Chapter 15

Don’t Dam Rutland
Hilary Crowden

The signs that went up across Rutland in 1968 with the exhortations ‘Don’t dam Rutland’ or ‘Don’t flood Rutland’ were indications of a titanic struggle by the small county. Placing a weak local argument against a national need, the arguments were imbalanced. With limited scope for compromise, Rutland’s loss of this battle highlighted the conflict between rural resources and urban expansion and changed the physical face of Rutland forever.

The origins of the decision to build a large pumped storage reservoir in the Gwash valley, with a dam at Empingham, lay in two pieces of legislation enacted in the early 1960s. The New Towns Act 1965 allowed for three New Town Development Corporations at Peterborough, Northampton and Corby and two expanded town schemes at Daventry and Wellingborough. These were all in the area covered by the Welland and Nene River Authority, set up by the Water Resources Act 1963. This Act empowered the Authority to assess the need for water into the next century. The search for a location for a large reservoir to serve this expanding population extended to 64 sites. The mid-Gwash valley was the site chosen because it achieved the criteria set out by Leonard Brown, the Authority’s engineer. It had the right shape with the right geology to support the weight of a dam; sufficient local material to build the dam; a river reasonably near to fill the reservoir; and a location near the new centres of population, to minimise pumping costs. Because of the potential cost, detailed secret planning was required before the private Bill could be put before Parliament by the Welland and Nene River Authority, the promoter, for consideration in Select Committee. Manton Reservoir in the adjoining Chater valley was the second choice. At one stage, both were to be built, with Manton coming second because of its marginally higher operation costs and lower yield. However, common sense prevailed at the Parliamentary stage when Manton was thrown out as being ‘a step too far’.

The Welland and Nene (Empingham Reservoir) and Mid-Northamptonshire Water Bill went to Westminster in late 1968.

A sticker for the anti-reservoir campaigners and supporters (Sir John Conant)
The promoter's case was simple and convincing. Regional planning policy depended on increasing the water supply, and per capita consumption was expected to rise at twice the national average within the Authority's area before the twenty-first century. Alternatives to Empingham, such as a Wash barrage, desalination and the use of the south Lincolnshire aquifers, were not available in the time limit required and would give insufficient yield.

The petitioners against the Bill, Rutland County Council, Oakham Rural District Council, The Country Landowners Association, The National Farmers Union and the Council for the Protection of Rural England, could not match the promoters in time, money or technical skills employed in their case. Their opposition was based around the claimed lack of adequate exploration of alternative solutions, the loss of agricultural land, and the disruption to local life and the landscape. Forty-eight agricultural holdings, twenty of which would become uneconomic, seven occupied cottages and gardens and seven ‘miscellaneous units’ would be affected, concerning nineteen owner-occupiers and 29 agricultural tenancies. Seven farmhouses and seven occupied cottages would be lost to the proposed reservoir.

Rutland levied a threepenny (3d) rate to help pay for the defence but was unable to match the financial resources of the promoter, and eventually the fighting fund was exhausted. It was with resignation that in the end the petitioners fought for the best deal. ‘We took it as far as we could but it was just no good,’ said Idris Evans, County Treasurer and one of the campaigners. The figures to support the need for water came from local authority development plans and had to be accepted by both sides. The promoter showed some willingness to explore other options, even considering a truncated reservoir at Empingham with two dams. However, this was found not to be feasible, economic or practical.

In the second reading in the Commons, Tom Bradley, MP for Leicester North-east, claimed the reservoir would ‘enhance the attractiveness of’ and
in no way desecrate that delightful county’, but he acknowledged ‘the passion
and fury’ over this ‘hydrological Stansted’. Kenneth Lewis, Member of
Parliament for Rutland and Stamford, high on rhetoric, if weak on argument,
argued against this ‘massive and expensive miscalculation’ and its ‘exaggerat-
ed demand forecasts’. He had ‘no wish for another Windermere in Rutland
. . . we do not wish to be a kind of towpath around a lake’. He was support-
ed by many rural MPs in a town versus countryside division of opinion. The
government declared itself regretfully in favour of the reservoir. The Bill
spent nine days in Commons Select Committee, before it reported ‘a
deplorable and regrettable necessity’ to build the reservoir in the Gwash
valley, ‘one of the melancholy consequences of the relentless demands of
the urban dweller’, said Keith Robinson MP. However, the Commons called
for further investigations of a Wash barrage, to avoid further large shallow
reservoirs, and emphasised the need for a national water grid. These misgiv-
ings helped in the creation of ten regional water authorities in 1973, Anglian
Water Authority incorporating the Welland and Nene River Authority
within its domain, but failed to stop the creation of Carsington Reservoir
(Derbyshire) or Kielder Water (Northumberland).

