

Sources for the Study of the Sheffield Gang Wars



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Front Cover Illustrations – left to right:

Sheffield from Sky Edge, 1984 (*Picture Sheffield: w01933*)

1925 Half-Penny

Sheffield Policeman, 1928 (*Picture Sheffield: s16708*)

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Contents

Introduction	4
Timeline showing Key Dates	6
List of documents, books, photographs and other items available at Sheffield Libraries, Archives and Information	7
Archive Collections held Elsewhere	11
Local Studies Library and Sheffield Archives Facilities	12
Contact Details	13

Introduction

This guide lists sources for the study of the inter-gang rivalry and confrontation in 1920s Sheffield popularly referred to as the Sheffield Gang Wars. The booklet does not offer a detailed description of this period in the city's history, but rather highlights for the reader who wishes to carry out their own research what is available within Sheffield Archives and Sheffield Local Studies Library.

Contemporary observers and later commentators have suggested that gambling was endemic in some parts of early-twentieth century Sheffield (notably the East End and Park areas of the city). This was in part fuelled by increases in munitions workers' wages during and immediately after World War One, enabling the betting on horse races, cards, dice and the throwing of coins (known as 'pitch and toss') to flourish.

This latter form of gambling (where bets were placed on the proportion of heads or tails which would show when three coins tossed in the air fell to the ground) was very popular, and the largest and best-organised pitching site in Sheffield was on Sky Edge, a ridge of wasteland overlooking the Park district slums (where the Park Hill flats now stand). This gambling site had been established before the outbreak of World War One. Its elevated position made possible the early sighting of approaching policemen, and by 1919 it was controlled by the Mooney Gang, led by George Mooney, allied with a group from Park led by Sam Garvin. Large numbers of gamblers were attracted to the site, which proved very profitable for the gang leaders.

Munitions work had ceased by the beginning of the 1920s, unemployment had risen and the gangs' profits fallen as people had less money to gamble. George Mooney's decision in 1923 to break away from the Park gang members, in an attempt to increase his share of the gambling profits, caused Sam Garvin to form a rival gang (known as the Park Brigade), and started a battle for territory that would continue almost uninterrupted from 1923 to 1925. This period was marked by a series of tit-for-tat attacks on rival gang members and their homes (including Mooney himself), involving beatings, razor slashing, and the use of guns, knives and bricks.

The Park Brigade prevailed, helped in part by in-fighting amongst members of the Mooney Gang. Despite attaining dominance over their rivals, the Park Brigade attacks continued, culminating in the fatal stabbing of William Plommer, a man who inadvertently offended Sam Garvin by insisting on fair play between two street fighters, one of whom (Wilfred Fowler) was a Garvin follower. Fowler and his brother, Lawrence, were found guilty of the murder at a trial held at the West Riding Assizes in Leeds. An appeal against their conviction was dismissed in the Court of Criminal Appeal in London, and both were hanged at Armley Prison in Leeds (Lawrence always protesting his innocence).

The murder of Plommer proved something of a turning point, as four days later the Chief Constable of Sheffield Police, John Hall-Dalwood, formed the Special Duty Squad, a group of four police officers given the task of eliminating gang activity in Sheffield. The Squad's tactics were aggressive and confrontational, and they were proactive in seeking out trouble, but ultimately they were successful. Percy Sillitoe replaced Hall-Dalwood in 1926, consolidating his predecessor's work, and when in 1928 the Special Duty Squad (known popularly as the 'Flying Squad') was disbanded, it was because the gangs were broken and the Squad's services were no longer required.

