

BADLANDS

The summer's fires on Saddleworth Moor are the latest in a line of dark events to befall this wild place. **Trail** takes a walk amongst it and asks whether a place can ever transcend the sins of its past...

WORDS **SIMON INGRAM** PHOTOGRAPHY **KINGSLEY SINGLETON**

Looking out onto
Manchester from
Saddleworth Moor.





Above: The abandoned shooter's hut at Bramley's Lodge, looking to Dove Stone Reservoir.

Below: A vision of the summer's fires on Saddleworth.



CHRISTIAN HEINTZEN/ALAMY

History hasn't been kind to Saddleworth Moor. Never has a relatively small wild place been the site of such a grim and unrelated series of events. This jostle of high moor, steep edges and reservoirs sits above the eastern fringes of Manchester with the same proximity Skiddaw sits over Keswick, but never are you likely to hear Oldham touted as one of the great outdoor towns of England. The question is, should you?

First was the locally infamous 'Bill O'Jacks' double murder in 1832 in the remote Moor Cock Inn, which stood above the Yeoman Hey reservoir, where an 84-year-old man and his son were brutally killed over what was believed to be gambling. They don't really know as they never found the killer.

Then there was a plane crash in 1949 at the head of the Chew Valley which killed 24 passengers and crew. Some wreckage from the tragedy still remains on the moor as a permanent reminder – I'll never understand why it's acceptable to just leave this stuff up here. If you look there's also the fatal crash sites of a Mosquito fighter and a Lysander plane, both of which went down in 1944.

Then there were the 'Moors murders' of the early 1960s which everyone knows about, and we won't be delving

into here, much less name the wicked pair who committed them. Saddleworth is synonymous with their crime, being the backdrop and grave for four of their five victims, one of whom is yet to be found. Over fifty years later, with both protagonists dead, investigators still periodically return to scratch old ground, the moor again chillingly cordoned off with *Crime Scene – Do Not Enter* tape feels the forensic prod of police.

Then in 2015, awful memories were re-agitated when the body of an unknown man was found beneath Rob's Rocks near the upper Chew Valley, with high levels of toxic strychnine in his system. It was later determined that he took his own life. Nobody knows why he chose Saddleworth.

To the present – and in an almost biblical turn of events – this relatively small pocket of ancient peat moorland was back in the news again when a suspected arson fire burned through it for almost the whole of June. Nine-thousand-year-old bogs dried out by a heatwave were turned into a giant, natural tinderbox. For weeks, Saddleworth was a vision of hell. The fire was so big it could be seen from space. So as you may imagine, two weeks after the last fire was extinguished Trail arrived in Saddleworth expecting to find a chaotic place wreathed in smoke and stinking of burning peat – accessories on a place that



Above: Climbers spied on Raven Stone rocks.

Top right: On the high moor.

Right: Ashy deposits on the paths – evidence of the recent fires that burned nearby.



“THE FIRE WAS SO BIG IT COULD BE SEEN FROM SPACE”

was already depressing to begin with.

Duly, the approach from the east was awesomely bleak: the A635 seemingly hugs the topmost contours as it runs across the northern brow of the moor, then plunges south. With the ground desiccated by the heatwave and layered like ocean swells, it was like driving across a brown, Martian sea. You could stand a cocktail stick up on a hilltop three miles away and it'd be the most vertically-inclined thing for miles. It was astonishing.

Then the road led into the glade shade of the Dovestone Reservoir, the left of the car filled with the brilliant glint of sun-on-water through trees, and then out onto the unmistakable, unnatural but not displeasing lines of a man-made lake. I ditched the car, paid the £1.30 per day charge to park in the spotless car park and started to walk. All around, crags looked down. The moor breaks slope around the reservoir with overhanging edges, and when you walk beneath them they throw sawtooth shapes against the sky. The huge shadow of a descending Dreamliner en route to Manchester Airport periodically crossed behind the billowy cloud, along with a near constant jet grumble roar, and I noted with interest that the crags these planes were cruising behind were the same that had downed that aeroplane way back in 1949. So far, so brooding. But I have to say, of what came next I have little but surprise.

The first surprise was, this is the Peak District. I never hear people mention Saddleworth Moor as 'that beautiful bit of the north western Peaks which is really, really accessible to millions of people who live within sight of it' – again, maybe this is negative press at work. But sure

enough, the yellow boundary of Britain's first national park closely but comprehensively scoops up the entire moor within it. It's as entitled to the Peak District title as Stanage Edge and Kinder Scout – but it's the bit nobody ever mentions, like the sibling heir who shaved their head and ran off to join a punk band. More proof? If you bang Saddleworth into OS, it redirects to somewhere tiny called Paddlesworth in Kent.

