Hale Village

The popular aspects of Hale Village, such as the Childe of Hale (his cottage pictured), have been well documented. This article looks at selected characteristics of the post medieval village, including the Ice-House, the Duck Decoy and the former route of the Back Lane.

Aspects of Post-Medieval Hale

Introduction

Although the History of Hale appears to be well documented, on taking a closer look at the material available, printed works barely scratch the surface, tending to concentrate on the popular appeal of the Childe of Hale, the Hale Hall and the Church. Yet there is a wealth of history still to be discovered in and around the village.

Current Research

For over a decade, David Roberts, a former Chairman of Merseyside Archaeological Society, has been taking on the mammoth task of studying the history of the Parish from its earliest times through to the present day.

Building surveys have been carried out and field names have been amassed and plotted, as well as being systematically walked to gain a complete image of the landscape. Documents and maps have been copied and collected from their various repositories. At the time of writing, a summary paper is due to printed in Journal of the Merseyside Archaeology Society. In the interim, however, we are able to highlight one or two areas presently under scrutiny in anticipation of fuller expositions appearing at a later date. [(1)]

The 'Back Lane' of Hale

In the planning of medieval villages, it was a common feature that where the crofts met against the open-field strips there was often a back lane, a perimeter road giving access to the fields. This was bounded on one side by a ditch and fence, which kept domestic animals from straying into arable fields, and on the other by the croft hedges, which helped to keep out predators. At various points there would be alley-ways running between the crofts leading to the main street. [(2)]

In Hale, such a lane existed until the 19th century. The course of the lane ran behind the High Street on the south side and would have provided access to the fields where the Park now lies. The route began on the east side, at a point now evident as a driveway between the Childe of Hale's house and the row of

Hale Park

Photographed by Mike Royden (1990).

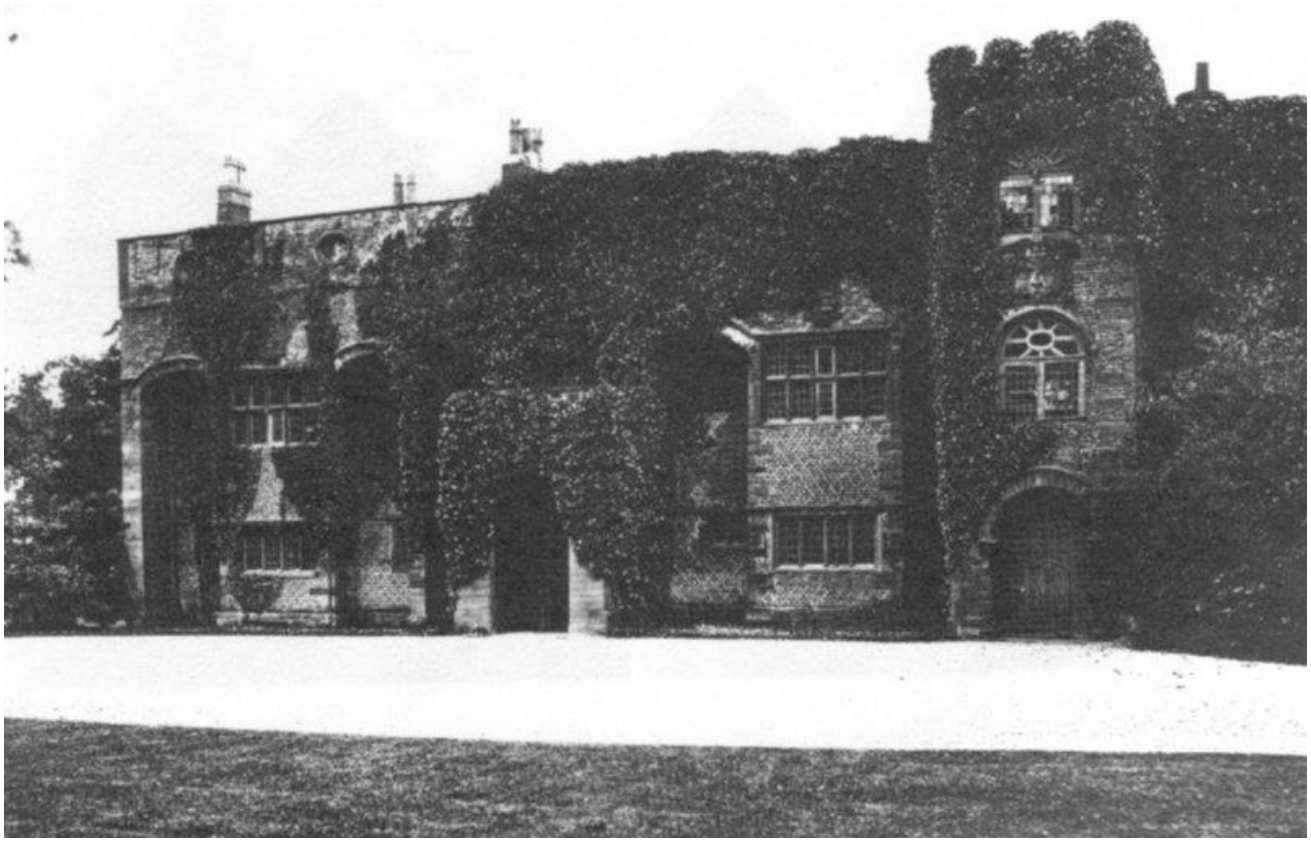
Hale Head
Photographed by Mike Royden (1990)

