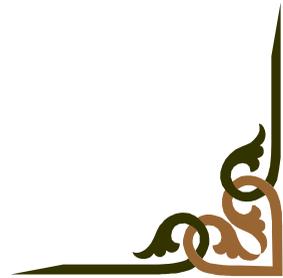




A History of the Moor Knutsford

Joan Leach MBE
with
Friends of the Moor



Contents

	page
Foreword.....	3
Preface.....	3
Acknowledgements.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Timeline.....	6
Knutsford and the Moor.....	14
Medieval days.....	14
Seventeenth Century.....	15
Eighteenth Century.....	16
Nineteenth Century.....	16
Twentieth Century.....	20
Recent History.....	23
Today.....	28
Bibliography.....	29

Foreword

by the Mayor of Knutsford,

I am very pleased to offer my support to this wonderful and unique document about the history of the Moor in Knutsford. Joan Leach is well known for her book on Knutsford's history and her work with the Friends of the Moor in producing another manuscript on times gone by will be very much appreciated by the local residents. I wish the dedicated Friends group and their supporters every success with their application for the Green Flag award in 2009.

Cllr Jennifer Holbrook
Mayor of Knutsford 2008 - 2009

Preface

This document has been produced by local historian Joan Leach MBE with the assistance of members of the Friends of the Moor, in support of Macclesfield Borough Council's bid for the Green Flag award for the Moor, Knutsford.

Acknowledgements

The author and the Friends of the Moor would like to thank the following for their help in the production of this document:

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Ordnance Survey - maps

Knutsford Guardian

Introduction

The Moor is not a typical formal park - in fact it has many characteristics of a village green. It provides a peaceful green open space between the built-up areas of Knutsford and Cross Town with attractive views of the town and its unusual architecture, as well as the Moor Pool with its reed beds, ducks, geese and swans.

A small river, known as the River Lily, runs alongside the Moor and it receives runoff from the built-up ridges to the east and west and, as a result, surface water has always been a problem. For centuries, much time and money have been spent trying to control the excess water, using drains, ditches, pipes and channels with varying degrees of success.

The area has a long history of use by the community, for keeping and feeding livestock, for supporting local industries (e.g. textiles and basket making, supplying reeds for thatching buildings), for military training, as a waste dumping site, as a thoroughfare between Knutsford and Cross Town, and (especially today) for recreation (football, fishing, dog-walking, family picnics, children's play, feeding the water birds - and for special events). Since the Urban District Council acquired the Moor in 1907, successive local governments and groups have worked towards the improvement of this area for the enjoyment of the local community.

Timeline

Geological history

PermoTriassic (270-200 million years ago)

This area of Cheshire is a desert with a shallow inland sea, producing beds of sandstone, and salt where the seawater evaporates. (In recent times, when the salt dissolves naturally or through industry, the land subsides causing lakes or meres (e.g. Tatton) and subsidence cracks in houses (by Mobberley Road)).

Ice Age (c50,000 years ago) and after

Clay, sand and gravel infill the valley. The River Lily rises in what is now Sanctuary Moor, flows through the Moor to Tatton and eventually joins the Bollin. The land rises to a ridge on both sides (where people will eventually settle).

Prehistoric times

Proof of Mesolithic, Neolithic, and Iron Age people is found in Tatton.

More recent times

- c1017** Danish King Canute reputedly fords the River Lily.
- 1086** Knutsford appears as Cunetesford in the Domesday Book.
- 1200 - 1300** Knutsford's original settlement, probably in Cross Town, where the Church of St Helena is established.
- 1292** King Edward I grants to William de Tabley Nether Knutsford's first charter. A market and fair are established.
- 1405** Under Cheshire's taxation system, the Mize, Knutsford pays 40 shillings. Agriculture is important round Knutsford: there are weekly markets and 3 annual fairs.
- 1598** Tatton passes to the Egertons who become Lords of the Manor.
- 1600s** Knutsford becomes the principal market town of mid-Cheshire.
- The Moor is common land, important for hay and grazing sheep and geese. By 1676 it is gated to prevent animals straying. A Manor Court appoints officials like

ditch clearers and lookers to ensure no one is abusing their rights.

