building. I showed people the first pin, because I used to use the instruments, you know, part of my self-education. One of the pegs had been, oh the date on it was about 1935, something stupid like that, you know, the setting out and I thought blimey o'reilly, this is back in the 50's you appreciate, and that's how long it took before we cut a solid turf there!

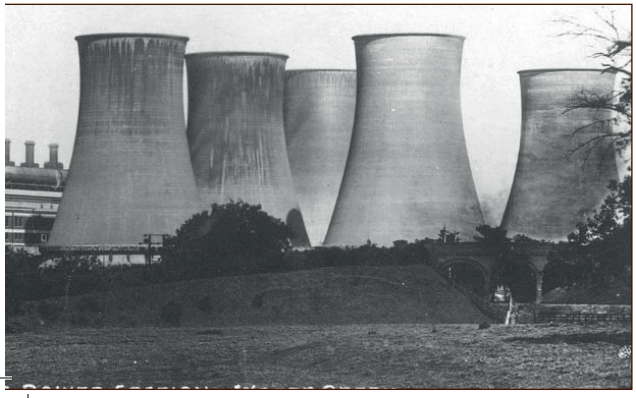
The Lurgi Gas Plant near Coleshill Station

Coleshill Station today

Anne Poole, who worked at Hams Hall

My grandfather, Thomas Hall, was the first family member to work at Hams Hall power station. He cycled from Hockley, Birmingham, every day on his bike to get here. My father, Bertram Hall, was foreman at Hams Hall B, as I think it was, or it could have been A, for many years after a transfer from Nechells power station. This was in the 1950s, he worked to his retirement in 1964. I also worked as secretary to Dr Gillam at the research centre based at Hams Hall from 1961 to 1964. Much research was on finding a use for the pulverised fuel ash, and two researchers whose names escape me were commissioned to do just that. They joined up with Thermalite who were on the Hams Hall site and produced bricks eventually from the ash. The admin section that I worked in had a receptionist, 4 clerical assistants and a manager called Mr Simmonds. All reports and correspondence were from the laboratories we dealt with on site. My father cycled from Castle Brom to get to Hams Hall and I had the luxury of a lift from a colleague, Jean Diddums, in her Robin Reliant car. We had two tea ladies who, morning and afternoon, would provide tea, coffee, toast and cakes and they were also the cleaners. My sister Patricia worked for Thermalite, so our family had our working lives based on the Hams Hall site. Happy days.

During the war, my father had his call up papers for the RAF, and he was scheduled to go to some railway station to go to some RAF base. And he actually got to where he was supposed to be going, and there was a telegram waiting for him to say he'd got to return because he was one of the necessary industries connected with the war. We've actually got the telegram still. He wasn't happy about that. Think he was looking forward to being in the RAF. He worked shifts and I remember my mother used to get quite unhappy that sometimes at 2.00 in the morning there'd be a knock on the door and a young man'd be there, he'd be on his bicycle saying, 'Oh Mr Hall's got to come, we've got a problem at the power station'.



Castle Bromwich Aerodrome 1944

Bob Matthews

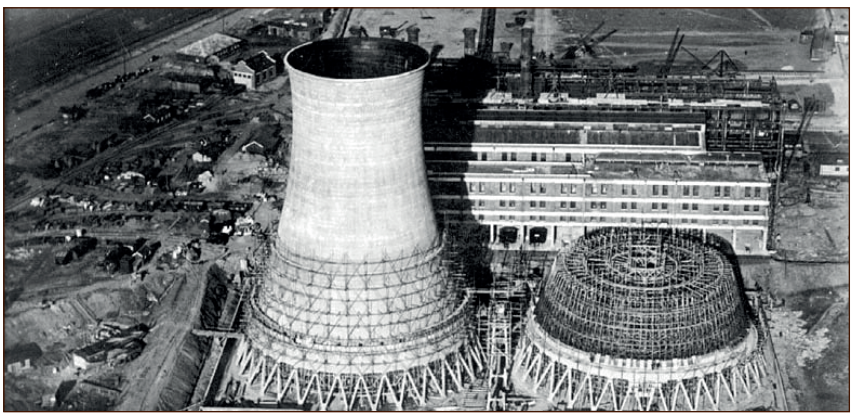
At its height, I think there was 16 cooling towers, and the pilots who were flying into Castle Brom used to use it as a turning point to line up for the runway for Castle Brom. And even when on a cloudy day, because of the vapour coming out of the cooling towers. They knew where it was because the vapour would be coming through the clouds.

