

The Old Pond

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During the late summer of 1993 an interesting item of ephemera was auctioned at Sotheby's. This comprised several pages of close, handwritten MS which was the early draft of a story written by Henry and entitled 'The Pond'. A facsimile of the first page of the MS was used to illustrate this item in the auctioneer's catalogue. In the description it was claimed that the MS, dated 1924, '... would appear to have remained unpublished.'

A brief examination of the sample page soon confirmed however, that this was actually an early draft of HW's delightful tale 'The Old Pond' which first appeared in *The Old Stag* (1926) and is also part of that splendid and evocative collection of nature essays published in 1933, *The Lone Swallows*.

Earlier in the year the then owner of the manuscript (the daughter of Janet Blaxter (née Hollis) who typed for HW at that time) had contacted our Chairman, Will Harris, who in response visited her (and had a delightful time) and was graciously given the opportunity to make a copy of the MS for the Society archives. Thus the committee, myself included, had the great privilege of reading a copy of this early draft manuscript complete with its many corrections and additions, so typical of HW's writing. And when discussing the make-up of this current *Journal*, the editorial team decided all our members should have this opportunity and we are grateful for the copyright permission of the Henry Williamson Literary Estate and the co-operation of the present owner of the actual manuscript, Mick Pyne.

It is quite fascinating to observe how over the years, the author's style had developed and matured, a fact which is clearly demonstrated in the final published version of the story. Readers who are familiar with the tale will recall that it recounts the sad saga of Teonk and Teank, a pair of moorhens who lived on an old mill-pond, fed by the river Ravensbourne. This, of course, is Southend Pond near Catford ('Cutlers Pond' of the *Chronicle* London novels). That familiar landmark of HW's youth still exists and is often visited by Williamson enthusiasts.

The pond has been reduced in size and the swing-boats and roundabouts of Peter Pan's Playground on its banks have long since gone, replaced by a spacious Sainsbury's 'Homebase' Store. The gaily painted small fleet of paddle-wheeled children's boats have disappeared from the waters of the pond. But its small island has survived which, together with resident swans and waterfowl ensures that much of the 'spirit of place' evoked by HW's nostalgic essay still lingers there.

Interesting to note that those ten precious hand-written pages were sold for around £1500!