

The Beck: Its History and Restoration

Background



St. Mary's Church and the Beck. Drawn by J.C. Nattes and engraved on copper by B. Howlett, c1804 (courtesy of Mrs B. Greenwood).

For centuries Barton's Beck, an artesian spring-fed pond, has been an important feature of the Town and a source of fresh water. St. Chad is reputed to have used it for baptism; and the stone for the great churches of St. Peter and St. Mary was almost certainly brought up the stream linking the Humber with the Beck – a likely harbour.

Until comparatively recent times, as shown in this map, the Beck was much larger than today, and was drained by an open watercourse which powered a Water Mill, fed a Tan Yard – conveniently close to Soutergate, associated with Shoe Makers – and, as it ran alongside Pasture Road, was used for washing sheep, hence 'Washdyke Lane' or 'Sheepdyke' being former names for that road.

It is sometimes thought that the Stream, originating as 'Waterslacks Drain' (off Horkstow Road) and running through Baysgarth and Whitecross Street, may have discharged into the Beck; the 1796 map shows quite clearly that this watercourse – carrying polluted water –

was isolated from the Beck, bypassing it across the Beck Hill as it headed for Pasture Road, and even then kept separate from the Beck stream in a parallel watercourse!



1796 Map of Barton

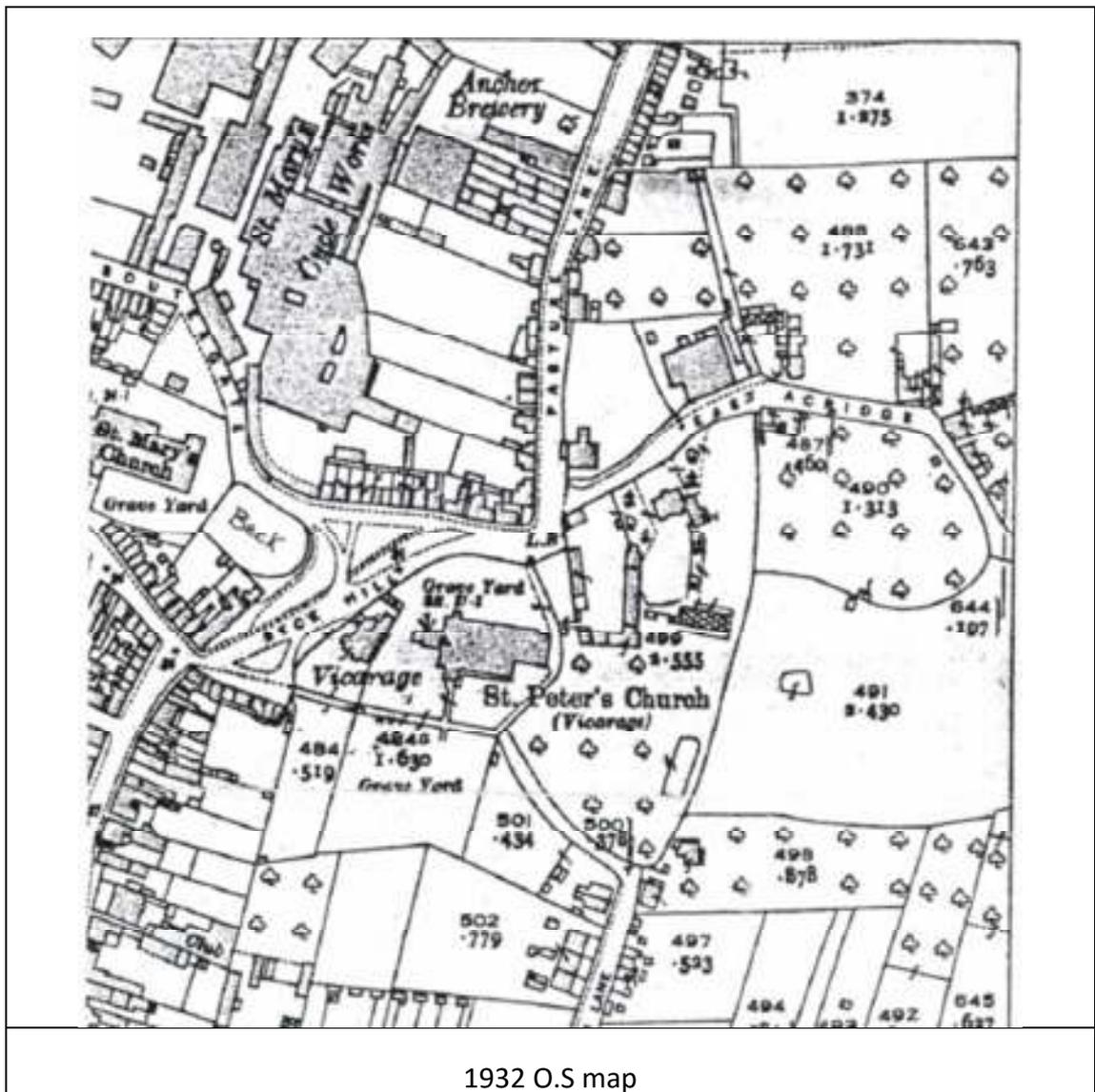
Responsibility for the Beck appears to have remained with the successive bodies administering local government – the Vestry, Local Board, Urban District Council, Glanford Borough Council and North Lincolnshire Council, which is now its registered owner.

