

A Short History of Sheffield



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Beginnings

Situated in the Pennine foothills in the extreme south west corner of Yorkshire, Sheffield has traditionally thought of itself as a city built on seven hills, and watered by five rivers. Pre-eminent among the rivers is the Don which rises below Holme Moss. In its journey through Sheffield it receives the waters of the Loxley, Rivelin, Porter and Sheaf, all of which rise on the high moors to the west. Identifying the seven hills by name is more difficult. They appear to be continuous ridges which rise from the Don Valley and connect with the high ground to north and west. With cross valleys and minor ridges the impression is gained that Sheffield is all hills, except for one corner containing Attercliffe and Carbrook on the Lower Don Valley. Since the industrial revolution this corner has provided the main link with the outside world by road, canal and rail and became the site of the great steel works. Between Margery Hill (546 metres), Sheffield's highest peak away to the north west overlooking the Derwent Valley reservoirs, the Lower Don, a mere 28 metres at Blackburn Meadows near Tinsley, Sheffield displays a remarkable variety of natural scenery, to which successive phases of urban and industrial history have contributed their peculiar quality.



The foundations of Sheffield's hills are the Lower Coal Measures. The coal lies between beds of sandstone and shale, the richest coal seams and the finest grained sandstone being found in the east. The oldest and coarsest forms the sheer cliffs of millstone grit which tower above Derbyshire at over 300 metres on the western boundary of Sheffield. Quarries have supplied massive building blocks as well as millstones. Turning east from the escarpment we cross a ridge of peaty moorland, gathering ground for the reservoirs which form Sheffield's Lakeland and supply much of its characteristic soft drinking water. Downstream of the reservoirs footpaths can be followed towards Sheffield. Open moorland has given way to conifers around the reservoirs.

Further down are remnants of ancient oak woodland on the steepest slopes, alternating with pastureland. Rocky outcrops expose finer sandstone, and field walls, buildings and discarded grindstones beside the streams show that the quarries have been extensively used. Many mill ponds will be encountered as reminders of past industry. Almost imperceptibly the paths lead through the residential outer suburbs into the central industrial area

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where industry used and abused the rivers and hid their polluted remains behind high walls. In the last few years a transformation has taken place as nature returns and more enlightened industries are opening up pleasant riverside walks as the Lower Don Valley is redeveloped. The Five Weirs Walk Trust has created a 7.5 kilometre riverside route from the city centre to Meadowhall which links into the Trans-Pennine Trail network.

Despite its scenic beauty there was not much to attract early settlers to the area.

Travel was difficult and the infertile slopes were difficult to plough. Sheffield has therefore always been something of a frontier region. The Celtic Brigantes set up forts at Carl's Wark and Wincobank to defend their southern flanks. The Romans built a road across what is now Sheffield to extract lead from Derbyshire and established a fort at Templeborough. In 829 the Anglian kings of Northumbria and Mercia met to settle their differences at Dore which at that time lay on their mutual frontier, and it is from this boundary that the River Sheaf, and so Sheffield, derives its name.

Castle and Manor

Sheffield's history before Domesday is largely conjectural, but it seems that there was already an Anglo-Danish building of some importance on the site which the Normans chose for their castle. There was also a preaching cross, but the Normans seem to have built the first parish church on the site of the present Anglican Cathedral. Between the church and the castle was the market. Street names (Haymarket, Westbar, Fargate) in the city centre still reflect the medieval layout. As trade and industry grew some rights of civic self-government were granted to the "Free Burgesses" by the Furnival Charter in 1297.

By 1400 there is evidence that some local farmers were supplementing their income by working part time as cutlers. Deposits of ironstone, coal and sandstone were proving useful and charcoal could be produced from abundant stands of timber. Fast flowing streams provided water power and the first powered grinding wheel was operated by 1489. Evidence of late medieval prosperity can still be seen in the 15th century parish churches of Sheffield, Ecclesfield and Bradfield, and the ruins of the Manor Lodge, which the Talbot Lords of the Manor built to enjoy the pleasures of the chase in the district still known as the Park. These powerful and resident lords steered the town through the Reformation. Among their concerns was the infant cutlery industry, still largely a part-time occupation for local farmers, but the 6th Earl of Shrewsbury, famous as the unwilling gaoler of Mary Queen of Scots, was the last resident Lord, and after 1600 the townspeople showed increasing independence in their political and religious lives. Local minor landowners and ironmasters were mainly puritan and parliamentarian. In the Civil War the

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Castle was captured by Royalists but the parliamentary forces enlisted enthusiastic local help to expel them. The Castle was subsequently demolished leaving virtually no trace; its stone enriched the appearance of many Sheffield buildings.

