

LITTLEBOROUGH HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Keith Parry, Bernice Brookes and David Grayson

Littleborough's history is unorthodox, frustratingly obscure and sometimes downright perverse. There is no clear theme, no natural progression. Very much a Lancashire outpost and hemmed in by the Pennines its landscape dominated its history and dictated its development. Glacial action carved the Summit Pass, 300 feet deep and half-a-mile wide through the ridge separating the 'lake' which had formed over what is now South Lancashire from the valley on the line of the present Calderdale (and gave up one of the few-low-level routes through the Pennines). The same action scoured the old lake bed (the 'bowl' in which the present Littleborough stands) and formed a distinct shelf — the old lake bed — along the valley sides.

A great deal of the area's historically built environment remains (well over 70 Listed buildings and at least as many again of merit or local significance) and remarkably little has been lost to subsequent development.



Littleborough Museum: 'The House in the Square'.

Littleborough was an industrial town (and retains a manufacturing base) but had a strong farming community. Its primary industry was textiles and being border country, wool was as important as cotton. It mined coal, mostly for its own use. The Coal Measures break the surface here, so coal 'pits' were often literally that. However, recently

discovered plans show large areas below the valley shelf honeycombed with galleries. Littleborough had foundries, engineering works, clay mines (from which it manufactured earthenware sewer pipes), an early viscose-rayon plant and even a glue works.

Yet when we look out from our Museum on the busy A58 cross-Pennine road we look across the central square of what appears to be a small country town — past a war memorial and a splendid High Victorian pub to a railway station which carries plaques commemorating the link with George Stephenson engineer to this pioneer trans-Pennine line. Behind the station is the Rochdale Canal, another Pennine Pioneer, and beyond that a steep hillside crowned by grazing cattle. Of industry — not a sign.

Behind the hill, but out of sight is Hollingworth Lake, built as a reservoir for the canal, metamorphosed in the 1860s to a 'Pleasure Resort' and again transformed in the 1970s to one of England's most popular Country Parks.

Beyond again is the isolated hamlet of Whittaker, an early nineteenth century weaving hamlet centred on a seventeenth century farmhouse — which itself is on a much earlier site. And beyond Whittaker the heights of Blackstone Edge with the paved road which is increasingly accepted as being Roman.

Solid remains there may be in abundance, but very little of the area's history has been recorded, so running a local history society here is an exciting — if sometimes frustrating — business. It is only now that we are (sometimes literally) unearthing our own history and attempting to make sense of it. Even the society is appropriately unusual, beginning in 1970 as an Archaeological Society and only adding 'Historical' when it amalgamated with local history enthusiasts within Littleborough Civic Trust.

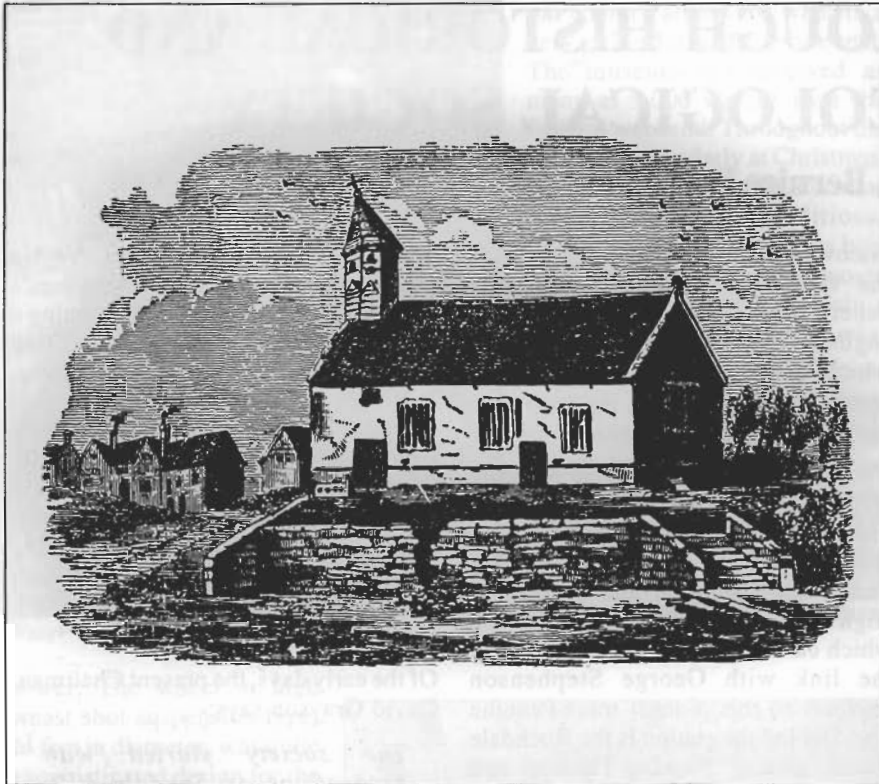
Of the early days, the present Chairman, David Grayson says:-

