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Carr Mill Dam:

a brief history from the eighteenth century to the 1960s

For the past couple of centuries, Carr Mill Dam's natural beauty has made it a focus of pleasure and recreation for the people of St Helens and the surroundings area. Despite its size and apparently perpetual permanence as a feature in the local landscape, Carr Mill Dam is essentially an artificial creation dating from the early industrial revolution. Early maps of Lancashire, such as those surveyed by Saxton (1577) and Speed (1611), show the rough outline of Sankey Brook but there is no indication of an associated lake. Cowley's "improved map" of Lancashire (1744) shows no evidence of Carr Mill Dam, though, like the earlier maps, does include the sprawling lake Martin Mere (now reclaimed land) near present-day Southport. However, whilst in this early period Carr Mill may not technically have been a lake, the area of the Dam may well have been moss land, perhaps a peat bog; 'car' is an Old Norse word for 'marsh', and Moss Bank implies the presence of a nearby marsh.

Unlike the earlier Lancashire maps, William Yates' 1786 map shows much clearer detail and depicted Carr Mill Dam together with the Black and Sankey Brooks, and also included Moss Bank and Garswood Park. Yates also gives us the name of the owner of the lands around the new lake, Sir Robert Gerard of nearby Garswood Hall; the Gerards having been the main local landowners for centuries. At the time that the Yates map was surveyed, Carr Mill Dam had only existed for about thirty years, the land on both banks of the Black Brook having flooded to provide a reservoir to maintain water levels in the new Sankey Navigation, constructed during the 1750s. ¹

The 1849 six inch OS map provides the first detailed overview of the Dam. For the first 110 years of its existence, Carr Mill Dam was significantly smaller (38 acres) and a somewhat different outline than it is today. The 1849 map also shows industrial development close to the south-east corner of the lake and this originated well before the construction of the Canal or Dam. The earliest recorded reference to industry in this vicinity dates from 1690. Thirty years later, Cheshire merchant Edward Hall secured a long lease at Carr Mill from Sir William Gerard, and the subsequent development of a charcoal yard on this land suggests that an industrial works existed close by. Carr Mill's significance as an industrial centre was

underlined by the construction of an iron furnace by entrepreneurs from Coalbrookdale in Shropshire, home of the world famous Iron Bridge. A smelting works near Carr Mill provided metal ingots, which from the 1770s were converted into nails at nearby Stanley Bank. The Gerards also got in on the act with the building of a horse-drawn rail track to bring coal from their Garswood collieries to the Sankey Canal wharf, giving Gerard coal a huge advantage in costs over other producers.²

Despite encroaching industry, the areas to the north and west of Carr Mill, that is, Billinge, Garswood Park and Moss Bank, remained resolutely rural and were renowned for a wide range of flora and fauna. In July 1865, the Liverpool Naturalists' Field Club went on a day trip to the "very picturesque district of Carr Mill Dam, an interesting area for enquiring botanists".³

The Dam did not, however, remain immune to further changes caused by the ongoing intensification of industry across the wider district of St Helens. For instance, improvements were made to the Sankey Canal during the 1820s in order to maintain its commercial edge against the proposed new railway connecting St Helens to the Runcorn Gap on the Mersey, and this had ramifications for Carr Mill with the introduction of a weir/slucice across the Dam's central section.⁴ Thirty years later, the Rivington scheme to supply water to the city of Liverpool entailed the construction of an aqueduct over the north end of the lake, a prominent landmark that remains to this day.

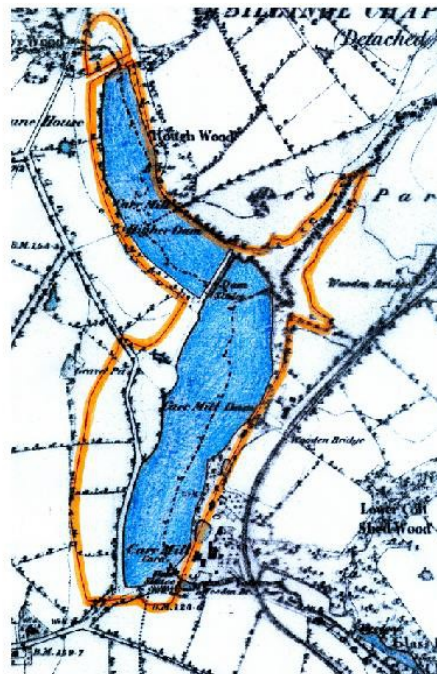


Figure 1. The 1849 6" OS map shows the earlier version of Carr Mill Dam with the sluice across the central section. The orange outline shows the extent of the lake from about 1866.

