

Along the Line

Crime Lake

A series featuring points of interest along the line of the canal, past or present.

Croxton Flash, Billinge Green Flash, Tixall Wide, Crime Lake... these are all locations where a canal widens out into a large expanse of water. Crime Lake, on the Hollinwood Branch of the Ashton Canal, can be said to be the odd one out because it is on a canal that is no longer navigable. It is also the odd one out in that it was completely unintended.

Between the top of Waterhouses Locks and the village of Woodhouses the canal needed to cross Woodpark Clough, the valley of the Woodpark Brook. A substantial curved embankment was constructed to carry the canal over this valley, with a culvert

beneath for the brook. However, in 1795, not long before the canal was due to open, the culvert became completely blocked by storm debris, obstructing the stream.

The company took the decision not to attempt to dig out the culvert but to allow the water to build up behind the embankment, forming a lake. It would seem that it was cheaper to acquire the extra land and the two small cottages that were in the valley than to undertake a major repair which may have delayed the opening of the canal. The embankment was 230 feet long, took 18 months to construct and was made up of 25,000 cubic yards of earth and puddle clay, which gives an



Crime Lake (continued)

idea of how substantial it was!

The cottages, which were said to have been in a dilapidated state, had been occupied by one James Wolstencroft and a family by the name of Wilson.

Such is the expanse of the new lake that it reportedly took four months for the brook to fill it. The lake effectively doubled the surface area of the water in the long pound between Bradley Bent in Hollinwood and Fenny Field Bridge at Fairbottom.

This had a limited usefulness, for while it acted as additional storage of water above the locks, it took longer to restore levels in dry periods. The lake would only have been useful as a reservoir had it been at a higher level than the canal, so that water

could have been released as required. The additional input of water to the canal from Woodpark Brook created problems in wet periods, however, so a long spillway had to be constructed close to the top of Waterhouses Locks, taking surplus water down into the River Medlock.

In the first half of the nineteenth century there was a coal mine called Warmbly Wood Colliery located close to what is now the location of St Chad's Church in Limeside. A tram road led from the mine to the northern end of Crime Lake. The colliery and tramway are shown on an 1845 map but by the 1894 map the tramway has gone there is no sign of the colliery apart from waste heaps and disused shafts. During the period when the colliery was open, wagons would take coal down the tramway to be loaded onto boats on the lake. It is not known how the boats got to the loading



Edwardian leisure pursuits at Crime Lake. [Photo: Garry Jones of Littlemoss]

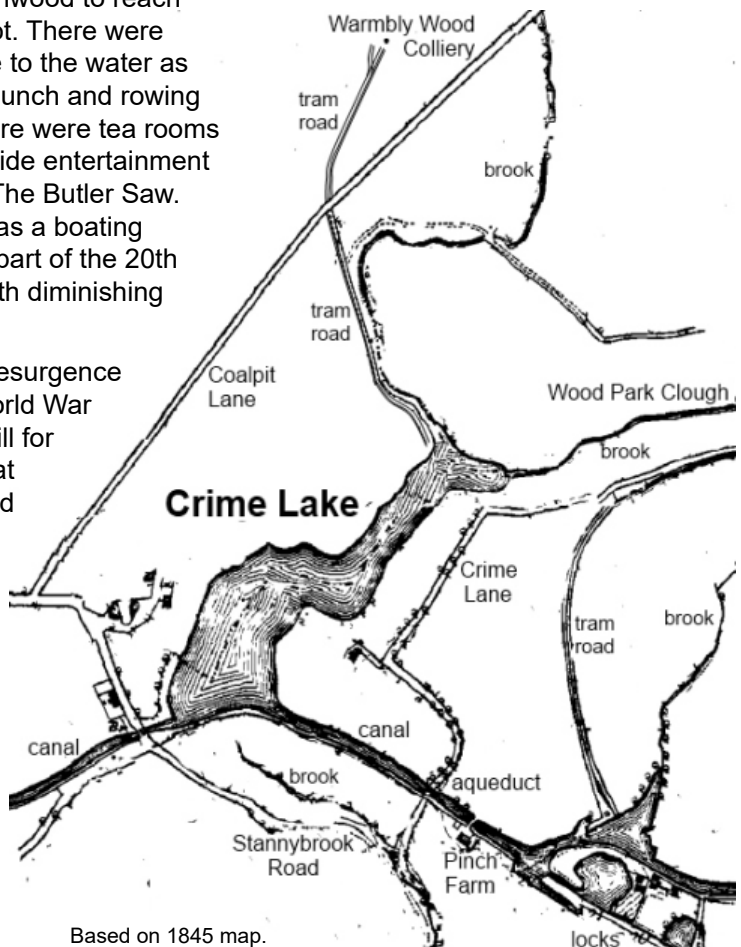
staithe as they did not have engines in those days. They may have been towed on a long line by horses walking along the northern shore or they may have used a rope across the lake to haul the boats manually. If they used poles they would have needed to keep close to the edge as the centre was up to 50 feet deep!

During the second half of the 19th century the lake started to become popular as a leisure destination. The canal towpaths made an easy level walk for workers from Ashton, Failsworth and Hollinwood to reach this local beauty spot. There were opportunities to take to the water as well, with a steam launch and rowing boats available. There were tea rooms and even such seaside entertainment machines as What The Butler Saw. The lake continued as a boating lake during the first part of the 20th century, although with diminishing numbers of visitors.

There was a slight resurgence after the Second World War with rowing boats still for hire. In 1947 the boat house was destroyed by fire, with firemen unable to take water from the lake as it was thick with ice! 1947 was one of several years in which the ice was so thick for so long a period that ice-skating on the lake became popular. It was

said that in 1855 a fair was set up on the ice and the Shaw family who lived in Riversvale Hall rode around the lake with their horse and carriage.

Although the boathouse was re-built after the fire the decline had set in. The lake and the buildings alongside beginning to look unloved and eventually the businesses closed. There is now no sign now of the boathouse or café but the lake has become popular with anglers and many people walk along the towpath past the lake each week.



Based on 1845 map.

Local artist L S Lowry made several paintings of the lake crowded with activity as well as several of nearby Daisy Nook Fair.

There is a popular tale that a village was submerged under the lake with the church tower being visible when the water is low. The story also suggests that people have sometimes heard the church bells ring! This is, of course, a myth, based on confusion with Derwent Reservoir in Derbyshire where the remains of the church tower (minus bells) can indeed be seen in times of drought.

On guided walks around the area, many people ask what the crime was that gave its name to the lake. Old newspaper articles come up with all sorts of ideas, such as the man who supposedly pushed his wife into the lake to drown her. I have to disappoint

them with the news that there was no such misdemeanor.

The word "Crime" in this instance comes from an old name for the area with Crime Lane passing under a nearby aqueduct. Indeed the official name for the lake was Crime Bank Reservoir. The name was originally spelt Chryme and the registers of Ashton Parish Church show the baptism in 1614 of "Daniel, son of John Newton of Chryme".

The name probably originates as an old word for a piece of land intersected by watercourses. There is an area called Crimes near Hepworth in Yorkshire. The word can also be a surname. Yorkshire's Edward Chryme was apparently the inventor of the non-leaking tap by his addition of a rubber washer!

Martin Clark



Tommy Dunstan, left, hiring out rowing boats on Crime Lake in the 1930s.
[Photo: Garry Jones of Littlemoss]