

Upperthorpe and Netherthorpe Workers History



Picture by William Ibbitt showing Sheffield's early development with Crookesmoor Reservoir and Dam House in centre (1856):

Credit:Sheffield Museums

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During the 19th century, Sheffield's population increased dramatically from a town of 45,000 to a city of almost half a million people.. This came about for two main reasons – firstly, couples were marrying at an earlier age, so more children were being born, but secondly -and more importantly – there was a great deal of migration into Sheffield, with people moving here for work. Employment opportunities were good. There was certainly a demand for more and more workers as the steel and engineering industries expanded and new large-scale factories were built. Although some immigrants came from far afield to try their luck in Sheffield, most arrived from adjacent agricultural counties, where jobs in farming were being lost due to the repeal of the Corn Laws and enclosure of common land. However, they were often unskilled in the metal trades, and the influx of all these new people sometimes caused problems with the existing Sheffield workers.

Given that everyone was crowded into closely-packed areas around the workshops and factories, these less than ideal living conditions could make it difficult for newcomers to settle into their new lives. There was some emigration from Sheffield – for example, cutlers going to America in the hope of higher wages and a better quality of life – but in general the movements made by an increasingly mobile UK population were from country to town, and from farming to manufacturing. The majority of people now came to be concentrated in large towns rather than living more isolated lives in countryside areas, as had previously been the case. This was the beginning of Sheffield's growth to city status.



This YouTube clip gives an idea of what Sheffield was like in the 1850s. Talking Art by Sheffield

Museums at Talking Art: South East View of Sheffield by William Ibbitt

The problems of growing towns

Sheffield had its fair share of problems as its population grew. By the middle of the 19th century the built-up area in the centre couldn't really accommodate any more people, as it was already full of residential and industrial properties. The outskirts were also starting to fill up with new factories, and still there was the problem of where to house the workers needed for these expanding industries. So with no overall plan in place, the race was on to build plenty of cheap houses as quickly as possible, preferably close to the workshops and factories where people were employed. Unfortunately the new residential areas were squalid, falling short in a number of ways: there was an erratic supply of those utilities such as gas and water, which we take for granted today; there were inadequate sanitary arrangements with houses frequently not connected to drainage and sewerage systems; there was no reliable street cleaning or rubbish collection; houses were badly designed and poorly-built; the general environment (land, air and rivers) was polluted, leading to poor health and high mortality rates for Sheffield residents; finally there were hardly any green spaces for the population to enjoy in the small amount of leisure time that they had. The progress that came from advances in manufacturing certainly had a detrimental effect on much of the population, both in terms of each individual's quality of life, and on his local environment.

Providing services in growing towns

As the century progressed, and particularly after 1893 when Sheffield became a city, some of the problems which had blighted the lives of the fast-growing population were starting to be addressed. This led to the provision of amenities such as baths and wash-houses. Upperthorpe Baths was opened in 1895, and was situated next to the public library, built some 20 years earlier. The building housed a swimming bath, and a number of what were called slipper baths. These were free-standing bath tubs, where people could pay to take a bath. There were two levels of service, which would reflect things like how many towels you were given, and the type of soap. Public baths were aimed at those people in the population who had no indoor plumbing and no space for a fixed bath at home. This of course would be most of the working-class population. There was also a public wash-house on the Daniel Hill side of Upperthorpe Baths, where people could come and do their laundry. This was another hard and time-consuming job if there was no piped water-supply

in the house, and of course no hot water. Services such as these helped people in challenging circumstances to keep themselves and their clothes clean.

People understood the connexion between keeping things clean and being healthy, and of course health was an important issue. Sheffield's first actual hospital was the Infirmary, built by public subscription and petition was located in the countryside when it opened in 1797. (Earlier institutions going by the name "hospital" were in fact almshouses.)

Some 30 or so years later, it became clear that the Infirmary couldn't adequately meet the medical needs of the growing population, so a Public Dispensary was opened, also by public subscription, in 1832. (This eventually became the Royal Hospital, which closed in 1978 when the Hallamshire Hospital opened.) As medical knowledge grew in the 19th century, various specialist hospitals and units were established. Medical care was also provided by publicly-funded workhouses at Fir Vale (which became the Northern General Hospital) and at Nether Edge. Access to medical services was as follows: if you were poor, you went to the medical facilities in the workhouse; if you were wealthy, you paid for a doctor to visit at home. Note that before you could get treatment from one of the subscription-funded hospitals (unless it was for an accident) you had to obtain a recommendation from one of the subscribers.

Further new hospitals, or extensions to existing hospitals, were built in the 20th century. Sheffield became an important centre for medical education and for research, with doctors taking a particular interest in the causes of and treatments for common industrial diseases. The aim was to make places of employment safer, and to stop so many workers dying young.

Transport

Other ways in which people's lives improved during the last quarter of the 19th century occurred through changes to transport systems and roads. Earlier in the century the main forms of transport were horse-

drawn vehicles of various kinds. Some roads were little more than poorly made tracks; others were main turnpike routes with tolls to be paid by the user. Then from 1873 there were privately-run horse-drawn tramways in the town, but this did not create a proper system for local passengers, and many people just walked everywhere. Other developments in communications such as canals and railways had more of an impact on freight rather than human passengers. Eventually the 1880s saw the abolition of tolls on turnpike roads, and then in 1896 the horse tramways in Sheffield were brought under public control. The local authority improved, extended and electrified this tramway system, with the first electric tram running in 1899. Putting on electric trams meant that steeper gradients could be tackled, which was important for Sheffield! Horse-drawn trams went out of service in 1902. As part of the necessary work to get the electric tramway up and running, new roads were made, and existing ones improved or widened. A consequence of now having a good public transport system was that people were not always forced to live close to their place of work; in theory they and their families could move out of the unhealthy industrial parts of Sheffield, and into more pleasant areas.

During the Edwardian period rapid expansion of the tramway system occurred; trams became more comfortable and were very well used by Sheffield people. However, in spite of their popularity, some trams started to be replaced by buses, and the feeling grew that integrating a tramway on the same stretch of road as other vehicles (whose numbers were increasing) was problematic. So the Sheffield tram system finally closed in 1960.

