

THE CRISIS OF THE HOUR IS THE HOUR OF THE WORLD

SOLIDARITY OF LABOUR

PRODUCTION FOR USE NOT FOR PROFIT

NO CHILD TOILERS

COOPERATION NOT COMPETITION

SHORTEN WORKING DAYS LENGTHEN LIFE

HOPE IN WORK & JOY IN LEISURE

CAMPAIGN FOR THE 40 HOUR WEEK

THE HOLBERRY SOCIETY

FOR THE STUDY OF SHEFFIELD LABOUR HISTORY

ESSAYS FROM THE HOLBERRY SOCIETY FOR  
THE STUDY OF SHEFFIELD LABOUR HISTORY: VOL 1

# CO-OPERATORS, RADICALS, WORKERS

Principle 5 Pamphlet No: 6

Published in 2024 by:

Principle 5 Yorkshire Co-operative Resource Centre

Aizlewood's Mill

Nursery Street

Sheffield

S3 8GG

## Principle **P5** FIVE

The articles in this pamphlet first appeared in the Holberry Society for the Study of Sheffield Labour History Bulletins, published between 1978 and 1984.



Printed by Footprint Workers Co-operative, 16 Back Sholebroke Avenue, Leeds, LS7 3HB

# PREFACE

Starting in the 1960s, historians became increasingly pre-occupied with examining the life of ordinary people - those not in positions of power and influence - and how their actions shaped society. The year 1966 was pivotal. In the United States, scholar and activist Jesse Lemisch pioneered the notion of looking at history “From the Bottom Up” and sought to spread it across the student movement. In the UK, E.P. Thompson, the author of *Making of the English Working Class* wrote of the need to study “History from Below” in *The Times Literary Supplement*.

“History from below” Thompson explained, was “history which preserves, and which foregrounds, the marginalised stories and experiences of people who, all else being equal, did not get chance to author their own story. History from below tries to redress that most final, and brutal, of life’s inequalities: whether or not you are forgotten.” The task of the scholar was to undertake “projects of rescue” for those who had been unable to write their own stories. No story, he argued, should be elided by the ‘condescension of posterity.’

In the United States, the backlash to “History from Below” was considerable. There were numerous examples of scholars being denied tenure. Work of this kind was thought to inflate the influence of social movements which had in fact had minimal impact, or imbibe them with ahistorical motivations in an effort to find kinship with earlier generations of “protesters”.

In Sheffield, the work undertaken by the Samuel Holberry Society for the Study of Sheffield Labour History, active from 1976-1984, was one such “rescue act”. Its members sought to reclaim and document the lives of ordinary people and their protests against power at a time when they had no control over their own lives, let alone the affairs of state.

Motivations aside, the Society members succeeded in putting their political differences to one side to unite around a project to chronicle the lives of ordinary Sheffielders, and correct many historical inaccuracies. Their legacy was substantial. For activists in need of inspiration, their work demonstrates the value of co-operation.

- Sheffield, May 2024



"Maybe at some stage...[the Holberry Society] will rise from the dead - what it stood for is still unfulfilled. That fulfilment will only come when every schoolchild in Sheffield is aware of the struggles of its forebears over the last two hundred years. I know of no city anywhere in world whose citizens have a finer history of unremitting struggle, yet our children are taught none of it."

"So here's to the day when they will all know."

- Bill Moore



# Introduction: The Holberry Society for the Study of Sheffield Labour History 1978-2002

The coming together of members of the Communist Party, the International Socialists, various other Trotskyite splinter groups, Big Flame and the Labour Party in a collaborative venture to examine and reclaim Sheffield's radical working-class history today seems very unlikely. But in the late-1970s it happened.

It was a very different Sheffield to the one we know today. I had come to the city in the autumn of 1969 to undertake a year's probationary Research MA, during which I further explored the emergence of working class class-consciousness in South Yorkshire in the late-18th to mid-19th century. I completed my PhD in 1977 (*The Origins of the Social War in South Yorkshire: A Study of Capitalist Evolution and Labour Class Realisation in One Industrial Region c.1750-1855*) under Professor Sidney Pollard, himself a scholar of working people in Sheffield and also of Robert Owen and co-operation.

Soon after my arrival, I became involved in the Free Press Collective. I was learning more about Samuel Holberry, and one of my efforts in the pages of the "opposition", the *Sheffield Star*, was to unearth the surviving death mask bust made in York in the summer of 1842.

The Holberry Society's founders started meeting informally in the mid-70s. Sam Holmes and Bill Moore were remarkable people. Sam was a retired building work union activist, once a member of the National Union of Painters (later UCATT). He was a highly capable writer about everyday life. Bill was a Sheffield born retired West Riding Communist Party organiser whose claims to fame included schooling a very young Arthur Scargill. He was also a serious historian and key figure in the CPs National History group.

The Holberry Society was founded in 1978 with an annual lecture, annual gatherings at the Holberry grave, a quarterly journal and a series of publication, exhibitions, community events, curriculum explorations and teacher groups in Sheffield and Rotherham. We also collaborated with the Women's History group. Cathy Burke (who I devised the Radical Walk with) and Bev Jackson are two names that spring to mind. With Paul Turner I organised the South Yorkshire History Workshop events in 1978.

The society spread its wings. Along with Bill, Sam, and myself were Tom Owen, Sue Owen, Nigel Clark, and Steve Bond. Leading figures in the Sheffield labour movement such as George Caborn of the Engineering workers, Reg Munn of the Co-op Party, Vernon Thornes of the Trade Council, South Yorkshire County Councillors like John Cornwell and Bill Michie, and Enid Hattersley at Sheffield Council were highly supportive. David Blunkett showed us genuine respect.

We had some real achievements in those early years. We got streets renamed. We got the Holberry bust renovated and in Weston Park assured it a permanent home. Publications included the original Holberry pamphlet, the Council of Action's bulletins during the 1926 General strike, Sheffield 1935 all out protests over part two of the National Unemployment Act, a study of the links between Irish Republicans and Sheffield's Labour Movement 1918-22, The Battle of Walkley when the unemployed fought back in 1922, and Sheffield's Aid to Republican Spain in the late 1930s. We had a collection of tapes relating to everyday life 1890-1939 street life, mostly transcribed and indexed under themes. We also started depositing our papers in Sheffield Archives.

Running on empty and depleted in number - distracted by "politics" from the Miners' Strike to the anti-poll tax movement and beyond, activity tailed off. But in the late 1990s, Bill Moore played a blinder with the Planning Committee. Our journey reached its end in 2002 with the opening of the Holberry Cascades at the Peace Gardens. Holberry finally got a lasting send off from his adopted city.

*- John Baxter, Sheffield, May 2024*

# Murder in Norfolk Street: The Story of Sheffield's 'Peterloo'

by John Baxter

At the parade ground in Norfolk Street on the evening of August 4th 1795, two Sheffield men were shot dead and other men, women, and children were wounded by members of the local ruling class wearing the uniform of the Sheffield Loyal Independent Volunteer Corps. The event was long remembered by Sheffield workers, and with similar bitterness attached as in the case of the better known 'Peterloo Massacre' in Manchester in August 1819. Even today the recollection is not dead. When I was speaking for the Holberry Society at a Ward Labour Party meeting in the City, a member recalled how in his family the story of Norfolk Street had been passed down from an ancestor who had been there. The event has been mentioned by some of the antiquarians who have delved into Sheffield's past. Several historians, looking at the Sheffield Jacobins or the Constitutional Society in the 1790s have commented on it. Sadly none presented the whole story and showed what really happened. Hopefully this short account, using new material, gets right inside the events of that evening.

The year 1795 witnessed a confusion of events – political defeat for the worker democrats of the Constitutional Society, poverty for Sheffield cutlers as export markets were cut off because of the war with France, harvest failure which meant soaring food prices, religious confusion with an outbreak of Methodist revival or 'madness' as it was known, tied in with a general feeling that the millennium was at hand.

Amid the whirlwind of changing forces one small group of men – ultra-radical democrats meeting in printer John Crome's Waingate shop – developed a revolutionary political strategy. They planned to carry on the political work the Constitutional Society was less able to perform. They sought to use the dissatisfaction with food prices and hunger to turn men to politics. They saw how a subscription got up by the town's 'respectable' merchants and manufacturers had been used

by a Corn Committee to buy up and sell corn cheap to help some of the people. The measure had 'bought off' some of the angry populace from rioting. Sheffield had not seen the violent market place attacks on dealers that other towns had in 1795. Now the Corn Committee was failing to cope with the worsening situation. The appearance of recruiting parties, and more important, the formation of a Sheffield Regiment from the unemployed, also angered the radicals. They saw their mates donning the uniform of the Sheffield Regiment of Foot and taking the Kings shilling as a consequence of hunger, poverty, and unemployment. They were angered even more that the soldiers were being raised to try to destroy France – a new republic and bastion of democracy. It was as a result of this last that they turned to intervene.

