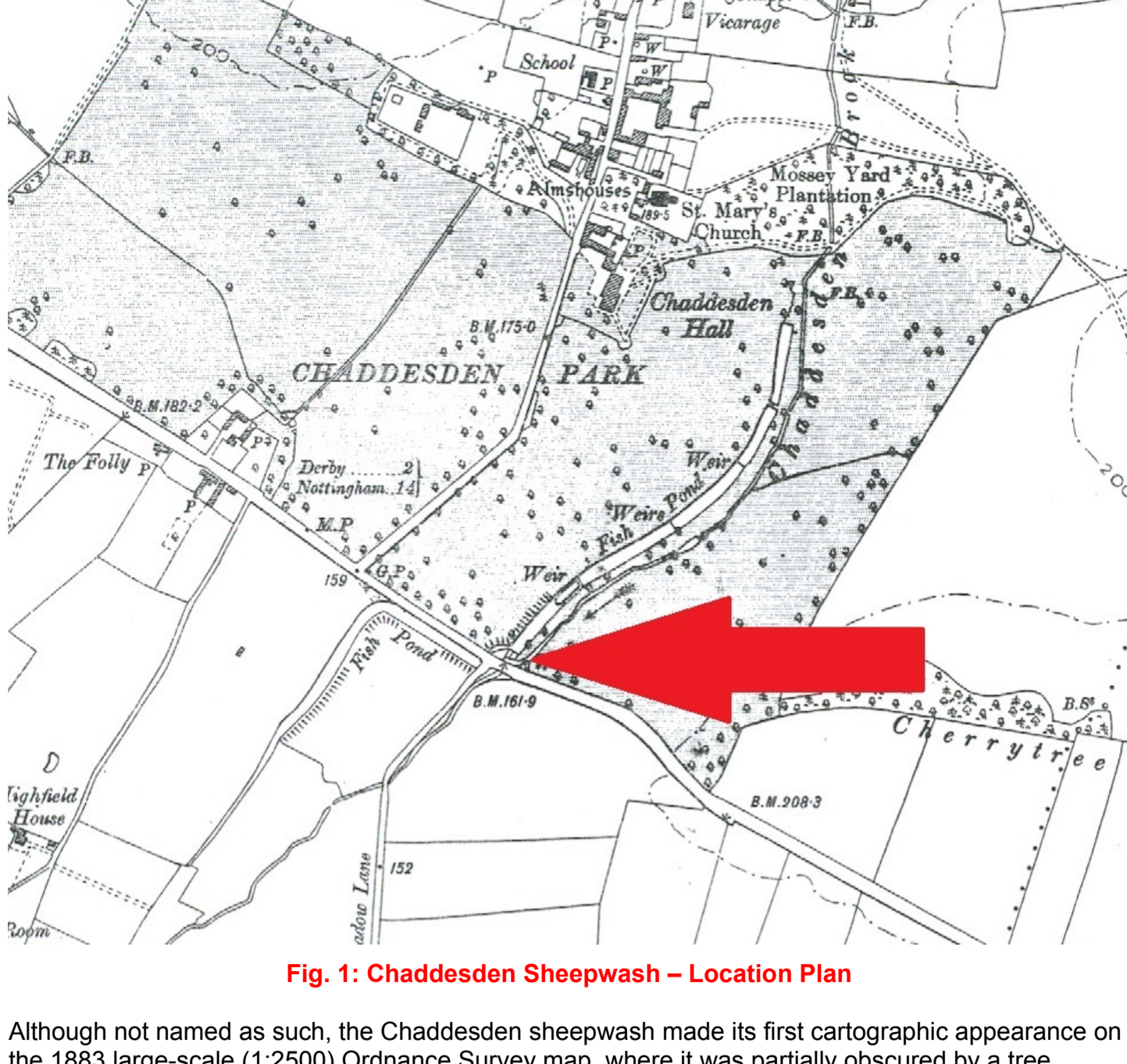


## THE CHADDESSEN SHEEPWASH

Had you lived in our part of Derbyshire between, say, the last decades of the nineteenth century and the years immediately following the First World War, a familiar sight on a fine day in late May or early June each year would have been the flocks of sheep awaiting their turn for an annual washing in the sheepwash situated in Chaddesden Brook adjacent to Nottingham Road (Fig. 1). Sheep were then routinely washed to remove the winter's grime and grease from their heavy fleeces to ensure the wool would be in as good a condition as possible for shearing a week or two later.