Getting the vote

In many ways working people's lives were improving during the 19th century, but because the working class were for a long time denied the vote, there was a power imbalance between different classes in the population. In addition to these class differences, men and women were also treated unequally when it came to the political influence they had, and the civic duties which each was permitted to take up. Before the 19th century the franchise was restricted to a very small number of property-owning men.

Various protest movements for reform grew from the Chartist movement, trade unions and women suffragettes. This pressure brought about change through a series of Reform Acts passed during the 19th century and early 20th century. Male voting rights were extended through the Reform Act of 1867 and in 1918 all men aged 21 and over were granted the vote, with no property restrictions in place. At the same time women over the age of 30 who met certain property qualifications (or whose husbands did) were also allowed to vote. It was only in 1928 that women achieved the vote on the same terms as men. In 1918 another important piece of legislation was passed which allowed women to stand for election to Parliament. (A previous act from 1911 had introduced payment for Members of Parliament).



A mass political meeting in Paradise Square sometime in the late 19th century. The square was often used by large groups to hear public speakers.

Taken from the balcony of the Middle Class School: Libraries Sheffield

However, this wasn't the first legislation permitting women to play a part in civic and political affairs. The 1869 Municipal Franchise Act allowed female ratepayers (that is, widows and unmarried women) to vote in local elections. Married women were not included because it was felt that their husbands' vote was sufficient. Later the 1894 Local Government Act allowed all women to vote and to serve on councils and local bodies of various sorts. As a result of this legislation, Mrs Sarah Ruth Wilson was elected in 1882 to the Sheffield School Board, and Mrs Elizabeth Chappell was elected as a Sheffield Poor Law Guardian.

Gradually women took on positions of responsibility locally, even though they were often ridiculed for campaigning for universal suffrage.

Sheffield was quite a radical place, and women here were very active in all branches of the suffrage movement, including the militant wing. Many Sheffield women organised events and went to prison as a consequence. Suddenly all this activity came to an end when war was declared in the summer of 1914, and the suffragettes abandoned their struggle for now, throwing themselves into giving support to the war effort. Finally there followed the 1918 legislation giving the vote (unequally) to all adult men and some adult women; then in 1928 electoral equality was achieved.

Arnold Freeman's work

One consequence of World War One was certainly the changing position of women. Along with this was the desire to do something about the inequality between the classes and hence to improve the lives of ordinary people. In some quarters nothing less than a reconstruction of society was called for. However, the postwar period was one of social and economic distress; the country was bankrupt and many ambitious social schemes came to nothing. Into that world stepped Arnold Freeman. He believed he knew the answer to an important question that was in people's minds: how was everyone to live a satisfying and productive life? Freeman arrived in Upperthorpe towards the end of World War One, and became warden of the Sheffield Educational Settlement, where he tried to put his ideas into practice. He wanted his Settlement to be accessible to everyone in the locality, and to be important to that locality and he felt that part of its work should be to do research about the area, in order to gain knowledge of what its problems were, so as then to be able to influence how local issues might be tackled. He thought it was important for people to be good workers, responsible members of households, and useful citizens. He recognised that most people hadn't received the sort of education that would prepare them to be that kind of adult, so he set about organising activities which would encourage people to develop skills and therefore have the confidence to play their part in society.

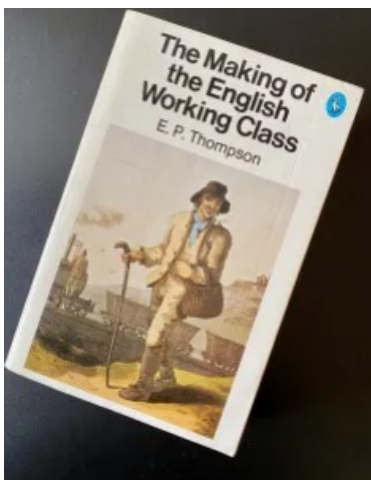
Freeman's type of education was debates not lectures, carried out in an open atmosphere where it was hoped that people could educate one another as equals. Perhaps his favourite activity was putting on a play, giving everyone involved the chance to learn about great literature, and to have opportunities for self-expression. Above all else he wanted people to talk to one another about anything that concerned them, so that they could learn from one another.

How We Learned

Adult Education

During the 19c Sheffield became noted for its social reformers and a strong working class. Walkley became the home for John Ruskin and even earlier Upperthorpe was the home for Ebenezer Elliott, the Corn Law Rhymer. Education and culture was seen as a method of self and societal improvement alongside the radical calls for political change and the need for a more educated workforce. Some initiatives were started by more affluent citizens wanting to introduce the uneducated to a better life whilst others were formed and run by working people themselves. Not only did these organisations provide education and culture but also provision of social functions like housing and libraries.

In the field of adult education, important organisations in Sheffield included the Mechanics' Institute (started as a library in 1824, then founded as an institute in 1832, and closed in the 1890s, its aim was to teach people subjects related to their working lives); the Sheffield Hall of Science (opened in 1839, with a highly political slant and covering wide-ranging topics); the Plebs League (based at 176 Springvale Road in Upperthorpe and forerunner of the National Council of Labour Colleges); the People's College (founded 1842, and closed 1879, again with a strong political focus); the Adult School movement (originally developed by Quakers; losing popularity during the 20th century); and the Co-operative movement. In *The Making of the English Working Class* E.P. Thompson writes that it was said of Sheffield:



“There is a peculiarity in the town of Sheffield.....all classes of labourer dare to speak out the truth that is within them, ay, and labour while they think.”

Each had their own character and focus. The Mechanics Institute excluded books “deemed subversive” whereas the Sheffield Hall of Science was organised on democratic lines and opened by the co-operator Robert Owen in 1837 and stated that “it was under the patronage of no-one”.

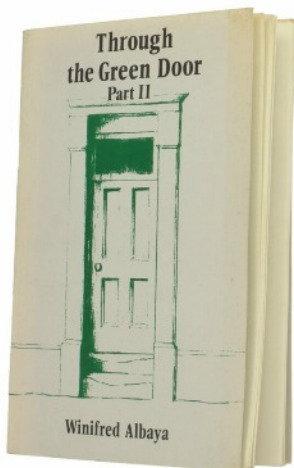
By the beginning of the 20th century ideas around adult education also began to change at this time. It finally came to be understood that once more people got the vote, they had to be better educated, both for work and society. In the past, it was thought undesirable to educate the working class, but now (in some circles at least) ideas had changed in favour of education for all. And some parents wanted literacy skills for themselves after seeing their children learning things at school.

