

New Mills shown on the Ordnance Survey map of 1899.

NEW MILLS LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

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New Mills is a small industrial town in north-west Derbyshire, on the edge of the Peak District, but only 8 miles from Stockport and 15 from Manchester. A dramatic physical feature in the town is the deep gorge of the River Goyt, known as the Torr. This became the site of water-powered cotton mills in the late eighteenth century and the town of New Mills subsequently grew up around the nucleus of a small pre-industrial hamlet. The growing town relied upon its commercial links with Stockport and Manchester, soon facilitated by the development of roads, canal and railways. But, surrounded by beautiful countryside and the hills of the Peak District, New Mills has never become absorbed into the Manchester region. The town still has a community which cherishes a feeling of independence and individual identity. No doubt helped by this, the Local History Society has had an active first few years and has been well supported by the people of the town.

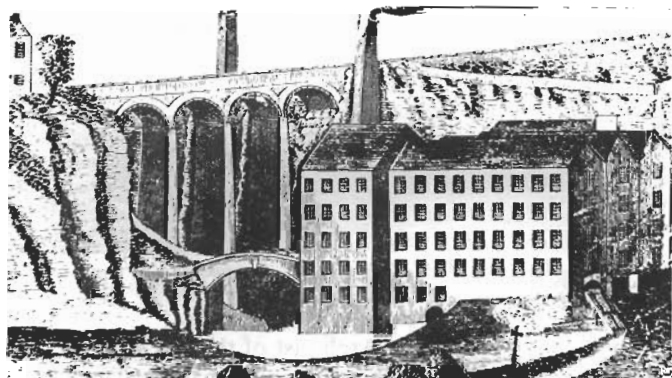
The New Mills Local History Society began in 1982 as a group attached to the Civic Amenity Society. At the suggestion of the author, an inaugural meeting was convened, chaired by John Symonds. This was an exciting occasion because it became clear that there was great interest in local history in the town and no shortage of ideas for projects and other activities which the group might undertake. By 1983 these activities were expanding rapidly, and it was decided that the local history group should become an independent organisation.

As one would expect, interest in local history was not new to the district in 1982. The book collection in the New Mills Public Library, a Carnegie Free Library built in 1909, bears witness to past interest. The material on

Derbyshire and the New Mills district includes the *Journal of the Derbyshire Archaeological and Natural History Society* from its start in 1879 and the much-used book *New Mills Wesleyanism* by Seth Evans (New Mills, 1912). During the years around 1950 there was an active local history group within the New Mills Arts Club (now defunct). One energetic member of this group was the late James Philip Bowden, a modern language master at Manchester Grammar School. He was born in Hayfield in 1897, lived in Manchester from 1906 to 1941, but then moved out to New Mills in his native Derbyshire. Many of Philip Bowden's scrapbooks and local history notes, compiled between the 1930s and the 1960s, are now in the collection of the Local History Society and form a valuable record for present-day researchers. In more recent years activities centred around local history have often formed part of the programme of the Workers' Educational Association and the Civic Amenity Society. Between 1971 and 1974, a WEA class conducted an analysis of the 1851 census returns and this led to the publication of the only general history of New Mills so far published: J.H. Smith and J.V. Symonds (eds.), *New Mills: A Short History including an Analysis of the Census of 1851* (Manchester, 1977).

Since the formation of the Local History Society there has been a great increase in activity in local history, and research has blossomed. Most of this activity has taken place through the Society and *because* of the existence of the Society. Our experience, which we are sure will have been shared by other societies, is that as the Society has gathered momentum it has generated an ever-increasing amount of activity. A programme of lecture meetings with the guarantee of an interested audience stimulates

prospective speakers to pick up the threads of half-finished research and try to turn a bundle of notes into a coherent story; and once the promise to speak has been made there is no escape! Committee meetings throw together like-minded people and produce a host of ideas for individual and group activities — too many to cope with, in our experience. The organisational structure of the Society, and the Honorary Secretary's relentless minute-taking, ensure that many of these ideas are brought to fruition.



Torr Mill and the Union Road Bridge, New Mills (1884).

