

Treasure trove that boasts chequered history

DUBBED the 'gateway to the Pennines', Healey Dell attracts thousands of nature-loving visitors every year.

But while walkers often stop to take in the magnificent sight of Spodden Valley, they may be unaware that they are viewing an historical and ecological treasure trove.

Would they know that the nature reserve was once used to store enough shells to reportedly 'blow up Rochdale', for example?

Or that a surge in rare plants could bump up its status to a site of special scientific interest?

Clive Belgeonne, of the Friends of Healey Dell, is piecing together the site's chequered past for a £17,000 lottery-funded vision of the dell.

The group will continue its public consultation despite a government inspector's recent decision to allow homes to be built on Healey Hall Mills.

Mr Belgeonne is especially keen for information about the munitions factory, used to produce a reported million tons of explosives during World War Two.

"The dell was ideal because it was secluded and accessible, with a railway line running

from Whitworth," he said.

"The factory would ignore health and safety, according to one person.

They would build the Nissen huts - used to store shells - so close together that had a German bomb dropped on it Rochdale would have been taken off the map.

"Another man even remembers a German bomber trying to shadow a train, which it lost as it reached the woods."

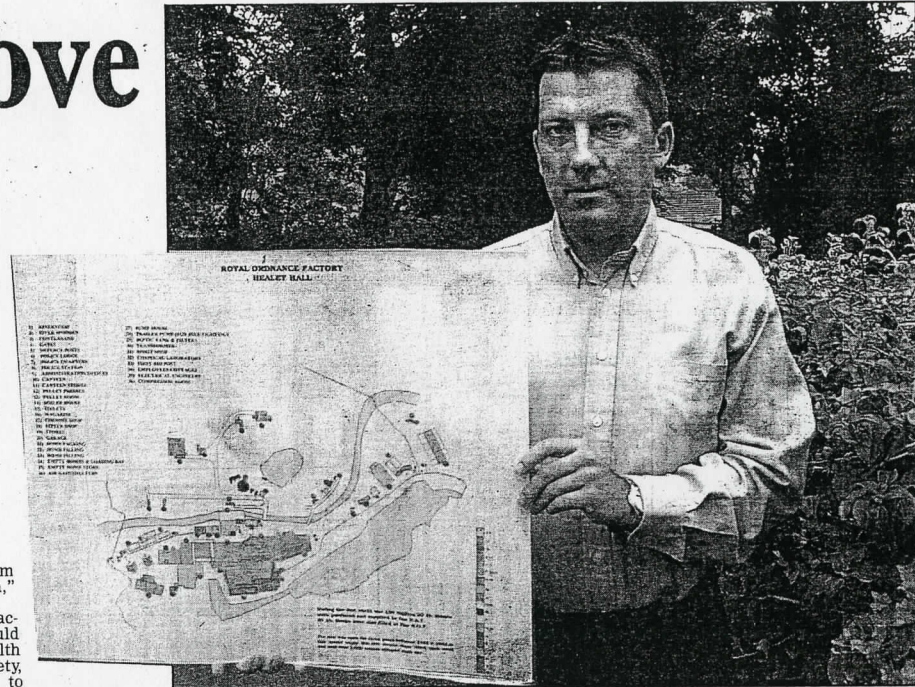
He added: "There are still remains of the factory on the west bank of the river and about eight sentry boxes.

"Did you or any of your friends or relatives work there or did you play there as a child?"

"We would also like any other memories from the post-war period, especially with regard to the railways."

The dell only became a nature reserve in the 1970s and a recent survey shows it was used by prominent industrial families, such as the Heaps and Tweedales, for more than two centuries.

Maps from the 1840s show the dell contained at least four mills, producing cotton, wool and flannel, a number of weirs and reservoirs and even the remains of a medieval



PIECING together Healey Dell's past ... Clive Belgeonne, of the Friends of Healey Dell, with an old map. OB3274A05

bloomy, used to smelt iron, near Market Street in Whitworth.

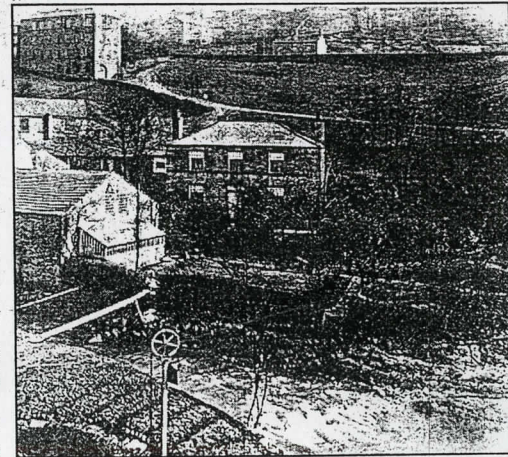
The friends also found the amount of rare moss and plants called bryophytes - a type of liverwort not present anywhere else in Lancashire - has trebled in size over the past decade.

The discovery has prompted the group to campaign for the dell to be upgraded from a site of biological importance to special scientific interest.

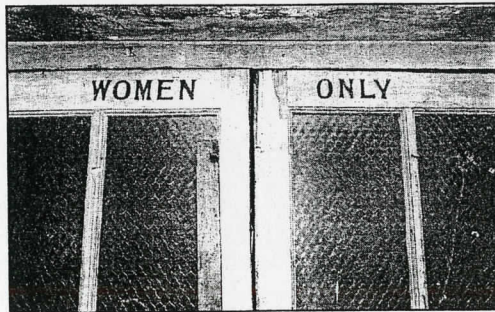
Mr Belgeonne added: "Healey Dell is a historical and ecological treasure trove, with its brilliant bryophytes, wonderful wildlife and magnificent mills and munitions.

"We want people to come forward with their memories and help us develop a long-term vision for the dell."

Anyone with information, particularly about the munitions factory and the railways, is asked to call Mr Belgeonne on 645347 or email clive@gn.apc.org.



CHANGING face of Healey Dell ... a view of Broadley Mill, from the south west, c1870.



SIGN of times past ... the old ladies' canteen which is now the doorway to one of the businesses on the dell. OB3274A05

R.O. 17/3/05
p. 11