The radicals tried to dissuade men from joining the new Regiment. They perhaps infiltrated it – the events of August 4th suggest this. They printed and issued a handbill which indicated their feelings a few days before the event. The handbill read:

TREASON! TREASON! TREASON!  
Against the People

The People's Humbug'd! A plot is discovered!  
Pitt and the Committee for Bread are combined  
Together to starve the Poor into the Army and Navy!  
And to starve your Widows and Orphans!  
God help ye Labourers of the Nation!  
You are held in requisition to fight in a bad cause,  
A cause that is blasted by Heaven and damned by all good  
men!

Every man to his Tent, O Israel,  
Sharpen your weapons and spare not! For all  
The Scrats (aristocrats) in the Nation are United  
against your Blood, your wives and your little ones!  
Behold good Bread at Six Shillings per stone!  
And may every wearer of a Bayonet be struck with  
Heaven's loudest Thunder, that refuse to help you!  
Fear not your lives! Aristocrats and Scoundrels  
Cowards! Cursed be the farmers and promoters  
of the Corn Bill! And let the people say Amen!

The handbill and the radical infiltration had a consequence. A mutiny began on the parade ground on the evening of August 4. The new soldiers had not received a 'bread money' allowance and used this as an excuse not to obey the orders of the commander, Colonel Cameron. A sympathetic crowd gathered in which a group of radicals was prominent. The handbills were distributed here. A radical named Eyre was very active leading the shouts of 'stand fast' and calling on the soldiers to 'push matters on' and 'not to forsake them'. Eyre pointed out the commander and shouted 'knock him off'.

At this point Squire Athorpe of Dinnington, one of Sheffield absentee magistrates, arrived with a posse of constables. He tried to arrest Eyre but the crowd closed ranks and blocked his path. Athorpe had arrived in a hurry; he had in fact forgotten his copy of the Riot Act. When he saw things were out of hand he called out the Volunteer Infantry Corps. – merchants and their sons and other 'respectables'. He 'read' the Riot Act, probably garbling it from memory. The Volunteers lined up behind him facing the crowd. The radicals steeled the crowd to face them back. The confrontation lasted nearly an hour – one hour was required from the reading of the Riot Act before the magistrate would allow troops to fire on a crowd.

When close to the hour the radicals thought they had called Athorpe's bluff, they began throwing stones and rubbish at the Volunteers. Sections of the crowd joined in. So did some of the soldiers! A total breakdown in the existing set of social relations was threatened. Athorpe ordered the Volunteers to fire their guns at the crowd. Two men were killed and many wounded. Amid the confusion of the crowd scattering, Athorpe and other mounted Volunteers rode into the crowd sabring men, women, and children.

In the aftermath several things happened. The coroner gave 'justifiable homicide' verdicts on the dead men. The editor of the town's newspaper, James Montgomery, was prosecuted for 'libel on Athorpe' in his reporting of the events in *The Iris*, his paper. He had a spell in York Castle to suffer for this, which nearly cured him of radical sympathy. Joe Mather, the street poet and a radical also, produced critical comment: a song 'Norfolk Street Riots'.

Joe Mather escaped prosecution – the ruling class wasn't so worried by him as by the respectable Montgomery. Crome and the ultra-radicals



# Murder in Norfolk Street

by Joe Mather

Corruption tells me homicide  
Is wilful murder justified.  
A striking precedent was tried  
In August 'ninety-five,  
When arm'd assassins dressed in blue  
Most wantonly their townsmen slew  
And magistrates and juries too  
At murder did connive.

I saw the tragic scene commence;  
A madman drunk, without offence  
Drew out his sword in false pretence,  
And woulded some more wise;  
Defenceless boys he chased about,  
The timid cried, the bold did shout,  
Which brought the curious no doubt  
To see what meant the noise.

The gazing crowd, stagnated stood  
To see a wretch that should know good,  
Instigate thirst for human blood  
Like one sent from beneath;  
This gave me well to understand  
A sword put in a madman's hand,  
Especially a villain grand,  
Must terminate in death.

'Twas manifest in the event  
That what the bloody tyrant meant  
Was murder without precedent  
Though by injustice screened  
The 'Courant' may her columns swell,  
Designing men may falsehoods tell,  
Not all the powers of earth or hell  
Can justify the fiend.

This arm'd banditti, filled with spleen,  
At his command, like bloodhounds keen,  
In fine, to crown the horrid scene,  
A shower of bullets fired.  
The consequence was deep distress,  
More widows and more fatherless,  
The devil blushed and did confess  
'Twas more than he required.

Corruption cried for his exploit  
"His worship shall be made a knight.  
I hold his conduct just and right,  
And think him all divine."  
Oppression need not fear alarms  
Since tyranny has got such swarms  
Of gallant heroes bearing arms.  
To butcher grunting swine.

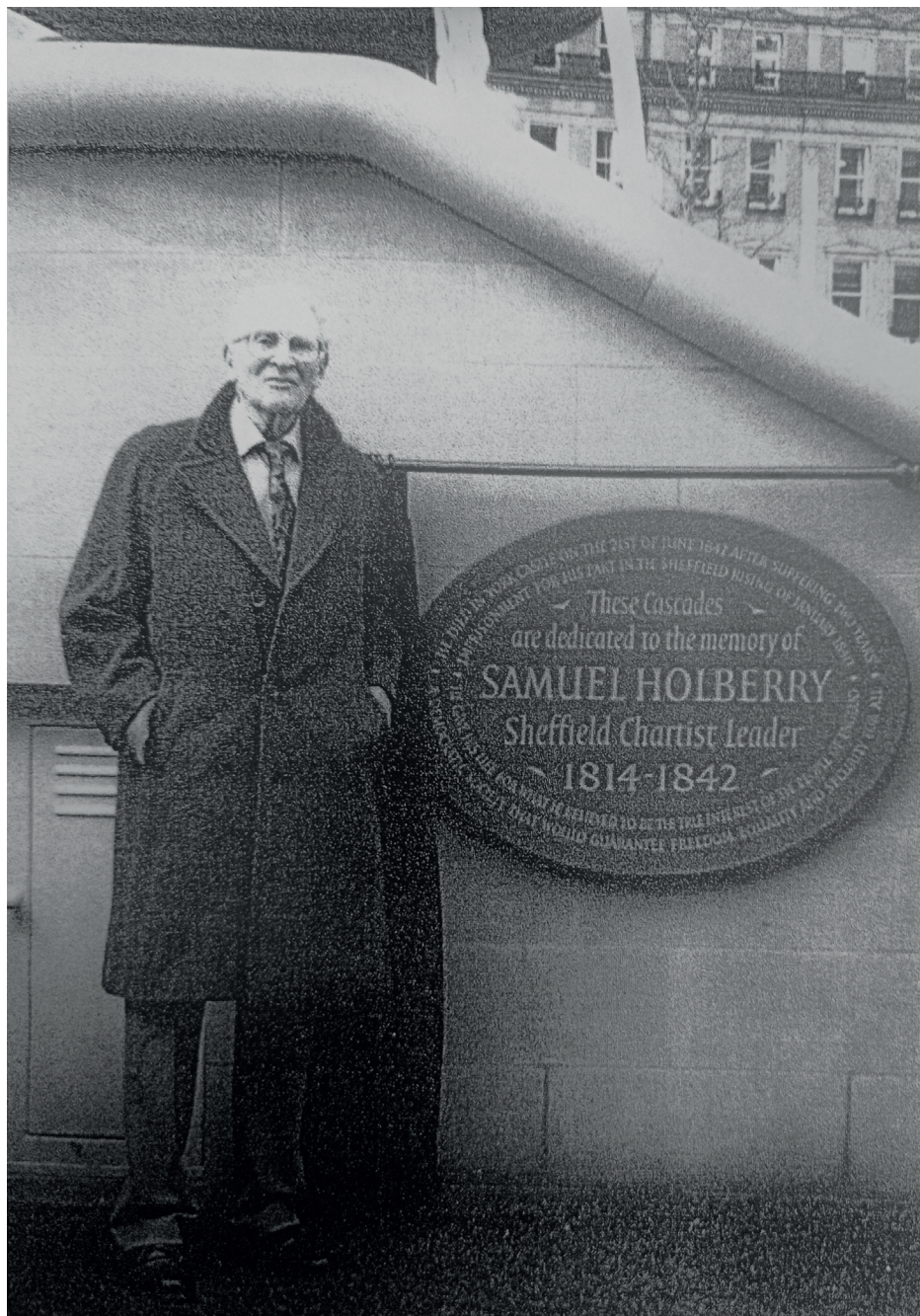
The stones besmeared  
with blood and brains  
Was the result of Robin's pains,  
Surviving friends wept o'er the stains,  
When dying victims bled;  
As Abel's blood aloud did call  
To Him whose power created all,  
Eternal vengeance sure must fall  
Upon his guilty head.