The Society now has about 70 members, in addition to other people who attend individual meetings which interest them. There is a stimulating mixture of members, ranging from people born and bred in the town to those who have moved into the area within recent years. There are representatives of families which have lived in the district for generations and who possess an amazing breadth of local knowledge and tradition. One well-known shopkeeper can be relied upon to brighten up discussion-time at meetings with his personal anecdotes — in an apparently inexhaustible store there is always something relevant to the theme of the evening. Many newcomers to the town come to admire its distinctive character and some of them develop a keen interest in local history. Among those most active in recent research into the town's history are several relative newcomers who are teachers or lecturers with a taste for rooting out source material. The membership also contains a small contingent of enthusiastic family historians.



The "bottom" of New Mills c.1900. Most of these houses have since been demolished.

From the beginning we felt that it was important not only to encourage research into local history but also to try to ensure that the results of this research were put on record. The Society therefore publishes a series of booklets and other occasional publications in different formats. These are usually printed directly from authors' typescripts and sold at a low profit margin. Although we attempt to

achieve a good quality of printing, this is seen as of less importance than keeping down costs and publication prices in order to achieve a wide distribution. Strict editorial control over content and style is not seen as practicable or desirable. Of course, minimum standards are required, and reasonable attempts are made to ensure accuracy. But we feel that it is important to encourage the study of topics of personal interest to individual members, and we do not wish to raise barriers which could prevent the publication of valuable research.

At the time of writing, 17 booklets have appeared in the New Mills History Notes series (see list at end). These include collections of extracts from the *Stockport Advertiser* (the result of many hours spent in front of microfilm readers sifting out material of local interest), abstracts of enclosure and tithe documents, deeds and land-tax records, and short histories of churches, cotton mills, coal mines, roads, railways and canals. Although profit has not been a primary motivation, the sale of publications has produced a good income which we have come increasingly to rely upon as a means of funding the other activities of the Society. Particularly successful as a fund-raiser has been a book of old photographs of the district, appealing to a general readership, and sold through a number of retail outlets in New Mills and the Manchester district.



Whitewashing squad at Woodside Mill during the annual Wakes holiday c.1908.

As the topics of our publications indicate, research has so far been concentrated on the period from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century. During this period New Mills grew up and matured as a small town dependent upon the cotton industry. About thirty textile mills are known to have existed in the district. The population rose steadily from 1,878 in 1801 to 8,998 in 1911, from which time it has remained fairly level. Most research has been into industrial and transport history — relatively little has been achieved in the field of social history. Research into earlier periods is still in its infancy, although some information has been collected concerning such things as local families, farms and estates, coal-mining and early fulling and paper mills. There is much untapped material, particularly in the Duchy of Lancaster records. One topic which the author has recently investigated in some detail is the history of the name New Mills. There was a Duchy corn mill in the locality in 1391. About 1496 a new corn mill was built which became known as the New Mill. From about 1600 the name New Mill was used as a place name for the small settlement near the mill. During the late eighteenth century the name evolved into New Mills as the new cotton mills gave the name an extra dimension of meaning. It is hoped that studies like this will form the building blocks for a larger history of New Mills to be written during the coming years.

A great deal of pleasure has been experienced in projects undertaken by groups of members. Although it is essential to have an enthusiastic leader to co-ordinate the project and see it through to completion, there is scope here for all those who are interested and willing to give some of their time. One of the projects completed in the first few years of the Society's existence was the recording of the memorial inscriptions in a large local graveyard, the Wesleyan graveyard in St. George's Road, and the preparation of the record for publication. More recently, in the summer of 1987, another group of members made a photographic survey of the parish. The area was divided up into sections which were allocated to individual members. Most of the resulting photographs were of high quality and the collection, which also includes a video film, will form an invaluable record for the future as landscape and buildings continue to change. Another group has begun to make a computer data-base of local census material. The group is using the "Inform" package produced by the Derbyshire Educational Software Centre, which will mean that data-files can be exchanged with other users.

