

Sheffield's Portland Works

At our September meeting, Mark Pickering illustrated the history of Portland Works against a background of the development of cutlery manufacture in Sheffield – with a far longer history than that of iron and steel making. As early as the 14th century, Chaucer referred to a “Sheffield thwitel” (whittle/knife) in his *Reeves Tale*. By the 1600's 60% of Sheffield's men were employed in the cutlery business: its importance to the city then was reflected the formation of the Company of Cutlers in 1624.



Few people however realize the role Portland Works played in the creation of stainless steel in the 20th century. Robert Fead Mosely had originally manufactured cutlery at several sites in Sheffield after spending a five year apprenticeship with a Sheffield scissor-maker. One of these was close to Portland Lane on West Street, and when he constructed the substantial works on its current site in Randall Street in 1877 it became known as the Portland Works. This brought together many of the separate manufacturing skills required in cutlery manufacture and located them in adjacent workshops under a single management. There has been a continuous history of manufacturing on this site ever since.

In 1914, Mosely met and collaborated with Harry Brearley, who had begun to experiment with materials to obviate the problem of corrosion in rifle barrels but had faced initial reluctance to consider his innovation. Thus Mosely's company has been credited with becoming the first producer of stainless steel cutlery – marketed under the improbable brand name of “Rustnorstain”. Portland Works prospered until 1921 when R.F. Mosely died. He was followed by his sons over the next 10 years. The company declined steadily following the economic depression of the 1930s and the later imposition of import controls by Australia. The business soldiered on but finally ceased trading in 1968. The workshops within Portland Works however continued to be used by

various small businesses.

When in 2009 the then owner of the site proposed a redevelopment of the works as apartments, a campaign was started to buy and save the works and its small businesses. A share issue raised £300,000, and the site was saved. This was especially important for many of the tenants at that time, who would have found it difficult to move and continue their businesses elsewhere. A programme of renovation was started, with funds from the National Lottery and other sources. Today there are 47 businesses on the site, and the rent provides a financial surplus to feed into further renovation. That work receives substantial input from a team of committed volunteers organised by The Friends of Portland Works. It is progressing well and the site appears to have a very healthy future.

At our meeting, several people spoke with Mark and expressed an interest in volunteering or contributing in some way. He is very keen that anyone interested in helping out should contact him directly (Mark Pickering, 07831 1118066). For members interested in seeing what has been achieved “on the ground” at Portland Works, we will arrange a visit for Ranmoor Society members sometime in May.

James Eardley: Pharmaceutical Chemist



Our 2019 membership card shows the early Edwardian frontage of the Ranmoor chemist at 382 Fulwood Road. Our records confirm that this has been a chemist or pharmacy since 1879, the date inscribed above the door.

At the start of the 20th century the shop passed into the hands of James Eardley who, because he held a M.P.S qualification, was entitled to trade as a “chemist”. This may have befitted Ranmoor but it is worth noting that Leonard Middleton, who ran a similar outlet down the hill at the junction of Hangingwater and Oakbrook Roads, was unqualified in that way and so could merely

describe his business as a “*drug store*”.

The shop front carries the name of *James F. Eardley*, “*Pharmaceutical Chemist*” He became the proprietor around 1900 and continued to trade here until the 1940’s. Our research reveals that James Furnival Eardley, the son of a Shropshire farmer arrived in Sheffield in the 1880’s with an M.P.S. qualification gained in London. He gradually expanded his business with shops in Broomhill, where the family lived, and on Glossop Road and Upper Hanover Street. By the outbreak of the First World War he had branched out into mineral water production at his Ecclesall Mineral Works in Stalker Lees Road. Thereafter all the shops traded as Eardley & Furnival. James Eardley retired in the 1920’s, and the mineral water business continued under his son Harold and grandson James E. Eardley who renamed the business British Siphon Industries.

Some people still remember the Eardley soda siphon. In the mid-1960s customers had to pay the chemist a deposit of 4s 6d, compared with 7s 6d for the Schweppes equivalent. This was why, it was alleged that the Eardley siphon sold more successfully locally. If you ever find one, engraved with “*J F Eardley - Pharmaceutical Chemist - Ecclesall Mineral Works Sheffield*”, there are people on eBay who might be interested . . . apparently!

Sewage Gas Destructor Lamps in Sheffield

In Victorian England, gas build-up in underground sewers was often a problem for city dwellers. In the 1890s, Joseph Edmund Webb of Birmingham invented and patented a device called the “*sewer gas destructor lamp*”, to deal with the problem of putrid sewer gases which had the potential to cause explosions. These lamps looked and behaved like ordinary gas lamps and were once a common feature on streets around the United Kingdom as well as the rest of Europe.

Webb’s idea was to vent methane gas up and out of the sewer mains through the lamp post to the burner at the top where it would be consumed by the flames. His idea was that the heat generated by the 370°C flame would create an up-draught, pulling gases from the sewer through the lamp column. Initially, Webb found there was insufficient methane to power the lights on their own, so he modified his design to simultaneously use town gas whilst still connected to the sewers below. A single lamp was said to be capable of venting up to three quarters of a mile of sewer and remained lit all round the clock. The sewer gas lamp proved so effective that, between 1914 and 1945, they were installed all around the UK in towns and cities including London, Sheffield, Winchester and Durham.

Sheffield’s many hilly areas made it more prone to gas pockets, and so the city had the highest number (80) of sewer gas destructor lamps.



It was when Sheffield City Council began contemplating the replacement of all lampposts as part of the 25-year *Streets Ahead* road improvement programme that residents began to campaign to restore them. Of the 25 that still exist in Sheffield, about 20 are Grade II listed and are still functioning, after being converted to mains gas over 20 years ago.

All but four of the Sheffield examples have now been electrified as part of the current restoration programme. Those which have been vandalised or have lost parts over the last 100 years will get new lanterns and arms. They will be repainted and powered by solar power LED lights to replicate the original lighting. So at least 20 of J E Webb’s lamps will remain to remind us of this once-common example of street furniture.

They can be spotted in Crookes (Mulehouse Rd.), Nether Edge (Park Rd. and Brincliffe Edge Rd.), Meersbrook (Upper Albert Rd.), Walkley (Burnaby Cresc.), Sharrow (Stewart Rd.), Sheffield (Eldon St., off West St.)

Subscriptions for 2019

A note about your subscription is attached to this letter. We have avoided increasing the level for several years, but at our last AGM members agreed that family membership should be increased to cover the additional costs of our speakers and charges for our regular venue in the Parish Centre. The new rates are shown on the form.

Committee 2019

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