

Year 8 History Project- Memories of the Holme Valley

The last day of term before summer stretches out. Miss talked for *ages* about our history project, 'Make sure you actually talk to people about their memories. Get to know your neighbours!'

I'd never spoken to Granny Barbara, who lived at the end of our street near the ditch always heaped with rubbish, but she invited me in for a brew and a kitkat.

We subdued the curling corners of an old map with our mugs, and I tried to make sense of the scrawl of lines and unfamiliar jigsaw of symbols. 'Do you know where we are on here?' came a question which presupposed the answer. 'You always need to know where you're from. You should always know which rivers will lead you Holme.'

Rivers?

A thread of blue on the map spooled from Digley reservoir, trickling through the valley right past where my finger pointed at *home*. Granny Barbara's squint eyes gleamed craftily when I argued that no such river ran through the valley. 'There isn't a river now, but there *used* to be one here when I was growing up'. The timbre of her voice grew angry as she told me how the reservoirs were extended to swell with water, but that this had cut off the flow of water that nourished the land and people below. Now there's just tarmac and scabs left.

I struggled to wrap my mind's eye around this new liquid reality, imagining the concrete becoming meltwater. Granny Barbara started to speak, and soon she was brimming with stories; stories which merged together and became tributaries to a larger tale, or which got caught in eddies where she forgot exactly *which* of her friends had swum naked one pale February night.

I tutted at her for lying about the 'Holmfirth Duck Race', but she swore blind that every year thousands of squat plastic ducks were tipped into the river, and children would wheel like kites along the banks waiting to glimpse the first sunstrike of yellow against the peaty water. She chuckled at jackets snagging on barbed wire in exchange for an illicitly caught fish. I had to look up what a *kingfisher* was later.

But then Granny Barbara's shoulders stooped, as she described the filth that invaded its banks- parents scolding children for paddling in case they stood on something sharp. Finally, there were tears in her eyes as she recalled the final day when she had heard its voice, before it ran dry while no one was paying attention. She cried as if she could bring the river back to life through her tears.

I looked up its history, read about the tragic flood of 1852, where Bilberry reservoir dam burst and a torrent of water swept through people's lives and homes. One day I walked up to the reservoir and stood in front of the looming dam. I imagined the water cascading forth, forcing people to notice its beauty once more.

Joanne