The state of the Beck was a recurring problem for the Local Board which began its work in 1863. Its Minute Books, which are now in the North East Lincolnshire Council's Archives, record that:

On 7th August 1863 the Board agreed that the Surveyor prepare a Plan and estimate of the probable Cost for filling up the Beck, for making a Road on the Tangarth side, and for putting down a Pump. It was resolved that a Committee be appointed "to confer with the Surveyor as to the best and cheapest method for effectively carrying out the above". Presumably as the cheapest way of filling up the Beck, people were invited to tip "Dry Rubbish" into it (eventually, "on the East side only" – Board Minutes of – 1st April and 6th April 1864).

The Highways Committee Minutes of 28th October 1864 inform us that "A Committee having inspected the Beck ... it was resolved to request Mr. Stamp [the Surveyor] to make estimate of new road through the Beck, and deepening the Beck and filling up the slopes around therewith, so as to save Expense of fencing, and to present the same to the next Meeting of the Local Board for their approval".

On the 4th November 1864 the Board looked at the Surveyor's drawings for the Beck. A couple of Members proposed "that the Beck be simply cleansed [sic] out by the removal of Filth and deposits to the North East side without deepening the same according to the Surveyor's Plans". However, this proposal was defeated by nine Members who agreed "that the Sections and Plans of Mr. Stamp the Surveyor relative to the cleaning of the Beck be adopted and that advertisements for Tenders to do the work be made". It would appear, therefore, that shortly afterwards the North East side of the Beck was filled and the carriageway in Soutergate extended to link with that on Beck Hill.



This extract from the 1932 Ordnance Survey, compared with the 1796 Map, clearly indicates how much the Beck has been reduced in area. It shows the Soutergate extension, occupying the North East side of the Beck; much infilling on its South East side, and now forming part of Beck Hill; the former 'leg' abutting Burgate now filled up and re-developed, together with

the brick culvert (visible in the South West corner of the Beck), and the area to the North of Soutergate now occupied by Hoppers Cycle Works, necessitating the culverting of the former outfall stream.