Woollen cloth and thread are made in Knutsford, and dyed in a pool on the Moor.

There is a ducking stool.

1700s Knutsford people have mostly settled along Moorside, King Street and the Old Market Place and keep the trenches and gutters of the Moor scoured to improve the drainage of this swampy area.

1734 Agreement between John Egerton, and freeholders concerning rights to common land

1820 Count d'Artois (later Charles X of France) almost sinks in the bog while plant hunting.

1847 The Moor now has 2 streams (the River Lily at the western side and the Middle Brook running through the centre).

There are several wells - Robin Hood's Well, Malt Street, and one by Drury Lane.

1862 Railway comes to Knutsford.

- 1870s** Drainage work creates channels eliminating the open water. Sewerage works are laid on.
- 1875** The Moor is divided into plots for rough grazing and there is a rifle range to train the local volunteer rifle brigade.
- Wells exist in Malt Street and Drury Lane.
- 1881** An attempt is made to drain and divert the Middle Brook using pipes and pumps, but the work is abandoned.
- 1895** Knutsford Urban District Council is constituted.
- 1896** Waste tipping starts at the south end of the Moor.
- 1900s -1907** Wilbraham Egerton and others sell Moor land to the UDC for recreational use only. (Conveyance dated 1907)
- 1907/9** Richard Harding Watt attempts landscaping of the Moor, planting trees. He designed Knutsford's famous Italianate buildings including the laundry, Gaskell Tower and Swinton Square, which can be seen to advantage from the Moor.

- 1910** The Moor now has dense vegetation.
The Moor Pool spreads to both sides of a wooden footbridge and c.1914 anglers from Manchester fish from it especially on Sundays.
- 1920s** Knutsford Urban District Council creates a refuse tip to the left of the causeway from the town side.
- 1940s** Moor still used as a rubbish tip. Troops are moved into Knutsford. Parachute Regiment members train in Tatton and afterwards General Patton's American officers use the Ruskin Rooms for recreation.
- 1946** The Knutsford Development Plan is exhibited and published by the News Chronicle. It envisages a 3 mile marina on the Moor, stretching to Tatton.
- Late 40s/50s** Building of council estates in Knutsford including Northwich Road, Westfield Drive and Thorneyholme.
- 1955** Knutsford armorial bearings are granted.
- 1959** Manchester Corporation builds 286 houses in Five Oaks area of Cross Town for Manchester people displaced by building clearances.

The Knutsford Society is founded and undertakes clearing of the Moor Pool and tree planting.

- 1960s** Redevelopment of Canute Square shopping area. 396 more council houses are built in Cross Town. M6 spoil is used to infill part of the Moor to improve drainage
- 1963** M6 opened
- 1967** Knutsford Round Table set up a children's play area on the Moor.
- 1970s** Industrial estates are set up at Parkgate and Longridge in Cross Town.
- 1974** Knutsford Town Council is established and Macclesfield Borough Council takes over responsibility for maintaining the Moor.
- 1980s/90s** Sewerage holding tanks are built under the Moor.
- In 1991 the area is smoothed, reseeded and the children's play area is reinstated. Middle Walk path is improved.
- 2000** Knutsford Great Race for Penny Farthing bicycles is held round the Moor.

- 2002** On 3 June Queen's Golden Jubilee is celebrated by a picnic on the Moor.
- 2003** January - publication of Macclesfield Borough Council Parks Strategy for The Moor, Knutsford and Implementation Plan (including the public consultation)
- 2005** January - Knutsford Town Centre Conservation Area appraisal draft is published. It stresses the attractive lake, the views of the town from the Moor, and its great value as an open space.
- 2005** 5 April - Friends of the Moor is set up.
The River Lily is cleared.
- 2006** Paths are raised and resurfaced, and drainage is tackled. Litter picks, bird box making and bulb planting take place. Picnic tables are set up.
- 2007** December - Macclesfield Borough Council applies for Green Flag status.
- 2008** New fencing and gates; more seating and litter bins are set up; events are held for children; Moor outline design brief is produced by Macclesfield Borough Council.

