

SGI 37 Reinstatement of Constable's Branch Hill Pond

London Borough of Camden, Hampstead Heath, adjacent to Branch Hill, NW3
Grid reference: TQ 260 862

Constable's Branch Hill Pond

Many will be familiar with John Constable's paintings of the Branch Hill Pond. He painted over 20 versions, all of them while living in Hampstead between 1819 and 1837. Some of the paintings show sand-digging on this small portion of Hampstead Heath. They were quarrying the Bagshot Sand which covers the top of Hampstead Heath and although there is no direct evidence of the quarry, a trained eye can detect a bite out of the hillside above the pond. Although the wide views from the top of the slope painted by Constable are now mostly obscured by buildings and trees, there is still a small view to the west between the houses on Branch Hill. In 1889 the pond was filled in.



John Constable 1820-22
Hampstead Heath with Harrow in the distance © Tate

www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-hampstead-heath-with-harrow-in-the-distance-n01237



John Constable, 1828 © Victoria & Albert Museum (Hampstead Heath with sand digging in the foreground)

http://media.vam.ac.uk/media/thira/collection_images/2006AR/2006AR0987.jpg

Reinstating the Branch Hill Pond

The reasons for reinstating the pond were two-fold. First, to attenuate rainwater to help prevent flooding by overflowing sewers further down the hill, and second, to increase biodiversity on this part of the Heath. This was a project suggested by Arup who were employed to advise the local Redington Froggnal Association on the location of the natural springs and waterways in the area. Most of these relate to the River Westbourne and it is thought that

the area underlain by the pond may have been a natural spring feeding the tributary that flows down Heath Drive and across the Finchley Road to West End Green and beyond to the Thames; the area of the pond was constantly damp underfoot even in dry weather.

The City of London Corporation, who own and manage Hampstead Heath, were enthusiastic about reinstating the pond as it would increase the biodiversity in this small corner of the Heath. Work of digging the pond began in August 2022 and it became rapidly filled by a thunderstorm before completion, and, surprisingly, the water was retained despite being underlain by soft sand. In Autumn 2023, after another hot summer with temperatures over 40°C, two areas of the pond were dug deeper to provide refuges for wildlife inhabiting the pond. Thankfully the pond had not dried out during the hot weather. Later that autumn a wire fence was erected and the surrounds to the pond planted with 1000 plugs of suitable vegetation. Unfortunately the following April, following a prolonged period of rain the pond flooded to outside the fenced area and it is not clear how many survived. The intention is to clothe the wire fence and provide additional habitat. So far, attenuating the water in the pond has prevented flooding on the Finchley Road and beyond.



The newly dug pond September 2022

Photo: L. Baker LGP



The pond in November 2023

Photo: R. Payne City of London Corporation

The Geology of Branch Hill Pond

Hampstead Heath is underlain by the full depth of the Eocene London Clay Formation (about 100 m thick, including the alternating silty/sandy layers at the top known as the Claygate Member which is about 16 m thick). On top of that lies the 50-million-year-old Bagshot Formation which is sand of varying grain size but usually orangey-coloured from the iron within it.

It is interesting and rather surprising that the both Constable's original pond and the reinstated one retain water, placed as it is, within the Bagshot Sand. Puddling clay was purchased for the reinstated pond in 2022 but a sudden thunderstorm filled the pond before it could be puddled and it has remained filled without it, even in temperatures of 40°+ in summer 2023. It is thought that the pond had been back-filled with London Clay when it was filled in about 1889, and that it is this that has prevented the water from escaping. It is possible that the original pond was puddled to retain the water but there is another possibility. On Sandy Heath, close by, the quarries dating from the 1860s never penetrated the full depth of the Bagshot Sand. It is thought that a layer of iron pan stopped them digging deeper and, in turn, the iron pan is thought to underlie the shallow ponds in that area of the Heath to this day. Samples of the iron pan have been found close by.

