

DUCK DECOYS

THEIR FUNCTION AND MANAGEMENT WITH REFERENCE TO NYLAND DECOY, CHEDDAR

E. DENNISON AND V. RUSSETT

Decoy ponds were constructed to catch and manage wildfowl, especially ducks, in order to provide a constant and sustainable supply of food. They were an important aspect of the rural economy and were a valuable asset to any landowner. Despite this, the subject has received little attention in the past and this paper will attempt to reiterate some of the processes involved, bring together much of the available literature, and give an account of one specific decoy.

1. DUCK DECOYS (E. Dennison)

Introduction

A duck decoy is an artificially created or modified pool of water, usually square or rectangular in outline, with one or more curving ditches called pipes leading from it. Wildfowl were encouraged onto the pond and then lured up the pipes to be netted. The pond is typically between 30m and 300m across and was constructed simply by digging out the original land surface to a relatively shallow depth, usually not more than 1m. Occasionally natural ponds or lakes, canals, fishponds and ornamental ponds were modified for use as decoy ponds. The main species that were caught were mallard, teal and wigeon, although many other types of wildfowl were also trapped.

Although interest in decoys dates mainly from the 19th century, there are some earlier accounts. Stukeley, for example, describes a decoy at Holbeck in Lincolnshire together with a superb diagram (Stukeley 1776, 18–19 & plate 2) but it was not until 1886 that a full and well researched discussion was provided by Payne-Gallwey. In this he reviews the past literature, details many aspects of the construction and use of a decoy, and provides a county-by-county gazetteer of ponds in Britain and Holland. As this volume is now almost unavailable it may be useful to provide a summary of the methodology involved, although short descriptions have been provided by Bateman (1971, 147–150) and Cook & Pilcher (1982). In addition, Ley (1977) gives an excellent synopsis of the construction and use of a decoy as well as an important section on the legislation appertaining to decoys.

At a more specific level there are few county descriptions of decoys. One of the earliest is that by Southwell (1879) for Norfolk and several more appeared after Payne-Gallwey's volume (eg. Harting 1888). In more recent times there has been a renewal of interest. There are a number of publications dealing with the history and

workings of specific decoys (eg. Prendergast 1984 & 1985) as well as several county surveys (eg. Dunning 1973 & McDonnell 1984) and general discussions (eg. Porter 1987 & Bettey 1988).

History

The tradition of constructing decoy ponds appears to have begun in England in the 13th century when they are mentioned in litigation. There is an account in 1432 of an armed mob taking 600 wildfowl from a decoy at Crowland (Lincolnshire) (Cook & Pilcher 1982, 8). These early examples were of simple design and the method of capturing the ducks was to drive them into tunnel nets at a time when the young birds could not fly and the older ones were moulting (Payne-Gallwey 1886, 4-6). This meant that numbers become seriously depleted and the practice was outlawed by an Act of Parliament in 1534 (Wildfowl, 25 Hen. VIII) although this was later altered in 1551 (Mansel-Pleydell 1887, 2-3).

There were alternative methods of catching ducks, usually involving the use of traps. One consisted of a wire cage which was worked by cords and pulleys from a secluded hut. The cage was lowered onto a platform in the water into which the birds were enticed with bait. Another method was by the use of a 'trap decoy' where the fowl were attracted into a pipe and then captured by lowering a trap door (Harting 1897, 296). Payne-Gallwey records one of these at Trengwainton House in Cornwall, where a square pond had a short pipe in each corner. These led to small square netted enclosures where bait was placed on a sunken stone slab in the centre. It is interesting to note that although it was built in 1819-20 it was abandoned before 1835 as it was not very successful in attracting ducks, despite there being plenty in the vicinity (Payne-Gallwey 1886, 70). This decoy is shown on the 1880 25-inch Ordnance Survey map (Cornwall sheet 73.4) as having three short pipes.

The more common wild-fowl or duck decoy works by enticement rather than entrapment. These originated in Holland and were introduced into Britain, probably in Norfolk, during the 17th century using Dutch expertise. The name 'decoy' comes from the Dutch *eendenkooi* meaning a duck cage or trap. Charles II was having one made in St James' Park in 1665 (Evelyn 1882, 178-9) but the earliest reference so far discovered comes from an account of the Parliamentary General Sir William Brereton, who in 1634 compares his decoy near Dodleston in Cheshire with a Dutch example (Prendergast 1894, 51). The high-point of activity came in the 18th and 19th centuries when large numbers were built. The majority fell out of use during the 20th century when the growth of duck shooting as a sport became popular. In addition, the widespread reclamation of the country's wetlands meant that the duck's natural habitats became seriously depleted and numbers subsequently declined. From an overall total of 188 decoys recorded in England and Wales, only 44 were still in operation in 1886 (Payne-Gallwey 1886). This number had dropped to 19 by 1918 (Whitaker 1918). However, there are a number of decoy pools still in operation today, managed by nature conservation bodies as at, for example, Boarstall (Buckinghamshire), Nacton (Suffolk), and Abbotsbury (Dorset).