The House of Lords went to the unusual step of putting the Bill into
Select Committee to ensure that, in the petitioners’ absence, the Bill received
detailed scrutiny. As with the Commons, the compelling case prevailed.
Later, the talk in the 1980s of ‘surplus capacity’ in the water industry was to
give way by 2000 to further talk of water shortages in the south-east.
However, everyone vastly underestimated the cost of pumping the water.

The fact that the petitioners could only obtain broad assurances from the
promoter at this stage over disruption, recreational provision, landscaping
and restraints on commercialism at the reservoir gave rise to a lot of local
scepticism and fuelled opposition to the reservoir. The promoter

\[ \text{Mow Mires at Normanton in 1970. It was one of the first casualties of Rutland Water (Jim Levisohn ARPS)} \]
appointed Frank Knights to be a link with the local community in a public relations offensive of exhibitions and meetings. More than 3,000 acres of Rutland countryside were taken for the reservoir, and over £30 million spent on the project. Frank Knights ensured that some local labour was employed and that disruption to roads and services was kept to a minimum. Such was the faith of the local community in him that when he moved house, from a cottage beneath the dam at Empingham to a house further downstream in Ryhall, questions were asked at Empingham Parish Council as to whether he knew something about the safety of the dam that they didn’t!

After inevitable delays, and the 1976 drought, Empingham Reservoir, originally known as ‘Empingham Pumped Water Storage Project’ and renamed ‘Rutland Water’ following an emotive campaign led by a local student, opened in May 1977. It flooded 3% of the county and could hold 27,300 million gallons at full capacity, which was not reached until 1979. What Bryan Matthews called in his Book of Rutland ‘latent indignation’ towards Anglian Water Authority was reflected in the actions of one man who avoided the obstacles and drove across the valley on his accustomed route to Hambleton despite the roads being ‘closed’ and water washing around his car wheels. This was the last vehicle to make the crossing. He and many other ‘locals’ refused to pay any charges at the reservoir car parks.

Apart from those who lost their homes and livelihoods, many other local people were affected by the construction works, which extended far beyond the four years of noise and dust which were an inevitable consequence of building the largest ever earth dam. As well as road closures across the twin

The Gwash Valley from Bull Brig Lane, Whitwell, before flooding (Jim Levisohn ARPS)
valleys, new roads were built to bypass Barnsdale Hill, to connect Hambleton back to the Oakham to Stamford road, and to link Edith Weston, via Normanton, to Empingham. Extraction works were built at Wansford and Tinwell to pump water from the rivers Nene and Welland to the reservoir, and this involved driving long tunnels and laying massive pipes. More large pipes were laid between Empingham and Wing where a large water treatment works was constructed on the outskirts of the village. Further pipe-laying became necessary as a result of the 1976 drought when the reservoir was linked to Grantham, and some years later the Wing to Whatborough pipeline was laid across the western side of Rutland. At the time of writing a proposal to increase the output capacity of Wing Treatment Works is being considered. Although the area covered by the reservoir will not be increased, the draw-down will result in much lower water levels during the summer months. In order to protect the nature reserve habitat at the west end of the reservoir, new lagoons are proposed on farmland around Egleton, and bunds are proposed across Manton Bay and below the Burley Fishponds area.

There was undisguised mirth in the late 1970s when the reservoir, which by then was almost full to capacity, was found to be ‘leaking’ thousands of gallons a day under the hill and out into the Chater valley, this water then flowing into the Welland ready to be pumped back into the reservoir. Local legend has it that ‘someone forgot to fill in the wells of the submerged farms at Hambleton properly’. Fly swarms in 1977 and toxic blue-green algae in 1989 were both endured as many people recognised the irony in the statement of Dame Sylvia Crowe, the landscape architect employed by the water authority, when she said she ‘. . . believed that the water would prove an enhancement to the surroundings’.

Rutland lost its independence in 1974 and became a district of Leicestershire. Rutland Water and the new post-1974 local authorities ushered in an era of planning for recreation and amenities, village conservation areas, ‘settlement planning’, ‘local needs’ and ‘restraint villages’. There was, and in some areas still is, considerable resistance to tourism. ‘Empingham to be the £700,000 playground for the East Midlands’ warned a headline in the Stamford Mercury: Sailing, fishing, cycling and walking have all been accepted, but motorboats, other than those used by anglers and the nature reserve, and for safety and rescue purposes, are not permitted.
The nature reserves and their management were welcomed but it took fifteen years for the local community to accept a passenger cruiser on the reservoir and even longer for refreshment kiosks to be tolerated. Caravan parks, camping and golf courses are still contentious issues and the erection of ‘The Great Tower’, then the largest single bronze-cast sculpture in the world at Sykes Lane, Empingham, caused an uproar at the time. The unveiling ceremony, which took place on 9th October 1980, was boycotted by the Empingham Parish Council, while the Australian sculptor, Alexander, was absent suffering from influenza.