**Fig. 1: Chaddesden Sheepwash – Location Plan**

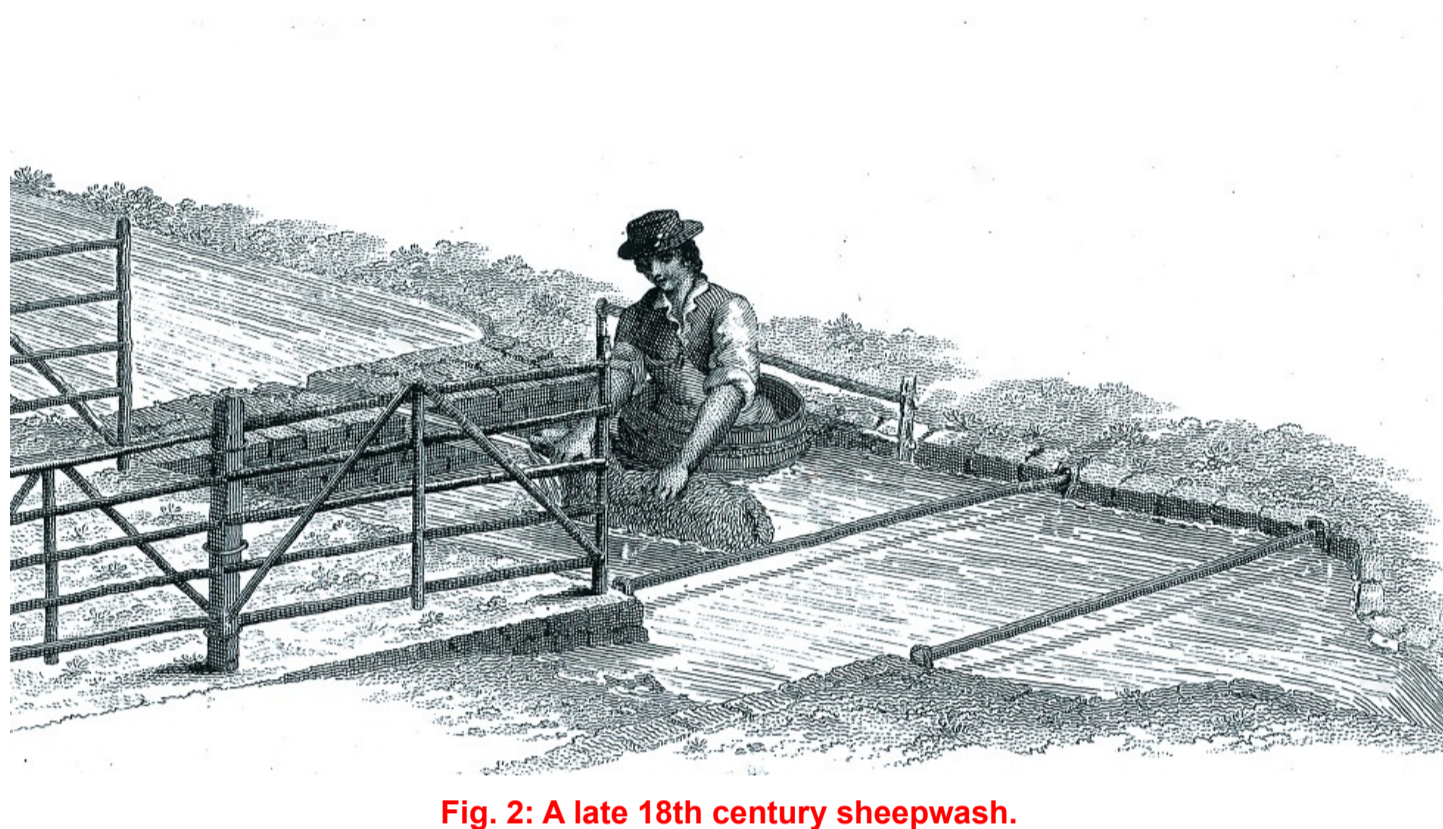
Although not named as such, the Chaddesden sheepwash made its first cartographic appearance on the 1883 large-scale (1:2500) Ordnance Survey map, where it was partially obscured by a tree symbol. The next edition of 1900 showed the situation more clearly. A little to the north of the main Nottingham Road a new short weir (not marked on the 1883 map) had been constructed across part of Chaddesden Brook, and at right angles to this was the rectangular enclosure of the wash itself, apparently built on the bed of the stream, with its long axis parallel to the flow of water. Before looking at the Chaddesden sheepwash in more detail, it may be helpful to consider the design and purpose of sheepwashes in a more general context:

