

Marple's Roman Lakes

by Rachel Sewart



Samuel Oldknow's Mellor Mill backed onto the northern lake

The dramatic fire that engulfed Samuel Oldknow's Mellor Mill in 1892 marked an emblematic change in direction for both the valley that it once dominated and the cotton industry as a whole.

In the aftermath of the mill's destruction the remnants of the colossal mill, which at its peak in 1804 operated 10,080 spindles and employed 550 people, was salvaged for its immediate material worth and then left abandoned to be reclaimed by the natural landscape.

The creator of this gigantic industrial monument was Samuel Oldknow – a remarkable visionary who reshaped the valley's natural landscape and the surrounding town. Despite at times near bankruptcy Oldknow consistently went to great efforts to improve the valley and ensure continued employment, nourishment and moral guidance of his workforce of a level far above common practice. However, despite all of his strengths in innovation and benevolence, as the mill and its infrastructure came into existence the demands on Oldknow's income soared and only due to a partnership with Richard Arkwright could his project at Mellor Mill continue. At Oldknow's death in 1828 Mellor Mill passed to his chief creditor, Richard Arkwright.

Consequently, by the time of the mill's destruction in 1892, the mill and the

surrounding estate were still retained in the possession of the great Arkwright family. The estates were offered for sale in 1867, but were presumably withdrawn, as it was not until 1924 that they were sold in small lots. However, as early as 1917 there are records of the Furniss family, agents of the Arkwright estate, as leasing and then later purchasing the grounds surrounding the millponds that came to be established and known as the Roman Bridge Lakes Company Ltd.

The area rapidly became a focus of social excursions and was established as an extremely popular pleasure ground, offering leisure and recreation to thousands of people who travelled for amusement from the nearby towns. Prior to our family's possession of the Lakes the water levels would be lowered each winter and the Lakes opened for winter ice-skating. In addition to this, summer boating and a dance floor, for which the Marple Band would play every Sunday, were complemented by the tearoom facilities both onsite at the Lakes and next door at 'Webs Tearooms.' An amusement arcade offered enthusiastic visitors the opportunity to electrocute themselves for a penny and take a glimpse at 'what the butler saw', ensuring the necessary



Rachel's Grandma, Granddad and Great Grandma having a tea party

volume of visitors to justify the weekend presence of a policeman.

The Arden family purchased the Lakes from the Furniss family and upon Charles Arden's decision to emigrate, the Lakes was passed to his daughter, Jean, who had married to become a Roscoe. It was during this period that fire struck again, destroying the main café building, which when coupled with changes in social life saw an end to an era when local attractions were in their heyday. By the time my grandfather's wife Edith saw the advertisement for the Lakes

in a local newspaper it had been on the market for two years. In the early 1950s the site was so routinely vandalised and targeted by thieves raiding the penny slot machines and stores of tobacco and cigarettes that my grandfather, Sydney Sewart, finally resorted to sleeping onsite, despite his early 4am opening time. It was in these turbulent conditions that my family came to the Lakes – a company that had first been established for the genteel pleasures of an Edwardian generation.

After the bitter loss of my grandfather's wife, which left three young children to his sole care, he stoically dedicated his life to the Lakes and its improvement. He was renowned for his love of talking with all who visited, but was also quite notorious for his apparently harsh treatment of any visitor that he felt to be engaging in 'dangerous activities.' He would confiscate sticks off children, swiftly dispose of opportunist swimmers' clothes into the water and reprimand any persons riding bicycles near the casting fishermen with great gusto.

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Helping visitors aboard a rowing boat 1960s when boat hire was very popular



A typical view of the moorings at Roman Lakes with the café beyond

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Although at times decidedly cantankerous, his early experiences of poverty led him to acts of innumerable charity and kindness that were only evidenced by the carefully folded letters of appreciation quietly held amongst his paperwork.

In these early years of ownership Grandad ceased feeding the lake from the polluted River Goyt and introduced carp and other coarse fish to the waters, a step which eventually ensured that the Roman Lakes became established as one of the major angling waters of the North. However, as the Lakes came to be dominated by carp and advances in angling equipment enabled the fishermen to cast further and further from the bank, a conflict between the swelling numbers of rowing and motorboats (reaching 68 at its peak) became apparent. Eventually the decision to end boating trips on the main lake drew an era of summer boat trips to an end. Water activities do still continue on the North Lake, under supervision, ensuring that thousands of children experience the Lakes in the way that generations before have enjoyed.

It is now over a century since Mellor Mill was destroyed and the estate was first

opened to the public for enjoyment. Nature has recovered its scarred industrial landscape to the extent that an unknowing visitor could pass through the valley's tranquil surroundings unaware of the past it holds. The mill complex has recently excited much archaeological attention since an exploratory dig undertaken in spring of last year by The Mellor Archaeological Trust. This initial dig uncovered generations of soil to reveal a time capsule of the disastrous foggy night that changed so many lives that followed. Further excavations will follow and with the opening up of the mill site the scale and craftsmanship of Oldknow and the men of his time will be appreciated by those with an interest in the industrial age and the history of our valley.

In July another open day at Mellor Mill is planned and it is anticipated that close work in the future between the Roman Lakes Leisure Park, The Mellor Archaeological Trust and Friends of Our Valley (a recently formed and rapidly growing friends group) will ensure that the valley area can continue to be a much appreciated local facility, used and enjoyed by all, for generations to come.