

Skelmersdale Heritage Society

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER



JULY UPDATE

This month we were very happy to publish our second book, 'Sandy Lane in the 60s'. Committee member Julie Thompson spent an incredible amount of time scouring our archives and seeking out new photos so we could publish a complete look at the lane as it appeared sixty years ago and what a fantastic job she did. The book has gone down a storm but if you're yet to get your copy we do still have a limited amount available.

At the recent Ormskirk Gingerbread Festival, an older lady approached me to ask about the book commenting "I bet you don't have a picture of where I grew up". After asking her where on the lane that was, I was delighted to be able to show her a picture of her childhood home and even more delighted to take her money for a copy of the book.

I should also give thanks to Neville Berkley who allowed us to use some of his collection in the book as well as providing us with some unseen New Town photos which we have added to our archives.

At the July meeting we were treated to two wonderful talks by Eve Pennington and George Orr who covered two very different eras of the town's history and the role our female population played in them.

NEXT MEETING:

Monday August 8th
7PM
Upholland Labour Club

PHOTOS/VIDEOS

Do you have old family photos or videos featuring the town? We'd love to have a look and get copies so drop us a line.

WANT TO WRITE FOR US?

Whether it's your memories, local history or something else entirely, if it's Skem related we'd love you to get involved. Just drop us an email and we'll consider it for our next newsletter.

I'm sure you'll all be delighted to know that I'll be doing the next talk on August 8th. It will be a detailed look at the history of the area known as Tawd Valley Park and will cover everything from mining to the New Town. It's an extended version of a talk I did a few months back for The Friends of Tawd Valley (so if you heard it at their AGM, don't worry there's LOADS of new stuff in it now!)

And in some final big news, the website is ready and will be launched in September. Everyone who renews their membership will be able to access our members area where not only will you be able to download the latest newsletters and SkemCasts, but you'll also have access to every edition we've done.

The final few weeks before the launch are being used in order to get as much content on as possible including pictures, articles and other things of interest to our members and the wider community as a whole. It's been a long time coming and I'd like to thank all of the committee, past and present, for their hard work in getting us to this stage.

That's it for now, see you at the meetings!

