

# AMWELL POOL

By  
Stuart Moya

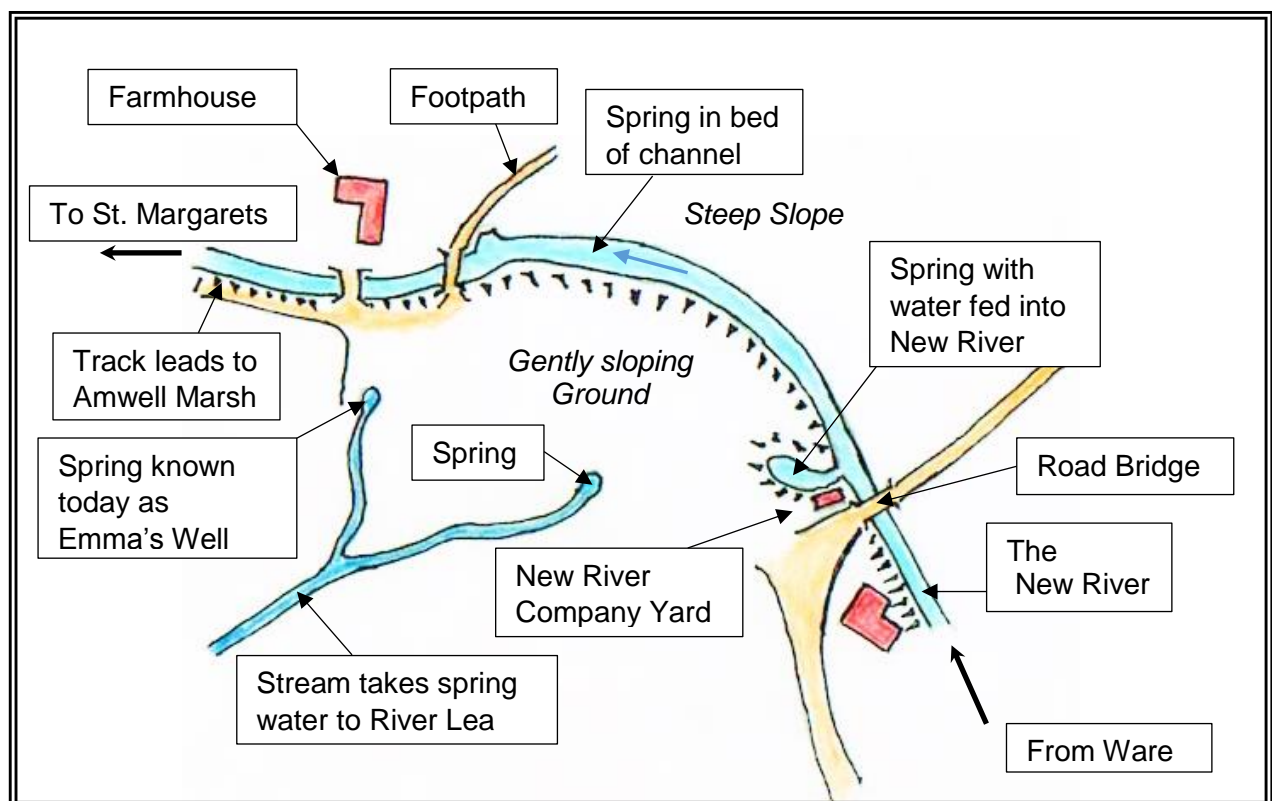
Many locals over the years have enjoyed a gentle walk along Amwell Lane to visit the local beauty spot that is Amwell Pool. It is located at the base of a steep slope below the ancient church of St. John The Baptist, the parish church of Great Amwell. The pool is part of the New River which takes fresh water from Hertfordshire down the Lea Valley to London. Although this stretch of the New River was first dug in 1605 the construction of the pool itself was not completed until some 200 years later. It was formed as part of a wider landscaping of the area by the Mylne family associated with a large house that Robert Mylne built nearby in the 1790s. He was at the time the Chief Engineer to the New River Company which goes a long way to explain how he was allowed to create this pool. This spot at Amwell is the site of Amwell Spring which along with Chadwell Spring in Ware were the original sources of the fresh water sent to London along the New River.