The most dramatic change to the Dam occurred in the mid-1860s after the London and North Western Railway had bought the St Helens Canal and Railway Company (owners of the Sankey Canal since 1845). It was decided that a deeper reservoir of water was needed to feed into the canal and to hold this the south-eastern bank was built up and a new road constructed alongside. The water level was allowed to rise four feet to the height of the new embankment and could be controlled by means of the new overflow sluice, another notable feature of the Dam down to the present day. ⁵Many acres on the gently sloping western banks were lost as the waters rose and the Dam assumed its present size and shape. With the support of the much bigger LNWR, the Lancashire Union Railway had been formed to connect Wigan and St Helens and a completely new rail embankment was built to carry the track about a hundred yards parallel to the eastern banks of the lake. This entailed the construction of a bridge near its south-east corner, over the Black Brook in the area later known as ‘Happy Valley’. The bridge consisted of six wrought iron lattice girders supported by 60 feet high brick piers. Before this new rail service was opened in 1869, the Gerard’s old inclined plane railway was removed and its former course became ‘Colliery Lane’. ⁶

Local working people gained progressively more recreational time during the course of the nineteenth century and Carr Mill Dam provided an outlet for fishing, swimming, and other physical pursuits both during the summer and winter months. When the lake’s shallower waters froze at the northern end adventurous souls were able to take up ice-skating using home-made skates with improvised blades.



Figure 2. Jack Hill, pictured here in middle age in his racing togs, became unofficial champion skater of England at the age of 17 in 1878.

The most celebrated of these pioneering characters was Billinge’s Jack Hill (1861 – 1923) who achieved the unofficial title of champion skater of England in 1878 when he defeated the exotically named Fish Smart of Lincolnshire, in a challenge match

arranged by the gambling fraternity. Nearly 20,000 people came to the Dam to witness proceedings; an attendance that may still be an unofficial British record for an ice-skating event. ⁷

The famous Fishing Cottage was built around 1860 by the Gerards, but the family never fully exploited the sporting potential of the lake and surrounding land and it was only when the second Baron Gerard sold his interest in the Dam to the industrialist and philanthropist, Sir David Gamble in 1891⁸ that widespread public use of the Dam's potential as a sporting venue could be contemplated. Gamble embarked on a development programme to improve the ramshackle facilities. New iron railings replaced old broken fencing on the estate's perimeter, a cinder track was laid near the edge of the water, together with the construction of the Pleasure Pavilion and Boathouse on the western side. A new Swiss-chalet style house was built for the boathouse keeper. The public were allowed free access to the Dam along the re-furbished path, "provided no damage is done to the plants and shrubbery", but Gamble specifically excluded the St Helens Angling Association from his plans, despite the fishing rights they had enjoyed under Lord Gerard. ⁹ In winter-time, Sir David allowed local people the freedom to skate on the frozen water but cautiously ensured that lifeguards and police officers remained in attendance. Gamble was all too aware of the dangers of the lake; in 1892 one of his labourers had drowned during a swimming break whilst re-building the boathouse.