Mark

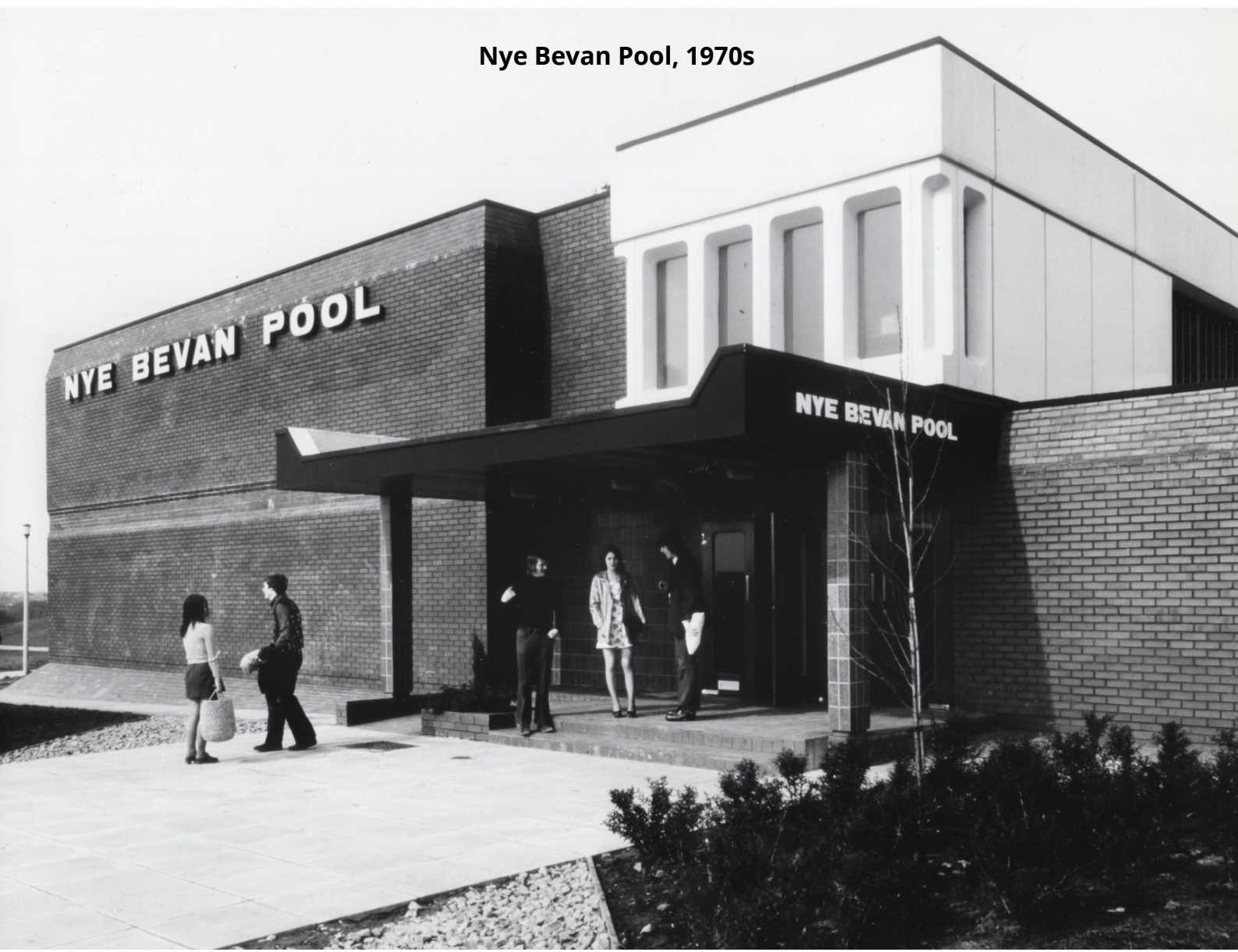


The news from.. July 1988

In the July 28th 1988 edition of The Ormskirk Advertiser there was a report on the closure of West Bank School. When it first opened in September 1970 the then Headmaster Jim Dobb had presided over just 137 children and 12 staff but by 1974 this had grown exponentially to 1,307 pupils and over 80 staff. Sadly, the rapid growth of the town centre school was not sustained and the final Headmaster, Norman Lyon would lament "When we had just 450 pupils left, the authorities decided to reorganise Secondary Education. Obviously I am sad the life of West Bank has come to a close."

Picture of the Month:

Nye Bevan Pool, 1970s



Crow Orchard School: The first two hundred years

By Mark Boardman

Over the years, as we know, Skelmersdale has lost many buildings and institutions that were cherished by the town. However, there is a local institution that has weathered this storm of change. Now I know that too many of our readers it will always be 'th' endowed' but you'll have to forgive me because to me it will always be Crow Orchard or 'Crowy'.

My mind stretches far enough back to remember my first headmaster Mr. Caine who's face, it seemed to me, always had the complexion of ginger nut biscuit. There was the fearsome Miss Bridge who was known to erupt into extreme anger if she felt you stepped out of line, there was my second Headteacher, the sarcastic and hilarious Mr. Cooke and then Mrs Christian, who everyone agreed, was just really nice (apart from the time I got in trouble for colouring a picture of a donkey in purple). Everyone who attended the school will have their own memories and stories and the history of the school stretches back over years, decades and indeed, centuries.



Crow Orchard School, early 1990s

It's worth noting that despite their later association, the school predates St. Pauls Church by over 40 years. The first St Pauls was built in 1776 but the genesis of Crow Orchard was October of 1732 when the Lord of the Manor of Skelmersdale, Thomas Henry Ashurst (1672-1744) granted the use of a building that had recently been erected on waste land to John Longworth and eleven others in order that it might be converted into 'a school for the instruction of local youth'. The grant included surrounding lands and was also a place that the Lord of the Manor could hold his court baron and receive rents. A court baron, typically held every three to four weeks, administered the customs of the manor and dealt with any offences against it. As well as dealing with matters that affected the local community, such as the regulation of agricultural affairs, the enforcement of labour services, the administration of justice for minor crimes, and the election of local officials. It was also a place where towns inhabitants could meet to conduct business and transactions.

The first 'master' of the school recorded was James Eden who was unlicensed followed by the Reverend Richard Ashton who was nominated to the post in January of 1772 and stayed in the position until his death in 1804. He was succeeded by the Reverend John Ireland who held the position until his resignation in 1824.

Charles Rigby replaced John Ireland and it was during his tenure that the school underwent extensive repairs and extension due to its dilapidated state. Following the renovation, the new room was used for the boys and as a Sunday School while the new, upper room was used for the girls. The girls had a separate Headmistress, an unmarried woman who did not receive a fee for her work.

