

# **HARRINGTON CONSERVATION AREA**

**The living museum**



**A plan for the future of the Harrington  
Conservation area by the people of Harrington**

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# HARRINGTON CA – THE LIVING MUSEUM

## FORWARD BY GAVIN HOUSTON

***Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and how shallow it is. It's thin current slides away, but eternity remains"*** HENRY DAVID THOREAU  
– ON WALDEN'S POND.

There is a debate going on that involves the future of the Harrington mill and mill pond- should the dam be repaired or replaced **or** removed completely and returned to a stream and natural barrier-less fishery as existed prior to man's original involvement circa 1840? On one side is the people- local residents, concerned citizens, historians. On the other side is the Provincial Government (concerned about liability) and lobbyist groups that believe **all** waterways should be barrier free regardless of circumstance. In the middle is the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority, not only the owner of the mill and pond but also the mediator who, upon performing its due diligence, will instruct the Province as to what the future of the dam should be. But, without pointing fingers, it is easy to determine that the main reason this debate is even happening in the first place is due to poor governance. Both the mill and the pond have succumbed to neglect for decades with the mill itself finally being rescued by the people, brought back to the cusp of being operational as it once was. Entirely due to the efforts of the people, the mill now appears to have a future which, in the minds of the people, will be a working museum, a small piece of man's ingenuity saved for the purpose of the education of future generations. But what of the mill pond? First, without the pond, the mill will not be operational and therefore a mere shell of what it could be. There is a vast difference between a restored building and a mill that actually works, the water from the pond turning the turbine that powers the machinery and grinds the wheat or rolls the oats. Second, it is also through the efforts of the people that the pond area itself has been improved and maintained- as part of an agreement between a local community group and Upper Thames River Conservation Authority (UTRCA).

Walking trails, picnic tables, memorial benches and trees, and regular ground maintenance is the result of the efforts of the people. Other than the installation of the current dam in 1952, which now appears to have been built with sub-grade material (not enough clay), and its mandatory repair after being breached in 2002, little to no physical work has been performed other than by the people- except for one small project.

Approximately 12 years ago, under the guidance of UTRCA, large rocks were installed where the stream enters the pond, the purpose- to alter the flow of the stream and collect sediment in a controlled manner for later removal. The sediment was never removed. Actually, this sediment that ***always*** accumulates when a barrier in a waterway slows the flow, one of the main issues that are negatively affecting the water quality and functionality of the Harrington Mill pond from the perspective of fish, wildlife, and recreation, one of the main points being used to strengthen the argument that the dam should be removed, *has not been removed since UTRCA took possession of the property nearly 70 years ago*. Prior to that, based on scant records and personal communication, the accumulated sediment was removed at least twice thereby deepening the pond and improving water quality, fish habitat, and recreational use. This removal of the sediment presumably was performed by the people. In fact, the majority of money spent on the mill and pond has come from the people either through fundraising, grant applications or personal contribution, yet, for a considerable number of years, taxpayers money has been set aside for the upkeep of the pond. It was either presented to UTRCA directly by the Township or withheld by the Township for future use. It seems some of the money, in part, was used for environmental and engineering assessments on the Harrington Dam as part of a Provincial Government initiative to assess all dams in the Province, but is that what the money was originally set aside for? Is that maintenance? One would have to ask the question that if the money had been used to upkeep the pond and remove the sediment whether the outcome of environmental assessment would have been different. And what of the remaining funds?

There is another example nearby of a barrier across a waterway that shows the effects of restricted flow, accumulated sediment, and reduced water quality, that being the Wildwood dam and reservoir that the Harrington Creek flows into. Formerly a cold water environment called Trout Creek, predictably because of the population of native brook trout that inhabited it, but now, due to the installation of the dam and the creation of the reservoir, the habitat has changed to a warm water environment. The trout have been replaced with bass, sunfishes, perch, pike and huge populations of coarse fish. A recent report I read from UTRCA listed all these warm water species as "native". Native to Southern Ontario perhaps, but not to Trout or Harrington Creek!

One of the arguments by the "save the pond" group is that: by removing the dam and returning the creek back to a more natural free-flowing waterway it will be jeopardizing the existing native fish and natural cold water environment by connecting the cold water to the un-natural warm water environment. They are correct. A quick look at the Eastern branch of Trout Creek that is connected directly to the Wildwood Reservoir shows the significant and negative effects of just such a combination. From silt-laden warm water to teeming schools of carp and suckers, parts of Trout Creek are a mere shadow of its former self.