Industrial Revolution

Meanwhile in 1624 an Act of Parliament had set up the Company of Cutlers in Hallamshire. This operated in a similar way to guilds or livery companies, enforcing standards and controlling apprentices. Its registers show a stream of immigrants from Derbyshire and the surrounding districts to work in the



staple trades. The restoration of the monarchy and religious intolerance left a small but influential body of Nonconformists in the town. There was an independent college for a time in Attercliffe and many prominent businessmen belonged to the Upper and Lower Chapels in Norfolk Street. The influence of the chapel was reinforced a century later when Methodism had great success in the

town.

About 1740 Benjamin Huntsman invented the crucible method of making steel, and by the end of the century Sheffield was supplying the world with engineering and tool steel. About the same time Thomas Boulsover invented Old Sheffield Plate through the fusion of silver and copper. Fashionable tableware and ornaments were now produced for an expanding English and Continental middle class and profits and wages improved, especially for plate workers. In the mid 18th century Sheffield had rather over 10,000 inhabitants. By 1800, under the impact of the industrial expansion the population had reached 45,000. Only after 1780 did the town outgrow its ancient limits, the new population being largely herded into property built in existing yards and gardens. The last years of the century produced a neat geometric layout of new streets, but town planning stopped there and the individual plots were developed into a jungle of industrial yards and their residential equivalents, "courts" flanked by cottages constructed back to back.

Political tensions became evident. Sheffield had something of a reputation as a hot bed of radical unrest. Joseph Gales published the "Sheffield Register" (1787-94), a newspaper expressing support for the French Revolution, and large meetings in the town were organised by the Constitutional Society. Riots broke out against enclosure of land in Hallam and against recruiting for the French wars. The authorities responded by suppressing the newspaper and building barracks at the town's expense to restore order.

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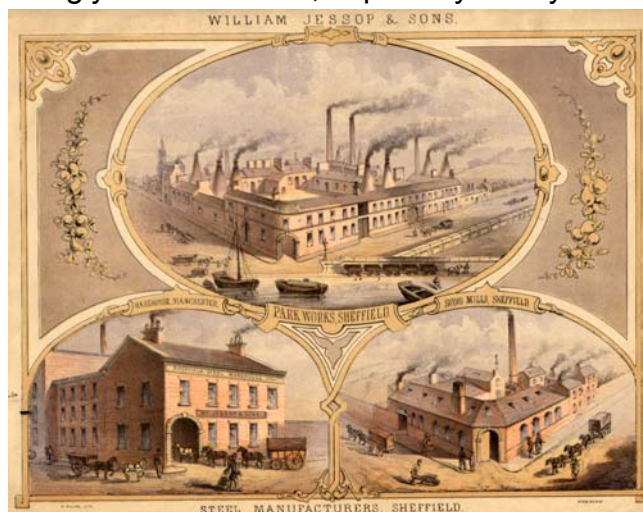
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The 1820s saw a revival in trade and some signs of wealth being spent on improvements in the town. The first integrated steel and cutlery factory, Greaves' Sheaf Works in Effingham Street, dates from this time, and still stands in part. By this time full use could be made of steam power and the Sheffield Canal, which was opened in 1819. Public facilities were provided either by charities, such as Carver Street Schools and the Public Hospital and Dispensary, or by companies of shareholders. The Botanical Gardens and Wesley College were examples of the latter, and set the tone for the very pleasant residential area of Broomhall/Broomhill. The condition of the working classes was more cramped and insanitary than ever. Inadequate or non-existent sewers exacerbated the cholera epidemic which killed 402 people in 1832 and the smoke menace increased with the number of industrial chimneys.

Politically, reformist enthusiasm did not lead to much action. In 1832 Sheffield acquired the right to elect two MPs but the majority had little say in the election. A mayor and corporation followed in 1843, but the vote was again highly restricted. Samuel Holberry, the local Chartist leader of an abortive rising in favour of universal parliamentary suffrage, became a hero after his death in prison in 1842. His more constitutional followers did gain a majority of elected seats on the Town Council in the 1840s, but aspirations for sanitary reforms were thwarted by the majority of unelected aldermen.

