

14 Duddingston Loch



South-east over Duddingston Loch

Viewed from the road through Holyrood Park, the loch provides a mirror image of the surrounding rocks and trees. Seen from its shores in Dr Neils Garden or the Bawsinch Nature Reserve, it is a place of peace and reflection.

Formed in a hollow probably cut by a combination of glaciers and glacial meltwater, Duddingston Loch is the largest natural freshwater loch in Edinburgh. It is shallow, with an average depth of only 2.2 m/7 ft, and its outflow

into the Braid Burn is narrow. The result is that its rate of water exchange is slow. Combined with copious bird droppings, this means the loch has a high phosphorus content and in summer there are blooms of algae.

Naturally it provides the home for a classic vegetation succession from open water through reeds into woodland. Trees, especially birch, are gradually encroaching on the reed beds causing a management dilemma. Is it better to cut





Bittern standing tall for better camouflage

them down to preserve the reeds and hope to encourage the elusive bittern to settle and breed – they exploit these reeds for camouflage? Or should they allow the trees to grow, extending the base of the heronry? At the last count there were about 17 breeding pairs and 22 nests in tree-tops. To look down into their nests, climb onto Hangman's Rock. Year-round the loch is home to mute swans, coots, mallards and more recently greylag geese and invasive Canada

geese. In winter look out for the beautiful teal in the reeds along the south shore and the occasional Great crested grebe; through binoculars, you may see sedge warblers. Residents have reported many sightings of the elusive otter, mostly around dawn and dusk.

The human history of the loch is colourful as shown by names such as Hangman's Rock overlooking the north-west corner, and Murder Acre further west. The discovery in 1778 of the Duddingston Hoard (see page 49) and the cultivation terraces testify to human settlement dating from over 3000 years ago.

More recently, Duddingston Loch was the scene of the world's first curling matches: see page 38. The cooler climate resulting from the so-called Little Ice Age created sound solid ice for both curling and skating. Skating was celebrated by Raeburn's famous painting: see page 56. Warmer winters, nature conservation management and a hawkish health and safety attitude mean that the loch is no longer used for winter sporting activities.

Across the loch to the Pentlands



15 Bawsinch Nature Reserve



Duddingston Loch and its surrounding reedbeds and woodland had been given to the nation by William Askew of Ladykirk in 1923, and designated as a bird sanctuary in 1925. Much later, in 1971, the Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) bought the land adjacent to Bawsinch to protect and extend the bird sanctuary. The reserve today is an entirely natural-looking area with a mixture of trees, shrubs and wetlands hosting a variety of tree-nesting and roosting birds. The habitat is well suited to breeding, and it makes a haven for wildfowl and herons. The foresight and determination of the SWT volunteers are to be credited for this excellent result. Led by a forester, the late Colin MacLean, the area has grown a rich diversity of native British tree types including wild service tree (*Sorbus torminalis*) and Scottish natives such as the

Tufted loosestrife



quaking aspen (*Populus tremulus*). The diversity of trees was a creative way of blotting out the ugly mess made by human activity, including a car dump. Plants rare in Britain include tufted loosestrife, slender pondweed and needle spike rush.

More recently, SWT has prepared many small-scale habitats such as Goose Green for roosting geese, scrapes in pits to encourage sand martins to breed, flowering plants to attract butterflies and insects and water holes for a variety of wetland plants. The row of mature ash trees along the border with the Innocent railway provides a barrier to the sounds of the city, and also a roosting place for crow species.

This reserve is well worth a visit. The northern shore is open all year, reached via steps from the Duddingston entrance to Holyrood Park. Access to the southern shore is by prior arrangement, through a locked gate  on Duddingston Road West. SWT members can borrow keys for access to the nearby hide, and anybody can sign up for one of the regular open days with an expert guide: see page 95 for details.

16 Reedbeds and Duddingston Hardings

The loch has extensive reedbeds, by far the largest area in the city. On the south-east and western shores, the reeds grow on marshes that merge into willow and poplar woodland, supporting many breeding species of wildfowl and heron.

The reeds were important to the history and economy of Duddingston long before it became a summer retreat for the affluent middle classes of Victorian Edinburgh. Reeds were dried and woven into a coarse cloth known as Duddingston Hardings. The weavers lived in primitive single-storey cottages in the Causeway, fitted with basic looms. In the 1760s at least 30 such cottage looms were operating, and weaving was an important source of employment in a village of about 500 people.