As stated above, sheep might simply be washed in fresh water to clean their fleeces and remove impurities in the wool, but this must not be confused with the practice of periodically dipping sheep in a variety of different chemicals to protect them from a host of complaints such as sheep-scab, blowflies and lice. Early sheep-dips were frequently based around toxic chemicals like arsenic and mercury, and much more recently there have been controversies over the use of organophosphate compounds, however, the dipping of sheep which normally takes place in a farmer's own yard does not concern us here.

Actual sheepwash design varied greatly according to such factors as the local terrain, water supply, provision of building materials, and funds available. That said, there are three basic types:

(1) In the simplest form of sheepwash, a convenient brook was temporarily dammed in two places perhaps thirty or forty feet apart by walls made of wooden boards, mud, stones, turves, etc., with the upstream (top) wall set slightly higher than the downstream (bottom) wall. An ideal location would be one where the stream bed was hard and gravelly, since there was little point in washing sheep in a muddy brook! A lead pipe would be knocked through the upstream wall just a few inches below its crest, ensuring that once a head of water had built up behind the wall there would be a continuous flow into the sheepwash enclosure. An overflow at the bottom dam would also be required to take away surplus water. All the sheep were then herded together into an adjacent pen or fold, the first animal grabbed by a couple of men (the catchers) and flung into the downstream end of the wash where two or three more men (the washer and his assistants), standing up to their waists in water, would give the sheep a good general soaking before dragging it to the upstream end. Here the washer would hold the sheep under the flowing pipe and give it a more intensive washing in clean water before letting it scramble out onto dry land. While this was going on, the next sheep would be thrown into the bottom end of the wash and the whole process continued until all the animals were dealt with. A reasonable throughput for this type of operation seems to have been in the region of fifty sheep per hour. If large numbers of exceptionally dirty sheep were handled on any particular day, it might be necessary for the men to halt the proceedings temporarily and drain the wash to remove surplus grease, small locks of wool, and other debris. Sheep-washing by this method was not a particularly pleasant job for the washer and his helpers, for even in June the water might be bitterly cold and a thoughtful employer would at the very least allow his men a regular tot of whisky to help keep them warm.