Timeline showing Key Dates

1919	Sky Edge pitch and toss ring under the control of George Mooney and Sam Garvin.
1923	Mooney Gang splits from Sam Garvin's group. Sam Garvin forms a rival gang, the Park Brigade.
23 April 1923	William Furniss (Park Brigade) attacked in his own home by members of the Mooney Gang.
16 June 1923	George Mooney's home attacked by the Park Brigade; George 'Ganner' Wheywell injured by gun fire.
24 December 1923	Further attack on Mooney's house. Mooney leaves Sheffield for a year.
27 April 1925	William Francis Plommer fatally stabbed outside his home in Princess Street, Norfolk Bridge.
27 April 1925	Sam Garvin and three others assault Harry Rippon outside the Bull and Oak pub on the Wicker.
1 May 1925	Sheffield Police Chief Constable John Hall-Dalwood forms the Special Duty Squad [known locally as the 'Flying Squad'].
19 May 1925	Verdict of 'wilful murder' [of William Plommer] given against the brothers Wilfred and Lawrence Fowler by an inquest jury, Nursery Street Coroner's Court, Sheffield.
17 June 1925	Sheffield magistrates' committal hearing commits 10 men to stand trial at West Riding Assizes, Leeds, in connection with the murder of William Plommer.
28 July 1925	William Plommer murder trial begins at the West Riding Assizes, Leeds Town Hall.
31 July 1925	Sam Garvin acquitted in the Princess Street case; but sentenced to 21 months hard labour for the wounding of Harry Rippon.
31 July 1925	Wilfred and Lawrence Fowler convicted of William Plommer's murder and sentenced to death.
3 September 1925	Wilfred Fowler hanged at Armley Prison, Leeds.
4 September 1925	Lawrence Fowler hanged at Armley Prison, Leeds
7 January 1926	Chief Constable Hall-Dalwood resigns.
1 April 1926	Captain Percy Sillitoe replaces Hall-Dalwood as Chief Constable.
1928	Special Duty Squad disbanded.

List of documents, books, photographs and other items available at Sheffield Libraries, Archives and Information

Documents, Journal Articles, Books and other Items

Bean, J. P., *The Sheffield Gang Wars* (Sheffield: D & D Publications, 1981)
(*Sheffield Local Studies Library: 364.14 S*, and *Sheffield Archives: BEA LOCAL*)

Bean, J. P., 'Gangmen and Gamblers', in *Crime in Sheffield*, pp. 88-95
(Sheffield: Sheffield City Libraries, 1987)
(*Sheffield Local Studies Library: 364.1 S*, and *Sheffield Archives: BEA LOCAL*)

Bentley, David, 'The Princess Street Gang Murder – William and Lawrence Fowler, 1925', in *The Sheffield Murders 1865 to 1965*, pp. 188-217 (Sheffield, 2003)
(*Sheffield Local Studies Library: 364.66*)

Cockerill, A. W., *Sir Percy Sillitoe* (London: W. H. Allen, 1975)
(*Sheffield Local Studies Library: B.Sill S*)

'Darts' magazine, no. 246, p. 6, 26th November 1964, photograph and brief biographical details of Percy Sillitoe
(*Sheffield Local Studies Library: 374.4274 SF*)

'Darts' magazine, no. 248, pp. 8-9, 21st January 1965, reminiscences of the Mooney Gang's activities in the 1920s
(*Sheffield Local Studies Library: 378.4274 SF*)

'Darts' magazine, no. 654, p. 14, 17th November 1994, Gang Wars article
(*Sheffield Local Studies Library: 374.4274 SF*)

Dyson, Mark, 'The Sheffield Gangs', in *Sheffield Spectator* June 1983, pp. 22-23
(*Sheffield Local Studies Library: 052.74 SQ*)

Greenhill-Bradway Tenants and Community Association News Magazine, November 1970, p. 4, article on [William Plommer's] murder near Norfolk Bridge in 1925
(*Sheffield Local Studies Library: 374.28 S*)

Hampton, William, correspondence with Peter Harvey regarding sources of information on the Sheffield Gang Wars, 1973
(*Sheffield Archives: Acc. 2001/40*)

Illuminated letter to Captain Percy Joseph Sillitoe [from colleagues in the East Riding of Yorkshire Police Force] on his appointment as Chief Constable of the City of Sheffield Police Force, 1926
(*Sheffield Archives: X462*)

