

The Old Reservoirs at Central Park.

At the lowest point of Peverell Park Road, almost at the end of Edgcombe Park Road there were two old reservoirs stretching west into Central Park. These reservoirs were constructed in 1860 to provide water for the Stonehouse Leat; even though they were far distant from Stonehouse itself they were confusingly named the 'Stonehouse Reservoirs'. After a rather short operational life they closed in 1892. Except for brief periods of use during the First and Second World Wars the reservoirs were left to return to nature largely unused and undisturbed. By the 1950's, when I was in the habit of frequenting this man-made wilderness, they had become what would send today's 'Rewilders' and ecologists into fits of rapture.

The oldest reservoir nearest Peverell Park Road, 'Ressie One' as we used to call it, was a very convenient garden waste disposal site for all the Park and Avenue roads thereabouts and the allotments nearby. In those days garden waste was completely free of plastics and toxic detritus, so it was quite an acceptable way of returning green waste back whence it came without fear of pollution or contamination, all at no expense whatsoever to Plymouth Corporation.

The resultant Eco-climate that developed over many years was an area of many acres of land sunk twenty feet below ground level bursting with every imaginable species of flora and fauna, both natural and introduced, constantly enriched by its passive horticultural donors. The water margins of the numerous ponds and bogs that emerged on the clay-lined reservoir floor grew a great variety of vegetation, Yellow Flag Iris, Waterlilies, Watercress, green Algae in profusion, and Bull-rushes of every type. The dryer areas sprouted Birch, Larch, an old Christmas Tree that someone had lovingly replanted along with one of those seaside Palms (Cordyline). Thickets of Bramble were everywhere co-existing alongside feral Raspberry canes. Hydrangea and Hawthorn were quite at home together with wildflowers and garden flowers mingling in their unrestricted freedom. The vegetation and watery environment proved ideal for Newts, Frogs, Toads, and a host of insects to be identified, this all to the delight of the pupils of Hyde Park Junior School who unofficially used the 'Ressies' as a rich Nature Study resource. Needless to say, bird life was prolific. In damp weather a blanket of mist hung overhead adding a mysterious aura to the old reservoir. Lying next to but totally unaffected by the suburban bustle of Peverell Park Road, it was our very own Eden Project, long before its time.

Alongside the old wild reservoir towards the west, was Ressie Two. Unlike the first reservoir which was square and of a natural construction this was a multi-sided enclosure clad in concrete with 45 degree sloping walls. It is not known if the concrete was used when the reservoir was initially built or was a later modification to improve water storage. The smooth sides, level floor, and lack of vegetation made it the perfect Velodrome for the local boys, free from any harassment from the Park Keepers. The Parkies were always busy over at the Milehouse end of the park with the swing park and the model boat ponds and were unconcerned with the Ressies. Once your pushbike was lowered into the arena by way of a knotted rope permanently tied to a nearby tree especially for this purpose, the fun could begin. One minor flaw in the Velodrome concept was that when you arrived at

the corners you were immediately confronted with a tricky prismatic obstacle requiring an abrupt change of direction. This unfortunate feature resulted in many grazed knees and elbows but developed our cycle handling skills to an extraordinary level of proficiency. Swooping down from a great height on the embankments to the reservoir floor and then back up again in a graceful curve was a joy to experience.... On the few times that it actually happened that is!

Our Ressies did not survive the inevitable rebirth of Plymouth and were filled in during the early 1970's. All that remains of that wild place today, is in comparison, a somewhat bland playing field, still flanked by the original allotments which actively supported Ressie One in its Green Period. To the credit of the planners the site has not been built over and still retains a natural feel for the time being. Today an experienced eye could maybe identify the original footprint of the reservoirs, the raised ground to the west gives a hint, but little more than that. I have searched endlessly for old photographs of the time but all that is forthcoming are three rather grainy 1930's shots lacking any real detail.

As with most enquiries into the past more questions arise than are answered. What route did the Stonehouse Conduit take through what is now Central Park? Why were the reservoirs abandoned? Could they have been preserved? The search continues.