By 1867 following the explosion of the local population due to the mining industry over 200 children were attending the school, by 1880 87 infants are recorded as being crammed into the classroom upstairs. Something had to give, or the foundations surely would.

Logbooks were introduced to the school in 1877 by the new Headmaster John Nightingale and some these still survive today in the school archives. Although Nightingale would only last two years, we can be grateful to him for the records he put in place. According to these records truancy was a problem in the late 19th century but much of it seemed to coincide with the seasonal demands of the local farming community especially during the Spring and Autumn when the planting of crops and harvesting took place.

In 1888, following the school being fatally condemned by a school inspector, more rebuilding work took place and the school started to resemble a little more closely how it looks today. This was the same year a new Headmaster, John Pearce would arrive he would remain there for thirty-eight years.



Date unknown but presumably prior to Pearce's renovations

The Tawd Vale Colliery Disaster of 1897 and the resulting exodus of townsfolk would result in a reduced number of pupils as would the closure of the Chapel House Colliery in 1904. There were still enough pupils to keep it going though and these pupils needed a better heating system than the one they currently had. In 1908 a boiler was installed replacing the large stove that until that point had been placed in the hall and provided the only source of heat. More improvements followed in 1911 when additional classrooms were built on the site of what had formerly been the school gardens.

There was sad news in the summer of 1926 when long standing Headmaster John Pearce passed away while on holiday in Anglesey. The unexpected death was reported to hit Skelmersdale, where he was held in high regard, hard. His funeral procession was led by Skelmersdale Old Prize Band, the organisation he had been Vice President of and followed by members of the Police, members of The Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffalos, Freemasons and, of course, pupils of the Endowed School.

In an eloquent speech at Pearce's funeral, the Reverend JJ Hulley would say:

"It is only necessary, I think, to point out the difference between the school building now and then to give us an illustration of the life of one we have lost. The school was practically only one large room, with one or two dilapidated buildings attached to it. Now six classrooms surround it, and that large room has been raised to nearly twice its original height."

The school has been entirely transformed and instead of the old-fashioned building that existed, it is a school up to date with regard to all educational requirements of the present day. What is true of the building, is also, I am sure, true of those who have passed under his capable guidance, and have received instruction in the early days of their life. They have gone forth into various parts of the world, and only a comparatively small number have remained amongst us. It is, therefore, a tribute to him, who as schoolmaster passed nearly forty years in this township, and to whom we desire to pay our tribute today."

It appears that Pearce played a major role in the shaping of the town as an active participant in fundraising for the new St. Pauls to be built, as a member of the Urban District Council, member of the Freemasons and as a county magistrate.

His rather large shoes would be filled by Mr J. Birch who was warmly welcomed to the town in the December of 1926 and would remain in post until 1932.



Mr J. Birch pictured far right

Of course, the story of the school was far from over, and today almost one hundred years later it is still educating the children of the town and will hopefully continue to do so for many more years.



c.1925



The upstairs classroom, c.1910

John Edward Gaskell

By Fred Marsh

John Edward Gaskell, known as 'Ted ', was born on the 9th of May 1921 in Upholland to Edward and Elizabeth Gaskell née Cowley. The youngest of four children he two brothers, Bill and Joe, plus a sister Lilly. At the outbreak of World War Two he was living at 335 Ormskirk Road in Upholland with his family and working, according to the 1939 Census, as a motor driver and heavy worker at the family haulage yard.



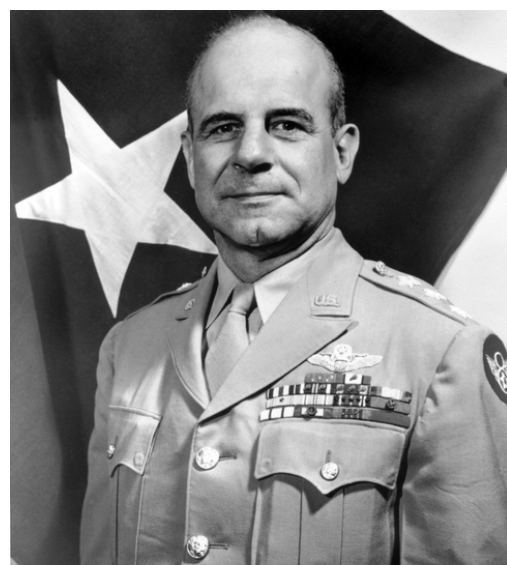
On July 25th, 1941, Ted joined the Royal Airforce, receiving the regiment number of 1485478 however before she was shipped out overseas he made sure to marry his sweetheart, Florence Elizabeth Sharples on the 24th of October 1942 at St Thomas's Upholland Parish Church.

