

Some South Derbyshire detective work with a twist

For the past two years I have been researching routes for a book of guided walks in South Derbyshire. The area south east of Burton-on-Trent is pleasant walking country especially around Walton-on-Trent and south of it all the way down to the Warwickshire border. There are very few published routes in this area so I spent a lot of time staring at the National Forest Explorer map trying to put routes together which looked worthwhile by linking pretty villages and other places of interest.

After looking at the map and investigating the area on the ground I realised that there were practically no footpaths in the small rural parish of Catton which should be splendid walking country. Catton is south of Walton-on-Trent and dominated today by Catton Hall, a grand 18th century country house (though on a much older site). Poring over a 19th century OS map I found that there were several paths in the parish including one from Catton to Walton along the Trent. However by the mid 20th century most had gone; a trip to the Derbyshire Records Office at Matlock was therefore in order.

Tracking down the information required was difficult especially since a mass of paperwork had been transferred from the Rights of Way department at Derbyshire County Council to the archives and had not been catalogued yet. I was looking for the records associated with the 1949 National Parks and Access to Countryside Act. The Matlock office has a folder for each Derbyshire parish containing correspondence and notes about footpaths from the early 1950s until the 1980s. There are also copies of the maps used by parish councils in 1950 to map their paths and the survey forms for each footpath. The only information I have been unable to find are the records of the appeals meetings in which landowners, ramblers organisations and others involved could raise objections to the routes added to the draft definitive map.

The details in the Catton folder were sparse but I was not surprised to see that the 1949 survey paperwork had been filled in by the owner of Catton Hall, George Henry Anson, who was chairman of the parish meeting. This element was a weakness of the 1949 Act as the returns for local paths were usually carried out by the parish council which in the post war period continued to be dominated by local landowners who were usually not keen to see footpaths going across their land. This turned out to be the case in Catton where three tiny footpaths were recorded (one more was added later by the local surveyor) on the margin of the parish none of which went anywhere near the attractive areas of the estate and house.

I have found that owners of landed estates often describe footpaths close to their properties as “workmen’s routes” which had never been walked by any members of the public. I have come across this in other parishes where the lords of the manor had tried to remove as many paths as they could from the map with a host of excuses including calling them “hunting roads”. Further problems emerged when the parish councils made their returns in the early 1950s to the County Councils which were dominated by the landed gentry. In Derbyshire these included the Dukes of Devonshire (Chatsworth) and in Leicestershire, the Dukes of Rutland; both hostile at the time to walkers.

In the Catton folder of correspondence there were two letters (written in 1966) involving a footpath that ran south of Catton to the Warwickshire border and beyond. The footpath was named after a 17th century poet who frequently stayed in the area; it was known as Dryden’s Walk. The author of the letters wanted the “Walk” to be added to the definitive map and pointed out that the route was on a series of Ordnance Survey maps even into the 1950s.

The author of the letters requested that contact be made with the County Archivist; whether this happened or not I cannot establish but a note on one of the letters states, “not on definitive, not claimed by parish, no reps (?)”. There is a further note in the correspondence stating that the matter be left “for a rainy day” as they had other more pressing things to deal with. The County Council surveyors department obviously did some work on the issue as there are further notes about the OS maps where this route was recorded. However, nothing came of the request and Dryden’s Walk was never added to the definitive map. Parts of it still seem to exist today and mention is made of it in several history books but certainly at the Catton end all signs of it have gone.

Who was the writer of the letters to the County Council? Initially I was stumped as they were sent from a location (perhaps a school) in Birmingham which no longer exists. The surname was unusual so I resorted to “Google” and found that the author was still active in footpath matters in the Coventry area as a member of the Local Area Forum (c 2007). You can imagine my surprise to discover very recently that the author was Leslie Menzer, our local correspondent for rights of way in Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire!

If any members have further suggestions as to how to add this route to the definitive map, they would be much appreciated.

*Barry Thomas
OSS Local Correspondent
South Derbyshire*

19 January 2012