A project which we started several years ago, and which will no doubt continue indefinitely, is an oral history project. We are recording the recollections of some of the older inhabitants of the town, covering such themes as family life, work and leisure. The best of the resulting tapes are compulsive listening and contain information which cannot easily be obtained in any other way. Here is a short extract in which Mrs. S., aged 75 in 1986, describes some experiences of her relatives during the First World War:

And my mother's mother ... had gone down to Gravesend in Kent where my Auntie Una lived ... and they were bombing down there and ... she went down to fetch my Cousin May back, who was eighteen months, two years old ... they were under the table with pillowcases and pillows and cushions on the top and she brought her back on the train, and while they were coming back on the train from London, from St. Pancras line it was then, up to Chinley, one of these airships or Zeppelins followed the train and I think it was the Dore and Tolley tunnel, about two hours the train stopped in there so that they'd lose that airship. I do remember that one went down in the North Sea, from what my father and mother used to tell me. Whether it was that same Zeppelin or airship I don't know, but to sort of lose it they stayed in this tunnel. You know it's a very long tunnel, and that's how they managed to get here without ... without it following them up to Manchester, I presume.

Anyone studying the history of a locality soon becomes aware of the enormous range of relevant source material and how widely dispersed this material is. In the case of New Mills, geographic location is a complicating factor because the town is adjacent to the boundary between Derbyshire and Cheshire and, in fact, part of it was originally in Cheshire. To facilitate the study of the history of the district, the Society began to build up a collection of local history material. This has expanded very rapidly, and the continued development of the collection has come to occupy a central place in the Society's activities. Money spent on the collection, particularly in relation to photography and storage materials, is consistently the largest item in our annual expenditure. The collection is available for use by any interested person, subject to necessary safeguards. Normally material cannot be borrowed but may be consulted, by arrangement, at New Mills Public Library.



Higginbottom's ironmonger's shop, Market Street, decorated for a gala in 1900.

In my role as Honorary Archivist of the Society, I index the collection and issue lists from time to time. These are sent to a number of libraries and record offices, and I can supply further copies on application.

Part of the collection consists of printed books, pamphlets and ephemera. In particular we try to obtain copies of relevant new printed material as it is published. An example of an older work in the collection is the illustrated pamphlet *Secondary and Technical Education at New Mills, Derbyshire* (with a preface by Edward Godward) published in 1904. Such local publications are often elusive to locate — for example, there may not be copies in the main public libraries or even the copyright libraries. The Society is always keen to obtain originals or photocopies of New Mills material for its collection, and would be grateful for any assistance that readers can provide.

Another part of the collection consists of photocopies of printed and manuscript material held in various libraries and record offices. For example, there are copies from the Public Record Office of seventeenth-century maps which show the division between the King's part and the Tenants' part in the disafforestation of the Royal Forest of the Peak. There are copies of the plans and books of reference made in connection with railway Bills, 1857-1897, when several railway companies were in competition for routes through the district. There are also copies of many Ordnance Survey maps, including all of the first edition 1:2500 maps of the district, surveyed in 1872 (Cheshire series) and 1879 (Derbyshire series).

The collection also contains copies of material held privately which we have been able to obtain by asking for the assistance of local people in lending items and allowing them to be copied. In this way we have been able to make the material more widely available and provide a safeguard in case of the loss of the original. Items copied in this way include printed material such as newspaper cuttings, bazaar and concert programmes, and documents such as a deed of 1600 which contains the earliest known use of New Mills as a place name: "... Edward Hyde of newe milne in the townshipp of Boden in the countie of the Darbie waller". Even items of a more ephemeral nature can be of great interest after a quite short period of time. For example, we have copies of some posters issued by New Mills Urban District Council to govern conduct at the Town Hall dances. A poster of 1954 prohibits "Jive and Be-Bop" while a poster of 1956 states that dancing

JIVE AND BE-BOP ARE PROHIBITED

except during Dances specially arranged

DANCERS WHOSE BEHAVIOUR IS A
NUISANCE TO OTHERS WILL BE EVICTED
BY THE DANCE HALL SUPERINTENDENT

A dancer leaving the Hall during the progress
of a dance will only be re-admitted to the dance
upon production of the proper Pass-out Ticket
or upon payment of the full price of Admission

**UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES WILL
ANY PERSON BE ADMITTED OR
RE-ADMITTED AFTER 9-30 P.M.**

By Order of the Council,
D. H. NICHOLSON,

7th September, 1954.

