

Gillian Smallwood visits a West Yorkshire town which has probably the oldest hostelry in the county and where pork pies are supreme. There is water, water everywhere in the Pennine hills above Ripponden, in fact so much that it has got to be the area's biggest 'export'. About half a dozen reservoirs, including Scammonden and Ryburn, dot the countryside attracting water sports enthusiasts, bird watchers and walkers.

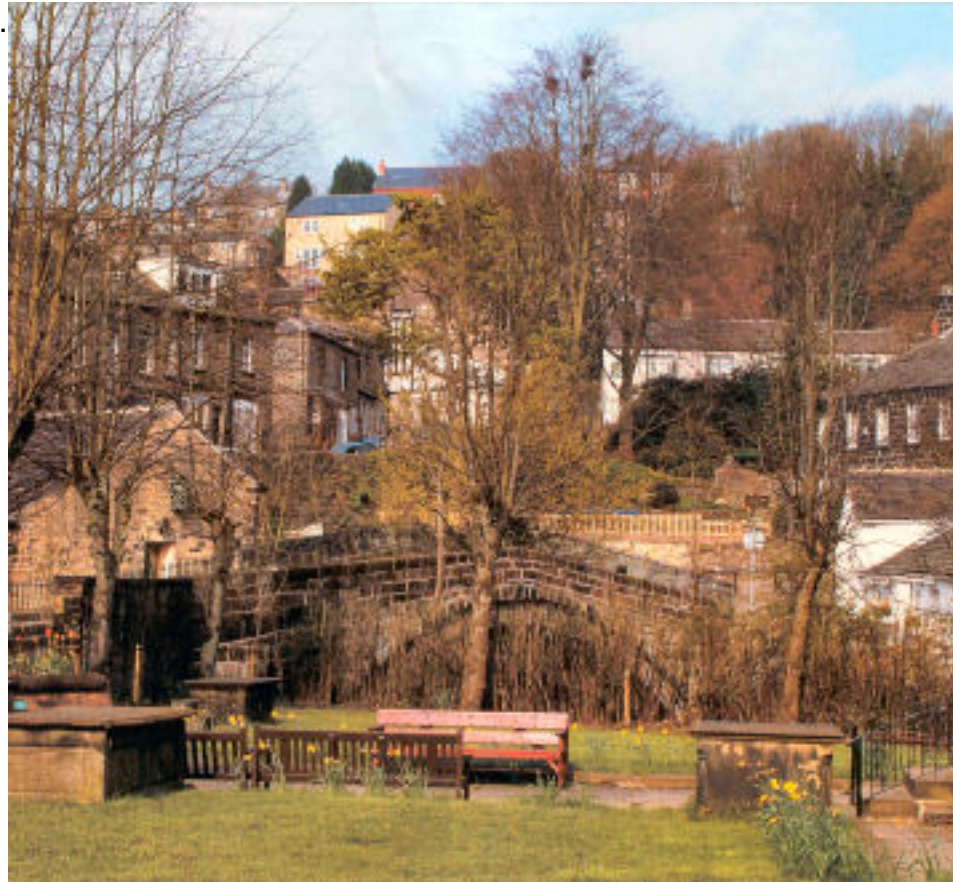


Down in Ripponden itself there is plenty happening including the gala, the pie eating contest and the up-coming rushbearing festival.

The rushbearing is the only festival of its kind in Yorkshire and it is a colourful sight, drawing huge crowds. Revived in 1977, it is now a two-day, annual event held each September. It starts with the blessing of the rushcart at St John's Church, Warley and after stops at seven churches and several public houses the revellers reach their final destination, St Bartholomew's Church, Ripponden.

Rushbearing dates back several centuries to the time when rushes provided floor covering in the churches. Each year, the old, rotten rushes were thrown out and new ones were taken to the churches in carts. This gradually turned into a celebration and holiday involving revelry, music and Morris dancing.

I was on my way to find out more about the pie-eating contest when a sudden heavy downpour prompted me to take shelter in one of the local cafes, and listening to the conversation I soon realised that Ripponden is a close-knit community. The diners and staff all knew each other well enough to be on first name terms, and the talk revolved around local issues and events.



Villagers have recently been doing some self-promotion with A Bit of a Do, which showcased several of the clubs and groups in the Upper Ryburn Valley including Ripponden Brass Band, Ryburn Ringers Handbell Group, the gardening club, the bowling club, pottery painting, dancing, keep fit and the art group.

As the skies cleared I headed for Old Ripponden, a secluded area by the church. I'd caught a glimpse of the slender spire of St Bartholomew's above the trees, but it was only when I reached the church itself that I spotted the ancient packhorse bridge across the narrow river Ryburn and the quaint, low, whitewashed buildings of the Old Bridge Inn.

It's probably Yorkshire's oldest hostelry - the earliest record of it is from 1307 - and it's here that the pie-eating contest takes place.

'Back in the 1980s, on Saturday afternoons, a group of young men would go to the local gym and then come here for a drink,' said Lindsay Eaton Walker, who runs the inn with her husband Tim.

