

BACK

With thanks to...
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All those who have had their oral histories recorded

COVER

Stories of Chat Moss
Story Map

INTRODUCTION

"1949 made this moss. Lettuce was making twelve shillings a box; ten and twelve shillings when a man's wages was four pounds. So you can weigh up from that what lettuce were worth at that time. At that time they were all able to buy new tractors and new equipment and get themselves set up for the job then. Without '49 they wouldn't have been able to do it. But 1949 was an amazing summer, it never rained between April and September, lettuce were like gold. A load of lettuce would buy the wagon that was taking them, that's how good it was"

"You see when you talk about Chat Moss you like about four hundred acres - well there's growers now growing fifteen hundred to two thousand acres; just iceberg lettuce, one or two very large growers in this country. That's probably a lot for want to go to one place order what they want, nationwide and have them delivered. But they were cruel really, you know they want things cheaper every time you talk to them and they can always find somebody to do it cheaper, that's it in a nutshell"

Stories of Chat Moss is a creative oral history project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The area of Salford known as Chat Moss farming by local communities. This project has started to record the stories and memories of these people, building up an oral history of the Moss and local area. Local schools have worked with artists to use these memories to inspire creative work, helping younger generations appreciate the history of their area.

This imaginative map has been created in response to creative writing produced by local people as part of the Stories of Chat Moss project. Based on stories, experiences, observations and aspirations, it maps out a community's perception of the Moss, picking out key places and people.

Use this map to guide you around Chat Moss, and read creative written pieces on the same spot they are inspired by!

Please be a responsible walker, respecting the land, private property, wildlife and the safety of yourself and others.

Describes how difficult it was to accept the end of his families farming career...

We needed to find some more income. Joyce [Peter's wife] decided to go to work. I didn't want to go to work. I was the most resistant one with being the farmer's boy as you might say. The extra income did help but we soon realised it wasn't enough. I remember I used to be working in the field when Joyce was going to work and I can remember her going over the motorway bridge and those were really sad days for me. I knew it was the start of the beginning of the end that started off working with me yet in the end had to go working away. And I think that was a massive thing for me you know, that we weren't working together anymore."

Likes about the impact the supermarkets have had on the Chat Moss farming community...

Always find somebody to do it cheaper, that's it in a nutshell"

Describes how her family came to live on the moss...

"My mother was born at West Derby, Liverpool and she was a Shacklady and in 1916 her eldest brother came to Barton Grange to farm. My father's family, the Dixons, his father was a game keeper and he came to Irlam Moss. There were thirteen Shacklady kids and my mother was about the eighth and twelve a butcher and then he went in the forces in the 14 - 18 war. When he came home his father had died and they wanted grandma and the sisters to stay in Keepers Cottage. So my dad had to give up a job he liked, which was butchering and run to game keeping which he had to learn from scratch more or less. But it was a good life, we enjoyed it. We weren't massively rich but it was a job he liked, which was butchering and run to wasn't there; rabbit pie and stews and things!"

Eddie Bickerton

Talks about how his father worked with the night soil that fertilised and prepared Chat Moss as farmland...

"The old chap [Eddie's father] during the days he used to lean over on a steam crane and lift the night soil out of the barges in the wharf and put them in the little trucks on the top and then the trains would take them all round the moss and distribute them to the farms. Each farm had its own rail siding and they used to take them up there. They used to drop so many wagons in each rail siding for the farmer to unload in a pit where they shovelled all this night soil from. I'm not sure but I think some of them [the trucks] were tippers; they tipped automatically sideways, some of them they had to shovel out which was a pleasant job! The farmers used to empty them themselves and spread it on the fields as and when they wanted it"

Myth or Mystery?: The Moss was always spoken of in fearful tones. It was regarded as a prehistoric bog into which men and beasts could disappear without trace. The Pedlar dismissed such talk as ignorance. The Moss was his place of work. Since the turn of the century there had been a degree of reclamation along its edges. There were now farms and smallholdings whose occupants were his regular customers.

He smiled as he noted that around these homesteads the hedges were covered in white linen bleaching in the weak autumn sun. Washday was usually a good day for the Pedlar. When washing articles the farmers' wives would notice cloth wearing thin, buttons missing and torn lace. In the stout box at his feet he had the answer to all their problems.