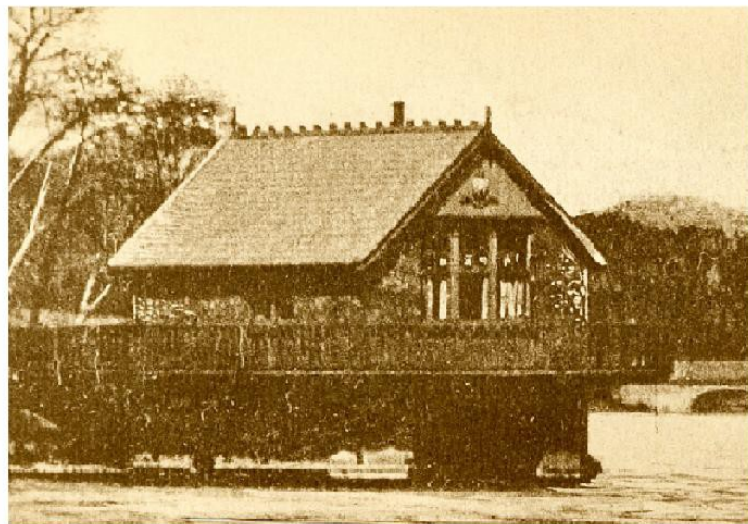


Figure 3. The Pleasure Pavilion built in 1891 by Sir David Gamble shortly after he bought the estate from Lord Gerard. Note the Rivington Viaduct in the distance.

The early years of Gamble ownership also witnessed major railway development near the Dam with the widening in 1892 of the Wigan to St Helens line. These improvements necessitated a second viaduct almost identical to the 1860s one, built adjacent to the earlier structure. ¹⁰The sloped grassy area in the shadow of the bridge became a magnet for working-class recreation on Sundays and Bank Holidays. 'Happy Valley' as this area was nicknamed, was a popular site for family

picnics. From the end of the nineteenth century until the 1950s, crowds of many hundreds would congregate on the slopes whilst younger visitors might brave a paddle in the fast waters of the overflow.

Sir David Gamble died in 1907, and as the Gerards had done before them, the surviving members of his family began the process of loosening their connections with St Helens, and so following the end of the Great War, the decision was made to sell Carr Mill Dam and the adjacent Gamble estates. The properties were sold at an auction held at the Fleece Hotel in St. Helens in July 1920. Apart from the Dam and its immediate vicinity, the sale included fishing and boating rights and the Fishing Cottage, as well as a number of nearby farms such as Laffak, Otters Swift, Hollin Hey, and Green Leach, and also included Haresfinch House and the Windle Schools.



Figure 4. 'Happy Valley' was a popular destination for family picnics on Summer Sundays and Bank Holidays. Note the overflow sluice and railway viaduct.

A 43 year old Parr grocer, Thomas Middlehurst, bought the land around the Dam with the intention of transforming it into a modern leisure resort under the new name of 'Lakewoods'. The planned attractions included a golf course, boating, variety shows, and a hotel. He also initiated speed boat racing, though this was curtailed following the death of a pilot in an accident. Some of the land was leased to leisure operators such as the American De Forest Morehouse, owner of the famous Kursaal Fairground in Southend-on-Sea; though local entrepreneurs were also involved including William Fillingham, a St Helens garage owner who erected a café and dance hall in the grounds. Middlehurst's scheme was eventually stymied due to red tape; he was unable to obtain a licence for the proposed hotel and his plans were further complicated because a number of authorities had vested interests in the development of the lake. The territory was split between three local councils,

Billinge and Winstanley, Ashton in Makerfield, and Whiston, as well as the water authority and the London and North Western Railway Company. Mr Middlehurst, who had in the meantime moved to the Lodge on Carr Mill Road, died in March 1931, and his widow sold 'Lakewoods' to Liverpool furrier, Bernard Rubin.¹¹

Mr Rubin's ownership of Carr Mill Dam was short-lived as in 1933 he transferred his interest to another furrier company, the London-based Keisner Brothers. During this period, the opening of the new Manchester-Liverpool highway, the East Lancashire Road, dramatically enhanced the potential worth of the area, as the Dam became more accessible to people from all over Lancashire and beyond. Other than the establishment of the hydroplane club, there were no greatly significant developments at Carr Mill in the 1930s though Happy Valley continued to attract local picnickers and day-trippers and the lake acquired a reputation as a centre for pike angling. The war years, however, were a time of neglect as trees, shrubs and buildings, including the old boathouse, were subject to wanton vandalism.