*A 2007 picture of Great Amwell Pool with the islands to the left and Amwell Lane to the right. The mature willow trees have been a particularly attractive feature of the pool for many years. It is just possible to glimpse the memorial to Sir Hugh Myddelton on the nearest island just to left of the centre of the picture*

The New River was first designed by Captain Colthurst and it was he, not Hugh Myddelton [who is most often associated with the construction], who surveyed the route and cut this section of the channel. Colthurst planned the channel carefully and tried to ensure an average gradient of five and a half inches per mile with a minimum of no less than four inches per mile. This ensured an even and gentle flow of water in the channel towards London along its full length. Due to this constraint he was only able to build his channel right at the base of the steep valley side below the church, at a considerably higher level than two of the springs. In this way he was able to maintain his gentle gradient so essential for his channel to work properly. The unfortunate consequence of this meant that he was only able to tap into the water from two of the main springs at Amwell rather than all four. It is estimated that at the time of the opening of the New River in 1613 the total water gushing out of the springs at Amwell amounted to some 10 million gallons per day but only a portion of that was available to be directed into the New River. The New River below the church at Great Amwell remained just a simple channel until Robert Mylne began to create the pool and the islands in the 1790s.

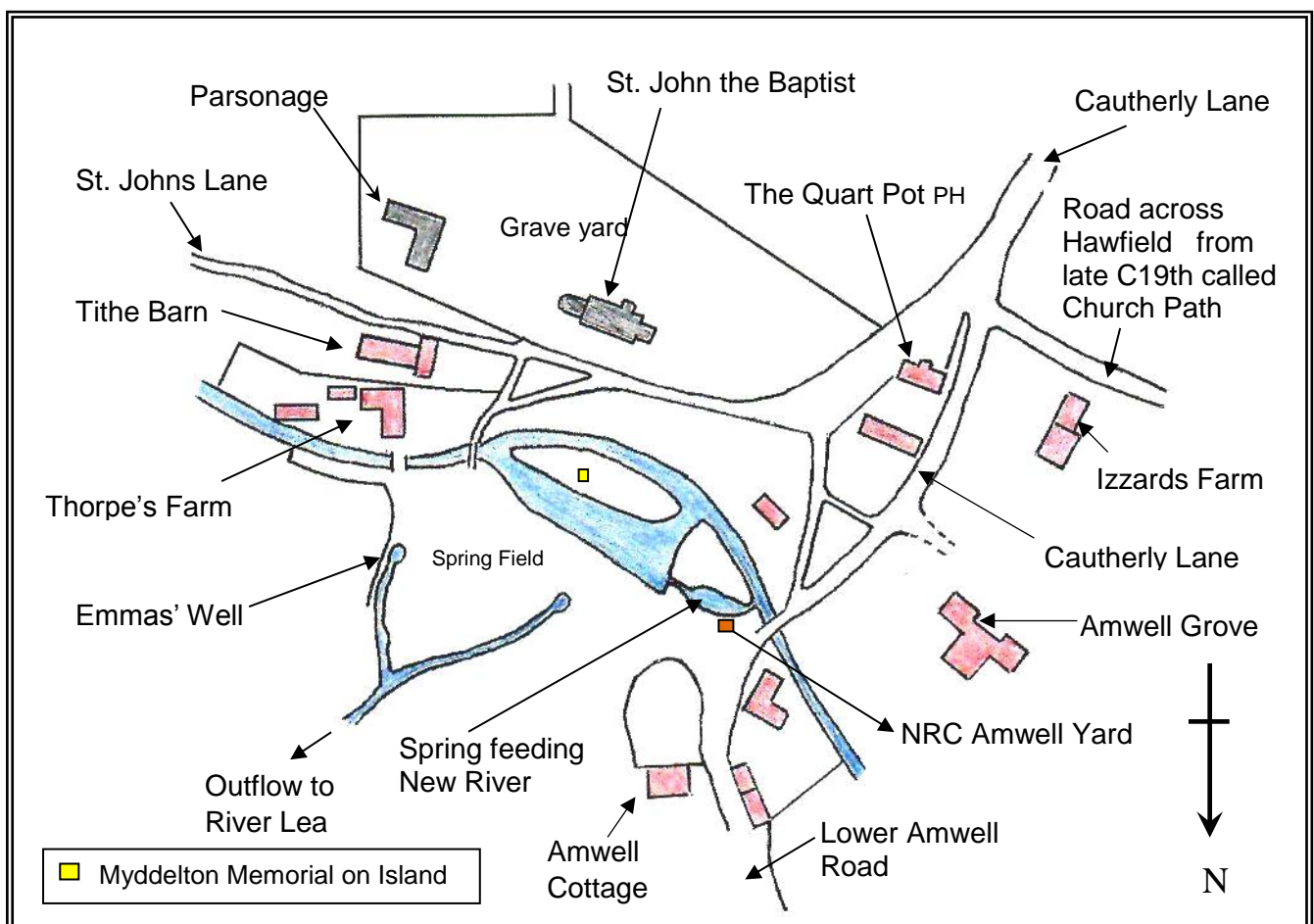
### THE SITE OF AMWELL POOL IN 1790



Before the New River was constructed the gently sloping ground between the springs would have been very wet and marshy with all four springs creating channels converging to form the stream taking the water to the River Lea. Apart from the water that issued out onto the surface a large volume of water was also introduced into the water table from the chalk rock which underlies this area. This historically led to a large area of the valley floor downstream of these springs to be heavily saturated and known as Amwell Marsh. It would appear that Captain Colthurst built his channel over the top of one of the springs at Amwell and quite close to a second. The latter was close to the road bridge and by embanking around it he was able to direct its water into his new waterway. Beside this spring the New River Company had established a maintenance yard which was to later delay the full development of Amwell Pool by some years. It is worth noting no road ran across this area in 1790 and Amwell Lane between St. Margarets and Amwell was yet to be constructed.

