

Skelmersdale Heritage Society

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER



The news from... December 2022

As we reach the end of 2022, we can look back on the last twelve months with a great deal of pride. Our Lancashire Night at the end of November was a roaring success and with over sixty people it was our best attended meeting since earlier this year. A good time was had by all attendees with fantastic performances from Mark Dowding and Sid Calderbank that had everyone singing along.

That was followed up in December with our Christmas Quiz, thanks to the hardy souls who braved the freezing weather to enjoy an evening of questions so taxing that some might say they even potentially had multiple answers. The Quizmasters decision is final!

Our 2022 Calendar has once again flown off the shelves, if you haven't got round to ordering yours, we still have a few left.

This year we also published our second book, 'Memories of Sandy Lane'. This photobook has received rave reviews, so much so we've had to do three print runs so far. Perhaps, while I have a bit of time off over Christmas, I'll finally be able to take a walk up 'th'loner with the book so I can see what it used to look like in person (mind you I've been trying to do that since we published it in the Summer!).

NEXT MEETING:

TBC

PHOTOS/VIDEOS

Do you have old family photos or videos featuring the town? We'd love to have a look and get copies so drop us a line.

WANT TO WRITE FOR US?

Whether it's your memories, local history or something else entirely, if it's Skem related we'd love you to get involved. Just drop us an email and we'll consider it for our next newsletter.

I'd like to end by repeating my thanks to all the Committee members for their hard work over the last twelve months: Carol, Joan, Julie, Hilary, Barry, Shirley and Susan really are the engine that keeps Skem Heritage going and as we head into the New Year, I can confidently say we're well placed to have a great 2023.

There'll be no meeting in January, I think we've all earned a little rest, but we'll be back in February with the first of our season of talks, more details will follow in due course. Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you and all your families. I hope you have a great festive season and we'll see you all next year!

Mark

The news from... December 1905

On Christmas Day morning Superintendent Richard Jervis distributed half a dozen hot pots to the needy of the town, this was less than the twenty from the year before, a sign, according to the Ormskirk Advertiser that those in distress was not as nearly as bad as the previous December. Meanwhile, the Reverend JJ Hulley sent several hares and pheasants over to Skelmersdale Police Station so that they could be given out to those in need. Inspector Pickering was the man in charge of making sure that they went to those who needed them most.

It was said of Skelmersdale that there were 'no better hearted fellows anywhere'. Always willing to give charitable donations when able and never ignoring deserving cases of charity.

Picture of the Month:



Christmas Fair at Sunday School. Year unknown, courtesy of Eileen Briscoe

Gone Fishin' – Fishy Tales in Three Parts

By Shirley Carr



Pond 4, now the site of The Concourse

There was a recent post on our Facebook page about the Number 3 and Number 4 ponds on the site of the Concourse, and it started me thinking about the pastime of angling in Skelmersdale before the landscape changed so radically. These two bodies of water were popular fishing haunts for the lads of Old Skem, together with the three reservoirs in the area that is now Gillibrands.

My dad and brothers were all keen anglers, my brothers for the sport and my dad, who was a young miner during the 1926 strike, probably in part to provide food for the table. Nowadays if anglers catch freshwater fish it is usual to place them back in the water, especially eels which are becoming rare (environmental reasons, not due to angling), but when I was growing up it was common practice to keep anything of a decent size with a view to eating it. Snig were delicious fried, and the skins would be kept as it was thought they were a good cure for sprained wrists, (not to be eaten but to be tied round the sore joint). Pike, roach and perch (if big enough) were good eating too. Large pike would

seem to make a good meal but yes it is true, they are absolutely full of sharp bones, and filleting one is like performing brain surgery. By the time the bones are out there's hardly anything left! Anyone who has cooked a freshly caught fish may have found that the nerves continue to work even though the fish is dead, as I found to my horror the first time I tried to prepare one and it flipped and flapped around on the kitchen table even though it had no head. It still continued twitching when it was fully filleted and put in the frying pan.