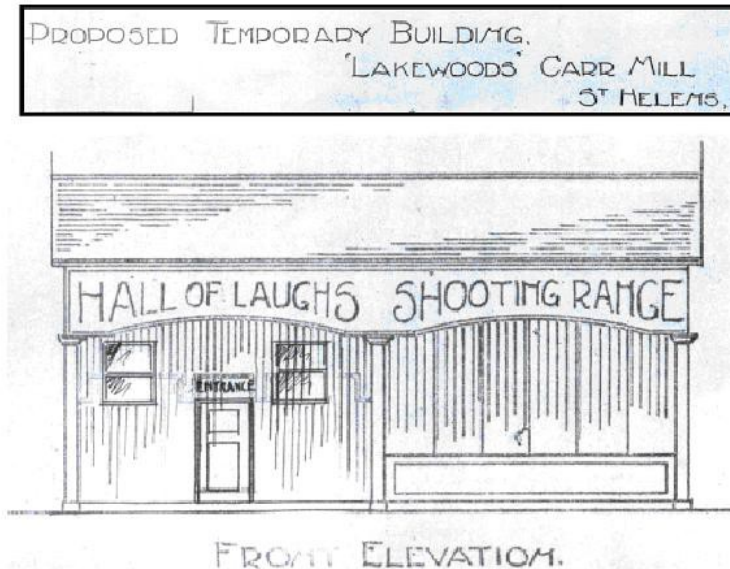


Figure 5. Front elevation of a proposed fairground stall for Kursaal Estates of Southend who leased part of the fair at Middlehurst's 'Lakewoods' development in the 1920s.

Following the end of the Second World War, the Keisners decided to sell the estate to a Liverpool-based partnership, Alfred William Bell and Charles Smith, who together made a concerted effort to further redevelop Carr Mill Dam as an inland leisure resort. Their ambitious plans were announced with appropriate fanfare announcing a "Lakeside Lido" and "an entertainment district" in an article in the *St Helens Newspaper* in October 1946. Mr Bell of Stockport and Mr Smith, a well-known Liverpool tobacconist, intended to spend £18,000 on the site and proposed to build a pavilion and club, together with re-laid shale paths as well as facilities for boating and sailing. Moreover, and more controversially in the long-term, Bell and

Smith proposed the re-introduction of powerboat racing and the re-establishment of the Lancashire Hydroplane Club. Charles Smith was an enthusiastic hydro-planer and was one of the six founder members of the original hydroplane club in 1937. The new owners wanted to preserve the natural beauty of the site and mindful of the potential detrimental effects of the motor-boats, declared that hydroplane racing would only be permitted with silenced engines and be run no more than twice a month. Architects were engaged to design a new landing stage, boathouse, and a larger café/restaurant and dance hall building. These were to be substantial concrete structures in the modern style rather than upgrades of the utilitarian timber huts from the Middlehurst period in the 1920s.¹²

The period from the late 1940s to the early 1960s was the golden age of the Carr Mill Pleasure Grounds when thousands of visitors would spend weekends and bank holidays enjoying attractions such as boating, the fairground and the Cat's Whisker Café. However, despite their investment, Bell and Smith decided to sell the business at auction in November 1952. In the event, the lot was withdrawn but was sold within a month to Surrey businessman, Alfred E. Cartlidge for £11,500. Cartlidge seemed an unusual owner for the Pleasure Grounds as he had spent his entire career to date in private aeroplane manufacture. He certainly seems to have had a very cordial relationship with the racing club and may, therefore, have been interested in the Dam as an opportunity to develop powerboats. Neither was he an absentee landlord. Despite having spent his whole life in the home counties, he moved with his wife into Carr Mill's Fishing Cottage. Sadly, however, Cartlidge's reign as Carr Mill overlord was to be a short one; he died suddenly in August 1954. Mrs. Cartlidge remained the owner for a further two and a half years, before offloading the business to the four Martland brothers, owners of a Scarisbrick caravan site as well as the catering concession at Southport's Pleasureland funfair.



Figure 6. An advert for Carr Mill Pleasure Gardens from 1951 after it had been comprehensively redeveloped by Bell and Smith.

The Martlands paid only about £5,500 at auction, a bargain representing a considerable loss for the original Cartlidge investment. In return the brothers

gained 21 acres of parkland, with two cafes, a boathouse, 36 rowing boats, a motor launch patrol boat, 2000 feet of miniature railway track plus locomotive and rolling stock, not to mention two cottages. The brothers, originally from a farming background, had diversified into fairgrounds and their upgrading of the Carr Mill Pleasure Park included the installation of a distinctive helter skelter facing the East Lancs Road.



