

Widewater Mute Swans.



[When did you develop an affection for the Widewater Swans?](#)

I moved to the Widewater Lagoon in 2007 but little did I know how my life was going to change and how enriched it would become through the privilege of a friendship with our Mute Swans.

At the time, there were two territorial pairs living on the lagoon. One pair, mainly occupied the western side of the central bridge and as I lived in this area, they would come to feed at the bottom of my garden and I would sit with them and watch them for far too long. I found them fascinating. They were wild birds but they seemed to enjoy being sociable and sitting so close to them allowed me to observe their behaviour. Day by day, I was being drawn into their lives.

Presumably, your neighbours like these Swans too?

Yes, and they've even given them names. The resident Cob is called Stanley and his mate is Hilda. I'll leave you to work out which soap characters they are!

Did two pairs of Swans living so close to one another cause difficulties?

Well in the beginning the Cobs were constantly at war, battling every day. They were both large strong Swans, equally matched and neither could dominate. I watched them busking and fighting, feeling anxious for their safety

What is busking?

Busking is a term used to describe a threat posture designed to let other Swans know that they are ready to fight. The secondary feathers are arched over the back to make them look larger and more intimidating and the head is laid back to prevent the necks becoming entwined. They thrust their bodies through the water using both feet together to create more power. The idea is to intimidate a rival causing him to withdraw but it didn't quite work out that way for our evenly matched Cobs.



Did they settle their differences?

Sort of. The central bridge was adopted as a demilitarized zone and apart from the odd incursion or excursion depending on your point of view, they tolerated each other reasonably well. My pair, Stanley and Hilda, at first nested in a garden facing the lagoon but when the house was demolished for



development, they moved to the bank at the east end of the eastern lagoon and more recently they built a nest on Stanley Allen Island to protect it from Foxes. Over the years they have produced 31 Cygnets surviving to fly into the wild but now the Cob's fertility is decreasing as he gets older. It's hard

to be completely accurate but I estimate his age to be about 25 years old though he may be older.

Many people feed Swans, did you feed them?

Yes. My pair bred each year and they would parade their cygnets along the edges of resident's gardens to show them off! I created all sorts of ledges and feeding bowls of different sizes and established twice daily meal times with fresh water available all the time. The lagoon is saline and I had read that although Swans have a salt gland that enables them to drink salt water by excreting the salt through the nostrils, the Cygnets would benefit from fresh water.



What about the other pair, how did they get on?

The other pair also bred at Widewater nesting on the bank at the East end of the lagoon until the day when everything changed for them. I often wonder if a Swan could have the intelligence to be tactical in the battle situation, it's possible as they are intelligent birds. Having reached a stale mate situation in terms of masculine combat, Stanley attacked the mate of his adversary and sadly she died of her injuries. Not long after, the East end Cob left the lagoon. I thought he might go to the river and bring back another mate but he didn't return. The idea that Swans bond with a mate for life and pine for a mate lost for the rest of their lives, is a romantic view but not true! Yes they are strongly bonded to a mate until the mate is lost but then the surviving Swan will find another mate. Survival of the species through breeding is the primary instinct.

So what happened next?

The resident pair dominated the lagoon without any serious challenges from other Swans and there followed several years of relative peace. Many Swans flew in hoping to stay but were soon chased away by the King and Queen! They had their Cygnets each Spring and were wonderful parents and as Swans do, they chased them all away when the Cygnets were about 8 months old to clear