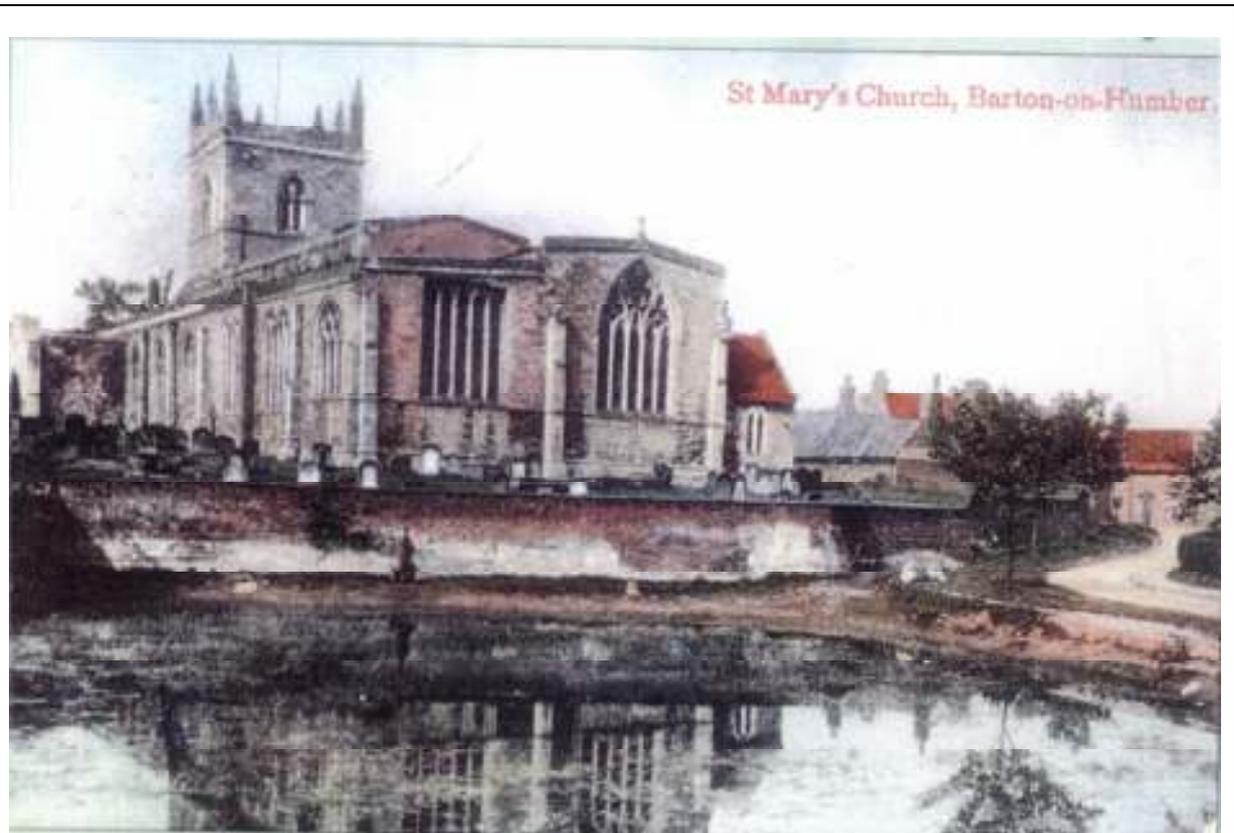


Photo of the Beck c1908 (Courtesy of Mr. B. Peeps)

Until the late 1960s the general appearance of the Beck during the 'Summer' months remained much the same as in this early 20th century photograph, whilst in the 'Winter' it was filled by the artesian springs or 'blow wells' – its level being controlled by a 'clough' at the mouth of the twin culverts under Soutergate. However, in the 1960s, the Water Authority and Industry increased their extraction from the aquifer feeding the springs, which led to prolonged periods of little or no water in the Beck and resultant calls for action.

The Civic Society's Response

Since its foundation in 1969, the Barton Civic Society has been especially concerned about the appearance of the Beck and the retention of water; it's Executive Committee has, over many years, worked hard to achieve a lasting improvement. The following extract from the Minutes of the Inaugural Meeting of the Society on 3rd October 1969 may be of interest:

"Main Topic.

How can Barton made the most of the Beck and Beck Hill – Mr. Phil Pape

The speaker put forward his scheme for the improvement of the Beck and the main recommendations were as follows:

- a) For the little-used road to the North to be closed to all but pedestrian traffic.
- b) The brick panels in the wall flanking this road to be decorated in

fibreglass or in carved bricks.

(Mr. Pape offered to do this at no expense to the Council or to the Society).

c) The grass area also to be extended.

d) A paved court to be made for limited car parking and for seats.

e) The feature of the scheme is the preservation of the water and the maintenance of the water level; this would entail the placing of a culvert, making a Clough and possibly breaking through a concrete floor at Hoppers Factory and clearing the passage of the water-course.

f) Concrete shelves to be constructed around the north and east sides of the Beck and bog plants to be planted for beauty and botanical studies for schools.

g) Some areas of the Beck to be deepened for lilies.