The importance of decoys was well known to landowners who spent considerable amounts of time and money over their construction. The decoy at Compton Dundon in Somerset was constructed in 1695 at a cost of £139 9s 2½d but by the 1720s it was making an annual profit of £35 from sale of birds (Bettey 1988, 713). Large numbers of wildfowl were taken: in 1875 the Hale decoy in Lancashire provided 1,162 birds; between 1864-65 4,250 duck, wigeon and teal were taken from the Ashby decoy in Lincolnshire; and between 1879-80 2,846 birds were taken

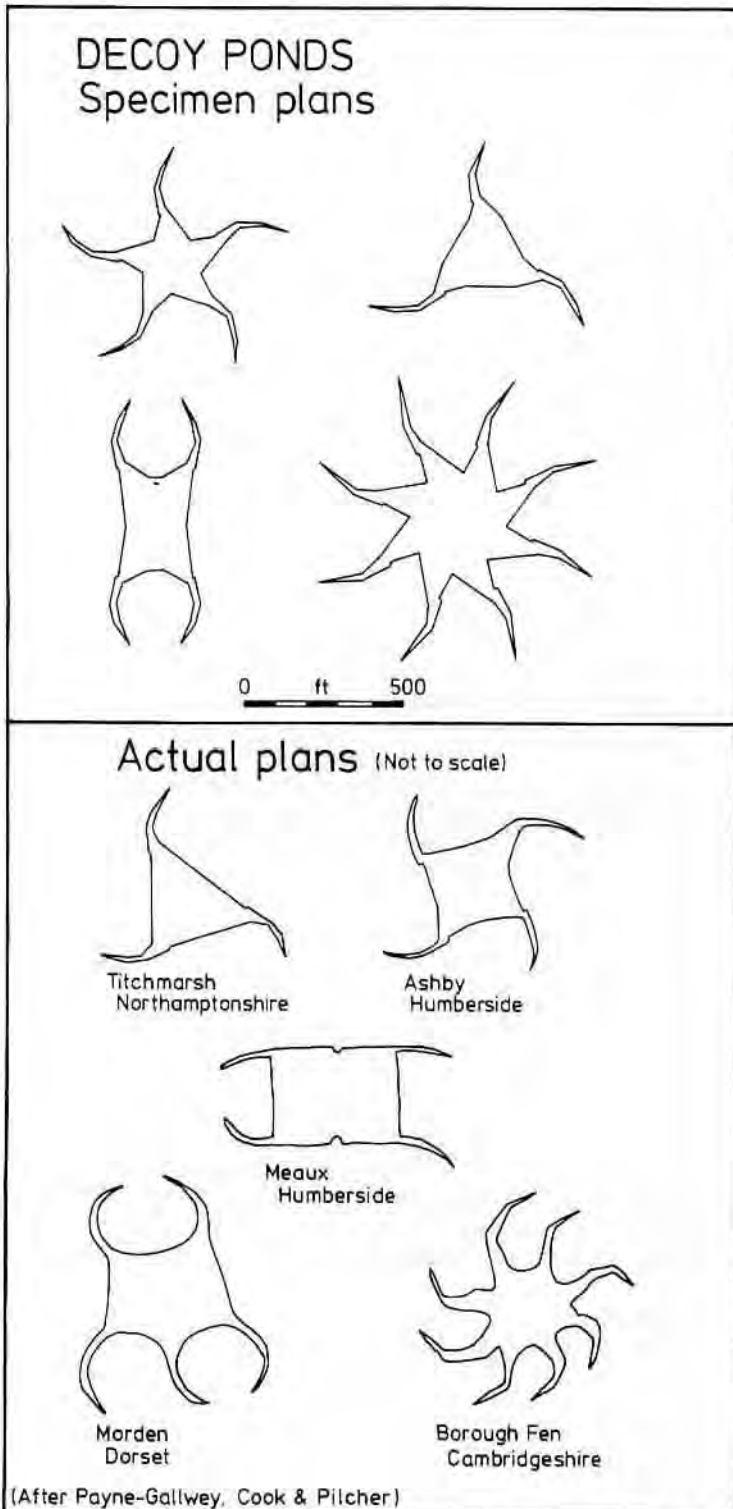


Fig. 1 Specimen and actual plans of decoy ponds (after Payne-Gallwey 1886 and Cook & Pilcher 1982).

from the Ilken decoy in Suffolk (Porter 1987, 27). Other studies of specific sites record similar numbers (eg. Matthews 1969; Cook & Pilcher 1982). It has been estimated that an annual catch of 28,500 ducks is made from the 100 decoys still in use in Holland (Eygenraam & Doude van Troostwijk 1963).

Numbers

The number of decoys recorded in England to date is not known with certainty because they have not yet been identified and catalogued in some areas. Payne-Gallwey's total of 188 is likely to be a gross underestimate; in Somerset for example, only 14 were recorded (Payne-Gallwey 1886, 152–160) but a recent study of the available aerial photographs has provided evidence for 45, which is likely to represent the true number for such an area (McDonnell 1984).

Decoys are generally located in the low-lying areas of England, with a bias towards the eastern counties (eg. Suffolk, Norfolk, Essex and Lincolnshire) (Wood 1979, 212–213). They also exist in large numbers in other wetland areas such as the Somerset Levels as well as in coastal areas and parts of the country rich in rivers and streams. It should be noted that those in Somerset all lie below 15m OD (McDonnell 1984).

Documentary sources are especially useful in helping to locate decoy ponds, usually through place-names, field-names and depictions on old maps. However, the extent to which historical records extend the knowledge of individual decoys depends on being able to associate specific sites with extant references. Where this can be done, the results are often highly rewarding: details of construction, management, expenditure and numbers of fowl taken are often recorded (eg. Matthews 1969). The lifespan of an individual decoy can also be determined: Morden decoy near Wareham, Dorset, was constructed in 1724 and ceased operation in 1856 while that at Abbotsbury was built in 1655 and is still in use (Prendergast 1984 & 1985). Antiquarian sources relating to decoy ponds can also be of value, as many were in operation when they were seen (eg. Payne-Gallwey 1886). Paintings, old pictures and oral history can occasionally be useful sources of information.