His destination in December 1942 was North Africa with 150 Squadron. Stationed at Blida, a strategic port in Algeria he was a Leading Aircraftman working on Wellington and later Hercules Aircraft.

The work of the 150 Squadron would later be praised by US Major General James 'Jimmy' Doolittle who in March of 1943 became the commanding General of the Northwest African Strategic Air Force, a unified command of USAF and RAF units.

"The work in the theatre of 142 and 150 Squadrons of 330 Wing has been outstanding. The phenomenally high operational rate and efficiency of the Wimpeys [a nickname for the Wellington Bombers] contributed materially to the success of the campaign. I am proud to have been associated with this fine organisation."

In May 1943 the unit moved to Tunisia and then to bases in Italy that December before disbanding in October 1944.



'Jimmy' Doolittle



Ted pictured with his unit, back row, 4th from left

He and Florence would have three children Leila, John and Joseph, four grandchildren and three Great Grandchildren.

For his efforts in the war, he would receive the Africa Star, the Italy Star, the Defence Medal and the War Medal.



Whatever happened to our Walking Days?

By Carol Fenlon



Photo from Lancashire County Council archive

In years gone by, walking days were a major feature of the summer months. Every town and village throughout the country would have their whit walks and other processions. Skelmersdale was no exception. I'm not sure when the above photo was taken, or even if it is in Skelmersdale although it is in my Skelmersdale collection. It is clearly a very long time ago and though none of us remember that far back, many of us can still recall the walking days of the 1960s.



Picture from Liverpool Echo and Evening Express, 11.1.62

Walking day processions were normally organised by the various churches in the parish and would usually begin or end at their specific church with a celebratory tea at the end.

These children on the left are just setting off on their journey to St Paul's for the flower service so it will be a

while before they can enjoy their tea. Not sure where they are starting from but there are some benches in the background which may be part of Coronation Park?

Only a couple of weeks later, Skelmersdale Parish church held a separate walking day which it appears was an annual event combined with sports and games.



The Liverpool Echo and Evening Express 2.7.62

Here the youngsters are watching the sports after the walk which left from the church but the report does not say where it ended up for the sports – perhaps Bromilow? I'm sure someone will know. An exciting event was the mums' egg and spoon race which they seem to be enjoying greatly

The flower processions were still going strong in 1964 as the Skelmersdale Advertiser of 18.6.64 reported. In this report we see that more than one Sunday school took part in the procession. Did they all meet up for tea in one place afterwards? I'm sure some of our older Skemmers will remember taking part and will let us know.





Children from Mission Sunday School, Witham Road



Children from The Endowed School

The last set of pictures I have is of Upholland and Digmaor churches' United Walking Day in June 1969. The images come from a newspaper *New Life*, which though printed by the Ormskirk Advertiser appears to be a church publication.



The theme for this walking day is reported as Good Neighbours and the speakers for the day were Roy Lyon, Chairman of Skelmersdale and Holland UDC, (back in the days when the new town had a council) and Mr G. Heyward, Chairman of Skelmersdale Development Corporation. It's an interesting theme and I can't help speculating if it was an attempt not only to improve relationships between the local councils and the SDC which deteriorated early on in the new town story as the councils felt themselves ignored and overridden by the central government policies of SDC. Not only that but perhaps an attempt to soothe Upholland council which had been dragged unwillingly into a partnership with Skelmersdale. Anyway, a moot point now as Skelmersdale and Upholland Council would before many years passed disappear in a puff of smoke with the new boundary re-organisations.



So what happened to our walking days? It's clear these were mostly organised by the various churches in the parishes and as the importance of the church as a social focus of town and village life declined, so did attendances and people willing to organise activities. Increased mobility with the enduring popularity of the car for days out etc., together with the break-up of traditional residential communities and the dispersal of their inhabitants to new and distant homes all played their part in the decline of traditional carnivals, fairs and walking days- these were the events that held people together throughout the year's fortunes and misfortunes. This is not a situation peculiar to Skelmersdale or to new towns, but a decline that is common up and down the country so that today just a handful of walking days still exist.