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Although a comprehensive plan for adult education was never really implemented, some public money was made available to some organisations providing services for adults. As well as the local authority, the universities with their Extension lectures and the Tutorial Class scheme, which gave people access to a university education whatever their level of schooling. Other voluntary bodies such as the trade unions, National Council of Labour Colleges fought to keep their independence from the State.



As part of a later university course Winifred Albaya wrote of the life of students in the Sheffield Educational Settlement during the 1930's. Winifred's partner Joe returned to his home country of Spain in 1936 to assist the Republican Government's fight against fascism. Other students went on to prominent roles in politics, trade unions, business and civil society.

Later in the 19th century there was a growing demand for a proper system of full-time compulsory education for all children. It was recognised that the existing haphazard mixture of schools was not satisfactory. In 1870 the Elementary Education Act was passed, followed over the next couple of decades by further supporting acts of Parliament. The legislation stipulated that where there were insufficient voluntary school places for the number of children in an area, then a School Board had to be elected and had to provide schools paid for out of local rates, this money being in addition to the existing government grants. These board schools, as they were called, catered initially for 5-10 year old children from working class families; they offered a basic education, mainly in the 3 Rs (though as time passed increasing efforts were made to broaden the curriculum). Fees were charged at first, but these were abolished in 1891.

Sheffield got onto this very quickly, and in the first ten years after the legislation, had built 21 new schools.

In 1875, when he was invited to open Park School, the Liberal MP David Chadwick made this remark about Sheffield's enthusiastic response to the 1870 Elementary Education Act:

“How in the name of fortune the School Board have persuaded the ratepayers of Sheffield to tolerate their extravagance in spending £100,000 in the building of 14 or 15 schools as substantial as so many castles. “

Many of these well- designed and sturdy school buildings are still in use today, and have made a large impact on communities in Sheffield. Although in the early years of state education there were ways of getting round the regulations on attendance, by 1880 children had to go to school by law. Parents were prosecuted if their children failed to attend school; they were fined and names and addresses of the responsible adults were published in the local press.

Education legislation was supported by various Factory Acts regulating hours of work, working conditions and part-time schooling for children in employment. In some circumstances children who had jobs could obtain a Labour certificate, exempting them from having to attend school. The minimum leaving age kept creeping up, to 11 in 1893, 12 in 1899, and rising to 14 years in 1918. School Boards lasted until the passing in 1902 of legislation for the provision of secondary education, when the board schools were taken over by new local education authorities.

As Sheffield embarked on its ambitious schools building programme, voluntary provision became less popular with parents. These developments in children's education also had an impact on services for adults. For example, the local School Board started to organise some evening classes, which at first were for young people aged between 12 and 21, but later were open to anyone. From the late 1890s, many

people of all ages attended these local authority-run classes, which lessened the demand for services previously provided by voluntary bodies.

By the 20th century, things were improving for children, but there were still many adults who had never had the chance to get a decent education. In about 1918 a group of people were asked by Arnold Freeman, who became warden of the Sheffield Educational Settlement, to write down their memories of being at school during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many of them hardly went to school at all. If they came from a poor family, even small fees of a few pennies a week were too much to pay, and anyway children would often be at work, earning much-needed money. If children didn't have shoes or decent clothes to wear, then they might be kept at home. Some attended school part-time, and in that case they would often be too hungry or too tired from working to be able to get any benefit from their lessons. It was not unknown for children to fall asleep in school in the afternoon, if they'd had a hard morning at work.

Like most working class children of that time, these authors didn't have access to any form of secondary or higher education. They would have attended elementary schools, which were certainly operating under difficulties. From the 1860s to the 1890s the amount of government grant was related to pupils' attendance and achievement – both areas where it

was easy for a school to fall short. Attendance could be spasmodic, and levels of achievement were affected by such things as the size of classes (generally large), the school environment and educational equipment available (generally poor), the type of teaching and learning taking place (generally unimaginative and rule-bound), and above all the quality and availability of good skilled teachers (definitely not enough of these). Eventually the regulations for the financing of schools were changed and this, coupled with less rigidity in the curriculum, made for a better experience for pupils and teachers alike.

Some children missed school through ill-health. Oscar D wrote:

I was about 5 years old when I started out to school. But unfortunately, was not able to keep it up, owing to having contracted consumption at 7 years. ... At 9 years of age, I went to a Private School, for, 13 weeks, my People Paying 1/- a week. but I could not keep it up, and had to stop altogether learning anything. I was 10 years old before I went to school again. then staying on till I left altogether at 14 years of age.

(Mrs) G C had to leave school because she was needed at home. She started school at the age of 3, but when she was nearly 12 she had reached the 7th standard (the top class at the time), and having a delicate Mother, who was not in a position to pay for help in the home,

I thought I would leave school. (Because of her young age she had to take an exam to prove the standard of education she had reached was high enough to enable her to leave.)

I do think it should not be so easy for a boy or girl to leave school. One hour's examination is a farce, and can be passed by children who really have had no Education whatever.

Joseph D was another child questioning why it seemed to be all right to leave school at a young age. He wrote:

At the age of 12 years I left school to go to work, I attended night school two nights a week for about five years. ... I often thought I ought to have been going to day school.

There seemed to be no restriction about leaving school, when a lad looked big enough, and strong enough to work, he simply left, to assist in helping to bring up some younger brother or sister. This system ought to be altered some time ago, for I feel that if I had been kept at school longer, I should have been able to have come on to the labour market, more fully equipped to deal with the strenuous time with which labour demands.

Some of the children obviously enjoyed their schooldays, but it has to be said that some schools had hardly any equipment, and taught a narrow range of subjects. Lemuel N, born in 1876 and at school between the ages of 5 and 12, had this to say:

I had by some means at the age of twelve passed the fourth standard, thought to be with sufficient instruction. Physical Training, I have had none, Moral Training, negligent; the three "Rs" that I had spent most of my time upon was perhaps the best part of my work, and with those seven years I was considered to be efficient, both by the education authorities, and my parents; anxious myself to go into the industrial world for like most other youths horribly sick of school work I was to take my choice. My education had closed, the work shop was sought for.