Knutsford Town Plan Steering Committee is set up and begins to ask the public what can be done to improve the town, including open spaces like the Moor. An action plan will be produced in 2009.

Knutsford and the Moor

The original settlement of *Cunetesford*, as it is styled in the Domesday Book of 1086, may have been on high ground near the Mobberley border and the River Birkin, because the first church was in this area. Legend has it that King Canute forded the River Lily around 1017 before or after fighting armies in the North (thus giving the town its name) but if he forded any water, it was more likely to be the Birkin Brook or Tatton Mere where an 'old ford' was still marked on a map of 1910.

Medieval days

In 1292 William de Tabley obtained a charter from King Edward I to set up a new town with a weekly market and an annual fair, a mill, a common oven and a street laid out in burgage plots for houses (this pattern still survives in King Street). The burgesses or charterers had rights to gather turves, moss, clay and sand on the common lands of the Moor and Heath. Overseers were appointed by the Manor Court Leet to manage this.

The Moor was bordered on the town side by the River Lily, which rises at Moorhead behind the present Legh Road and turned a water mill near there in medieval days. There was a ford across Brook Street and parts of the river ran through

the garden of Brook House at the bottom of Adams Hill before reaching the Moor. In 1598, Tatton Old Hall passed to the Egerton family, who became Lords of the Manor.

Seventeenth Century

Knutsford was then known as the principal market town of mid-Cheshire. The River Lily was referred to in earliest documents as 'the brook' when regular orders were made for it to be scoured. The Moor was important for hay, and grazing sheep and geese. We get a glimpse of the use of the Moor from early records when in 1676 the Moor Lookers complained that Ellen Shaw, an inn keeper, had forcibly broken open the common moor gate so that she might "fetch and deliver cattle at her pleasure to and from the Cock Meadow contrary to the custom to the great prejudice of a way both to the church and market with several inconveniences". No doubt the gate was to secure land against straying beasts. People used a pool on the Moor for dyeing the local woollen cloths and threads. A ducking stool was also sited here. The path for worshippers going from Knutsford to the church of St Helena in Cross Town would have passed across the Moor to St. John's Wood (There are still remains of the churchyard and graves to be seen).

Eighteenth Century

Knutsford now became a parish with a new church built within the town in 1744. It thrived attracting new industries like textiles and the coaching trade through its hostelries and inns. In 1734 John Egerton of Tatton, as Lord of the Manor, signed an agreement with the Freeholders of the town, confirming their rights to common land. From this period onwards they as a body took on its management, including the Moor and especially the Heath (because of its racecourse). Burdett's 1788 Map of Cheshire shows that at this time the brook flowed into Tatton Mere, but there was no open water on the Moor, just some trees. People were encouraged to keep trenches and gullies scoured to improve drainage.

Nineteenth Century

Knutsford was prosperous, but failed to be industrialised, so it was a desirable location for the affluent and aristocratic, although poor densely populated areas did exist eg near the old Market Place. In 1818 a new Sessions House and House of Correction were built (Quarter sessions had been held in Knutsford since 1575) - they gave the town consequence and kept the gentry busy. There was also a new Town hall/Market hall (paid for by the Earl Egerton) and St Cross and Wesleyan Methodist Churches. Railway links with

Altrincham and Northwich were constructed in 1863.

A well is marked on 19th century maps of the Moor at the bottom of Malt Street. The quaintly named Robin Hood's Well and Cottage seem to have been called that after a racehorse of that name, owned by Matthew Miller whose initials can still be seen on a building in the street. (There was a racecourse on the Heath for some 300 years). A mound at one time marked the horse's grave. The well was marked with the saying "If Robin Hood is not at home. Stop and take a drink with little John". There is also mention of a well at the bottom of Drury Lane; it had a reputation for curing eye diseases and people brought bottles to it to fill and take away.