Hale - Within Way (top right)
Photographed by Mike Royden (1990)

South Hale, Halebank, Mersey and Runcorn Bridge
Photographed by Mike Royden (1990)

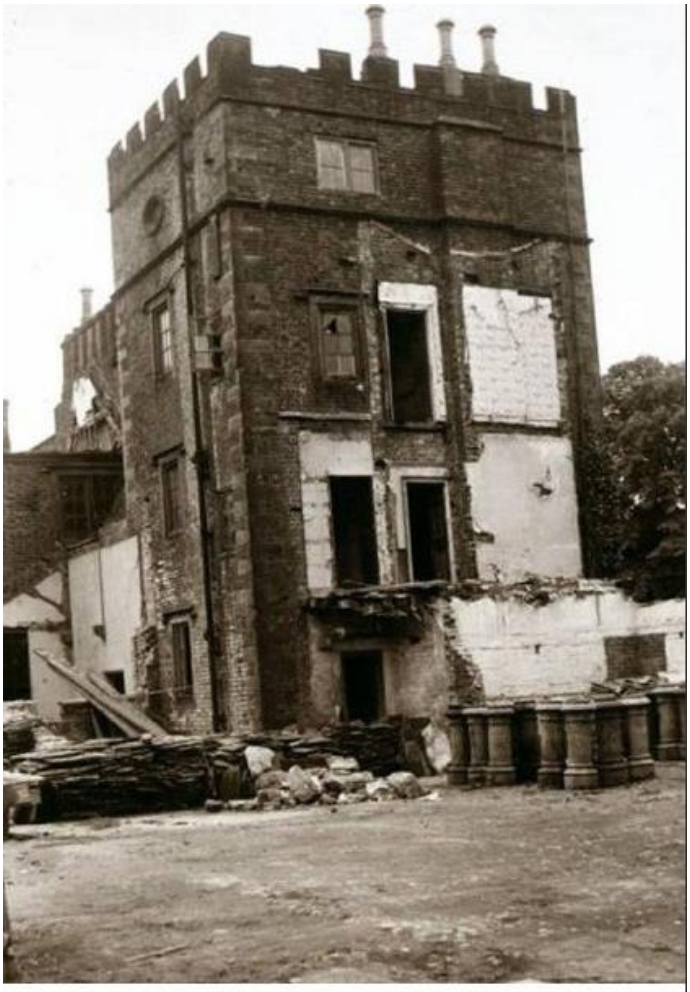
Hale Park and Church End
Photographed by Mike Royden (1990)

Hale Hall in the 1840s



Hale Hall c.1900

Hale Hall c1900



Hale Hall, Halewood, Hale. 1937

(below)

Hale Hall 1981

Photographed shortly before demolition. The area was so overgrown it was impossible to take a clear shot of the Hall.

thatched cottages alongside. A distinct ground depression between rows of trees and hedges, which runs for a few yards towards the Park, indicates the probable route at this point. The lane then turned and followed a line across the Park parallel with the High Street, passing Home Farm, and re-emerging on Hale Road in the west. The Home Farm access road was part of the lane at this end.

