

Trouble with the WATER WORKS

*Hatty Willmoth on the
Surbiton wetland row
threatening to burst its
banks*

Seething Wells is an odd name for a place. It seems to invoke images of inhabitants stamping their feet with rage around communal bodies of water. Ridiculous as that image may be, the people of Seething Wells, just west of Surbiton, have much to be angry about – and yes, water is involved.

The Seething Wells Filter Beds were originally built in the 19th century to treat sewage. Waste would filter through a series of pools, or 'beds', cleaned naturally by sediment, until fresh water entered the River Thames at the end.

When it was eventually decommissioned in the early 2000s, the beds became a haven for wildlife.

What had once been a cog in the machine of London's sewage system became a beautiful manmade wetland, attracting swans and ducks as well as rarer birds, reptiles, and plenty of bats. The 14 acres of still water provided a haven for creatures in need of respite from the tidal Thames.

But today, visitors and new residents alike would be forgiven for dismissing the filter beds as an eyesore, characterised by litter, weeds, broken chain fences, barbed wire, and paint peeling off tired iron railings. Water levels have fallen dramatically, leaving little for swans to swim on.

In recent years, the very existence of these filter beds has come under threat. Back in 2012, a planning application was filed to develop the site – rejected due to the filter beds' status as Metropolitan Open Land (MOL) and a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC).

Since then, some locals have accused current owner Cascina Ltd of neglecting the filter beds in pursuit of permission to build (something Cascina stringently denies).

An impassioned campaign to protect



Seething Wells reimaged by local artist



Sarah Onions, a member of Seething Wells Action Group

the site grew in 2020, when Sharron Sumner – at the time a Green Party councillor for Kingston – set up a petition to Save Seething Wells, receiving 10,000 signatures in a few months.

Now, the Seething Wells Action Group (SWAG) continues to work towards the filter beds becoming a nature reserve.

Sarah Onions is one of about a dozen members of SWAG. About a decade ago, she reported on the beds herself as a broadcast journalist for Radio Jackie, but is now the group's media officer.

On her first week in the job, she says there was a sighting of a hoopoe – a striking rare bird – in Seething Wells, that she was able to present to London's media.

"That was a very happy thing to start on," she says.

Sarah loves wild swimming and gardening, and learnt to love Seething Wells through her dad.

"He moved here to [Surbiton] in the 70s," she

says, "and he used to tell me about the bats flying above the house in the summer. I think I got my love of that from him.

"If nothing else, he would be so upset to think that the species of birds and bats would have been destroyed on the site if it was paved over."

In pursuit of turning the filter beds into a protected nature reserve, SWAG has been trying to facilitate conversation between the council, advisory groups, and owners Cascina.

"The landowner is willing to engage with members of the community," says Cascina's spokesperson, Sean Reardon:

“**WWT**
supports
wetlands
right where
people live”

"(It) has met with members of the council planning team, planning committee and even a member of SWAG."

Last year, Wimbledon Magistrates Court ordered Cascina to carry out overdue maintenance work to help improve the condition of the site in action brought by Kingston Council.

Sarah is hopeful that a solution will be found, adding: "We've actually offered to see if we could find someone who wants to buy the site, ideally an environmentalist and a naturalist with some money. Who knows? We are trying to be on the best foot forward now."

Most recently, Sarah says the group are proud of the discussions they've had with the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT), a representative of which recently visited Seething Wells.

Senior project manager Andy Graham says: "I was invited by the SWAG to have a look at the old Thames Water supply reservoir that they hope can be transformed into a fantastic wetland resource for people and wildlife in the heart of London.

"On behalf of WWT, I think their vision for a place where people can get up close and personal with reedbeds, ponds, wet woods, marshes and all the wetland wildlife that will surely come is fantastic.

"WWT supports their vision of creating wetlands right in the places where people live and we're happy to help them in their quest."

Nor must we simply image this vision. Back in the spring, SWAG commissioned a local artist to show how the filter beds could look if maintained as a nature reserve: a waterworld secure on its axis; an urban oasis of calm.

Who could be angry with that?