But, the people have a plan. They are looking at the Harrington Mill and its associated pond from a different perspective than other vested parties. They look at it as a remnant of days gone by, an asset that has purpose from a historical and education perspective. They believe that their little conservation area has similar potential as the Jack Minor Bird Sanctuary and Black Creek Pioneer Village rolled into one. Under their governance, as with the restoration of the mill, this plan has merit. I used a quote from Henry David Thoreau at the beginning not just because of its poignancy but because of several parallels to the situation in Harrington. Mr. Thoreau was one of Americas most significant writers who wrote about life on Walden's pond in Massachusetts, not unlike Harrington's connection to Ralph Connor, one of Canada's most prolific writers. Due to poor governance, in the 1980's, two large developments were approved for the woods around Walden's pond. People in the area were not happy with the prospect and banded together to stop the developments and save the pond and woods. Don Henley, founding member of the music group the Eagles, a conservationist and fan of the works of Thoreau, joined in the fray and together they were eventually successful. They not only saved the pond and woods but turned it into a tourist attraction with emphasis on the natural history as well as the literary history created by Thoreau. It is now a pride of the state.

The following presentation by the people is about what they see as the future of their Conservation area by emphasizing the past. It is a multifaceted plan that involves the natural history and historical significance of the site while considering the repair and maintenance after years of neglect. It is a plan of good governance that will preserve and maintain a historically significant gem that can be used as an educational tool and a recreational hub for generations to come.

## **Purpose**

The people of Harrington have prepared this plan to present to all parties with a vested interest in the future of the Harrington Conservation Area to ensure that the position of the people is clearly understood. Where some would prefer that the dam and pond be removed, the people would clearly look at this as a loss to not only the local community, but all residents, and as a failure to the original intent of the creation of the conservation area in the first place. This plan demonstrates what the potential of the site can be and how the people would see it through to its fruition.

## THE DAM

The people, though they feel they have little influence on the future of the dam, believe that it is worth saving. It seems, based on numerous reports and assessments, that the greatest concern for the dam is catastrophic failure in the event of severe weather, that the dam was not designed for heavier flows of water. The people strongly believe that by creating a new overflow spillway at the north-west corner of the pond, the purpose of which to receive and control excessive flows of water and direct it towards Harrington creek below the dam, future stress on the dam would be alleviated. These types of spillways, using rock and fabric, have been created numerous times before and the cost is minimal. Under the guidance of UTRCA, the community would be in a position to install the spillway as designed.

With the installation of the spillway, the risk of imminent failure is removed and the need to replace the existing concrete structure eliminated. If it is decided that the earthen portion still requires work, the new spillway could be used to divert water and simplify the construction and, therefore, reduce costs. Also, if clay is required for strengthening the earthen portion of the dyke, a call to local landowners with suitable clay, and who would like a free dugout or pond, could be sourced, again, greatly reducing costs.

The amount of money suggested by the EA report for the reconstruction of the Harrington dam is huge. It should be noted that when the EA for Dorchester dam was completed, the exact same environmental concerns existed in Dorchester as they do in Harrington – reduced water quality, sediment buildup, increased temperature – yet the dam was replaced and the water quality concerns still exist. The main reason it seems the dam was replaced was simply because grants for the project were readily available. This time they are not. But the people believe there are other options available to improve the water quality and condition of the pond, assuming the dam remains with the new overflow.

## The Pond

Whether the pond is saved, altered or removed, the sediment within the pond **must** be removed. A proposal for the removal of the sediment in the pond has been prepared by the local residents. They propose to use a low impact suction dredge to remove the sediment from the pond, create an island, and open up the channel to improve flow and reduce further sediment build-up. This would have zero impact on the shoreline. In places where natural springs enter the pond, the area could be deepened to allow for better seepage from the springs and create a greater cooling effect. With the sediment removed, water quality would be improved, mainly the temperature and suitable habitat for the native brook trout would be created. This would also impact vegetative growth and habitat for other wildlife in a positive way.

## Fish and Fishing

Once the sediment is removed from the pond, the intent is to recreate the excellent trout fishing that once occurred on the pond. This would only involve the native brook trout. Stocking of rainbow trout, for decades a yearly event, would stop. There are numerous historical references to the quality of fishing in the pond including the photograph and split-cane fly rod on display in the restored mill. Prior to silting, a healthy brook trout population existed within the pond. With the pond returned to its original state with deep, cool zones and improved flow, the native fish will return. By introducing woodpiles, rock, and gravel, the fishery can be further enhanced with the possibility of transplanting some fish from nearby over-populated branches of the same stream system into the pond. First, the carp



that got into the pond from Wildwood reservoir would have to be removed. A plan is in place to do just that.

Brook trout fishing is an under-utilized resource. Due to the nature of the fish and its preferred habitat, it is not a species that is accessible to everyone. After making improvements to the pond and improving the fishery, further projects will be undertaken to encourage and promote fishing for this amazing little fish. Better access to the water's edge and fishing platforms, including a handicap fishing platform, will provide safe fishing opportunities. Fly fishing can be promoted and encouraged. Signage describing the brook trout and promoting the fishery will also be posted.

