

# John Bodger's map

**(November 2018 – Cambridgeshire Archives, Shire Hall, Cambridge<sup>1</sup>)**

A copy of John Bodger's map of Whittlesea Mere, held by Cambridgeshire Archives in Shire Hall, was carefully placed in front of me, beside more requested items, upon a wooden bench that fills much of the room. The intense quiet of the place, focused on scraps left by the past, now belongs itself to a lost world; a cloister of obsession, everyone lost in their own forgotten stories. Bodger's map, covered, at first, in brown paper, was printed on silk, held across a large board, three feet wide. The silk has yellowed, frayed and ripped but every mark was sharp and clear, etched carefully with a hard sharp pen. Bodger must have been an intense meticulous man, creating such fine lines that his head must have been held constantly close to the page as he worked. This copy hung on the walls of Ely council for many years before it was moved to the archives.

John Bodger, who lived in the Stilton village, only a few miles to the west of Whittlesea Mere, was commissioned to create the map by the Earl of Sandwich in 1786 when the lake was still at its finest; the heart of life in Huntingdonshire.

Miniature anchors, finely drawn on the map, mark the spots where depth soundings were made, mostly five or six feet deep, shallow enough for the entirety of the lake to have been filled with light on clear, bright days. As Bodger leant out and looked down at the bed, the boat would have rocked constantly and created waves that would have cast small runs and turns of gathering light on the bed that would have moved as fast as the fish that evaded them. As Bodger's leant out and looked down, rope in hand, his shadow would have crossed these waves. On windy days he would have noticed the silt rise or blooms of algae would have come and gone, each bringing their own smells and colours.

Beyond the heart of the mere, the map shows rings of lines, each one denoting a depth - four, three, two feet - then close to the west shore is Gosling Island, nothing more than a group of reeds, marked by a small cluster of pen strokes. Looking across the map, I noticed the group of masonry stones, engraved on the bed, close to the curve of the south shore. Abandoned during a storm, I'd read, they were lost from a boat en route to

Peterborough, remaining in this place on the bed for the next one or two centuries, before they were moved to a farm yard where they still rest today. Beside the shore are reed shoals, marked by a mass of pen strokes; every fine line marks a reed and, by the mere, are pumps, bays, mills and headlands.

Because much of the shore was deep in reeds, John Bodger's survey was undertaken by a small boat that could row up the lodes and bays or drift between them. A fisherman from the mere would have held the oars and carefully pointed out all the things he saw. The survey took a few weeks, exploring all the points marked on the map, the boat filled with lots of equipment, weights, ropes and stakes; the very things that I know, from experience tangle up, move and trip you up in a small boat like this. He probably took hundreds of compass bearings and measured many more distances, marking fixed points with stakes, painted white and tall to be visible from the far side of mere, allowing him to compare them to known locations such as St Peter's church in Yaxely and St Giles' in Holme, in the distance. Bodger carefully wrote notes in his book, the paper marked by splashes thrown up by the oars.

Looking at John Bodger's work, reminded me of a map of Grafham Water, a reservoir ten miles away to the south, a bathymetric map that shows the topography of the bed, equally detailed its own way. I spent four days in April 1998, collecting sonar measurements in a small rowing boat, traced on a turning reel of paper, then, like John Bodger, carefully spent a few weeks transforming them to the map that still rests in a box near my desk. The survey required me to go back and forth across the reservoir in a series of thirty-five transects north to south then more along its length east to west, approximately sixty-five kilometres travelled, although, unlike Bodger, I had the advantages of an outboard engine. We started early each day and continued to late, navigating past every feature of the reservoir, each headland and bay, Savages Creek, Dudley Creek, Gaynes Cove and the spire of Grafham church and, even now, twenty years later I can draw an outline of Grafham Water almost perfectly from my mind's eye on a blank sheet of paper. Whittlesea Mere was double the size of Grafham Water so without electronic devices or an outboard, Bodger must have spent much more time completing the survey and no doubt came to know it just as well.