As a contrast to this, (Mrs) A K, with experience of several different schools. It was her view that when school life came to an end every girl seemed sorry to leave. She wrote fondly of one as follows:

There was also a large library at this school and we could have a book out weekly. We also had a special teacher once a week for cookery and one for cutting out and making garments. The one drawback here was there being only one teacher for standards six and seven, and as there were about sixty scholars in the two classes it was hard work for both teacher and scholar. On Wednesday afternoons a Major used to take us for drilling.

Returning to Lemuel N, he considered how his elementary school would differ from a secondary school, where pupils enjoyed the advantages of the best modern equipment ... small classes, each having its separate and spacious room, the enlarged recreation ground with organised games and physical training, the close cooperation of teacher and student and perhaps not lastly the best trained teacher.

Alas! I often think to myself how do I stand with my colleagues? what were the chances of educational advancement? ... As I have said, at the age of 13 toiling for my livelihood, exploited by my employer, at 14 drifted from home. No parent, no school, no church, no pressure brought to bear. ... What was to be the future?

These memories of schooldays have come from material in the Sheffield Educational Settlement Papers held in the Special Collections and Archives department of the University of Sheffield Library. The children going to school in Victorian times certainly had a limited education, and once they became adults, many felt how unfair this had been. They were therefore keen to grasp any new opportunity to get the education denied to them in their youth. Enter the Settlement movement, whose aim it was to help equip people to live meaningful, useful and creative lives.

The Settlement movement

The first Settlement opened in London in 1885. More followed – some founded by religious and other bodies, some loosely attached to universities. Each Settlement was different, but all grew out of the desire to do something about the negative consequences of the Industrial Revolution, such as the increase in class differences and poverty, particularly in urban areas. By becoming a part of the neighbourhood, offering friendship and education to the people living there, the hope was that some of these gaps – between the educated and the uneducated, the rich and the poor – would be bridged, and all would be able to share a common life. Settlements had different priorities; for instance, some placed their emphasis on social work, while others concentrated on art, music and recreation. All aimed to improve people's lives through the work that they did.

The Sheffield Educational Settlement

The earliest Settlements in Sheffield were developed by the Neighbourhood Guilds Association, which was formed in 1897 and for a while ran services in two main locations, Neepsend and Shalesmoor. There was also the Croft House Settlement, which was opened in 1902 by William Blackshaw. Croft House Settlement Musical and Dramatic Society, now Croft House Theatre Company, was created as part of this Settlement's activities. They continue to put on musical theatre productions, with the original Croft House Settlement building still open as a venue for many different groups.

The Neighbourhood Guilds Association Settlement in Neepsend lasted till the 1970s; the one in Shalesmoor moved in 1908 to Shipton Street, Upperthorpe, but had to close in 1918

due to financial difficulties. The YMCA then took over these premises in order to establish their own Settlement there.

Alterations were made, including the creation of a small stage for theatre productions, and in September 1919 the YMCA Settlement opened there with Arnold Freeman as warden. In about 1921 the YMCA felt it couldn't support this venture any longer because of increasing costs, but Freeman stayed on there as warden for the new Sheffield Educational Settlement.

Settlements often had a residential element, and this was true of the Sheffield Educational Settlement in the early days. Next to the Settlement premises at 3 and 5 Shipton Street was a large building on the corner of Oxford Street. This was the Settlement hostel, with 3 and 5 Shipton Street being where all the Settlement activities took place. In 1924 the Royal Infirmary took over the Oxford Street hostel, and the open space behind it, for use as a nurses' home.

In some ways the hostel was a great loss to the Sheffield Educational Settlement. During the mid 1930s Freeman and other Settlement members bought a site near Castleton, called Hollowford. The hostel situated there was used by the Settlement's camping and hiking groups, and also by refugees in the 1940s. This got people away from the city and into the countryside. Some attempt at farming was made at one time, but it never really got off the ground. The Settlement sold Hollowford in 1946; it is now used by a charitable trust running outdoor education activities.

In the press, the Sheffield Educational Settlement was sometimes called the backstreet university, or the university of Oxford Street. In common with most other Settlements, it was established in a poor area, and tried to plug the gaps in public welfare and education provision. There were many activities organised at this Settlement, some in response to the social conditions of the day. Freeman did a lot of work with the unemployed in the 1920s and 30s, and also with refugees in the 1940s. From 1941 to 1948, there was a canteen at the Settlement, which proved extremely popular. Education work became less important after World War Two, as the state took on more responsibility for services. For example, the Education Act of 1944, as well as setting out a system of free secondary education for everyone up to the age of 15, made it obligatory for local authorities to provide facilities for adults.

Throughout the Settlement's life drama was a really important part of the work done in Shipton Street, and many plays were put on in what was called the Little Theatre. Freeman retired in 1955. He was followed as warden by Christopher Boulton, who was also an enthusiast for drama. (Boulton went on to found the Merlin Theatre.) In the following years there were a couple more wardens, but once plans for slum clearance came into force, much of the housing in the area was demolished, and the Settlement's days came to an end.

HOW WE LIVED

In the early 19th century Upperthorpe and Netherthorpe were both largely rural, with farming as the main activity. However, in the space of a few decades, following a huge increase in the number of people coming to live and work in the area, the landscape changed completely. By the end of the 19th century, this region was full of streets of poorly built houses, often back-to-back and frequently situated right alongside workshops and other industrial buildings. There was no real planning when properties were built and when streets were created. It was quite common for a builder to own just a small plot of land on which he erected a few houses for the rental market as an investment. In these circumstances repairs were not always done on time, so the houses deteriorated quite quickly, and people were forced to put up with some dreadful living conditions.

Life in a back-to-back house

Back-to-backs were terraced houses with an additional shared wall at the back, giving people neighbours on three sides. A number of these houses would be grouped together round a yard; this was called a court, and formed the extent of the outdoor space available to the occupants of the houses. The aim of the builder was to get the maximum number of dwellings onto his piece of land, so the houses themselves were very small and lacked many of the amenities we take for granted today.