Not only does the Hale Enclosure Map of 1803 [3] clearly show the route described above, but the map also shows two of the 'alley- ways' which linked the back lane to the High Street. One lane appeared to run directly from Cocklade Lane on the High Street to the back lane, while the other was part of the lane now used as the entrance to the Park. Regarding the latter, the map showed its original form, in that it ran only to the back lane; it was extended to reach Hale Hall only in the last century.

Together with the Home Farm, at least ten cottages lay along the route of the back lane when the map was drawn. Several cottages also lined the two alley lanes.

During the medieval period, the centre of the village in Hale was situated around the village green in Church End. Once this fact is considered in conjunction with the route taken by the back lane, an interesting theory develops; as the back lane makes a straight link not only between Hale Road and the centre of the medieval village, but also with the Within Way (which, of course, led on to the ferry crossing), was this back lane originally the 'High Street'? Was the present High Street a later addition? The existence of so many dwellings along the back lane is certainly unusual; their survival as remnants on a decayed high street does not seem improbable.

Why did the lane not survive into the 20th century? The answer to this seems fairly straightforward. During the first decade of the 19th century, Hale Hall underwent extensive renovations carried out by the Lord of the Manor, John Ireland-Blackburne. He probably objected to the lane with its tenant cottages being in such close proximity to the Hall. The vista would no doubt be improved once the lane and the cottages were removed completely and the area landscaped, or at least, incorporated into the Park. This appears to have been the case, as on the next land survey in the mid-19th century, [4] the lane and cottages had disappeared, as had the alley opposite Cocklade Lane. The cottages on the second alley were also removed, while the alley itself was turned into a driveway to the Hall. The land between the Childe's cottage and the thatched row was still called 'Lane' on the 1841 Tithe Map.

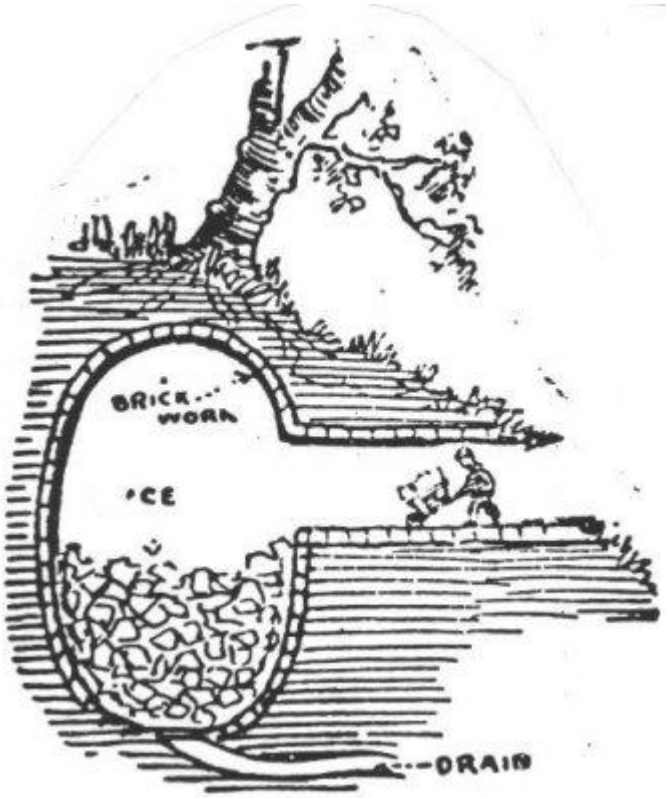
If there was a back lane, it was normally built to give access to the field strips farmed by the villagers within an open field arrangement. According to Dr. Robert Philpott of the Merseyside Archaeological Survey,

> **'In common with the other south west Lancashire boroughs, Hale had an open field system. An Ireland-Blackburne Estate Map of 1837 marks a group of narrow enclosed strip fields between Withen Way Lane and the road to Widnes as the 'Townfield'. A late 18th century reference to land on the north side of Church Lane mentions the 'South Townfield' and this may either have been part of a single large field on the sandy soil south and east of the town or one of two or more smaller fields comprising the open arable of the township'. [5]**

Recent aerial photography has revealed clear evidence of the former existence of medieval field strips in the field lying between the Church Willow Bed and the dog leg of the Within Way. [6]

Hale Village

The Ice House



In Hale Park to the west of Hale Hall there is a small wood known as the Icehouse Plantation. Within the wood, near to the track which runs to Home Farm, is a small subterranean chamber - an icehouse - from which the plantation takes its name.

