

# THE PARAGON

Journal of Stocksbridge & District History Society



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## SIR HENRY BESSEMER (1813 - 1898)

The *Sheffield Telegraph* of Friday 15<sup>th</sup> February featured a letter from Trevor Lodge, whom we remember well as Publicity Officer for United Steels Special Steels and later, *Corus*, in Stocksbridge Works. He reminds us that this year marks the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the successful commercial use of the Bessemer process for converting iron into steel – steel strong enough for the railway rails that made Sheffield the rail-making capital of the world.

There were five Bessemer steel plants in Sheffield, Penistone and Stocksbridge, and John Brown, Charles Cammell and Samuel Fox became household names locally. Trevor Lodge says that the rails they made were exported all over the globe, and Bessemer was eventually able to claim that his invention had “covered with a network of steel rails the surface of every country in Europe, and in America alone there are no less than 175,000 miles of Bessemer steel rails binding together its widely-scattered cities.”

Trevor is making a case for naming the new approach road to Sheffield Railway Station after this pioneer, who did so much to put Sheffield on the map, and surely many of us in the Stocksbridge and District History Society would endorse his view.

A second letter is featured in the *Telegraph*, from Derek Bayliss of the South Yorkshire Industrial History Society, who some members will remember talking to us about the history of some of our industrial buildings. He was actually replying to a reader’s query about Bower Spring Furnace, which he says was used to make the “blister steel” produced by cementation – the process used until Henry Bessemer introduced his converter to make bulk cheap steel about 150 years ago.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* claims that the “Bessemer process” method of mass-producing steel was actually invented by an American, William Kelly of Pittsburgh, ten years before the Englishman developed and patented his. One wonders why, in that case, was the city in Jefferson County, Alabama, and another in Michigan in the United States, named Bessemer and not Kelly City.

In 1922 Joseph Sheldon recorded in his *Founders and Builders of Stocksbridge Works* all the departments of the Works and the people he remembered working in them. He says the first Bessemer plant was started in 1862-3 and was sited

between the hammer shed and the old rail mill. It was only the second or third of its kind in the country.

Sheldon testifies that “Mr. Fox was most anxious to get the new venture going, and he would often hand up bricks for the brick setters in order to make greater progress. Mrs. Fox did not favour the plant; she said it would mean the ruin of all that had been accomplished.” She did not always share his vision.

The name Bessemer was given to one of the first rows of houses built for the workmen and their families in Stocksbridge

## ANSWERS TO THE CHRISTMAS QUIZ

...HIS INVENTION HAD  
“COVERED WITH A NETWORK  
OF STEEL RAILS THE SURFACE  
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EUROPE...”

1. The LORD OF MISRULE presided over Christmas festivities at Court in late Medieval and early Tudor times (see the front cover illustration in Issue 50).
2. Maureen Newton was recounting ALBERT COOKE’s recollections.
3. W.E.SPENCER submitted results of West Riding County Elections 1837-48.
4. It was STANLEY FIELDSSEND who told us about his childhood in Deepcar.
5. JACK AMBLER was the intrepid photographer.
6. Willis Burgin’s father was THOMAS KNOTT

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BURGIN, also son of a miner.

7. The Historian who preceded Jack Branston was HARRY EASTWOOD.
8. THICKETT'S shop sold toys at Christmas in 1902. (Betty hadn't known.)
9. My brother and I bought Mother a PRESSURE COOKER – she never used it.
10. EILEEN LINDLEY told us about Deepcar in her young days.
11. Kenworthy's *Jubilee of the Band of Hope Cooperative Society* was published in 1845.
12. Woodhead Tunnel opened in 1910, according to our Chairman Roy Mallinson.

The Winner: Betty McKay

## THE DIARY OF WILLIS BURGIN

### BELTON PARK CAMP – RATS, AUSTRALIANS AND THE REALITY OF WAR COMES CLOSER.

We had one big trouble in this camp, rats! Rat catchers had to be used. One Sergeant was given permission to bring his dog from home and this was good, picking them up in his mouth by the neck – one good shake and the rat had had it. It was a spare time job for the Sergeant – he got 2d per tail. The best hunting time was at dusk and near the cookhouse. The rat holes were at the bottom of the tin sheeted walls and as the rats headed for them with the dog in pursuit, the noise they made sounded like kettledrums being struck by drumsticks. In the winter months our sleep was disturbed by the rats running underneath our beds, which were only 10 inches from the hut floor. They nibbled our kitbags and the socks in our boots. I slept near the stove and many times I would see rats playing around the fire.

More and more soldiers were arriving in camp, amongst them a party of 200 Australian troopers. Thirty of them were put in Hut 9 and I was the NCO in charge. One of these Troopers was found to have German measles, so all 200 and I were confined to a camp higher up the Park for three weeks.