Martin Howell tells a ghost story

I did tell you that I used to go to that Lost Valley and I used to fly birds of prey. And one very misty morning I was out there with a friend and we heard a piper, a bagpiper. Now, when you're 5 o'clock in the morning and it's just getting light and it's misty about 3 foot off the ground the last thing you want to hear is a bagpiper. Because you don't know where it's coming from, and I have to say to you it's the only time I got a bit worried that day, because we couldn't work out, when you work out how far Castle Vale was away. Obviously someone who worked at the water treatment works might play bagpipes, and somebody's sent him off down the bottom to play them and the acoustics was pretty good, but it was a little bit ghostly, a little bit eerie, listening to that. A friend of mine, he was going white he was. I'm only mentioning it now because I know I have a good corroboration with a good friend of mine who was actually with me at the time. But if it had just been me on my own I would never have mentioned it. I was that convinced, we did actually go back to check the history of the airfield to see if there was any link. We never ever found any, so we just put it down to some guy kicked out, go and practice your pipes a long way away!

Patricia Southall, known to all as 'Will', memories of dances at the Entertainment Centre at Hams Hall Power Station

They had an Entertainment Centre and dances on Saturday evenings, and I used to sometimes go there. I love dancing, still dance, the oldest disco dancer you've ever met! I remember there was a lady and gentleman and they used to fascinate me. The lady always made her face up very much, wore roses in her hair, and the gentleman wore an evening suit to dancing. Quite unusual, because it was only a little country dance. I mean the other people didn't, I went, you know, in ordinary dancy clothes but they always dressed up and in his evening suit and, yes! Posh dancing!



Barbara Hewer, memories of the cooling towers being demolished

Yes, there were, from what I can remember, there was three, I know they I think pulled two down together, vaguely remembering that, then the last one, I didn't know when it was but it must have been about 1991. But we were interested in having a dog from one of the dog breeders in the village which was a red setter, it got pups but when they pulled the last one down she aborted them, because, I think the noise must have frightened her.

Fishing

Dianne Hazel, brought up at Shustoke Reservoir

From April to October, when he was on Bailiff duty, Dad was at home, as he had to run the Fishery side of things too. He had to open up the car park gates and clubhouse, sign the anglers in and out, sell day tickets and boat tickets and make sure all the fish weights and sizes were recorded, as a membership only allowed you a certain number of fish a day and a quota for the week. He also had to bail out all the boats, and see off any trespassers. The reservoirs were strictly private at this time for pollution reasons, no-one was allowed on the grounds without permission, and there were always plenty of people that tried to walk around it, as you can imagine! Anglers could fish until an hour after sunset, so in summer it meant very late nights for Dad, as he had to wait for the last to leave, search for any that hadn't returned to the clubhouse, lock up and then cycle home. Neither he nor Mr. Freeman drove, it was all done on a pushbike, although at one point Mr. Freeman had a really old fashioned black motorbike. Even when he had a motorbike, he used his pushbike to check on the anglers so they couldn't hear him approaching!