He probably met his guide at Holme then took the boat down to Port Sandwich via the mile long Holme Lode, on the south west side of the mere, carrying his food and tools. The fishermen's sailing boats moored there, alongside boat huts where fish lines were kept and nets were hung out for repair. Perhaps, at first, they used a sail boat to see the whole mere, where Bodger took soundings in the open water by lowering a rope with a wide heavy weight from the side, only five or six feet deep, much less than Grafham Water's fifty near the dam. During my own survey, I made soundings with a metal weight which showed on the sonar trace and let me calibrate the depths. Perhaps Bodger would have sailed close to the shore, around Swere point then made his way to the outlet of the Old River Nene, onward to Bevill's Leam then the north shore to Conquest Lode where the River Nene joined the mere, continuing then past Yaxley Lode to Port Sandwich, the journey taking most of the day as he made his notes and decided what to do next. Because the land each side of the mere was so unerringly flat and the reeds so high, the view would have been made up entirely of the breadth of the mere and wider breadth of fen sky and between these, a fringe of the reeds. The church spires of the Holme and Yaxley rose from these reeds. The expanse of great lakes like Whittlesea Mere and Grafham Water are theatres of the weather, playing out its various moods. Even on a grey, calm day, every hour can see a change, the slightest shift in the breeze roughs up the waves in new ways and the patterns of light change with the clouds and the light turns as the sun traverses the sky. On windy days, the change can be swift, as the wind and currents fight to turn the waves their way and the fetch meets the geography of the shore, and sudden squalls can rise up in the Fens and overturn all this - washing the light clean once more - changing just as fast into a hard, cold rain that can soak you the skin. During his work, Bodger surely must have seen all of these moods. Throughout the survey of Grafham Water, an unremitting wind made it hard to keep on course and after being there all day, my exposed skin grew hard and raw with the cold of the spray.

Accuracy wasn't Bodger's only aim; he was also tasked with creating a beautiful object to adorn the walls of houses, public spaces and inns to advertise the fishery, hunting and sailing on the mere. Perhaps it hung alongside stuffed fish and birds, shot and caught in the same bays that

Bodger drew on the map. His Whittlesea Mere map was advertised for sale in newspapers and sold for the sum of one guinea.

Briefly, I looked up from the map, and went back to the dull light of the archives. My making of notes was the one thing I could hear in the room's perpetual quiet. Only fragments from the past can find their way to the archives; the detritus of the rest is lost and gone and, with them, we lose a multitude of stories; successes and loss, sadness and joys, births and departures, unimaginable numbers of things that are gone, all moved to landfills or burnt in fires, and, within the calm of the room, we bear this gathering of loss. A similar fate comes to most of us of course, we will be forgotten and all of the things we own will soon be gone. I lowered my head; proceeding to look at the map where a wave caught the boat and turned it sideways to face the wind.

I haven't seen a picture of John Bodger; it's unlikely there is one, but still an impression has grown in my mind of an earnest, stern, sharp man; the intricate care of his map leads to this view, whereas the meaning of 'bodger' conflicts with this (a person who makes or repairs things poorly or clumsily). Consequently, another view has grown in my mind of a disorganised man; someone who liked to talk and crack a joke but could still concentrate hard on one thing when there was work to be done. Many perfectionists I've known have been this way; messy most of the time, but otherwise, owning a clear, sharp mind. I discovered later that the term 'bodger' also refers to a man who turns beech wood to make chairs; first softened to make it bend, and this changed my view of him once more.