We cannot be sure at what stage the Moor became marshy but Henry Green in his "Knutsford - its traditions and history " wrote about Charles X of France (while in exile as the Count D'Artois) being brought to the Moor by M. Rogier, a French emigre dancing master in the town, to search for a rare marsh saxifrage. ". . . ditch after ditch they successfully crossed, - when, lo! one wide and deep, with the peculiarly unctuous mire of the locality, arrested their progress. The light-footed dancing master jumped across but the Count almost drowned". This shows the state of part of the Moor in the early nineteenth century. However, that the Moor was also in use for agriculture is shown by records of a court case in 1846 when a corn stack had been set alight and

discovered by boys 'bathing in a trench'. The Wood family, iron founders and makers of agricultural implements with a workshop on Manchester Road, also farmed there in the early 1800s. William Wood 'used the old right to common of the moor and held a plot there for grazing and hay' according to his grandson's memoirs.



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The first large scale ordnance survey map of c.1872 shows no open water on the Moor, because of large scale drainage work. This was expensive - when the town was directed to provide an infant school in 1873, it was reported they could not afford it because they were still paying for the drainage of the Moor. The area created by this drainage is marked out on the map in hundreds of yards as a Volunteers rifle range with the marker's butt near Tatton and 600 yards to the railway embankment. The map

shows a central drain running across the whole area into Tatton Mere.

However, in 1878 the problem of the town's drainage and sewerage became acute again. (As the Moor was the lowest lying area it naturally drained the town.) Increase in building meant a system of main drainage was overdue. In May, town representatives went to London where they met Lord Egerton and the Hon Wilbraham Egerton to discuss the problem and the Egertons' concerns that Tatton Mere might become polluted. It was estimated that carrying the drains as far as the River Bollin (via Park Gate) would cost £2,000 and this was deemed too expensive. Money was available for surface drainage and the Egertons agreed to lease 15 acres of their land at £1 per acre for 21 years for that purpose. The Board of Guardians decided to make sewerage works at the south end of Dog Field. In 1881 it was decided to divert the Middle Brook, laying pipes to a large tank 18 feet deep on the Drury Lane side of the Moor and fixing three steam pumps with boilers. This was a failure and the job was stopped and all timbers in the cutting left in.

The drained part of the Moor was divided into plots for mowing e.g. J Shorter and Joseph Berry had the part by the Rifle Butts on the East Side and a section was divided into 10 yard plots where other residents were allowed one plot provided they kept a cow. There were 3 loose rails by the road to keep cattle from straying with

a stile for foot passengers to the Railway Bridge. To cross the Middle trench an old tree trunk about 12 inches wide and 8 feet long was used while a road was made alongside the railway to King Street. There was an old brick culvert that ran under the road by the side of the River Lily carrying sewerage to Tatton Mere.

About 1896 waste tipping was commenced at the south end of the Moor but as there were objections by the St Cross congregation, it was then carried out only at the Sewerage Works end by permission of Lord Egerton.

By 1899 the Urban District Council had initially given up their plan to utilise the south end of the Moor for recreation due to conditions imposed by Lord Egerton. Negotiations continued however and in April 1904 Earl Egerton agreed to sell this to the town council (The Freeholders contributed £100 to the cost).

Twentieth Century

Richard Harding Watt, a Manchester glove maker, changed the appearance of Knutsford with a series of Italianate buildings. It was planned that several would be seen from the Moor. These included the Gaskell Tower and a laundry, converted from a tannery in Drury Lane, with towers and minarets.