I am hopeful that some kind of regeneration is bringing our communities back together however. Skelmersdale certainly has many organisations that put together fairs and other events for the benefit of the community and this has been maintained through the hardest years of the new town and seems to be on the increase today. Post pandemic our community events are starting to build again and who knows, if fuel prices continue to escalate as they are doing now, we may all be doing a lot more walking and maybe turning to more local ways of amusing ourselves and meeting our friends.

What Lies Beneath: The Archaeological Survey for Lathom Pastures

By Mark Boardman

There has been much chat in the community recently on the clearance of the land off Neverstitch Road near the Duck Pond. The trees and foliage have been removed and all that has been left standing is two buildings, one of which was formerly an air road shelter.

What may not be as well known is that an archaeological survey was taken of the area back in February 2020. Carried out by Lanpro Services in order to inform the planning permission application in consultation with the Planning Officer for Archaeology at Lancashire County Council Archaeological Team.

The published document which is available to any member of the public who wishes to view it details the work that was done and the conclusions that were reached.

In 2013 Lancashire County Council set out a new local planning policy that took into account guidance from Historic England, the public body that looks after England's historic environment.

The core of this policy is that the historic environment of an area has an aesthetic value that promotes the local distinctiveness of said area and whilst facilitating economic development through regeneration, leisure and tourism certain principles must still be applied.

This includes the following criteria:

1. development will not be permitted that will adversely affect a listed building, a scheduled monument, a conservation area, historic park or garden, or important archaeological remains;
2. development affecting the historic environment should seek to preserve or enhance the heritage asset and any features of specific historic, archaeological, architectural or artistic interest;
3. in all cases there will be an expectation that any new development will enhance the historic environment in the first instance, unless there are no identifiable opportunities; and
4. in instances where existing features have a negative impact on the historic environment, as identified through character appraisals, the Local Planning Authority will request the removal of the features that undermine the historic environment as part of any proposed development.

Furthermore, the guidelines go on to say:

(b) Substantial harm to, or loss of, a listed building, park or garden will only be permitted in exceptional circumstances where it can be demonstrated that:

1. the substantial harm to, or loss of significance of, the heritage asset is necessary in order to deliver substantial public benefits that outweigh the harm or loss, or the nature of the heritage asset prevents all reasonable uses of the site;
2. no viable use of the heritage asset itself can be found in the medium term that will enable its conservation (evidence for appropriate marketing and reasonable endeavours should be provided in line with Policy GN4);
3. conservation through grant funding or some form of charitable or public ownership is not possible; and
4. the harm to, or loss of, the heritage assets is outweighed by the benefits of bringing the site back into use.

(c) There will be a presumption in favour of the protection and enhancement of existing non-designated heritage assets which have a particular local importance or character which it is desirable to keep. Such historic buildings, groups of buildings, spaces or other historic resources will be identified through a Local List which will be adopted by the Council.

(d) Heritage Statements and/or Archaeological Evaluations will be required for proposals related to, or impacting on, the setting of heritage assets and/or possible archaeological sites, in order that sufficient information is provided to assess the impacts of development on historic environment assets, together with any proposed mitigation methods.

(e) Where possible, opportunities to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change will be encouraged. Re-use of heritage assets and, where suitable, modification so as to reduce carbon emissions and secure sustainable development will be permitted where appropriate. The public benefit of mitigating the effects of climate change should be weighed against any harm to the significance of the heritage asset.

On the Facebook page before we've mentioned the 19th Century Powder Hut that was used by Lathom Colliery. This is located just to the North of this area; this was part of a separate survey for Lathom Pastures phase one and the current plans for this area include the retention of the structure.

As part of the study forty-seven were excavated in order to determine if anything of significance could be located below the surface. The main survey area comprised of around six field parcels divided by a railway cutting of which no physical remains of the railway were apparent. Research on the archaeological background of the area was taken from the Lancashire Historic Environment Record (HER), the National Heritage List for



The 19th Century Powder Hut off Firswood Road

England and Record Offices. The study was not designed to create a detailed archaeological or historical narrative of the area, but to provide an assessment of the study site's historical development and archaeological potential in accordance with the National Planning Policy Framework. Nevertheless though, there are interesting things to note in regard to the heritage of the area.