After he surveyed the open water and sketched a rough map of the lake, Bodger must have turned to the shore that makes up most of the map's fine details, carefully making his way round the ten or so miles of reed fringed shallows. During my survey of Grafham Water, we ran the boat along the entire length of the shore to create the one-meter line on the map, the shallowest depth at which the sonar could be used, which took us hours, taking care not to hit the bed with the keel of the boat. Bodger marked each detail of the lodes and drains, sometimes rowing up them to find the boundary of the mere, deep in reed. The survey began, no doubt, at Port Sandwich, then, after loading the boat, they rowed up the west shore past Caldecott and Stilton dykes that connected the mere to the Great North

Road, along which fish, fowl, reed and turf could be sent on their way to Peterborough, London and Huntingdon. Between these dykes was White Pit, a broader, deeper channel that ran into Trundle Mere, a smaller water body, a hundred acres in size, hidden by deep reed. It attracted huge flocks of wildfowl, especially when the wind was strong and the large mere was choppy. Savages Creek on the west side of Grafham Water forms a like haven of calm when the wind blows. Bodger's map only marks the edge of Trundle Mere; a separate fishery and beyond the scope of his work. As Bodger made his notes, hundreds of gulls and terns would have swooped around the boat, and, beneath him, he would have seen streams of fish in the weeds.

After this, the boat turned up the west shore, past more lodes, then met Foleotes point where the cut was made to drain the mere, then moved to Arnold's Mouth, where the muddy water of the River Nene flowed down Conquest Lode, carrying boats from the north. A yachting club is marked on Bodger's map close to this point.

Along the northern shore was a long bank that cut off the mere from the heavily drained land of Farcet Fen to the north and Bodger might have recorded bearings there; including the great stone spire of Peterborough cathedral then gone on to view the two miles of the bank; its trees and windmills drawn there on the map. Perhaps he then went back to the yachting club to stay the night or moved on to Frog Hall, a large house, a hundred or so yards to the east.

The silence in the room held me in its spell for hours. Although it was so different to the mere, it was immersive in its own way. Archival records are generally dull; business ledgers or lists but, every now and then, you find an entirely human thing; a diary or letter that brings back a clear, sharp circumstance or point in time, and Bodger's map did this for me. Beside me, I noticed a man and wife; an elderly couple. Looking up, I saw his face becoming flushed and red, then saw his eyes had filled of tears. He was studying the thing he'd found. I didn't know what it was; perhaps a newspaper or letter that he'd tried to find for hours

The northern shore was fringed by reeds that ran the length of the bank, interrupted by a wide drain that met the turning sails of a wind pump that transferred water from Farcet Fen to the mere. Beyond the shore, was the

entrance to Bevill's River, an embanked drain that stretched out to the east. Constructed in 1631 it took the flow of the mere through the vast drained landscape to the east. Like Grafham Water, this exposed eastern shore was usually devoid of weeds.

Bevill's Leam ran between tall banks, so they might have moored up in the sheltered mouth of this drain to climb the side to look out at wide arc of Whittlesea Fen to the east and, beyond, they could see reeds that marked Ramsey Mere. The wooden towers of the wind pumps, holding white rotating sails rose there, turning to face the wind; many of them in the disappearing distance of the flat lands. Because the drainage had long suffered as the peat sank and the rivers were deep with silt, the land was waterlogged at this time, and patches of sedge and reed grew by fields of barley. Whittlesea Mere and its marshes, even in 1786, were the last disappearing relics of the old wet fens

Looking west from the high bank, Bodger could see the three-mile width of Whilltesea Mere, shaded by clouds or darkened by hard rain or a slow gathering mist fell on the mere or sometimes the sun came through and the surface glared but, later on, the wind broke this up and left an arc of scattering pieces or many of these things could be seen at the same time across the view.

During the time Bodger was there, fishing boats could be seen on Whittlesea Mere, night and day; also pleasure boats owned by the aristocracy, sailing through the mere and, each year, there was a great regatta; a spectacle of races that took all day, with boats of all size and colour.

Detailed surveys like Bodger's, entail hours and hours of cold, and sheer tedium, during which you soon find you run out of things to say, and you enter a strange calm in which no-one needs to say a word. During my time on Grafham Water work; after twenty or more transects, time ran slow and exposure to the cold wind numbed my mind as well as the skin and, though, twenty years have passed since then, these times are clear to me now; the aching cold of the spray had its own smell and this sank down deep in my memories of the time.