It is known that Robert Mylne had no residence in Amwell until 1792 when he acquired Amwell Cottage, known today as The Well House. Between 1794 and 1797 he built himself a retirement home called Amwell Grove to the west of the pool. At the same time he commenced to landscape the area around his house as well as the steep slope between the New River and the church. Despite his land being bisected by Cautherly Lane he attempted to create attractive surroundings for his new house. A map of 1797 shows just the downstream island had been constructed with the spring close to the road bridge and the New River Company {NRC} maintenance yard left unaltered at this time. In 1800 when Robert Mylne erected a memorial to Sir Hugh Myddelton on the island all the planned landscaping work around the pond was completed.

#### AMWELL POND AND CHURCH IN 1800



The Pool was known at the time as Amwell Pond with Amwell Cottage and Amwell Grove both being properties owned by Robert Mylne. He did not own all of the Spring Field nor Thorpe's Farm. However he had already gone some way towards creating pleasant surroundings for the family's homes. The 1797 map suggests a pipe was inserted underground to join the spring at the western end of the pool to the much widened watercourse surrounding the new island. The way in which the western end of the excavations had been carried out suggest that Robert Mylne already had plans for a second island.



The memorial to Sir Hugh Myddelton took the form of an inscribed base supporting an ornamental urn. Different inscriptions, some in Latin, can be found on each side of the pedestal each relating to Myddelton's involvement with the construction of the New River. The ornate swagged urn is still in remarkably good condition retaining very sharp definition of its intricate details. This is due to it being made of coade stone one of the most highly sort after of the Victorian artificial stones.



*The memorial to Sir Hugh Myddelton overhung by willow tree branches on the larger of the two island taken from the road which runs alongside the pool.*

## Coade Stone

Coade stone is a ceramic made of terracotta, glass, silicates and clay which once carved is subject to high temperature firing for several days. It has the rather useful property of being easily carved but once fired is incredibly resilient to weathering and impact damage. It was the most sort after of the various Victorian artificial stones and its manufacture was a closely guarded secret. Having discovered how to create this high quality material in about 1770 Eleanor Coade set about employing the highest quality sculptors and workmen in her artificial stone manufacturing company. She was a remarkable women being herself a capable sculptor and astute business women. The high quality product she insisted upon soon saw her business become highly productive and successful. Production began in 1771 and continued after her death in 1821. However her successor did not have her drive with the business closing in 1840 and the secrets of coade stone lost. After much research and trial and error these secrets were rediscovered and Coade Ltd. was founded and restarted production in the year 2000. There are today over 600 coade stone sculptures from Mrs Coade's manufactory still in existence all around the world. It would be true to say about Mrs Coade's invention that it was often imitated but never bettered.