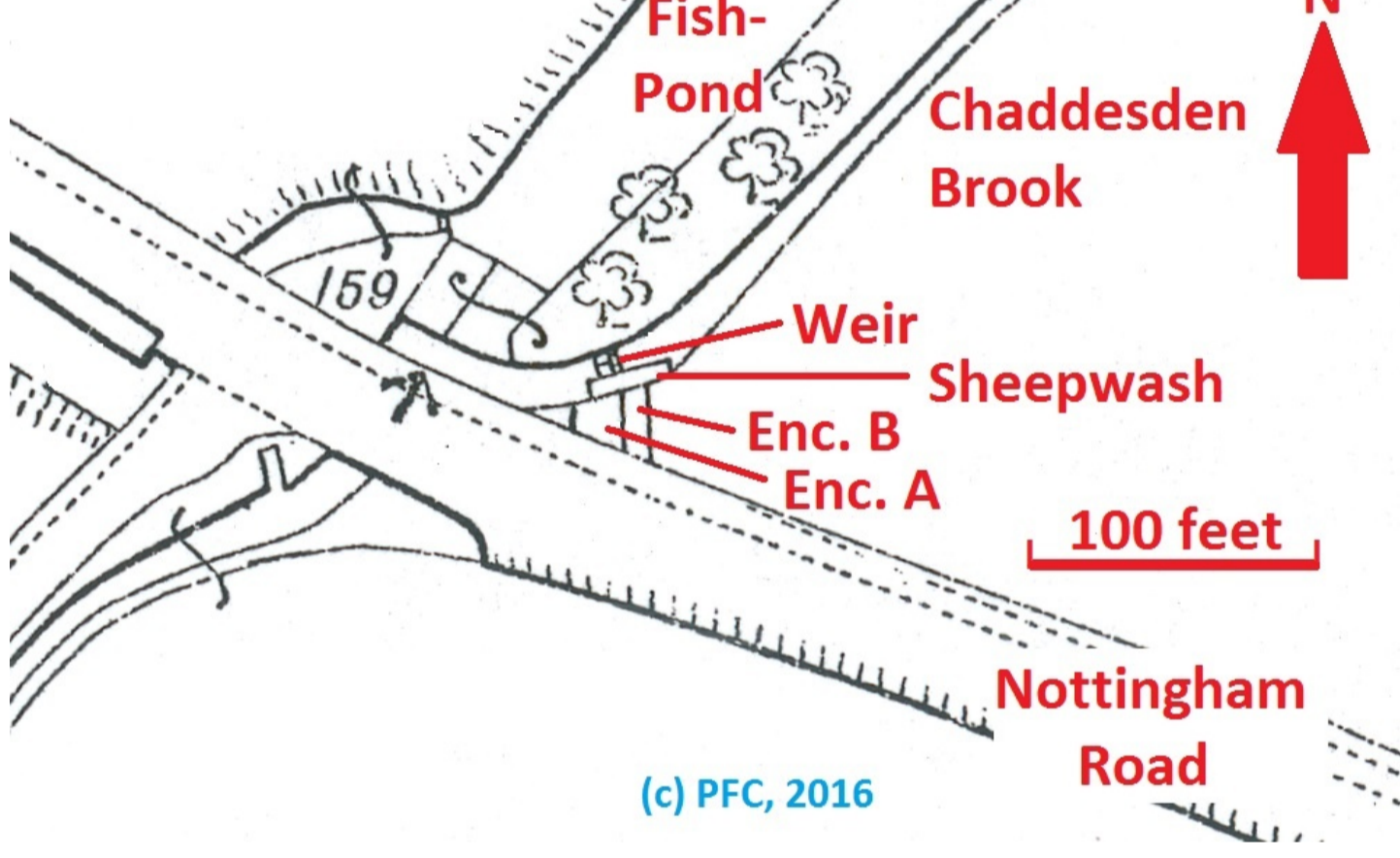
(2) In a modified form of the above, the sheep entering the wash was given its initial soaking by men equipped with long poles tipped with hooks or crooks which could be used to push the animal under the water and then propel it to the upstream end. The man washing the sheep under the flowing pipe now stood inside a tall, narrow and hopefully water-proof tub, securely fastened to posts fixed into the bed of the stream so that the washer could brace himself against the tub walls whilst parting and washing the sheep's fleece (Fig. 2). Inevitably the washer in his tub drew comparisons with the local parson preaching his Sunday sermon and the tubs were sometimes nicknamed "pulpits". Variant forms of sheepwash involved the use of wooden walkways or permanent stone "pulpits" fixed in the centre of the pit, both designed to keep the washer out of the water [Note 1].



