

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

It is the end of June 2026. I should be walking riverside, taking snapshots, with the u3a Photography Group. Ideally, there would be a breeze drifting over me from the Thames, keeping me cool.

But circumstances can change – as does the weather – like record breaking June temperatures in excess of thirty degrees. And, excessive heat does not lend itself to an unsheltered trek in the daytime at noon. So shade has to be the order of the day and a relaxing stroll in Knighton Woods would seem fit for purpose.

That is where I am now, with the group, ambling along – or I should be. They have looked and wandered on. I have looked and lingered. Why – because I am intrigued by what I see or can't see.

The earth is soft and crunchy with nature's debris yielding under my feet. I step on and over roots between an old, gnarled tree and a scrawny tree: Major and Minor; not very imposing, they stand at the porchway entrance of a pond, the image of which I have just captured on the screen of my camera.

I progress cautiously and close in on the edge where algae meet earth. There is no water to be seen. But I guess where it is hiding because it was clearly visible in similar stretches of waterscape we passed by earlier in the course of our excursion – similar, but different.

This pond is shaped like an inverted balloon glass with a long stem and with no ending in sight. I know there must be an ending. I just can't see it because the green bloom winds away from my point of vision. So, definitely out there somewhere, only nowhere to be seen.



That makes me curious for starters although loitering in my mind is a more significant issue which reminds me of the Mary Celeste mystery. I am thinking, surely one slimy pond is much the same as any other. But the any others are frequented by mallards and moorhens. I watched only minutes ago moorhens flapping their wings to disperse the immediate scum from around them.

It's a conundrum. No end in sight and no waterfowl in sight. Surely the ponds all have the same appeal. Now, I am doing some more thinking, could it possibly have anything to do with what may lie round the bend.

Do I leave it like that, or do I go where no man has gone before me. I chuckle at my choice of words.

The water can't be that deep. No-one will miss me. What if I take my socks and trainers off and go for a paddle to explore the outer reaches. See what the eye can't see. I have my shorts on and long legs that go with them. It can't be that deep.

I look around me. I can't see anyone, nor hear anyone. I tuck my footwear between the twin trunks of Major before dipping a toe in the algae. Ugh, warm and slimy, not unexpected. Never mind it will wash off, although I may have to forgo tea and cake in Princes Road later.

The trouble is that I have this, 'must go for it', notion in my head. So, I push on. Slow progress, no rush. I reckon I have paddled nearly half distance along the creek and now the trail has narrowed and bushes are flopping into the soup.

My first obstacle lies just ahead. A log is straddled across my path. Don't try to be clever is my mantra as I steady myself with one hand on the log and cock my right leg over it. Safely done I follow up with my left leg and I apply the same level of caution.

Don't overthink it – it's hardly the Amazon rainforest, I mutter. Then I remind myself of the poem framed on my wall: *If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you*. Nice. The touch of jingoism lifts me – brightens my mood.

I notice the slime is almost up to my knees and roll my shorts up a further notch. Small steps, I slither along trying not to create too much backwash to preserve my once pristine shorts.

Strangely, my earlier bravado appears to be on the wane. I half-turn my head and see I have covered off two-thirds of my mission. I decide it would be too disheartening to turn back. Nevertheless, I stand still for a moment while I consider my situation.

No-one would know if I turned back – only me. But that one person would be one too many. The strangest thing is I still can't get to grips as to why there isn't any waterfowl here. What do they know that I don't?

But I go on – compelled to do so as I close in on the unknown. Subconsciously, I feel the need to roll my shorts up yet another inch. I look down and see there are no more roll-ups to be had – my shorts are up to my groin. I must have made others without thinking.

There are alarm bells ringing in my head. The sensation I am experiencing is like times when I realise I have taken one step too many when climbing a ladder. I react accordingly and regulate my steps to a soft shoe shuffle treading even more warily – if that is possible. I am in serious worry mode. And once again my desire to see the unknown is challenged

But then I am distracted. I'm under attack from a squadron of mosquitos. I fight back and swat them away with my flailing hands, taking care not to topple over in the process – this is not the moment for a mouthful of mushy peas.

I craft plan A in my head. I'll just peer round the corner to see what is to be seen – and feel all the better for the experience. I have no doubt. Now, almost there, I lean forward cautiously, extending my head and shoulders to search for that early view of the beyond.

I gape at what I have stumbled across. I find it difficult to process all that I am seeing with just one sweep of the head.

Is this a microcosm of the Epping Forest I know? Through the ages, landscaped by the Ice Age; touched by the Iron Age; imposed upon by invading Romans; tinkered with by royals and landed gentry and plundered in recent centuries by the extraction of gravel to make tracks and roads – although I concede, perhaps the latter-day pillaging may have added character to the landscape.

But then who could have been responsible for this example of paradise? Dick Turpin – surely not! Although the cave-like mound I see before me could be on the lines of what one of his eighteenth-century dens looked like – but without the water at its mouth and what looks to me like a subterranean cave.

I give it more thought. Had it been converted by Turpin from a sculpted hill-fort originally intended as a stronghold to escape the dastardly Roman attackers? And undiscovered until this moment by me? I find it impossible to trace its outline due to dense thicket

Slowly, I am taking it in – this, the other end of the balloon glass replicated but larger on a scale of five to one. Colonised, corralled by blackthorn, hawthorn, brambles and nettles making it impregnable to intruders from the outer circle. And in the midst of them, birch and beech trees stand tall in the small. They overhang the pond: sheltering it, allowing just a portion of dappled rays from the midday sun through their canopy.

I turn my attention to the pond. Unlike the source it is clear, tranquil, and probably deeper, and bowl shaped. Almost certainly one of those gravel pits dug out in the late nineteenth century, of glacial origin – a spring where gravel and sand rests on clay.

The pond is still, and it is clear like the air above it, and devoid of algae unlike its source. It reaches into the cave – a cave formed out of rock or out of earth – who knows? With the overgrowth I have no means to tell.

Now finally my attention settles on a rock, the centre piece in the millpond. But when does a rock not look like a rock? Well, this certainly doesn't look like a rock to me. And a strange fascination overcomes me. I have to say I am entranced, mesmerised and in a funny way magnetised by this thing, this object, whatever it is.

Do I detect movement? Is it floating towards me – surely not! The heat of the day must have finally got to me.

But it is drawing me in. I am wide-eyed. I have a sense of Valhalla – is it part of my heritage – is it where I come from?

My caution has deserted me. I take a step too far and my body plummets, and my head follows, and I am falling.

I see the creature. It is almost on me. Now, in a nanosecond I realise what the ducks know and I did not. It is a giant turtle. But it can't be. They live in the oceans. It is a loggerhead turtle.

Where did it come from? Who brought it here? How long has it been here?

It is enormous. Weight and length it dwarfs me. And I am in awe of it!

With a burst of speed, its head is like a figurehead on the prow of an old galleon, with eyes that glitter at me – and then its mouth opens and I am petrified at the sight of the sharp spikes in its throat – they are pointing backwards towards its stomach.

I am terrified. It is going to take ages for me to get back off to sleep again.

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