

## The story of Upperthorpe and Netherthorpe

# HOW WE WORKED

### Work, skill and survival

For generations, Sheffield's identity was forged in iron, steel, cutlery and tools. In the 19th century, skilled craftsmen known as 'little mesters' worked in small workshops, often specialising in a single process. But as factories and machinery expanded, traditional skills were increasingly replaced by mechanised production.

Despite economic ups and downs, metalworking remained the city's economic backbone until the industrial decline of the 1970s and 80s.

Behind the factories was a low-paid service economy. Young women worked in shops and domestic service, while many found work as 'buffers' or polishers in the cutlery trade.



Workshop with young boys

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LISTEN...  
...to The Grinders Song



LISTEN...  
...to the life of a young Victorian steely worker



A Sheffield grinding shop



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### Dangerous work

Some Sheffield trades were deadly. By 1908, grinding was officially recognised as a dangerous occupation because of serious risks from injury and respiratory disease. Conditions gradually improved through safer technology, workplace regulation and trade union pressure.



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'The Buffer' Girls' picture was hung above the fireplace at the settlement

### A working life

Sidney S. was born in Sheffield in 1883 into a cutler's family. When his father died, Sidney was just 18 months old. By 1891, he was living with nine relatives in a cramped three-room house while his mother worked as a charwoman.

Two years later, Sidney left school and began working full-time. He became an errand boy for a silver plate manufacturer, delivering materials to craftsmen working in run-down workshops. Workers typically faced 54–60 hour weeks. Sidney eventually built a 20-year career in Sheffield's small-tools trade.

### From 60 hours to 48

Working life changed dramatically during the 20th century. Child labour was restricted and the working week fell to 48 hours after WWI. 12-hour shifts gave way to three 8-hour shifts and paid holidays became a legal right in the 1930s.

From workshop to factory, Sheffield's working life was transformed, but it was still based on skill, hard work and long hours.