

Villagers create an idyllic pond from a squalid patch of mud



Sticklebacks swim in the village pond at Hempstead, near Saffron Walden. A kingfisher comes looking for fish, and children paddle there searching for tadpoles.

Planting primroses around the village pond are, left to right: Sian Weedon, Sarah Graham and Michael Weedon.

Nothing special about that—except that a little while ago the pond was a muddy, overgrown rubbish tip. An eyesore which split the village down the middle, and almost disappeared under a bulldozer.

The fight started when some of the villagers said it was dangerous and unsightly and should be filled in. Conservationists in the village took up the cause. A village meeting was called, an earlier decision to fill in the pond was reversed and the conservationists found themselves with a lot of work to do.

“When we first started it was just a mass of long grass and thick mud and garden rubbish—it was just a rubbish dump,” said Mr. Alan Weedon, of the Hempstead Village Society, who have done most of the work on the pond.

A Saffron Walden contractor, Mr. R. A. Jossaume, gave them his digger and some turf “for a much too small sum.” The parish council allocated them £50, naturalists from the regional office of the Nature Conservancy gave them encouragement, and they set to work.

They cleared the rubbish, filled in a hole in the bank, laid clay on the bed and turfed the banks. Later, they brought fish and water plants.

“The sticklebacks we got from Sampford—and they’ve thrived,” said Mrs. Margaret Slee, a primary school teacher and an ardent conservationist.

“It’s got its first batch of tadpoles this year, and a kingfisher’s been seen frequently.”

The pond is fed by a nearby spring, said to be rich in sulphur. Last summer, during the drought, it kept the pond at Hempstead full of water while ponds for miles about were dry.

As the rubbish dump began to emerge into a fully fledged pond, village support for the scheme grew. “You’ll always get objections whatever you do,” said Mr. Fred Wilson, a parish councillor. “But no one’s got anything against it now. It’s improved the amenities of the village.”

There is still much to be done. This weekend, children planted wild primroses on the banks of the pond.

The village society are already at work on enlarging it further and making it deeper—hoping for bigger fish and perhaps attracting some ducks.