When the Fishery was run by Birmingham Water, it was a very exclusive club. The number was limited, it was expensive, and new members had to be 'put forward for consideration' and voted on. Most were from professional backgrounds and we knew many by name, stopping and chatting to them as we rode past on the horses. With the rise of the car factories and industry in Birmingham, the membership fees became affordable to many more people and the club became more inclusive. There were a lot more local people involved in the sport and more people learning how to fly fish. My Dad had gained lifelong permission to keep horses and ride them on the reservoirs, and for us to walk around the place too. We had to take care when riding or walking past the anglers so as not to get caught by the fishing flies as they back cast! The reservoirs were stocked with trout about a fortnight before the fishing season started, and then re-stocked at points throughout the season. In the winter, the small reservoir was netted by a local coarse fishing association, and any coarse fish captured were taken to a local river and released. Always a noisy day.

Joe Sedgwick and his colleagues clearing Shustoke Reservoir

There would be about 20 or so men, Bailiffs supervising, two boats out on the water and a huge net that was pulled in like a giant tug of war. How successful this was is uncertain as I remember a lot of noise on the water one day, and watched a little grebe pulled under by its legs, never to be seen again, so I presume there was either an extremely large trout or a reasonable-sized pike there somewhere!

Alan Wood

I was handyman at Blyth Hall for 25 years from 1979 to 2004. 1629, the original, but it burnt down, I can't remember when it burnt down but there was only one chimney breast left and they built the rest of the house from that chimney breast. To my knowledge the hall has only flooded once, before that I understand it had never been flooded, but then we only got it in a small cellar which was only a low cellar in the first place. We didn't keep much in there because it was only a very small cellar under a set of stairs for that very reason, because it was so so wet around there.

Blyth Hall has what people call a moat but it isn't a moat, it's called stew ponds, it's where they used to breed the fish to put back in the river so's they could feed themselves because there was no supermarkets and shops, everybody had to live off the land and that's how it worked. As far as I understand they only fed into the river Blythe because there was no way out once they were in there because they had some sluice gates which they used to open and close to keep the water level balanced and presumably the water temperature balanced because the river would be a different temperature to the stew ponds, especially in the summer where one would get too warm because it's not flowing, not moving anywhere.

Conservation

Maurice Arnold, Botanist and Conservationist, remembering his pioneering surveys of nature and the environment in the Tame Valley, carried out with his late brother

It happened that the *Flora of Warwickshire* was being started by Birmingham University and got in touch with them and they wanted to know all about which flowers and trees, bushes and whatever we were finding around Tamworth. So we got on well with those and they brought us along a lot, identifying the rarer flowers and more difficult groups. We contributed a lot to these early surveys. The early work was called *The Computer-Mapped Flora* by Professor Jack Hawkes, B.L. Kershaw and R. C. Readett, and they were all very keen and helpful to me, including Dorothy Cadbury who helped me and brother sort out various things. She was especially keen on pond weeds and my brother found a lot of different pond weeds around Tamworth, Tame Valley river, Tame and tributaries and the canals and pools especially Alvecote Pools which were mining subsidence pools. I was very interested with my brother in preserving these places where we found a lot of different species.

Professor Jack Hawkes

Dorothy Cadbury

Dianne Hazel, brought up by Shustoke Reservoir, recalls the variety of wildlife and wildflowers she saw there in the 1970s

There were foxes, though they were rarely seen, weasels, stoats, hares, rabbits, hedgehogs, mice, lots of rats, grey squirrels and badgers. There was a badger sett just off the end of our paddock, close to where the reed mace grew. As it was decided their digging would disturb the reservoir bank, the badgers were controlled by gassing, sadly. We once found a polecat by the railway crossing. It was too tame to be a wild one, so we caught it and kept it in the greenhouse for a few days, before a friend of the local gamekeeper gave it a home with his other ferrets.

There were the normal wetland birds using the reservoir: mallard; coots; goldeneye, and tufted ducks, along with great crested grebes and little grebes. We had a red necked grebe on the small reservoir for one winter and a great northern diver for a couple of weeks another, much to the delight of the birdwatchers. There were waders in the winter and always the heron, but from the late 70's we had cormorants too. The seagull population seemed to increase every year, especially

Shustoke Reservoir in winter

in the winter months. When the local fields were ploughed when I was very young flocks of lapwings would follow the tractor across the field. Sadly, within 10 years, lapwings had been replaced by seagulls and the lapwings became very scarce.