The society started with excavations on Snoddle Hill, overlooking the Summit Pass, attempting to confirm findings made by a turn-of-the-century dig which had suggested the hill was the site of Neolithic settlement. Three summers'; excavations revealed a possible cist surrounded by large stones, surmounted by a large pyramid shaped stone and a flat slab.

Winter months were taken up with field-walking, attempting to discover further evidence of prehistoric man. We found many sites worthy of excavation — one of these was subsequently Carbon Dated to 5600BC. But by far the most productive site was one overlooking Windy Hill (close by the M62) which produced over 10,000 pieces of flint — including quite a high percentage of worked pieces. This site proved to be the oldest in the area, Carbon Dating to 7446BC; both sites produced flints of the broad blade type dated to the Mesolithic period.

Further sites were identified and some later excavated. One of these was a trackway, possibly of the Bronze Age period, in the Piethorne valley, near Milnrow. This would be contemporary with other sites in the area.

The last major excavation was of a ruined seventeenth century farmhouse at Raghole (again, near Milnrow). It was found that habitation of the site could be



Littleborough Chapel.

traced back to the fourteenth century. Impressed by our work at Raghole, North West Water invited us to excavate the site of Marled Earth Farm, an eighteenth-century building on NWW land in the Watergrove valley on the western side of the Roch valley. Only one summer's work has been done, but a further year should see the site excavated and made easier to interpret.

Although human presence can be dated back virtually 10,000 years, Littleborough's origins are obscure. Place names tend to suggest Celtic and Norse settlement with remarkably little Saxon. Eighteenth century archaeologists found evidence of Celtic settlement at Mawrode (a definitively Celtic name) guarding the entrance to the Summit Pass and carved Celtic heads have been found in the valley beyond. 'Holme', '-stall', 'nab', 'slack', 'gale', 'turn' and 'durn' appear in profusion, suggesting substantial Norse settlement. Littleborough (originally 'Littleburgh') has its 'gates' — Lydgate, Moorgate and Reddystone Scout Gate, the old packhorse track along the western rim of the Summit Pass.

Medieval history is decidedly patchy. Land held by the Saxon Gamul was passed to Roger de Poitou, then to the de Laceys — and some land was held by the Abbots of Whalley. A church was built in 1472; before that a priest being accommodated at Stubble Hall.

Parts of that building date back to the early 1500s and it is generally accepted as being Littleborough's oldest surviving building. But recently a number of 'seventeenth century' homesteads have revealed evidence of earlier timber-framed buildings incorporated in to the fabric which may take them back a further 100-150 years.

There is documentary evidence for a route over Blackstone Edge as early as the thirteenth century and Colonel Rosworm fortified the heights during the Civil War. Celia Fiennes crossed in 1698, describing it as 'a dismal high precipice, known all over England' and

she found the 'causey' she travelled on unusual enough to remark on. But then there is the question of legend. Did Robin Hood really sleep in his rocky bed on Blackstone Edge? Did a returning Crusader really bring a Saracen maiden back to Stubble hall? Does she really haunt the old building? Certainly someone appears to. Were the infants due to inherit Clegg Hall really murdered Princes-in-the-Tower-style by a dastardly uncle (and does this account for the troublesome Clegg Hall Boggart?) Is there really the site of a Roman fort on Blackstone Edge? At least in this case we can say 'usually well informed sources' say there is, but aren't saying where!