Decoys can be recognised as field monuments through their distinctive earthworks and channels, especially by the characteristic curving plan of the pipes leading from the pond (Fig. 1). Nevertheless, positive identification often requires fairly intensive survey and close attention to surface topography because the ponds were so shallow. The pipes and the pond require a supply of slow moving water and so there are often leats, channels and sluices associated with a decoy. Decoys were also surrounded by areas of woodland, whether natural or planted, to provide shelter from the wind and protection for the birds. The whole complex was protected by a hedge or fence for security from both animal and human predators. In some cases water-filled ditches may be an additional security measure. Buildings which were used to accommodate the decoyman and for the storage of equipment can also be found in association with decoys.

Plan and components

The plan or design of a decoy can vary a great deal and may be determined by local topography. The most distinctive component is the pond. Payne-Gallwey suggests that the ideal size was between 1 and 2 acres (0.4–0.8ha) with a depth of not more than 3 feet (1m) (Payne-Gallwey 1886, 35). Most of the surviving examples generally conform to these approximate dimensions. The overall shape of the pond was determined by the number and arrangement of pipes associated with it; square or rectangular ponds are the most common, but triangular and star-shaped ponds

also exist. Small irregularities in the banks may provide nesting places for breeding birds and in certain instances the banks may be revetted with wood and/or stone to prevent collapse. Although the ponds are of a uniform depth, there may be areas of shallower ground around the edges. These can be used for nesting areas and for launching small boats which were used for maintenance purposes. Some ponds may also contain islands which were used as breeding areas.

It is the pipes which give the decoy its particular shape. These are long curving channels which extend from the edges or corners of the pond, tapering in width and height away from it (Fig. 1). When in use they were covered by netting stretched over hoops of wood or iron (*pipe-rods*). The length of pipe can vary from pond to pond and even within an individual pond but they are usually about 65m long, 6m wide at the junction with the pond, decreasing to about 0.5m at the farthest point. Stukeley mentions that they had only one angle but the later examples shown by Payne-Gallwey have several.

The details of any decoy are to be found in the pipes and there is a terminology which is associated with them (Payne-Gallwey 1886, 17–18; Harting 1897, 200) (Fig. 2). The *draught* of a pipe is that part of the pond which narrows in front of the pipe. Halfway between each pipe entrance are the *reed edges* which consist of small areas of reeds which provide places for waterfowl to hide in. The *breast wall* is made from one or two concealing screens flanking the left-hand side of the pipe and this shelters the *breast wall landing*. This, and the *back-wing landing*, consist of smooth banks on the flanks of the pipe entrance which tempt the ducks into landing. Once landed, the ducks are said to be *banked*, and are then considered to be at a suitable distance for decoying along the pipe nearest to them. Screens are placed at intervals along the left-hand side of a pipe at a distance of about 0.5–1m from the edge and at an angle to it. These are made from reeds and are of sufficient height to allow the decoyman and his dog to remain concealed whenever required. Between the high screens are connecting low ones called *dog jumps*, designed to allow a dog to negotiate the length of pipe when decoying. Stukeley mentions that these dog jumps had a hole in them through which the dog could pass, rather than having to jump over them (Stukeley 1776, 18). The *yackoop* (a corruption of 'wake-up') is a special dog jump between the breast wall and high screen. The other end of the pipe, where it has become very narrow, is known as the *tunnel net* and is detachable in order to remove the trapped ducks after a successful decoy.

The number of pipes in a decoy varies and there appears to be no rule as to the most suitable arrangement. Payne-Gallwey suggests that between three and six are best (Payne-Gallwey 1886, 55–56) but most examples have anything from two to ten. What is important is that the pipes should be positioned so that the wind can blow down them as ducks, when frightened, will only take off into the wind. Several pipes may have been in use at any one time.

Operation

The operation to capture the ducks is relatively straightforward and is undertaken by a decoyman and a trained dog, on whom the success of a decoy often depends. The dog, usually called 'Piper', was often a small red-coloured breed which the ducks assume to be a fox.

The ducks are encouraged onto the pond by the use of bait and/or decoy birds although they will usually land of their own free will to take advantage of the natural habitat for rest and breeding. The dog is then commanded to appear from behind the yackoop and it is this sudden activity which attracts the banked ducks. They assume it is a fox and, being very inquisitive, swim towards it and begin to follow it up the pipe. Meanwhile the dog has concealed itself and run round behind