Steel Centre of the World

The coming of the railways in the 1840s provided new opportunities for Sheffield manufacturers. Small steel and tool makers who grasped them became the great steel masters of the late Victorian age. John Brown, for example, made his fortune developing the conical spring buffer. The demand for steel for rails was met by the Bessemer process, first successfully applied in Sheffield. From the 1860s the new works turned increasingly to armaments, especially heavy armour plate. The new works were massive in scale; they reckoned their employees by the thousands and their profits in proportion. They were built on the flat part of the Don Valley near railway and canal. The workforce came largely from agricultural districts and they were employed in highly organised teams who were paid as a unit. Despite huge steam rolling mills and hammers, the



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work was physically hard in conditions of extreme heat. There was no tradition of trade unionism.

In contrast, in the cutlery trade, union membership was general and standard prices for each process were agreed by unions and manufacturers. The “closed shop” was effectively and sometimes brutally enforced; in 1867 a Trades Union Outrages Commission found the Sawgrinders’ Union responsible for murderous attacks on unscrupulous small employers. Rattening (minor industrial sabotage) was an accepted fact of Sheffield life. Such safety regulations as there were could not be enforced in the small, cramped works. The dreaded grinders’ disease, silicosis, claimed the lives of many. In the 1860s it was normal for a fork grinder to be past work at 35 and dead by 40.

The steel magnates built large mansions for themselves in outer suburbs like Ranmoor, and some at least are remembered for philanthropy. Mark Firth gave a park for the East End and endowed Firth College which later became part of the university. Self-help was more often the order of the day, as in the Freehold Land Societies around Walkley where the houses thrifty workers built with their own hands can still be seen.

In 1864 an episode focused the attention of the whole country on Sheffield. The private Sheffield Water Company, under criticism for its unreliable supply, was in the course of constructing new reservoirs in the upper Loxley Valley. On the night of 11th March a newly completed dam gave way, releasing a whole reservoir of water on the unsuspecting town. 248 people drowned. The accident seemed to point the danger of dependence on a private company for essential services, and the Council began a long fight to take the company over, only succeeding in 1888. Mains drainage subsequently began to be installed and the Council began to take a more active role towards environmental improvements. Further back to back houses were prohibited in 1865 and by the end of the century slum clearance was underway. Meanwhile a new, very progressive local authority made its appearance with the Education Act of 1870. The Sheffield School Board was one of the first to open a new school (Newhall in 1872) and its new complex of central buildings on Leopold Street made provision for all levels of education from infants to degree level.

After much delay city centre properties were acquired and streets widened, to be lined with handsome commercial buildings. Cheap transport was the key to enabling working people to move to the smoke-free outer suburbs. The struggling horse tramway company was taken over in 1897 and electric trams were extended through the town centre into the furthest suburbs, to the annoyance of some of the wealthier residents as speculators ran up rows of red brick terraces at every stage of the route. By 1903 281 miles of tramways were in service, the maximum fare was 1d and £28,000 profit was made for

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the Corporation. In 1905 the Corporation boldly took a leaf out of the speculative builders' book and started their own estate of "model cottages" at High Wincobank.

1900 saw the start of Sheffield's boundary extensions, involving the suburbs of Hillsborough, Norton Woodseats and Meersbrook, which brought the population to 409,070. Created a city in 1893, Sheffield was somewhat embarrassed at having no Town Hall, a position remedied by the magnificent building opened by Queen Victoria in 1897. Another fillip to Sheffield pride was the university opened by Edward VII in 1905, the result of a long campaign for recognition.

In the early 20th century production of bulk steel began to move away from Sheffield but the high speed, self-hardening and alloy steels developed through the experiments of Sorby, Hadfield and Brearley were more profitable and convenient to produce on an inland site. Many of these steels were indispensable to modern armaments and at the outbreak of the First World War Sheffield's crucial position as a supplier of munitions led to an influx of workers, including women, housed in temporary wooden huts. Sheffield youth volunteered for the Hallamshire Battalion; many perished on the Somme in 1916. At home a Zeppelin sneaked across Sheffield killing 28 people.