CHAT MOSS

Let us have a chat all about Chat Moss just take off your hat – and watch for the boss was work very hard in days long ago up there on Twelve Yard for Mr Roscoe

Well where shall I start we were pioneers with a horse and cart taming wild frontiers like Davy Crockett on the first railway Stevenson's Rocket to Botany Bay

We did what we could shrouded in dense fog the earth wasn't good a big wet peat bog 'twill bear neither man nor beast' said Defoe 'so forget your plan 'cos nothing will grow'

We knew that the ground would not support rails but engineers found help in cotton bails this stiffened morale too – soon there was grass along with clay marl and sharp broken glass

No one had a fridge just candles for light under Boysnope bridge came 'night-soil' at night despite the bad stink we spread it by hand brought back from the brink some Grade A farm land

Men dug out a ditch others spread the clay but no one got rich on sixpence a day they banned narrow wheels imposed ten bob fines forerunners of Peel's smoking their Woodbines

Horses with flat shoes made steady progress one day we would use what was wilderness we did what we aimed and farm houses built that's how we reclaimed this rich patchwork quilt

What is a name The Railway or Plough they are but the same - the moss Then & Now thank workers you met along the Tramway who won by their sweat what we have today

John Eaton

Dennis Dixon

Talks about working on the Chat Moss farms as a child...

"If we were going to school camp we used to have to earn our own money so we used to have to go on the moss and work for it 'cos me dad was on poor wages on the canal. We used to go on the farms and work for three pence an hour and we used to have to work flamin' hard we did! I worked on quite a few and we used to do a bit of harvesting but that was a little job that was, you only got that now and then. We used to get scratched to glory with harvesting the corn. The farmers used to let you go on the field when they were coming round with the reaper and binder, not the combines that was a later day. When they were going round and round they used to let you go when they were getting at the end and so all the rabbits used to congregate at the end and they used to shoot the rabbits coming out and foxes; anything coming out we used to get it you know. It was great; it was a great life at the time you know. I didn't realise how great it was really."

Harold Bennett

Describes working on the farms as a child...

"I used to go on the farms from being about 11 years old. We used to go picking potatoes and one year one of the farmers named Sudhall said well when you're finished picking the potatoes will you come and help with other general jobs on the farm. So myself and one of my friends we did this and we used to go pull onions and fill boxes and get them ready to take to the market next day. We used to go and gather various waste food from canteens in Trafford Park, gather all the old food together and boil it up for the pigs and when the corn was ripe we used to help with the harvesting of the corn. We weren't big enough to throw all the sheaves of corn around but we were big enough to stack it on the trucks and we were taught how to stack it so that it wouldn't fall off. I remember once we were stacking in a barn and the stack got so high in a big Dutch barn that the only place left in it was about a square yard at the top of the barn where there was a trap door to get out of. So myself and a gentleman who was about 70 a Mr James, we were stuck at the top of the barn and they got a ladder and it wasn't long enough so eventually they pulled another load of corn underneath the trap door and we jumped down about 20 feet on to the corn so that was a little bit exciting! I was worried but Mr James wasn't worried. He just said 'come on we're going to jump' and off we went!"

Morris

(past)

Since I moved here in 1995, I've been walking my dog over Cutnook lane. I used to walk her to the Twelve-yards Road, where we would pass a farm that was also a kennel for dogs whose owners had gone on holiday. The dogs used to be very noisy as we walked past.

(present)

The kennels must have closed because now there are the fisheries - some fishing pools, a small bait shop and café. There are also walking groups and general people out and about, who enjoy visiting these pools as they have ducks on them. The landscape is improving, it's very pleasant.

(future)

In the future, the owners of the fisheries are looking to expand and set up a resource centre with classes for children, to promote sustainable fishing and environmental issues, connected to the land around them.

John Hannan

Talks about how his great grandfather from Ireland ended up farming on the moss...

"Back in the late 1800's my great grandfather came over from Ireland to work on the Manchester Ship Canal and he stayed on the canal from Liverpool all the way up to Manchester/Salford. On his way through Irlam which is where we are now he noticed that they were developing farmland and decided that he'd have some land and stayed, so we've been here ever since. When I was farming it was salads and vegetables. Originally back when he started in the early 1900's they were still doing things which they did in Ireland like hay making and corn thrashing that sort of thing so I don't quite know when it developed. How I knew it salads were the main crop. It was mostly lettuce, spring onions, radish and then you'd have a few cauliflowers, cabbage, potatoes; they were quite a big thing as well because the ground is so rich. It would grow absolutely anything. It was fabulous."