The report states that evidence for Neolithic Settlements in this part of Lancashire is scarce although there have been chance finds. Mesolithic to Bronze Age flints were found at Cock Farm in 1999. Meanwhile, Romano British Pottery has previously been discovered on Slate Lane suggesting a low level of Roman Activity in the area. A small number of Roman coins have also been found locally but not enough to suggest any major settlement.

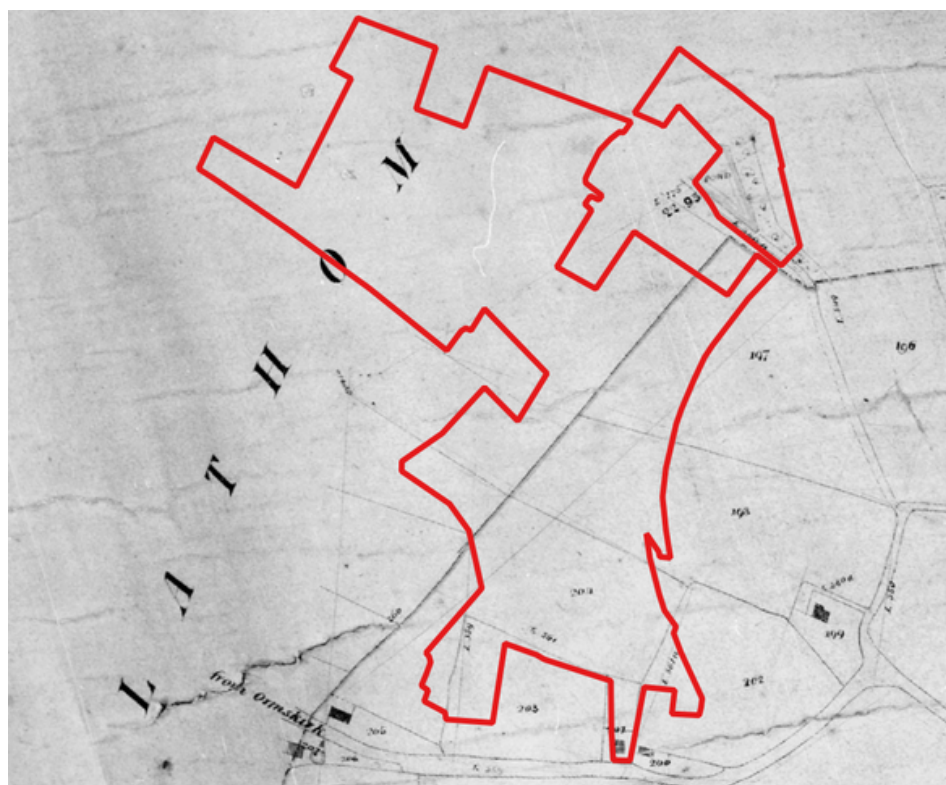
According to Historic England peat deposits can be important archives of past human activities and environments as they have often been formed over thousands of years. The waterlogged conditions that characterise peatlands result in the exceptional preservation of natural and cultural organic remains, unrivalled at typical 'dryland' archaeological sites.

And indeed, peat deposits were found in the area, however they were sporadic and there was no evidence found for Neolithic or Bronze Age activity in the study area.

Sadly, there is no evidence for medieval activity within Old Skelmersdale; the closest medieval settlement evidence that has been found is Ormskirk and the closest known site is the potential medieval Lathom manor house on the site of the existing house. It's thought that during this period Skelmersdale is likely to have been agricultural land meaning the potential for significant (i.e., non-agricultural) archaeological remains is very low.

As we get into the industrial age though the past comes into clearer focus. Records are better, maps are more detailed, and we can get a clearer idea of the area. According to HER there were around six mines in the immediate area. A mound representing a potential coal pit is located around 940 metres north-east of the study site and coal pits and associated tracks are recorded around 500 metres to the south of the study site at Blaguegate Moss, presumably is part of Blaguegate Colliery (Firwood Road appearing on early maps as 'Coalpit Lane').

The earliest cartographic survey of the study site is contained on an 1839 Township of Skelmersdale tithe map. It portrays the eastern extent of the main study site which respects the parish boundary showing six identifiable land parcels of likely arable farmland. Most notably, a structure is shown towards the southern tip of the study site and described as a cottage and garden. By the time of the 1908 OS map two more structures can be seen to the immediate north of this one within the same plot of land, however by the 1960s following the redevelopment of the area they're no longer there.