As a child I occasionally accompanied my brother on his fishing trips, but I hadn't developed the patience of an angler at that time.

'Keep still you're frightening the fish!'

'Move out of the light, you're making a shadow on the water, it'll frighten the fish!'



Perch (Perca)

Lots of little perch could be caught at the reservoir across the road from the Potato Factory, where I would sometimes go with dad. Those were not worth keeping, but it was a nice way to pass an afternoon. This was one of the three reservoirs in that area drained in the summer of 1964 to make way for new roads and factories - a cause of great excitement for the local people. I have happy memories of this event, but it was a watershed moment in the history of Skem, which since the closure of the coal mines had been a fairly rural backwater. To tell the story here is a copy of an article from the 'Skelmersdale Reporter' June 1964:

"First families dispossessed of their homes to make way for the New Town are the Tench's, the Perch's and the Roach's, 10 to 15 thousand of them - Skelmersdale's fish population.

Operation Rescue took place on Thursday, Friday and Saturday of last week, and again on Tuesday night this week. Now the reservoirs on the Gillibrands Farm site are completely dry of fish. Next to go will be their home, the waters and soon the anglers' little paradise in the fields will become the first of the New Town's roads.

The ten clubs in the district will be following their fish at the weekends. They will meet again at the Birkacre reservoir near Chorley. In charge of the big move was Wigan Centre of Northern Anglers - to which the Skelmersdale clubs belong - whose trustee is Mr Thomas Jones, the proprietor of the fish business at the top of Sandy Lane, and who lives at Worsley Mesnes.



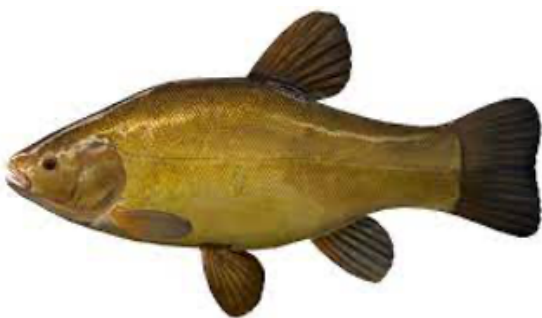
Eel (Anguilliformes) - known locally as 'snig'



The Potato Works: A good place for fishing

The fish transferred were roach of half to two-pound, tench of half to four pound and small perch. Each night of the big lift there was a large crowd of Skelmersdale people to bid the fish a fond farewell."

I was there on that last night when the final bit of water was drained from the reservoir more or less opposite the Potato Factory. It was a warm, calm summer evening, and the reservoir was surrounded by many Skemmers, mostly Pennylanders I think, who had come to see what was left in the last remaining inches of water. There was a great air of anticipation, and as the pumps were finally turned off the crowd was not disappointed as a huge tench did its farewell dance in the mud. I think some people went home very muddy that night after their attempts to capture it!



Tench (Tinca Tinca)



No pearls in these!

Another surprise in the mud layer was a bed of large freshwater mussels. I think these must have been 'swan mussels,' (*Anodonta cygnea*), not the rare 'freshwater pearl mussels', which are only found in clean rivers.

One of the reservoirs in Yarrow Country Park where the 'Old Skem Fishy Descendants' now live.



Nowadays my freezer is always well-stocked with rainbow trout caught by a certain 'Owd Brid', here are his memories of his days fishing in Skelmersdale.

'Owd Brides' Memories...