**Fig. 2: A late 18th century sheepwash.**

(3) The best type of properly constructed sheepwash enclosure would contain a soaking pit some four feet deep leading to a narrower washing channel, say, three and a half feet deep, with its water supply carefully regulated by stop-gates. The washer could now stand on dry ground alongside the washing channel and simply lean over a short parapet wall into the sheepwash in order to deal with the animal.

The Chaddesden sheepwash must have been built out of relatively permanent materials (presumably stone) since it features on large-scale Ordnance Survey maps of 1883, 1900 and 1914. Although it is difficult to determine precise details of its construction from the maps, its elongated rectangular structure measured some thirty feet by eight feet and was seemingly placed on the bed of Chaddesden Brook (Fig. 3). Alongside it, the little weir would allow a head of water to build up at the north end of the wash thus providing the necessary running water for the washer. The two enclosures A and B shown on the plan were both small sheep-folds (around 250 and 150 square feet respectively) but together might have held as many as forty animals at any one time. If the usual method of washing as outlined in process no. 1 above was followed, sheep in fold A would be the first into the south (soaking) end of the wash, then dragged up to the north (washing) end for further treatment before finally being let out onto the adjacent grassland. The reason why the upstream ends of sheepwashes were usually reserved for the final wash is simple: when first flung into the sheepwash at the downstream end, all the mud and dirt from the animal's fleece would quickly flow out of the sheepwash, thus when the sheep was moved to the upstream end for its final treatment, the water it was washed in would be unpolluted by dirt, grit, and wool remnants. The late Mrs. Catherine Rees (1918 - 2011) remembered that sheep sometimes managed to escape when being washed and made their get-away by running down the brook and under the adjacent bridge on Nottingham Road (Fig. 4) [Note 2].



**Fig. 3: Chaddesden Sheepwash. From the Ordnance Survey map of 1900.**

Curiously enough, the earliest documentary reference to the sheepwash I have so far managed to find has absolutely nothing to do with sheep, but rather with the detection of a crime! Very early one morning in June 1875, Police Constable Madeley of the County Police Force was at the Chaddesden parish boundary close to Nottingham Road Cemetery, when a man coming from the direction of Derby walked past him. P.C. Madeley thought that the man, who was carrying a parcel and an umbrella, seemed rather suspicious and so followed him towards Chaddesden. As soon as the man reached Chaddesden Park "he darted off the road and made towards a sheep dip." When he came out again, the officer apprehended him and examined the parcel, which was found to contain three dozen sheep of new stockings. Once the man had been safely locked up, the constable returned to the sheepwash and found an old pair of trousers. Further investigation showed that the trousers worn by the detained man (now identified as Thomas Harris of Leicester) were actually the property of the Midland Railway Company and had been stolen by him, together with the stockings and other items, from the company's left-luggage office at Nottingham Road Station late the previous night [Note 3]. In using the sheepwash in order to change his own worn-out trousers for a new, stolen pair, Harris had unwittingly provided later generations with a small, but useful, piece of information about this particular piece of Chaddesden's history.