Among the rarer birds were the lesser spotted woodpeckers that nested in the aspen trees by the tumbling bays, willow tits that would come to the bird table along with the great tits, blue tits, coal tits, long tailed tits and marsh tits. Our resident moorhen 'Millie', as we named her, was one of the strangest sights and always the first to the table in the morning. We had a talking magpie for a couple of years that would sit in the damson tree and repeat 'my name's Jack' several times over while Mum hung out the washing on the line. Much later on we had a green parakeet that flew around in the pine tops. Flocks of bramblings, siskins and goldcrests would fill the alder trees by the river in winter along with fieldfares and redwings that would show up on the bird table when the weather got really cold. There were little owls and tawny owls. A tawny owl used to roost about four feet off the ground in a thicket by the stream between the bridge and tumbling bays. You could get up very close to it as it sat with its eyes shut tight during the day. One night, as my Dad cycled home, he found it caught up by the wing feathers on the barbed wire of the field fence by the bridge. It took about half an hour with a set of leather gauntlets on to unwind it from the wire. Thankfully, it was unharmed and flew away on release.

There were lots of butterflies in the long mowing grass, but the worst insects were the summer gnats. The banks of the reservoirs used to look like they were on fire on summer evenings; the gnat swarms looked just like smoke plumes. It was unpleasant to walk through them and impossible to ride bikes or the horses through. Summer evening rides were always around the local laneways out from the village up Back Lane and on towards Shawbury and Maxstoke. The cowslips carpeted areas of the banks in the spring, along with lady's smock. They were so fragrant, we would pick some and put them in a vase with bluebells from the wood. Dog violets grew in the hedge by the washing line, but the best place to find them was alongside the river at the back of the big reservoir. There were even white ones growing among them. Meadowsweet used to grow amongst the reeds that lined the top of the concrete skirt at the edge of the small reservoir, with yellow bedstraw, yarrow and tansy, clover and trefoils among the mowing grass.

Maurice Arnold, Botanist and Conservationist, remembers his involvement in changing government policy

There was a lot of places threatened, very good places, one of them Alvecote Pools, mining subsidence pools around the river Anker, north east of Tamworth. Brother in particular was studying what was there, a lot of different birds and reeds and whatever there and one of the pools there, the best pool, 12 acres, was to be excavated for opencast coal with two other sites nearby. But we happened to save that, thank goodness, we were very keen on conservation. Fortunately for us, one of the people, birdwatchers, that my brother knew visited Alvecote Pools with his son in law. The man involved (Cyril Hurcomb) happened to be chairman of the new Nature Conservancy Council and chairman of the RSPB, so we were fortunate to know him. He happened to serve as a senior civil servant during the War and after the War. He took it up at high level with the government and then the House of Lords. He made an amendment to the Opencast Coal Act that the opencast coal executive should take notice of the importance of wildlife habitats, the environment, during the course of their duties. That was passed without opposition, I believe, and became law. And shortly after that, the same member of the House of Lords made an amendment to the Central Electricity Generating Board requiring them to take notice of the environment, the natural wildlife that exists there. One of those places was Hams Hall here. This is one of the very first study places, environmental study places in Britain or anywhere really. At Alvecote Pools, the pool in question was saved and that became distinctive really as having the law changed at government departments. Other government departments had to take notice of what the importance was of the landscape and wildlife and take it into consideration. And ever since then, it's burgeoned. The first nature trails in Britain, one of them is at Alvecote Pools. So again, we were, brother and I, involved in an early change in government policy really.