Then in June 1916 something terrible happened. How well I remember the day when the morning newspaper's front page in large, black headlines proclaimed

### LORD KITCHENER MISSING, BELIEVED DEAD!

Lord Kitchener had boarded the cruiser *Hampshire* on his

way to Russia on a military mission, when the ship hit a mine near Scapa Flow and all aboard were lost. This was a sickening blow and a shock for our camp and all the country.

News from the Western Front was also bad; German U-Boats were sinking many of our Merchant ships, and we were confined to barracks with German measles!

But the training of the 200 Australians went on just the same, and being the only P.T. Instructor in camp, I was kept very busy. I found the Australian soldiers more difficult to get on with than our own lads, the Tommies, although I had no trouble on the parade ground in getting orders obeyed, it was in the barrack room! For instance, if I wanted a window closing in the hut and gave the order to a British soldier, "Close that window, Private Smith!" it would be obeyed at once. When I tried this on an Australian Trooper he just looked at me and walked away, leaving me to shut it myself. Being confined to camp, I learned to give my orders differently – "Trooper Shaw, would you mind closing that window?" and Trooper Shaw would do what I wanted.

Those three weeks were a drag for all of us and we were all pleased when the last Saturday night came to sleep in that camp. Before retiring to my room at the end of the hut, I made my final check to see that all the beds were occupied. At 10.00 pm I switched off the lights in the hut and jumped into bed in my small room. At about 1.30 am I heard noises coming from the hut – soldiers talking and moving about. Pulling on my trousers and slippers I opened the door quietly and switched on the lights. Not a sound in the room – it was much too quiet, I thought. All the beds seemed to be occupied, but I looked more closely, examining each bed all up one side and then half way down the other. And there in a bed was a head that needed a haircut. The occupant was well covered by an army blanket, but proved to be the one causing all the disturbance – it was female!

I used some hard-hitting words to those Australian soldiers, giving them one minute to clear the Hut of this visitor. Failing this, I would put all 30 of them on a charge! When I returned, she had vanished. That Sunday morning all the Australians were worried about what action I would take after the incident, but I did nothing. After three weeks of confinement, it was a treat to have our freedom again.

## THE MEMOIRS OF LILIAN BIRKHEAD

My life at Cheetham Hill was not ideal for a student. The Vice-Principal, Miss Jackson, who had to watch over the few students who were in digs, finding that I had to do my own chores, etc., thought it advisable that I should have more suitable accommodation. On the recommendation of Rev. Bernard Smith (son of Oliver) and a minister in the area, I went to new lodgings in that district. They were very good, with a sitting room and a bedroom to myself, but far too expensive for our slender means.

Next I found a "bed-sitter" – cheaper but far from

ideal - and Miss Jackson also thought it unsatisfactory. She knew of a vacancy in the Y.W.C.A. hostel in Bury New Road, and thought I should try that. So once more I packed up my cases and went to Belmont, and there I stayed for the rest of my college life. There I met friendly girls, enjoyed the communal life and the prepared and ample meals, a great contrast to the solitary digs I had hitherto. The only drawback was that there was no study, just a small, unoccupied bedroom with a gas fire that needed pennies, which were scarce! And it did not function very well. So I did most of my studying in the bedroom, which I shared with two other girls - they did not come up till later in the evening. To keep warm, I would get between the grey blankets, wear a cardigan and sometimes, gloves. There was no central heating, which is taken for granted now in any public buildings.

The YWCA and YMCA were very good organisations, set up in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and from them branched many movements for the benefit of young people before the days of Youth Clubs.

This Spartan way of life didn't worry me. I had made friends, had good lodgings and good food. I had ample time to walk to College - half an hour - thereby saving bus fare, and looked forward to my day in class. Sometimes I also walked back, for the evening meal was not until seven. Then between arriving home and dinner, there was time to study in the library before the other girls arrived. Then the library became rather too noisy for study, despite its name.

My two roommates were good company; one was a teacher and the other worked in an office. We had very jolly times there, gossiping long after the appointed "lights out". We were responsible for cleaning our own bedrooms, and since I did not go to college on Saturday mornings, I used to sweep and dust our room - all workers used to work Saturday mornings in those days - and make it all spick and span for the weekend. I loved the view from our third-floor bedroom, overlooking Higher Broughton.

Each week, mostly on Sunday, I wrote home, and about Thursday came a letter from my mother, sometimes my father or brother. My mother (Clemey Bramall) was a very good letter-writer and made very few spelling mistakes - remarkable, as she left school at 10 or 11. She began school with her grandmother, who kept a Dame's school, and later went to the school at Thurgoland.