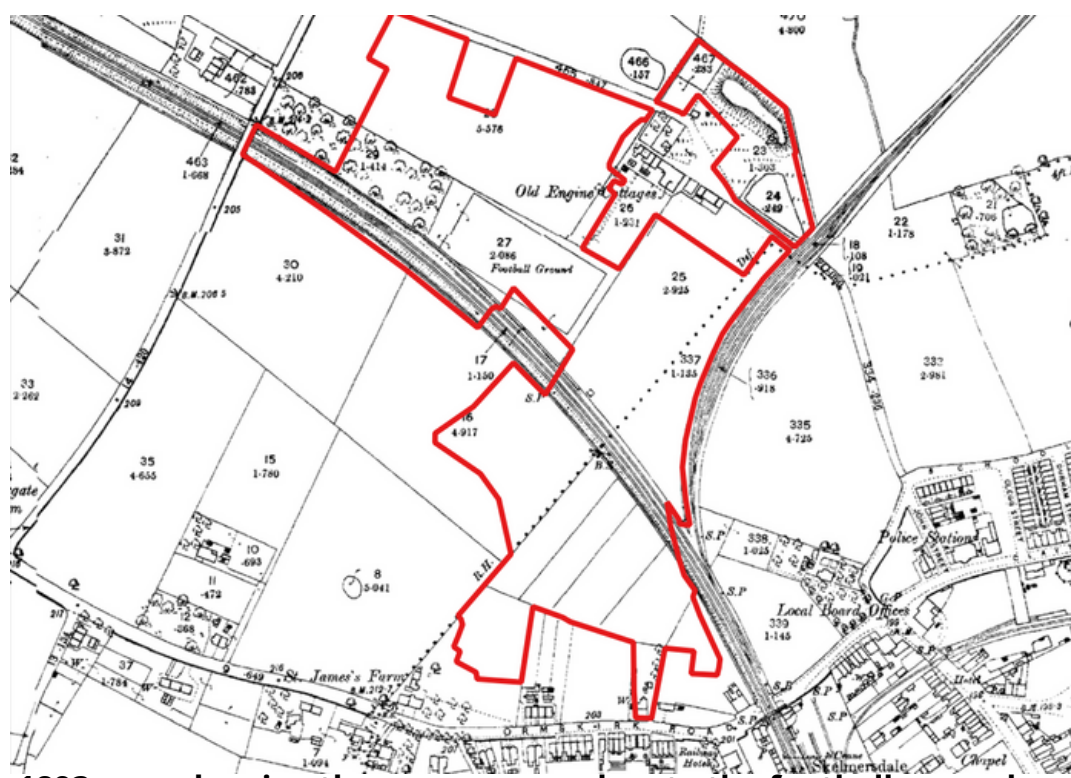


1839 tithe map showing the area surveyed

An 1846 Lathom Tithe map shows the area to the north of the survey area including an area known as 'Lower Brick Hey' suggesting brick making was taking place nearby old Engine Cottages, still standing today are also listed. The field parcel it is located on is listed as 'Smithy Field' and indeed if you look at the 1900 map a 'Smith' is listed in the area that is now Sherrat Street.



By the time of the 1893 OS there have been significant changes and an industrialisation of the landscape. The railway line, which opened in 1858 runs centrally through the area though no sleepers or rails seem to remain. Curiously on the same map there is also a 'football field' listed. This was located to the north of the railway line, as far as I'm aware it was nothing to do with Skelmersdale United, so its purpose remains a mystery for now.



1893 map showing the area surveyed, note the football ground

By 1908 additional tramlines have been added off the railway line which would be used by The Sandwash, what was a small pond has now been redeveloped into a larger reservoir, this reservoir is, of course what we know as 'the duck pond'.

Also mentioned are the two outbuildings which, at time of writing were still standing. The smaller of these we know to have been an air raid shelter dating from the Second World War.



The report concludes that there is 'low/nil' potential for the discovery of significant archaeological remains relating to either the prehistoric or medieval period and though potentially there could be remains of buildings from before the 18th century it is likely that whatever remains would already have been disturbed with the redevelopment that has taken place over the last two hundred years.

It was with all this in mind that it was reported back there were no heritage assets in the area under the framework of the National Planning Policy Framework. That isn't to say is nothing of interest at a local level, only, sadly, that under current planning guidelines there is nothing that is deemed of particular value

In recent months the clearance of the land has revealed remains from the Sandwash, but I believe this has already been broken up. My advice, get a good view of it now and take some photos before it disappears forever.