

The Heritage of Rutland Water

Rutland Local History & Record Society at Rutland County Museum

When the twin valleys of the River Gwash were flooded in the mid-1970s, Rutland Water became Europe's largest man-made lake set in England's smallest county. This large area of water created as a reservoir, initially strongly opposed, has become a major tourist attraction internationally recognized for its wildlife.

Our project involves the local community in investigating, documenting and publicising the changing heritage of this area. This is the first time that such a detailed and comprehensive survey has been attempted and it may be the last opportunity before memories disappear.



Rutland Water was planned in the 1960s to meet the needs of the expanding East Midlands area of England. Sixty-four sites in and around the Northamptonshire area were investigated before the twin valleys of the River Gwash were chosen. The second choice was the Chater valley, less than a mile away to the south.

The main reasons for choosing this site were the availability of clay within the reservoir area to build the dam, the nearness of the River Welland and the River Nene to supply the water required, and its central location to the area requiring the water.

Construction started in 1971, filling commenced in 1975, and it was full by 1979.





Initially it was to be called 'Empingham Reservoir', but local pressure persuaded the water authority to change it to 'Rutland Water'.

Not everyone was happy at the prospect of flooding a large area of prime agricultural land and there was a concerted campaign against the proposal, especially from those farmers who considered that they were about to lose their land and livelihood.

The fertile land which was about to be flooded has been farmed for thousands of years. Archaeological investigations, both before and during the construction of the reservoir, revealed evidence of Roman farmsteads, which is not

surprising considering that Great Casterton, the known location of an important Roman fort and town, is only a few miles further down the valley. Sites of Iron Age hut circles, Saxon houses and cemeteries, and medieval dwellings and barns were also found. Aerial photographs of the valleys before flooding also show large areas of medieval ridge and furrow, certain evidence of strip farming methods being used.



Archaeological excavation at Whitwell 1973



Above: Normanton House 1910

Until the early 20th century most of the land in the valleys was owned by a few aristocratic families, particularly the Finch family, the Earls of Winchelsea and Nottingham, who lived at Burley on the Hill and the Heathcote family, the Earls of Ancaster, who lived at Normanton House.



Right: Normanton House Stables 1974

Both estates were broken up and sold, but farming continued to be the main occupation of the area. Normanton House, located right on the southern edge of what was to become Rutland Water, failed to reach its reserve at the auction in 1924 and it was eventually demolished.

The adjacent stables survived and after being a prisoner of war camp in WW2, and later farmer's barns, they were eventually converted to a hotel thanks to their unique location on the south shore of Rutland Water.

St Matthews Church, the private chapel to the Normanton Estate, was lucky to have escaped being demolished as it was below the high water line of the proposed reservoir. It was deconsecrated in 1970 and a Trust was formed to try and ensure its preservation.



Various alternatives were considered but the adopted plan was to fill the lower half of the church to just below window level with limestone and rubble capped with concrete. Externally, a bank was to be built to give protection from the water, and a causeway was to be laid to provide access. It is now a Water Museum and it is a dominant feature in the landscape at Rutland Water.



Normanton church as a building was saved, but inevitably other buildings were lost, including a number of farms and one entire village.



The hamlet of Nether Hambleton was a small community of houses and farms at the western end of the south arm of the proposed reservoir. It came as a severe blow to the inhabitants on realizing that they were to lose their homes, and some their livelihoods.



One of the most interesting properties to go was Beehive Cottage, thought to be one of the earliest dwellings in Rutland.





Our research has unearthed some interesting stories about the people who once lived in the valley, going as far back as the 1300s. A good example is the Weldon family of Nether Hambleton. An estate notebook of 1797 lists the houses and their occupants who were tenants of the Finch family of Burley on the Hill. One house was occupied by Mrs Weldon. A cross was placed by her name with the note 'Where you never go'. Further research revealed that her sons, Richard and William, murdered a baker from Edith Weston who was passing through the village. They received the death penalty for their crime and their bodies were hung on a gibbet within sight of the family home.

Before the valleys were flooded an extensive survey was carried out by the local Natural History Society as there was great concern regarding the loss of the natural habitats of flora and fauna.

Although these fears were well founded and habitats were lost, the construction of Rutland Water has resulted in the creation of extensive nature reserves which are attracting a number of endangered species, particularly the osprey. In fact it has provided one of the most important wild fowl sanctuaries in Great Britain.



Canada Goose



Osprey on nest



The construction of Rutland Water commenced in 1971 and it took nearly five years to complete. The main part of the project was to build the dam wall. This is made of compacted clay which was excavated from borrow pits within the perimeter of the reservoir.



The dam is 35 metres high, up to 810 metres wide at its base, and 1200 metres long. All the landscaping round the reservoir has been very carefully and sympathetically designed, not least the dam wall which is hardly noticeable from Empingham, the nearest village.



Edna Locke 1974
Nether Hambleton & Lax Hill background

A major component of the project has been to talk to those people who lived in the area immediately before the reservoir was built, particularly those who were affected in some way by its coming. To do this we have trained a group of people to carry out oral history interviews and their recordings are being transcribed and indexed. An example of this is Edna Locke who lived at Beech Farm, Middle Hambleton until just before it was demolished for the reservoir. Her memories of living at the farm, and the trauma of having to leave it, are fundamental to the project.



Ivydene Nether Hambleton before RW



Nether Hambleton before RW



Nether Hambleton Rutland Water Completed

Another way of involving the community has been to devise a competition for school children. The Prince Yuri Galitzine Prize was offered for the best project on the reservoir and its surrounding area, which encouraged children to do some basic research and to talk to their grandparents and neighbours about the impact of Rutland Water. Information provided by the 32 entries from 53 children has been a very valuable contribution to our project. Pictures shown are by Megan and Jeffrey Lamb aged 10 years.



Manton Post Office circa 1920

Another major component of our research has been the 20th century photographic history of the villages surrounding the reservoir. Fortunately we have been given access to a number of collections, one of which consists of some 2500 early postcards of Rutland. Two examples are shown here.



Edith Weston Hall circa 1910



Rutland Water has become an important tourist attraction, offering something for everyone, including fishing, sailing, cycling, bird watching and walking.



For detailed information on all the activities available go to:

www.rutlandwater.net.

Examples of all these are currently being photographed for the project.