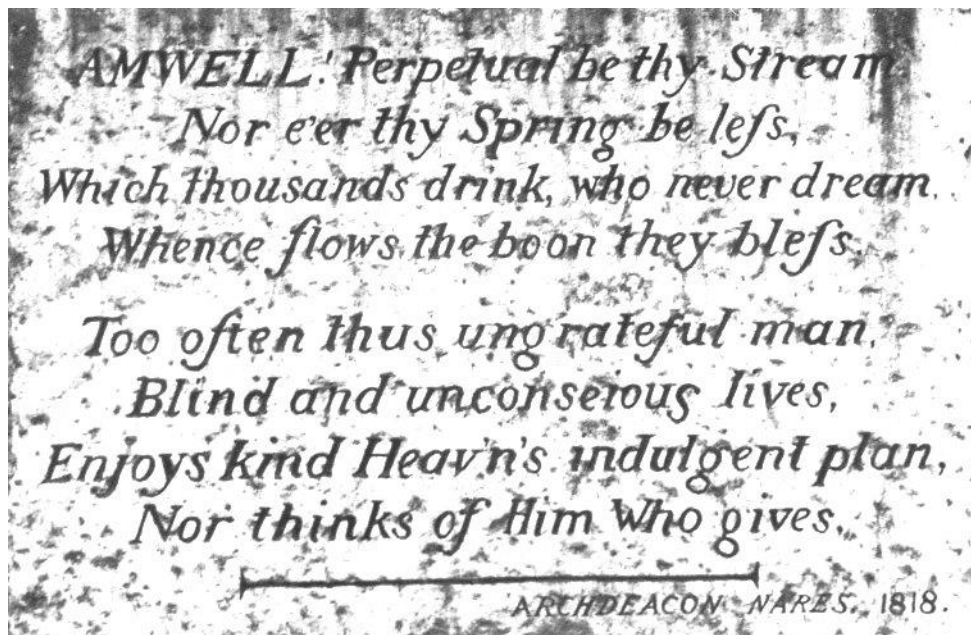
*The engraving of Amwell Pool dates from 1807 and gives an impression of the newly created pool, island and the planting on the rising ground between the church and the pool. Robert Milne's memorial can be seen depicted on the island as can the willow and other shrubbery and trees planted in this new landscape*

Some writers have suggested that the second island was built soon after the first, but a map of 1811 shows just one island in existence. This map it is believed was drawn by Mary Smith Coxhead the wife of William Chadwell Mylne. He was Robert Milne's son and had become his father's assistant in 1804. When his father retired in 1810 the New River Company appointed him the Chief Engineer in his father's place. Sadly Robert Mylne was to enjoy only a very short retirement dying in 1811. It is not clear when the second island was constructed, but certainly between 1811 and 1818 when the monument on the second island was erected by William Chadwell Mylne. It is possible William added a monument to his island soon after its completion as his father had done with the first island.



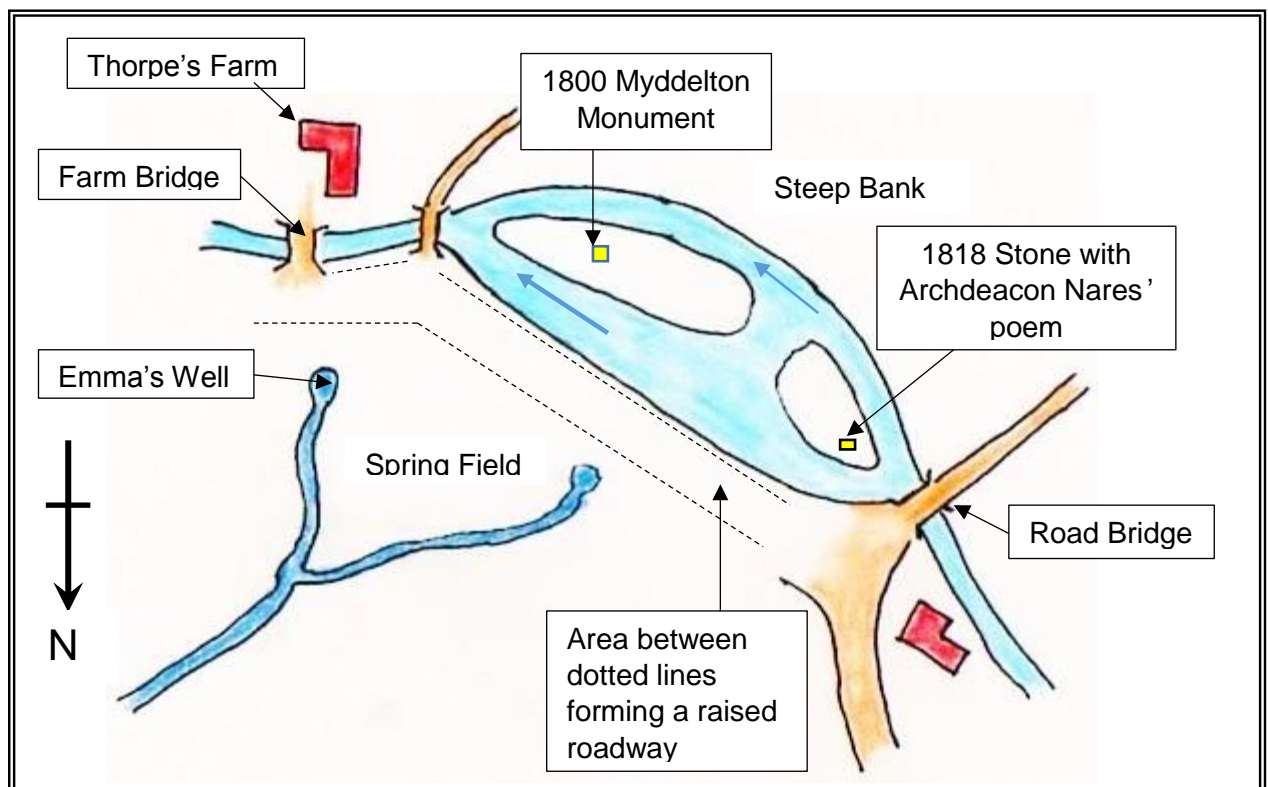
*A 1974 view of Amwell Pool showing the memorial on the smaller Island.*