Magistrates' Court registers, City of Sheffield Division, 1925. A magistrate would examine the evidence against the accused and determine whether it was sufficient to justify sending them to the Assizes for trial. From 1913 in Sheffield concurrent sessions were held before different magistrates.
(*Sheffield Archives: MC/4/17, MC/4/22-24*)
(*Information in court records may be subject to access restrictions under the Data Protection Act, or may be subject to exemptions from the Freedom of Information Act.*)

'Newspaper Cuttings relating to Sheffield', vol. 35, p. 6, photograph and biographical notes on Percy Sillitoe
(*Sheffield Local Studies Library: 942.74 SF*)

Sheffield City Council, Minutes of Council and Committees, 1918-1929. These may include record of official responses to gambling and organised criminal activity in the city.
(*Sheffield Archives: CA-MIN/57-67*)

Sheffield City Council, Watch Committee, Signed and Draft Minutes, 1917-1933. These may include record of official responses to gambling and organised criminal activity in the city, as well as reference to the work of Chief Constable John Hall-Dalwood.
(*Sheffield Archives: CA-WAC/1/19-20 and CA-WAC/2/46-53*)

Sheffield Police Force, newspaper cutting from *The Police Review and Parade Gossip*, 9th April 1926, describing the farewell presentation to Lieutenant-Colonel John Hall-Dalwood on his retirement as Chief Constable of Sheffield.
(*Sheffield Archives: SY295/6/3*)

Sheffield Police Force, volumes of cuttings from local newspapers, c. 1880-1929
(*Sheffield Archives: SY295/6/4/1-2*)

Sheffield Year Book and Record (1926), account of the murder of William F. Plommer, and the trial and execution of William and Lawrence Fowler, pp. 347-362
(*Sheffield Local Studies Library: 032.74 S*)

Sillitoe, Percy, *Cloak without Dagger* (London: Cassell, 1955)
(*Sheffield Local Studies Library: BSi 35 S*)

Newspaper Reports

The main titles available at Sheffield Local Studies Library for the 1920s are: *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 1855 – 1986; *Sheffield Independent* 1819 – 1938; the *Sheffield Mail* 1920-1931; and *The Star* 1873 – date.

Reports on the murder of William Plommer, and the subsequent inquest and criminal trial can be found in:

Sheffield Independent (1925): 28-29 April; 19-22, 26-30 May; 17-18, 20 June; 29-31 July; 1, 17, 19 August

Sheffield Daily Telegraph (1925): 19, 26-27, 29 May; 29-31 July; 17 August

The Star (1925): 28, 30 April; 2, 6, 20-21, 25, 27 May; 28-31 July; 1, 18, 20 August; 3-4 September

Articles on/by Percy Sillitoe:

The Star, 16th October 1952, photograph and note on Percy Sillitoe.

The Sheffield Telegraph, 17th October 1952, p. 2, photograph and note on Percy Sillitoe.

The Star, 22nd May 1953, p. 3, picture and biographical note on Percy Sillitoe, on the occasion of his 65th birthday.

The Star, 31st August 1953, p. 3, photograph and note on Percy Sillitoe's retirement.

The Star, 10th – 26th January 1955, series of autobiographical articles by Percy Sillitoe.

The Sheffield Telegraph, 5th April 1962, obituary for Percy Sillitoe.

Archives of some national newspapers are available on the internet, notably *The Times* (<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/archive/>) and *The Guardian* (<http://archive.guardian.co.uk>)

See, in particular, *The Times* 1 and 19 August, 1925

Photographs

Over 45,000 images from the Sheffield Local Studies Library photographic collection are available to search online at www.picturesheffield.com. A number of them show Skye Edge and other locations relevant to this subject.

Oral Testimonies

Sheffield Archives' collection of **B.B.C. Radio Sheffield audio-tape recordings** includes a studio item relating to the Sheffield Gang Wars. The majority of the original recordings in this collection are open-reel in format, and whilst no access copies are currently available, it may be possible for Sheffield Archives, in conjunction with Radio Sheffield, to arrange for such

copies to be made. Archives' staff can offer further guidance on this procedure.

