

History notes for Silsden Stroll 4

This walk encompasses Silsden Reservoir. There are no closer footpaths to the reservoir's banks, but views of the water can be clearly enjoyed along the route of this walk. These notes tell the story of the building of the reservoir.

In the 1850s Bradford needed to expand its water supply to serve an ever growing urban population. So it embarked on an impressive scheme to take water from the Barden area of Wharfedale. Bradford's plan included building a large storage reservoir at Barden and then allowing the collected water to flow through a pipeline that was to stretch all the way into Airedale. It was to cross the River Aire at Hirst Mill above Saltaire and eventually terminate at a new service reservoir at Chellow Heights above Heaton, from which it would supply water to a growing Bradford.

This pipeline is still in use today. It passes into Silsden in a tunnel under Cringles and then is taken along the hillside, buried under the ground except where it comes out to cross ravines such as the aqueduct over the beck at Swartha. By trapping water from streams and feeding them into the pipeline at various points, Bradford was depleting the amount of water getting into both the rivers Wharfe and Aire. As a result compensation reservoirs were built at Grimwith (in the Wharfe catchment) and at Silsden (in the Aire catchment). These allowed for a controlled release of water into the rivers to "compensate" mill owners along the banks of the rivers ensuring that river levels did not fall unnecessarily low.

Silsden reservoir was built in the late 1850s. It took a number of years to build the embankment and make sure it was safe. When the mayor and dignitaries of Bradford visited the site in September 1859 it was nearly complete. The city's chief engineer explained that there was some delay because there had been "a series of subsidences" of the embankment during construction, but that the matter was in hand. He said that retaining walls were being constructed, which would solve the problem. We are told by the newspaper account of the mayor's visit that the valves of the culvert were opened so the visiting party could see the effect of the cascading water for themselves before they retired for lunch. The newspaper waxed lyrical about the setting of the reservoir. It reported that it was "most beautifully situated" and was well wooded and that "when [it] is full and there is sufficient water to fill the bye-wash, the scene will be one, if not equal to in grandeur, scarcely inferior in beauty and somewhat resembling in form, the far-famed Cora Linn at the Falls of Clyde."

The reservoir was completed and in use by 1861. However, it had caused consternation while it was being constructed to the people of Silsden, who suddenly found themselves living close to the foot of the dam. They were aware of the appalling disaster at Holmfirth when the reservoir in the Holme Valley above that town had burst in 1852, killing 81 people and destroying much property in the path of deluging flood water. Therefore the slippages during the building of the embankment at Silsden Reservoir had alarmed the people living in its shadow. Whilst their concerns were noted they did not halt the building programme.

However, when an even bigger reservoir above the existing one was proposed in the 1870s, to be constructed higher up the same stream at Cringles, Silsdeners were much more vociferous. They sought legal representation to try and stop the project. Despite their determined opposition, a Parliamentary Act of 1875 was eventually passed giving Bradford permission to build the second reservoir. However, it was never actually realised. Bradford had turned its attention towards Nidderdale where it could build several large reservoirs one above the other. That was a much more ambitious project and meant that a new reservoir at Silsden would no longer be required.

When Silsden Reservoir was built it flooded not only fields, but also a successful chair-making business. It was located in a mill with a mill pond powering a water wheel, nestling beside the stream, and run by the Laycock family. Their wooden chairs were sold throughout Yorkshire and Lancashire as well as other wooden household and agricultural products such as washing dollies and hay rakes. What could be saved was rescued from the mill buildings before the flooding.

Occasionally during serious drought, such as that of 1959, signs of the abandoned Laycock's mill have been glimpsed when the water level has been exceptionally low.