John Baxter and Cathy Burke leading the Sheffield Radical History Walk, 1982

achieved something from the Norfolk Street affair: the local class nature of the repression was revealed in the Volunteers' actions. The radicals continued to organise underground revolutionary actions, and two years later formed a branch of the United Englishmen and became part of the national movement.

What is the significance of the murders in Norfolk Street for us? We need to be reminded of the brutality of our own ruling class. We need to be warned and ready to repel force by force. What about a memorial? A memorial street play every August 4 on the Crucible steps adjoining Norfolk Street - sponsored by the same bodies who lavish our money on the snob high culture and trashy middle-brow culture found inside the theatre? Any suggestions? Offers welcome - particularly some action!



Bill Moore at the Holberry Cascades



# Co-operative Ideas, Experiments, and Schemes in Sheffield 1790 – 1875

by John Baxter

Working people had been involved in co-operative schemes for over sixty years before the formation of the societies of the 1860s and early 1870s which came together to produce the modern Sheffield and Ecclesall and Brightside and Carbrook Societies. The following article aims to present the important episodes in local co-operative “pre-history” to help people working for the modern movement find among their “roots” inspiration and extra pride, for their part in building a progressive system of production and distribution. Perhaps it may also serve to make the wider co-operative membership and consumers appreciate the principles of common ownership and distribution of profit.

There were three major phases of development. In the 1790s, co-operatives in coal, corn, milk, and boot manufacture and distribution were founded. The 1830s and 1840s saw produce co-ops involving Owenites, Trade Unionists, and Chartists organised. Then, in the 1850s and 1860s, against a background of Sheffield’s industrial and social development, the Rochdale inspired groups appeared. Throughout this period, Sheffield continued to grow.

In the 1790s, Sheffield grew from 40,000 people to 45,000. Most of these people were crammed into the warren of workshops and tenements of the central township. Most people owed their living to the fortunes of the cutlery trades and worked in small workshops under control of the merchants or factors to whose warehouses finished work was taken for payment. A few larger workshops and some small factories had begun to appear with the arrival of the silver and silver-plate trade. A few people worked in local iron foundries and in the small number of local pits.

During the 1790s, for the first time ever working people began to organise to demand their political rights. The Sheffield Society for Constitutional

Information was formed in 1791 and soon had 2,000 members formed by an alliance of the small shopkeeper, small master, and wage-earning journeymen classes. Four years of campaigning through mass meetings and petitions failed to win one-man, one-vote, and still only a twentieth of the population had the right to vote. All the same, working people began to organise more successfully to protect their living standards.

The early 1790s saw the start of war with France which hit local industry. These were times of poor harvests and shortages of food and rapid inflation in the market place. In the worst instances crowds gathered in the market and seized food and re-sold it at a fair price. The magistrates called such events “riots” and punished ringleaders with transportation. Some workers used their friendly, benefit, or sick clubs to help them through such times. In some instances the clubs were secret trade unions and able, despite the harsh legal bans on trade unions, to organise strikes. There were over fifty such clubs in Sheffield in the 1790s. Many were just self-help insurance societies for the small master and shopkeeper and even more “respectable” classes. Perhaps a dozen or more were trade union bodies. It was these that gave a lead in forming the first Sheffield co-operatives.

There is one mention of several sick or friendly clubs forming a common fund to run a coal mine in 1793. The aim was to break the monopoly of the Duke of Norfolk whose pits, including the Ponds Pit under the modern bus station, produced expensive coal. Nothing can be discovered about the pit and its backers but it is worth noticing in passing that the clubs organising in this way probably had been involved in united action for the first time in the 1780s when they helped the journeymen’s campaign against the merchants and larger masters trying to abolish the protective powers of the Cutler’s Company. In 1795 there is a mention of the Dore House pit at Handsworth being run as a co-operative pit backed by a sick club providing the town with cheap coal. This was the year of the most extensive co-operative venture – the Club Corn Mill.

The year 1795 was one of great turmoil in Sheffield. The price of bread flour soared to between 5s6d (27p) and 6s (30p) a stone, at a time when the average cutler, if lucky enough to be in work, was taking home 14s – 15s (70-75p) a week. The threat of “riots” with women wandering the streets carrying empty meal sacks tied with black ribbons (threatening death) forced the authorities to open a subscription to buy flour



and sell it at lower prices. The organised section of the working class through its sick clubs decided to act to provide cheaper bread other than on the basis of charity.

In August, led by the Mason's Society, several clubs met to discuss proposals for raising a common fund to build and operate a co-operative corn mill to provide members with bread flour at cost price. A scheme was planned and a fund set up and on 5 November the first brick was laid at Hill Foot. A huge procession formed up on Lady's Bridge with bands and banners from forty-two clubs. Eyewitnesses claimed 20,000 people turned out to watch the procession march through the town to the site of the mill. Among the speakers was Edward Oakes, a worker from the silver plate trade, who had been active in the political struggles of the Constitutional Society. Several of the clubs and leading lights represented the towns' trade unions and we can see the early "labour movement" represented at the ceremony.

There is little information surviving about the success of the scheme. It appears that the clubs involved set up retail stores to sell the cheap produce to the members but that in several instances bad management took place. In 1811 the mill and land was sold off to a private firm. Some time between 1795 and 1811 problems had set in. All the same, the scale of the operation was remarkable and also spread to products like boots, milk, and coal. Of these, the coal pits were more successful and for a while worried the Duke of Norfolk, whose monopoly was temporarily broken.

From 1811, when the town's population was around 50,000, to 1830, when it had nearly doubled to 90,000, there were no signs of co-operative experimentation. These were years of great hardship, particularly after the French Wars ended in 1815. They were years when the political and industrial struggles of working people continued, the one to fight for political rights and the other to defend living standards. The Union and Hampden Clubs of 1816 and the Paine Club and sellers of the forbidden "unstamped" radical papers of the 1820s carried on the political struggle.

The trade unions, many coming out into the open when the harsh Combination Laws were partly repealed in the middle 1830s, carried on industrial struggle. The late 1820s, with great hardship experienced, saw a revival of ideas on co-operative production. In Barnsley a weavers' co-op had appeared in 1822, employing the out-of-work on the basis of a fund

raised among the Weavers Union members. In 1829, another co-operative was formed. Sheffield followed suit with the forming of a “Sheffield First” Society in January 1830, and a “Sheffield Second” in April.

Details concerning the two Sheffield Societies is provided by returns to the two Co-operative Congresses held in 1832. The third Congress, held in London in April 1832, shows that the “First Society” had 63 members, £110 in funds and had members manufacturing razors, scissors, and files. It also had a small library but did not have a school as yet. The “Second Society” had 183 members, some also manufacturing cutlery wares. It had £300 in funds. It had neither a library nor a school and like the “First Society” had not yet discussed the scheme of “labour exchanges” advocated by Owen to link up various producer co-ops who would then exchange services and “labour notes” and build up a cash-free alternative economy.

The co-operative press – the paper *The Crisis and Lancashire and Yorkshire Co-operator* provide a few details on the activities of the Sheffield groups, including a meeting in the Music Hall in June 1832 when a co-operative band played before visiting speakers spoke. However short-lived these societies were and however small, they were genuine attempts at building alternative communities and changing the wider society by example. At the Forth Congress held in Liverpool in October 1832, the two societies were again represented. Their memberships had fallen to 60 and 90 members and their funds stood at £120 and £150 respectively. By this stage they had both discussed the “labour exchange” principle and sent wares for exchange at the “labour bazaar”. The societies were also linked to the wholesale organisation, the North West of England United Co-operative Company.

There is no mention of Sheffield at the later Congresses held up to 1835 when the national movement collapsed. Some of the Sheffielders may have been involved in various groups Robert Owen led through the 1830s. In the early 1830s Owen had been involved in building general trade unions embracing a range of trades and pointing out the merit of co-operative production as an alternative to capitalism. Some Sheffield trades were linked to this but when the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union collapsed interest waned. Owen led more exclusive and intellectual elements in the later 1830s and 1840s. A branch of his Universal Community Society built the Hall of Science which gave people a place for free debate in the late 1830s. This group also preached co-operation, which they described as “socialism”, through the late 1830s and

into the 1840s. It was, however, only when industrially organised workers in trade unions adopted the ideas that there was any consequence.