Take for example the issue of the supply and quality of water. Initially people got water themselves from wells, springs and ponds, but as the population and industry grew this supply was nowhere near enough.

Even the provision of public wells and an artificial reservoir at Barker's Pool could not fully meet

Sheffield's needs.

Early attempts at providing an organised piped water supply for the town's inhabitants began in the 18th century with the construction of a series of small reservoirs near Hillsborough called the Whitehouse Dams, built to catch water running off the moors. They were connected to other reservoirs in the Crookesmoor area, but the supply remained inadequate. It was clear that much larger infrastructure was needed, which ultimately was developed at Redmires, and in the Peak District. In time all the early reservoirs apart from the Old Great Dam – now the lake in Crookes Valley Park – were filled in, and the land used for housing, roads and public open space.

Meanwhile for the ordinary family living in a back-to-back house in the 19th century the water services were often inadequate. When these houses were first built there was generally no fresh running water inside the house. People had to use a shared tap in the yard. Sometimes the supply would be irregular, and of course the water was cold. If you wanted hot water for anything, you had to fill a bucket from the outside tap, carry the water into the house, and then heat it on the fire. In the yard there would be a number of toilets shared amongst several families, plus one or more midden bins. These toilets were not flushing toilets connected to sewers as we are used to today, and as a consequence people's health suffered.

It wasn't just an issue with the provision of adequate toilets: getting rid of any sort of rubbish was a problem. Much of it was just dumped in the courts, making things really unpleasant for the residents. The courts themselves were often dark, being enclosed by high walls with perhaps a tunnel entrance to the street. In addition, the outdoor atmosphere could well be smoky and polluted. Inside these houses people had to put up with inadequate light and ventilation in cramped rooms which were often damp. There was nowhere to store anything, no privacy, and arrangements for cooking were usually primitive. The smallest back-to-backs were two rooms only – a downstairs room, and above it a bedroom. Difficult when families were large, or if people had to take in lodgers to make a bit of extra money.

Things started to change in the 1860s when Sheffield's local authority introduced a set of bye-laws relating to controls on building, with the result that the construction of back-to-back houses was prohibited. Other measures followed, to do with paving and widening streets, implementing adequate drainage and sewerage systems for streets and houses, and improving standards of house construction in general. Sheffield also acquired land for parks and recreation grounds, creating at least some open spaces for the population to enjoy away from their homes. In spite of all this, there were still areas of Sheffield which in the 20th century contained houses barely fit for human habitation.

Sadly, many of the Upperthorpe and Netherthorpe streets fell into this category, where totally inadequate houses were put up quickly, sometimes improved slightly as time went on, but then demolished wholesale and the residents relocated elsewhere, usually with no consultation about their wishes in the matter.

Children's experiences

Two local authors have written about their childhoods in the area. Fred Pass (born 1942) grew up on Martin Street, Upperthorpe in the 1940s and 50s, while twenty years earlier in the 1920s and 30s Ethel Johnstone (born Aspinall in 1921) lived on Morpeth Street, Netherthorpe. She attended Netherthorpe School. Both give details of what back-to-back houses were like inside and out. Fred describes Martin Street, which was typical of the area, as "a cobbled street with terraced houses on both sides, on the right the houses were slightly raised by a two-step pavement, where the houses had a postage-stamp garden. On the left were terraced houses, whose continuity was punctured by an entry which went downwards to a yard of back-to-back houses, hence the use of 'court' in the address, in our case 19 court 5". His was a 'one up one down' house, and he describes the downstairs room as follows: the downstairs room had a cast iron fireplace to the right as you entered, a pot sink alongside and a single gas ring. On the other side of the fireplace were two built-in cupboards, and a long top of about five feet ending with a two-foot bottom cupboard. There was a coal cellar in the facing corner. Ethel describes her downstairs room, highlighting in particular the equipment they had for cooking and washing. Opposite to the oven was a hob with a lid where we kept sticks to light the fire. Some hobs had a brass tap and this enabled families to keep a supply of hot water. ... For cooking, pans and kettles were placed on the open fire or a small iron grid that pulled down in front of the fire. A gas ring was also used for cooking. This was placed on a wooden board covering the copper. On washing day, the copper was filled with water which was heated by a small fire underneath then ladled into a wash tub to do the weekly wash using a scrubbing board and a peggy leg. This was a three legged

contraption made of wood which was pushed and turned up and down to agitate the clothes. Ethel tells us that the copper could also be used for boiling food such as puddings. She goes on to say that neighbours helped one another so when a copper was lit for cooking purposes whoever put a pudding in shared the expense of the coal or returned the favour.

Ethel's house was a little bigger than Fred's, having the room downstairs, one main bedroom, an attic and a cellar. Fred's house didn't have an attic. He describes going up a wooden staircase to the (one) bedroom: at the top of the stair was an alcove that had a curtain hung across the front of it to make an improvised

wardrobe. The bedroom had two double beds about six inches apart. Brian and me in one bed, mam and dad in the other. There was no wallpaper on the walls because rain used to seep down the walls in bad weather, so they were distempered a depressing blueish colour.

Fred's family, in common with many people, had hardly any bedding; they used woolly jumpers and a couple of old sheets and overcoats. Similarly their furniture in the downstairs room was very sparse; they had a sideboard, a settee, a table and four straight-backed wooden chairs, a lino-covered floor and a pegged rug in front of the fire.

Both Fred and Ethel describe the toilet arrangements. In Ethel's yard was a row of toilets, each one shared by two houses. We didn't have toilet rolls in those days, newspaper was cut into squares and threaded on to string which was hung on a nail behind the door. Fred's household was in a worse situation: he says there were six toilets in his yard, and six toilets and seven houses sounds OK, but those six toilets, or closets, as we called them, not only served us, but about a dozen other houses on Martin Street. We were lucky that the toilet we used was in our yard.

Fred was aware that though these conditions were undeniably sparse, we were, in some ways, lucky, for there were only four people in our house. Some families of ten, or more, lived in identical conditions. Fred and family left the Martin Street house in 1952 when he was about 11 years old. They moved to somewhere more spacious – two bedrooms, an off-shot kitchen, and an outside toilet all to themselves.