If there is a constant in this shifting historical scene it is the history of Trans-Pennine transport — a Roman road, a complex network of packhorse tracks criss-crossing the moor, four Turnpike roads, the first Trans-Pennine canal and railway (and a bit of the M62). This collection is unique and ought to guarantee Littleborough a place in the reference books. It doesn't: nor does the fact that Brindley, Rennie, Jessop, two Stephensons and two Gooches all left their mark on the area.

The low level route between Lancashire and Yorkshire was an obvious choice for canal and railway. Their construction — and road improvements — turned a remote and sparsely-inhabited Pennine clough into a major traffic artery well within one lifetime. As it happens, two such lifetimes exist, those of Job and Elizabeth Cogswell. They arrived in Littleborough in 1791 to take over the Red Lion Inn. Plans to build a canal to connect the Calder and Hebble Navigation to the Bridgewater Canal



Whittaker Farm.



Rushcart Procession. Revived after 150 years, the Rushbearing Festival is an indication of the area's increasing awareness of its heritage.

were being revived and it was due to cut through land owned by the Red Lion. Job Cogswell first sub-contracted for the canal's constructors, then branched out into boat-building, then into canal carrying. Ultimately, his only serious competition on the Rochdale was a firm called Pickford's!

Job Cogswell died in 1829, the year before the opening of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway revived proposals for a line between Manchester and Leeds. Elizabeth Cogswell, however, lived on until 1844. In her time in Littleborough she would have seen the arrival of the canal, a second Blackstone Edge Turnpike, the opening in 1824 of a new road up the valley (only possible because the construction of the canal had drained the marshy valley floor), the building of the first Non-Conformist chapel, the splendidly named 'Methodical Piazza' (and the rebuilding of the old Holy Trinity Church shortly afterwards), the building of most of Littleborough's characteristic weavers' cottages and, as an old lady, the opening of the Manchester and Leeds Railway.

The significance of the Cogswells and their place in our local history only emerged through recent research in the Museum's archives — proof, if any were needed, of the value of the local museum.

Although there are a number of water-powered mill sites, industry developed comparatively late — after the arrival of the canal and railway. Even then, development

was restricted by the topography. Much of the valley floor was considered unsuitable for building and most primary industrial sites are well away from the centre of the town.

Littleborough had its millowning families, but they were not the Mill Barons of legend. Most bore local names — Clegg, Law, Kershaw, so if ever they were tempted to forget their roots other Cleggs, Laws and Kershaws would remind them. All the same, Sir Alfred Law, woollen manufacturer of Durn and Lydgate mills went on to become MP for High Peak and Barwick

Clegg, cotton manufacturer of Shore became High Sheriff of Lancashire (and his son, Deputy Chairman of Barclays Bank).

The Harveys, however, were 'comers-in', arriving in the late 1850s to take over a cotton mill at Summit. Bred in the traditions of the Manchester Radical school they proved to be enlightened employers. They believed in accommodation with trade unions, not confrontation, they brought in canteens, workers' councils and welfare services. One son, Ernst, devoted his life to running what became a complex of 'advanced' mills, but the other, Gordon, embarked on a political career, first as a Lancashire County Councillor then (after an abortive attempt in 1900) as MP for Rochdale after the Liberal Landslide election of 1906.

Harvey's first biographer, Francis Hirst described him as 'a political idealist, a practical reformer, a believer in civilised progress and in the perfectibility of mankind'. To that can be added 'local benefactor, enlightened millowner and pioneer environmentalist'. He instigated landscaping round the family mills and established the curiously-named 'Beautiful Littleborough Society', forerunner of today's civic societies. In 1910 Gordon Harvey started Parliament by proposing what amounted to a Clean Air Act, pointing out that the Harvey mills now emitted no smoke whatsoever. The Bill failed.



The 'methodical Piazza' of 1808.



Summit Tunnel (W). The portal carries the only known example of the Manchester and Leeds Railway. Main Summit Tunnel beyond, opened 1841.