In 1837 the town's first Chartist group appeared – the Sheffield Working Men's Association. This led a mass campaign for political rights, for the demands of the 1790s had still not been met. For a while many of the 30-odd trade unions gave open support. The Sheffield working class was on the move under the Chartist banner. When, in 1839, the Chartist national petition to Parliament was turned down, the Chartists turned to using what economic weapons they had. One of these was to direct members and supporters to “deal exclusively” with tradespeople friendly to the cause. During the autumn of 1839, when the “exclusive dealing” was at its height, the Chartists met in their Fig Tree Lane headquarters to discuss co-operative production and retailing. Other groups of Chartists particularly in Newcastle had successfully sold foodstuffs bought out of common stock and put many traders out of business. At the same time the repression the Chartists faced forced them to arm to defend themselves and it was this tactic that was put into use in the winter of 1839-40.

The economic hardships of the early 1840s drained away the funds of trade unions paying out vast sums to the hundreds of men “on the box” i.e. unemployed. In 1843 the joiners' tool and brace and bit trade acquired some land to set its own unemployed to work. This was the only example of “spade husbandry” schemes much talked about in Chartist, Owenite, and trade union circles in the early and middle 1840s. Such schemes were intended to take men off the labour market and stop them being used as a pool of cheap labour by the parish workhouse masters in collaboration with local employers. In 1844, after the colliers' strike, one section of the large workforce of the Sheffield Coal Company was not taken on by the firm and they set up a co-operative at Greenhill. Soon after, many of the trade unions in the City became involved with a national trade union federation – the National Association of United Trades for the Protection of Labour. Sheffield sent representatives to a “Labour Parliament” which sat for a short while and discussed among other things co-operative workshops. No practical results followed except that in the severe economic crisis of 1847-8 at least five trade unions bought or leased land to set their unemployed to work. The Edge Tool Grinders had a 70 acre farm at Wincobank, the Britannia Metalsmiths a 12 acre farm on Gleadless Common, the Pen Blade Grinders had 8 acres, the File Hardeners 4 acres, and the Scissors Forgers a

similar small farm. In addition the Scissors Forgers used their funds to buy up the manufactured wares of their members and stockpiled them at their own warehouses to the tune of £7,000 worth of rough scissors.

The trade union solution to surplus labour – to acquire land and set the unemployed to work – was closer to co-operative principles than the Chartist Land Plan which aimed to set people up on small peasant plots of land. The Land Plan was very popular and had, when wound up in the early 1850s, over 600 Sheffield subscribers. Set against the problems of unemployment, both seasonal and long-term, such schemes made little inroads in what was a city with well over 130,000 inhabitants by 1850.

The twenty-five years which saw the birth of the modern steel dominated city were years of tremendous expansion with the population almost doubling from 130,000 to 250,000. The prosperity was unevenly divided and there were some bad years for workers in cutlery, tools, and older established light trades and also the new “heavy” trades developing at the east end of the city. Working people temporarily gave up the fight for political rights although the 1867 Reform Act gave many skilled and better off industrial workers the vote. Through the trade unions, a trades council, and friendly and sick clubs, the organised working class fought to improve its lot in good times and to hold its gains in bad times. Co-operative schemes continued to play a part in this struggle.

The improvement in trade in the early 1850s meant that even the lowest and least organisable trades could be unionised. The spring knife workers established a co-operative store to provide cheap food for their members as part of their union activity in 1851. A co-operative store was opened in the Woodhouse area run for the locals in the mid-1850s, and a mid-1950s trade directory lists a Saw Handle Makers warehouse, suggesting another trade union employing its own members. The story of co-operative ventures in the 1860s and early 1870s becomes more complicated with the growth of organisations and their collapse and later re-organisation. There were several trade union producer co-operatives. Pollard’s book “History of Labour in Sheffield” notes the fact that at various times the saw grinders, razor grinders, scale pressers, and saw handle makers unions acquired tools and set their unemployed to work in short-term co-operative ventures. Among the powerful filesmiths, the spring knife, and scissor trades, longer-lasting and self supporting co-ops were founded. A “Co-operative Filesmiths” Society was begun

in 1861 to help strikers and survived into the 1870s. Three branches of the spring knife trade combined in 1866 in a Cutlery Co-operative Production Society and employed up to 100 men through periods of trade depression. A similar scissor trade co-operative was begun in 1873.

The ups and downs of the retail societies set up in the 1860s and early 1870s are difficult to follow, but an examination of local trade directories, co-operative directories, reports in the national co-operative monthly *The Co-operator* and later histories of local societies help to sort out details. The societies formed followed the successful Rochdale model, raising their capital on a £1 share basis raised by members' twopenny (1p) weekly dues. A small amount of interest was paid to members on their share capital and they also received full dividend payouts on purchases. Non-members could trade at the shops but only got half the dividend.

An 1860 Sheffield trades directory listed a "Co-operative Stores (Equitable Pioneers)" at 66 Queen Street. A directory of 1861 noted the same store and another at 32 Scotland Street. At the same time stores were starting at Stocksbridge (Band of Hope Industrial Co-operative Society), Kilnhurst, and High Green. The Sheffield Equitable Co-operative and Industrial Society moved to 127 Devonshire Street during 1861, probably as part of a re-organisation. It celebrated its early success with a soirée in July. The Society had expanded its membership from 62 in February to 270 subscribers and by September it had 400 and a branch store in the Wicker.

Two other Co-operative stores were also in existence in the town in Green Lane and a Catholic Co-op (St Vincents) in Westbar Green. The Sheffield Society continued to expand. A report in *The Co-operator* in June 1862 noted it had four branches (Devonshire Street, South Street, the Moor, and Nursery Street), 369 members, a capital of £1381 and sales of £6240 in the last three months. Sales dropped to £3256 during the next three months as the loss of Sheffield's markets in America due to the Civil War, began to make its mark. The High Green Society with 83 members and a modest capital of £58 and sales in the same quarter of £284 managed a 1s 2d (6p) in the pound dividend. It noted in its November report: "Owing to the depression in trade and other causes, we have had a good many withdrawals, but as the main body of the members have allowed their profits to accumulate, the capital of the society remains stationary."



There are no reports in *The Co-operator* of 1863 covering Sheffield. The Society's shops are listed in the 1863 trades directory and it is likely that it struggled through the year with its numbers dwindling. A store at Attercliffe is also mentioned. A co-operative directory of 1863 mentions a figure of 713 Sheffield members. Smaller local societies including High Green, Stocksbridge, and Malin Bridge gave more favourable reports.

For example, Stocksbridge's half-yearly report, made in October 1863, noted a capital of £1177, sales of £3856, profit of £171 and dividends of 1s 1d and 6d to non-members. Three years' work now saw Stocksbridge co-operators with a grocery and provision store, a drapers and a butchers shop. A shoemakers and cloggers workshop was being completed. In celebration the Stocksbridge and Malin Bridge Societies held a cricket match in September 1863 – a reminder that the societies were ventures in recreational and wider social enjoyment, including self-education. They were also places where temperance or stricter abstinence from drinking was discussed and responded to.

There were no reports on activity in central Sheffield in 1864, although it is likely that the main town society struggled on into that year. The smaller societies flourished, although a natural disaster – the Great Sheffield Flood – dealt the Malin Bridge Society a severe blow. *The Co-operator* reported in September: "Although the door of the stores was plated with iron, the force of the torrent burst it open and washed out the shelves on which were stored sugar, soap, rice, etc. The counters, flour bins, scales, vinegar barrels, sacks of flour etc, were swimming in the water – we also lost nine members, two of whom besides their wives had families of six to nine children." Nearly a year later, leading lights in Sheffield co-operation, including Alderman G.L. Saunders and Samuel B. Auty (Secretary of the Sheffield Society) came to take part in a re-opening ceremony. The Sheffield Society had now in 1865 been revived, although on a much reduced scale. It had a new name – the Sheffield Improved Industrial and Provident Society – and it was located at 127 Devonshire Street. A trade directory for 1865 also lists stores at Wadsley Bridge and Dronfield – probably connected to the Malin Bridge and Woodhouse societies.