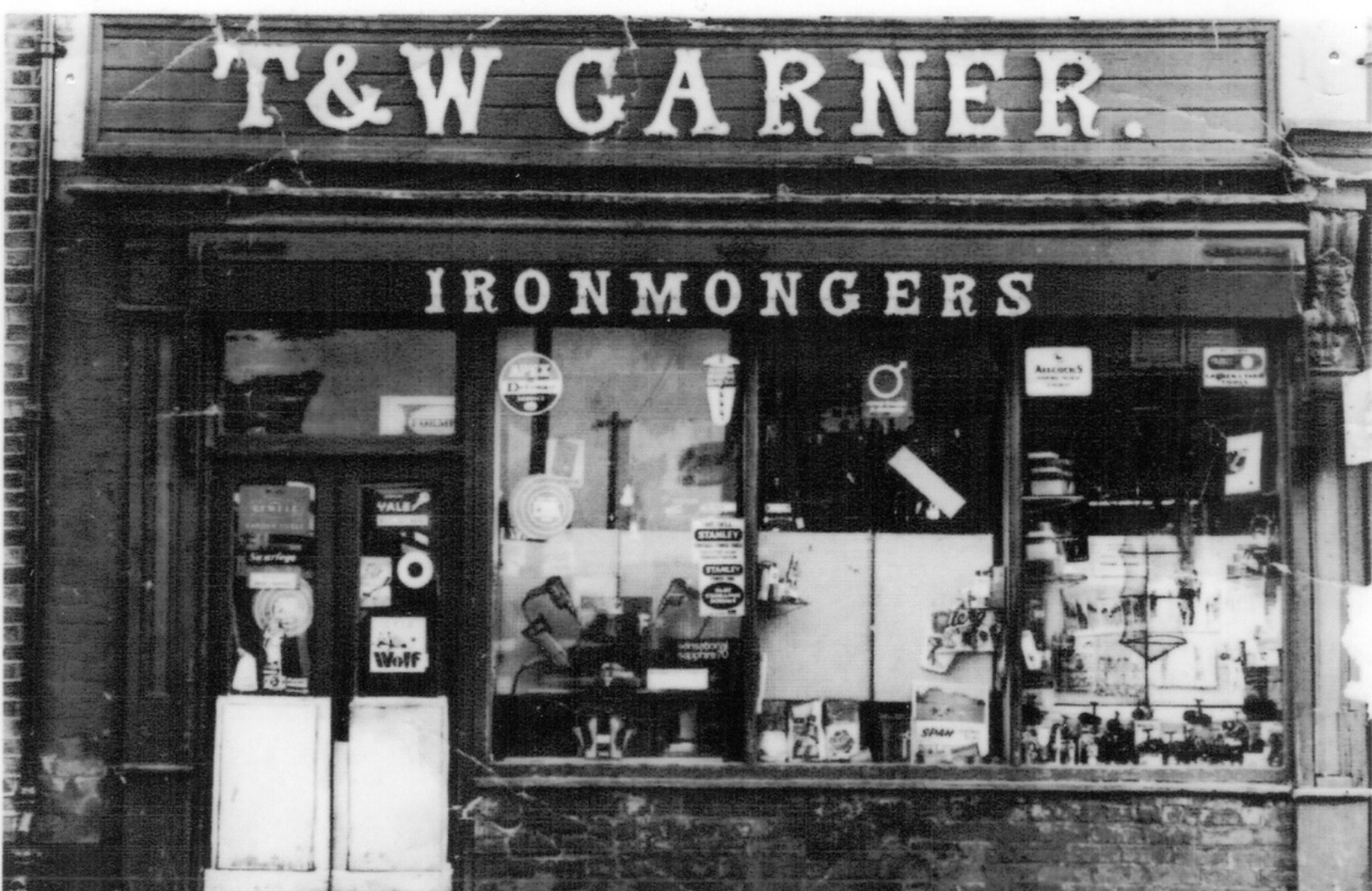
When I was a lad in the 1950's and 1960's like most of my mates I was mad on fishing. Our fishing tackle shop was not John Norris of Penrith but Garners in Witham Road.

My first rod was a 7 foot bamboo cane, no reel, just a length of fishing line and a packet of the smallest hooks, size 14 or size 16. We used bread paste for catching roach, worms for perch and snigs and then maggots as a versatile bate for most fish.

We went to the small pond in Chris Macrea's field (a farm near Pennyland). Another favourite place was the number 4 reservoir and particularly the number 3. Number 4 reservoir was our open air swimming pool in summer and number 3 was more shaded as it was surrounded with trees.