Hardings were used more for sacking than for clothing, being coarse in texture. Sacks were used to transport various goods – notably salt and coal – in smaller quantities for delivery into Edinburgh. Goods were sourced in Easter Duddingston, including the salt pans at Joppa, and taken into Edinburgh by Duddingston middlemen.

Horse-drawn transport was crucial in this 18th century development, and up to 36



Above and below: Reeds fringe the loch

horses were used to deliver goods in sacks or creels. However by the time of the Second Statistical Account of 1843, competition from more efficient mills elsewhere had decimated Duddingston's weaving industry, the reeds were no longer harvested and the population of the village had reduced to only 225..



17 Holyrood Park

Holyrood Park is the largest area of open space near the centre of Edinburgh. It covers 650 acres and contains three small lochs and a cluster of volcanic hills: see page 46. It belongs to the Crown and is both a Scheduled Ancient Monument and a Site of Special Scientific Interest, managed by Historic Environment Scotland: see page 95.

The park offers a huge variety of natural and human interest. Evidence of Bronze Age settlement and cultivation is still visible, and there are Iron Age defensive hilltop sites. It was a place of religion and sanctuary, and later quarrying and military training. Nature has retained its foothold on the six main hills: Salisbury Crags, Arthur's Seat, Nether Hill, Crow Hill, Whinny Hill and Dunsapie Crag. The park is Edinburgh's largest area of unimproved grassland, with over 350 plant species. Attempts to restore lost species have been partly successful, most notably the sticky catchfly plant and the Northern brown argus butterfly. Before it was settled, it probably would have been more wooded with more boggy areas. It was transformed over many generations by clearance for cultivation, for building defences and for small settlements. A few decades ago, sheep were still grazed, but at a time when human use was rising rapidly the sheep presented management problems.



Sticky catchfly

From Duddingston, horizontal lines can clearly be seen on the slopes of Arthur's Seat and its neighbour, Crow Hill. These were constructed to help with cultivation, but when were they formed and why are they sometimes rig and furrow and sometimes terraces? About 3000 years ago, Bronze Age farmers probably developed terraces on Crow Hill to provide thicker soils and to prevent crops slipping down the slopes.

The rig and furrow layouts are much later, probably of medieval origin. Both types of cultivation are evident on the eastern slopes of Arthur's Seat, which has 15 terraces with rig and furrows at a lower level. Others can be viewed from Prestonfield Golf Course – best seen in low light on a winter's afternoon.

Iron Age forts are prominent on the higher hills. A 20-acre site exists on Arthur's Seat, a slightly larger one on top of Salisbury Crags, and smaller ones on top of Dunsapie Crag and Samson's Ribs.

Salisbury Crags





Cultivation terraces on Crow Hill

Bronze Age flat axes were found on Dunsapie and a Roman intaglio (engraved finger ring) on Samson's Ribs.

The Holyrood sanctuary was one of the largest in Europe. From the 16th century it provided a place of safety for debtors otherwise at the mercy of their creditors and liable to imprisonment. The small community of debtors was known as Abbey Lairds. During the week they had to remain within the precincts to avoid arrest, but on Sundays they could wander more freely. Among them was the eccentric James Tytler: see page 67.

Quarrying became a significant activity, probably from the mid-16th century, for the construction of Holyrood Palace and the boundary wall around the Park ordered by James V. The remains of this period are still obvious at the whinstone quarry at the eastern end of Salisbury Crags and the large sandstone quarry at Camstone above those Crags.

The Radical Road was built by unemployed weavers in the 1820s, and still provides a bracing walk for those with a head for heights and wariness of rock falls. A rifle range in the Hunter's Bog area was in use for about a century from the 1850s.

Queen Victoria and Prince Albert made many changes to the Park, with extensive landscaping and drainage. The Queen's Drive was created as a high-level carriage route with excellent vistas. It roughly follows the perimeter of the Park and required cutting through rock on the southern side. They created two artificial lochs – St Margaret's and Dunsapie: see page 48.

The park became a place of sanctuary from the 12th century, functioning as a precinct to Holyrood Abbey. Whilst sanctuaries were common enough, the boundaries were normally tightly confined to the church or abbey.