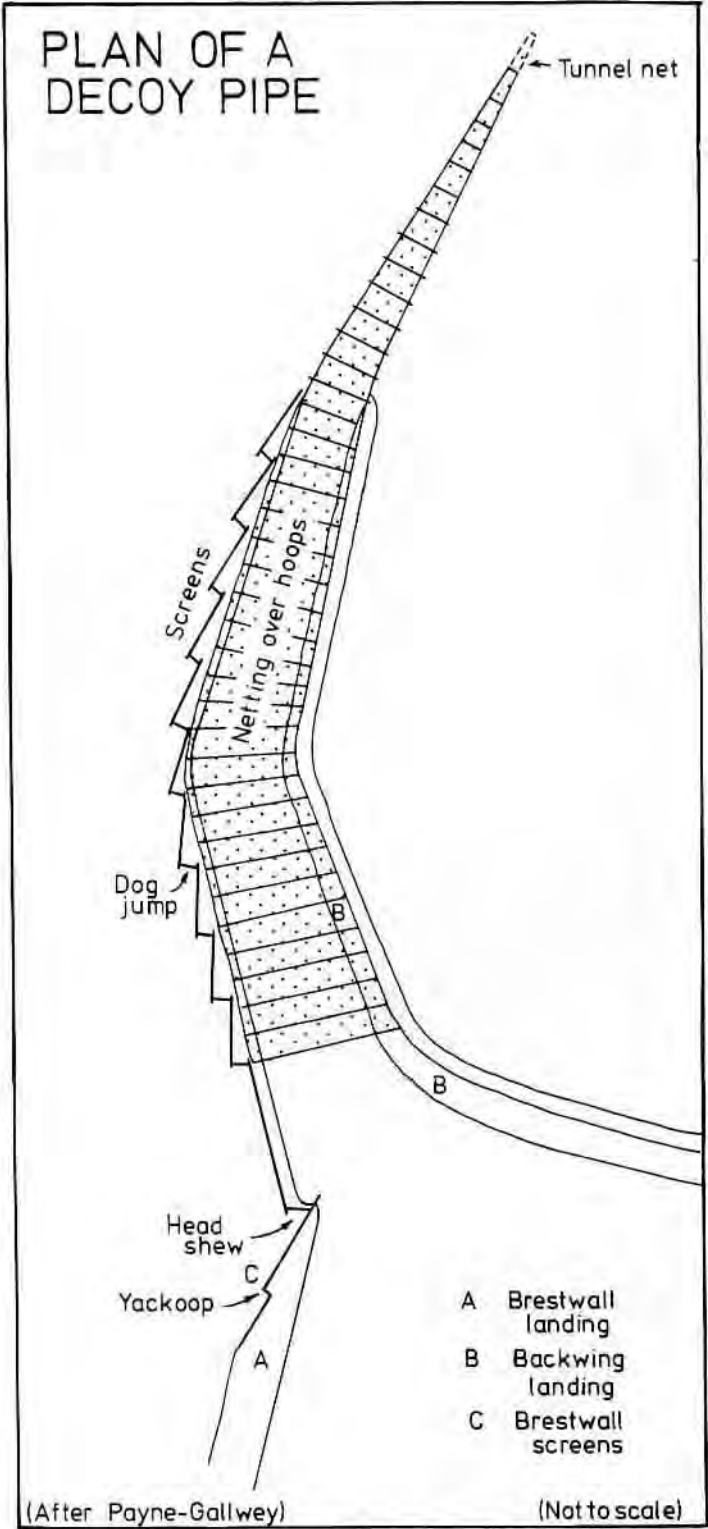


Fig. 2 Plan of a decoy pipe (after Payne-Gallwey 1886).

the screens to emerge again a little further down the pipe. The ducks continue to follow or chase it as the curving shape of the pipe means that they are unable to see it narrowing. The decoyman, whose scent has been masked by burning turf, then appears from behind the *head shew*, and frightens the ducks. They attempt to fly away, into the wind and down the pipe, but are prevented by the netting which is stretched over the pipe. They succeed only in reaching the smallest section, the tunnel net, when a gate is closed and they are trapped. The tunnel net is then removed and the ducks extracted.

Classification

No formal classification of decoys based on morphological evidence has been published. There does not appear to be any correlation between the date of construction and the size and shape of the pond, or between the number and arrangement of pipes. Many of the early decoys were complex having five pipes – Abbotsbury, Dorset (built in 1655), Rodney Stoke, Somerset (by 1635), and Dodleston, Cheshire (by 1634) (Prendergast 1984, 51). A provisional classification may be based on the number of pipes associated with a particular decoy pond. Given the recorded variations in plan and design three main types may be recognised:

A. One or two pipes: these decoy ponds are of simple design with one or two pipes at either end of the pond. This would have allowed operation during the prevailing wind conditions. These examples may be direct descendants of the earlier decoy traps.

B. Three, four or five pipes: this is the ideal number of pipes as recommended by Payne-Gallwey and may represent the model for many designs. The pipes are usually situated at the corners of a rectangular or square pond or equidistant around a star-shaped pond (eg. Meaux decoy, Humberside or Nyland decoy, Somerset).

C. More than five pipes: decoy ponds with more than five pipes may represent an attempt to maximise catches. This number of pipes would allow operation in all wind conditions and the pipes were positioned on all sides of a square or rectangular pond or equidistant around a star-shaped pond (eg. Borough Fen decoy, Cambridgeshire), or around an adapted previously existing body of water (eg. Mickle Mere, Norfolk).

All three types may exist in a relatively small area and in some cases it is possible that the earlier five pipe decoys may have been used as a model for later examples. It is also likely that those decoys which initially had few pipes may have been modified to have additional ones at a later date. Decoys may also undergo a complete change; Borough Fen decoy, for example, originated as a square pond with eight pipes arranged around the edges but this was later changed to the present circular form (Cook & Pilcher 1982, 20). Fig. 1 provides a series of specimen ground plans.

Somerset decoys

In Somerset there are a number of decoy ponds which have received some attention in the past. Payne-Gallwey devotes a chapter to them, recording those in use and giving details of their condition and catches (Payne-Gallwey 1886, 152–160). Of the 14 recorded, five (at Sharpham Park, at Shapwick and three on King's Sedgemoor) were then still working. The total of 14 is reiterated by Williams (1970, 173) while Ley describes 20 (Ley 1977). As noted above, the actual figure of 45 is much higher and present condition ranges from well-preserved earthworks to those which have been completely destroyed (McDonnell 1984). It is interesting to note that the

three on King's Sedgemoor were in fact leased by Payne-Gallwey in the 1880s but he reported that the pools were too small and the pipes too narrow and short to be of much use (Anon. 1886).

There has also been a certain amount of documentary research carried out into the Somerset decoys (Betley 1988) but generally the wealth of material that is available has been largely untapped. This applies to the contemporary documents held in the Somerset Record Office as well as to the unpublished Savory papers (dating from 1889 to 1962) which are deposited in the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society's library in Taunton. These papers provide photographs of, and comments on, the state and condition of decoys in Somerset in addition to many useful documents relating to decoys in general.