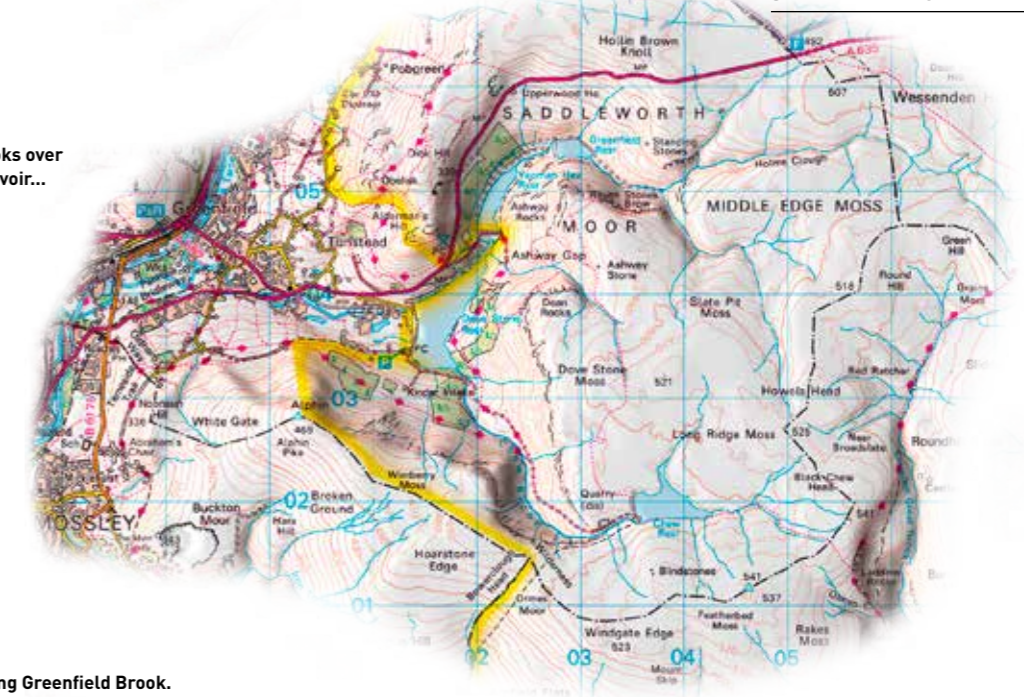
Secondly, it's the friendliest place I've walked in a good long while. As I walked up from the reservoir everyone said hello, and smiled. *Everyone*. People walking by, reservoir workers, people sat down resting, people out with their dogs. It was... strange. I felt compelled to check a mirror to make sure I hadn't turned into Professor Brian Cox or Sir Alex Ferguson on the way over. It's sort of sad that I noticed this, but it's a fact that in some places people don't say hello, pass the time of day, recognise your existence or give a monkey's whether you were there or not. People seemed delighted to be there. And as tragic as it is, this genuinely put me in a good mood as I took the track up towards the Chew Reservoir.

The next surprise was just how normal everything was. There were no cordoned off areas, no fire engines, no shell-shocked looking fire-fighters sitting on walls covered in ash. All the news maps seemed to suggest that right now we should be standing on the remains of a barbecue. Yet here was as comely a scene as I could imagine. "Oh, the fire was over that way. Side of Yapley Brow to Willie's Edge, then as far as Grike's Pot." This is not actually what he said but his accent was so thickly Scottish – that's right – I didn't quite get the specifics, other than that it was clearly well away from where we were so as not to hinder our day's explorations. This was all going very well.

Above Chew Reservoir the moor opens out and you enter big sky country. Discs of gritstone – the Peak District's signature rock – stood like islands in the heather. Near the edges they leaned over precariously, jointed and tilted, like stacked plates. You can take the moor path, and jump out of your skin every five minutes as fistfuls of grouse burst chortling from the



The Trinnacle looks over Greenfield Reservoir... and a long drop.



Below: Descending Greenfield Brook.



spirit-level the horizon. The Trinnacle – top marks to whoever thought of that name – has as its crown a trio of small horns, a leap between which makes Tryfan’s Adam and Eve look like a toddler’s play area. There are pictures online of some nutter doing it, but I was content just to look. Even that was enough to make my guts wriggle uncomfortably. Below, the Greenfield Brook was a slingshot descent away and soon I was descending back down a canyon where the water ran orange-brown with peat and the rock was reddened by it. Above, those skyline crags watched.