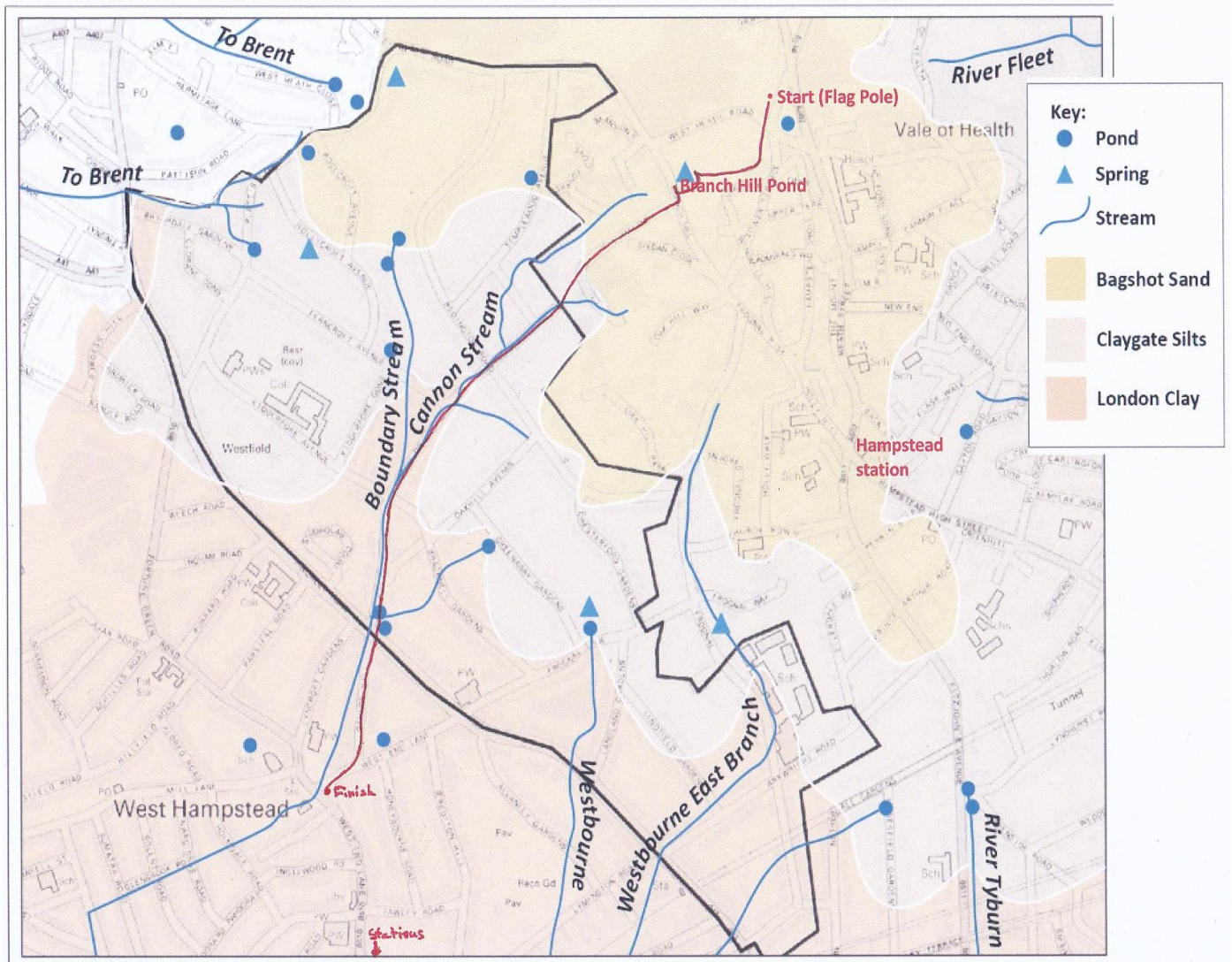
During the planning process for the reinstated pond auguring was made beneath the pond site to a depth of only 3 m and no iron-pan was encountered but that is not to say that it exists at a slightly lower level. Probable Bagshot Sand was encountered at about 2.5 m; the pond itself was dug to a maximum depth of nearly 1 m with a couple of deeper refuges added in 2023. Extrapolating between the pond site and Sandy Heath confirms that the bases of both ponds lie on similar contours (beneath 115 m OD) and so the possibility that a layer of iron-pan prevented Constable's pond from disappearing cannot be discounted.



Wildlife comes to Branch Hill Pond. Photo L. Baker, LGP September 2022

Access

Several buses pass close to Whitestone Pond at the high point on top of the Heath (the Flag Pole is at 134 m OD) and it can also be reached by a 10-minute walk up Heath Street from Hampstead tube station. From the Flag Pole walk south, over West Heath Street and admire what is left of the view from above the pond. Walk down the slope to Branch Hill to view the pond at close quarters. Alternatively it can be accessed from Branch Hill. To continue down this tributary of the Westbourne, turn left up Branch Hill, then first down Heysham Lane and wiggle down past Spedon Close Playground to the top of Redington Gardens, thence via Heath Drive to the Finchley Road.



Sources of the Westbourne in the Redington Froggal area. A combination of maps on the streams and the geology from the report by Dr Adam Broadhead of Arup, combined by Dee McLean. The red line is the route of the Geotrail from the source of the Westbourne to West End Green.