



DISCOVERING LANCASHIRE: 109

Rufford

Pictures: CYRIL LINDLEY

It is not clear why Rufford ever wanted to be 'put on the map' but that was the intention expressed in 1976 when the idea was mooted that the age-old Rufford Mediaeval Market and Fair should be revived. There is more to Rufford, they said, than Rufford Old Hall. Nearly six hundred and fifty years ago – in 1339 – Edward III granted to the then Lord of the Manor, Sir William Hesketh, a charter giving him the right to hold a market every Friday and an annual fair on the first day of May. The charter disappeared during the 16th century but was duly confirmed by Queen Elizabeth in 1573 and this later approval can be seen in the Lancashire County Archives at Preston. Until 1976 the fair had not been held for nearly sixty years and its revival was a resounding success. Instead of the hoped-for 1,500 attendance some 4,000 turned up. It is now an annual event and last May Day the attendance was 9,500 so the aim of letting the world know that Rufford is alive

and well and has a history going back to the year dot has been splendidly achieved.

Despite this ancient heritage, Rufford is not an archetypal village where church, pub, post office and general store cluster cosily round a village green with a cross and a duck pond. It has all these things but they are scattered over a wide area bisected by the busy A59 Liverpool-Preston road. And whilst it would not be true to say that never the twain do meet it is a fact that this trunk road at its busiest is almost as separative as a canal without a bridge. The Parish Church, the New Fermor Arms, the railway station and the two shops – a post office and a grocer's – are on the East, Rufford Old Hall side while the village hall, the school, the Hesketh Arms and the bulk of the houses are on the West, Rufford Hospital side. The Old Hall and the Hospital are singled out because they are the two features by which Rufford is best known to the general public.

Top left: Bob Fisher, landlord of the New Fermor Arms, and his wife, Carole, with Ian Nicholson (left), a brewer sent regularly from Warrington to brew "Blezard's Bitter" to the recipe of an old Liverpool brewery taken over in 1926.

Top right: New pub for old: the New Fermor Arms.

Above left: "Although Rufford has changed over the years, development has always been well-controlled and the rural atmosphere has been retained," says County Councillor Miss Susannah Taylor, a parish councillor since 1964 and chairman of West Lancashire District Council. A former chairman of Rufford Village Hall Committee, which she was instrumental in reviving, she also initiated the formation of the village youth club.

Above right: If the village can be said to have a centre, perhaps it's the post office and grocery.

Rufford Old Hall was the seat of the Hesketh family from the time it was built (between 1416 and 1458 though it is thought to have replaced an even earlier house on the same site) until the middle of the 18th century when Sir Thomas Hesketh, the first baronet, built Rufford New Hall a short distance away. The Old Hall was used for a time as the village school and intermittently at later dates by other members of the Hesketh family. When the first Lord Hesketh (grandfather of the present lord of motor-racing fame) sold what remained of the family's Rufford estates in 1934, the Old Hall had been empty for a number of years, the family seat having been established at Easton Neston in Northamptonshire which had been acquired in 1846 though the marriage of the fifth baronet to Lady Fermor. In

1936 he gave the hall to the National Trust, with some of its original furniture and fourteen acres of land, together with an endowment towards its upkeep.

It is one of the finest buildings of its era in the country and, in particular, the Great Hall with its unique carved screen is worth travelling a long way to see. In fact, when the hall boasted a visitors' book (a luxury the National Trust cannot now afford) there was hardly a country in the world not represented in it.

The New Hall was built in 1760 and enlarged in 1798 and soon after the end of the First World War it was sold to Lancashire County Council for use as a sanatorium. With three cottages, a keeper's cottage and 304 acres

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Above left: Mrs. Rosemary Lee describes herself as "a newcomer to Rufford - I've only lived here twenty-three years!" As chairman of the Village Hall Committee, she masterminds the successful, annual Mediaeval Market and Fair. "You would be hard-pressed to find a more friendly place anywhere," she says. "Everyone has genuine concern for their neighbours and a kindly, watchful eye is kept on old people living alone."

Above right: Product of more than thirty years' fund-raising: Rufford Village Hall.

Left: Circa 1795, the Hesketh Arms has a well in its cellar, a secret passage and, allegedly, a phantom "grey lady".

Rufford

continued

to go with it, the hall cost £21,656. It was known as Rufford Pulmonary Hospital but today, as plain Rufford Hospital, it provides pre-convalescence for sixty-one patients in peaceful, pastoral surroundings. It has, of necessity, been much altered to suit its present role and while the addition of vital outside fire escapes has not enhanced it, as far as possible due regard has been paid to its origins. The beautiful, enclosed rose garden is as much as it always was and it made a delightful setting for the patients' Royal Wedding party in July.

In the early nineteenth century a straightening-out of the A59 robbed the village of its green and caused the village cross - or, more correctly, the base of it which was all that remained - to be removed to the parish churchyard. The base - dated AD 1000 and the oldest relic in Rufford - is now surmounted by a sundial. When John Wesley

came to the village he preached a sermon beside it but a riot broke out and it is said he wept as he left the village.

Although the 'green' is no more, the first Lord Hesketh donated what had been the family's private recreation ground for the use of the villagers. It is now known as Rufford Park and is fringed with trees which he sent from Easton Neston. It is on this piece of ground that the village agricultural shows were held and it is where the Mediaeval Fair takes place. In 1974 a splendid village hall was built on one edge of it and this is now in use for one activity or another almost every day or night of the week.

Rufford has never had a village duck pond as such but can boast of something much more spectacular. Martin Mere, no less, of which part lies within the parish. The mere was once much larger, but in 1819 (to quote a contemporary directory) "through the laudable exertions of Sir T. G. Hesketh, Bart., of Rufford Hall, a steam engine of twenty horse power was erected for throwing off the surplus water and the whole has, in

consequence, been made capable of cultivation. . . . It may be truly said that the superintending eye of a resident paternal landlord is visible here".

It was not, however, wholly successful and what remained now forms the Martin Mere Wildfowl Trust. But the mere apart, Rufford has recently acquired a large man-made lake of its own which is similarly reserved for the birds. It is in Mere Sands Wood, a 104 acre-plantation originally created by the Hesketh family as a shoot. Like most of the land on this westward side, the subsoil was compounded of layers of peat and sand and in 1963, to the great dismay of the villagers, a sand and gravel company obtained sand-winning rights in the wood. To extract the sand meant rooting up acres of trees, shrubs and bushes and when a further application was made in 1975 to extend the operation it was agreed that ultimately the wood should be turned into a nature reserve in the care of the Lancashire Naturalists Trust. The original firm of contractors went out of business but their successors, Sedgefield Sand Limited, have continued the co-

operation with the Trust and the reserve now boasts four specific 'environments' - woodland, marsh, water and dune. In the middle, however, where the sand-winning continues it is pure moonscape but when the contractors take their leave - probably towards the end of next year - the whole site will be gradually reclaimed for the benefit of all things bright and beautiful and all creatures great and small.

And, who knows, the lake may one day be home to the ruff. This bird, the male of which has an ornate frilly ruff round its neck in summer, used to be a common breeding-bird in these parts and, one theory goes, gave its name to the village . . . Ruff-ford. It was in demand both as a table delicacy and for its feathers but tastes changed and it disappeared about a hundred and fifty years ago. The species is, however, well established on the Martin Mere reserve so, provided the shallow muddy habitat they like is available, it is conceivable that a few may move over.

Any excitement a first sighting may engender, though, could be dimmed by looking up 'Rufford' in Eilert Ekwall's *Place Names of*