Before Man had the benefit of the refrigerator, he was continually faced with the problem of the cool storage and preservation of food. The icehouse method was developed as an attempt to alleviate the problem and structures were usually sited on the rising bank of a running stream. They were generally underground egg- shaped brick-lined chambers, sunk in the embankment, and shaded with a clump of trees. Entrance to these structures was by means of a subterranean passage, along which the ice taken from the surface of the stream in winter was conveyed. This ice was then thrown into the chamber, the sides of which had been previously lined with straw. Here it lay until the summer; the superfluous moisture being carried away by a drain at the base.

Such a construction is known to have existed in the Dingle in Liverpool. A short distance before the Cheshire Lines Railway enters Dingle Tunnel, the Line originally crossed a bridge over a narrow gorge called Dickenson's Dingle. On the north side of the embankment an ice house was discovered in the late 19th century. Robert Griffiths visited the site while compiling his History of Toxteth Park;

> **'Known as the Cave, it is an egg-shaped cavity in the ground, lined with bricks. This was brought to light a few years back through the roof giving way beneath the weight of a cow peacefully browsing above it. The hole thus made soon became enlarged, and a deep subterranean chamber was exposed to view. Leading into this was an underground passage, which was then discovered to be none other than the famous tunnel. [(7)] The brick lined chamber was afterwards filled with earth, and the subterranean passage has become almost blocked up with earth and rubbish. And here ends the mystery of the subterranean tunnel'. [(8)]**

The Hale Icehouse is very similar to the Dingle example. It is several feet in diameter and with a torch and small step ladder it is a simple job to climb inside. The walls are circular with a domed corbelled ceiling. Part of the dome actually rises above ground level but is disguised with earth, trees and bracken. The chamber is partly silted up, thus preventing a full survey of its construction, although the foundation is probably the same as the Dingle icehouse. It is likely that the drain ran into the dried-up pool below. A partly filled pool also lies close by, both being the necessary source for ice.

Ice-houses of this kind tend to date from the late 17th to mid-19th Century. A precise date is yet to be placed on the Hale Icehouse, but it is possible that it was constructed during the 1806 rebuilding programme at Hale Hall. The corbelled ceiling of the interior contains similar bricks used on the Hall extensions. More work is required before reasonable conclusions can be made. The Icehouse has been recognised as being of historical importance and was cleared out in recent times by the Hale Preservation Society, however despite their keen efforts it is again silting up.