Cyril Hurcomb

Kingsbury

Craig Stevens, who owns the Teacher's House in Kingsbury, on his research on Thomas Coton

I've been living in the Teacher's House for about 15 years now. I've always been fascinated by the history of the Teacher's House. It was built, probably, in the 1630's originally, but the school became endowed in 1686 by a wonderful man called Thomas Coton who left it in his will to create a school for the poor children of the local area of Kingsbury. I'd been fascinated, a couple of years ago, to try and find out a bit more about Thomas Coton, where he lived, by looking through some local maps with my son. I managed to discover that he only lived a mile and half away at a place called Coton Bridge. Looking into the maps, we went over to try and find where his original hall was, and we actually found his hall and the footings of his hall. Thankfully, about 12 months ago, I managed to get a plaque up to show where he originally lived. That's provoked a lot of interest locally about Thomas Coton, where he lived, and a bit more about the history of the man and we've been able to establish quite a bit about the hall itself. Even today, actually, some material was dropped off that illustrated how old his original hall was and it actually looked like it went back to the 1500s.

The Teacher's House, Kingsbury

I think the thing that fascinates me is history and living history. I think, when you've lived in an old property, you've sensed that living history, and what's been lovely about the story is that the history has evolved not just from this house but to the man who inspired it and built it. Increasingly now I'm finding out more about his hall, the footings of his hall . One of the things that's a great shame really is that, it was only uncovered today, is that building was standing in 1989 so, you know, it's a pity it did get knocked down. At least now his hall is recognised, at least the connection between the hall and the house is recognised. It really is a wonderful story of a man who had an ambition to really drive education through the poor people and the poor children around Kingsbury really. There's a reasonable amount known about the school but not a huge amount known about the man, but there are hints you know to the fact that he was quite prominent, you do have a Coton Lane, Coton Hall Fisheries. That's actually where the Coton Hall is and it's really strange that I never made the connection that Coton Hall Fisheries was where his hall would actually be. It really filled my imagination with the fact that from that piece of land where his hall was he could look across to Kingsbury and actually see in his mind where he'd like to have the school. What's great about it now is many people in the village know the connection between the house and the hall and the great history of Thomas Coton and that's fantastic. One thing that I'm very proud of is that I've been part of resurrecting some of that history and legacy of education that's been in Kingsbury village for 330 years.

River Tame

Maurice Arnold, Botanist and Conservationist

The river Tame was one of the most polluted in Britain, probably the most polluted, nothing grew in the river water in those days, water was dead really, so some purification lakes came about, filtered the water through the reed beds, as it filters through several reed beds it gets purer and purer so that started the restoration of the water, improving the quality of the water and it's quite good now. Fishing's quite good now, there was no fish in the 1940's, 1950's.

Bob Jenkins, recalling the area in the 1960s

The dirtiest place I would say was the River Tame, it was really polluted. You could tell, you know, us being country lads going round like fishing and stuff, catching rabbits and whatever. There was hardly any wildlife in the Tame, none at all, polluted, the Cole was dirty, the Blyth was the richest. The River Tame was really brown, black sometimes, industrial from Birmingham.

Patricia Southall, known to all as 'Will'

What I didn't like was that I thought they were snakes and they used to nest where the bridge is in Lea Marston, the snakes nested by the river just at the side of there. I used to walk round the other side thinking I wouldn't see any because I'm terrified of snakes, but you had to keep the dog away because if they fell in it was difficult to get out at that point because it's very steep. Well there was one evidently that lived in the hedge in between the next door neighbour and me but I didn't know and my daughter was riding her bike almost at church and there was one in the road when she was riding her bike because evidently there are quite a few in the environment next to the church where all the trees are. Adders and grass snakes, yes.

The River Tame by Lea Marston Church

Martin Howell

I've known the Tame I suppose running through Brum and it was always a dead river as far as we were concerned so I think it went up through the bottom of the Bromford estate. It come under the motorway, up from the city centre, and then it went out through some land there which is marsh land down the left. I actually used to fly birds of prey, used to fly them down that side which is down the side of the M6, when I was a kid, the M6 didn't exist and it used to be called The Lost Valley, that was our local name for it. You used to be able to walk across before the motorway was there. I suppose I was about 7, 8? Into the Lost Valley, down to the Tame, and obviously got the railway tracks there. Then they put the motorway in, so it put a little bit more restriction in.