Progress of local societies in 1866 was affected by the prolonged file strike. The Malin Bridge Society was the worst affected by this. It also suffered a disaster the following year when its Langsett Road Store was destroyed by fire. The Sheffield Society was slowly rebuilding. Its

fourth half-yearly report of 1876 noted the recent addition of 25 members bringing the total to 134 – a shadow of its size in the early 1860s. Despite bad trade during that year and its losses from withdrawals by members facing hard times, its dividend for the second half of 1867 was 1s 1d 5.5p) in the pound and membership held steady. The Sheffield Society battled on through 1868. A report in *The Co-operator* in June noted they had 200 members, one store dealing in groceries, provisions and butchers meat. This store was moved from Devonshire Street to 82 Snig Hill during the Spring. A report in November noted five shops and four branches (or separate societies) in Sheffield and its suburbs. A note of discord was struck in comments made by a prominent Sheffield co-operator: “I am sorry to report that in some cases they are tempting the public by various means to trade with them, and so far sully the fair principle of co-operation.”

The same year the Carbrook Society was begun by a group of blacksmiths from Jessop’s steelworks. This appears to have grown out of a self-help group “Brightside Improvement Class Saving Society” begun in 1865. The origins of this society are also linked to the Kilnhurst Society. The following year saw further evidence of the revival in Sheffield with a public lecture given in the Temperance Hall. The early 1870s saw more growth with two new stores being listed in an 1872 directory – a Co-operative Society (Atlas Works) in Carlisle Street, and a Co-operative STORE (Brunswick) in Occupation Road. Stocksbridge also opened new branches. Two years later, some workers from Chesterman’s Bow Works (engineering tools, cutlery) on Ecclesall Road got together with others (48 original shareholders) and founded the Ecclesall Industrial and Provident Society Limited. The linking of this society and the Sheffield one resulted in the modern Sheffield and Ecclesall Society and the Carbrook Society became the modern Brightside and Carbrook.

It must be recognised that the trade union producer co-ops and the Rochdale-inspired societies formed in the period of mid-Victorian prosperity involved only a small minority of working people. The industrial co-ops kept only a few workers working “off the box” or “off the parish”. The shops reached a wider working class public than just the members. They helped to force private traders to deal more honestly and at fairer profit margins. The moral message of the co-operators about abstinence from drink and tobacco helped some workers to manage their scarce earning and provide better for their families. No credit was given and in bad

times out-of-work co-operators may have been forced back to private dealers with higher prices but credit. They may have had to pawn, beg, steal, or improvise like the mass of depressed workers. The high mindedness of co-operative ideals helped many to avoid such a fall into the abyss of despair. Despite having the assistance of the employing class, the new 1870s co-op stores carried on the principle of common ownership, profit sharing, and democratic control. We should recognise the practical contribution of such bodies in the struggle for socialism.

---

### Joe Mather

Joe Mather was a filesmith,  
And laboured at his trade.  
The clamour of the workshop  
Tings in the songs he made.  
The bustle of industrial strife  
His anger at man's wrongs,  
The want and hardship of his life –  
They hammer in his songs.

The rich who ruled in Sheffield  
Were furious to hear  
Sedition in his ballads  
And muzzled him a year.  
But in the streets and taverns  
The cutlers sang the same,  
and when the year was over  
Joe Mather spoke again.

Whatever is one's talent,  
To draw or sew or speak,  
One's business is to flourish it  
In workshop, hall, and street.  
Wherever working people  
By brawn or brain or hand  
Would outlaw war and poverty  
From Britain's pleasant land.

- Frances Moore

### Joseph Mather (1737-1804)

Joseph Mather was born in Sheffield in 1737, in "Cack Alley" a jennel which led from Lambert Street to Westbar Green. He apprenticed to the file trade in the small works of Nicholas Jackson.

A Methodist in his youth, throughout his life he supplemented his income by composing ballads, which he sold in the streets and in public houses. He often ended up in Pudding Lane (now King Street) debtors gaol. The ballads focused on the terrible conditions experienced by most Sheffielders.

### Frances Moore (1906 – 1994)

Frances Moore, who was married to Bill Moore, was a teacher and activist in the National Union of Teachers. In her later years, she wrote a great deal of poetry. Some of her poems about working people appeared in the Holberry Society Bulletin.

# Unemployment in Late Victorian Sheffield

by Bill Moore

Reports on the state of unemployment in the town in the *Sheffield Daily Independent* and the *Sheffield Telegraph* during February 1886, give a very clear picture of the traditional view of unemployment, the way in which it was dealt with, and the signs of the change of attitude to it that began to develop nationally in the 1880s.

On Feb 15th, 1886, a mass meeting of about 500 unemployed men met in Paradise Square and elected a deputation to see the Mayor, Alderman J.W. Pye-Smith. The leader of the deputation, William Hanson, told the Mayor: "...there was a great deal of distress in the town which they believed was unknown to the community at large, and they wished to ask the Mayor if he would cause some public work to be taken in hand for the relief of the unemployed...something similar to what was done six or seven years ago...there were some 8,000 to 10,000 out of work...it has been getting worse and worse these last nine months. All the working men I have come across have a great deal of distress and some of their houses are going to wreck. There is hardly any furniture in the houses...there were men outside who had come with him with four or five children and without anything to eat...it was no use answering advertisements, for there were hundreds of applicants...he, his wife, and an adopted child had lived on less than sixpence a day since Christmas and it was heartrending to think that honest, intelligent working men should wish for work and could not get it."

The Mayor promised to call the Improvement Committee together and to consult the Borough Surveyor. The Improvement Committee, meeting the next day, decided to set up a free registry at which the names and addresses of unemployed could be entered. The agent of the Duke of Norfolk promised, if possible, to find some work.

On February 16th a further meeting was held in Paradise Square to hear a report of progress. The Church, the main dispenser of charity, was present in force. The meeting was chaired by Archdeacon Blakeney, with the Revs. Tweedie, Senior, and Johnson also present – as well as Stuart Uttley, William Holley, W. H. Smith, and others from the Sheffield Labour Association. William Hanson referred to the unemployed register: “That no doubt would be a good thing, but he did not wish to take part in anything that would be used to lower wages. His idea was that it might be better to have shorter hours, so that men might be put on who were walking about, and so have partial employment until the distress was alleviated...the distress would not last long; we should have prosperity set in before a year was over.”

Archdeacon Blakeney said: “They had done what they could to distribute relief among the people and to give free dinners to children in connection with the Parish Church, and he believed this had been done in other parishes in Sheffield; but it was quite clear that there was an enormous amount of distress in the town that was not at all met, and he hoped that the committee which it was proposed to form would meet that distress. He felt certain that the benevolence and philanthropy of the people of Sheffield would never allow any man, woman, or child to suffer from hunger. Hundreds of the well-to-do classes would be only too glad to come forward and subscribe whatever might be required... he hoped that the workmen before him would set an example of order and good conduct to the whole country, and would not follow in the slightest degree the disgraceful conduct of those who had, as he considered, brought shame upon themselves in London and other places. He did not think that such conduct would advance their cause.”<sup>1</sup>

Rev. A. C. Tweedie said: “He believed that there was more distress at the present time than at any time for the last thirteen years...he had also learned something else, that the Sheffield working man preferred to suffer a great deal of hardship and misery rather than take what is generally understood as charity (hear, hear!). That was much to their

---

1 A reference to the demonstration led by John Burns and H. M. Hyndman a week previously from Trafalgar Square to Hyde Park, during which stones were hurled “through the windows of gentlemen’s clubs in Pall Mall and St. James’ Street, and through the carriage windows of fashionable equipages on their way to the Park (D. Torre: “Tom Mann and His Times” p. 226-7.



honour and credit, and it was to the honour and credit of this committee that they had gone to the Mayor asking not for charity but for honest work.” He suggested that work planned for some time in the future (such as a new road in the Endcliffe Wood) should be undertaken immediately. Rev. W. Senior said: “He had seen men sitting at home taking care of the babies while their wives were earning a few shillings to keep the home together, and no one could say that that was a healthy state of things”. He spoke of the thousands of quarts of soup that had been distributed since Christmas and said “in that way inestimable good had been done”.

Mr Hanson, in moving a vote of thanks to Archdeacon Blakeney, said that “what the working man wanted was not charity but an opportunity to earn their own livelihood” (Cheers!). The vote was seconded by Mr John P. Hardy, a working man, who said he admitted that soup kitchens had been an inestimable boom “but there were hundreds of unemployed in Sheffield who would allow themselves to be reduced to the very verge of starvation before they would ask for charity (Cheers!). All honour to men who would rather depend on their own handicraft and their own resources and be independent, than crave the charity of those who had been more fortunate than themselves.”

