

DEATH OF A SEWAGE FARM

The many square miles of mud flats, sandbanks and saltmarshes of the Ribble Estuary are well known as an internationally important haunt of waders and wildfowl. This is difficult terrain in which to locate and identify the scarcer fresh waders and perhaps vagrant ones from North America. Few people nowadays make the effort to search the marshes, preferring to travel to the sludge beds and tiny estuary of the Weaver in Cheshire to locate these birds in relative ease.

Bird watchers who were active throughout the Nineteen Fifties and Sixties will have fond memories of an habitat which attracted and held such waders - the Freckleton Sewage Farm. Famous sites were spread widely across England - Nottingham, Sinderland, Perry Oaks, Wisbech and on the North bank of the Ribble, all with a reputation for attracting rare waders.

The purpose of this short paper is to document the birds of this now vanished habitat at Freckleton. The Sewage Farm consisted throughout the Fifties and Sixties of about twenty low embanked areas between which settled sewage sludge was pumped. After lying for a year or two this "mud" became rich in invertebrate life - a prime feeding habitat for waders. Grass would eventually colonise a sludge bed and the area would dry out. These beds would often be bulldozed over and then re-flooded, but always there were beds in "prime" condition for attracting waders. Surroundings consisted of grazing meadows, often flooded in Autumn, an extensive saltmarsh (Clifton) and over an embankment the main Ribble Channel, with Hutton and Longton Marshes beyond the river.

Credit for the discovery of this major haunt of Lancashires waders must go to the well known Preston naturalist Harry Shorrocks, who visited the site with his friend Alan Harrison in the early days. On Harry's first visit on the 5th July 1947 he found a Red Necked Phalarope in full summer plumage.

By 1950, Harry and Allan were joined by a retired headmaster from St. Annes, Nelson Harwood, who made almost daily visits over many years. In that year (1950), a Buff Breasted Sandpiper stayed from the 19th to the 27th August - this was about the twentieth British record and the first in Lancashire since 1829. A Wood Sandpiper was only the 9th Lancashire record, and later observations at Freckleton were to completely alter the known status of this species in the County. A Broad Billed Sandpiper from the 28th September to the 7th October, added a new species to the County List.

In 1951 the outstanding wader was a Long Billed Dowitcher found on the 28th of October - at that time there were only about thirty British Records - this was the second for Lancashire.

Nineteen Fifty Two started with a Wood Sandpiper on the 28th August, and an "out of habitat" Purple Sandpiper on the 21st of September. A Pectoral Sandpiper from the 21st to the 26th September was yet another bird new to the County. During that year I made my second visit to the Farm with a school friend, Arthur Shorrocks, on the 11th October. We joined Harry and Allan and were confronted by Little Stints and Curlew Sandpipers, species quite new to us. In addition, two waders feeding at close range, which Harry and Allan had found before our arrival, were new to us all. After consulting the "Handbook" (there were no field guides in those days), we all agreed the birds were Bonaparte's Sandpipers (later called White Rumped Sandpipers), the first for Lancashire and about the 13th for Britain. Both stayed until the 18th of October, and one until the 19th. I heard that the well known Cheshire naturalist Major A.W. Boyd called in to see the two sandpipers on his way back from a wedding in top hat and tails. Needless to say I was well and truly hooked on Freckleton, and I was rarely absent between August and October on Wednesday afternoons and Sundays. On the 14th October, Nelson Harwood picked up a dead Long Tailed Skua from a field next to the Sewage Farm.

The following Autumn (1952) brought maximum totals of nineteen Little Stints and twenty three Curlew Sandpipers. A male Red Crested Pochard was at nearby Freckleton Pool on the 28th October. Interesting birds at or near the Farm in 1954 were Smew from the 19th to the 25th March, four Wood Sandpipers together in early August, up to fifty two Ruff, a Black Guillemot on the river on the 11th September, and a migrant Rough Legged Buzzard the same day.

In 1955, up to three Wood Sandpipers were present in early September, and my early arrival on the 25th September was rewarded with close views of a Buff Breasted Sandpiper, unfortunately the bird had flown away inland before other friends arrived.

In 1957 little Stints were present from the 28th August to the 6th November, and during strong Easterly winds numbers peaked at thirty eight on the 25th September. Curlew Sandpipers peaked at fourteen on the 19th of September. A memorable visit to the nearby Freckleton Pool on the 29th September, with Harry Shorrocks and Nelson Harwood, produced a Temminck's Stint and a Richard's Pipit.