Clerk of the Council.

Town Hall notice of 1954.

must progress in an anti-clockwise direction round the room and "behaviour such as that commonly known as 'smooching' is strictly prohibited".

An important part of the collection is the photographic section consisting of about 2,000 illustrations of local scenes, people and events, covering the period from about 1870 to the present day. When we started we had no idea that so many interesting pictures were in existence. Among the earlier photographs are several pictures of the toll-gates and toll-houses on the Thornsett turnpike road, which ceased operation in 1886. Many of the photographs are copies of originals lent by local people. The originals are copied on to 35 mm. film from which contact prints are made, and usually enlargements as well. The photographs are indexed both topographically and by subject. We have mounted several exhibitions of the photographs and they have generated great interest, often giving a boost to our oral history work. In 1986, when we mounted an exhibition of photographs and other items to highlight the history of the Torrs, there were an estimated 3,000 visitors, including about 1,000 pupils in school parties.

We also have a substantial number of original documents acquired through purchases and donations. For example, there are records of local businesses and organisations such as an accounts ledger of Beverley's shoe shop, 1904-1915, miscellaneous plans and papers of New Mills Co-operative Society, 1910-1960, and programme leaflets and minute books of the Arts Club, 1946-1978. As mentioned before, we possess the scrapbooks and notes on local history compiled by the late J.P. Bowden, together with records which he had preserved: these include teachers' attendance registers and other material connected with Bethel Chapel, Hayfield, 1837-1956. Finally there are several hundred title deeds, dating from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, many of which were acquired after an exciting discovery in a Manchester bookshop. Detailed abstracts have been made of some of these and work is progressing on the remainder. It should be said in connection with such records that they are being carefully preserved (in archival storage materials) and some documents have been deposited with the Stockport Archive Service and the Derbyshire Record Office.

The Society has established a good working relationship with Derbyshire County Council Library Service and the staff at New Mills Library, with the object of helping to expand the local studies section there. In 1987 a microfilm reader was obtained for the Library under an arrangement in which the Society paid about half of the cost. We raised the money partly by means of a sponsored walk around the parish boundary, and we are delighted that it is now possible for the Library to hold, on microfilm, copies of material which could not otherwise be kept there. The Society has provided microfilm copies of the 1841-1881 census enumerators' returns and the *Glossop Record* newspaper, 1859-1871, and the Library Service has provided copies of the *High Peak Reporter* newspaper, 1916-1921. The Society has also microfilmed, from the originals in the Town Hall, the albums of James Hibbert, compiled about 1900, which contain varied material arising out of Hibbert's involvement in the town's public affairs — these are available in the Library on microfiche.

New Mills is fortunate in having a Town Council which is extremely active in the development of leisure facilities. It has been a privilege and a pleasure for the Society to help with several projects designed to encourage local people and visitors to enjoy the unique scenery and industrial heritage of the town. Two guided trails have been created, one covering industry in the Torrs and the other featuring the rich variety of bridges in the town. It was a thrilling surprise when in 1987 the leaflet describing the bridges trail won, for the Town Council, first prize of £500 in a national competition. Several members of the Society have been heavily involved in the setting up of the newly-opened New Mills Heritage Centre. After several years of discussion, this has become a reality through the initiative of the Town Council, particularly Martin Doughty, and the assistance of staff of Derbyshire County Council. Our role has been to advise on the layout of the Centre, and to assist with the writing of a "New Mills story" and the selection of illustrative historical material. It has been exciting work, but very demanding.

It may be of interest to members of other societies to have some brief details of our finances. Here, for example, are the main items of income and expenditure for the year 1986-87 (although no single year is entirely typical). On the income side, membership subscriptions totalled £198 (mostly at £3 each). £50 was received in grants from New Mills Town Council and High Peak Borough Council, £150 from two donations *in memoriam*, and £54 in other donations. The sale of our publications yielded £952. Proceeds of fund-raising, by coffee mornings and a stall at a flea market, were £268. The net income during an



Market Street decorated for a fund-raising gala in 1900.



