

ON THE SHROPSHIRE MERES.



FOR rich beauty of wood and water, and quiet rural scenery, there is no district which surpasses that where the seven silver Meres of Salop mirror the ancient woods. Within sight of the Wrekin and almost in the shadow of the Welsh border hills, lies the pretty and

sleepy town of Ellesmere. It is situate in the north-west of Shropshire, and is accessible by the Cambrian Railway. No one goes there except to fish in the Meres, or perchance to sketch; but its inns are comfortable, its houses quaint; its church a handsome cruciform building on high ground overlooking the Mere; it has a bowling-green unique in its situation, inasmuch as it occupies the crest of a hill, whence there is an extensive view, and the surrounding country has abundant charms for those fond of sylvan life and scenery. Ellesmere has not much of a history. The bowling-green is on the site of a castle formerly given to Llewellyn, Prince of North Wales, by King John, which was afterwards destroyed during the civil wars of the seventeenth century.

The great charm of the place is the Mere, which lies in a hollow on the east of the town. It covers 116 acres, and derives its name either from the Saxon word *Aels*, or Greatest Mere, it being the largest of the Meres, or from the abundance of eels it contains. As you follow the road out of the town, the lake bursts suddenly on the view; and surrounded as it is by stately trees, and edged with tall green reeds, with islets wooded to the margin breaking the uniformity of the expanse of water, it is a sight worth a journey to see. On the side nearest the town some public gardens have been tastefully laid out, and a pleasanter retreat on a hot summer day cannot be imagined. Wherever you go there is the cool shade of mighty trees, whose branches curve and droop over the clear water where the white swans part the whiter lilies. If you wish for a row you must return to the road, and follow it until you come to a group of boat-houses in the shadow of a grove of trees. Here are rowing-boats and fishing-punts, and when you are

afloat you will see two charming pictures. On one side is the town with its pointed gables peering above the trees, and dominated by the church on the high ground, and on the opposite side is the mansion of Oatley with its terraced gardens leading down to the water, and its green park slopes, seen between ancient trees, with perchance a score of deer down by the Mere and mirrored on the calm surface.

On the side of the Mere next the town it is shallow, but on the other side it is deep. That dreadful American importation the *Anacharis alsinastrum* is the bane of the Mere, circumscribing the fishing-grounds, and interfering with bathing and boating. Here and there you will see stakes projecting from the water. These are to moor fishing-boats to, and mark the best places. The fishing is good, the Mere having plenty of pike in it, some of them of large size. It is not much fished during the cold winter weather, when the weeds are down and the pike are best caught, and a visitor would then be certain of fair sport. Perch are plentiful but run small. On cool summer mornings and evenings they bite freely. Roach are also numerous, and bream swarm in nearly all the Meres, but are not much fished for. Tench run to a good size, and carp bask on the surface on summer evenings in numbers, and enormous fish some of them are. Much more might be written about the fishing here, which is free to all, but I may safely say that a skilful angler would find at Ellesmere good sport, and comfortable quarters at a moderate cost. If he is fortunate and applies in the proper quarter, he may obtain leave to fish the other Meres, particularly Whitemere;



BRIDGE ON CANAL.

and if he is tired of the Mere, a walk along the canal trailing a spinning bait after him will generally result in some good pike being bagged.

Most of the Meres, but Ellesmere in particular, are subject to a yearly phenomenon known as "breaking."

