

The Ranmoor Society

July 2016

Ranmoor's Historical Archive

Over many years the Society has gathered together documents and maps relating to the history of Ranmoor and district. Our July meeting was devoted to the Archive's content and how it might be used. This task becomes all the more difficult because we have no permanent base for our huge range of material. The meeting's four mini-presentations were designed to illustrate some of the information we hold about Ranmoor but, in a single meeting, we could only "scratch the surface". Many members were surprised and delighted to hear Michael Palin's offering in which he recalled with humour his early days living in Whitworth Road. In fact this was a 16-minute recording he made specifically for the Society for our exhibition in year 2000.

Much of the material in the Archive however is more commonplace and consists of documents, maps, photographs, street directories and census details. Information on each of the 40 or so roads in our area requires a separate folder; we also have folders dedicated to key local people (11), Ranmoor's land societies (5) and on other themes such as transport and sports clubs, etc. In addition, we hold large-scale maps between 1793 and 1935 and many "sale plans" for particular houses or pieces of land. We have a store of old photographs, booklets, letters etc.

The Ranmoor Archive is available to any interested member. If you would like some help on how to investigate a particular topic, please contact Peter Warr on 0114 230 9174 or warr@ranmoor.plus.com.

Firth's Alms Houses

One of our Archive folders brings together information on the Alms Houses which were built in 1870 in Nether Green Road. These were financed and constructed by prominent local industrialist Mark Firth (1819-1880) of Oakbrook, at a time when much of Ranmoor was still fields and social service provision as we know it today was non-existent. His success in expanding his father's firm enabled him to play an important part in the development of Sheffield, for example donating Firth Park to the town, contributing to Ranmoor College on Fulwood

Road in 1864 (for training Methodist New Connexion ministers, demolished in the 1960s) and working tirelessly to improve young people's education in Sheffield.

Mark Firth, a man of strong religious belief, saw the need for additional Alms Houses to provide affordable accommodation for elderly men and women in poverty. In order to benefit from the free housing (and initially a small income), applicants had to be at least 60 years-old and show evidence of a strong protestant belief. Not only did he finance the original purchase of land and construction of the building, he donated investments which could yield a continuing income to meet running costs. Other Firth-family members contributed gifts and legacies over many years.



This engraving of 1873 shows the original alms houses. The building contained 36 self-contained apartments, 12 of which were designed for married couples. In addition, the building provided a chapel as well as accommodation for a resident chaplain, who was a retired church minister (and usually also his wife). The chaplain was required to hold a short service each day and a longer one on Sundays, which was open to local people as well as to residents.



But by the mid-20th century the accommodation had become increasingly old-fashioned and uncomfortable, and the structure was in frequent need of repair. The Trustees discussed possible ways to bring the 1870 building up to date, but eventually decided to demolish it and build an

entirely new complex.

Now named Firth's Homes, this opened in 1970 (see the 2016 photo above). It consists of 32 apartments and one for a warden rather than a chaplain. Occupants must be on state benefit and now have to pay a small rent for their apartment. The Firth family (now dispersed around the country) is no longer involved in management of the Homes, and the honorary Trustees are members of the local community with relevant professional skills.

Sheffield: Salesman to the World

In April we welcomed Mike Spick back to talk to us, and on this occasion he was able to provide a fascinating insight into the methods used to advertise and sell Sheffield-made products over the centuries.

Sheffield's first Trade Directory was published in 1774 and this focused mainly on silver and plate manufacture. The development of the railways made it possible to transport heavy goods, lifting a major constraint on the expansion of manufacturing.

The Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in 1851 provided an important opportunity for Sheffield companies, and among the town's many exhibits were substantial stove grates made here. The town's developing reputation for excellence was recognised by the awarding of 55 medals, including five prestigious Council Medals.

By this time Sheffield firms had branches and agents in all parts of the world, with the USA being especially important. In the late 19th century with the imposition by USA of high trade tariffs and the development of competing steel production in Germany, Sheffield companies focused their marketing on the Empire which saved our industry from decline at that time.

The huge range of manufactured items produced in Sheffield over the following century was a surprise to many in the audience, and it is good to remember that, as well as cutlery and other metal products, Sheffield has produced both Henderson's Relish

Edward Carpenter

At our May meeting Suzanne Bingham introduced us to a not particularly well-known Victorian character who had close connections to Sheffield. Edward Carpenter was born in Brighton in 1844 into an upper middle-class family and enjoyed a privileged upbringing. But from early on he felt out of step with his comfortable surroundings and the attitudes and behaviours of his social class. As a boy he was well educated, but his six sisters were denied a fulfilling education in spite of being intelligent young women. Edward observed their frustration, leading to a general concern about the way women were treated. He also realised from an early time that he was gay, which added further to alienation from his environment.

From 1864 to 1868 he read mathematics at Cambridge University and then stayed on as a lecturer. However, he was very aware of his selective and privileged environment and the exclusion of the working classes. He accepted an opportunity to teach on the newly established University Extension Programme and was sent north in 1874 to Leeds. One of the subjects he taught was Astronomy, and he was quick to point out that, since the skies over Leeds were permanently covered in smoke, there was no possibility of his pupils actually being able to see the night sky! He moved to Sheffield in 1876, and quickly bonded with the local people, so different from his upbringing. He became well-known nationally and was invited to tutor the children of the Prince of Wales, but turned down the offer in order to concentrate on the needs of working folk. He had a punishing teaching programme across several northern towns, but still found time to write and publish social commentaries on working conditions. He became a vegetarian for dietary and ethical reasons and remained so for the rest of his life.

In 1879 he met Albert Fearnough and Charles Fox and moved to Bradway (then in the country) to live with them at Fox Farm where he had close relationships with both. He lost his mother in 1881 and his father in 1882. With the £6000 he was left he set up a commercial market garden with Albert at Millthorpe in the Cordwell Valley, where he lived for many years promoting the idea of the simple life, growing and marketing produce.

Meanwhile he continued to write and promote socialist ideas, which were not popular with many local people. He joined the National Socialists in London, met William Morris, and agreed to set up a Socialist Group in Sheffield. In 1886 the group met and immediately rejected affiliation with the London group. It set up premises, pursued local educational and social programmes, and opened a café. Celebrations on May Day were revived. The garden-city concept, bringing the country to the town was successfully promoted in the Wincobank Estate.

Around this time Edward met his lifetime partner George Merrill, continuing a close relationship until George's death in 1928. The Socialist Group quickly fell apart following traditional left wing disputes; the café closed following a principled stand against paying rent, and Millthorpe became a commune for a while. Edward wrote extensively on social issues – about socialism ([England's Ideal](#), 1886/7), sexual freedom including women's and gay rights, the struggle between nature and scientific progress, animal rights, and improving education.

His writings influenced many people and Millthorpe hosted many well-known visitors -- Siegfried Sassoon, E. M. Forster, William Morris and many others. He was an initial supporter of The Great War, assuming it would be brief, but turned against it when the slaughter became apparent. His influence faded towards the end of his life, and by 1922 he had moved to Guildford with George. George died in 1928 and Carpenter a year later.

Since the 1960's Carpenter's reputation has undergone something of a revival and there are now plans to erect a statue in Sheffield to commemorate this unusual man.