

Rutland Local History and Record Society

The Rutland Water Project



Rutland Water Today

When the twin valleys of the River Gwash were flooded in the mid-1970s, Rutland Water became Europe's largest man-made lake set in England's smallest county. This large area of water created as a reservoir, initially strongly opposed, has become a major tourist attraction internationally recognized for its wildlife.

Our project involves the local community in investigating, documenting and publicising the changing heritage of this area.

This is the first time that such a detailed and comprehensive survey has been attempted and it may be the last opportunity before memories disappear.

Rutland Water was planned in the 1960s to meet the needs of the expanding East Midlands area of England. Sixty-four sites in and around the Northamptonshire area were investigated before the twin valleys of the River Gwash were chosen.

The second choice was the Chater valley, less than a mile away to the south. The main reasons for choosing this site were the availability of clay within the reservoir area to build the dam, the nearness of the River Welland and the River Nene to supply the water required, and its central location to the area requiring the water.

Construction started in 1971, filling commenced in 1975, and it was full by 1979.



The Rutland Belle

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Initially it was to be called 'Empingham Reservoir', but local pressure persuaded the water authority to change it to 'Rutland Water'. Not everyone was happy at the prospect of flooding a large area of prime agricultural land and there was a concerted campaign against the proposal, especially from those farmers who considered that they were about to lose their land and livelihood.

A selection of Newspaper cuttings from 1970

Archaeological excavation at Whitwell 1973 The fertile land which was about to be flooded had been farmed for thousands of years. Archaeological investigations, both before and during the construction of the reservoir, revealed evidence of Roman farmsteads, which is not surprising considering that Great Casterton, the known location of an important Roman fort and town, is only a few miles further down the valley. Sites of Iron Age hut circles, Saxon houses and cemeteries, and medieval dwellings and barns were found.



Aerial photographs of the valleys before flooding also show large areas of medieval ridge and furrow, with certain evidence of strip farming methods being used.

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Normanton Hall

Until the early 20th century most of the land in the valleys was owned by a few aristocratic families, particularly the Finch family, the Earls of Winchilsea and Nottingham, who lived at Burley on the Hill and the Heathcote family, the Earls of Ancaster, who lived at Normanton Hall.

Both estates were broken up and sold, but farming continued to be the main occupation of the area.

Normanton Hall, located right on the southern edge of what was to become Rutland Water, failed to reach its reserve at the auction in 1924 and it was eventually demolished.

The adjacent stables survived and after being a prisoner of war camp in WW2, and later farmer's barns, they were converted to a hotel thanks to their unique location on the south shore of Rutland Water.



Normanton Hall Stables 1974

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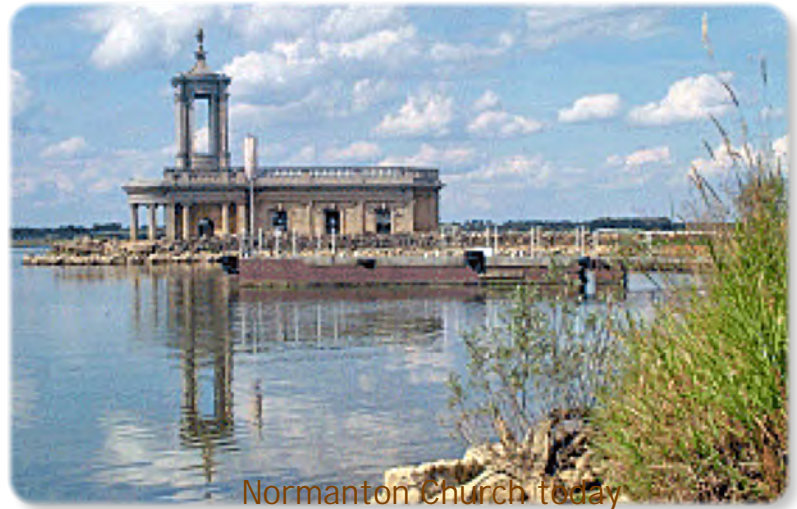


St Matthews Church, the private chapel to the Normanton Estate, was lucky to have escaped being demolished as it was below the high water line of the proposed reservoir.

It was deconsecrated in 1970 and a Trust was formed to try and ensure its preservation.

[Audio - In the crypt](#)

Externally, a bank was to be built to give protection from the water, and a causeway was to be laid to provide access.



Normanton Church today



Normanton Church today

It is now a Water Museum and it is a dominant feature in the landscape at Rutland Water. Normanton Church as a building was saved, but inevitably other buildings were lost, including a number of farms and one entire village.

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Nether Hambleton

The hamlet of Nether Hambleton was a small community of houses and farms at the western end of the south arm of the proposed reservoir. It came as a severe blow to the inhabitants on realizing that they were to lose their homes, and some their livelihoods.

One of the most interesting properties to go was Beehive Cottage, thought to be one of the earliest dwellings in Rutland.

Our research has unearthed some interesting stories about the people who once lived in the valley, going as far back as the 1300s.

A good example is the Weldon family of Nether Hambleton. An estate notebook of 1797 lists the houses and their occupants who were tenants of the Finch family of Burley on the Hill. One house was occupied by Mrs Weldon. A cross was placed by her name with the note 'Where you never go'.



Beehive Cottage Nether Hambleton 1972



Further research revealed that her sons, Richard and William, murdered a baker from Edith Weston. They received the death penalty for their crime and their bodies were hung on a gibbet within sight of the family home.

The Weldon brothers hang on the gibbet

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Rutland Water Construction Phase 1

Although these fears were well founded and habitats were lost, the construction of Rutland Water has resulted in the creation of extensive nature reserves which are attracting a number of endangered species, particularly the osprey.



Young Osprey on nest at Rutland Water



Canada Goose on Rutland Water

In fact it has provided one of the most important wild fowl sanctuaries in Great Britain.

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The construction of Rutland Water commenced in 1971 and it took nearly five years to complete. The main part of the project was to build the dam wall.

Building the dam wall

This is made of compacted clay which was excavated from borrow pits within the perimeter of the reservoir.

The dam is 35 metres high, up to 810 metres wide at its base, and 1200 metres long.



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A major component of the project has been to talk to those people who lived in the area immediately before the reservoir was built, particularly those who were affected in some way by its coming. To do this we have trained a group of people to carry out oral history interviews and their recordings are being transcribed and indexed.

An example of this is Edna Locke who lived at Beech Farm, Middle Hambleton until just before it was demolished for the reservoir. Her memories of living at the farm, and the trauma of having to leave it, are fundamental to the project.

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Ivydene Farm Nether Hambleton before Rutland Water

Another way of involving the community has been to devise a competition for school children. The Prince Yuri Galitzine Prize was offered for the best project on the reservoir and its surrounding area, which encouraged children to do some basic research and to talk to their grandparents and neighbours about the impact of Rutland Water.

The paintings portray Ivydene Farm at Nether Hambleton and Nether Hambleton before and after Rutland Water.

All the landscaping round the reservoir has been very carefully and sympathetically designed, not least the dam wall which is hardly noticeable from Empingham, the nearest village.



Paintings of Nether Hambleton by Megan & Jeffrey aged 10

Information provided by the thirty-two entries from fifty-three children has been a very valuable contribution to our project.



Nether Hambleton after construction of Rutland Water