

# Early Days

The first known written documentation of Risley Moss occurs in the Domesday Book where it was described as part of the Culcheth Estate. When the last Lord of the Manor, one Gilbert de Culcheth was murdered in 1246, the Estate was divided up between his four daughters. Ellen was thought to have drawn the short straw when she inherited Risley Moss. So she was also given good pasture lands in Lowton and Winwick to compensate her for this large amount of 'unproductive useless land'. The Estate remained in the de Risley family until being sold in 1736 to local land owner John Irelande Blackburne.

The Mersey Valley mosslands, or raised peat bogs, were largely left untouched until the 18th century and only used locally as a source of fuel. They were regarded as treacherous wastelands. In 1724 when Daniel Defoe passed by Chat Moss on his tour of England he noted-

*...the surface at a distance looks black and dirty and frightful to think of, for it will bear neither horse nor man, ....what nature meant by such a useless production, tis hard to imagine, but the land is entirely to waste....*

The surrounding mosslands which were successfully reclaimed, such as Rixton and Woolston, were to become some of the most productive arable farming areas in the country. At first only potatoes and oats could be grown in the acidic soils. But as the farmers toiled to improve the soil quality the ground was intensively cropped with produce such as carrots, lettuce, celery, peas and radishes. The vegetables were of such high quality, they were sent to Covent Garden Market to be sold.



With the onset of the Industrial Revolution, drainage of the Manchester Mosses was greatly facilitated. The building of the railway in 1872 across the Moss was an enormous achievement and feat of engineering. But Risley Moss was too wet and boggy to be successfully reclaimed. The discovery that peat could be processed into litter and substituted for straw animal bedding led to the development of a peat processing plant on the southern edge of the Moss. The Risley Peat and Moss Litter Company began commercial peat cutting some time after 1872.

A two storey wood and corrugated iron peat works was built on the Risley Moss side of the Cheshire Lines railway. A permanent central tramway with two branch lines was constructed into the peat cutting areas. The moss was partially drained by digging a series of main ditches, with side ditches at right angles to these, giving the mossland its characteristic herringbone drainage pattern.

Commercial peat digging on the mossland ceased in 1928, although peat from other areas was processed at the works until it burnt down in 1947.



In 1939 the Government acquired Risley Moss along with over 900 acres of prime agricultural land to build a giant bomb filling factory. Around thirty tenant farmers had their land taken off them by compulsory purchase. The flat, damp, isolated area, which was often hidden by mist, was a perfect location for Risley Royal Ordnance Factory.

During the war years a vast number of items ranging from small bullets to the enormous 'Grand Slam' bomb were filled at Risley. The factory was like a self-sufficient town, with nearly 2000 buildings, a road and railway network, canteens, workshops, its own police and fire service and a workforce average of 22,000 people. Risley Moss could not be built on, but was used as a testing ground for smoke bombs and as a dumping and burning ground.

The factory stopped producing bombs at the end of the war. It was then used by the Admiralty as a store until they moved out in 1961. As the factory fell into disrepair, it formed one of the largest derelict sites in Europe.