All these fishing initiatives will be undertaken by the local community with permission and guidance from UTRCA. By performing this work, the Harrington pond will not only become a destination for the avid angler but a place to introduce school children, Cubs, Scouts, Guides, 4H and other youth organizations to the natural world of the brook trout. This would not just include fishing, but a natural history lesson on the life history of the brook trout and the water and insects it depends on. Brook trout and its food are like a canary in a coal mine, a sign of a clean and healthy environment.

## **The Land**

Through the efforts of a local community group, a walking trail with some emphasis on birdwatching has been developed. Once the pond is improved, the trails will be improved and expanded, the intent being to create a more educational experience. By introducing wildlife specific trees, shrubs and plants to attract certain kinds of wildlife, as well as feeding stations for birds, hummingbird stations, butterflies etc, a greater interaction with wildlife will be presented to visitors. Appropriate signage would also be included for educational purposes.

Designated resting areas and picnic zones will also be incorporated and maintained. Along the trails will also be small plaques denoting quotes from the works of Harrington's famous writer, Ralph Connor.

Improved maintenance will also be included to ensure the clean and sustainable use of the area.

An arrangement has already been made for the installation of an osprey platform prior to the spring of 2017 nesting season. For several years Ospreys have been using the pond intermittently and it is hoped that by providing the platform, they will become more permanent residents. The platform will have the capability of having a camera installed for watching the nest from any computer.

All of the above initiatives will be undertaken by the local residents.

## **The Mill**

After years of sweat equity and money spent, all generated by local people, the Mill is almost completely restored and ready to become operational again with water from the pond. The final pieces required to become fully operational are the restructuring of the original turbine and the millrace from the pond. Options for the turbine are currently being reviewed and engineering for the millrace has begun. Most of the money for this is already in place. As has been the intention from the beginning, the mill is being restored to be a working museum. There are very few of these mills still in existence and even fewer that are functional. Harrington will have one of the last functioning grist mills in existence and an excellent educational tool for young and old. Every effort will be made to keep the mill as original as possible and to have it operate under water power as before. Even a functioning

replica of the punt in the “fishing” picture hanging on the wall in the mill will be built to not only complete the historical link between the mill and the pond but to be available should access to the water ever be required.

## **Education**

Education is a reoccurring theme throughout the plan for the Harrington Conservation Area. The intent is not to make a pretty spot for locals but to create an attraction to draw people to the area. Contact has been made with three school divisions and several clubs all of which expressed interest in including Harrington Conservation Area as a yearly education day-trip destination once the plan is implemented.

The educational tour: Starting with the pond and trails with discussions on habitat, natural and sustainable resources, fish and fishing, birds and birding, water and benthic sampling (using fine nets to sample the water and bottom substrate to learn what lives there) and terminating with a tour of the functioning mill showing mans ingenuity and how things used to be. The hall would also be used as a classroom where children could see pictures of the area before and after as well as further education on nature and the environment, including microscopes where they could see what wonders live in the water they collected from the pond. A lesson on Ralph Connor would also be included, along with a display of the complete collection of his books (available in the library), and combined with a discussion on other famous local people and related books such as the two-volume collection on the history of the township. The hall would also be a fallback in case of poor weather.

Initially, all the work and tours would be performed by the local residents including the natural history outdoor tours, the mill tour, and

classroom teaching in the hall. Eventually, as attendance and cash-flow allow, post-secondary students or young local residents would be given the opportunity to participate, with the potential for full-time seasonal employment.

This is not only an educational opportunity for thousands of children and adults alike, it is an opportunity to highlight another worthwhile destination in Zorra/Oxford as well as providing employment potential to local youth.

## **Heritage Classification**

In the near future, as part of the Ontario Heritage Act, we would like the Municipality to have the Mill designated as an official Heritage Building. We also foresee the entire Conservation Area designated as a Heritage Conservation District under the same Act. These declarations should be made soon to ensure the necessary protection to the site and to give access to other benefits from tax related, benefits, Provincial media coverage, and special signage to name just a few. We will be officially contacting the Municipality in the near future regarding our specific request and are bringing it to everyone's attention now as there is likely preliminary work required from the Township.

## **Conclusion**

This is what the people see as the potential and future of the Harrington Conservation Area along with increased use of the Harrington Hall. The infrastructure is already in place with only minor modifications required to make all this happen. Unfortunately, right

now, because of the dam, the area is looked upon as a liability by some. Hopefully, this plan from the people will demonstrate what an asset it really can be. The people have the means and desire to make this happen. They did it with the mill, and with so little help from others that, until recently, UTRCA did not realize just how far things had come along and that the mill was at the point of being made operational. History has shown what the people can do. Let's make this the new future...

***Harrington Conservation Area, the Living Museum***