

THE BURRATOR RESERVOIR

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Background information for a West Dart History Group visit - 5 July 2022

Burrator Reservoir

By the Tudor era Plymouth was well-established as an important naval and commercial port. As the population expanded, and the number of ships requiring provision increased, so too did the demand for a reliable source of water. This was met in 1591 with the opening of Drake's or Plymouth Leat which took water from the River Meavy and followed a sinuous contoured course to Millbay providing water to the town by a series of conduits and driving a series of mills, some owned by Sir Francis Drake.

The development of the town of Plymouth Dock, later named Devonport, meant that by the late 18thC the water supply was again seriously inadequate. Consequently, a new leat, the Devonport Leat, was constructed from the West Dart River north of Wistman's Wood and opened in 1797.

By the end of the 19thC population of the Plymouth area had increased to over 150,000 and the leats were unable to meet demand. In 1891 the Plymouth County Borough Water Engineer, Edward Sandeman, recommended that a reservoir be built at Burrator and this was completed in 1898. The reservoir has two dams, the Burrator Dam across the River Meavy at Burrator Gorge, and the Sheepstor Dam built on a low point above the Sheepstor Brook to the south-east. The massive Burrator Dam, constructed first, has a concrete core wall faced with granite blocks. The Sheepstor Dam is an earth embankment with a core of puddled clay on concrete foundations.

In 1923 it was decided to enlarge the reservoir capacity from 668 million gallons to 1,026 million. This was achieved by raising the height of both dams by 10 feet. Work began in 1923 and was completed in 1928.

The watershed north of the reservoir had been purchased in 1916 by Plymouth Corporation which ordered the cessation of agricultural activity as a prelude to termination all farm leases over an area of 5,500 acres. It is debatable as to whether or not the farms were in any way a serious threat to the purity of the reservoir water which was filtered before being piped to consumers. What is not in doubt is that over a dozen long-established farming families lost their livelihoods at the stroke of a pen and their homes were left to fall into ruins.

Longstone Manor

Only one farm, Essworthy, was drowned by the reservoir waters, and certainly no hamlets or villages with church bells tolling in the depths. The best-preserved ruins of the other farms are those of Longstone Manor House which was originally a farmstead and reverted to that function in 1748. It is probable that there was a dwelling on the site from the C13, built by Herbert de Cumba, though much of the present structure dates to 1633 when it was constructed by Walter Elford. His son, John Elford, is believed to have been the builder of the wind strew, a threshing platform, to the north-west of the house in 1637.

The farm was sold to Sir Manasseh Masseh Lopes, 1st Baronet of Maristow in 1811. The Maristow Estate became the Roborough Estate in 1938 when the 4th Baronet was raised to the peerage as Baron Roborough. The farm was tenanted until 1897 and after 1898 was abandoned as the reservoir had flooded most of its lands. The house itself was noted as being in good repair at this time. After the site was abandoned, the roof was removed. When the reservoir was expanded between in 1928 the remains of the outbuildings to the south of the main house were submerged. Work to consolidate the masonry remains of the main house were carried out in the late C20.

The house itself survives as a structure measuring 14.5m long by 6.5m wide and stands over 4m high. There is evidence of a double height ashlar porch, as well as five windows and three fireplaces, and the main building materials include granite stones, killas (slate) infill and internal white plaster. The threshing platform survives standing at up to 1.2m in height, and measuring 6m long by 5.5m wide, constructed of granite with three stones used as steps

(Some of the information on Longstone is taken from Eric Hemery's book *High Dartmoor* published by Robert Hale – 1983, which contains a substantial section on the manor house and the Burrator farms. This book is an extraordinary achievement and is, in my view, the best available on the subject of Dartmoor.)

Middleworth Farm

The earliest account of the occupation of the site of Middleworth is 1281 though its origins are probably Saxon. It developed into a typical example of a late medieval Dartmoor farmstead with a longhouse and outbuildings. The farm buildings were modified in the mid-C19 under the land-ownership of the 3rd Baronet of Maristow, Sir Massey Lopes. The farmhouse and buildings are now reduced to single courses of stone, but the walls of the granite shippen are intact. They show fine masonry work including massive lintels, broad and narrow work on the quoins (corners) and expertly shaped upper floor springers.

