

November 2023



## *Out of season begins...*

No sooner have we shut the nursery gate, the out of season work is back underway. We have finally been able to get some hard landscaping done but the weather is once again causing problems...



## *Stop-start*

We have not had a good weather window at the nursery now for almost two years so our project work has stalled.

This has been so deeply frustrating, not least of all because the trees are still awaiting planting and the fencing is stacked at the ready. Our nursery sits on pretty decent soil but not far under the surface is heavy clay. This acts as a sponge during wet weather and like granite when dry. Consequently, the soil conditions need to be optimal to do any significantly heavy landscaping without causing long-term damage to the soil structure. It is also really difficult to physically work with soil that is too wet or dry.

As October approached we realised the soil was at just that right level of moisture for us to be able to start work on the reservoir banks so we hired in a digger, dumper and land rake and rolled up our sleeves for some major soil shifting – Roy on the dumper and David on the digger:



## *The nursery reservoir*

We moved to Mickfield in 1975, the year before the famous drought of '76.

It became very quickly apparent that if we were to use the land we would need an effective watering system to augment natural rainfall. We were aware that our weather tends to follow cycles but those cycles have been disrupted more and more with the effects of climate change over recent years.

The reservoir was dug out gradually over a few years, when we had the equipment and time combined. Eventually the little crawler Robin was using disappeared from view and he needed to get a JCB in to finish the work and dig down to the water table. The soil was banked up around the edge of the reservoir to create more capacity.

Robin was then able to pump water in from the ditch when

The first week was spent clearing accumulated rubble and rubbish from around the reservoir. We had a rubble stack running the length of the eastern bank of the reservoir, which has been annoying us for a number of years – it has finally been removed!

In its place we have a gently sloping bank to support the root system of the two self-sown field maples, which have grown into the top of the bank over the past few years – see photo below:



It wasn't an easy task removing the rubble. David had to break it up and move it from underneath the two field maples so a grab could pick it up. We had toyed with the idea of crushing it for footings to extend our workshop but there was way too much of it. In the end it took nine lorry loads to remove – around 80 tonnes worth.

It seems quite incredible that so much had built up over the past 30+ years and it was like a potted history of events at the nursery. There were old concrete gabions Robin had made as pole supports for tunnels, the old bungalow chimney, my old bathroom tiles, and that was just the identifiable stuff. There was also a massive heap of rubble at the north-east corner of the reservoir where Robin had had repeated attempts to plug a leak in that part of the reservoir bank – see side column for more about the reservoir.



required, and out using a system of pipes fed into the far end of each tunnel. He constructed benching that was gradually sloped with dammed sections that allowed the water to flow over and fill each section as it flowed downhill to the front of the tunnels.

This system worked well for several years, the only issue was a leak in the north-east corner of the reservoir bank. Robin believed it was a result of soil compaction as he moved in and out of the reservoir with the crawler prior to getting the digger in to finish the work. The newly dumped soil probably failed to knit in with the compacted clay causing the bank to leak when the water level was high enough.

It hasn't been a problem for many years as the water level struggled to reach that point when we were no longer able to abstract water from the ditch to fill it over winter.

The ditch that runs along our northern boundary feeds into the start of the river Deben at Debenham, 2.5 miles downstream from Mickfield. Every winter we pumped water from this ditch to top up the reservoir but for at least the past decade we have been unable to do this as the rainfall totals were insufficient to make the ditch 'run'. Until the ditch can run with water for at least a week or two Robin would not be happy to start extracting water, as it had the potential to contain anything leaching through the surrounding farmland.

