

Forum Historical Environment Report April 2025

Once again Enterprise House was packed in April, this time to hear Ian Royston's talk on 'Reservoir Mania'. Ian spoke of the three great 'manias' of the 19th century – Canals, Railways and Reservoirs; much has been said about the first two of these, but the third has often been unfairly neglected. Ian's talk did much to correct this unfairness, at least for this audience. Ian started his tale with the Romans who (as so often) were the first to set up reservoirs and their dams, aqueducts and other associated water conduits. He mentioned the Roman reservoir and aqueduct at Lanchester of which traces may still be seen. Following the departure of the Romans there followed nearly 1500 years of 'Dark Ages' before the 'modern' reservoir mania of the 19th century got underway, resulting in the building of over 200 reservoirs in the Pennines alone between 1840 and 1970.

Before 1793 most of the population centres of Northern England relied on wells and rivers to supply water for drinking, as well as for the relatively small amount of industry which required it. As the industrial revolution gained impetus these resources became sorely stretched and public health became a major concern. As early as 1793 the lower reservoir at Foulridge had been built to provide water for the Leeds and Liverpool canal, but the rise of industry and its associated population growth in Manchester ('Cottonopolis') throughout the 19th century required a huge building programme. This brought to the fore John Frederick Bateman who was known as 'the greatest dam builder of his generation'. Between 1835 and 1860 Bateman oversaw four great reservoir schemes which provided water for Manchester and Salford.

Following accounts of similar schemes for other cities (Nottingham and Bradford, Sheffield and Lincoln for example), Ian moved on to describe Birmingham's massive venture in Central Wales, the Elan Valley project. This was overseen by James Mansergh, another great name in 19th Century dam building. To combat the diseases arising from poor public health Birmingham purchased 180 square kilometres of Welsh land to construct five linked dams (with two supplementary dams), all constructed of stone and feeding into a 117 km gravity aqueduct from the reservoir to the outskirts of Birmingham. Designed by Mansergh the scheme was approved in 1871 and was completed by 1892.

Moving to more local matters, water in Darlington had been abstracted from the Tees at Broken Scar to serve Darlington since 1849, with a steam pump installed in 1860. The poor quality of the water however led to the appointment in 1876 of the same James Mansergh to produce plans for reservoirs in Teesdale. Work was started in 1891 to construct Hury reservoir under George Yourdi, a Greco-Irish citizen domiciled at Cotharstone since 1884. Assistant to Mansergh since 1871 this mercurial character man-managed every aspect of the construction, before being head-hunted in 1893 to successfully oversee the afore-mentioned Elan Valley project.

Ian went on to further describe the addition of Grassholme reservoir which Mansergh's son Ernest built between 1901 and 1914, as well as a plethora of later 20th century schemes which threatened to destroy the tranquil setting of High Force; he then finished the local picture with the works at Cow Green, and the major Kielder 'megadam' unveiled in 1982, including its links with our current water supply in Teesdale and beyond. This was a superb talk, well illustrated and told in great detail, but with a lightness of touch that kept the audience's attention throughout. The next meeting on May 8th will feature our member Christine Price speaking on Richard Cobden and his links with the Schools at Bowes. Further details from Tim Meacham.

Tim Meacham