An immature Little Ringed Plover from the 14th September to the 17th September, 1958, was only the third Lancashire record. This species has increased nationally and now breeds within the County.

Wood Sandpipers occurred each Autumn, usually singly, but with three in August of 1958 and up to four in 1960. Temminck's Stint appeared on the 23rd of May 1959, 3rd of June 1962, and 19th of May 1963.

The Farm's third Buff Breasted Sandpiper was present between the 21st August and 4th of September 1960. This was an exceptional year for Little Stints, birds being present from the 28th of August to the year end and peaking at sixty birds on the 28th of September.

A new species in 1961 was a Grey Phalarope, caught and ringed by John Morgan on the 28th of October, which stayed until the 1st of November.

Throughout the Fifties and Sixties an increasing number of observations were made by an increasing number of observers, which included, Peter Carah, Phillip Thompson, Len Knowles, Lawrence Eccles, Ken Smith, Malcolm Greenhalgh, and Mike Ainscough.

Some outstanding birds appeared in 1963. Harry Shorrocks and Phillip Thompson found a Baird's Sandpiper across the river on Hutton Marsh on the 22nd of September, and sure enough on the next high tides this bird appeared on the sludge beds at Freckleton, and was seen from the 5th to the 11th of October (this was only the 8th British record). Lucky observers on the 6th of October saw the Baird's and a Long Billed Dowitcher, whilst observers hoping to see these the following week were rewarded instead with a White Rumped Sandpiper (12th to 14th Oct.) and an immature Temminck's Stint (11th to 20th Oct.) - both these latter two waders were photographed by Lawrence Eccles, whose premature death a few years later was a tragedy for Lancashire ornithology.

In 1964 an embanked area of Lea Marsh a mile upriver from the Farm was flooded with dredgings from the Ribble Channel, and this proved an even greater attraction to birds than the Sewage Farm. Many Ruff, commoner waders, Curlew Sandpipers, Little Stints, and up to thirty Black Terns were often present. Two Ruddy Shelduck were seen on the 14th of August and stayed into September, with a single to the 13th. Harry Shorrocks, Graham Blackwell, and myself, were amazed to see a Cyr Falcon over this area during the evening of the 25th of August. The falcon struck, but did not kill, an Herring Gull. Two White Rumped Sandpipers fed together there from the 1st to the 5th of November, recalling memories of the events of 1952. Whilst back at the Farm during 1964, a Fire crest was found frequenting ornamental bushes from the 18th to the 20th October, and a Wood Sandpiper stayed until the very late date of the 22nd November.

Some doubts prevail regarding the record of a Lesser Yellowlegs from the 11th to the 12th August 1965, as a Greenshank with aberrant yellow legs was certainly present at the time.

Modernisation of parts of the Sewage Farm, and especially with the advent of the tipping of domestic refuse on top of the sludge lagoons which began in the sixties, was the beginning of the end of the Farm as I knew it, but thankfully birds continued to "drop in". In 1969 a Broad Billed Sandpiper in very poor condition was found on the 30th of August, but sadly died by the next day - attempts to recover the corpse from one of the few remaining lagoons proved fruitless. An immature White Winged Black Tern provided some excellent close views between the 30th of August and 2nd of September. A Temminck's Stint and as many as fifty four Curlew Sandpipers provided other highlights.

Few of the old sludge lagoons remained by the early seventies, with extensive tipping covering the lagoons and surrounding meadows, but rare birds continued to be found on man made pools, Clifton Marsh, Freckleton Pool, and on Newton Marsh. Peter Carah reported a Purple Heron at Freckleton Pool on the 8th of May 1970. A Temminck's Stint was on Clifton Marsh from the 23rd to the 26th August. A Pectoral Sandpiper was present from the 20th to the 29th of September, and yet another White Rumped Sandpiper was seen briefly by visiting birdwatchers on the 15th of November on pools close by the river.

A Pectoral Sandpiper was photographed on one of the few Farm lagoons which remained suitable for waders on the 17th and 18th September 1971, and another Temminck's Stint occurred on the 10th of August 1972.

The Spring of 1973 produced overshoots from the Continent in the form of a Spoonbill on Newton Marsh (20th to 27th May), and a Little Egret on the Marsh (26th May to the 3rd June). Autumn of 1973 brought a Wryneck on 25th August, a peak of Little Stints on the 25th September when thirty nine were counted, and a Wilson's Phalarope from the 4th to the 9th of October.