We have had a couple of wet winters since but the reservoir

It is quite difficult to envisage the amount of soil we moved during the week but the bank either side of the field maples is now gently sloping down to ground level so we should be able to keep it clear from undesirable vegetation in future. The photo below shows the view from the top of the north-east corner of the reservoir, still a nice view across open farmland:



The southern bank has been removed to around two foot above ground level (see the banner photo at the head of the newsletter) so we can gain access to begin clearing out the reservoir again. We did this all a few years ago but it is amazing how quickly the wildlife recolonises the space – photos below and on right:



#### **Dead trees**

During the week and a half we had the equipment we retrieved a lot of the trees we felled over the past two years to satisfy demand for logs. We have been busy moving tonnes of stumps, thick branches and trunks back to the top of the nursery drive for processing. We still have around 20 trees left to fell but they are all in the far north part of the field and it will help us to stagger the amount of wood we need to store. We would still like to create some bio char from some of it but there is way too much for us to process in this way, hence selling some at the gate.

became so choked with vegetation that used most of the water.

When we were able to abstract water to top up the reservoir, it teemed with life and we had koi carp in there inherited from my uncle. The water used to 'boil' when we walked down the pontoon walkway to feed them. They were wonderful but we lost them to mink or otters over the course of one winter, sadly.



We aim to turn the reservoir from an important functional tool to a more accessible landscape whilst hopefully still supporting a diverse wildlife population.

Back in 2018 I shared a plan to cultivate the inside of the reservoir into a hidden garden, [see website](#), but the recent changes to more extreme weather patterns mean the space would be very difficult to maintain. The water level in the reservoir is no longer consistent and these fluctuating levels means the space needs to be able to flood, or dry out completely, and

### **Live trees**

The clearance we did before felling the trees on the western boundary was kept under and so we have decided to start planting trees nearer to the nursery, and leave the far end of the field to clear at a later date.

We don't have a planting plan and will look at each individual tree, and its requirements, before selecting where to plant it. This is a deviation from the plan originally to create a winding ditch through the field and planting either side. We might do this at some point in the future but we do really need to get the trees in the ground as they have been in grow bags for two years longer than anticipated.

Once again the weather is having a say in the matter though. We had originally planned to hire the equipment for at least two weeks to finish smoothing off all the banks and perhaps tackle the west bank, next to the boundary. However, the weather changed so everything was taken off hire after 8 days. There was no point in churning up the ground just to try to complete the work, instead we will hire again if it ever stops raining.

Over the past two weeks we have gone from ideal conditions to having more rain than the ground can process. Once again we have to be flexible and work with what we have whilst near neighbours are having a disastrous time battling floods – see side column.

During the 8 days of hire it was so unseasonably warm we were working in t-shirts and were lulled into a false sense of security and, as I sit in my office writing this newsletter, I do feel a little despondent over the weather. I do remember having a career that wasn't weather dependent but then this is one of the few downsides to working outdoors – there are still so many upsides.

We will keep you up to date with the nursery work over winter and keep our fingers crossed for better conditions.

Next month we revisit the topic of pest control. Lenore reports on problems she has faced this year, which have proven much harder to cope with than some modest snail damage.

Speak soon,

**Team Mickfield Hostas**

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develop its own ecosystem rather than try to impose one on it.

### **Flooding in Debenham and Framlingham**

Less than two weeks ago Debenham and Framlingham suffered their worst flooding in over 30 years. The water couldn't escape the catchments quickly enough as over 18 hours of steady torrential rain fell on the area.

Our local rivers are in such a woeful state they are unable to cope with such deluges. Once stretches of these rivers were navigable quite a way inland but many have been reduced to a trickle over the years. In addition, many flood plains have been developed on without the implementation of mitigating schemes to deal with extreme flooding events.

The river Deben is tiny from Debenham through to Woodbridge and the miniscule flood plain wasn't able to soak up the water in time to prevent flooding. The run-off from the fields combined with the faster flowing run-off from the developed land and quickly overwhelmed the village.

As I write this newsletter storm Ciaran is threatening to dump yet more rain on us.

Our thoughts go out to all victims of flooding – the after effects of which can last years. It puts our grumbles about the weather into perspective.