2. THE NYLAND DECOY (V. Russett)

The decoy at Nyland, west of Draycott (Fig. 3), is in excellent condition and is protected as an Ancient Monument. A long series of detailed accounts exist among the Popham papers in the Somerset Record Office recording the running and maintenance of this decoy, in some cases even extending to tradesmen's receipts, and totals and value of the birds caught. However, no attempt is made to describe the specific species until the closing years of its use in the early 19th century.

The decoy was probably built for the Popham family, the absentee landlords living at Hunstrete House, near Marksbury. They took over the manor of Nyland-cum-Batcombe from the Horners in 1578 and it is likely that the possession of such a pool was an important part of the social aspirations of the period. Unlike some of the other decoys on the Somerset Levels, no foundation deed or accounts of the actual construction survive, so its exact date cannot be established. It is first mentioned in 1668; the Popham land-holding was referred to as 'The Manor of Cheddar Berkeley and Nyland with the Decoy Poole'.¹ It was also prominently and carefully drawn with its outbuildings on a map of 1773² (Fig. 4).

The decoy, as the earthwork plan shows (Fig. 5), is a six pipe example measuring about 220m by 100m, with a central pool 100m square and now about 1m deep. The decoy was fed with water from a rhyne which ran from the 'Cut end' – presumably the Nyland end of Lower Gully Ditch. It then seems likely to have followed the ditches around 'Knottfield Ham' and 'Read Close' to reach the north-west corner of the decoy, the same route as that once taken by the natural river Ylake.³ This rhyne was continually being cleaned out, as indeed was the length of rhyne described as '... against Newham ...' and '... from hickxham to the pool doar ...', presumably following the old course of the River Axe to join the course of Hixham Rhyne (Fig. 3).

The set of three pipes at the north-eastern end of the pool, shown clearly on the 1773 map, still survive as shallow earthwork ditches. Between them are the faint earthworks of 'reed edges'. There are no traces of the building that is shown between the two converging pipes on the early map, although the accounts make it clear that it must have been fairly substantial.⁴ The three pipes at the south-western end are also still quite clear on the ground, although the central pipe has another unexplained shallow feature on its northern side. The northernmost pipe of this set runs to a depression at the extreme north-western corner of the decoy pool field, which in turn connects to the old course of the River Axe in the next field; this is presumably the site of the 'pool door' referred to in the accounts.⁵

On the north side of the pool is a protrusion extending about 5m into the pond. This may be the ledge from which the decoy boat was launched. It may also be the

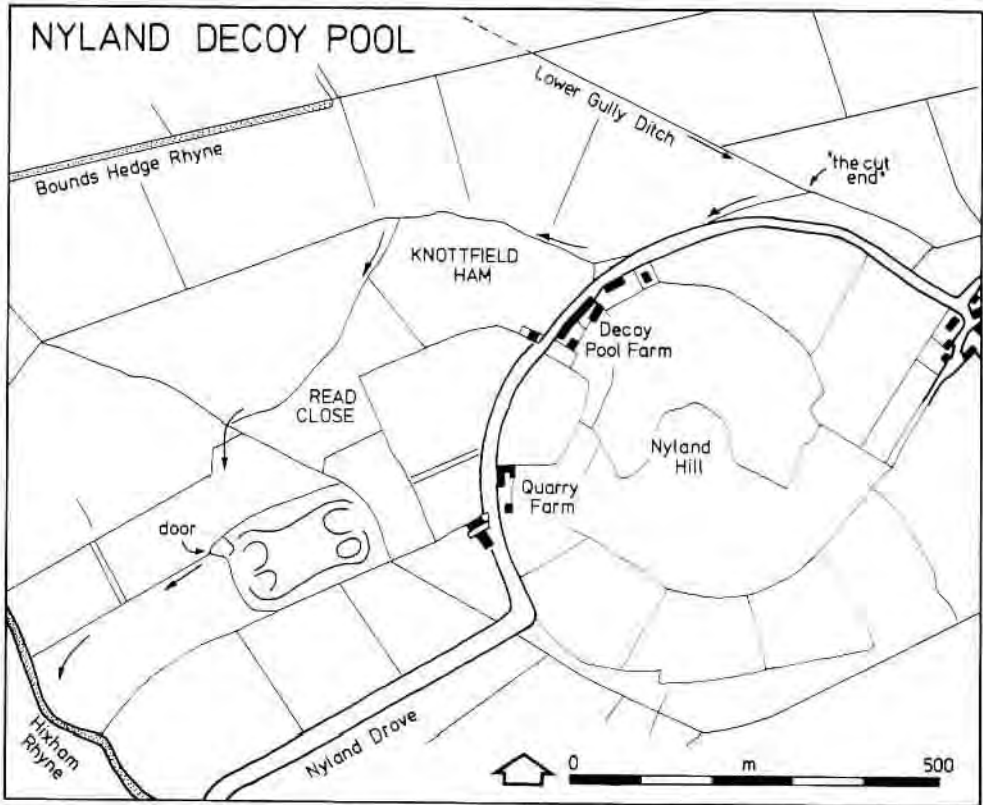


Fig. 3 Location of Nyland Decoy Pool.