Rabbit Hey

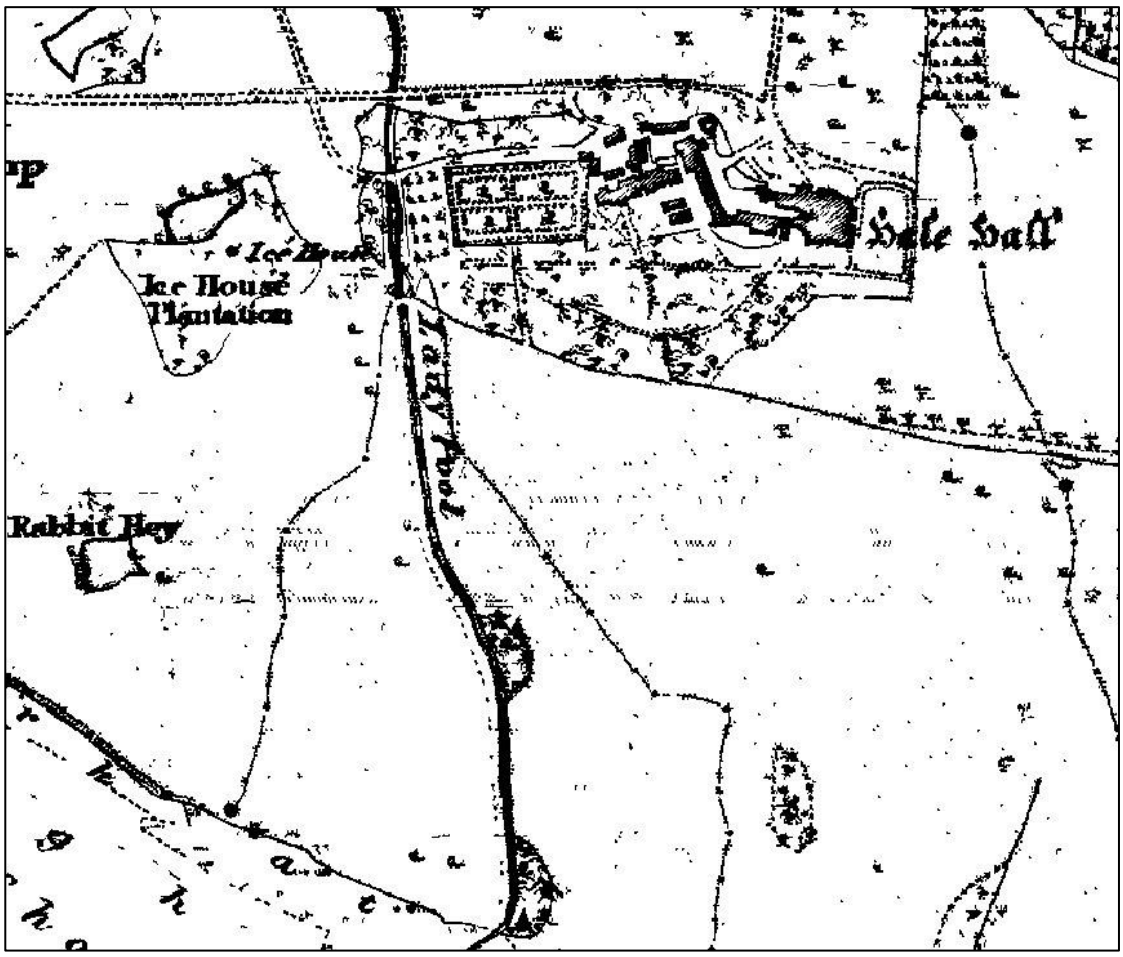
Lying between the Icehouse Plantation and the Lady Pool brook is a field with the name of Rabbit Hey. It is quite possible that this was once the site of a rabbit warren built by the villagers. All over England there are numerous examples of such creations which when occurring as earth works, are referred to as pillow mounds, although they are more cigar or bolster shaped. They can occur in association with ridge and furrow and village earth-works, but they are more widespread on upland areas like Dartmoor, where hundreds of them are scattered across the upland pasture.

After much debate it seems that these were built for rabbits to live and breed in so that they could be caught for meat and fur. This may have been done in the Middle Ages, but many warrens seem to date from the 16th century onwards. Their construction and use indicates permanent pasture, thus, they presumably represent abandoned areas when occurring on village and field sites.

Only one warren seems to be securely dated: that at Bryncysegrfan, Llanfair Clydogan in Dyfed, which was excavated and found to have stone tunnels within it; radiocarbon dating suggests a date around AD1375+ 60. [9]

Other features sometimes occur in association with the warrens. Often there was a warrener's house with sheds, where feed, nets, and other equipment would have been kept. Sometimes a boundary, rather like a park pale, can be distinguished around the warren area. Much more difficult to find although probably widespread, are the cross shaped vermin traps built to intercept predators like rats and weasels.

The Rabbit Hey in Hale has natural boundaries on two sides; the Mersey to the south and the Lady Pool brook on the east, which would have been an ideal site for the creation of such a complex. However, no evidence has yet been discovered to enable a positive claim to be made regarding the existence of such a structure in Hale. All that can be observed in the Rabbit Hey today is a filled in marl pit and a few undulating curves in the landscape. If visible evidence did exist it has long been ploughed out.



Hale Duck Decoy

On leaving Hale village and proceeding towards Halebank, the traveller cannot help but notice an isolated wooded area to the right in the salt-marsh fields leading down to the Mersey. Situated a few hundred yards to the south east of Town Lane, a seventy-five-yard belt of trees form the outer boundary of Hale Duck Decoy.

It was designed so as to resemble similar coverts dotted around the surrounding landscape and to be attractive to the scores of wild fowl which visited the Hale and Ince Banks each year. Lowland areas of England were not only important for pasture; where seasonal flooding was common the wildfowl that was attracted to the area provided a source of food which was important in the locality for a very long time.

Such areas were frequently drained and enclosed, which effectively reduced the natural habitat suitable for visiting ducks and other water fowl. Attempts were made during the 17th century to create artificial pools with trapping systems, although it was not until the 18th and 19th centuries before such systems achieved a reasonable level of sophistication. The result of these efforts was the duck decoy.