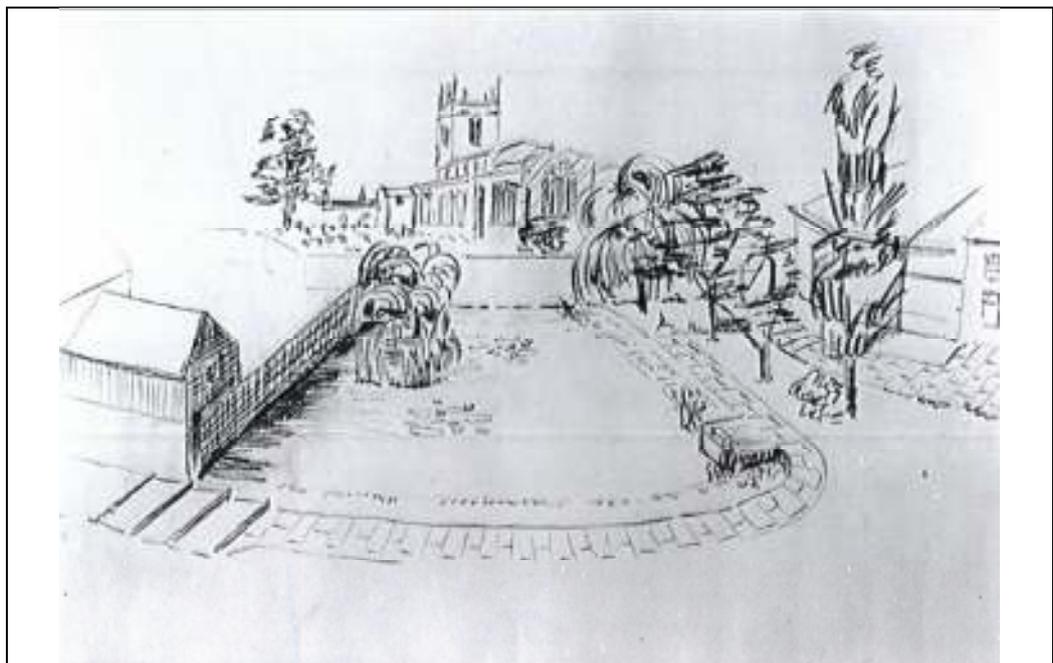
h) A small island to be constructed in the SW corner of the Beck for weeping willows.

This scheme was enthusiastically welcomed and the main suggestions of this scheme thoroughly discussed.

The Chairman asked if anyone was against the scheme or had alternatives to put forward or would like to see a car park. There were no alternative suggestions made and the idea of a Car Park was rejected.

Colonel Robey mentioned the need to guard against the danger to children. Mrs. Chambers thought that new flowering trees could be planted to ensure colour in Spring and Autumn, but Mr. Pape thought it better not to overcrowd the area. Few additions could be made without cutting down existing trees.

The meeting resolved that the scheme should be adopted by the Barton-upon-Humber Civic Society”.



Phil Pape's Sketch for the Beck (Courtesy of N.L. Council's Museum Service)

At the Executive Committee Meeting on 23rd September 1970 it was reported that the Surveyor of Barton Urban District Council had responded to a letter from the Society, saying that “regular attention was given to the Beck area and Beck Hill in general”. He continued: “Conserving water in the Beck was a very difficult matter. Any suggestions from the Society would be given careful attention by the Council”. At this time, the lack of water in the Beck was of great concern, it being supposed that, with the lowering of the water table, the artesian springs were unlikely to flow again. To this end, on 27th April 1971 the Executive Committee considered two ideas for the Beck, put forward by Mr. Varah and Mr. Pape:

- “a) A scheme be drawn up for making the actual water-hole smaller in area, the problem could be tackled by doing something with it.
- b) To tidy up and take grass further inwards.

It was resolved that Mr. Bryant and his helpers should dig a hole in the middle of the Beck to see if there is clay in the bottom, Mr. Bryant to advise the Barton Urban District Council of what was being done”.

By 26th September 1971, “It was reported that Mr. Bryant, Mrs. Chambers and Mrs. Chapman had undertaken three “digs” in the Beck, one near St. Mary’s Church wall, one in the middle of the Beck, and one at the Eastern edge of the Beck. It was discovered that only about 6” was refuse and then it was just white sand and gravel” – no clay.