Ethel came from a larger family than Fred's, and in her account she describes some of her family's experiences with illness. Living in back-to-back houses was not conducive to good health. Infectious diseases spread very quickly, and in fact Ethel herself contracted diphtheria when she was five, and was dangerously ill. Just after she was discharged from hospital, her 11 month old twin siblings were admitted to the same hospital with double pneumonia. Sadly both died, and Ethel makes the observation that families in those days really did suffer great hardships and tragedies.

When Fred Pass and Ethel Aspinall were living in their childhood homes, the houses were already old and deteriorating. As a contrast, Winifred Albaya (born Turton in 1911) wrote an account of what it was like living in Townhead Street in a flat which was part of the first slum clearance and rebuilding carried out by Sheffield council. These flats were built to a much higher standard than the typical privately built back-to-back house.

The Townhead Street flats date from 1902. The aim was to provide good working-class housing, supposedly at affordable rents. However, the rents were by no means cheap, which put these blocks of flats outside the reach of many of the poorer families.

Winifred writes that each block had three flats on either side of a flight of stone steps. ...

Ours was the top flat, and the front door opened directly into the living room, which had a large Yorkshire range, flanked by cupboards, facing the door. On the right hand wall, a door led into our one bedroom which overlooked Townhead Street, and on the left hand side, opening directly from the hearth, was another door which led into a so-called 'kitchen' which was nothing larger than a cubby hole. The living room was lit by a high sash window which looked down into the communal yard, and a low cupboard under the window served as our pantry.

But to return to the kitchen – This had a copper or wash boiler with a little fire grate underneath, which was lit from the coals of the living room fire. A stone sink with one cold tap, and a heavy iron mangle, or wringing machine, together with dolly tub, completed the furnishings of the kitchen, and from there, another door led on to the open landing surrounded by iron railings: here was our WC and coal bin.

Some flats had more than one bedroom, but note that there was no bathroom. Though the toilet was indoors, it was situated outside the flat on a landing. This landing was also where the family kept their tin bath, hung up on a nail. On bath night, the bath was brought into the living room, put in front of the fire, and filled using a kettle to heat the water.

Washing day was a real chore. Winifred writes that in our cubby hole of a kitchen my mother toiled all morning, boiling the clothes in the copper, pushing them in the tub with the wooden dolly-legs, rinsing, mangling, blueing and starching. The folded clothes were carried down to the yard in a clothes basket, and hung out on lines from wall to railings. The yard on Mondays looked like some festive occasion of flags and banners as sheets fluttered in the breeze, on a fine day. ...

A wet washing day was nothing short of a disaster, with our limited drying facilities. Sheets hanging in a small, damp, steamy living room were not very welcoming for father when he came home to tea, especially as we were restricted to sitting in a small space on the hearthrug all evening. But I thought it was great fun running up and down between the sheets, pretending they were tunnels, and I was a train.

Though Winifred's flat inside was superior to a back-to-back house, it had some of the same faults. There wasn't much outdoor space for families and the lack of facilities indoors meant that doing the washing, for instance, was still very hard work. Winifred makes this general point about life in those times: *It was like being aboard a precarious raft where many people of all ages were crowded together. When frequent heavy waves washed up onto the raft and swept some of them overboard, willing arms were stretched out immediately to rescue them, though some went under and could not be rescued.*

Winifred and her family left Townhead Street in March 1922, when she was 11 years old. They moved to a new council house in Firth Park. As she puts it We settled down to enjoy the benefits of electric light, hot and cold water, a bathroom and the joy of a garden. Best of all was the awareness that the real, true countryside began at the end of our road, five minutes away.

Alley and court concerts start in Martin Street

Now we leave Winifred's account of her escape to Firth Park, and return to the story of people who had the misfortune to live in the tiny back-to-backs in dark, unhealthy courts. Life was pretty grim, but there was at least one attempt made by the authorities to brighten things up. This was an initiative called "alley and court concerts". Outdoor concerts were already organised in Sheffield's parks, but at one period concerts were also brought right into the courts.

Picture the scene: a piano comes on the back of a lorry and is wheeled from the street into the court. A stage is erected, and seating brought in. People assemble, waiting for the entertainment to begin. The

programme is free and has been set up just for them. There are no strings attached – it literally is something for nothing.

These court and alley concerts were put on by Sheffield's Parks Committee each year from 1903 to about 1912, and usually took place once a week during the summer months. They'd be held in a different court each week, and the programme would vary according to who the performers were. Some would be like a variety show, with a mixture of singing, instrumental pieces, and comedy sketches. Others would be purely musical in content. The idea behind them was to bring entertainment to the actual places where people lived, particularly where conditions were dreary and difficult. The first of these concerts was held in May 1903 in Court 11, Martin Street.

Apparently these concerts were very popular particularly at first, but the decision was taken to stop them in 1912 because other forms of entertainment such as going to the cinema (or picture palace, as it was called) were becoming increasingly available to people. Possibly the feeling was that the court and alley programme had served its purpose, and the money could be better spent putting on more open-air concerts in traditional spaces such as the parks. However, concerts in the courts were resumed in 1925, but stopped again for good at the end of the 1933 season, the reason once again being that conditions had changed, lessening the need for this provision. In particular, many more households had a wireless (radio), and some of the slums were now actually being demolished.

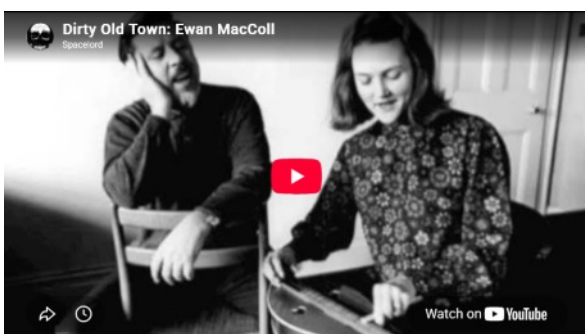
Sheffield wasn't the only place to put on this sort of concert. At the turn of the century court and alley concerts were becoming established in a number of different towns and cities, for example in Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham. All were popular, often with huge audiences squashed into a small courtyard. Perhaps the concerts were sometimes raucous affairs! As regards the performers, it could well have been a bit of an eye-opener for them if they'd not ventured much into slum areas before.