On the broader political field Harvey was uncompromisingly radical. He wanted to see the House of Lords abolished and advocated Land Reform. He believed land should be first 'municipalised', then nationalised. Significantly, although the Harveys were undoubtedly 'gentry' they were not landed gentry. He was a committed internationalist, a founder member of the League of Nations movement and — unwisely in the circumstances — became Chairman of the National Peace Council immediately before the outbreak of the 1914-18 war. Inevitably, he approached the end of his life a disillusioned man. On his retirement from Parliament in 1918 he wrote to his Rochdale constituents:

Force has conquered force and power has subdued power as was

the only way in the situation in which the world was placed: and now a task infinitely more delicate remains to be accomplished: I mean that great change of heart and mind and soul all over Christendom which shall end war and league the nations in common purpose.

The more we can raise the condition of our people — morally and materially — the better we shall fit them for their share in this great enterprise, and the more strictly we stand by our proud traditions with regard to foreign peoples — freedom of intercourse, of trade, of settlement; sympathy with the aspirations of the weak and oppressed, and above all those great traditions of justice and impartiality which have gained for Britain so great renown — the quicker will come to that feeling of international goodwill which should be the contribution of the twentieth century to human development.

These stirring sentiments (so elegantly expressed) were written in 1918 and quoted in the privately-published Hirst biography which appeared shortly after Gordon Harvey's death in 1922. They re-appeared as recently as 1982, again as a result of research into local archive material. Hopefully, one day, Littleborough Museum will be able to commemorate the work of this long-forgotten but inspirational figure.

Millowners like the Cleggs, Laws and Harveys were natural leaders, but they tended to gather the community round them rather than dominating it. Gordon

Harvey, for instance, campaigned for a National School for the town. The local vicar, the formidable Rev Doctor Salts condemned such schools as 'ungodly' and opposed them for 25 years. Harvey's campaign was ultimately successful, but only after he attracted



The formidable Rev. Doctor Salts, Vicar of Littleborough, 1872-1910.

the Non-Conformist vote (he, in fact, was an Anglican). The Littleborough Central Board School, opened in 1901 has the dubious distinction of being the very last school to be built under the 1870 Education Act.

Non-conformism moulded the character of Littleborough (as it did so many other similar remote Pennine areas). Each community had at least one chapel, functioning as community centre and debating chamber as well as a place of worship. Although the first church was built in 1472 it was nearly 400 years before a second was needed and by the time it (St James's Calderbrook) was built there were 17 Nonconformist chapels for a population of about 10,000. The oldest of them, the Methodical Piazza of 1808, was in fact, about to close. The building itself survived until the 1950s when — in a fit of municipal madness — it was demolished. Had it not been it would have given Littleborough another eccentricity; since it pre-dated the rebuilding of Holy Trinity church on the other side of the river it would have been Littleborough's oldest place of worship.

Littleborough Cycle Parade.