In the early 1970s the Civic Society sought the advice of several Consulting Engineers about the retention of water in the Beck at all times. “It looks delightful in the winter when it is full of water, but rather horrible in the summer when it is dry”, wrote Margaret Rook, the Hon. Secretary. On 14th November 1971, the Executive Committee resolved to ask the Barton Urban District Council whether they would consider employing one of the two consultants, recommended by the Civic Trust, to make a professional survey. Consideration was also given to a suggestion “that the Beck might be lined with a kind of polythene in order to retain the water”.

Mrs. Russell, Mr. Pape and Mr. Varah attended a meeting of the Barton Urban District Council’s Public Health and Parks Committee on 21st February 1972, “but no headway had been made with the Beck”.

Mr. Pape then wrote to the Council “setting out plans for the Beck, and offering to meet the Committee again and to take along a model”.

At the Executive’s Meeting on 23rd May 1972 the Secretary reported that a letter had been received from Mr. T.A.D. Farran of Grantham, Brundell & Farren, Consulting Engineers, stating that “It is evident that it would be a very difficult matter to ensure that water is retained in the Beck at all times without prejudicing various other interests. I am of the opinion that the matter is too complex to be settled without the considerable expenditure which would be necessary to ensure that no claims could be brought successfully against your Society for damage due to flooding and other reasons. Having regard to all the circumstances I would advise that this matter be left in abeyance so far as your Society is concerned, but you may wish to make your own representations through the Local Authority”.

The Society's Executive Committee on 4th January 1973 were pleased that "Statements" had appeared in the Press, and that "Discussions were at last taking place in the Council and investigations were pending".

The Barton Star of 2nd February 1973 reported that the Barton Urban District Council was inviting someone from the Department of the Environment to see what aspects of a development scheme could be grand aided. This resulted in Government funding towards reshaping the bottom of the Beck with top soil, seeding with grass, and planting some trees in it.

In response to a request from Secretary, Margaret Rook, a letter was received in April 1973 from Mr. Neil Ashley, a former Barton resident and consulting engineer, then in Berkshire. Mr. Ashley outlined his thoughts on the Beck, and stated that, ideally, extensive field investigation and survey work would be required. He pointed out that the "loss of water was coincidental with the sinking of deep bore holes in the surrounding area that is outside of Barton by the Lincolnshire Water Board. In my opinion this had the immediate effect of lowering the general water table and dried up not only sources of 'Spring' water for the Beck" but other springs in this region.

Mr. Ashley continued by pointing out that to recreate the Beck as a 'beauty spot' would require an extensive supply of water; and it would also be necessary to prevent water loss from the Beck by forming an impervious membrane, either synthetic, or by using puddled clay.

In May 1973, the Society sent the Barton Urban District Council Dr. J. Robertson's suggestions for retaining water in the Beck - by sealing the base and directing the spring water through a carefully camouflaged central pillar into the pond. The Council's Surveyor was to look into the feasibility of this suggestion.

By June 1978, the Beck was again in the Society's Minutes! A substantial amount of water must have re-appeared, as Mr. K. Horton, Glanford Borough Council's Engineer and Surveyor was to be approached regarding means of retaining water in the Beck, the maintenance of grass verges round the Beck, and also the state of the Churchyard retaining wall under St. Mary's East window. There followed, over a period of time, various meetings and other liaison with Officers of the Council.

Over the years, the unsightly appearance of the Beck stimulated adverse criticism of the Town from Judges of the 'Best Kept Towns' competition; and in 1981 'Britain in Bloom' assessors commented that "the pond adjacent to the Church is disappointing – a potentially very attractive area which would pay for improving".

A Press report of April 1979 stated that the Council was considering three possible courses of action:

- a) to fill in the Beck,
- b) to build a flood-wall round it,
- c) to lay larger outfall pipes.

The Executive Committee strongly objected to any idea of filling in the Beck, and awaited the result of further investigation by Council Officers. The Society's Hon. Secretary sought the advice and support of numerous amenity bodies.

However, before any works were done, the spring water returned with great force; and led to a severe risk of flooding to the nearby houses, only averted by constant pumping day and night into the combined sewer in Beck Hill. The 'Barton Star' of 15th February 1980 quotes the volume of water being pumped as 2,600 gallons per minute!



Flooding of Soutergate/Beck Hill, Feb 1980 (photo by Mr J. French)

In November 1981 a letter from Mr. Horton, Glanford Borough Council informed the Society of the results of a CCTV survey of the outfall culvert which "has suffered significant structural deterioration. Indeed in one location the culvert has collapsed thus causing a severe impediment to the Beck outfall flow".

