


HISTORY NOTES FOR SILSDEN STROLL 1

This walk encompasses the original water meadows or ings of Silsden Township. It crosses low-lying, fields, sometimes flooded under inches of water from the overflowing River Aire. The paths can be very muddy after heavy rain. In the great flood of November 1866, described at the time as the worst in living memory, a youth of seventeen, named William Widdop, a local farmer's son, valiantly set out to round up a flock of threatened sheep in the flooding ings. He attempted the rescue in heavy rain and rising waters, with tragic consequences. When the flood waters receded his body was found drowned in a ditch along with many of the sheep he was trying to save. The inquest was held at the Thanet Arms (later the Bridge Inn, now redeveloped as apartments). The verdict was accidental death.

HAINSWORTH LANE – This lane was originally known as Low Lane and leads towards the farms of Low Holden. When the riverside fields are seriously flooded this lane is just above the flood-line. To the right as you pass under the aqueduct there is now a development of modern housing. Incorporated into it can be identified the original, imposing Victorian farmhouse and barns of Hainsworth House. This was the site of 'Wright's Place' in the 1850's, the then home of William Wright, local worsted manufacturer, whose factory was in Becks Mill, the first of Silsden's Worsted Mills, now demolished.

HISTORIC STONE FOOTBRIDGE – After walking through the fields, just before arriving at the main Steeton to Silsden road, about half way around the walk, you will reach a narrow, stone bridge. This is Grade 2 listed, described as, 'a single basket-arch with roughly dressed voussoirs'. Voussoirs are the stones that form the arch. It once crossed the Silsden Beck before the beck entered the River Aire close by. Silsden Beck was later diverted before it reached the bridge and now it enters the river further to the east. This footbridge is surprisingly narrow to be considered as a traditional packhorse bridge, although in other ways it does resemble one. It connects a sometimes indistinct footpath that follows the riverbank from Kildwick to Holden, which would not always have been passable because of flooding. The footbridge is thought to be late eighteenth century, though it could be older.

BRIDGE OVER RIVER AIRE – As you approach the main road inspect the elegant Georgian stone road bridge that spans the River Aire. Take a moment to enjoy vistas of the bridge from both sides of the road. This bridge was built to take the new turnpike (from Burnley to Addingham) across the Aire. John Clough, a local Victorian historian, tells us it was erected around 1804-5 to the plans of Bernard Hartley, Surveyor of Bridges to the West Riding and that it cost £3529 to construct (roughly £120,000 today). Prior to the building of the stone bridge, getting from Steeton to Silsden meant using a wooden footbridge and vehicular ford a little up river of the present bridge. If you want to see the site of the ford



(all evidence of a footbridge has now gone) then look for the point at which Steeton Beck meets the main river as you walk along the riverbank path.

SITE OF SEWAGE WORKS – If you look down river from the road bridge you will see a higher mounded area close to the river. This is the site of Silsden’s sewage works in the first half of the twentieth century, when Silsden had an Urban District Council, responsible for its own sewage arrangements. The settling tanks and filter beds are now grassed over. The straight, banked track from the road to the mound was the original route onto the site. The diverted Silsden Beck flows on the far side of this raised track.

AN ANCIENT MEDIAEVAL BOUNDARY - The route now follows the riverbank path until it meets a ditch called Esp Sike. The large field you have just crossed was named Blind Pool on a township map of 1757. The name probably refers to a pond formed by the ever-changing position of the meandering river over its flood plain. Esp Sike is the ancient boundary between Silsden and Kildwick Townships. The footpath follows the sike back up to the canal at Cowling Bridge. The farm ahead across the canal is Low Woodside Farm. This is the beginning of an area of Silsden traditionally known as Woodside.

CANAL – The Leeds and Liverpool Canal was constructed through Silsden in the years 1771-2. It was opened to barge traffic on 8th April 1773. The Silsden stretch was built by labourers under the direction of John Tickle, who found the job harder than he had bargained for. The navvies he employed were sometimes difficult to control and local people complained of damage to property and rowdy behaviour. The Canal Company’s inspectors accused Tickle of not properly supervising the work of the navvies and allowing shoddy workmanship. The Canal Company, however, received complaints from Tickle that the local inn keepers were fleecing his work force!

CANAL AQUEDUCT – This small, rather robust aqueduct carries the canal across Silsden Beck. The solid-looking buttresses on the south side were placed there in 1776 to strengthen the structure, which had showed signs of strain only a few years after having been built.