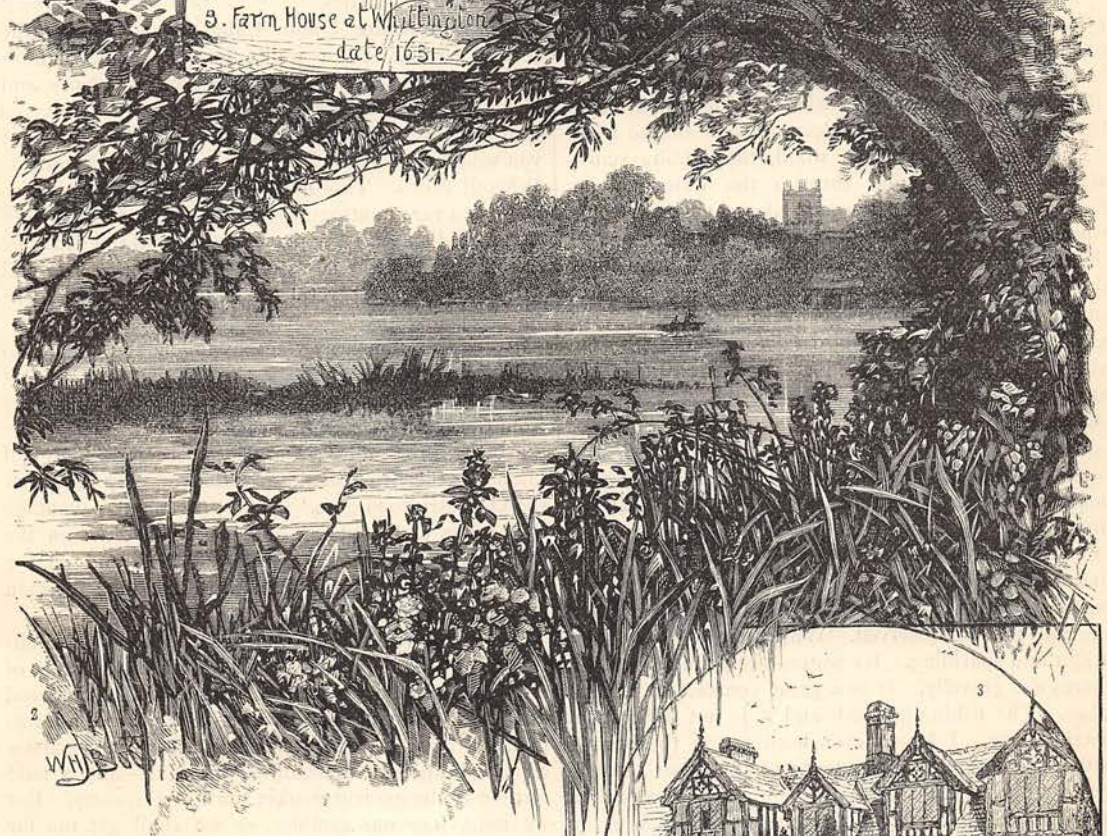
The water has then a most singular appearance, and whereas it is usually of a crystal clearness, you cannot then see a foot into it.

It is a strange thing, but all over the country less care is taken of lakes or navigable streams than formerly. Ellesmere is no exception. The weeds used to be annually cut, and the Mere netted, to thin the stock, the coarse fish being given to the poor; but this is not now done.

There are six other Meres all lying close together, in the hollows between the wooded hills, or rather undulations, into which this part of the country is broken up. A circle of three miles in diameter would embrace all the Meres except Crosemere, which lies a



1. Whittington Castle.
2. Ellesmere.
3. Farm House at Whittington
date 1631.



When the Mere "breaks," the fish are not so ready to take the bait. Every summer, generally in August, the water becomes thick with greenish particles held in suspension. Under the microscope these particles are found to consist of round green balls covered with spikes. Scientific men are not, I think, quite clear as to whether it is an animal or vegetable organisation; its name is given as *Echinella articulata*.

Whitemere is said to "break" later than Ellesmere.

little more to the south. Ellesmere, Whitemere, Blackmere, Colemere, Kettlemere, Newton Mere, and Crosemere, are the names of those lakes which are large enough to have names, but besides these there are pools of lesser note.

From Ellesmere you may strike across the park, passing deer in the tall ferns under the oaks, and crossing the Whitchurch road, come to a deep crater-like hollow, the sides of which are clothed with trees. Here, silent and black and still, lies Blackmere, a deep and clear lake, fed by springs which bubble up so strong and cold, that you must beware of swimming far from your boat, or you may suddenly feel the icy and numbing chill of the spring-water beneath you.

Here and there on this Mere you will find that very rare plant the small yellow or Highland water-lily, *Nuphar Pumila*. I well recollect the excitement of a botanical friend on his discovering this plant on Blackmere, and how I had to row him about in the hot sun, searching for more specimens.