We also fished Blackhurst's reservoir near the Spud Factory. We found that it had hardly been fished by anyone and when me and a few of the mates started catching big perch of about 1 to 2 pounds it was wonderful. By this time I had a proper set of rods including a small fibre glass spinning rod and reel. Another great venue was the Moss Lodges which was also great for swimming.

We started to go further afield, and a favourite place was the River Crossens near Southport. We had great sport catching snigs (eels) which we kept for eating. Other fish included roach, perch and big tench. We also fished the Liverpool Leeds Canal at Rufford and as we got a bit older and one of the lads could drive his father's van we would go to Loughrigg Tarn near Ambleside. We would sleep in the open air until daylight and then



Garners, a great place for fishing gear back in the day

fish for pike, using live bait, (not an acceptable method nowadays).

We also fished Tarn Hows and on one occasion we fished Ullswater using bubble floats, hoping to catch brown trout.

The Lancaster Canal was a great venue for all kinds of fish and people who did not have transport would go by train to Preston and then on the bus. It was quite a journey, but my older brother had a motorcycle and side car and when he took me fishing it was great. He used to take loads of food for the day and his famous saying was "If the fish don't bite we will"



Roach (Rutilus Rutilus)

Love and Strife in Skelmersdale 150 years ago

By Barry Carr

This is the case of love and alleged broken promises in the late 1870's that made newspapers across the country. It involves Elizabeth Swift of Blaguegate, Skelmersdale and her claim that a certain John Rhodes had promised to marry her before renegeing.

Ultimately this resulted in a court case at Liverpool assizes in 1878. Elizabeth Swift (the plaintiff) was a widow, 42 years of age, with six children, and lived at Skelmersdale; and John Rhodes (the defendant), who was 52 years of age, was a wealthy farmer residing at Ormskirk (*Editors Note: Typical*).

At the Liverpool Assizes, Elizabeth Swift sued John Rhodes to recover damages for breach of promise of marriage. Mr Cottingham and Mr Hardy were for the plaintiff; and Mr Russell, Q.C., and Dr O'Feely for defendant.

In court, Elizabeth Swift stated that her husband, who was a wheelwright and kept the Three Oaks Public house at Skelmersdale, had died in 1867. She continued the public house, and after her husband's death and was visited by the Rhodes, who said he had always admired her and would marry her. Despite what the press reports say, the Three Oaks wasn't actually in Skelmersdale, it was in Lathom.



Here it is, courtesy of 'Images of Burscough and the Surrounding Areas'

Nevertheless, the result of the intimacy was the birth of a child, and Rhodes then gave up visiting her, and she affiliated the child upon him. After that she left the Three Oaks and went to assist her brother, who kept the Ring-o'-Bells at Lathom.

Whilst at her brother's Rhodes came to see her in December 1873, and said he had not seen her for five years, and would fulfil his promise to marry her.

She returned to reside at Skelmersdale, and Rhodes again visited her there, and in 1875, hearing that another man named Paul Hunt was courting her, said he would take good care that she had not Paul Hunt - that, he would marry her himself. On this occasion he sent for Hunt, who came to the house.

This is how the court case proceeded as reported in the Monday Aug. 5th edition of the Edinburgh Evening news from 1878:

Mr Hardy: Did the defendant say anything to Hunt?

Witness: Yes, he said when he got to know that I was going with him he did not sleep for three or four weeks. (*Laughter*). Hunt then left the house, and did so quite vexed. On this occasion the Rhodes stayed all night at the invitation of her son, but did not sleep with her; he a stopped became it was getting late. The next morning before he went out, her son asked him what he intended to do, and he said he intended to fulfil his promise. He told her that he could keep her without work or business, that he had £1,000 in the docks (dock bonds), £1,200 in railway shares, and £900 invested somewhere else. He repeated this, she could say, fifty times during the time he kept her company.

Mr Russell: This is not a case of filthy lucre, I hope, but of blighted affections. (*Laughter*) Plaintiff further stated that defendant married a girl 19 years of age, who was his servant. Swift would then be cross examined by Mr Russel, acting for the defence:

Mr Russell: The age of her eldest child was beginning 23. Then you were married when you were a girl?