As I said, it was always known as being a dead river. Even when I come with my own daughter I suppose, 20 years ago, she come to the environmental centre in Lea Marston and they told us then, yeah it's a dead river. But now it's not. Technology's changed in the way that they do the water treatment element, and talking to one or two fishermen, being a fisherman myself, you do occasionally get pollution. But now it's fished, I believe, right the way up to the settlement lakes, even before then, you know. And if you go down and you look at the wildlife which is on there, the bird life which is on there, well cormorants don't sit around dead water, cormorants sit around water because there's food in them. The same as great crested grebes, they don't sit there because there's nothing there, they sit there cos there's food. So, if you've got that sort of wildlife, and herons, you can still have that smell, but it's become quite a healthy river now I think.

Margaret Stewart

The Tame in Tamworth is very visible, which is nice, it's there for everybody to see but by the time you get to Birmingham you can't see it at all, it's gone underneath culverts and, if someone says there it is, you might be able to look down and see it but you wouldn't necessarily realise that that was the river unless you were told.

Coal mining

Maurice Arnold, Botanist and Conservationist

The need for coal in the Second World War was very great of course and various places, fields all around Tamworth, were excavated for opencast coal for the power stations and so forth which meant the National Coal Board and the opencast executive just had a plot of 100 acres or so to dig up the ground and get the coal and put the land back as it were. It seemed a great shame to brother and myself, such places were lost, some very good habitats were dug up and the coal extracted and the land was just dumped back in higgledy piggledy form. The topsoil was taken off first of course and then the lower layers later and the deeper strata at the end and the coal extracted and then the layers were replaced in any order really and one open cast coal site at Dordon was particularly poorly restored, all boggy and for years and years which wouldn't hardly grow anything. But in time people learned. They learned to put the lower levels of the soil that were extracted they put at the lower levels when they restored it, and the topsoil went back at the top, so that took a lot of time to sort that out and get that restored to good agricultural land again.

Margaret Stewart, remembering Tamworth in the 1970s

When I worked at the hospital, several of our older men were miners, and they used to come into the hospital with their lung diseases, pneumoconiosis, caused by the dust in the mine. Several of the younger generation in Tamworth have fathers and grandfathers who worked in the mines, it was very much a mining town. You just don't see the old miners anymore. After the mines closed the local people were looking for something else to do with Tamworth and they really started pushing it as an historical place, the centre of Mercia and they made a lot more of the castle and so much more tourism which is rather lovely because there's such a lot to see in Tamworth and I think that people do come from far and wide to visit it.

Gravel extraction

Jean Ward, brought up in Bodymoor Heath

During the war, my father built us an air raid shelter in the gravel pit hills. Where they dug the gravel pit out they used to sort of sieve it and get the gravel and the sand and the rest of it. They made big hills, and it skirted our garden and my dad built us an air raid shelter with railway sleepers and then he put all the grass over the top so it just looked like a hill, you know, and we used to go in there when the air raid sirens went. I was in the garden with my mum, I don't know whether it was morning or afternoon, certainly daylight and we saw a German plane come right over us. There were two landmines in the village on Rogers' Farm left but apart from that I don't recall any other bombs but I do remember the landmines.

Robert Williams remembers collecting gravel

Well we didn't go right in, we went as far as where the gravel dumps were where we loaded up our own bags and trailer, so we didn't go right into it, but I should imagine it would be pretty much the same all over. You know, brown, light brown mud, gravel everywhere, lots of water. A right mess. I don't think you'd ever think the place would turn out to be somewhere like Kingsbury Water Park.