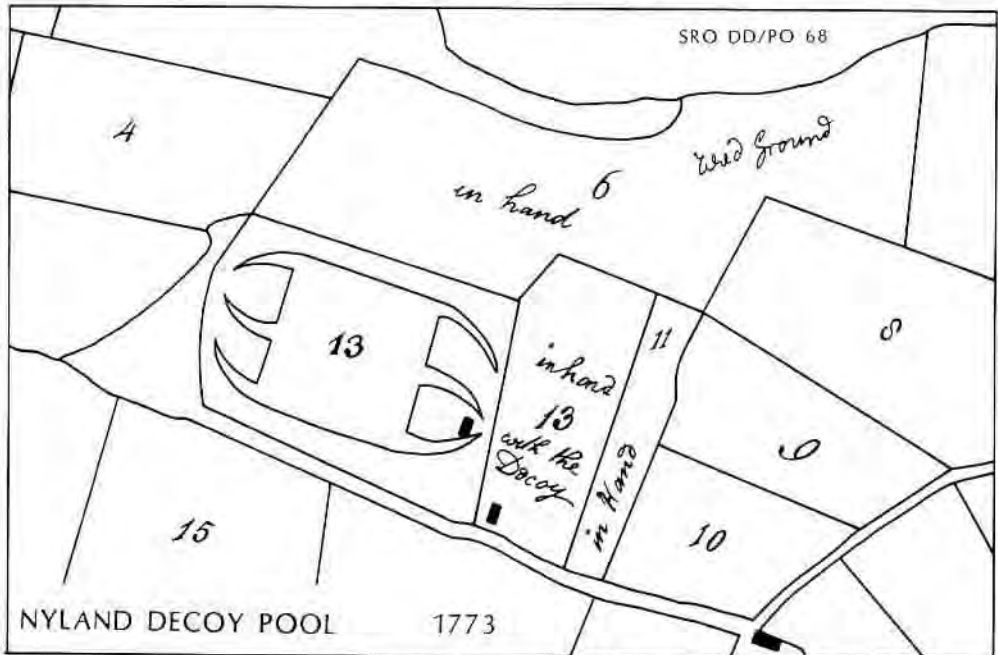


Fig. 4 Nyland Decoy Pool (map of 1773).

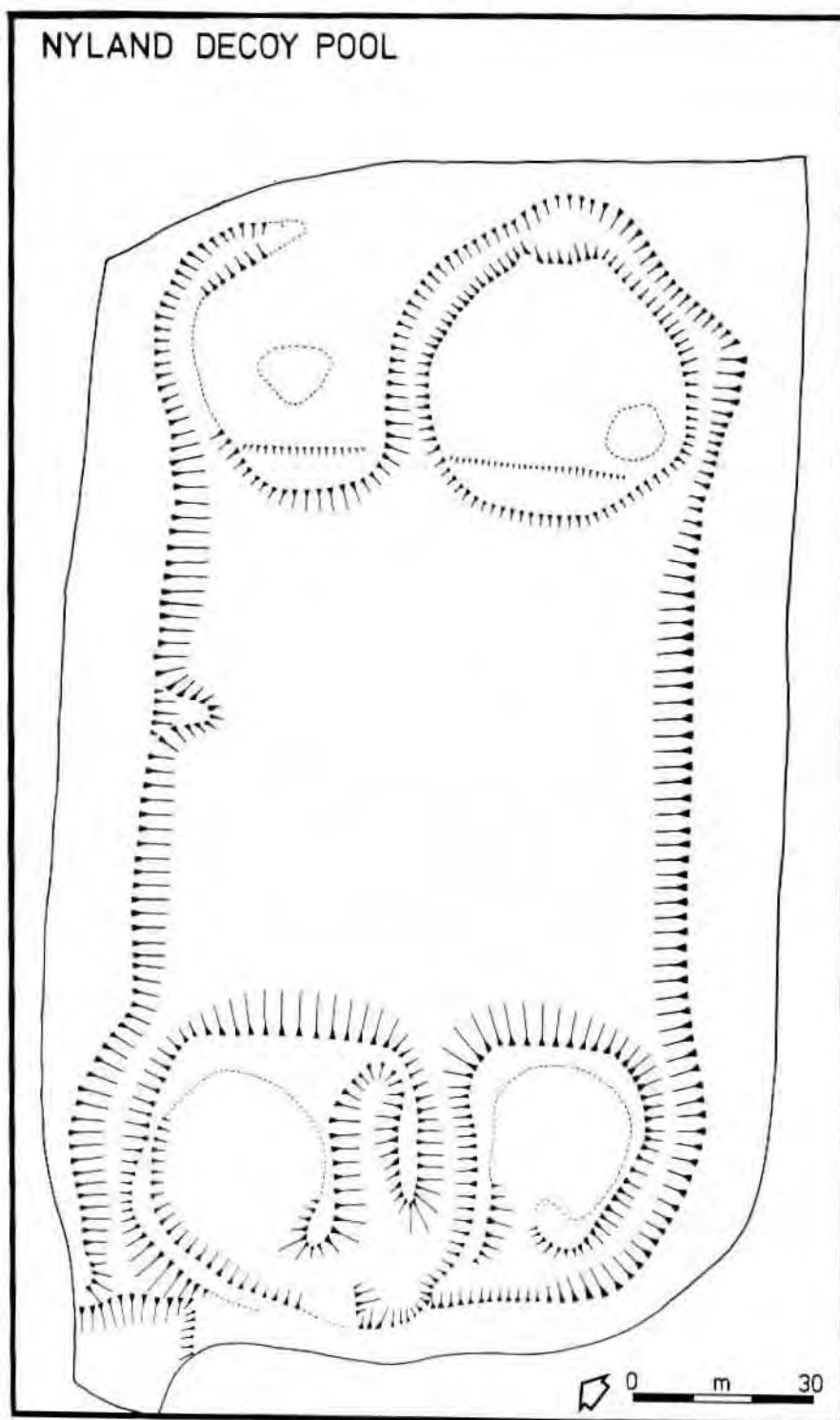


Fig. 5 Nyland Decoy Pool (earthwork plan).