All change as slums disappear

Martin Street has featured a few times in this account of life in Upperthorpe and Netherthorpe. In many ways its history has mirrored the history of the area. So finally the houses in this street, together with many of the buildings in the surrounding districts, eventually became the subjects of slum clearance and compulsory purchase orders. These orders were originally drawn up in the late 1930s, but were only acted on fully in the 1950s and 60s, when a great deal of demolition and rebuilding took place. In Upperthorpe the buildings from that time include bungalows, maisonettes and seven tower blocks, which take their names from the old streets of the area – Wentworth, Adelphi, Martin, Burlington, Bond, Albion and Oxford. Martin Street runs alongside these tower blocks; it's not a through road and in fact in places is just a footpath, but it does follow the line of the old Martin Street.

Demolition in Netherthorpe began in the 1950s, with new housing in the form of tower blocks and maisonettes built in phases. As part of this reconstruction of the landscape, a brand new major road was created, running from Brook Hill to Shalesmoor, with a large roundabout at the Brook Hill end. This road is now also a tram route. In the midst of all this urban development an area called the Ponderosa was left for recreation. The four Netherthorpe tower blocks were completed in the early 1960s, and are called Adamfield, Cornhill, Robertshaw and Crawshaw.

What of the families living in these areas earmarked for demolition? Once an area was cleared and everyone had to move out, should people try to find somewhere local to live, or should they start afresh and move away? Those electing to remain would probably already be living near to their work, so there would be no increase in transport costs, or in time spent getting to and from work. The area would be familiar, so any sense of belonging would remain, unless of course all their neighbours had chosen to move away. Some people looked for an area similar to the one they had just left, but in that case the housing was likely to be poor, but it would be cheap. For those families going to one of the new council estates, they would undoubtedly end up with a much better house (with a kitchen, a bathroom, a garden, and much more living and bedroom space), but this would come at a price. The rent would be significantly higher, and people would be wanting to buy better furniture and equipment for the new house. As well as these expenses, there would probably be additional transport costs to get to work. It was quite a decision to make, but I imagine most people – provided it was affordable – would jump at the chance to have a lovely modern house with plenty of room for everyone. No doubt it was poverty which made people choose otherwise.



Ewan MacColl wrote the song “Dirty old town” in 1949. It is about his home town of Salford, but could almost equally well apply to Sheffield. Here is a link to a YouTube video of him singing the song with Peggy Seeger; it includes some scenes of the Manchester area.

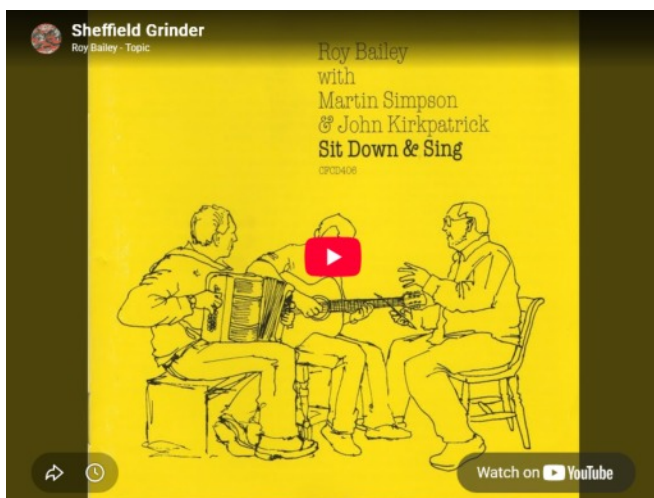
How We Worked

For centuries Sheffield has been in the business of producing iron and steel, and making tools, cutlery and other goods from these materials. These metal trades, utilizing traditional manual craft skills, began in rural forges and workshops which were initially powered by water from Sheffield's rivers. Once the change from water-power to steam-power was made, many of these industries moved to the town and its immediate outskirts, where large factories were built employing hundreds of people. There were still many small producers – the “little mesters” – often doing work for these factories according to their own particular specialism, but inevitably the old craft skills and ways of working started to disappear.

Mechanization, though resisted in some quarters, had to come eventually as a response to new technologies and competition from abroad. Sheffield played a major role in the innovations of the Industrial Revolution, but as people's working lives changed, so their rights to safe and decent working conditions were often bypassed.

Conditions at work

In the early 20th century some efforts were made to improve conditions for workers using evidence from factory inspections and critical reports written by medical officers, but it was a slow process. Some traditional Sheffield occupations, for example the grinder and the file-cutter, were classified as dangerous, so what was it like to work in these jobs?



This folksong gives some clues:
YouTube clip Grinder's Hardships
(Sheffield Grinder) – Lyrics & Chords

To learn more about ordinary workers and their jobs, we can turn to a piece of research conducted just after World War One by the Sheffield Educational Settlement (which was based in premises on Shipton Street, Upperthorpe). The aim of the research was to find out what work was like for people in manual occupations, and to discover what influences the type and place of work had on them as people – on their character and on their attitudes to life. This research project was never finished, but as part of the material gathered for it there were some personal accounts written by people about their work.

Sidney S, tool fitter

Sidney S had a lot to say about his working environment. He was born in Sheffield in 1883 and had a difficult childhood because his father, a cutler, died at the age of 27 when Sidney was only 18 months old.

At the age of 11 Sidney was earning money which was much needed by his family:

I got a job as assistant to a barber. In other words I became a lather lad. Worked at it Wed and Friday nights from 5-30 to 9, and all day Sat from 8-30 the morning until 11-30 at night. Then after leaving school at the age of 13 he started working full time (that is, for 54 to 60 hours a week), first as an errand boy, next as a cutler, and then for 20 years as a tool fitter.

Sidney wrote that in this job he felt he was just a number; he likened it to being in prison because the work was so hard and monotonous. He describes the tool workshop as follows:

It is a brick building, or series of buildings – bricks coloured with Sheffield's unique atmosphere – contained in an oblong. There are two stories with lathes, drilling and milling machines both upstairs and downstairs on one of the long sides of the factory. On the other long side with the warehouses overhead is the 'wheel' – grinding wheel to be precise – containing two wet stoves, two emery wheels (dry) and several spindles whereon glaziers are run. This place calls, nay, shrieks for special mention. It shall have it as far as my descriptive powers and language both hopelessly inadequate for the purpose will allow. It is a wondrously dirty 'hoil' which somebody should be jolly well ashamed of, with four small windows – three with glass panes which keep out the light (must be seen to be believed) and a fourth with iron bars only which allows the passage of light, also of winds and rain and snow – and a tremendous smell.