Watchers during the Spring of 1974 found another Little Egret on Newton Marsh from the 10th to the 28th April, and on the 24th of May a Collared Pratincole found at dusk, provided much excitement amongst local observers until the 29th. A wet Autumn provided many flooded fields and a Lesser Yellowlegs was found on a field adjacent to the Farm and also on Newton Marsh during the periods 6th to the 13th October and 30th October to the 16th November. A ditch and some pools attracted an immature Red Necked Phalarope from the 10th to the 16th October.

The Spring of 1976 provided a sighting of another Red Necked Phalarope, this time in the company of Dunlin in flight over the Ribble Channel. A Wryneck was watched by several observers in the period 25th to the 28th September as it fed on the embankment by the sewage works during the day, and roosted inside one of the large garages in the evenings. From the 16th to the 20th October a Pectoral Sandpiper was on a sandy lagoon just upriver from the Farm.

Peter Guy had by this period been working in the Sewage Works Laboratory for a couple of years, and this provided him with excellent opportunities to check the area almost daily. In 1977, two Roseate Terns were over the Ribble on the 13th May, and a full summer plumaged White Winged Black Tern there on the 20th June. The following Spring another Roseate Tern was over the Ribble on the 4th May.

In 1979 a Spoonbill was at Newton Marsh on 13th and 14th of April, and pools adjacent to the Farm on Clifton Marsh turned up a Pectoral Sandpiper from the 13th to the 15th August. A Buff Breasted Sandpiper on Clifton Marsh on the 7th of September was moved off overnight by high tides, and an Avocet there from the 17th of September to the 11th of October was seen by many observers.

The status of Wood Sandpipers at the Farm was changed dramatically on the 6th of August 1980, when a group of sixteen birds, pushed down by heavy overnight rain, was found feeding on a flooded field next to the sewage works access road.

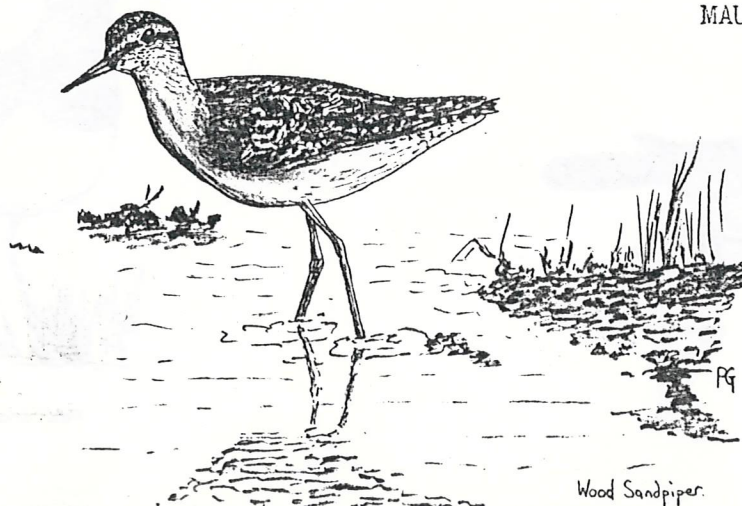
Yet another White Rumped Sandpiper turned up in the area on the 1st of September 1981, and later that month during severe westerly gales, an adult and a juvenile Grey Phalarope were found together at the edge of Clifton Marsh next to the Sewage Works.

Curlew Sandpipers still visit the area, and during the Autumn of 1982 a good count of thirty was made on the mudbanks of the Ribble at Clifton Marsh.

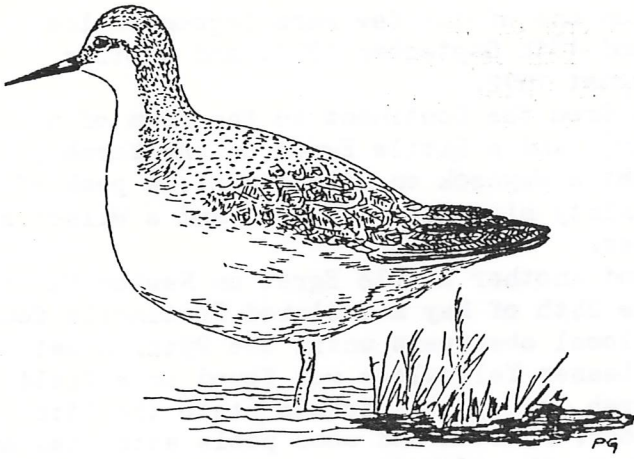
The destruction of the Farm and many of its adjacent fields is now almost complete. Clifton Marsh has been reclaimed for agriculture, and the long term plans for the Marsh include that it also will be tipped over as and when the tipping on the Sewage Farm is complete.