They travelled down to Johnston's Point where a small croft is marked on Bodger's map; perhaps they'd stayed the night there to put off the long return trip home. Beyond this point, they came to the fall of the mere, entering the old course of the River Nene. Before Bevill's Leam was built, the waters of the mere flowed this way, then moved down to their long twisting route through the fens, passing through smaller Ugg Mere and Ramsey Mere, before they made their long way to the sea. The marsh-men constructed weirs to trap eels there each year when they set off on their migration back to the sea.

The final stretch on the south shore was made up of a deep shoals of reeds, hundreds of yards wide. Bodger carried on past Swere Point then, a long peninsular that stretched to the heart of the mere, then came a wide bay, approaching Port Sandwich, an expanse marked as 'weedy' on the map; probably full stonewort, or hornwort in dense beds. Grafham Water was always much too turbid to support these plants but at Rutland Water and Pitsford Reservoir, they would grow in great wide beds in such dense profusion that the lake's surface would look like hard ground as if you might easily step out and of the boat cross them on foot. The air had the thick, pungent smell of them.

The final tail end of the work would have used up the rest of the time – a horizontal transect at Grafham Water; a downward bend of the mere, the numerous dykes that met the shore, each full of reeds, or one more chain measurement, ropes pulled, depths marked, notes drawn, Kirting Docking, Rhymes Reedbed, Gaynes Cove, Frog Hall, Savages Creek, and more missed details.

Balladers Hole, Girls Pit, Burnt Cote, Rookery, Sir Gideon's, Plantation, The Rood, Alderheard, Reedhill are examples of the hundred or so places named along the shore of the mere.

Finally, they arrived back at Port Sandwich with books full of notes and measurements. After several days, Bodger and his guide would have parted company; perhaps a long, warm hand shake; spending so long in a small cluttered boat, surely, they talked of the rest of their lives. I was once accompanied through Ranworth Broad in Norfolk by a marsh-man, the closest we might find these days to the boatmen of Whittlesea Mere. After crossing the broad; he took me up the River Bure. His face was a dark

seasoned brown from his thousands and thousands of hours in the sun. In the thickest of Norfolk accents; he pointed things out to me as he stood above me at the back of the boat; told me how things had changed; that summer the reeds had spread and would soon start to form scrub; the river ran high that year, the movement of the tide was less marked; a male otter could be seen by that long bank; a kingfisher perched on that long hanging branch most days; the silt was deep; the bank was hard by the meander where the tide liked to turn.

Bodger may also have gone to some of the places near the mere by foot, particularly to the north and east, although the open fen to the south was difficult to reach and was made up of things too small to go on a map, cotton grass, rushes, grass and sedge.

After the survey work was over, Bodger must have spent days at home, translating the numbers and notes into his map. I also spent much time digitising the hundreds of yards of sonar traces and turned them into my bathymetric map. In addition, panels on the right side of the map show Whittlesea Mere's place in Eastern England, and to the left is a long list of sailing distances from Port Sandwich to all the points on the mere, Bevill's Leam, Foleotes Point, Swere Point, as well as distances to places further afield through the rivers, leams and drains that cross the Fens as far as Wisbech and King's Lynn. Written below the map is an account of the history of the mere from Medieval times to 1786, written in such fine lettering, I had to move so close to the map to read the words, and tried to imagine the smell of the ink from his pen.

In the corner of the map is inscribed, *The Beautiful Fishery of Whittlesea Mere in the County of Huntingdon ... most respectfully inscribed to the Nobility and Gentry by the much obliged and most obedient and humble servant, John Bodger.*

Before leaving the archives, I took one last look at the map. Although reproductions can be found, most of these are small and have lost its marvellous details. Its beauty is lost too; the immense skill and care of its creation, as well as the sense of the man who had worked so long with painstaking care.



The archivist brought other items of interest for me to examine. These included petitions from the 1830s by local people against the planned draining of the mere.

The bathymetric survey was the last time I went out on Grafham Water, after hundreds of sampling trips over close to eight years.

John Bodger died in 1843 at the age of 90.