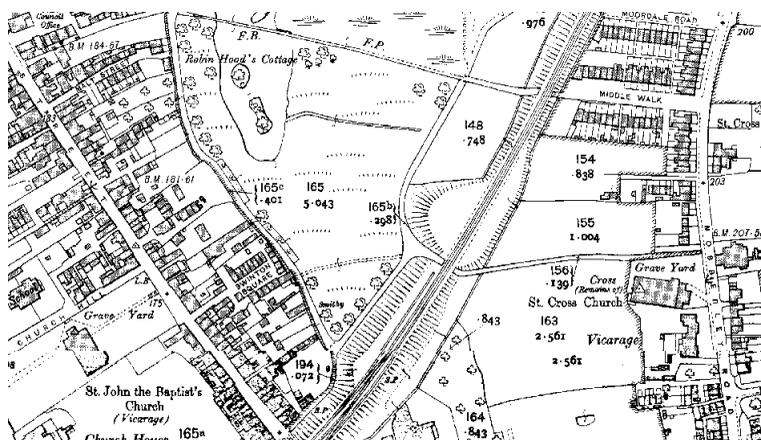
Watt attempted to landscape the Moor but a councillor protested that his plants were rough and worthless (they were poplars). In 1906, it was reported horses had damaged the planted trees. There was now a substantial pool with an island. Mr Gidman was giving willows to plant round the island. (The Gidmans were basket makers and had probably grown willows for coppicing on part of the Moor). Around this time, work was done at the sewage works.

In 1907 Wilbraham Egerton and others sold Moor land to the local Urban District Council for recreational use only. Legal documentation said the land had to be kept in good condition and the main pedestrian route, the Middle Walk path, retained. At the Freeholders AGM meeting in 1906 Watt queried the costs of transfer of Moor land and was told that Egerton paid one third, Freeholders and the Council paid the rest. The Freeholders found Richard Harding Watt difficult to deal with at their 1908 AGM as he queried the expenditure and arrangements about the Moor. He complained that the Moor path to the laundry was deep in sludge and a disgrace to Knutsford. It was made clear that the path from the bridge to the laundry belonged to Earl Egerton.

In December 1906 there were complaints about football “in the evening and every Sunday”. It was particularly offensive to church goers. Nothing could be done about this or foul language until possession was shown, then police might be called. In January 1907, conveyance documents

were received so the complaints could be dealt with.

Around 1910 to 1914 the Moor's pool was spanned by a wooden bridge and was popular with fishermen who came out from Manchester by train on Sundays. There were frequent calls on Pemberton's joiners to make repairs to this bridge.



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From the 1920s to 1940s the Moor was used as a council rubbish tip on the recreation ground side, which was very unsightly, but perhaps the intention was to raise the water table and prevent flooding. During the days of the Second World War, troops from the Parachute Regiment, training in Tatton, and later Americans from General Patton's army, used to skate on the Moor in winter. American officers used the Ruskin Rooms and each week discarded food was taken

to the Moor for dumping (unless intercepted by locals).

Recent History

In 1946, a Development Plan for Knutsford was exhibited and then published by the News Chronicle. It anticipated a population rise to 30,000 with local industrial estates and the creation of a shopping precinct by knocking down the lower side of King Street. A major feature was to transform the Moor area into a water front with yachting marinas, opening up the Moor to join Tatton Mere. It seems that it was a lack of money for development, rather than respect for Knutsford's history that prevented this scheme going ahead. The town did grow substantially, however, with the building of several council housing estates, especially at the Five Oaks area of Cross Town, built to house people displaced by building clearance in Manchester. A further 396 houses were built here in the 1960s and the estate was called Longridge.



In 1959, the Knutsford Society was founded “to maintain and improve Knutsford” and their first major task was to dredge the Moor Pool and cut down overgrown vegetation with scythes. Items found included nine bicycle frames, 2 bedsteads, 30 oil drums, 30 tyres and 2 baths! Further cleaning and tree planting was undertaken in November. In the 1960s, surplus soil from work on the M6 motorway was tipped on the Moor area, south of the path, to hopefully make the area drier. In 1967 the Knutsford Round Table set up a play area with swings and a roundabout.