This last location was the one I took home. The best word to describe Saddleworth is not haunting (though it is) or cursed (which it might be) or grim (which it isn’t). Here’s a word I didn’t expect to use: spectacular. And in all, a place that offers a genuinely kaleidoscopic outdoor experience right next to the biggest city of the north. Maybe it is seen as all of these things by many already. The reservoirs certainly weren’t short of visitors today.



Above: The heather showing plenty of colour.

One thing is absolutely for sure – Saddleworth has a power and an atmosphere of rare concentration, an edgeland with a story, and an atmosphere you could kick. It’s good, it’s bad, it’s beautiful... but it’s there.

There is a line in the Michelle Paver book *Dark Matter* that goes: “If something happens in a place – something intensely emotional or violent – it imprints itself upon the place.” The author calls this idea ‘place memory.’ It’s a strange idea to warm to. But it could hold water. Who is to say only humans have memory?

But here’s a thing. Of all the people you might expect to fear it, avoid it, feel disturbed or appalled by it, Winnie Johnson came here as often as she could. In 1964 her 12-year-old son Keith Bennett didn’t come home. He’s still up here somewhere. She never found out where. Of Saddleworth Moor she had this to say, a few years before her death in 2012: “I love it up there. It’s so peaceful.”

“THE TRINNACLE IS A WEATHERED, HOUSE-SIZED BLOCK OF GRITSTONE”

ground, or you can walk along the edges. After a few instances of the former, I plumped for the latter.

There are lots of things about Saddleworth Moor that are interesting but don’t sit quite so high in the national consciousness. Saddleworth has a long history of human activity. Mesolithic people settled there. An old myth concerns two giants named Alphin and Alder – both immortalised in the names of local hills – who had a fight over a water nymph called Rimmon, who lived in Chew Brook. Rimmon preferred Alphin, who was killed in the fight (lots of throwing of rocks) and Rimmon hurled herself off the crags above Chew Brook to join him.

An inscription found on a rock above the Chew Brook reads, in Ancient Greek glyphs, ‘Behold the Works of God.’ It is thought to date from 1685 and to be some reference to the Ottomans, who were trying to eradicate the language at the time. What it’s doing there, nobody knows. A huge subterranean system of rock fissures lies beneath the moor, and is given the jingly name ‘Fairy Holes’, despite being hugely hazardous. It’s enjoyed by parties of schoolchildren to this day. It was an early champion of the anti-litter movement – in 1932 a scarecrow made of discarded rubbish

named ‘litter lout’ was burned in the Chew Valley in a kind of noxious Wicker Man-esque statement against despoiling the moor. In 1984 Lord John Hunt, the leader of the victorious 1953 Everest expedition, was pictured climbing on Alderman’s Hill, on the other side of the Dove Stone Reservoir. Then in 2002 locals got a shock when an American bald eagle, which had escaped from a country show, was spotted cruising the waters near Chew Reservoir. This was followed by the sighting of a panther-type big cat on the very moors I was walking along. All interesting stuff.

And you know what? It’s really quite pretty. In summer, with the heather vivid and the cottongrass bobbing, and the purple loosestrife waist-height by the path, it’s very fetching.

It *does* have a melancholy feel to it – if you know anything about it, it can’t not. When you get up to a place on this scale it seems almost ridiculous that humans and their troubles could in any way dent its natural power. But then, humans are everywhere here – they built the reservoirs below, they fly the planes overhead, and they live in the city whose skyscrapers you can see from the gritstone crags.

I stood on Dean Rocks and looked into Manchester, a dark-looking bristle of high-rises

softened by fumes and distance, at the end of a long valley of spurs. It’s hard to know what to make of this – whether Manchester is lucky to have this place on its doorstep, or Saddleworth Moor unlucky to have the city so close. I don’t really know, so don’t ask me. I just stood there feeling very struck by it all.

There was more to see, though, so I didn’t stand there for long. And if you’re the sort of person who would never associate the Peak District with long drops that make your stomach try to leap out of your mouth, the next bit of the moor is the place to firmly correct that idea.

Turn west along the edge that runs along Dove Stone Moss and you’ll start to appreciate this. The northern crags of this escarpment lean over a considerable drop over a gorge containing the Yeoman Hey reservoir. These rocks, which together combine into an escarpment called Raven Stones Brow, stack high against the cliff and in some cases, sickeningly over it. We saw climbers negotiating one. A few tourists photographing another. And then there was the one we’d come to see.

The Trinnacle is a weathered, house-sized block of gritstone levered out from the moor above, well, nothing. Beyond it, the Greenfield Reservoir offers a commanding backdrop, and the heights of the moor