The recording of relevance is:

John Irvain, co-writer of a documentary film about the Sheffield Gang Wars, talks about the various personalities involved in the Gang Wars and how the trouble started. Irvain describes the story and the recently-made film (1986). (*Sheffield Archives: SY425/8611/4*)

The Local Studies library holds a collection of **oral history audio interviews** originally recorded in Sheffield in the early 1980s. There is a subject card index for this collection, and for most recordings there is a printed sheet with a summary of the interview:

- An impression of the Sheffield gangs in the 1920s and 1930s. The Fowler brothers, hanged for a murder they did not commit? Their version of the story. Favourite pubs of various gangs. Percy Sillitoe's 'Flying Squad'. (*Local Studies tape no. 48*)
- Gangs coming into [a] barber's shop. (*Local Studies tape no. 53*)
- Sheffield gangs (*Local Studies tape no. 151*)
- The Mooney Gang and their raids. (*Local Studies tape nos. 156-158*)
- Sheffield Police and Percy Sillitoe's involvement with the Sheffield gangs. (*Local Studies tape no. 170*)
- Gangs in Sheffield, and the Police's response to them. (*Local Studies tape no. 172*)
- General remarks on the activities of Sheffield gangs, including the 'Gas Tank Gang'. Percy Sillitoe and the clean up of the gangs. (*Local Studies tape no. 182*)

Internet articles

Hamilton, David, 'Protecting the Public from Gangs: Sheffield in the 1920s', in *New English Review* (January 2011), http://www.newenglishreview.org/custpage.cfm/frm/79187/sec_id/79187 (accessed April 2011)

Milner, William, 'Gang War in Sheffield' (December 2010), <https://suite.io/william-milner/4ke32vx> (accessed April 2014)

Archive Collections held Elsewhere

Records relating to the trial of the Fowler brothers at Leeds Assize Court are held at the Wakefield headquarters of the West Yorkshire Archive Service:

- Sessions Rolls (*West Yorkshire Archive Service, Wakefield: QS/1*)
- Indictment Books (*West Yorkshire Archive Service, Wakefield: QS/4*)
- Calendars of Prisoners (*West Yorkshire Archive Service, Wakefield: QS/7*)
- Leeds Prison, Armley, nominal registers, 1908-1950 (*West Yorkshire Archive Service, Wakefield: C187*)

Further records relating to Wilfred and Lawrence Fowler are held at the National Archives, Kew (<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>):

- Court of Criminal Appeal, Register, January-July 1925 (*National Archives: J81/19*)
- Home Office, Registered Papers (Supplementary), Wilfred and Lawrence Fowler, 1925 (*National Archives: HO 144/5366*)
- Prison Commission, Criminal Cases (Capital), Lawrence Fowler, 1925 (*National Archives: PCOM 8/58*)
- Prison Commission, Criminal Cases (Capital), Wilfred Fowler, 1922-1925 (*National Archives: PCOM 8/59*)

Sheffield Archives and Local Studies services collect and preserve original records and printed material relating to Sheffield and the surrounding area.

The information dates from the 12th century to the present and relates to Sheffield, South Yorkshire and north Derbyshire.

Included are extensive collections of books • pamphlets • photographs • church registers • newspapers • census records • minutes • diaries • films • maps • deeds • records from schools • hospitals • businesses and charities • family estates • personal papers etc.

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Adding to our collections

Sheffield Libraries and Archives seeks to preserve information about events in our city's history. If you have photographs or personal papers that may be worth preserving, please consider safeguarding them for current and future generations by placing them in the care of Sheffield Libraries and Archives. It is only through the generosity of individuals and organisations that we are able to have a complete record of important events in the history of Sheffield and the nation. We are interested in photographs, flyers and posters, minutes of meetings etc. For advice on record keeping and the facilities we offer, please contact Peter Evans, Archives & Local Studies Manager (pete.evans@sheffield.gov.uk or 0114 203 9397).

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and
<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

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<http://shefflibraries.blogspot.co.uk>



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