'We're a traditional public house, rather than a restaurant and we don't serve food on Saturday or Sunday evenings.

'One chap always brought a snack to eat, and the others would be salivating as he ate it in front of them. Eventually they asked Tim if they could each bring in a pork pie and rather than lose a dozen thirsty lads he agreed. They soon realised that some pork pies had more merit than others and so the Pork Pie Appreciation Society was founded.

'Now we have an annual competition with butchers from all over the country entering their pork pies and the winner gets a trophy,' added Lindsay.



The Old Bridge Inn is full of history there's some original wattle and daub walls and a fine

cruck frame but one thing you won't find is a traditional pub sign outside the door

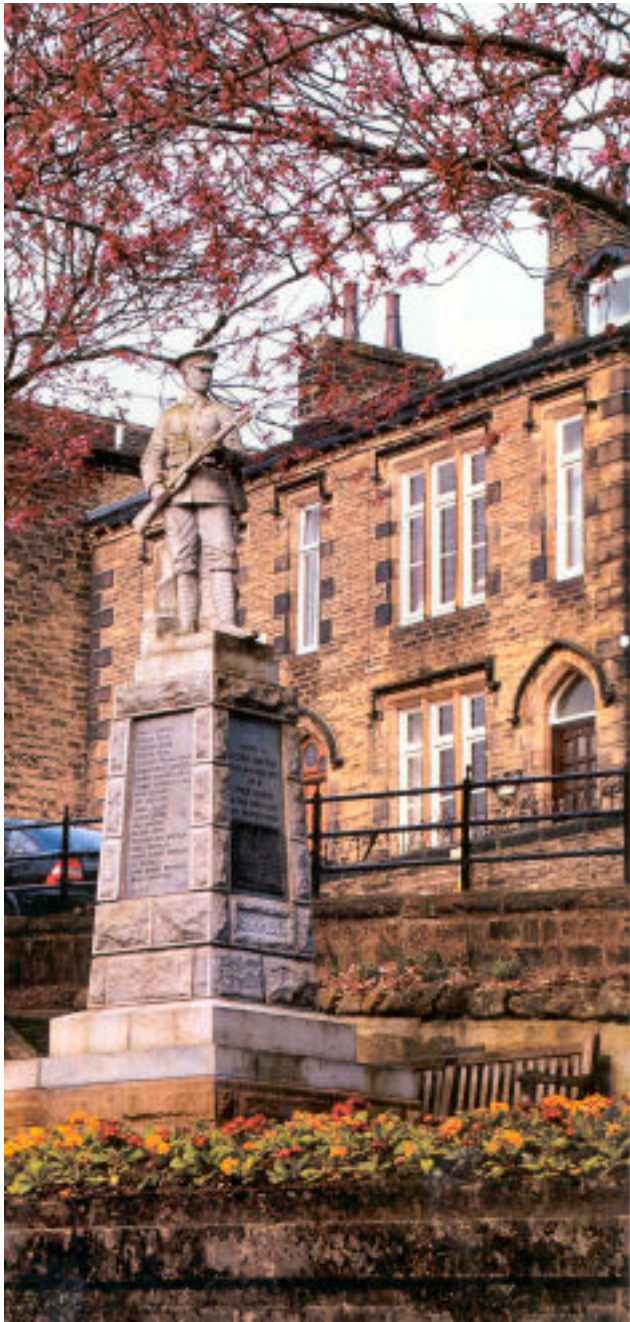
'We don't need a sign above the door because people know us by reputation', said Lindsay.

Something else that is aimed at enhancing the village's reputation is the newly formed Ripponden Villages' Group.

'It's been set up to promote

community action to protect and improve Ripponden and district,' said Barbara Costello, clerk to the parish council, which along with Ripponden covers Rishworth, Soyland and Barkisland.

'It will organise activities to renovate, enhance and maintain public places and will eventually take over Ripponden in Bloom.



Ripponden Roundup

The first recorded reference to Ripponden was in 1307 when it was called Rybourdene, which is Anglo Saxon meaning a forded river in a valley.

One of the stained glass windows in the present St Bartholomew's Church the fourth to be built since the 15th century - is made from fragments of a window in the first church, which was built by permission of Edward IV.

It takes 60 men to pull the rushcart, which weighs around 18 hundredweight. on its nine mile journey via local villages from Sowerby Bridge to Ripponden.

During the Second World War the place names one old milestone opposite the toll bar house were chiselled away to cause confusion should the enemy

reach Ripponden.

When the first passenger train left Ripponden Station in 1878 the local brass band was on board playing away spiritedly

The Old Bridge Inn at Ripponden won the Traditional Pub of the Year category in the Yorkshire Life Food and Wine awards 2004-2005 for exemplary cooking with welcoming service in a charming location.

In 1722 a storm caused the river Ryburn to rise to a height of 15 feet. The raging torrent flooded the churchyard and coffins were left in the branches of trees.

The Calderdale Way passes through the heart of Ripponden.

Photographs: Leo Rosser