'Cway' referred to in the accounts, although this is more likely to be a reference to the whole pool; the area of the Hythe Decoy Pool near Cheddar was universally known as 'Quaiple' until recently, and it could be that this represents a local pronunciation preserved in the documents.

To the south, a lane formerly gave access to the pool through a locked gate; the site of this is no longer clear. The lane is shown on the 1773 map, although the enclosure road of 1791 to the south superseded it.⁶ When the decoy went out of use in the early 19th century, this lane also became disused although a metalled surface, containing 17th- and 18th-century pottery, was discovered by the farmer in 1987–88 on a route which corresponds to its position.

Surrounding the decoy pool, and still present as a field ditch, was a 'moat' (as it is referred to in the accounts). This is often mentioned because payments were made to clean it out. This was, and still is, supported at the southern end of the decoy by walling and the first detailed account of works carried out at the decoy in 1706 mention the repair of the walling.⁷

The income from the decoy is not easily assessed, especially as the Popham family frequently changed between employing a decoyman and leasing it out. For many years the only income quoted is that paid for the rent of the pool and against this are set the yearly maintenance expenses and land tax. When Richard Jefferies leased the pool between 1730 and 1735, the only income recorded was the rent of £25 per half year and he claimed £2 17s 6d of this back at Lady Day in 1731. This comprised a half-year's land tax, a year's Royalty which was due to Lord Weymouth and 8s 6d for cleaning the ditches leading to the decoy pool.⁸

When the pool was in hand, the income was usually higher, but even then it sometimes appears to be alarmingly 'in the red'. Losses of £31 and £43 are recorded in 1747 and 1757 while large profits of £93 and £50 are recorded for 1758 and 1761. Perhaps only then (in 1762) could a complete digging out and dredging of the pool be carried out at a cost of £42. For the six years out of the twenty for which records survive in the period 1790–1820, losses of more than £20 per annum are tolerated. These losses seem so severe, especially in a family that was not inclined to be spendthrift, that one is inclined to speculate that the accounts are not complete – were many ducks being taken locally, or sent to Hunstrete, the home of the Pophams, without any proper record being made? In 1710 the price for a couple of ducks was 10d but by 1803 this had risen to 3s 6d; this could make a very large difference.⁹

Four seven-year leases of the decoy pool survive¹⁰ and they suggest that the lessees were taking ducks as part of their income. The first lease is as early as 1678, when Edward Strode (Alexander Popham's steward) leased the pool to 'William Kynne of Nyland, husbandman, John Kynne of the same place, husbandman, and Edward Tottinham of Dracott in the parish of Rodney Stoke, yeoman.' The lease runs

'... Edward Strode hath rented . . . all that place . . . called . . . the decoy poole . . . together with all housinge, ponds, motes and Fence thereunto belonginge with free liberty of the Fowlinge and takeinge of Fowle in the said decoy poole to their own proper use . . . for seven years from September 29th next . . . at a rent of £55 per year . . . (they) are acquitted from all manner of tax . . . or from moneys that may be laid out upon the decoy poole and premises . . . and also one hundred cupple of wilde Fowle yearly to be delivered . . . of such sort of fflowle as . . . (Alexander Popham) . . . may please to have . . . and they will keepe the said decoy poole . . . and all the fences, netts and pipes . . . in good repair at their own cost . . . and leave stock of one hundred and fifty cupple of tame Fowle . . .'

The document is endorsed to the effect that if any less than '100 cupple' of wildfowl

are paid, ten pence would be due for each couple wanting. The three other leases (of 1711, 1722 and 1770) shown that the rent had risen to £60 per annum, but the number of ducks required was only 20 couple.

The physical structures of the pool are also mentioned in the accounts. In 1716, for example, the pool door was replaced with oak board and timber, 'brazing' either side, ironwork, nails and a lock, at a total cost of £3 5s, as well as 2s being paid to haul the timber from Cheddar.¹¹ This door lasted for 16 years, and was replaced in 1732 with a rather cheaper one at the bargain price of 16s.¹² The locks for this later door were frequently replaced, at a constant cost of 3s 6d, raising the question of whether they were broken by outside parties, or whether the decoy man was careless with the key! Traps were set for polecats in 1746¹³ and the pipe-rods were replaced every seven years or so up until 1809, which appears to be the last time they are recorded.¹⁴

The 'stable' and the 'barn', as well as 'The Pool House', which is now the site of either Quarry or Decoy Pool Farms (the documents are ambiguous), are frequently mentioned as being repaired. In 1721 there must have been major repairs, or even rebuilding, for the expenses included '5 sacks of lime 5s, 2000 last naills 5s 4d, 5 bushels haier 5s, 6 daies work for the playsterer 10s 6d, 5 daies work tending ye playsterer 5s, one dozen and a healf of healem (thatching reed) 5s 3d, 4 days work a thaching 6s, 3 daies tending the thacher 1s 6d'.¹⁵ Thatching in particular was a constant expense in the maintenance of these buildings.

An account for 1756¹⁶ is interesting in that it gives the source of some of the items used, as well as their cost. 23 score of pipe rods were brought from Asham Wood near Frome, at a cost of 26s, while the haulage cost 21s, and the price of the horse to visit the wood was 3s 4d. Twine for the nets was brought from Wells at 6d; a barrel of tar, for tarring the nets once they had been made, was bought in Bristol and hauled to Nyland for 18s, while a kettle for melting the tar was borrowed at a cost of 6d. 14lbs of pitch was purchased for caulking the pool boat, which itself had been bought only two years previously. There were many other costs in the same year, such as 'work about the pool' (£4 6s 6d), oats and hempseed purchased in Wells for the ducks (£4 19s), £1 12s spent on reed-cutting and so on. It is interesting to note that the rods were always brought from Asham Wood rather than from Nyland Wood which was only a few hundred metres away.