This prompted the construction by Anglian Water in 1982 of a new relief outfall sewer from the Beck, across Beck Hill and down Pasture Road to link with the existing culvert near the Anchor Brewery building.

Landscape Plans, sympathetic to the Beck and its setting were drawn up within the Council's Planning Department. These plans provided for the retention of a large expanse of water within a 'soft' landscape, together with the majority of seating facing the Beck. They were well-received by all Members of the Executive Committee in October 1980. But sadly by December, to the dismay of the Committee, they had been "shelved indefinitely". However, in February 1982 hopes were raised when Mr. Nix from the Planning Department showed the Committee some possible schemes for the Beck area, favouring the 'Village Pond' idea.

Concern at the condition of the Beck was yet again aired at the Executive Meeting of 3rd June 1983, "especially since the storms had brought about the collapse of part of the retaining wall" [of No. 10 Burgate. This wall has just been rebuilt at the time of writing,

March 2016]. Mr. Robson, Planning Officer to be asked what plans Glanford Borough Council had for the Beck area.

About the beginning of 1984, the Council commissioned John Whiteley and Partners to redesign the Beck area. His scheme involved:

- a) getting rid of the water, hence a great amount of stone infill, incorporating land drainage, and a token lozenge-shaped pond with its outfall, at the lowest possible level,
- b) the introduction of much soil and planting in the Beck itself - creating a park, rather than a pond,
- c) infilling of the North East side of the Beck to create a small car park,
- d) replacement of the low, stone walling along the North East and South East sides of the Beck with red engineering brickwork,
- e) formation of a seating area, with its back to the Beck,
- f) re-paving of the footway along the South East side of the Beck, and building of brick planters round the trees in the adjoining verge on Beck Hill.

The Executive Committee considered the proposed Scheme on 2nd March 1984, and the Hon. Secretary, Hazel Best wrote to Mr. D. Murray in the Council's Engineers Department, making "the following points, in the light of the recent high water levels in the Beck, which lead us to make reservations about the scheme proposed:

1. The present level of the outfall is too low and needs to be raised about one foot at least.
2. The introduction of more soil into the Beck for the landscaping will cause problems, in view of the water discharged by the artesian springs which permeate the Beck ...
3. We feel that the area covered by water should be increased rather than reduced. If the top soil was removed the problem of weeds, soil disturbance etc. would be reduced and the appearance of the Beck would be improved more cheaply and more effectively.
4. There are ecological reasons for preserving the water in the Beck, and I enclose points made by Mr. Miles Hopper, the noted local naturalist.

Thus while we are anxious that some scheme for the Beck area be undertaken as quickly as possible, we feel that we cannot go along with the landscaping of the Beck itself, although we are in favour of the construction of the surrounding pathways etc. as indicated on the plans".

However, during 1984 the Scheme, costing some £50,000, was completed.



Part of the 1984 work to the Beck area (photo by Mr R. Patterson)

At the end of 1991, Highway works were carried out on Beck Hill. These included removal of the block-paved footway alongside the Beck, together with the brick planters round the trees, the regrading of the verge and planting of shrubs between the main footpath on Beck Hill and the Beck.

As the years progressed the planting in the Beck matured and then was occasionally pruned, but largely neglected; the shrubs on the verge developed in a similar fashion and steadily obscured the view of St. Mary's.

Nigel Land, the Society's Hon. Secretary resurrected the whole Beck issue in his comprehensive Report which summarised the Civic Society's campaign to 'sort out' the Beck, the current situation, and suggested a way forward.

Nigel's Report was considered at a Meeting on 6th February 2003. Bob Patterson, Paul Brown, Nigel Land and John French met with the objective of producing "a proposal for the restoration of the Beck back to its former appearance to place before the Barton Town Council Environment Regeneration Committee". The main problems needing attention were seen as:

- the site is neglected, and maintenance costs will escalate
- the engineering brick work is ugly and intrusive
- the dense vegetation is encouraging crime and anti-social behaviour
- the traditional view of St. Mary's is all but lost
- seats all face away from the Beck and are in need of repair

It was pointed out that in the previous Summer (2002) some work had been done in the Beck by a youth group, (Operation Life Style), led by Helen Danson; and that some people would like to retain the soil infill and current semi-wild shrubs and trees. It was thought

that the approach should be to stress the potential complementary nature of a clear body of water to the habitat provided by the churchyards. This would provide more diversity than currently exists, as the Beck has become just an extension of the churchyard habitat.