Swift: I was married, when I was 18.

Russell: The defendant never disowned the child till he went into court; he had paid 2s 6d a week regularly upon the affiliation order, and he always sent it by post; he had never sent her a letter, and he had told her he could not read a letter.

Russell: She first commenced to take up with Hunt In August of 1870; and he made love to her; she did not know whether he was a warm or a cold man — (*laughter*) — he was in pretty good circumstances.

Russell: Were you willing to marry Hunt?:

Swift: Yes, if Rhodes had kept away. (*Laughter*).

Russell: If Rhodes had not beguiled you?

Swift: Yes. (*Laughter*). But I never told him I would marry him.

Russell: You don't mean to say you were trifling with his affections? Was not he a most devoted lover?

Swift: I had not given my mind to him so much.

Russell: Was he not paying his attentions to you morning, noon, and particularly night? *(Laughter)*.

Swift: I was not going to marry a man in that way after what I had gone through.

Russell: You had really fixed your heart on John Rhodes?

Swift: I had.

Russell: Is he better looking than Paul? *(Laughter)*.

Swift: I don't care what a man's looks are if his heart is good. *(Renewed laughter)*. Rhodes was 56 or 54 at least, and a deal older than Hunt.

Russell: Did Paul ever give you a schedule of his wealth?

Swift: I don't understand what you mean.

Russell: Did he give you a list of his property?

Swift: I know he has five cottages; he is an engineer.

Russell: A civil one, I hope *(Laughter)*.

Swift: Of course, he has to do with colliery engines. He had four children by his first wife.

Russell: Perhaps they were an objection, were they?

Swift: I don't mind a man's children if I think well of the man. *(Laughter)*.

Russell: When Paul made his proposition, I suppose he went down on his knees ? *(Laughter)*.

Swift: If you ask me a feasible question, I shall answer you.

Russell: It is a proper thing to do, is it not ? *(Laughter)*.

Swift: I shall not do it.

Russell: He did not go down on his knees, then?

Swift: If he did I shall not tell you. *(Laughter)*.

Russell: I will spare your feelings, Mrs Swift.

Swift: I don't think you do. *(Laughter)*.

Russell: When Paul proposed to you, two months after his wife's death, did you say "I like you very well, but my heart is true to John?"

Swift: I am not so soft as that. *(Laughter)*.

Russell: Were you not meeting him morn, noon, and night, whenever he was away from his engine?

Swift: I never met him and he never met me excepting when he came to the house.

Russell: You won't tell me what you said to Paul?

Swift: I am not going to say.

Russell: After Rhodes asked you to marry him, you decided against Paul like a shot?

Swift: Of course I did. *(Laughter)*.

Poor Paul Hunt! He was just about ready to be fitted with a pair of antlers having been apparently cuckolded by the dashing (and rich) Farmer Rhodes. Hunt's Father was the landlord of Swifts house. In June 1875 Hunt's wife had died and some months after he had begun to show and interest in Swift, in November of the same year he was sent for by Rhodes to go to Swift's house and it was here that he witnessed Rhodes say he would marry Swift. Still, if he felt downcast at this turn of events he got over it pretty quickly!

Cottingham: In fact you left the field and retired?

Hunt: Yes.

The Judge : You don't seem to take it much to heart. (*Laughter*).

Cottingham (to witness): You have consoled yourself by marrying a young wife?

Hunt: Yes. (*Laughter*).

Amongst the witnesses called on behalf of the plaintiff to prove the promise made by the defendant were Robert and Sarah Swift the 23 and 22-year-old son and daughter of the plaintiff. Rhodes meanwhile was denying that he had ever promised to marry the plaintiff.

Cottingham: Then the whole thing is a falsehood from beginning to end!

Rhodes: It is all a lie. (*Laughter*).

Cottingham: And it is not true that you were the father of that child?