Mr Holley of the Sheffield Labour Association was called for from the crowd. Mr Hanson objected to politics being introduced but was assured that Mr Rolley would not talk politics. Holley said: “They ought to consider the present state of affairs and see if they could not get a permanent remedy for them...The present state of things had not come about all in a day. His idea was that at any rate there should be some solution of the social problem which would enable men to see a goal at which to aim and which, with honest industry and integrity, they could work for a secure certainty in their lifetime. The working classes were living year in and year out from hand to mouth on the very borders of pauperism even when trade was good (Hear, hear!). In the generality of cases it was impossible to save anything to meet the periods of depression which came again and again. The commercial relationships of society and the social conditions of the people could never be satisfactory while this state of things existed. He did not want to be disrespectful to anyone, but he saw that large fortunes were made in a very short space of time and he was of the opinion that till things were more equal between the producers and the employers they would not arrive at a solution of the difficulty...He had often grieved to see groups of men

standing at the gates of works waiting to get employment, and to observe some foreman turn his nose up when he came near the group... the poor law, as at present constituted and administered, was a curse to the country rather than a blessing (Hear, hear!)... he condemned also the law which stipulated that an able-bodied working man could not receive outdoor relief, and was condemned therefore to be without union (i.e., Poor law) assistance unless he sold up his furniture and went into the workhouse. They could be orderly and he hoped they would, but the times were enough to drive men to desperation.”

The committee was then formed, but when Holley was proposed he declined in favour of Stuart Uttley, which was duly agreed to. By Feb. 22nd about 7000 men had registered their names at the Borough Surveyor's office, Bridge Street, asking for assistance. About 400 of them were assembled that Saturday morning in the basement of the office and were addressed by the Borough Accountant, Mr B. Jones, who gave them each a twopenny ticket (out of his own pocket) in order that they might get food – warning them “do not let him hear of any of the unemployed going and selling their tickets for a pennorth of beer!” Later that day a deputation saw the Mayor at his home regarding urgent cases of distress. He gave them £2 which was used to give bread, tea, and sugar to eighty cases.

Eventually, some 400 men were employed on work in Old Park Woods. Some 200 destitute persons were fed daily at the back of Mr Jones's office. The parish clergy dispensed soup. The unemployed and their families tightened their belts and if they could survive at all without completely starving, kept away from the workhouse.

From this newspaper account one can draw a number of important points.

1. The traditional attitude to unemployment (if not due to depravity and idleness) is that it is a pure misfortune – some are lucky and keep their jobs, some are unlucky. But in any case it won't last long: “we should have prosperity set in before a year is over”. This view came from long experience – the winter of 1885-6 marked the twenty-first slump since the beginning of industrial capitalism in Britain in the 1780s.

2. What the men wanted was work, not charity, but work that would not lower the general level of wages in the town. Hanson's point anticipated the Local Government Board circular (see point 5), which suggested

as one of the conditions of local authority employment on emergency work that the pay should be slightly less than that given for comparable private employment (the condition was not dropped until 1895).

3. The fear and hatred of the Poor Law and the workhouse.

4. Benevolence and philanthropy could always be called on but, as Archdeacon Blakeney admitted, it was quite inadequate even minimally to relieve the widespread distress then existing.

5. The fear of insurrection was there. The initial mass meeting in Sheffield came only a week after the historic Feb. 8th demonstration and riot in London, which terrified the well-to-do and was in many ways a turning point in the authority's attitude to unemployment. The most important result of this London riot was that on March 15th Joseph Chamberlain, President of the Local Government Board, issued a circular encouraging local authorities to undertake public works as a means of relieving unemployment. "This circular expressed for the first time, however reluctantly and hesitantly, the acceptance by the government of the principle that unemployment was a problem of society, not the result of want of virtue or of laziness in an individual."<sup>2</sup>

6. William Rolley's speech is important from the working-class side as a symptom of the revival in the 1880s of socialist thinking. The radical Democratic Federation, founded in June 1881, was changed in August 1884 into the Social Democratic Federation, based on Marxism, or at any rate on Hyndman's version of Marxism. It was a reflection of the growing difficulties of British capitalism in the middle of the "Great Depression". Rolley's speech reflects the new attitude. He was obviously choosing his words very carefully, but he was nevertheless able to suggest that the relations of society were clearly wrong if big fortunes could be made while working people were always on the verge of pauperism, that the Poor Law was worse than useless but that a permanent solution to unemployment could be found.

Increasingly in the following decades the working class understood that unemployment was not a 'misfortune' but a fault of the system that could only be finally overcome by changing the system.

---

2 B. B. Gilbert: "The Evolution of National Insurance in Great Britain", Michael Joseph, 1966, p. 3.

# The National Engineering Lock-Out in Sheffield, 1897-8

by Cathy Burke

In 1896 two particular developments occurred which signified a radical alteration of industrial relations in the British engineering industry; the formation of the Employers' Federation of Engineering Associations, uniting already existing local organisations; and the elevation of the socialist, George Barnes, to the office of General Secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE). The battle between the union of employers and the union of workers which began in the following year was long-expected, and was heralded as the "greatest struggle between capital and labour that this country has ever seen". The ultimate defeat of the trade unions, after 6 and a half months was important in causing a shift towards political action, as opposed to economic-industrial action, in moves towards the foundation of the Labour Representation Committee (later the Labour Party) in 1900.

The ASE had successfully fought with the nine-hour day in 1871. Further introduction of labour-saving machinery into the works, and the increase of socialist propaganda and activity among trade unionists in the 1880s combined to strengthen the claim for further reduction in hours. The "Eight Hour Day" became the slogan of militant trade unionism.

While the reduction in hours was the main issue in dispute, the more far-reaching question of general rights of control in the industry was at stake. The ASE had grown to be the most efficiently organised and the largest trade union in Britain, since its foundation in 1851. Its main strength came from its restriction of membership to the highly skilled and of strict apprenticeship controls. However, the introduction of machinery to do the same work as this skilled workforce seriously threatened the basis of strength of organised labour. The employers claimed their right to control the workforce as a property right. The huge in-

vestment of capital involved in the new technology made the employers more anxious to establish absolute control in the modern industry. The Conservative Government in office was likewise concerned in this effort, as the engineering industry was crucial to its imperialist ambitions in the massive expansion of naval and military resources which began in this period. Also, the largest engineering firms in the country were becoming heavily dependent on Government contracts for work, as they concentrated more on the production of armaments, a highly profitable option. The Lock-out which began in July 1897, was an attempt by the employers, in the Government's interest, to destroy morally and financially the ASE and the basis of trade unionism in general.

In Sheffield, the engineering, iron, and steel industry was concentrated in the east end of the city, in the Attercliffe, Darnall, and Brightside areas. The local industry was dominated by a small number of large family firms – Vickers, John Brown, Cammells, and Firths (Hadfields had privately introduced the eight-hour day in 1892). These firms represented a large proportion of the British armament industry, especially in producing armour-plating for the Navy. The Sheffield employers were reluctant to combine and there was no local demand for reduction in hours from the workforce. Trade was good. There was almost complete employment of trade unionist engineers, and rates of wages were slightly higher in Sheffield than in other parts. However, five weeks after the commencement of the Lock-out by the organised employers, the Sheffield employers decided to join forces with the national employers' movement, endorsed its policy and began to lock out local members of the ASE in August 1897.

The delay in the start of the dispute in Sheffield was interpreted by contemporaries as showing the comparatively harmonious relations in the local industry. A local member of the ASE thought "it would probably have been years before the movement caught Sheffield in its toils". The absence of obvious conflict was thought to be due partly to the tendency for engineering firms in Sheffield to be on a less extensive scale than in the north of England and London, with closer relations between masters and men.

However, a closer look at the local situation denies such optimistic explanation. Firstly, in 1897, the German iron and steel manufacturer, Krupps, invented a much-improved form of armour plating for naval vessels. The British firms were forced to take out the expensive patent and begin a reorganisation and rebuilding of premises, if they were at least to remain



internationally competitive. In order to release the necessary capital to undertake this expansion, national mergers took place, e.g. Vickers bought up the Maxims Naval Construction and Armaments Company at Barrow. All the main armaments manufacturers in the east end of Sheffield were embarking on massive plant improvements. Clearly, it was in the interests of these employers that potential difficulties in industrial relations should be smashed at this critical moment.

Secondly, the death of A. J. Mundella, veteran Liberal MP for Brightside, forced a by-election there in early August 1897. The Federated Employers in other cities began locking out their ASE employees from July 13th and frequent attempts were made to include the Sheffield employers in their efforts. However, the firms likely to become involved were situated in the Brightside area and the employers were actively promoting the Conservative candidate, J. F. Hope. Had they joined the national employers' movement before the election, they would have been sure to alienate a large proportion of the working-class vote. The Liberal-Labour candidate only narrowly succeeded in the election on August 6th. On August 10th the first batch of local ASE engineers were locked out.