For many years the River Lily was popular with children who could often be seen with fishing nets and jam jars catching sticklebacks and minnows. It flowed all along the border of the Moor and finished up as a bright orange bog at the Tatton Park wall, filtering into the Mere. It was useful to allotment keepers for watering their plots.

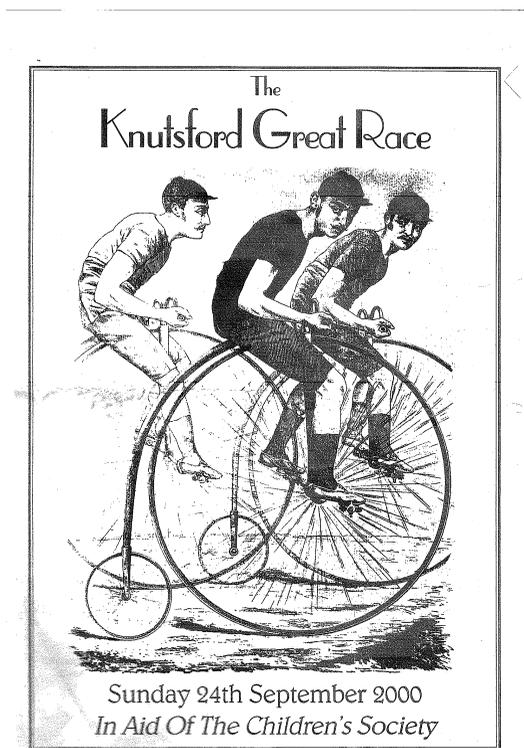
During the 1970s, industrial estates were set up at the railway goods yard, Parkgate and Longridge. There was a reorganisation of local government in 1974 and Macclesfield Borough Council took over responsibility for maintaining the Moor (The Pool area, a SSSI and Ramsar site, was under the management of Cheshire Wildlife Trust for Mr Brooks, the owner after the last Lord Egerton died in 1958)

In the late 1980s/90s sewerage holding tanks were built under the Moor, together with culverts. In 1991, the area was smoothed and reseeded and the children's play area, closed for 3 years, was reinstated. The surface of the Middle Walk path was improved, and staff checked the water levels as far as the Tatton sluice, as problems with drainage of the Moor were recurring.



Increasingly, the Moor was being used for events. In September 2000, the Knutsford Great Race took place, with Penny Farthing and boneshaker bicycles ridden by over 70 contestants from all over the world (Another is planned in 2010). For the Queen's Golden Jubilee in June 2002, the Town Council and Lions organised a community picnic, with refreshments, a train, circus skills,

line dancing, and a best dressed Royal Teddy competition. From April 2006 there is an annual Rotary Club jog for charity.



In 2003, Macclesfield Borough Council's Park Strategy was published, based on a public consultation. This led to Friends of the Moor, a group of volunteers, being set up to liaise with MBC's Outdoor Leisure Section to improve the Moor maintenance, tackle the drainage problem, support the development of the play area for children of all ages and improve safety and security.

In 2005, an aerial runway was added to the play area and unsafe trees and vandalised seats removed. New lamp posts were erected by the Middle Walk and the River Lily cleared. The next year, the paths across the park were raised and resurfaced, and drainage tackled using a French drain, with some success. The Friends organised litter picks, bird box making and school bulb-planting events. In 2007, the Moor was made an alcohol-free zone. Picnic tables were set up near the play area. In 2008, the wooden fencing was replaced with metal fencing and gates, and more seating and litter bins installed, especially by the path alongside the Pool. A “Museum in the Street” type sign, sponsored by the Lions, was erected, to tell visitors about the history of the area and link it to the town centre and during August, several events for children (e.g. National Playday) were held.

Today

Much positive feedback has been received from people of Knutsford about improved play areas, seating and maintenance of the park. Through Friends of the Moor and other bodies, and by using Knutsford’s Town Plan (in preparation) it is intended to get ideas and help from the community of Knutsford to make the Moor an area to be proud of.

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