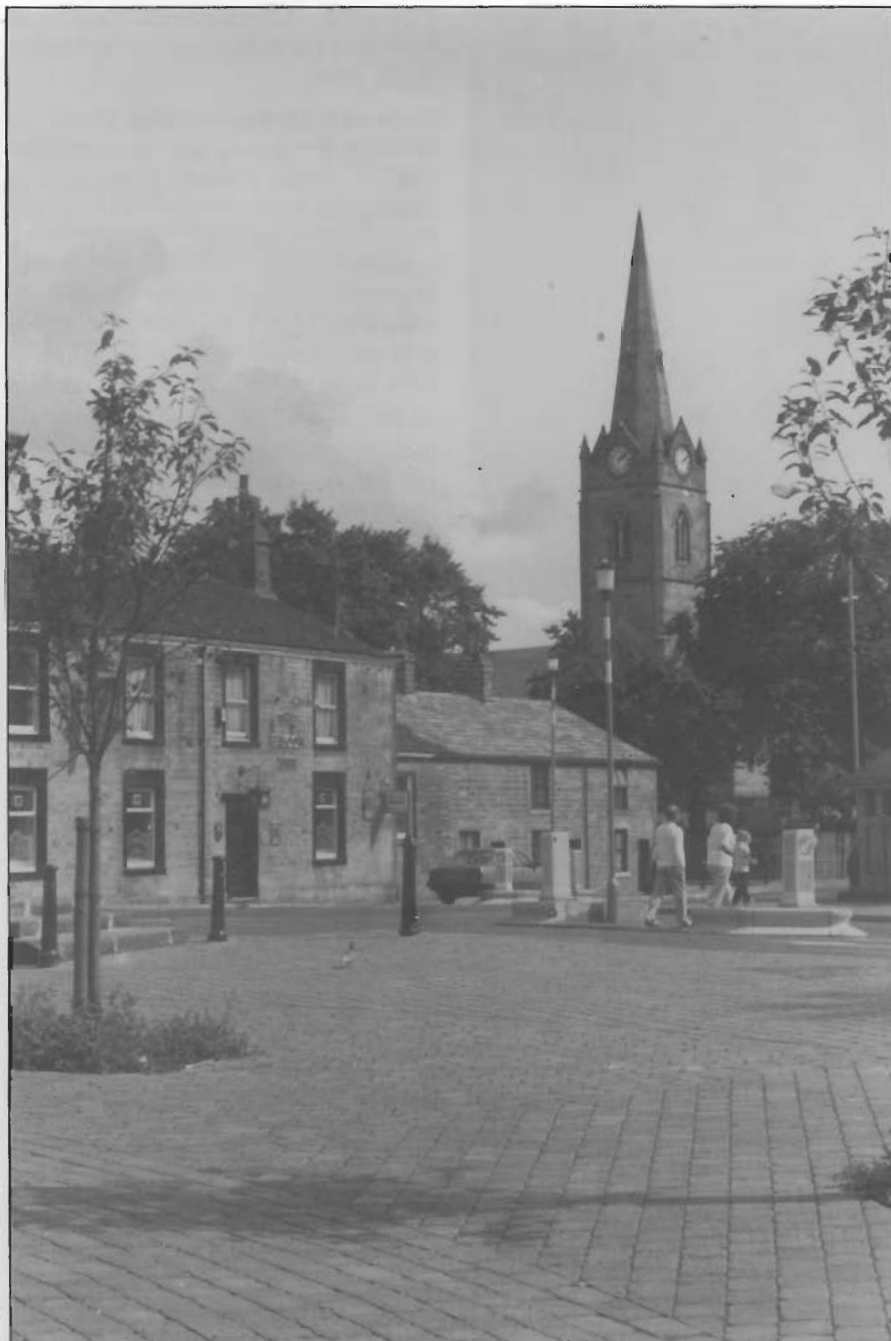
Old Folks Treat.

The Committee of the above Parade give you a hearty invitation to Tea on Saturday, October 2nd, 1909, at the Parish Church School, Littleborough.

President: J. T. ROGERS, Esq.

A. BOTTOMLEY, Hon. Sec.

Littleborough Printing Co.



Holy Trinity Church from the Square.

But perhaps we have enough eccentricities for one historical society to cope with. After all, Littleborough itself is an oddity since, as a name for the whole area it dates back only to the setting up of the Local Board in 1870. Before that it was 'Calderbrook and Blatchinworth'. Calderbrook certainly exists (although there is no actual Calder Brook), but there's no Blatchinworth road, hamlet, farm or hill; it is simply a roughly-defined area to the east of the river Roch. Then before Calderbrook and Blatchinworth, Littleborough was merely one of a scattering of settlements within the Township of Hundersfeld which stretched from Rochdale church up the valley and over the natural watershed to the river Calder at Todmorden. It was important only in

that it had the church and a couple of inns and marked the point at which two roads diverged. One forded the river on its way to Blackstone Edge and Yorkshire, the other ran off northwards towards the Reddyshore Gate route to the Calder valley.

Littleborough's new museum stands very near that old junction. Entirely the product of local initiative and run by a dedicated band of volunteers its opening marked a distinct change of gear for the society. After much deliberation the society had committed itself to opening — and facing costs of something like £5,000 a year. With no financial support from the local authority and private sponsorship severely limited by recession the Museum would have to

be self-supporting. On the other hand, without premises the society would not be able to show off its growing collection, provide adequate access to documentary source material and, by doing this, justify its case for future support.

Not surprisingly, fundraising has been a major pre-occupation since the Museum opened. A 'Sponsor A Month' appeal to local industry was reasonably successful, but a renewed appeal to an admittedly hard-pressed local council was not. Events organised by the society and its friends have provided most of the finance to keep the museum going — and some of the fundraising has been appropriately unusual: a Band Concert, a Balloon Race, an 'Indian Evening' with food donated by a kindly local takeaway — and society members can always be found selling hotdogs and beefburgers at Littleborough's Christmas and Rushbearing Festivals.

