



# The Bugle



## Royton Local History Society's Newsletter

On 29th October 2014, during a Service of Dedication, the commemorative flagstone for Sgt John Hogan VC was unveiled at the war memorial in Royton Park by the Mayor of Oldham Cllr Fida Hussein and Mayoress Tanvir Hussein.

The ceremony was introduced by Cllr Tony Larkin who read Sgt Hogan's VC Citation. Father Peter McEvitt of St Paul's Church, Royton guided us through the rest of the service with Major Mark Lydiate reading The Collect of the Manchester Regiment. The ceremony was enhanced by the presence of members of the Hogan family, The Royal British Legion, 1855 Squadron (Royton) Air Training Corps, Training Ship Onslow Cadets, Royton Councillors, Royton Town Hall Officers, Greater Manchester Police and the Deputy Lieutenant of Greater Manchester, Norman Stoller. Several members from Royton Local History Society were also present amongst a large crowd of onlookers.

A few days later, at the Service of Remembrance on Sunday 9th November, RLHS Vice Chairman Doug Ashmore laid a wreath at the War Memorial on behalf of our Society. Because this is a special year it had been decided by members who attended our AGM that we should do this.

Finally, just one last thing before you all get caught up in the Christmas festivities, I would like to remind you that for economic reasons there will be no RLHS meetings during January and February 2015. Our next meeting will be on Monday 9th March 2015 at 7.30pm when Gordon Speakman will be describing the history of the River Mersey, from it's source to the sea.

I look forward to seeing you all on the 9th March 2015 but between now and then I hope you all have a good Christmas followed by a happy and healthy New Year.

**Geoff Oliver, Chairman**



### A Christmas Tree and a Robin - Christmas 1864

In December 1864 the people of Royton were heading into the last months of the American Civil War and Cotton Famine. The mills of the district had been working longer hours and bountiful Christmas festivities were anticipated. Yet over 120 families a week were still receiving poor relief, clog tickets and baskets of coal. Twenty-four of the poorest inhabitants of Royton received blankets from the Lord of the Manor, Sir Joseph Radcliffe, and on 21 December Richard Hill, Vicar of St Paul's, doled out Royton's share of Tetlow's Poorfields Charity, 'it being St Thomas's Day'. (a traditional day for Christmas charity). This included flannel, twenty shirts and forty petticoats.

Private donations weren't lacking either. Mrs Robert Whittaker of Lower House, Flake Lane, gave new altar cloth and cushions, rugs and hassocks to St Paul's church. Other ladies of the congregation donated new linen, linen, hassocks and rugs for the communion, carpets for the reading desk and pulpit for use the first time on Christmas Day. Henry Whittaker provided the meal at the annual Royton Fire Brigade dinner at the engine house in Cotton Street 'till a late hour'.

The Wesleyan Church too dug into their pockets to give their retiring school teacher J W Mills a fine send-off attended by 400 pupils and staff. Not only did Mr Mills receive a writing desk but bound volumes of Wesley's hymns. The school master and children were reduced to tears. The Baptist Sunday School also had a fine Christmas party for 200 people with singing and recitations, as did the Wesleyan Sunday School, the Village School and pubs and other institutions.

Members of The Literary Institution held a ball on Christmas Eve for 'wives and sweethearts' and turned out to sing 'the usual Christmas Hymns at midnight. Tea parties were held by the Congregational School at the Temperance Seminary (now Casa Belmondo), likewise the Baptist Sunday School at the bottom of Dogford Road and the Primitive Methodists. The Village Sunday School party starred Thomas Dunkerly singing glees after the 'recitations of a religious and moral character'. Mr Dunkerley's repertoire included Hail Smiling Morn, Rosabello and the Hallelujah Chorus. St Paul's Sunday School teachers' and monitors' party on Christmas Eve ended with the Scholars repairing 'according to custom' to the parsonage to sing 'The Christmas Hymn' (Christians Awake).

But none of these schools could match St Paul's day and Sunday school party in the New Year which boasted a new-fangled Christmas Tree - 'one of the greatest affairs to have happened in Royton'. The tree had been festooned with 844 gifts of books, baskets, dolls, neckties and mufflers for the children. Christmas trees were rare in those days, most homes made do with holly branches and mistletoe bunched into a 'kissing bush'. To complete the Dickensian picture there was a snowfall in the New Year with thunder and lightening and in Oldham the lake in the newly constructed Alexandra Park froze over, allowing people to skate on it.