The memorial on the smaller upstream island takes the form of a rectangular stone on a chamfered base topped by a decorative ball. On its upstream face easily seen from the road bridge over the New River is the poem by Archdeacon Nares. The Archdeacon is known to have been a guest of William Chadwell Mylne in 1818. After he had left a piece of paper upon which he had written the poem was found on the table in the round room of Amwell Cottage. One can only imagine that the two men had discussed the need for an inscription for the proposed monument and the Archdeacon kindly left behind a suggestion for that purpose.

### AMWELL POOL 1820



In the six years leading up to 1818 William Chadwell Mylne was able to remove the New River maintenance yard from the pool area. This meant that the pool could be enlarged and the second island formed. It also meant that even more excavated soil had to be disposed of and like the initial excavation it appears to have been used to raise the level of land to the north of the pool. This strip of land today underlies the roadway that runs alongside the pool and there is evidence to suggest that the originally rather boggy area had been transformed into a useable roadway even by 1811. In this way it is thought that William was able to complete his father's design for the pool within the land owned by the Mylne family.

We learn from the writings of his daughter Mary that William had noticed how the bridge across the New River used by Thorpe's Farm to access the farmyard was always muddy and wet with water constantly dripping into the fresh water channel. Given there were cattle that crossed this bridge on a regular basis he had formed some concerns that this may well be tainting the river water. A situation that he considered detrimental to the quality of the fresh water his employees were supplying to its London customers. This set him off on a strategy of removing all private bridges along the full length of the New River. In 1828 he was able to purchase Thorpe's farm and thus incorporate the farmhouse into the landscaped area of the pool. Mary further relates that with little alteration Thorpe's farmhouse was turned into a pleasant private residence and the land around it into an attractive garden. Once completed it was named "The Lintz", in later years it was to be renamed River Cottage.



*River Cottage as it appeared on warm summer's day in August 2019. The footbridge is the most recent of many wooden bridges that have spanned the New River at this point. Both cottage and bridge together form a pleasing bookend to the landscaped pool area as does the road bridge and trees at the upstream end of the pool.*