Figure 7. The Helter Skelter on the East Lancs Road end photographed in about 1960 by Frank Sheen.

In the 1950s car ownership was increasing and Carr Mill's prime location on the East Lancs Road attracted day-trippers, not only from its immediate hinterland, but also the big Lancashire conurbations and population centres even further afield. It was an obvious location for early television outside broadcasts and Granada's Travelling Eye unit visited on a busy summer's day in 1959 (Bill Grundy and all). The year before, the BBC televised hydroplane racing in a live programme devoted to this increasingly popular sport. By the mid-fifties, the re-formed racing club had 31 active members from a range of backgrounds across the north-west, including US servicemen based at Burtonwood and local star Gwen Mills, who though only in her twenties was already a pilot of many years experience.¹³

Environmental concerns about the effects of the powerboats started to become a sensitive issue during the 1950s. The small settlement on Moss Bank had been augmented by newer housing developments south of the East Lancs Road and in particular by the large council estate to the west of the Dam. The noise problem was not the only controversial issue connected with the hydroplanes; the angling, sailing, and naturalist fraternities started to make complaints about temporary inconvenience and the long-term environmental impact. Relations between interested parties have been heated on occasion over the past sixty years but a relatively peaceful accommodation has prevailed in more recent times.

In 1958 the Martland brothers applied to Ashton in Makerfield Council for permission to build a caravan site adjacent to the Dam but this plan was eventually rejected on environmental grounds. Given their caravan background this may have

been intended as an integral part of the Martlands' overall strategy for Carr Mill from the outset. However, whatever the reasons, the brothers did not feel that the Pleasure Grounds had a long-term future in their business interests and in February 1963 they decided to sell the property to B and M Entertainments Ltd of Southport. B and M's senior directors were young entrepreneurs Peter Barlow and Colin Mead. The latter was a Southport-based chartered accountant whilst Barlow already had considerable experience in the 'amusements' industry. His father, Harry, had bought the Southport Lakeside Miniature Railway in 1935 and was also responsible for the installation of the miniature rail system at the Festival of Britain funfair at Battersea in 1951. Peter had managed both of these and had been involved in catering at Southport's Pleasureland which had brought him into close association with the Martlands. Exciting proposals were announced by the new owners including plans for water skiing and aqua displays, skating, "amusement facilities for teenagers", rock concerts, bingo and barbecues. It was even suggested that "the lake will eventually be floodlit at night to give a fairyland effect."¹⁴



Figure 8. Spectators watch a hydroplane race in about 1958. Note the Rivington Viaduct in the distance.

B and M's tenure of Carr Mill Dam began with much optimism but unanticipated setbacks were looming and few of the ambitious ideas fully materialised. A particularly crucial blow to B and M occurred during a night-time raid by vandals when all the boats were seriously damaged and the miniature train engine was driven into the lake. In 1966, B and M sold the Park to a London-based property company, People's Home Finance, whose intentions for the area were radically different to the numerous proprietors during the preceding four and a half decades. The new owners drew up plans for a luxury leisure complex incorporating a casino, nightclub, and six-storey motel, which were approved by St Helens Corporation in 1969. In the event, the scheme fell foul of gambling licensing legislation and was scrapped. However, during the intervening years since the end of B and M's ownership, the old Pleasure Park, which seems to have had no part in the new

owners' plans, had been closed and the site neglected so that by the end of the 1960s what remained of the old fairground buildings were vandalised ruins.¹⁵

During the last forty-odd years Carr Mill Dam has passed through several other owners, including more property companies, and grand schemes to redevelop the site were periodically unveiled. Most of these projects were still-born but the Waterside public house and Premier Inn have been built within the last twenty years. During the eighties, the St Helens Angling Association bought some land as well as the fishing rights to the lake. The headquarters of the Lancashire Powerboat Racing Club are still based at the Dam and major racing events continue. From the environmental perspective, the trend towards dereliction has been reversed with newly laid paths and walkways, planting and landscaping, and conservation areas with a thriving retinue of local wildlife.