He remarks that there is a fan, but it is too small and not sufficiently powerful to carry away the dust that flies from emery wheel and glazier with the result that there is an accumulation on walls and ceiling (this very low) and, could one see it, not a little on the lungs of the unfortunate people – mostly women – whose industrial lot is cast in such a fearful place. Also there is much dust flying in space, and this is so thick and congealed with glue and oil that it strikes those who needs must make enforced entry into the wheel in big lumps.

He talks of the gas stove, but this doesn't give out any warmth because there's not enough fuel, and the burners are choked with the all pervading dust. Factory acts and inspectors you enquire. "What of them?"

Yes, what of them, and more particularly the latter? That's what I want to know." ...

I have known threemen contract consumption in that wheel. Two of these are dead, the other is dying. Next to the wheel, on the same level, is the plating and finishing shop, another dusty place in which, again, there are the main essentials to the health and comfort of the people occupying it, conspicuous by their absence. The shop in which I work is on one of the short sides of the building and directly over the engine house. It is so placed, too, that it catches the full heat of the afternoon sun, and in Summer it is uncomfortably warm to say the least of it.

In short, Sidney would be happier if his workplace was better lighted, with a more suitable, even temperature, less dust and proper ventilation. The noise we accept as inevitable, but we don't accept so philosophically the lack of some provision to enable us to get our dinners in some small measure of cleanliness and comfort.

He also comments on the lack of opportunity that they all have to develop their talents in their work. Though Sidney himself was born in Sheffield, his father and paternal grandfather were both from Lincolnshire, and his maternal grandfather from Nottinghamshire. Sidney was well settled in Sheffield and married Edith in 1909, and they had children. Shortly after he wrote this account of his working life, he got a job at a Sheffield power station. Sidney died in 1968 aged 84.

Jack H, silver plate worker

As Sidney wrote, it was quite common for there to be no canteen for meal breaks. People often brought their own food to work; they would eat it in some part of the factory or factory yard, or even in the street outside. Alternatively they could buy something to eat in one of the many small cook shops in the area.

Jack H, a silver plate worker, commented that

There is very little room to knock about in the factory yard. Every possible inch of ground is utilised for some sort of necessary structure. ... At the 'gate' there is a corner pub which is a boon & blessing to some, & next door to the pub there is a little house window shop to which the workers are allowed to go for cigarettes, sweets, cakes & cheap dinners, etc.

Jack was born in 1885 in Sheffield. He came from a large family of 14 children, where only 7 of them lived to adulthood. His father, a worker in the steel industry, died in 1900. Jack himself worked as a silver holloware finisher for a silver and electro-plate manufacturer. He married Ethel in 1912, eventually having two daughters. Jack served in the army in World War One from 1915; he spent two years in France, and was away for four years in total. On his return he felt out of touch with his job and in fact shortly after writing his piece about silver plate working he got a job as a clerk in Sheffield; he finished his working life as an insurance manager in Chester-le-Street, county Durham. Ethel died in 1968, and Jack in 1973.

Lemuel N, railway worker

Many workers felt they had no power in the workplace. Holidays could be a difficulty. Lemuel N was born in 1876 in Middlesex, and spent all his life there. He started work as a railway porter, and later became a railway signaller. Lemuel married Ellen in 1899, and had three daughters. Ellen died in 1959;

Lemuel in 1968. In his account he wrote:

A final word now in regard to the annual Holidays (six days) granted to each of the employees. It is the practise for the responsible official to prepare a "Roster" at the commencement of the holiday season. This list is prepared I believe with all good faith, unfortunately Signaller are not consulted and often the times fixed are not suitable. If they were it is but very rare that the times are adhered to. Men go off sick, abnormal working often becomes the rule. The relief staff is inadequate to meet the exigencies and at the

eleventh hour leave is cancelled probably for another three weeks or so. It is not possible to make any initial arrangements if one wishes to take a journey with their family to some seaside resort it invariably happens that the sanction arrives too late the train is gone, and one day of the six is gone. ... A protest meeting was held a few days since demanding an alteration and proper system established in order that Signalmen should not have differential treatment to any other grade.

Lemuel also mentioned that he would like more weekends off, so that he and his family could take advantage of all the new forms of transport to go and visit friends, or have a day out in the countryside.

He asks: How long are we to be so submissive to industry?

Railway porter

The problems of wages, tips and opportunities at work were raised by an anonymous writer working as a railway porter.

It might be admitted at once that as to Porters duty there is no limit seeing he is the lowest grade that wears the uniform & he is there for the use of his superior officers & for the convenience of the public so nothing is too small or great if he is asked to do it as he isn't important enough to say yes or no.

... Now about Wages & Tips, up to the war a porter in a large town could not live on wages only, The

Company knew this, public too, but the inconsistency of this is the company forbid them to be taken, yet pay a wage which compel a Porter to take them or starve & then the unequal distribution is injustice as in many cases say at large Stations a good man is placed in Position whereby tips run thin & men who are not so trustworthy doing the ordinary work remaining in the Position to get the largest share, as there is difference in men it has always been so, as regards Promotion he have to wait his turn & in many cases he is qualified years before the opportunity presents itself.

Buffer girls and women at work

Several of these accounts were written by a researcher visiting different places of work. One such report is on the working environment of a buffer girl:

The workers in the buffing shops are chiefly women. The buffer girls of Sheffield wear a special head-dress – a red handkerchief worn in a certain way, and said to be a survival from Mediaeval times. They can be recognised anywhere with their clothes and hands & faces blackened by their work: their sleeves rolled up above the elbow and this red head-dress. ...

The shops are indescribably dirty owing to the quantities of fine black sand which fly off from the wheels of the machines. This settles everywhere, on the clothes of the worker, and especially it covers the windows making the shops very dark. The work in spite of its unpleasant character is highly skilled, and it takes several years to turn out an efficient buffer. ... The buffer is standing at the machine most of the day, dealing with perpetual blackness. She has to scoop up black sand from a heap of it that lies by the