The Group tasked itself with numerous 'Action Points', including:

- locating drawings of the 1984 Project, photos, maps and plans of the Beck,
- researching a 'state-of-the-art rigid membrane', and artesian ponds,
- establishing current and historic water levels.

On 17th May 2004 Nigel issued his up-dated Report, "Barton Beck – History and Options", for discussion within the Civic Society and Barton Town Council Environment Regeneration Committee. In his covering letter, Nigel pointed out that "When investigations started 18 months ago it appeared quite feasible to restore the Beck to a large area of open water. Now, after monitoring spring flows for over 12 months, I have concluded that lack of rainfall is a serious barrier to this plan. The shrubs have been severely pruned and the Beck area does look quite attractive as it is – to dig out all the infill and finish up with months of arid dry earth banks every summer would simply take us back to the starting point over 30 years ago".

What had started quite optimistically was now not looking too promising.

In an effort to tidy the Beck, members of the Civic Society and Barton Lions Club did some pruning of the bushes and trees in 2009 and 2010.

At the Annual Town Meeting on 15th April 2010 a representative of the Civic Society aired concern at the neglected appearance and lack of maintenance of the Beck. The Minutes of this Meeting record that, in response a North Lincs Officer pointed out that no deeds exist, and that they are not owners of the Beck, but would look further into this issue. "Whilst grass-cutting is undertaken by Neighbourhood Services it was not deemed that further public money be spent on this".

However, not satisfied with this response, a resident, Ian Lawless spoke up forcefully in favour of the enhancement of the Beck. It was this intervention which really stimulated the Civic Society to produce two Discussion Papers, outlining radical work to return the Beck to its original state, which were presented, for consideration, to Barton Town Council Environment Regeneration Committee on 17th May 2010.

Barton Town Council has continued to be very supportive of all efforts being made to restore this historic and environmentally sensitive area of our Town; we are most grateful!

Following this, The Friends of Beck Hill was formed on 28th July 2010, and a Committee was elected:

Chairman - Ian Lawless, Secretary - Bob Patterson, and other Members:

John Hughes, John French, John Whittaker and Martin D'Alessandro.

The 'Friends' began to re-ignite interest in the Beck restoration.

On 20th April 2011 the work of the 'Friends' was transferred to a Civic Society Beck Sub-Committee:

Chairman - Ian Lawless, Secretary - John French and other Members:

John Womersley, Tim Allen (N.L.Council Advisor) and Andrew Robinson (from 4th February 2013)

With the assistance of Consulting Engineers, the Sub-Committee prepared a scheme involving:

- the clearance of most of the planting within the Beck,
- the removal of much of the 1980s soil in-fill,
- further excavation of the centre of the Beck and lining with clay to form a permanent pond,
- raising of the general water level and its control by means of a weir at the head of the outfall culvert,
- restoration of the surrounding walls,
- enhancement of the seating area, with most of the seats facing the Beck, and
- opening up the classic view of St. Marys Church and its reflection in the Beck.

In brief, the aim was to achieve the potential of this area of Barton by creating a tranquil and visually attractive asset for residents and visitors to enjoy.

The estimated cost of the Project is about £70,000, towards which WREN (Waste Regeneration Environmental Limited) has contributed £32,500, and North Lincolnshire Council £11,700, through a Community Aid Grant. The balance is expected to come from various sponsors, as well as Civic Society funds.

The Civic Society is most grateful to North Lincolnshire Council for the huge amount of support given to this Project, and for its financial contribution; we thank WREN for its generous Grant; and also those sponsoring the Project, especially the seating.

A Public Display and Consultation over the proposed scheme took place in St. Marys Church during September 2014, attracting a large number of people and enthusiastic support from the Town's residents! The striking display panels, designed by North Lincolnshire Council, were re-erected in the Local Link at Providence House for some 5 months from February 2015 and generated much interest and admiration.

Restoration of the Beck is, without doubt, the most ambitious project undertaken by the Civic Society. Its achievement has not been easy but, hopefully, will have lasting benefit for the Town.

John French
March 2016