The reservoir has not resulted directly in any great increase in employment, but attractions such as Barnsdale Gardens, the Bird Watching Centre and the Nature Reserve, the annual Birdfair, the Falconry Centre, the Butterfly Centre, Normanton Church Museum, trout fishing, sailing, windsurfing, cycle hire, tracks for walking and running, time-share holiday accommodation, picnic areas, cafés, and a Tourist Information Centre, as well as public houses and hotels which have been developed around the reservoir, have made tourism a substantial contributor to the local economy, eclipsing that of farming. Despite the assurances in Parliament, ‘a lot of farmers had a rough deal . . . ’, stated Frank Knights.
Compensation was set at 1970 values, woefully inadequate by the time it came to be paid in 1977. No allowance was made for inflation. Some farmers retired, some diversified, only to have to fight planning regulations stopping them fully exploiting their land. It was no longer considered ‘their’ land, ‘their’ barns or ‘their’ property. It belonged to the community. The agricultural interest no longer ran the county. There were strong feelings at a public meeting and one farmer asked the ‘invaders’ what they knew about rearing hamsters. When asked what he meant, he declared that with the amount of land left to him by the invading water authority ‘hamsters are all I can reasonably put out to pasture!’

Frank Knights also had his public relations work cut out when 1,500 trout fishermen turned up on the first day of the fishing season, causing ‘great consternation’. One lady had to wait two hours in her car to gain access to her driveway. It wasn't helped by the fact she was a local magistrate!

Idris Evans summed up local feeling: ‘It put us on the map, there’s no doubt of that, but did we really want to be on the map?’ In the early 1970s Rutland County Council did not object to the name ‘Empingham Reservoir’, which had been adopted by the Welland and Nene River Authority for the new reservoir, although other names such as Rutland Water and perhaps less seriously ‘Ruddle’s Puddle’ were discussed. ‘Ruddle’s Puddle’ is a reference to Sir Kenneth Ruddle of Langham who was a leading light in the campaign against the local government reorganisation which was to
result in Rutland becoming a district of Leicestershire in 1974. In 1975, the popular mood had changed. There was considerable discussion in the local press and a consensus emerged in favour of renaming the reservoir ‘Rutland Water’ to perpetuate the county name. Major R Hoare of Hambleton stated, in a letter to the editor of the *Stamford Mercury* in September 1976:

‘Surely it would be the wish of a vast majority of the inhabitants of what was our county, that this bit of water... which is going to be very beautiful, should be called “Rutland Water” to remind posterity of what used to be a happy and prosperous county before the planners stepped in.’

Anglian Water Authority refused, partly to be consistent, partly because it felt the water itself came from the region and did not ‘belong to the county’. They underestimated the support for the name change in the local community. Those outside found the campaign for a change ‘ridiculous... tiresome... compounding an unimportant issue’. Those inside Rutland were incensed how an un-elected board with no representatives from Rutland could obstruct the popular will. They were considered ‘meddlesome upstarts’. Mr Lustig of Whissendine, chairman of Rutland District Society of Ratepayers and Residents, threatened to throw any member of the authority who came to Rutland into the reservoir!

Jane Merritt, a Rutland Sixth Form College student and a prominent member of the East Midlands Young Liberals, organised a petition which raised more than 4,000 signatures in support of renaming the reservoir ‘Rutland Water’. Kenneth Lewis MP threatened to boycott the opening. Councils, organisations, groups and
individuals within Rutland were unanimous for the change. Clearly, Anglian Water Authority, confusingly referred to as ‘Anglican Warter Authority’ in one Parish Council’s minuted protests, had a potential major public relations disaster on their hands. Eventually, after a year’s debate, wiser counsels prevailed. Mr T Hall, a member of the Anglian Water Authority, said at a meeting on 6th October 1976:

‘I do feel that public opinion shows we can’t steamroller all the little people and it would be a good exercise in public relations, if we went along with them.’

The full board of the authority endorsed the majority opinion of the Water Committee on 10th November 1976. One wonders whether public opinion would have been so agitated about this issue had popular feeling against local government reorganisation the year previously, and the loss of the battle against the reservoir, not been so much in the forefront of community politics. It proved that ‘the little people’ could still fight back.
Normanton Bridge, now under Rutland Water, crossed the River Gwash just upstream of Normanton Fishpond. It was a Victorian iron girder bridge, often referred to as ‘Iron Bridge’. The only road bridge in Normanton Park, it linked the former Normanton Park, a deer park, with New Park on the north-west side of the river (see Chapter 11 – Normanton and Chapter 14 – Rutland Waters).

Left: An aerial view of the Gwash Valley at Normanton in 1967 showing: A – Normanton Bridge, B – Normanton Church, C – Normanton Fishpond, D – Normanton deserted village earthworks (Anglian Water)

Below: The upstream side of Normanton Bridge during flood conditions in 1968 (Anglian Water)

Below: Looking towards Normanton Bridge from the Hambleton Road, near Half Moon Spinney, in 1971, when most of the trees had been removed from this part of the valley. The stone pillars (arrowed) are the remains of a former Normanton Park gate (Richard Adams)