Two residents of Bank (Bunk) in Royton made the news - John Booth found new life in the shape of a Robin's nest and four eggs in the stone wall of his garden, protected by strawberry leaves and stalks growing in the wall. Thomas Kay lost his life in the Unicorn public house on High Street after attending a Christmas party and Goose dinner and declaring he wanted to die. On paying a shilling for a pint of beer he declared he would stay until he had spent the remaining tenpence and then die. Too drunk to go home after several half-noggins of rum he was found dead in his taproom chair the next morning. It was said he had long held a death wish and suffered from fits.

The New Year was truly seen in at the Railway Inn when Royton Agricultural Society held a grand dinner and singing session, led by Vicar Hill and several Local Board members and magistrates. The main singer was Joe Mellor with John Taylor at piano. Yes, a good time was had by all.

Sources: Oldham Chronicle/Oldham Standard 17,24, 31 Dec 1864. 7 Jan. 1865.

Michael Higgins



## *Interesting Roytonians* **John Whittaker 1834 -1898**

John Whittaker was a master bricksetter, in business with Thomas Whittaker in the second half of the 19th century (see Bugle Dec 2012 for a mention of them). The latter is famous for rescuing the Percival-Gregge family coat of arms from Royton Hall Park wall in the 1860s and re-setting the stone tablet in the gable end of the house still standing at the corner of Shepherd Street and Middleton Road. The coat of arms lay there for some 120 years until stolen by a monument collector in 1989. I have more than a historian's interest in the Whittakers because I spotted the tablet missing the day after it was taken and instigated the first official search to regain it for Royton. In this I was aided by Mr Broadbent, proprietor of Geometric Furniture at the Shepherd Street Mill, and Councillor Eric Critchley, who got the police involved. I also tried to contact the alleged thief but that is another story. The tablet is still missing, though it was recently offered for sale on ebay and has since disappeared again.

John and Thomas Whittaker may have been related to the mill owning Whittaker family (Hall Street and Turf Lane Mills). Thomas and John went into the equally profitable business of house construction at a time when mills and speculative cottage erections for the workers were in great demand. Thomas, when living at Dryclough House, also acted as agent for the absentee lord of the manor, Sir Joseph Radcliffe. In the 1860s, along with unemployed mill workers, they helped to clear part of the old park walls to extend Middleton Road to what is now Rochdale/Oldham Road. Parts of the walls allegedly remained behind the houses in High Street and Sandy Lane until last century. The coat of arms depicting a hobbled horse, probably stood originally by the gate leading into the old Hall Fold or farmyard at the junction of High Street. It was Thomas's idea to preserve it for Royton by bricking it into the newly built cottage situated in the old vegetable garden and orchard of the Hall. The alleged thief of 1989 replaced the space with period bricks. Today this space is hidden by advertising.

Alas not much has been recorded of the Whittakers, save snippets of their building activities, and their role in the expansion of the town after the cotton famine is sparsely recorded. Apart from trade directories and census returns there is precious little to go on. Thomas seems to have died in 1879.

So, when I came across John Whittaker's name in a report of his death in 1898 my mind raced back to that day in 1989 when I noticed the coat of arms missing. The facts of his death sadly tell us little of his life save that he had retired at the age of 62, two years previous, and was living with his sister Elizabeth at Millfields (Royley Clough). The address is bizarrely given as Thornham, Streetbridge. Sadly he had recently taken to drinking heavily and had been warned by his doctor to stop drinking. He had gone out with a visitor named John Starkey the night before after hardly eating his supper at 9:00pm, probably to the Bridge Inn, Streetbridge. He had struggled to get out of the bed the next morning and despite Elizabeth's exertions John collapsed on the floor, and she ran to neighbours John and Lewis Baron at 5 Royley Cottages who fetched Dr Hall. The Inquest was held at the Bridge Inn. John had been warned that drink would snuff his life out if he did not stop.

In light of the above it is a pity that the coat of arms the Whittakers saved is not still in the gable end of the house on Shepherd Street. It would be a timely memorial to the family who helped Royton to expand and house its mill workers after the great trade depression caused by the American Civil War. And it would be a timely memento of Royton Hall and our members who helped in the archaeological digs on site a few years ago.

Main source Oldham Chronicle Feb 26, 1898

Michael Higgins



*The Chairman and committee of Royton Local History Society would like to wish everyone*

**A VERY MERRY CHRISTMAS AND A HAPPY, HEALTHY AND PROSPEROUS NEW YEAR.**



Visit the R.L.H.S. websites at [www.roytonlocalhistorysociety.co.uk](http://www.roytonlocalhistorysociety.co.uk) or [www.rlhs.co.uk](http://www.rlhs.co.uk)  
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