My two roommates didn't have much of a home life and thought I was very lucky to have these weekly letters, and occasionally a food parcel. The hostel charge was one guinea (£1. 1s. 0d) a week for dinner, bed and breakfast, with extra charges for Saturday lunch and Sunday tea. Sunday tea - a very light meal of brown bread and butter and one cake - was the only meal where I could have eaten more. These charges sound incredible in 1977, but small as they were, I never had much spare for extras. The smell of coffee coming up from the college tuck shop at morning break was most tempting, but I could seldom afford it. I always seemed to be short of money.

The 1921 Strike at Fox's meant that most of the workmen were out of work for six months and my father

and brother were both on the dole. I hated having to write home, asking for money. College grants were small, outings had to be taken sparingly. This I didn't mind apart from the entertainments. Good plays and musicals came to Manchester with well-known actors and actresses. How I wished I could afford to go and see them! No wonder we older people think twice about spending, especially on luxuries! We have had to grow up the hard way.

But I enjoyed all the more any pleasures that came along. Once I was given a ticket for the Free Trade Hall by the Halle Orchestra. What a treat! Arthur Turner from Glossop was First Violin for many years.

I was attending another Methodist Church now - Salem - more friendly, no embarrassment about named pews. I went morning and evening, unless I was late back from visiting my cousin in Pendleton, and my regular church-going habits were known to the other girls, who sometimes asked to go with me. My father used to count up the number of Sundays I would be away each term and save up 3d bits, two for each Sunday, so that I would always have collection money - 6d per week - and then there was the one guinea per week for the hostel. After my father's death I found all my weekly letters had been saved and kept in order of date - that is how I have been able to recall my college days in such detail.

## SOCIETY NEWS

**W**e were shocked to read of the death of one of our members, Josephine Rhodes, not having realised that she was ill. We know that she was looking forward to a future visit to Sheffield Manor and learning more about Mary, Queen of Scots. She will be missed and our heartfelt sympathy goes to her husband Graham.

Our good wishes also to Wendy Goodhind, who is recuperating from an operation.

We are pleased to be able to announce another successful application for a grant from The Bridge charity shop, which will enable us to have a number of our own Kenworthy books bound, so that we would be confident of their being handled by the Library. The opening of The Bridge will be recorded in the *Concise History of Stocksbridge*.

Last year's grant paid for improvements to the main Society computer and the previous year's supplied us with the laptop computer that is equally invaluable. For instance, every word of Alf Bonner's book *The Little Don Valley and Beyond* was transcribed on it. Copies of this can still be obtained from Stocksbridge Library and several small retailers. It is very reasonably priced at £9.99 and although the income from this book goes to the author to repay his outlay, with little profit, and not to the Society, we thought it was worth

STOCKSBRIDGE & DISTRICT  
HISTORY SOCIETY

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MEETINGS ARE NORMALLY HELD ON THE SECOND  
THURSDAY OF EACH MONTH, AT THE UNITED RE-  
FORMED CHURCH, MANCHESTER ROAD, STOCKSBRIDGE  
AT 7.00 PM.

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MEETINGS

❖ PROGRAMME 2008 ❖

MARCH 13<sup>TH</sup>

THE HISTORY OF SHEFFIELD WATER

MR. D. LYON

APRIL 10<sup>TH</sup>

THE SOVEREIGN ISLE OF MAN

MRS. K. MACKAY

(FROM THE CELTIC BRITAIN SERIES)

MAY 8<sup>TH</sup>

HERALDRY

MR. ROTHWELL

JUNE 12<sup>TH</sup>

A GRAND DAY OUT

JULY 10<sup>TH</sup>

S. YORKSHIRE ABBEYS AND CASTLES

MR. P. MCLAUGHLIN

AUGUST SUMMER RECESS

SEPTEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup>

MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS IN CAPTIVITY

MR. D. TEMPLEMAN

OCTOBER 9<sup>TH</sup>

BEHIND THE BROWN PAPER

MRS. G. BOOTH

NOVEMBER 13<sup>TH</sup>

150 YEARS OF WEDDING DRESSES

MR. YOUNG

Saturday December 13<sup>th</sup> CAROL SUPPER

doing for the value of the Local History aspect involved.

The laptop also produces this Newsletter, which is sent by E-mail to chief editor Mike Spick for printing. Many of our more recent members may not realise that it was largely due to his efforts that the Stocksbridge & District History Society rose from the ashes of the Joseph Kenworthy Fellowship in November 1989. He was then Community Librarian at Stocksbridge Library and now holds a senior post at Sheffield Central, only continuing to do us this service as a favour. We certainly should acknowledge his continuing contribution.