The Museum has been an undoubted success, with something like 7000 first-time visitors since it opened in early 1991. Local people have taken it to their hearts and 'word-of-mouth' publicity has been invaluable since we cannot afford any other kind. The collection has continued to grow and space is now at a premium. Displays are changed frequently to enable as much material as possible to be shown and visitors are encouraged to chat — and to handle the artefacts. This practice horrified the curator of a more conventional museum, but we pointed out that the rarer and more delicate objects were safely behind glass and we had not lost anything important — yet!

From the start the museum has been open every afternoon from Tuesday to Friday and all day Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays. Saturdays sees our 'Young Diggers' filling the small back room. Designed to introduce young people to history and archaeology, the group has been an outstanding success. Bernice Brookes, organiser of the Young Diggers' study programme says:

'Even in the early days of the society our late Chairman, Alan Luke encouraged young people to join and take an active part in all aspects of the Society's life. Our present Chairman, David Grayson, joined as a young boy and, along with several others remains today as proof that societies need to think constantly of the future.'

We are proud of what our Young



The Young Diggers with the Society's later chairman, Alan Luke.

Diggers have achieved. In practice members tend to be between 10 and 12 so it has not proved too difficult to gear the work — which is, incidentally, in line with the National Curriculum — to individual needs.

Study topics have been varied — 'Transport' (canals, roads and railways) 'Pre-History', 'Normans' and so on. We have taken the group fossiling and they excavated a Victorian refuse tip. At the same time we have to remember this isn't 'school'. The approach has to be relaxed and informal. 'Normans' included a performance of the monologue about the Battle of Hastings associated with Stanley Holloway!

'Involvement' is important. As an extension of their canal studies the Young Diggers were persuaded to plant Spring bulbs donated by Oldham and Rochdale Groundwork Trust on a canalside site. 'Persuasion' was a trip on a narrowboat, courtesy of the Rochdale Canal Boat Club! Then, last October they took part in the celebrations to mark the fifth anniversary of the Mersey Basin Campaign. Officially they were carrying out a survey of the historical use of water, but were in fact being made to feel part of the event by reporting their findings to the Mersey Basin Trust — and getting an appreciative reply.

Links are important for the Society, too. It is an active member of the

Lancashire Federation of Historical Societies and is hosting an 'At Home' for the federation this coming October. Locally, the society is a member of Littleborough Action Group, a consortium of residents, businesses and organisations dedicated to the improvement of the town's physical, economic and social environments. It has close links, too, with Oldham and

Rochdale Groundwork and is represented at Board level on the Mersey Basin Trust.

Reviewing the position after a year, we decided we should say our museum was 'a small, friendly place with a fascinating story to tell'. Telling the story to parties of visiting schoolchildren is an altogether fascinating experience. Victorian spectacles have to be tried on, hair has to be curled with old iron tongs, cameras have to be clicked. But — universally — they dislike our Fur Tippet!

In spite of the fundraising problems, in spite of trying to cope with visitors who clearly know far more than we do, in spite of trying to piece together Littleborough's idiosyncratic history (some pieces are still under the carpet, but some, we fear are lost forever) opening the Museum is the best thing Littleborough Historical and Archaeological Society ever did. But standing 1,300 feet up on Blackstone Edge, facing into the teeth of a freezing early-March gale and trying desperately to tell a bunch of rampaging 10-year-olds about Romans, one does tend to wonder if this is what one volunteered for!

Readers interested in finding out more about our work, please contact: *Mr. D. Grayson, % The Museum, 24, Church Street, Littleborough OL15 9AA.*

LITTLEBOROUGH HISTORICAL & ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

invite you to visit their

MUSEUM

at

24 Church Street, Littleborough.

A small but friendly museum, opened in January, 1991, giving access to our LOCAL historical and archaeological collections.

OPENING TIMES

All Year: Saturday, Sunday
and Bank Holidays, 10:30am–4:30pm
Tuesday to Friday, 2:00–4:30pm