Rhodes: I don't think it is true. (*Laughter*). I would not have stood against it if I thought it was true.

The Judge: It is a clever child that knows his own father, but it may also be said it is a clever father that knows his own child. (*Laughter*).

The case continued the following Monday when Rhodes was cross examined under oath where he stated he had been married to his current wife, who had previously been his servant for two years. Cottingham emphasised to the Judge that the defendants counsel had not attempted to undermine Swift's character in any way and that she had not been asked any questions that undermined her version of events. He also pointed out that Paul Hunt had not visited Swift's house since the interview with Swift other than to collect his rent and furthermore that Swift had never taken legal steps against Hunt after his marriage.

The Judge clearly agreed, finding in favour of Swift, she was awarded damages of £50.

What was Happening About Skem

By Mark Boardman

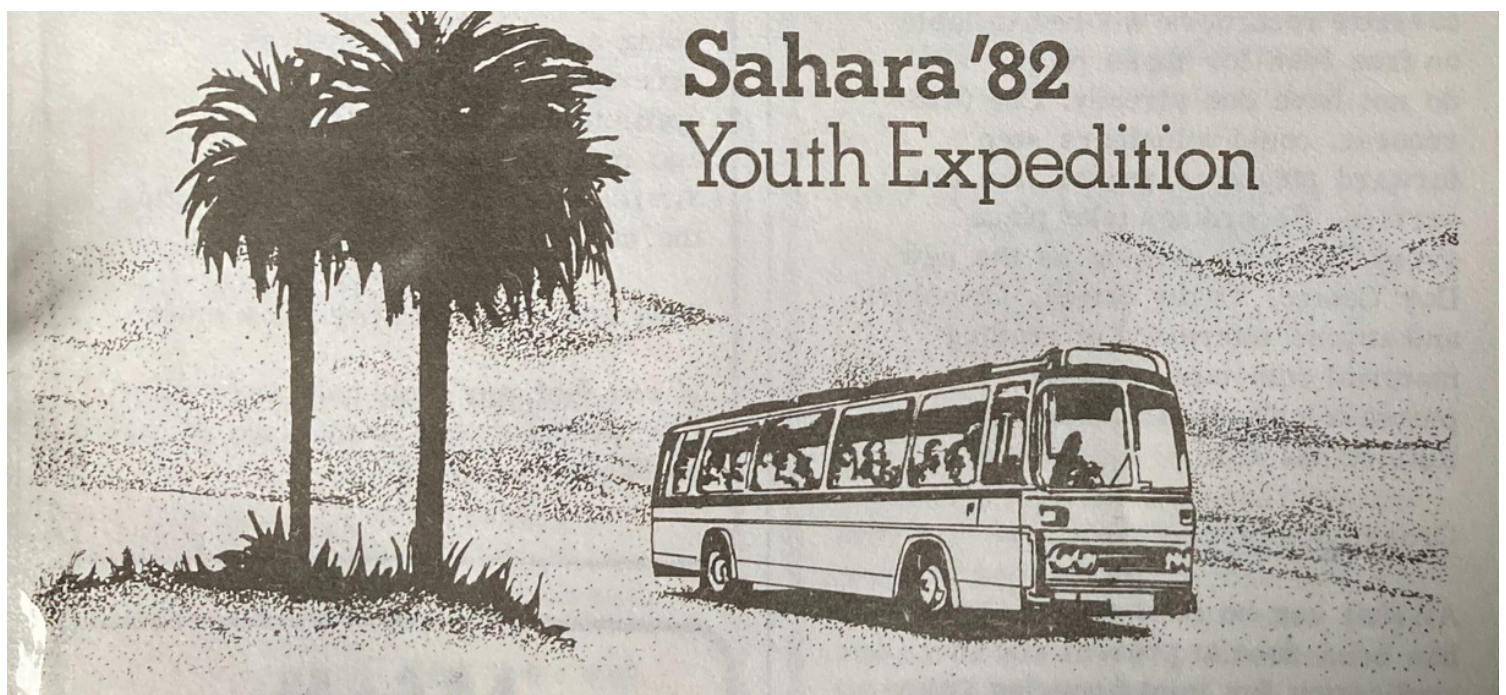
In December 1981 Skelmersdale Development Corporation published the eighth and final edition of 'About Skem', a quarterly newsletter that was designed to tell the residents of the town new and old about the activities of the various community groups in the local area.