Alan Wood, handyman at Blyth Hall for 25 years until 2004

A lot of dust and dirt, yes, even one of the bulldozers managed to knock our fence down, it was that close to our house where we lived, in the cottage! Turning round, he slipped, and we had to have the fence replaced. I was in the house but the fence was what 15 feet away from the house. There was a lot of noise and a lot of dust but once they started extracting the gravel it quietened down quite a bit because they did the bit by the hall first and then moved further afield so they were moving away all the while. Since they took the gravel out and reinstated the ground back to normal, while I was there it flooded twice, that was since the mid 80's to the end of 80s, and I know it's flooded twice since I left but before that my house had never flooded before and that was built in the 50s I think. It took an awful lot of trees down that I didn't think needed to go but they just bulldozed them out.

Blyth Hall

Tamworth

Maurice Arnold, Botanist and Conservationist, remembering his childhood in the Tamworth area in the 1920s and 30s

Bird's Eyes

I was born in 1925 and I've known the Tame Valley and the Tamworth area all my life. I'm one of 5 brothers and sisters, only myself still living. I was born on the old Watling Street at Wilnecote, a house there, miner's cottages, and there were ten others living in a three bedroomed house; one cousin, five of us children, mother and father, and grandparents. In those days there was a lot of poverty about and we had to grow our own food, which we did, had a large garden and grandparents and mother and father were keen on growing things to feed the lot of us. We grew a lot of vegetables, such as potatoes, cabbages, carrots, I do remember. Father was very good at growing celery, for one thing, loads and loads of different vegetables and a few flowers and a little fruit so I got to know which vegetables are which and which fruit was which and the various flowers and we were taught to know which were good species to the gardener or allotment holder and which were pests. Amongst the wildflowers there were little pretty blue flowers called, well, mother called them 'bird's eyes', and when I got an early book on wildlife it was 'speedwells', I found. No mention of bird's eyes so I had to work it out, bird's eyes were speedwells, and I found there were several different kinds of speedwells so that took a bit of sorting out, and from one thing to another I gently, slowly learnt which were different flowers and different plants and got interested in the plants in particular. We were told which birds were a nuisance and which were worth preserving, and we were told not to collect bird's eggs. Well that didn't go down very well! Nearly everyone in those days collected bird's eggs, usually one egg from a nest, but some of our friends took all the clutch of a blackbird, thrush, or a robin. They were early nests of course, before the leaves come on the hedgerows and trees, so

the birds just got used to it and laid another clutch when the cover was better, and they were more successful then. I wasn't very good at bird's egg collecting myself. I remember once taking, probably, a song thrush's egg, putting it in my pocket and squashed it! And that made a mess of my jacket, one of my best clothes, so I got in trouble with that and didn't like bird's egg collecting very much!

Margaret Stewart

When we first moved here in 1973, Tamworth was much smaller than it is now, and it was a small market town and there weren't that many cars on the road so it was very easy to get to where you were going. I worked at Tamworth General at that time and I used to drive from Tamworth General down through the main street up through the arches to Glascote where I lived. It's completely different. Tamworth General Hospital closed some time ago and George Street itself doesn't join up with the Arches any more because the Egg Island has been built. So George Street ends on the Egg Island and Wetherspoons has been built there. To get to the arches you have to get onto the Egg Island from one of the other roads. But there's been so much building since then. Stoneydelph new town was built on the fields where we used to walk our dog in the early 1970s. They were just farmer's fields in those days and we used to walk the dog round the fields.

Where the Egg Island is now, the river Anker regularly used to flood that area, it's a very low-lying area and after heavy rain I couldn't drive down George Street to go up through the arches to Glascote because there was just a great basin of water there. Before they built Ankerside, that was a real problem with flooding in that area. When they built Ankerside they altered the course of the Anker which was supposed to stop a lot of that flooding and I think it did help.

Confluence of the Tame and Anker

The Tudor bridge at Water Orton

Curdworth

Barbara Hewer

I've lived in Curdworth for 43 years, a lot has changed since then, one being the motorway. When we first came to Curdworth, we didn't know the motorway was coming through but then obviously it did and the approach that I used to really like was, I think it's called Coleshill Road, I think that was the original Coleshill Road then it runs into Coleshill Road and then you have Marsh Lane joining it. You used to just pass the traffic lights up where you go to Water Orton, you'd go over the bridge which is over the river, not sure if it's the Tame, and then you turn left at the gateway, still there, and this time of year, September, October, the trees used to start turning, copper beeches down there were just so beautiful. Now you have the approach to the village over the motorway which is, well it's ok, but it's not as it used to be. And also they built Oaklands whereas when I moved there, there was a derelict farm there, all that was open land, so there's been a lot of change in Curdworth.