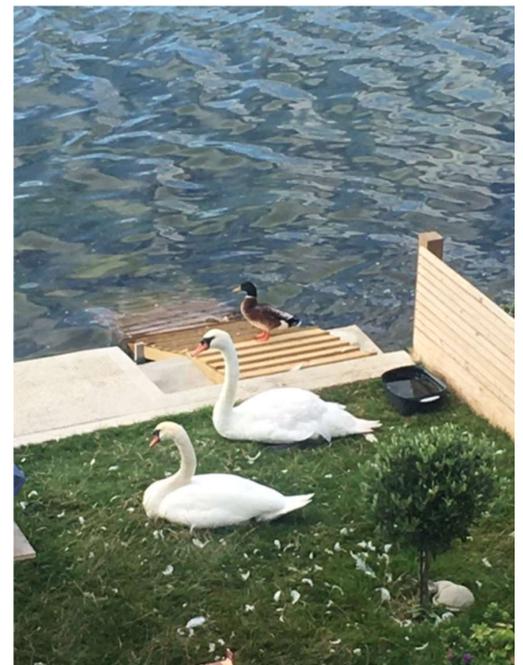
the decks for the new brood. These Juveniles would fly to find the nearest flock on the River Adur where they would stay until they reached maturity at 3/4 years. Then they would pair up and fly away to find a breeding territory of their own.

How did your relationship with your swans develop?



At Dawn, every day I would sit with the Swans at the bottom of the garden in the perfect tranquillity of a still morning as the sun rose. I was also there in the pouring rain, howling gales and snow! It didn't matter, they would come and I would be there. It's hard to put into words those moments of communion with Swans but I felt blessed and thankful for the privilege. The time spent with them always taught me something else about them. I learned about the different sounds and calls that they make: distress, bonding, triumph, and asking for more food. They are far from Mute! I observed their

physical features and the details that have helped me identify them when Swans look so similar. A tiny "bleed" of the black "mask" leaving a small mark on the bill has been the feature that I have always looked for to confirm that the Cob is Stanley. But in the end, I got to know their demeanour and personalities and I would know which Swan was swimming towards me from a distance. Stanley is slower, stately and measured, Hilda is feisty and alert and more aggressive. Last year, Stanley decided to have his annual moult in my garden! He sat there for several weeks and covered the lawn in white feathers that looked like snow, It was beautiful and I loved having him there. Hilda would visit and sit with him sometimes. These were the last times that they would come to the garden.



I believe that your commitment to swans extended beyond Widewater. Can you tell me about that?

I had so many questions so I read every book I could find and the more I learned, the more I wanted to know. When I couldn't find any more books to read, I decided to become a volunteer at the Swan Sanctuary in Shepperton, a huge hospital and



sanctuary for sick and injured Swans and many other

birds. I have been going there, when I can, for twelve years and have learned so much more about the problems that Swans encounter and I have learned how to rescue and care for them.



Recently, I believe there has been drama at the lagoon, with a rival pair arriving and breeding, what has happened and is this unusual?

It's not unusual for other pairs to arrive and usually they are driven off by the residents after a short chase but this year a new Cob arrived and was much more aggressive and equal in size to the older Cob. He managed to drive Hilda and Stanley under the bridge into the eastern end of the lagoon. It became the "front line" for a protracted territorial battle. For some time they would busk there with neither giving way. In the end, however, the new pair gave up and left the lagoon, possibly to find a safer breeding territory.

Did the new pair return?

Yes, in the Spring, the new pair returned to Widewater, presumably to breed and they built a nest on a Tamarisk island east of the bridge. Suitable habitats for breeding are becoming fewer as natural wetland habitats are destroyed. Widewater has ideal conditions for breeding having plentiful weed for food, suitable nesting sites on islands and a long "runway" for flying lessons! It is therefore prime territory and worth fighting for and the conflict between the Cobs resumed. The first serious fight took place and though neither were injured. nothing was resolved.

So how did Hilda and Stanley manage with the return of their rivals?



As the breeding season had begun, they built a nest on Stanley Allen island at the east end of the lagoon. Incidentally the island is named after the late SDOS President Stanley Allen. At the beginning of May, one Cygnet hatched for Hilda and Stanley! We were elated after months of wondering if the eggs were fertilised and if Hilda was going to sit for weeks waiting for them to hatch as she did the previous year when she sat on infertile eggs for 15 weeks almost starving. Then tragedy struck and after only two days on the water, the Cygnet was predated by a Black backed Gull. Hilda

returned to the nest to sit on the other eggs that were not going to hatch. It was heart breaking to watch her.