Market Street c.1918.

exhibition was £80 (from entrance donations and a raffle). Smaller items included about £13 in income tax recovered under deeds of covenant — we are registered as a charity. On the expenditure side, £865 was spent on acquisitions, photography and storage materials for the collection, and £150 on microfilms of census returns. The cost of production of publications was £695. Administrative costs were £54 and insurance £25.

The Society's lecture meetings take place approximately once a month, from September to May. They are held on various week-nights in the Library Lecture Room, Hall Street, New Mills, starting at 7.45 pm. New members and visitors are always welcome. There has been a wide range of lecture topics, and we try to achieve a balance between lectures on local themes and others providing a broader context. Lectures are recorded, whenever possible, subject to the agreement of the speaker. Consequently we have on record several lively evenings of reminiscences by local people and a number of descriptions of unpublished research. In addition to the lecture meetings, various field-trips and excursions are organised. As organisers of lectures and trips for other local history societies will know, the arrangement of a programme of events can be a

hectic business. We should be pleased to hear from other societies in order to exchange speakers and arrange summer excursions.

We hope that this record of the Society's activities has been of interest. Although most of the activities have been centred around the history of New Mills, they have been wide-ranging in other respects, and some of the projects and group activities which have been successful in New Mills would no doubt be equally successful elsewhere. Also, we hope that readers of this article and members of other local history societies will visit New Mills and its Heritage Centre. We particularly recommend a trip down into the Torrs to see the remains of the cotton mills and workers' cottages situated between the precipitous rocky walls of the river-gorge. Many casual visitors to New Mills fail to discover this fascinating area beneath the town.

General information about the Society can be obtained from John Symonds, c/o New Mills School, or Derek Brumhead, 3 Falcon Close, New Mills, Stockport: tel. 0663 44863. Further information about library and archive holdings can be obtained from Roger Bryant, 36 Hall Street, New Mills, Stockport: tel. 0663 44227.

Publications of New Mills Local History Society

(These can be obtained from Ron Weston, 'The Thorns', Laneside Road, New Mills, Stockport: tel. 0663 44838. Prices are exclusive of the cost of postage and packaging.)
New Mills History Notes series.

1. R.M. Bryant, *New Mills in the 1820s (Part 1)* (1983). (£0.30)
2. R.M. Bryant, *New Mills in the 1820s (Part 2)* (1983). (£0.30)
3. R.M. Bryant, *Whittle Enclosure* (1983). (Temporarily out of print.)
4. John V. Symonds, *The Mills of New Mills* (1983). (£0.45)
5. R.G. Weston, *New Mills 1830 to 1835* (1984). (£0.30)
6. Derek Brumhead, *Railways of New Mills and District* (1984); *Railways of New Mills* (2nd edition, 1987). (£0.45)
7. R.M. Bryant, *Turnpike Roads and Riots* (1984). (Temporarily out of print.)
8. Eileen Miller, *The Lost Mills of Rowarth* (1984; 2nd edition, 1987). (£0.30)
9. Ron Weston, *The New Mills Tithe Award* with accompanying map (1985). (Temporarily out of print.)

10. R.M. Bryant and Eileen Miller, *Deeds of New Mills and District* (1985). (£0.45)
11. Olive Bowyer, *The Peak Forest Canal: Upper Level: Towpath Guide* (1986). (£0.75)
12. J.P. Bowden, *A History of Providence Congregational (Independent) Church, New Mills* (1986). (£0.30)
13. John W. Taylor, *Memories of Strines* (1986). (£0.45)
14. Eileen Miller, *The Lost Chapel of Rowarth* (1986). (£0.45)
15. Derek Brumhead, *The Coal Mines of New Mills* (1987). (£1.25)
16. C.T. Bowden, *Bowden Middlecale — The Occupants of the Land, 1778-1811* (1987). (£0.45)
17. Roger M. Bryant and Eileen Miller, *More Deeds of New Mills and District* (1988). (£0.45)

Other publications.

- R.M. Bryant and R.G. Weston (eds.), *Gravestone Inscriptions of the St. George's Road Methodist Cemetery, New Mills* (1985). (Out of print.)
Roger Bryant and John Symonds, *New Mills and District: A Look Back* (1987). (£2.75)
Olive Bowyer, *The Peak Forest Canal: Its Construction and Later Development* (1988). (£1.50)