When the Sheffield employers locked out 25% of ASE members employed in their firms the Union withdrew the remaining membership immediately. More important for the outcome of the dispute was the spontaneous support given by the unorganised semi-skilled engineers and labourers and, because of the inter-dependency of various sectors of the steel industry in Sheffield, it was estimated that in a fortnight the number affected would have risen to 20,000 – 30,000. The support of the non-unionists was crucial to the cause of the workers because, with recent modernisation of the industry, it was quite possible for the unskilled to do the work usually done by the skilled, through the manning of machinery. In fact, the employers regularly imported labour from outside the area throughout the dispute to maintain some production. The imported labour was attracted by the assurance of high rates of pay, free accommodation on work premises and other benefits, such as rations of tobacco and beer. These workers were also escorted to the works by the police, often through crowds of hostile, and sometimes violent strikers. The fact that the employers were still able to work the plants with an unskilled workforce was a potent reminder to the engineers that the original basis of their strength in controlling the supply of labour was now seriously out of date.

The dispute was organised locally by the Federated Trades Council (FTC), and by separate strike committees. The trade unionists received strike pay from the ASE but the non-unionists were totally dependent on voluntary support. Collection boxes were placed in local public houses, concerts and parades were organised to raise funds. The collective response of the community, regardless of status or skill, contributed towards a reassessment of the role of trade unionism by both unionists and non-unionists. The unionists realised the limitation of the industrial organisation of the workers on the present lines in the face of the mammoth unity of capitalist interests. The non-unionists realised, perhaps for the first time, the importance of working-class organisation.

One non-unionist engineer confessed at a meeting held in support of the strikers that “the lock-out had opened his eyes on the question of trade unionism (applause) and he now thought he ought to have been a society man years ago. Others felt like him.” Unions organising the semi-skilled and labourers were reporting record recruitments and attendances at meetings during the dispute and Fred Maddison, the newly elected Lib-Lab MP for Brightside, commented, that the employers had raised a spirit in favour of trade unionism which they would regret in the future.

While the executive committee of the FTC was officially in charge of the conduct of the dispute in Sheffield, the membership of the co-ordinating Strike Committee tended to belong to independent political organisations, or socialist societies of the area. This contributed to the political content of the dispute. So much so that the Liberal party-oriented FTC decided in August 1898, six months after the end of the dispute, to take no further action in future elections of workers to public bodies, commenting that “party politics had, during the past year, been the greatest danger that had threatened the usefulness of the Council”. By retreating from a political response to industrial demands, the Trades Council was unwittingly encouraging the aspirations of more militant trade unionist members of the Council. These were to become realised in the opening years of the 20th Century in the foundation of a National Labour Representation Committee in 1900; the formation of a local LRC in 1903; and the creation from this of an alternative Trades Council in the city in 1908, allied to the Labour Party.

The dispute ended in 1898, when the London ASE membership gave in to the employers over the central question of hours. The news was greeted in Sheffield with disbelief. In the previous months, the remarkable strength

and unity of the local strikers was shown in their response to a national ballot on the employers' proposals. In the ballot taken in December 1897, those for the proposals of the negotiating committee numbered 3; those against 1,695. When news arrived of the defeat, the Sheffield Lock-out Committee said the news had come as "a great shock to the men as a whole. There is no sign whatever of weakness amongst them".

The terms of settlement dealt with all the outstanding issues, and gave the employers all they had wanted. They won full freedom of action on selection, training, and employment of labour and there was to be no limitation of the number of apprentices. Also, a system of industry-wide bargaining was established in order to avoid disruption in the future. The consequences of the dispute and settlement were as long-lasting as the employers had hoped. The only subsequent major attack on managerial rights, in 1922, was defeated and the system of industrial relations which the dispute established is much the same today.

The experience of trade unionists during the Lock-out was of defeat of the existing methods to combat capitalism. They therefore looked for firmer ground for the future. In its Annual Report, 1897-8, the Sheffield Federated Council commented, "The Capitalists have learned well the lessons of combination, and it will be well for Labour also to learn wisdom by experience – it is evident that in future, if Labour is to be successful in maintaining its position, fully 90% must be financial members of their respective unions. The whole of the unions must be federated". On the other hand, the argument for independent representation of working men in Parliament was strengthened. At the Annual Labour Rally in May 1898, the major theme was the local experience of the engineering dispute. The march through the city centre included over 30 local trade societies with their own banners and bands and the procession was headed by the band and banner of the ASE. The principal speaker, Fred Maddison, MP for Brightside, called for the federation of all trade unions. Another speaker thought that "Trade Unionists must stand shoulder to shoulder, prepared to sink their political and religious differences – the questions (eight-hour day etc) should be fought out on the floor of the House of Commons".

The defeat of the unions was so shattering that the response of ideas of union federation and Parliamentary representation were defensive and conservative. Charles Hobson, president of the Federated Trades

Council, emphasised this when he said, “Both unions and federations would find their greatest success lay not in fighting capital, but in agreeing with and making terms with capital. Recognising the usefulness of both Capital and Labour, they must use both and give to each its proper position and price, or reward.” The employers had achieved the desired conciliation of Labour in the industry. The ASE continued to preserve its select status in Trade Unionism, in failing to allow the unskilled into its membership. For the long-term, the realisation of the economic industrial power of labour was given up for what was thought to be the “scientific and methodical” effort through the ballot box.

---

## Reminiscences of Sam Holmes

*Across a number of articles, Sam Holmes shared his memories of growing up in Sheffield in the 1910s and 1920s.*

### Back to Back

A back-to-back house is a terraced house in that it is of a ‘run’ of such houses, each is separated from its neighbour by a party or dividing wall with no more than a brick thick plus roughing and skinning, no more than six inches in all. The ‘run’ is duplicated at the back so that the back house is both attached and separated by a similar wall. No matter how long or short the run of the houses, it is always two in depth. Access to the back houses from the street is by an ‘entry’ no more than a yard wide which at its end opens into a ‘yard’ or the regal sounding name of a ‘court’. The street houses are numbered in the usual way, the numbers of their companions at the back have the prefix ‘Court’ so that the address of a back house would appear as say ‘14 court 9 house’ or simply 14/9.

Viewed from outside each house like its neighbour has a door and two casement windows, the room and the bedroom, a third window or fanlight lies flat on the slates and is concealed from our view, this fanlight lets in the light of day to the third room or attic. The court is of flagstones, a keen observer will note the holes in the joints of the ‘flags’ that have held marbles or home-made cricket stumps, many of the flags are numbered in chalk for some children’s game. Across the court and fac-

ing the houses are middens piled high with household refuse. There are 'closets' in rows, each one serving at least two households of large families and therefore in constant use. There are stables and the carts and drays the horse's haul. There is a coal-place where an old and gnarled man weighs coal from a huge heap and tips into barrows later to be delivered by kids from school in return for an odd penny. A few hens cluck around this part of the 'court', a few dogs and Nellie the goat, not Nanny for some odd reason, and a favourite with the kids. The whole area of the court is a football pitch where men and boys play together or oppose each other, where women and girls too play their games and dance and skip on festive occasions to the tunes of the visiting barrel-organ.

But we are at the door of 14/9. Let us enter, but mind the step, so white with the loving application of years of 'pot-mould'. The room is small and warm from the coal fire burning in a Yorkshire range which is just an open fire and oven, there is a 'hob' on which stands a large iron kettle, the contents of which are simmering, as they always are. A shelf running the length of the range is the oven 'top' and holds a tea-pot and numbers of pots and pans, no doubt 'Ria' will make us a cup of tea, or more likely a pint-pot. On the same wall as the 'range on our left is a shallow stone sink with one cold water tap and between the sink and the range is a copper with its own tiny fire-grate to heat the water that does the family wash each Monday. The right-hand end of the wall is a shallow recess from the chimney breast where hangs the day-to-day wear of the family, a variety of boots and shoes are on the floor in a neat row under the clothing.

The window wall features no more than a large wooden armed chair and a huge wringing-machine that would challenge the strength of a professional writer to turn. The wall opposite the range has two wooden chairs separated by a large mirror-back side-board which holds a display of ornaments, photographs, and perhaps a neat pile of newly-ironed clothing, upon its small shelves are the Rent book, the Insurance books, books containing the accounts of hire-purchase and on one tiny shelf, all alone, the closet key.