That royal fern the *Osmunda regalis* grows in profusion around this and the adjoining Mere. We push through quite a grove of its monster fronds and seed-crowned crests as we make our way to a smaller Mere, called Kettlemere, which looks of an ebony blackness as it lies in the deep shadow of the trees. As we push through the wood, the rabbits scurry across the paths and through the ferns; a jay flies screaming away; a woodpecker taps busily on a whitened trunk, and—a sight not unfrequently seen over these sequestered waters—a noble osprey soars over the lake. But from out of a clump of firs a puff of smoke issues, a sharp report reverberates through the woods, and the splendid bird falls headlong into the water. Alas! that it should be considered necessary to wage such ceaseless war against the rare and the beautiful in nature.

About a mile further, taking the road over the canal, we come to another wood-fringed hollow, where lies a good-sized Mere called Whitemere. We go through the keeper's garden, and down a long slope to the water, to find on a well-kept sward a pretty thatched house with projecting eaves, where picnic parties often resort, and shady seats where lovers may sit and talk unobserved. Whitemere always looks bright and sparkling. Its waters are pellucid and its shores are gravelly. It is a great contrast to Blackmere. The fishing is good, and it is not difficult to obtain leave. I have never been on in the spring without finding one or two nests of the great crested grebe, a bird which is fairly common on the Meres, and in the winter time wild-fowl of many kinds swim in flocks on its surface.

A coot-shooting party, when several boat-loads of men surround the frightened birds, is one of the Ellesmerian winter institutions.

The road to the left leads us to Colemere, which is wilder in its surroundings than the others. It is a large lake bordered on one side by silent aisles of fir-trees. The great feature of this Mere is a phenomenon

created no doubt by subtle springs, eddies, and currents at the bottom. These appear to catch up any vegetable matter and roll it up in balls of all sizes up to two feet in diameter and numbered by thousands. They are of two kinds: the green "moss-balls," composed entirely of confervæ (*Conferva agagropila*), and "fir-balls," brown, and made of the fir-needles shed from the fir-trees on the south and opposite side of the lake, together with other vegetable matter. These balls are found only on the north side of the Mere, and are quite round and compact. If you let your pike-bait sink to the bottom, you will probably hook one at once. I have not heard of the like in any other water. In the belt of reeds along the north side, great numbers of reed-wrens nest in their cup-shaped reed-suspended nests, and in the gloaming of summer evenings their songs fill the dusky air with music. Pike are plentiful in this Mere, and run to a good size.

The other Meres are of the same class, with no special characteristics.

The Shropshire Union Canal winds through the Mere district, and a walk along its banks unfolds many sylvan beauties. If you pick out an empty and clean canal-berth, and give the man a small tip, you would do well to take a voyage to Whitchurch, for you would pass over a vast expanse of moss known as Whixall Moss. This morass, which is many miles wide, is a rare hunting-ground for the naturalist; but it is a wild and gloomy place, needing all the sunshine of summer and the acres of white cotton-grasses and yellow flowers of several kinds, to make it acceptable to the ordinary eye.

Going the other way you may follow the canal into Wales, and the loveliest part of Wales, the Vale of Llangollen, where the canal draws much of its water from the Dee.

About three miles from Ellesmere is a high hill known as the Brow Bank, over the very top of which the Oswestry road goes. From this coign of vantage the view is a distant and most striking one: on the one side the hills and valleys of Wales, and on the other the far-reaching plain with the blue Wrekin rising abruptly out of it.

Three miles further is the pretty village of Whittington, where there are the very picturesque ruins of a castle and a noteworthy example of the timbered houses so common on this side of England, a farmhouse of 1631. A mile further is a perfect specimen of an Elizabethan mansion—Park Hall—and a mile further is the ancient market town of Oswestry. But we must stay our rambles, or we shall get too far from the Shropshire Meres.

The combination of wood and water in such a quiet rural district makes the country around Ellesmere of special interest to the naturalist and the lover of scenery, and I am quite sure that any one in search of cheap healthy quarters, and every kind of country amusement, would be well satisfied with a sojourn at Ellesmere.

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