Although wildfowl were the prime purpose of decoy pools, many had secondary purposes, and Nyland was no exception. 156 apple trees were planted around it in 1759 at a cost of £6 16s, including 3s for the 'mens eating and drinking'.^{17 18} The pool also provided ice, which was cut on winter nights and very likely stored in the north-facing hole in the rock outcrop behind Decoy Pool Farm, later known as 'The Monks Hole' and 'Cocklake Dungeon'.¹⁹ In 1820 the decoy provided firewood in the form of poles from pollarded ashes²⁰ although by this time, the pool may no longer have been in use as a decoy.

One or two interesting personal stories stand out from the accounts. In 1782 George Williams, of Clewer (about 2km away in the parish of Wedmore) was served with a trespasser's bond. This was worded

'... Know all men by these presents, that we George Williams, John Williams and James Fisher, of Clewer . . . husbandmen, are held and firmly bound to John Milton of Draycott . . . Baileif to Miss Hutton, Lady of the Manor of Batcomb and Nyland, in the sum of ten pounds . . . whereas the above bounden George Williams have unlawfully carried a gun and shoot within the Manor of Batcomb and Nyland . . . and by so doing did disturb and Arise the birds in the decoy pool thereunto belonging to the Great Damage of the said Miss Hutton, therefore the condition of this obligation is such that if the above bounden George Williams shall not be found and Detected carrying a Gun

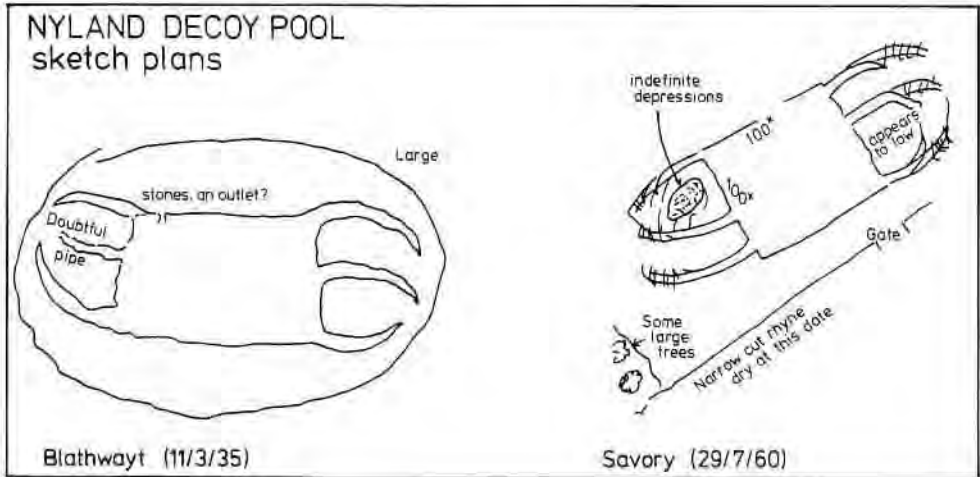


Fig. 6 Nyland Decoy Pool (sketch plans).

within ye Manor aforesaid nor in any other place whatsoever so as to shoot and disturb the birds within the Decoy Pool aforesaid for the space of Fiftie years next ensewing the date thereof, then this obligation to be void . . .²¹

All three men made their mark to the document, so presumably all three were bound by it; an earlier trespasser's bond of 1764²² – against the same John Williams as is mentioned above – made it clear that it was an alternative to prosecution.

While the final accounts are so sparse as to be almost worthless, they do imply that the decoy was still being used until the second decade of the 19th century. Collinson (1791) mentions that it was working.²³ The accounts of 1822, 1823 and 1825²⁴ no longer mention it, the last definite account being in 1813.²⁵ By 1844 at the latest, George Grinstead held the pool as ' . . . 6½ acres of pasture called The Decoy Pool . . .', and as this area includes the pool itself, it must have presumably been out of use for some years previously. Payne-Gallwey mentions that it was disused in 1886.²⁶ The latest phase of agricultural activity has left its mark in the floor of the decoy, where parallel gripes show an attempt to drain the wet area.²⁷

The Revd. F.L. Blathwayt visited the site in March 1935, reported that it was in excellent condition and produced a sketch plan.²⁸ Harry Savory also visited it in July 1960 as part of his tour of decoys in the neighbourhood and commented that it could clearly be seen, was not disturbed by trees or undergrowth and 'has the appearance of a large sunken tennis court'.²⁹ A sketch plan was also produced. Fig. 6 shows these plans which compare well with the measured example.

Finally, there may be just a hint of why Asham Wood was the source of the pipe rods rather than the nearby Nyland Wood. In 1764 the account of Philip Creese, decoyman, reads 'Paid Mr Tarrant for 25 score of Pipe Rods for the youse of nyland Decay Pool £1 7s . . . For the hir of the hors for to go to aishim wood 2s . . . For the ciping of the hors 2 nits 1s 4d . . . For my eating and drinking 3s . . .'.³⁰ As this latter sum was the equivalent of 3½ days wages for Creese, it looks as though his trip to Asham Wood was graced with a substantial 'expense account', as well as being a business venture of a more traditional kind. On the other hand, he may have been visiting family or relations as the Creese family still live in vicinity of Asham.³¹

Bibliography

While this bibliography deals with references mentioned in the text above, it also lists much of the available literature on the subject.

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