**Fig. 4: Bridge adjacent to the sheepwash, Nottingham Road, Chaddesden.**

Although in all likelihood the date at which the sheepwash was first built will never be known, an intriguing reference in a somewhat obscure late eighteenth-century book gives us a delightful word picture of what this part of Chaddesden once looked like when seen from Nottingham Road. The book, entitled *Eccentric Excursions, or Literary & Pictorial Sketches of Countenance, Character & Country*, was written by George Moutard Woodard and published in London in 1796. Speaking of his tour through Derbyshire, he writes on page 189: "Leaving Spondon, on the right is Chaddesden, the seat of the late Sir Robert Mead Wilmot, Bart. The house is a good old-fashioned substantial structure. A piece of water at a considerable expanse has been tortured into various meanders, in order to form something like cascades, falling about three feet perpendicular, one of which is brought near the road, creating in the passing villagers a momentary surprise at the wonderful works of man!" Clearly the Wilmots had done their best to contrive a picturesque scene at this particular location ... if a sheepwash was already in existence here at this point in time then perhaps it too was intended to add to the pastoral appeal. Some thirty miles north-west of Chaddesden, modern visitors to the Derbyshire village of Ashford-in-the-Water certainly seem to appreciate the scenic qualities of its eighteenth-century bridge and sheepwash (SK 1943 6960).

Since it is not shown on the Ordnance Survey's large-scale map of 1938, it appears the Chaddesden sheepwash had fallen out of use by then; in any case, the increasing urbanisation of Chaddesden had already significantly reduced the number of farms that might have needed to use it. Nevertheless, for a few years after this date it was still possible to see cattle and sheep being ushered along Nottingham Road by a couple of men and maybe a dog or two. Back in 2000 I had a letter from Mr. Roy Liversage in Australia, who as a child had lived in Chaddesden, close by Nottingham Road. As a young boy growing up in the early 1940s he remembered "hordes of sheep swarming all over the road and verges, being herded to Derby markets" - perhaps these were from Mr. Bert Oldershaw's Poplar Farm at Spondon. Unfortunately sheepwashes are relatively small and inconspicuous features in the built environment and are frequently overlooked, so references to the Chaddesden example are scarce. That said, a recently published book recounting the bottom of the late Frank Hooley of Spondon (1889 - 1975), mentions the wash under the road "at the bottom of Cherry Tree Hill", which "was known as the Chaddesden Sheep Wash because, after shearing, the sheep were taken to the stream and dipped." Although Mr. Hooley was mistaken as to the order of events, inasmuch the sheep were washed before, not after, shearing, his reference at least demonstrates that the sheepwash was known to people outside the parish.

Located as it was just within the confines of Chaddesden Park, the question remains as to who was allowed to use the sheepwash? Was it specifically reserved for washing sheep owned by the Wilmot family of Chaddesden Hall and perhaps their tenant farmers as well, or had all the farmers in the village combined together to build it as a joint project? Then again, maybe it had been built and maintained by the parish authorities who would have charged farmers to use it ... at Wingerworth, for example, where the sheepwash was in use until the 1920s, it is on record that farmers using the facility had to pay in the region of one shilling per twenty sheep [Note 4].

It is not clear if all traces of the Chaddesden sheepwash were removed when it ceased to be used. In the early 1960s I seem to recall a confused arrangement of stone walls and/or concrete at this very part of the brook, though whether this was in any way connected with the former sheepwash or a later weir I cannot say. Had any remnants survived, they would certainly have been swept away in 1971 when the whole profile of the brook was re-engineered to prevent flooding.

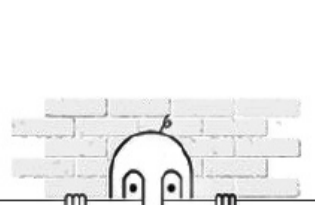
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### FOOTNOTES:

- Note 1. Now somewhat off the beaten track, the late 17th century sheepwash at Thurgarton, Notts (SK 6744 4945) possesses just such a stone "pulpit".
- Note 2. Mrs. Rees' short audio commentary about this incident can be heard on our Oral History page <https://www.chaddesdenhistorygroup.co.uk/audio> under "Countryside" in the section headed "Old Chaddesden". The relevant narrative begins at approximately 2m 40s.
- Note 3. *Derby Mercury*, 23 June 1875.
- Note 4. The well-preserved Wingerworth sheepwash on Tricket Brook at Hillhouses Lane (SK 3694 6710) dates from c.1850 and can conveniently be seen from the roadside.

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