

Local events

As you will know, our regular monthly meetings have been postponed until the autumn. Whilst it is disappointing that we will miss some interesting talks, we hope that we can reschedule the speakers for future meetings.

Meanwhile, we aim to send out an additional edition of Ranmoor Notes to fill the gap. We hope you enjoy this one, and look forward to seeing you at a meeting later this autumn.

Now some good news from our Chair Mike Killingley. In our last Notes we referred to the unloved Grade II electric transformer at the top of Storth Lane and our intention to seek funding to restore it. One of our members suggested we apply to Sheffield Town Trust for a grant to cover the cost of this, and we were delighted to learn that our case had been accepted and accordingly we have been awarded a grant of £800. So the work will start in the coming months when weather and other restrictions allow.

The Sheffield Town Trust

Many people know very little about this august and venerable charity which, for over 700 years, has been carefully and methodically collecting its income from property rental and other bequests and redistributing it for the benefit of the people of Sheffield.

Although the Town Trust dates back to 1297 when it was formed by Thomas de Furnival for the benefit of his free tenants, its constitution was formalised later by a decree in 1681 when it was agreed that the property and income of the Burgery of Sheffield should be administered by a body of 13 persons elected by a majority of the town's inhabitants. It was only the town's approximately one hundred freeholders who could be nominated and therefore vote. From this time this group was to be known as the Town Trust with the Town Collector as its principal Trustee. Another body, the Church Burgesses, had previously been held responsible for maintaining the Parish Church in good repair and for those streets and bridges closest to it.

The Town Trust's responsibilities extended to the repair of Sheffield's roads, causeways and highways, and for key parts of the town's infrastructure such as Lady's Bridge, Barkers Pool and the rest of the town water supply. It also maintained the workhouse and financed certain celebrations of public events such as proclamations and royal coronations. During the nineteenth century the Trust began purchasing land in order to widen and improve the town's medieval street pattern including the Street between St James's Row and Townhead Street. It was also instrumental

in planning and financing the key turnpikes in and out of the town including the routes to Chesterfield (1795), Baslow via Abbeydale (1812) and Glossop (1818).

Having built the town's original Town Hall near the Parish Church gates in 1700, it became involved again in its replacement with a larger building combining Town Hall, Court House and Prison, but on that occasion it shared the cost with the Duke of Norfolk and other interested parties.

The new Town Hall was completed in 1808 and, although replaced by the current Town Hall in 1897, continued to be used as a Court House until the 1990s. During the course of the nineteenth century many of these responsibilities were gradually transferred to the new municipal bodies such as the Sheffield Water Works Company (1840) and Sheffield Corporation (in 1847).

The Town Trust still uses its income to finance schemes that benefit the people of Sheffield in the form of grants to charities and various other organisations. It now distributes charitable donations in excess of £250,000 a year. The grants range in size from tens of pounds to thousands of pounds and cover organisations including youth groups, tenant's associations, friends' groups, hospices, hospitals and the city's universities. Other beneficiaries have included the Friends of the General Cemetery, the Five Weirs Walk and the Botanical Gardens. Had the Trust not purchased the latter back in 1898 as it struggled with severe financial difficulties, the gardens might well have closed. The Gardens are currently leased to Sheffield Corporation on a 99-year peppercorn rent.

Old Sheffield Street Names

Recently a number of temporary historic street signs were added in the Castlegate area in a bid to emphasise the area's history. Most of these would have been well known to early members of the Sheffield Town Trust.

Truelove's Gutter Perhaps disappointingly the name seems to have come from a family called Truelove who lived on either Castle Street or Exchange Street. The Gutter part probably reflects the fact that most streets in old Sheffield doubled up as drains, which were flushed periodically by opening the Barker's Pool reservoir, removing debris, dead cats and worse to the Don at Lady's Bridge.

Under the Water (now Bridge Street). This was once at a somewhat lower level, with steps up to Lady's Bridge and was frequently flooded by the Don.

The Isle (now Estelli Parade). The goyt for the Town Corn Mill which formed what became known as Kelham Island actually ran right into the town re-

joining the Don just above the Wicker Weir. So this area was referred to as 'The Isle' or sometimes confusingly 'The Isle of Wight'!

Chandlers Row For more than 200 years the land now known as Castlegate was occupied by slaughter houses and related processes. One of the most important would have been the candle-makers or chandlers.

Castle Orchard The area now occupied by Castlegate and Exchange Street was once the orchard supplying Sheffield Castle which would have dominated the area on the opposite bank of the River Sheaf.

Sergeants Walk This probably referred to the favourite walk of the soldiers who garrisoned the castle.

Water Lane What is now the forecourt of the Magistrates Court was once a narrow lane leading down to the Don at Bridge Street.

Nags Head Yard or Shemeld Croft Commercial Street was initially a ramp built by the Midland Railway Company in 1870 to allow better access to its new Midland Station. Its construction required the demolition of a number of narrow medieval lanes mostly named after inns or pubs.

Lost Theatres of Sheffield



The Empire Theatre at the corner of Charles Street and Union Street in 1895. An exuberant example of Frank Matcham's theatre design

Whilst we may be short of open theatres in Sheffield at this time, it is interesting to think back to the many other theatres that have existed in the city in days gone by. West Bar, named after Sheffield's only

recorded town gate was in the later 19th century known as 'Little Piccadilly' because of the many pubs, music halls and street entertainers that there were there.

A number of significant theatres were built in the city centre to cater to the needs of the growing population and perhaps the most impressive was the Empire Palace of Varieties. It was built on a site at the corner of Charles Street and Union Street at a cost of £65,000 (approx. £8.6M at today's value) It opened in 1895 and had seating for 3,000 with standing room for a further 1,000. It finally closed in 1959.

The opening night had a variety bill topped by Cora Stuart & Company performing a celebrated sketch and supported by a comedy double act, a ventriloquist and acrobats amongst others. Most of the famous artists of the time performed here over the following years, names such as Vesta Tilley, Florrie Ford, Marie Lloyd, Nellie Wallace, Sir Harry Lauder and George Formby (father of the perhaps more famous now, George Formby Jnr). Fred Karno's Company appeared in 1899 and the troupe included Charles Chaplin and Stan Jefferson (later Laurel).

The Sheffield theatres continued to thrive well into the 20th century and offered much needed entertainment during both world wars. During WWII Sheffield had 130 air raid warnings and if one occurred during a performance the audience was informed from the stage that they could leave, though the performers continued. On 12 December 1940 Henry Hall and his Orchestra topped the bill. During their performance there was a tremendous explosion but the band played on. Amidst the scent of brick dust & smoke the manager cleared the audience - though many audience members went down to the boiler room where Henry and colleagues continued to entertain them!

During the 1950's many stars of the era appeared at the Empire, including Max Wall, Laurel and Hardy, The Tiller Girls, Julie Andrews, the Beverley Sisters, Tommy Steele, Ken Dodd and Shirley Bassey. By then, the theatre had a tired and drab air to it and dwindling audiences and the impact of television contributed to its final demise in 1959. The last variety show there was on 2 May and the Empire finally closed on 4 May, being demolished in July.

Committee 2020

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