This article has concentrated on the story of Carr Mill Dam from its creation in the 18th century until the decline of the Pleasure Park in the 1960s. As the previous paragraphs indicate, the story of its past forty-five years has been a complicated and controversial one, but it is hoped to publish this in due course as a separate article. Many issues surrounding the Dam's story remain unclear. I would be very interested to hear from anyone with detailed information about the Carr Mill story from about 1966 to the present day. If you are able to provide help, please get in touch with St Helens Local History and Archives Library and your material may well be included in a revised version of this essay or other future articles.

Dr Tom Preston,
Heritage Outreach Officer,
St Helens Local History and Archives Library

I would like to acknowledge in particular the help of Mr Colin Meads, part owner of Carr Mill Pleasure Gardens 1963 to 1966, in the preparation of this article. All illustrations in this article are from *St Helens Local History and Archives Library*.

¹ T. C. Barker, *The Sankey Navigation*, original paper given at Oxford University, January 1949, Appendix III, part II (map).

² T. C. Barker & J.R. Harris, *A Merseyside Town in the Industrial Revolution: St Helens 1750 – 1900*, Third Impression, Frank Cass Ltd., (London), 1993, p.76. Edward Hall's 30 year lease from Sir William Gerard, Lancashire Record Office (LRO) QDD Roll 4th George I, Letter from Edward Hall 22nd March 1742, LRO DDHu 19/38-9. *Williamson's Liverpool Advertiser*, February 5th 1784.

³ *St Helens Newspaper and Advertiser*, July 8th 1865.

⁴ O.S. map 6" 1:10560 series, Lancashire sheet 101, August 1849, Barker & Harris, p.185

⁵ "Boat mishap may be clue to lost village", *Liverpool Daily Post*, 20th July 1957. A persistent aspect of the folklore of Carr Mill Dam concerns the supposed lost village beneath its waters. In 1957 a boat was damaged by a hard object beneath the surface in the south-eastern corner, during a summer when the water level was particularly low. A local diver investigated and discovered a stone structure several feet down. These remains are almost certainly part of an outbuilding from the old corn mill.

⁶ Dennis Sweeney, *The Lancashire Union Railway*, Triangle Publishing (Leigh), 2010, p.15.

⁷ Richard Donald Lewis, *The Billingers*, Transcreen Publications (Hampshire), 2009, Chapter 7, pp 45-48.

⁸ Perhaps it is not a coincidence that shortly after the sale of Carr Mill Dam and other estates, Lord Gerard purchased the Eastwell Park estate in Kent. This marks the start of the period during which the Gerard family began to wind down their Lancashire interests.

⁹ *St Helens Newspaper and Advertiser*, January 23rd 1892.

¹⁰ Dennis Sweeney, *The Lancashire Union Railway*, p.18.

¹¹ Mr Middlehurst's son, Michael (1902-1970), was also a director of the Lakewoods company and around 1925 established the Middlehurst car dealership, presently based in Jackson Street, St Helens. Envelope plans, St Helens Local History and Archives Library, Plan No 13710, Proposed Hall and Café at Carr Mill, Feb. 28th 1924, Plan No 13737, Proposed temporary building at Carr Mill, June 23rd 1927, Plan No 13739, Proposed Hall of Laughs for Kursaal Estates, Oct. 1927.

¹² *St Helens Newspaper*, October 4th 1946. Envelope plans, St Helens Local History and Archives Library, Plan No 47/133, Proposed boat house at Carr Mill, Feb. 1st 1947, Plan No 47/139, Proposed restaurant at Carr Mill, April 19th 1948.

¹³ Unidentified 1953 racing club guide found on www.lancashirepowerboat.com/about-us Gwen Mills aged 18 can be seen in a Pathe newsreel 1948, viewed on www.britishpathe.com/video/hydroplaning

¹⁴ *St Helens Reporter*, March 29th 1958. *St Helens Reporter*, February 16th 1963, Conversation with Mr Colin Mead, December 2nd 2013. Mr Mead's present company runs several caravan sites in North Wales.

¹⁵ One of the old Pleasure Gardens' buildings that had a stay of execution was the former cafe building, re-opened by Dougie Roulette as the Sands Club in 1967. After a change of ownership and name (Robinson Crusoe Club) it eventually closed for good in the early seventies.

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