In Hale a footpath leads from Town Lane to a fifteen feet wide moat surrounding the outer perimeter of the Decoy wood. A strong wooden plank on a pivot acted as a drawbridge to provide access; this was swung to the bank-side and padlocked against a post when not in use. The earth recovered from the moat during construction was used to form an inner rampart and a stone pathway led through here down to the inner pool and channels.

Its date of origin is unclear, and has been placed at 1613 and 1631 with no degree of reliability. The outer moat is pentagon in shape with a pond of similar appearance in the centre. At the five points of the pond small canals curve off towards the outer boundary.

In the mid-19th century, while the decoy was still in use, catches were reported at between 750 and 1,500 ducks per season, and it was estimated that by that time over 200,000 birds had been taken since its

construction. The maintenance of the pond was around £30 per year. An anonymous contemporary writer reported;

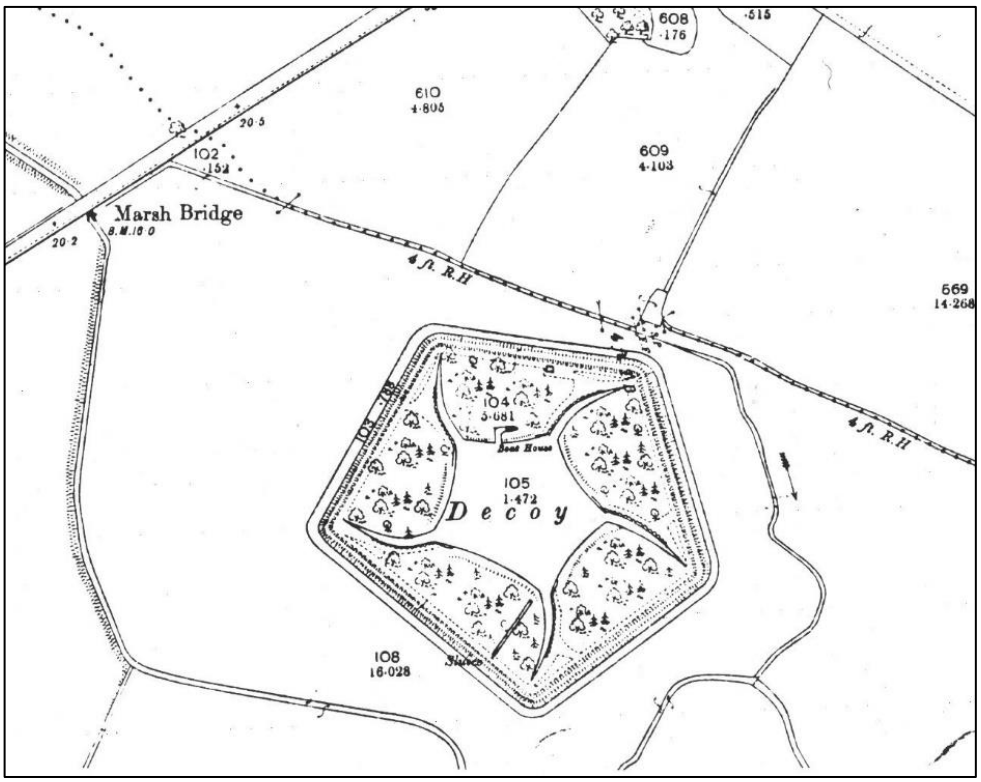
> **'...The pond measures about three acres, and looks like a sweet little sylvan retreat for water fowl, elves, fays, fairies and spirits, but the atmosphere on account of the swampy locality and lack of wind over the surface of the water is somewhat close and its smell musty. The ducks seem, nevertheless, to thrive well...The openings (into the central pond), five in number, are fifteen feet wide and wind circularly...' [(10)]**

The openings were fenced on both sides by eleven feet high boards which were laid in zigzag pattern. Holes were cut at intervals which enabled an observer to view the ducks unnoticed as they swam along the channel. At the end of the channel, where it narrowed down to a point, there was a net fixed on hoops with a round opening leading onto it. Small dogs were trained to run between the zigzag boards to drive the ducks towards the net, where they were usually helped inside by observers beating on the boards. Once in the net they were easily secured.

Only a very small number of decoys remain [(11)] and Hale is one of the best preserved. In some parts of the country, especially eastern England and the Somerset Levels, dry grassy hollows - all that can be seen of former decoys - are widespread. Frequently they coexisted with rectangular or circular stock ponds and together they form distinctive elements of lowland landscapes.