Lea Marston

Patricia Southall, known to all as 'Will'

I lived in Church Lane for 20 years. I have been left now 6 years, and I live in Fullerton now but I loved it. I was Verger of the church for most of that time and I love Lea Marston church. I used to wash up at Marston Farm where I used to go and eat in well-off days, I used to clean for a lady who lived on the bridge at Lea Marston, you know, there's a bridge there. She's left now and of course I was great friends with the garden centre, Edwards Garden Centre, and really that's my biggest memories. Mrs Edwards was a great worker, and it was her husband actually, who was a councillor, Norman Edwards, who got us the house in Lea Marston. So, my dearest memories were working in the garden centre. It was sold and there's some beautiful houses there now and my oldest daughter has just gone to live in the Norman Edwards Close.

Lea Marston Church

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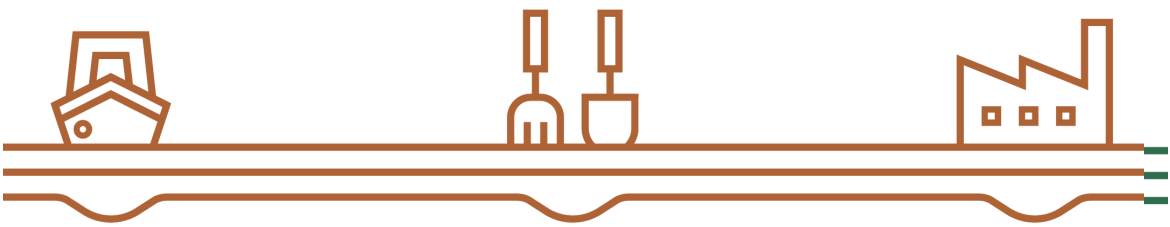

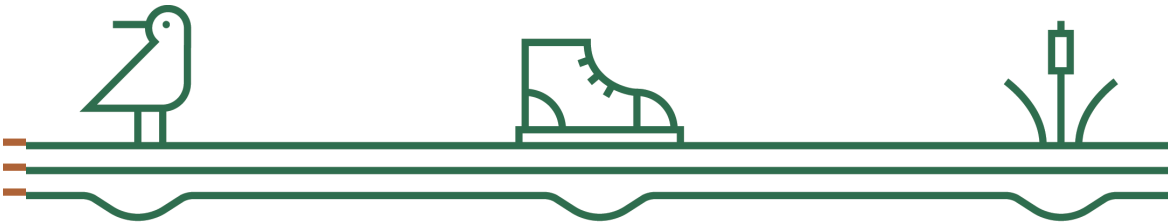

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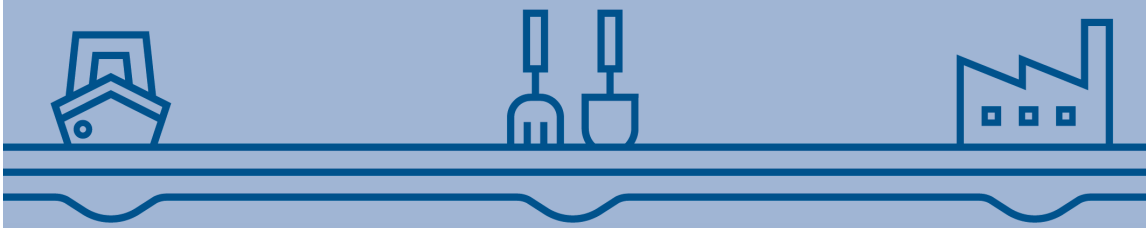

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