The wall facing the door is an ugly absurdity, there are two doors, one at each end of the wall, the one on our left is quite ordinary, it opens onto the cellar-head, the shelved family pantry where also is kept the wash-tub, rubbing board and peggy-legs, in fact everything that spells toil for 'Ria'. The other door for some odd reason is two feet higher than its mate, let's look. Oh, yes, two treads of the staircase protrude into that tiny room

so that the bottom rail of the door closes on to the 'rising' of the third 'riser', but perhaps we are unjust in our criticism for if we open the door, we see a miracle of carpentry that turns the staircase abruptly to the left so that the 'flight' runs behind the same wall between the two doors. There are a few chairs and stools in the room, a rocking-chair and a table, on the table is a paraffin lamp with an ornate iron base much too heavy to be accidentally knocked over, its predecessor, less ornate, had stood on the side-board, the floor of the room is earthen with flagstones and hidden by several thicknesses of lime and a scattering of hand-pegged rugs.

Lots of us remember the only lighting other than daylight is the fire and the paraffin lamp, if we open the stairs door we can feel along the 'tread' at shoulder height and find a candle-stick and a box of matches, the only lighting for upstairs.

The first short flight end in a small landing, on our left is the bedroom, again a tiny room, nevertheless containing a large double-bed, a marble-topped dressing table on which stand a large jug and wash basin only used in times of illness, at births, and deaths. In the corner there is an empty cot as quietly expectant as Ria herself. The floor is of wood and without covering, a matter of necessity, not to provide a hiding place and refuge for bugs and other such things. At the top of the second flight there is no door, the stairs open out into an attic and the only protection from a fall down the well of the stairs are a few upright posts and a hand rail. There is the fanlight in the sloping ceiling, but our impression is of a 'sea' of bed clothes, and only Ria can find her way there or knows how many 'ships' there are, a busy sea, in fact if we listen to the kids is their final calls before falling asleep we might hear a little girl saying 'put watter straight'. If we go back downstairs Ria will have 'mashed', its ten o'clock anyway, and if we sit quietly chatting we will see a few cockroaches already anticipating lights out and bed for the family, making their first runs later to be joined by others in their hundreds.

As we leave the Court, from a house whose door is slightly ajar comes a rich baritone voice from a wind-up gramophone singing "that hath made this world a E-e-e-e-den" and it isn't an Eden, is it?



## Poverty

There are at least two ways of telling that Spring is here. One is finding a field or meadow and if one's hand can cover six daisies, then it is Spring. The other method is by observing the windows of drapers' shops. If there is a sign on the window which reads: "Goods laid away must be paid for in the next two weeks" – then it is Spring.

The sign that reads 'Goods may be laid away' is always there, summer and winter. It is an invitation to contract a debt. It is a device by which a family can be clothed and re-clothed. The alternative is to get the things and pay later.

It would be a romantic notion to believe that somewhere in the folklore of a people is the idea that children must be 'rigged out' at Whitsun. Maybe something to do with the Maypole and fertility? The custom is old. Was it invented by an emergent capitalism that the clothing manufacturers found profitable? When I was a boy, the tradition and custom was very strong.

There was mass poverty. Little could be prepared for; each week saw a family's income whittled away in the repayment of debts, the largest debt always being the family's clothing. In the twelve months between any two Whitsuns the clothing debt would slowly and painfully fall. Now and then the debt would leap as some child needed a pair of shorts, a shirt, a frock, or a pair of shoes, but generally and overall, the debt would diminish enough so that in the few weeks preceding another Whitsun, a frantic effort would clear the old debt ready for a whole new one.

The 'Caller' was always there. He came every week and knew his craft. Suddenly everyone was rich, with enough money in cheques to clothe the entire family; four kids? Six kids? Twenty-two kids (there was such a family)? The cheques were not a call on a bank but 'credit notes' of the clothing firm who also employed the 'Caller', the debt collector.

On Whitsun morning thousands of kids, clean scrubbed, celluloid-collared, with vaselined hair parted with the family hatchet, girls curled and beribboned, roamed the streets visiting friends, neighbours, aunts and uncles and six-times-removed cousins to show off and receive their pennies. By noon it was all over. The kids stripped off and donned their rags and went to play. As each parent had given out many pennies they

could ill afford, the kids accumulation was confiscated and everyone was back where they were in the first place. Yet a penny tram ride to the nearest park where there was grass would have shown that it was indeed Spring and they would have been satisfied with that.

On the Saturday following Whitsun the 'Caller' came for his first repayment of the new debt. On the next day the kids were allowed their new things for a few hours, with instructions to be careful for the decision had already been made on which items would be pawned on Monday. Each Saturday the items that were in pawn were fetched out, and taken back again on Monday. Inevitably, because kids are kids, the time came when the clothes were no longer acceptable by the pawn shop, either because they were soiled or had been washed. It is an odd fact that vests and pants were rarely worn by working-class children, an unnecessary luxury. From the pawn-broker's first refusal the clothes became everyday wear and were soon rags.

Children's clothing needs were small. A coat bought with a suit at Whitsun lasted forever. Because it was never worn, it could be handed down to a younger brother. Most kids were satisfied with a pair of shorts or knee-breeches, a shirt, and a jersey (or ganzy, as they were called). Boots and shoes were always a problem. Many kids wore clogs from which the irons had been stripped off and replaced with rubber belting that had been 'knocked off' from, or discarded by, some local 'goff' shop. It was possible to get a pair of plimsolls at school if any kid was prepared to be a Morris dancer few did. A teacher named Wright must have spent his entire leisure time, evenings and weekends, searching for boots and shoes. He always seemed to have an old pair for some ill-shod kid.

Many kids had a preference for bare feet, especially in the summer time, a boy couldn't be a silent and agile thief in clogs.

Most of the shops on the Moor had an open glassless window, with goods stacked on the terraced shelves, which were shuttered at night. Every street corner had a barrow; they sold fruit, vegetables, wet fish, books and comics; some sold second-hand clothes. Boys rarely stole sweets or toffees because they were kept in glass jars with lids, which meant the whole jar or nothing. Fruit and carrots were the favourites – in fact if a boy had an odd penny, he would spend it on carrots; a lot could be bought for a penny and could be shared. Walk bare-foot and mingle with

the crowd, grab the apple or orange or whatever it was and dive straight into the traffic, all horse-drawn except for the trams. The fastest thing in a congested area was a bare-footed boy and it was all over in seconds. The technique was perfect. If a moving tram got in the way, well, get on the next tram; the conductor would give you a clip and chuck you off at the next stop – usually with a helpful grin.

At the bottom of Thomas Street was a pub called the ‘Punch Bowl’. It stood back so that there was a forecourt both wide and deep. On the forecourt there were always barrows and a large stall selling wet fish. At opening time, the barrows were wheeled away and the stall was lifted bodily and carried into the ‘Punch Bowl’s’ back yard and placed in a large wooden shed.

At the far end of the ‘Big Yard’ was the ‘Little Yard’. There were two stables there, and facing them was a tiny house where little Biddy lived on her own. Between Biddy’s and the stables was a high wall which divided the Little Yard from the ‘Punch Bowl’s’ back yard.

The wall was not a difficult climb and once over, access to the shed was by springing a loose batten. The stall had a drawer which contained a ‘float’ in small change for the next day, around twenty-five shillings. On Friday it might be as much as two pounds. To take the lot would have been to dry up that source. Only a few coppers were taken, but occasionally five shillings to slip into Ria’s purse. That puzzled her. Twenty years on, I told her.

# Principle FIVE **P5**



## JOIN PRINCIPLE 5

An accessible co-operative learning  
and information resource for all.

Lending Library

Co-operative archive and information resource

Talks, study groups, visits, and film screenings

Engagement with other co-operatives and libraries

Co-operative News available for Members

Principle 5 Yorkshire Co-operative Resource Centre  
Aizlewood's Mill, Nursery Street, Sheffield, S3 8GG  
Tel: 0114 282 3132 Web: <https://www.principle5.coop>

# CO-OPERATORS, RADICALS, WORKERS

Principle 5 Pamphlet: No 6

The coming together of members of the Communist Party, the International Socialists, various other Trotskyite splinter groups, Big Flame and the Labour Party in a collaborative venture to examine and reclaim Sheffield's radical working-class history today seems very unlikely. But in the late 1970s it happened.

The Holberry Society for the Study of Sheffield Labour History, formed in 1978, worked to rediscover the radicals who had fought for democracy and workers rights from the 18th century to the present day. Their work culminated in the early 2000s with the opening of the Holberry Cascades in the new Peace Gardens.

This new pamphlet brings back into print some of the highlights from the Holberry Society Bulletin, of which eight editions were published between 1978 and 1984. From co-operative experiments, labour strikes, and working-class narratives, to historic injustices and 'justified homicides', the Holberry Society members put political differences aside to retell Sheffield's radical story.

£5

Principle **P5**  
FIVE