Decoy Marsh, the land surrounding the Hale Decoy between the Ram's Brook and the smaller ditch approximately 200 yards to the north, was purchased by the National Trust some years ago, ensuring the preservation of this post medieval relic. Today its restoration has ironically become the embodiment of the very opposite of its original purpose - a bird sanctuary. Visitors are allowed in the Decoy, but only by appointment and on accompaniment by the Keeper.

Mike Royden (1992)



Hale Duck Decoy

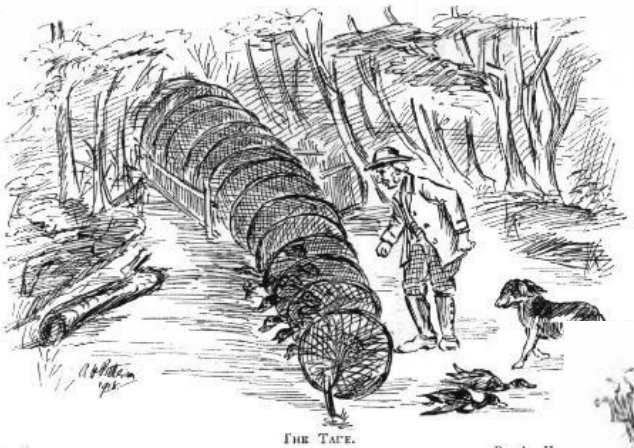
Photographed by Mike Royden (1989)

Map 1895

Drawn by Author

Vincent Brooks Day & Son. lith.

DECOYMAN ENTICING WILD DUCKS UP THE DECOY PIPE BY THE USE OF A DOG.

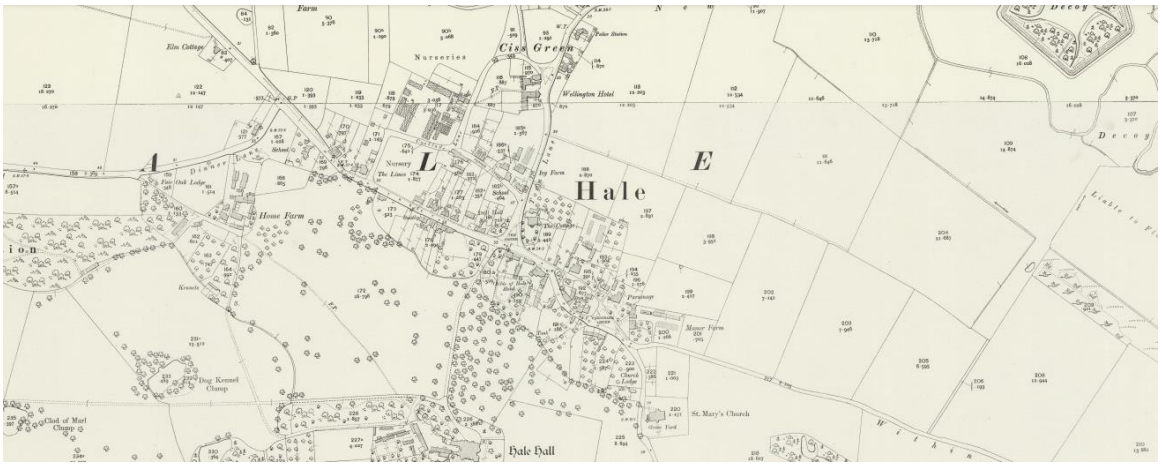


THE TAPE.

By A. H.

WHAT HE SEES.

By A. H. Patterson.



Footnotes

1. Ecroyd-Smith. H, 'Notes of the Architectural and Natural history of the Mersey District', Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire & Cheshire (1865) vol. p.197
2. ibid. p.199
3. Griffiths, R. op.cit. p.110
4. The Coucher Book of Whalley Abbey, extract translated from the Latin in Boult, J. 'The Historical Topography of Aigburth and Garston', T.H.S.L.C. vol 20 (1868), p.150 & p.156
5. This was the chapel used by the Puritan community of his home, and still stands at the foot of Park Road, Toxteth.
6. The Times 28th Dec 1921 and Saunders-Jones,R. 'Jordan & Jericho', Ancient Liverpool (Old Liverpool Industries), (1924) p.16
7. Griffiths, op.cit. p.113
8. ibid. p.115
9. ibid. p.116-7

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