So, what was happening forty years ago?

The young people of Ashurst Youth Club had a lot to look forward to as the plan was that in August 1982, they would all board a converted coach to go on the adventure of a lifetime! Twenty-three people aged between sixteen and twenty-one were being the opportunity to head to the Sahara desert!

Young people were asked to apply for the expedition that would last three weeks and cost £130 (a bargain £589 in today's money). The article ended with a call to get in touch to find out more and the statement that 'You may not be the same person when you return (?)' which was both grammatically incorrect as well as sounding like a mild threat.



Volunteers have always been the backbone of the town and Dave Williams was asking for donations to facilitate holidays, exchanges, and other community links between Skelmersdale and Belfast for the benefit of the young people of both areas. Their first effort was to try and raise £500 so they could arrange a trip to Scotland.

A longer article celebrated that 1981 had been the United Nations 'International Year of Disabled Persons' and the local branch of PHAB kept readers up to date with what they'd been up to. The Ormskirk Advertiser had announced plans to release a 'Talking Newspaper' for the benefit of those who were blind or partially sorted. The newspaper would record every edition onto cassette tape so that the local population could keep up with the news. There was also the announcement that 'The Thursday Club' was now available for younger disabled people aged between sixteen and thirty years, meeting at the Ecumenical Centre between 2 and 4 PM on Thursday afternoons.



Plenty going on at the Ecumenical Centre in 1981

The Sunday school classes continued and in later years when owned by the council it continued to be used as a meeting hall and social venue with St Paul's players putting on many performances.

And it wasn't just young people who were being offered support, The West Lancashire District Adult Literacy Service was offering to group and individual tuition to anyone aged over 16 who struggled with their reading.

Struggles of a different kind were being dealt with by the Marriage Guidance Council who were looking for a new receptionist.

The Summit Mountaineering Club based on Aughton Street, Ormskirk were looking for new members to take part in their fell walking, rock climbing, winter snow and ice climbing expeditions in Scotland and abroad.

Plans were in place for the West Lancashire Show of July 1982, following the success of the 1981 event that saw over 35,000 visitors. January 22nd would see Skelmersdale hold its very own Antiques Roadshow at the Ecumenical Centre after a successful event had been held at Appley Bridge in November.

The local schools had been benefitting from the efforts of Cerys Smye-Rumsby who had been working with local musicians to give young people the chance to learn about music and meanwhile Skelmersdale College announced the release of his handbook for the academic year that introduced a wide range of A Level and O Level Subjects including Law, Sociology, Electronics, and the History of Art.

The Sports Centre would be a hive of activity with a Five a Side Tournament scheduled for to run from January to March, a Table Tennis Tournament in January, and Ladies five a side. There was also gymnastics, Yoga plus clubs for Archery, Boxing, Badminton, Karate and more!



Finally, Tawd Vale High School (now Lathom) were delighted to announce that their fundraising drive had resulted in the purchase of a brand new minibus for use on field trips.



Tawd Vale High School. 1981

So, as we can see, despite the challenges that the town was facing in the early 1980s a lot of effort was going into making sure the people of the town had the resources they needed. This proud tradition of volunteering continues today with the numerous groups that still operate in the area... including this one!

The Most Wonderful Time of the Year: Images of Skelmersdale in winter



Beacon Park, winter 1973, courtesy of Edith Coombe



View from Cornbrook, winter, 1973, courtesy of Edith Coombe



Sandy Lane, Year unknown



Billy Briscoe, Sandy Lane, year unknown



Liverpool Road, Market Hall on left, possibly 1928



Construction of Gillibrands Bridge after snowstorm, February, 1970.



Church Road, mid 1960s