How did the newcomers fare?

Five Cygnets hatched at the beginning of June and were led on to the water almost immediately. the water. Only 4 were seen the next day and the following day I watched a Greater Black backed Gull predate another. It was too far away to help. The Cob tried to save his Cygnet and flew at the Gull but it was too late. Swans are very good parents but this year there seem to be more Gulls on the lagoon and as it is such an open space with little shelter they are easy prey.

The new Cob now dominates the territory. Hilda and Stanley have been driven down to the far East end of the lagoon a long way from my garden. Sadly the old timers don't seem able to push the newbies back and seem to accept that they have lost their territory. What will happen in the end is unpredictable. They could leave and fly to the river but it's unlikely as they are a breeding pair. They could be moved but to where? This is their home and moving them for example to the Swan Sanctuary and putting them amongst 200 other Swans on their lake, would be very stressful for them. The recent outbreak of Avian flu has made it difficult for birds to be moved anywhere so what seems to be a

solution is not a straight forward option. My hope is that the younger pair will return to breed on the Tamarisk island near the bridge and the dominant male will be preoccupied there. Stanley's fertility is dropping now and they may not breed this year. The best outcome would be if both pairs settle reasonably peacefully for a shared territory. Swans are adaptable and Stanley and Hilda have had to share before.

The Swans have 'Celebrity' status on social media. Have you been surprised by how many people are following this year's events?

With all the Drama of the lives of these conspicuous birds who share their home with the human residents of the lagoon, it isn't surprising that there is much interest in watching this story unfold. Social media has opened up a window of communication where reports, images and questions can be posted and it has become like a daily "Swan Newspaper"! Like myself, people have been caught up in the story with all its unexpected twists and turns, highs and lows and everyone wants to know what will happen next! We have become involved with their lives and we have grown attached to them and emotionally invested in our relationship with them. They are definitely the celebrities of Widewater; they're certainly the most photographed !

Why do you think Swans are so popular with the public?

There are so many reasons! I think they have a particular beauty, an aesthetic appeal with their long, curved necks, pure white feathers, bright orange beaks and their large imposing size. They are instantly recognisable. We have all watched the awesome sight of Swans in flight and heard their distinctive wing song as they beat their huge expansive wings. They have a deeply rooted history and have been entwined in our culture for centuries. We see them on ponds, lakes and rivers in every part of the countryside. They feature in any artist's English country scene seeming to symbolise the essence of peaceful country life, gliding serenely over the water. They have inspired Art, Music, Ballet and have acquired Royal status! They symbolise Peace, Love



and Fidelity and they are revered in many cultures and religions. In so many ways, Swans touch all our lives.



[Will you write the book about Stanley and Hilda?](#)

It has crossed my mind to record their story but that will be when their story ends. The Swan who has captured my heart and become my friend for 15 years is an old Swan now and I know that a very difficult day will come when I will have to say goodbye to him or to them both. There will be many others, who know and care about them, who will feel the same.

I will always be so grateful for the immeasurable gift that I have been given for the rare glimpses that I have been allowed, into the lives of these Mute Swans.

Appendix

Stanley's breeding efforts over the years:

2008 – 1 surviving Cygnet. Previous Mate.

2009 – 4 surviving Cygnets

2010 – 6 hatched 0 survived. Present Mate- Hilda.

2011 – 8 hatched 0 survived

2012 – 5 hatched 5 survived

2013 – 6 hatched 6 survived

2014 – 2 hatched 1 survived

2015 – 7 hatched 7 survived

2016 – 5 hatched 5 survived

2017 – 4 hatched 4 survived

2018 – 1 hatched 1 survived

2019 – 2 hatched 1 survived

2020 – 3 hatched 1 survived

2021 – 0 hatched

2022 – 1 hatched 0 survived