

## Power and Potability

*South Pennines History Group Day School held at the Birchcliffe Centre on Saturday 6 September*

It had to be raining of course. The local history enthusiasts were gathered Upstairs@The Birchcliffe for the seventh annual day school to hear from several expert speakers about how water has contributed to the landscape and society of our Pennine communities, and the weather obligingly provided a storm.



Archaeologist Dave Weldrake explored the social significance of wells, ranging from myths and magical stories, through the seemingly more rational fashion for spas and the strictly utilitarian provision of domestic water. Many of the legends attached to wells seem to go back no further than a fashion for folklore in the nineteenth century, with little documentary or archaeological evidence to link them to earlier times. There was perhaps an element of magic in the belief in the healing powers of water which led to the fashion for plunge baths and spa resorts. Water for utilitarian purposes undoubtedly shaped the landscape, with hilltop settlements clustering around the lines of springs and wells, pumps and troughs still to be seen in the landscape.

Water as a source of power in the Calder Valley was the theme of Justine Wyatt's talk, from the earliest corn and fulling mills of the 14th century to the provision of power for the textile industry and today's alternative technologies. The complex engineering involved in exploiting this great natural resource is a reminder of how important water was to the industrial development of the South Pennines, and the landscape still carries the evidence of this spectacular growth.

Victor Khadem looked at the significance of water in Medieval times. He referred to place-name and other evidence that suggested water was associated with the supernatural, but also showed how the sophisticated exploitation of water was not an invention of the industrial revolution, with streams channelled and diverted to serve some Saddleworth settlements back in the 12th century.

The larger more centralised populations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century required water on a grander scale. Norman Redhead of the Greater Manchester Archaeological Advisory Service looked at the impact of the network of reservoirs built in the hills surrounding Oldham. High rainfall and deep cloughs made the construction of reservoirs in this area very attractive. The resulting dramatic changes to the landscape included the disappearance and depopulation of the upland hamlets, diverted roads and the magnificent engineering excellence of the structures built by gangs of imported 'navvy' labour.

The life of the navvies was explored more closely by Ann Kilbey, who told the story of 'Dawson City' at Heptonstall where the navvies who built Walshaw Dean reservoirs were housed. These men led a nomadic existence, but Dawson City provided them with homes for their families, a school and even a small hospital. Eventually, the men moved on, leaving the landscape changed forever. The evocative photographs of men and machines bring to life an extraordinary era in the ambitious exploitation of this ordinary natural resource.

*'Power in the Landscape' by Justine Wyatt and 'City in the Hills' by Ann Kilbey and Corinne McDonald are available locally.*

*With thanks to Sheila Graham for this report*