

The Ranmoor Cutlery Works

It may seem unlikely that a small works in what was then rural Ranmoor would be actively making scissors in Georgian times. Sheffield's cutlery industry was already sizeable by the sixteenth century but much of it continued to be carried on a by small workshops situated in the rural villages beyond. The hearth tax returns for Lady Day 1672 show that only 38% of metalworking craftsmen resided in the Sheffield Township itself.

By 1750 many of the villages outside Sheffield had begun to specialize in various branches of the cutlery trades. Norton had a virtual monopoly on scythes and sickles, Wadsley was known for its common penknives and Eckington concentrated on files and forks. Trade directories list up to 33 villages as having connections with the cutlery trades in the nineteenth century. Many of these lay near river valleys to take advantage of water power to grind their products as well as sources of charcoal and sandstone.

But the location of this works at the top of Water (Storth) Lane halfway between the Rivelin and Porter valleys can hardly have been determined by the availability of water power alone. There may have been small water courses in the vicinity (as the name Water Lane suggests) but could these have delivered enough motive power to drive a grinding wheel? It is known that in a dual economy where agriculture and industry were closely linked, much of the work involved in making cutlery and edge tools was carried out using hand power. Small-scale operations including hand forging were possible in the workers' own homes or in an adjacent workshop.(as seen in example below)



Cottage, Barn and Workshop at Dungworth

This site of little more than half an acre was occupied for perhaps two hundred years by the Beal family who hailed from the Stannington area. They can be traced back to William Beal, a Master Scissorsmith of Hallamshire who was thought to have held land in Water Lane in the mid seventeenth century. William Fairbank's 1791/2 survey of this piece of land for the Hallam Enclosure Award recorded the Duke of

Norfolk as landowner and John Beal as its tenant with "a cottage and croft near Rand Moor" but makes no mention of a workshop. However the earlier 1776 will of John's father refers to "the 2 or 3 buildings in Water Lane including a house and workshop".

Scrolling on sixty years the 1850 O.S. map proclaims optimistically "**Ranmoor Works-Cutlery**" and the 1851 census shows Sarah Beal as a "Scissor and cutlery manufacturer employing 8 men" and head of the household. The contemporary rate books show the site significantly upgraded with *three workshops (32 ft by 15 ft), two houses (two storied with bedrooms above), a barn, since converted to a grinding wheel and a steam engine with running gear, grinding troughs & drums.*

Sarah's husband, Peter, had died 16 years previously when aged only 48. Sarah was by now 59 years old and helped by her sons Joseph (aged 34) and James (aged 25). Clearly keen to take the business forward by branching out into new and more lucrative ventures, the sons began a partnership while still at Water Lane, as: *manufacturers of tailors scissors, butchers' and shoe knives 'for exportation' using the trade mark 'ROYAL'.*

However in 1860 pressure was beginning to grow from land developers, in this case from George Wostenholme who had now purchased 26 acres of adjacent farmland known as the Storth Fields with a view to creating a high grade residential area. Indeed the Upper Hallam Rate Book of 1861 confirms the sad news that Wostenholme had indeed become the owner of the site and that the "*Grinding Wheel, Steel House and Shop*" had been "Taken Down".

This may have prompted the brothers to move nearer to the heart of cutlery making in Sheffield and thus take advantage of the multiplicity of skills there. James was the first to do this and established a business under his own name in Dixon's Yard, Silver Street. By 1863 the company, still in Silver Street; was trading as "**Joseph Beal & James Beal**" but within seven years it had moved to Red Hill Works, off Broad Lane now under the name **Joseph Beal & Sons**. This works eventually covered an acre with a frontage of 140 ft. and employing 350 hands. The firm later became **J & J Beal** and remained at Red Hill until 1938.



Robert Middleton and his Kensington Dream

Robert Middleton was a typical example of the Victorian entrepreneurial spirit. Born in 1845 he originally worked as a file hardener but gradually climbed the ladder to become a builder and house developer eventually mutating as the proprietor of a small omnibus company in Nether Green.

The land on which he plied his early trade was a strip on the south side of Oakbrook Road between its junctions with Hangingwater and Westwood Roads. His brother Elias first purchased this in 1887 after which Robert set to work with lofty plans for a terrace of houses which he would name “*Kensington Crescent*” Unfortunately the configuration of the land would not lend itself to the formation of a true crescent but undeterred he incorporated plaques at each end to forcefully underline his intention. At the lower end (Nos.171-3) a plaque reads “*Kensington Crescent AD 1890-6*” and at the other (Nos. 205-7) “*Kensington Crescent erected by Robert Middleton AD 1890-6*”. Although often overlooked the plaques are still visible today.

Before Middleton developed his crescent the only buildings on this stretch were three old cottages dating back to the early 1800s near the corner with Hangingwater Road. They had been owned by Joseph Biggin a grinder. He and his wife kept a beerhouse in one of them named “The Barrel” and Alethea continued to run it after his death in 1832 (see Ranmoor Notes May 2018). Had these cottages become a bit dilapidated and were they now detracting from the new crescent’s appearance? In any event Middleton appears to have acquired the cottages and set about completely remodeling their frontages. The shops were also decorated with the “Kensington” logo contained in a plaque above the door of the corner shop (No 237). This too can still be seen proclaiming “*Kensington Market Founded by Robert Middleton 1887-1902 AD*” which followed the fashion of the time to name parades of shops with the “market” suffix.

The Kensington name seemed to catch on and was applied to a shoe repairer (*The Kensington Boot Repairing Depot*) and a grocer’s shop (*The Kensington Stores*) and to a small area behind it (the *Kensington Tea Gardens*).



According to the street directories Robert had by now become an “*omnibus proprietor*” and the above photograph shows Robert as a driver too at the control of one of his omnibuses outside the Bull’s Head. It appeared in the Sheffield Telegraph in July 1901 entitled “*The Last Horse Bus to Nether Green*” and refers to the last days of his shuttle service between Nether Green terminus (which of course he named “*Kensington Bus Station*”) and the Bulls Head in Ranmoor. On this auspicious occasion his passengers, Mrs Tregenza, Mrs Price and Mrs Hudson might well have been on their way to enjoy a cup of tea at his “*Kensington Tea Garden*”. The appearance of electric tram services along both Fulwood and Oakbrook Roads in 1901 would scupper not only his refreshment business but also his main horse-bus service (from Moorhead to Nether Green via Hunters Bar and Rustlings Road).

Apparently he continued building thereafter in nearby Fulney Road (where he stabled his horses) and Westwood Road. His entrepreneurial style led him into several disputes with the city council concerning his tendency to ignore their building regulations. Quite an irony considering the way he used “*Kensington*” to imply quality!

Message from the Chairman

Welcome to this winter edition of Notes. You will already have received a membership card giving details of next year’s programme and been invited to renew your subscription for 2022.

We plan to continue with hybrid meetings for the time being but recognize that one of the disadvantages we face is the difficulty of having questions and comments that involve all attendees. If you are viewing via Zoom you are welcome to send any responses to talks via the chat function.

The January meeting will also be the AGM and reports will be circulated in advance. There will be two proposals for approval. The election of the committee (all current members are willing to continue) and also a recommendation to set the subscription rate for 2023 at £10 (individual) and £15 (family). More details will be included in the reports and if you have any comments or questions please let us know in advance of the meeting. With best wishes for the festive season.

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