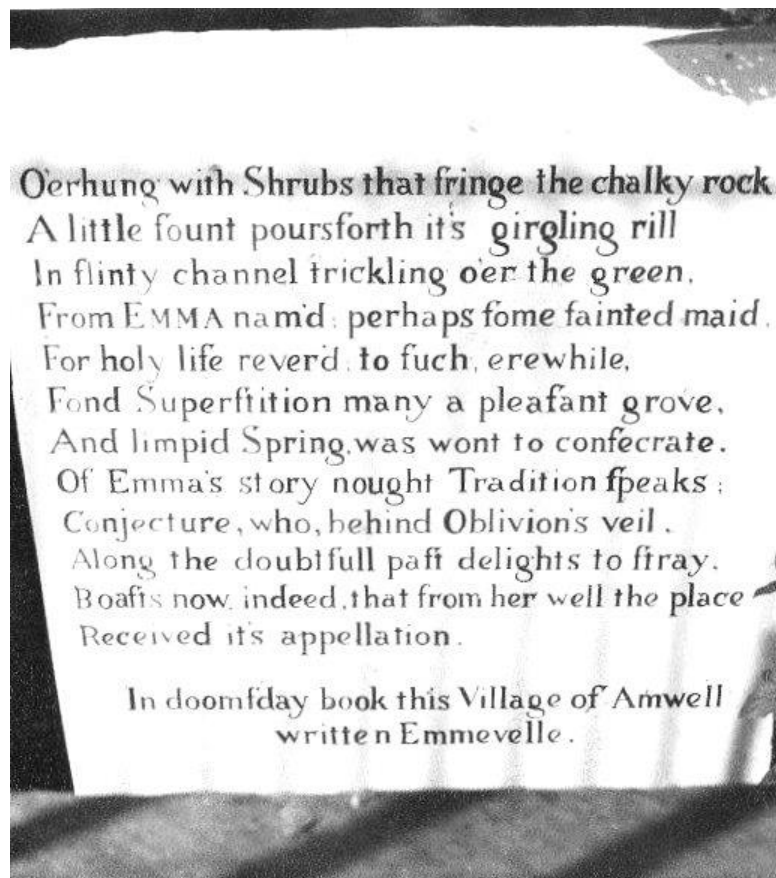
In 1838 William Chadwell Mylne was able to purchase Emma's Well from Henry Brown the Lord of the Manor. It is situated at a lower level on the opposite side of the road from the pool. There has been some confusion created over the years with the use of words when referring to the springs at both Amwell and Chadwell. In the early 1600s there was in common practice the phrase "The Great Springs at both Chadwell and Amwell" which for those at the time made sense. There were in fact two major springs at Chadwell as well as several smaller oozing's of water at the surface. At Amwell there was an area in which there were four springs of significance and other lesser seepages of water at the surface. One of the springs at Amwell has become to be called Emma's Well and is often suggested erroneously to be the source of water for the New River at Amwell. As the New River took more and more water the water table began to lower and less water reached the surface. As abstraction by pumping from the water table grew in the C19th the springs began to go dry during the summer seasons. Indeed in 1830 during a dry summer Emma's Well is reported to have dried up and was considered an unusual event then. When William Mylne acquired the spring and some land around it eight years later he is thought to have been the person who engineered the rectangular pond with island and introduced a weir to maintain a high level of water. A sluice also being provided to lower the water level for maintenance purposes. The island and the banks of the pool were lined with brick work. The spring water entered the pond through the brick work by means of a cast iron pipe built into the southern bank. All presenting when completed a well-engineered appearance as befitted William's professional standing.



*An early spring view of Emmas Well showing the artificial nature of the pond. The ivy covered railings in the right foreground line the steep pathway that leads down from the road behind the photographer. On this occasion water was to found in the pond but that has not always been the case in dryer seasons for many years.*



.On the steep bank between Emmas Well and the road stands a stone upon which are written the words from a poem by the Quaker poet John Scott 1731-1783. He in later life had retired to live at Amwell House in the parish of Great Amwell about a mile away from Amwell Pool



Given the Mylne families' previous liking for marking events with commemorative stones it is more than probable that this stone was erected by William Chadwell Mylne shortly after he had completed the engineering work on the well pond. Some 50 to 60 years ago a story circulated in Amwell that during the Victorian period Emma's Well had fallen into disrepair and was much overgrown. When efforts were made to clear the undergrowth in preparation for renovating the pond, the stone, by then forgotten, was rediscovered lying flat under much ivy and dead vegetation. The stone was renovated and then re-erected where it was thought it had previously stood. It can be viewed today from the roadway by looking through the metal railings that top the roadside wall.

It would be true to say that Robert Mylne and his son William created a wonderfully picturesque spot around the pool below the church at Great Amwell. All the various elements forming a group of complementary features within the landscaped area. Once Amwell Lane had been built in 1841/2 this idyllic spot was much easier for the folk of Stanstead Abbots and St. Margarets to visit and enjoy. Something local people have continued to do over many generations ever since

Stuart Moye March 2020