Only the meadowland of Newton Marsh and the margins of Freckleton Pool remain largely unchanged, these constituting part of the Ribble S.S.S.I. - unfortunately, the Pool is too often disturbed and difficult of access. If a conservation body could acquire and flood a few acres of the remaining land, then only then are we ever likely to experience once again the riches of Freckleton in its heyday.

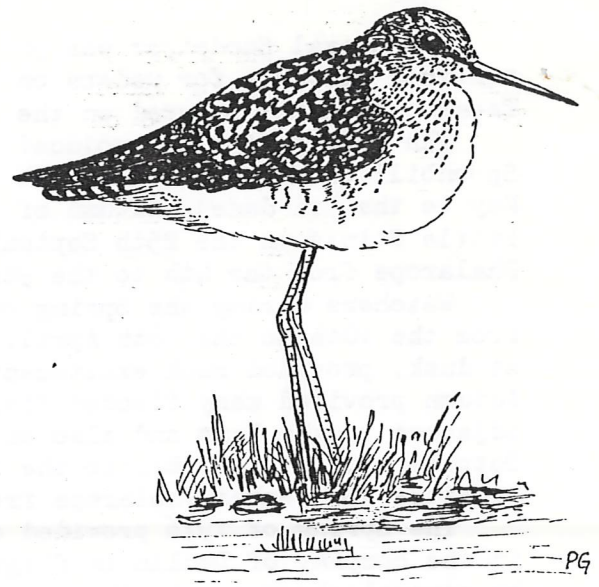
MAURICE JONES - November 1984.



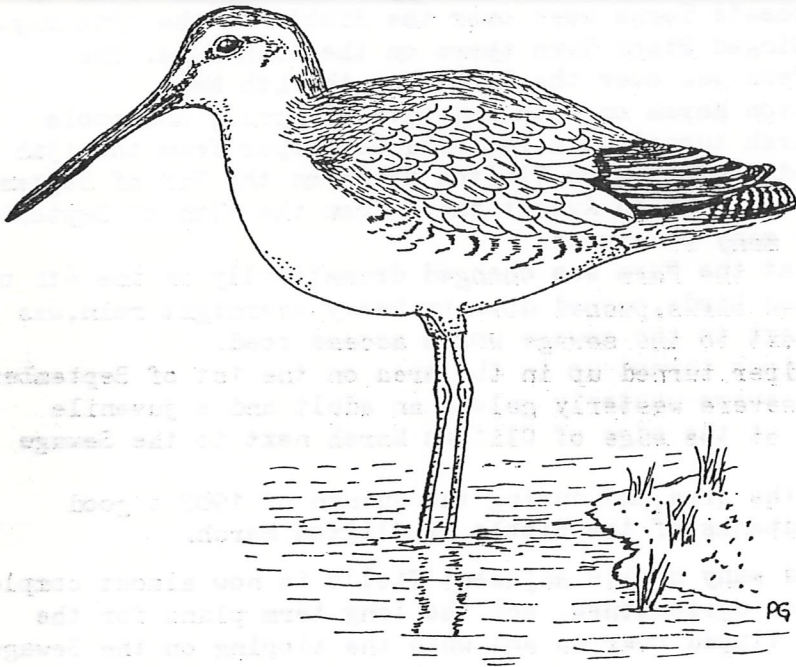
Wood Sandpiper.



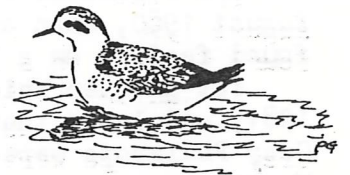
Wilson's Phalarope



Lesser Yellowlegs



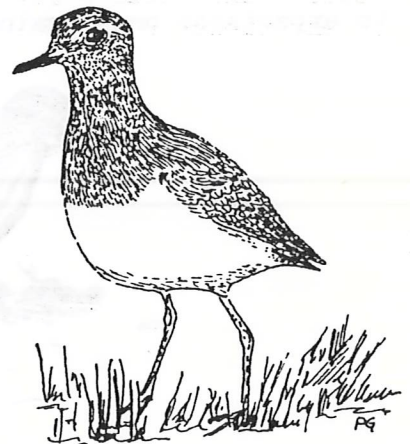
Long Billed Dowitcher



Grey Phalarope



Wrenneck



Pectoral Sandpiper