The War was won but in peace the skills required for the manufacture of munitions were unwanted. Unemployment was swollen by returning ex-servicemen and the Sheffield Poor Law Guardians constantly battled with Whitehall over "over-generous" payment of relief. Rival gangs engaged in open warfare over control of illegal betting rings

frequented by the unemployed. In this atmosphere the Labour Party gained control of the Council. The recession continued but a programme of public works became a central feature of the life of the city. The worst slums were cleared and the people moved onto new housing estates in the suburbs. Buildings including the City Hall and the Central Library were provided in the city centre. New parks were laid out including the start of the famous 10 mile "round walk" made possible through donations from J G Graves, a Sheffield mail order pioneer.

In 1939 munitions were again in demand, as were aircraft parts. Hitler's bombers made two attempts to destroy Sheffield's factories, but it was the city centre which took the brunt of the Blitz of December 1940. 602 citizens of Sheffield died.

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Fresh Start

Post war energies were devoted not just to rebuilding but in pushing on with slum clearance and new housing. By the 1960s Sheffield had gained an international reputation for developments in this field, which embraced estates of traditional houses such as the spectacularly landscaped Gleadless Valley as well as high rise complexes such as Park Hill. Sheffield had developed a radical new look, with modern shops and office buildings to offset its traditional industrial profile. Distinctive tower blocks marked greatly expanding educational facilities provided by the polytechnic and university. Ring roads and pedestrianisation relieved the city centre from the pressure of through traffic. Trams were replaced by buses.

An outstanding achievement of the decade was the virtual elimination of industrial and domestic smoke through vigorous enforcement of the clean air acts. At the same time there was a major shift from coal to oil and electricity as industrial fuels and dust collecting plant was pioneered in the major steel works. By 1966 the claim could be made that Sheffield was the world's cleanest industrial city.

The dream of a new satellite town had to await further boundary extensions into Derbyshire in 1967. Corporation estates had earlier been built on the fringes of the surrounding countryside, but Mosborough was the first to be planned around comprehensive local services and broke new ground in mixing municipal and private development. Further extensions in 1974 established the existing city boundaries.

The last two decades have been a period of startling change. In the industrial east end the steel industry suffered a dramatic decline and many of the famous firms disappeared. Meadowhall Shopping Centre was built on the site of Hadfields and Brown Bayleys was replaced by the Don Valley Stadium. The Sheffield Development Corporation was given the task of attracting business and jobs to the Lower Don Valley, but, while Sheffield's famous special steels are still produced, the future economy is based largely on service industries and leisure complexes. The facilities built for the World Student Games in 1991 have become venues for both top class sport and concerts.

The story is the same elsewhere. Ponds Forge has become synonymous with international swimming rather than the working of metal, the Cultural Industrial Quarter has attracted new businesses, including the independent Showroom Cinema and the BBC has built a new studio complex in Shoreham Street. The National Centre for Popular Music opened in 1999, but failed to attract sufficient visitors. It is now being transformed into Sheffield Hallam University's student union.

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Sheffield's reputation as an education centre has been enhanced by the creation of a second university, Sheffield Hallam, and the students sustain a new generation of city centre housing projects, nightclubs and café bars.

At the same time Sheffield's multicultural society faces social, economic and educational challenges. Some of the post-war developments which promised so much have contributed to the problems of social deprivation. While Park Hill Flats achieved listed building status, Hyde Park and Kelvin have been demolished and areas such as Norfolk Park are being transformed through community partnership and the input of public and private finance. The Heart of the City Project has created a new winter garden on the site of the 'egg-box' Town Hall extension, and the Millennium Galleries, which link together to form an alternative pedestrian route from Norfolk Street to Arundel Gate. In an attempt to reduce traffic congestion in the city, a number of roads, including Arundel Gate, have been downgraded and new through routes established to take cars away from the centre. However, the past has not been left behind entirely. The Canal Basin has been restored for leisure and commercial use, the historic markets are being redeveloped, trams have returned in the form of Supertram, Dixon's famous Cornish Place works and a number of other former industrial premises, have been converted for residential use. The Botanical Gardens and Norfolk Park are being restored. Sheffield may yet be encircled by a community forest reminiscent of the natural woodland encountered by the first founders thirteen centuries ago.

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Selected Reading

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