Alma Turner

Explains how the prisoners of war during the 2nd World War worked on the farms on Chat Moss...

"We had German prisoners of war and Italians and also the air force cadets; they were right characters they were. They weren't very old, that was what struck me. They'd been in the war and had been fighting and made prisoners yet they were still only young. I remember one, I think he was only 18, he'd been a Luftwaffe pilot at only 18. One of them made me a brass ring out of something, it was lovely but it made my finger go black! But it was a lovely gesture"

Fun and Games on Chat Moss: In the autumn we would wander about picking blackberries. It was quite precarious picking blackberries because if you didn't get caught by the brambles you could easily end up in a ditch. The blackberry bushes grew along side the ditches which had been cut as drainage for the fields. At the height of Autumn when the blackberry bushes were at their best you were never quite sure which side of the ditch the bushes were as the branches had spread all over the ditch.

So if you leaned just that little bit too far to get the juiciest berries you could not only end up falling into the bushes but you could fall straight into the ditch. It was always funny to watch someone stretching over when you knew the ditch was there, waiting for them to fall in. Unfortunately for my sister as she was the eldest but the smallest of us she was the one we would send stretching over the ditch.

The Crooked House: When I walk up the Moss to where my Dad used to farm, it looks totally different to how it used to be. The original farm house and out-buildings have all gone, but I still remember the green wooden bungalow stable and sheds.

When I was a little girl, back in the old house, I always laughed to myself when I went down the lobby from the kitchen to the lounge, because the bungalow used to lean at an angle towards the fields - and it would take you with it! You had to be careful how you walked, because the whole house was sinking into the rich peat-moss soil.

Gwen Hall

Describes some of the difficulties the farmers used to face...

"The farmers were doing quite well. This was in the early 60's. There's was convoys of trucks going down to London and they were all working hard and everybody seemed to be making money. Everything was going alright until we went into the EU. What they used to say was that they could make their money if you had two good weeks of harvesting the lettuce, you could make your money for the year. It was unbelievable, because of supply and demand but as soon as we went into the EU they could source it abroad. Then in the early 80's we had a terrible storm, there was huge hailstones and it came down about this time of year in June and they were like big flying saucers and in the centre of it there was like a big nucleus and they said that it was sand from the Sahara and it came across and we lost 25 acres of lettuce.

We had three sons and they did work on the farm but they've gone into other professions now and there was no way that they were going to continue."

Norman Westhall

Describes life on the moss in the 1930's...

"We had oil lamps. There was no electricity or anything like that. They came with the electric when I was about 7 or 8. They laid the electricity down and we all had to pay so much to the electricity company to get it. There were a couple of farms that wouldn't pay and they still had the oil lamps hung from the ceiling with a mantel and everything. There was water laid on to every farm except the last one which was Bond's and he had a water dolly, if you know what I mean. It was like a 40 gallon drum on 2 wheels, it swung and it had iron wheels and he pulled it half a mile and came and filled it up at our tap then pulled it back and that lasted him a week. It was alright. All the farms had horses then. There were no tractors. We had 3 horses"

Back to the Moss again: Once we passed Barton Airport I thought we were in the country side, the only other time I had seen fields was when we went on holiday. The house on Heron Drive was so different than the one we left behind. A proper bathroom and an inside loo seemed like heaven, but was nothing compared to our first trip onto the Moss, cycling along the rutted roads, not a hedge or fence in sight. We had open spaces almost on our doorstep. With new friends, a bottle of water and some jam butties, it wasn't long before we felt at home wandering the dirt tracks, peering into drainage ditches, making a Tarzan swing across the ditch at Skelly Woods, our name for a small stand of trees with white bark which we decided looked like skeletons.

Sean

(past)

I remember going up onto the Moss and noticing the types of cottages on it. They were of light construction, mostly wood and asbestos and they seemed to float on the Moss. They didn't have any running water or electricity.

(present)

Now I see solid brick-built houses on very deep foundations with all the mod-cons. They look attractive, but almost out of character for the remote area.

(future)

I hope that there is no more building on the Moss. I would like to see more nature reserves and good facilities for walkers, cyclists and horse-riders.