

History of Marsden Park

Before Nelson developed and Colne grew, the area that included Marsden Park was divided up into the townships of Little Marsden and Great Marsden. Marsden Old Hall formed the heart of Great Marsden and was the seat of the Walton family.

The Walton family's connection with the Marsden estate can be traced back as far as 1352 when Henry, Duke of Lancaster, gave Richard de Walton a large portion of land. The estate grew further in 1356 when Queen Isabella gave the family another 118 acres.

The family continued to live in the hall and although they may have appeared wealthy, this was perhaps not the case especially during the 15th century.

Much of the evidence that remains of the Walton family up to the 1600s is tied up in legal matters. One record states that Christopher de Walton was outlawed in 1423 for the crime of taking deer from the royal hunting grounds of the Forest of Pendle and another record that Henry Walton was sued for debt just 23 years later.

The last of the true Waltons of Marsden, Banastre, died in 1784 and the estate passed to his cousin, Reverend Richard Wroe, a rector in Radcliffe. Richard Wroe moved to the Marsden estate and assumed the name Wroe-Walton in accordance with Banastre's will.

Richard Wroe-Walton died on 3rd December 1801 and was succeeded by his son, Richard Thomas. Richard Thomas was described as 'a typical country squire, a gentleman of the old school in dress and manners'. He was extremely interested in the welfare of his tenant farmers, his staff and the poor.

There are many stories about Richard Thomas's generosity and helping the poor. The shelter at the coach gate was built so that on Sundays Richard Thomas could 'fling' coins over the fence to the poor. The silk purse used for this was still in the family's possession in 1926 and gave weight to the story.

Local legends say that bread was always available should anyone approach the gates, while another tells how Richard Thomas gave his own boots to someone with 'wretched footwear' while out on his daily ride saying 'Take them, you have more need of them than I have'.

Richard Thomas died on 1st April 1845 aged 71. His remains were taken to Altham Church and interred in the family tomb. One gentleman wrote in his diary that 'never had I seen so marked a respect paid to the memory of the dead as at that funeral'. Most of the shops in Colne and Burnley closed out of respect. The funeral cortege was made up of 30 to 40 carriages, and stretched around a mile in length, and all the

male tenant farmers rode on horseback in cloaks of black. The funeral was described as 'a noble end to a noble life'.

After the death of Richard Thomas the absence of an heir meant that the estate passed to his sisters. On their deaths it again passed to cousins whose ancestors were the original Walton family.

After a few years at Marsden Hall, Mrs Hallam retired to Colne having sold her family's estate of Broadbank. She leased the hall and the estate to Dr Pinder of Whalley who opened the property as a private hospital for people with mental health issues. The hall and estate was used for this purpose for around 40 years. On the death of Mrs Hallam the estate passed to her daughter Mrs Howarth who sold the hall and 44½ acres to the Corporation of Nelson for £6,000. On 20th June 1912 Marsden Park was formally opened by the Mayor and Mayoress, Alderman and Mrs Davies.

The Egyptian Gate

The Egyptian Gate was once the main entrance to the upper gardens. It is known locally as 'The Wishing Gate' after the local custom of picking a leaf from a tree and placing it in one of the carved holes before walking through the gate and making a wish. What will you wish for?

The gate has several unusual carvings around it. One of the most notable is of the Secretary Bird (pictured) at the top of the arch. This bird of prey is only found in Africa. Usually, the Secretary Bird hunts on the ground eating snakes and lizards as its main diet. This bird has become a symbol for strength and success.

The Egyptian Gate has played a major part in Marsden Park's history. The top photograph shows the original opening of Marsden Park in 1912.

Richard Thomas and the Stone Mason

One day there was a knock at the door of the hall. On answering, Richard Thomas was asked to see a beggar. Richard Thomas spoke to the man and gave him some money. The beggar was so thrilled that he proceeded to tell Richard Thomas that in his youth he had been a worker of stone and that in return for Richard Thomas's generosity he would like to do some work for him. Richard Thomas agreed and was so impressed with the beggar's work that he gave him a job. The beggar stone mason was given anything he asked for in terms of tools, stone, lodgings, food and clothing. The beggar set about creating much of the stonework that remains in the park, which was said to be the best work he had ever created.

It is very difficult to prove whether or not this story is true. It is obvious that a stonemason worked on the estate, but there is no documentary evidence to prove that the stonemason was a beggar or where he came from. The photograph below dates from around Richard Thomas's time. It clearly depicts stonemasons working on Walton Lane. Could the man in the foreground be the old stonemason?

The Tunnels of Marsden Park

By the time Richard Thomas had died, his sisters Maria Ann and Jane were also in the later years of their lives. Stories state that by this time the sisters were both infirm and found it impossible to walk through the hall gardens to the My Lady's Garden. It is common belief that a tunnel ran from the cellars of the hall to the garden and the sisters would use these.

During the renovations of the park funded by the Heritage Lottery Grant, the two doorways that are in the My Lady's Garden were opened up. One room appears to be an ice house, a sort of early fridge, while the other appears to be a summer house or potting shed. There is no structural evidence to suggest that there was a tunnel linking the house to this garden in either room or in the cellars.

There is also no documentary evidence to suggest that the sisters were infirm in the later years of their lives. Evidence seems to suggest that both sisters were quite active after Richard Thomas died.

The hall has two sets of cellars. The set which is under the former conservatory does have a passageway that comes to a dead end. However, this passageway runs in the direction of the lake and does not have a fall on it. It remains unclear what this passageway was used for.

During 2007 reports Park Keepers were told that two boys had found a tunnel in the park. They told their parents that the tunnel went quite a way and eventually came out into a chamber furnished with statues. Although Parks & Recreation Services staff are aware of the tunnel's location, it has yet to be investigated. The general feeling is that it is highly unlikely that this particular chamber exists.

An alternative chamber does exist although it is not reachable by any tunnel. This chamber feeds four springs into the river south of the Upper Lake. The chamber is well away from the park and is not obvious from above ground. It is constructed of brick work with a vaulted ceiling. And there are definitely no statues in this chamber.

The Walton Spire

Although not located in the park, the Walton Spire has a connection with Richard Thomas Wroe-Walton.

The area surrounding Marsden Park has long been inhabited and evidence of this, such as Castercliffe Hill Fort and the locations of several stone circles, is testament to this.

Richard Thomas and his family were very religious and as a result, it is assumed, were opposed to anything connected to the pagan history of the area. The Walton Spire was once a large monolith that stood in the same location. It is believed that Richard Thomas was not happy that a pagan relic was located on his land and had the stone converted in to the Spire that can still be seen today.

The Ghosts of Marsden Park

There have long been various stories of ghostly happenings in Marsden Park. In the late 1980s local newspaper the Nelson Leader ran a story about a group of teenagers who saw a white glowing figure in the Pseudo-Roman Bath House, affectionately known as 'the dungeons'. None of the group could pick out any features and did not hang around to have a good luck.

Some people have also reported feelings of unease in certain parts of the hall, although no actual reports of ghostly figures have been confirmed.

Other talks include the appearance of a white lady in the My Lady's Garden area of the park. Again instances of this occurrence seem to be irregular and loosely reported.