



The Bugle



Royton Local History Society's Newsletter

This is our last meeting before we break for the summer and I hope you have enjoyed the variety of speakers who have visited us during the past ten months. I think you will agree that you get excellent value for your £10 membership fee and we will continue to bring you many more interesting speakers next year. Unfortunately speakers fees have increased over the years and we need to cover these and other rising costs. The committee does not wish to discourage the loyal members of RLHS by increasing the membership fee so has decided instead to increase the visitors donation to £1:50p per night, starting at the September 2009 meeting. The membership fee will stay the same - £10 for 10 meetings and is due at, or before, the September meeting.

I hope you enjoy the summer and I will see you all after the break on September 14th when the first talk will be about Byron Street School, which is due to close this summer after serving the children of Royton for over 100 years.

Geoff Oliver, Chairman

Our Website

Recently there has been a lot of activity on the Royton Local History Society's Web Site. On average the site is visited by 120 Internet surfers every month. Some of the visitors are from as far afield as Australia and Canada. Many of these are ex Royton residents or people tracing their family history. Most of the enquiries coming via the site are to Phil Ellis our family history guru, but some more recently have been of real historical interest. Some of these queries I have asked for help from Michael Higgins and Frances Stott to provide answers to because they requested information about 'The Grimbies', the 'Royton Plate' and Royton Mill workers being sent to Russia to set up similar Mills there. One gleeful surfer praised our site most warmly because when tracing the background of her great grandfather, Zachry Brierley, she found a photograph of his Royton shop on our site.

Our Society's original web site was designed and built in 2005 by children at Royton and Crompton School as part of fulfilling the conditions of the National Lottery bid for monies to fund the Royton Hall Excavations. The web pages created therefore were heavily based upon this project and did not extend much beyond it. This is understandable as the children could only produce a site based upon the information they were supplied with. Also, as there was no money available, the pages were uploaded onto the Internet through a "Free Webs" hosting company and as a consequence it was not easily accessible for viewing and the search engines at the time could not find it and therefore it was more or less impossible for a wider audience to see it.

When the 2008 excavation of Royton Hall was completed, I was asked if anything could be done to update the site. After some investigation I was finally given the access codes and passwords from the school so that I could fully examine what still existed and as a result of this I determined that the simplest and quickest thing to do was to create a whole new site rather than repair and refurbish the original. However the information on the original site was quite valid so I transferred it from the site to my computer to save it having to be rewritten, and this is the 'History of Royton Hall' page on the new site and I based the new site around this page which had been originally written by Frances Stott.

Creating a basic web site is not as complicated as you might think. There are many software packages available which work like a 'Word Processor' where you literally type in the words, add the pictures and the software does all the conversion to HTML, the language that the Internet understands. So an attractive site with bold colours and lots of pretty pictures can soon be built up. Our "Home" page or opening page which is the first page anyone sees when logging on to our site is simple and minimalist with a series of 'links' which take the viewer to other pages of information which are then packed with text and photographs. There is even a summary video of the Royton Hall Excavations on there which can be played live 'on line' or downloaded for later viewing. The past 2 years of editions of The Bugle can also be found there, along with Doug Ashmore's series of "Famous Roytonians". A potted history of Royton written by Michael Higgins and a brief description of the Royton Hall digs by Frances Stott is also available. A Family History page is also included. The "Royton History Walks" brochures are available for download to save you a trip to the Library to collect them.

Altogether there are now approximately 16 different topics relating to Royton's history that can be found on the site. The vast majority of the content has been written by our members and all I have done is present the information in what I hope is an attractive fashion.

When I had a built a reasonable site I uploaded it to the Internet using the space available to me from my Internet Service Provider (ISP). Then I applied for a Domain Name so that the search engines would easily find it when anyone typed "Royton" into it. I found that my first choice of www.roytonlocalhistorysociety.co.uk was unavailable to me but www.rlhs.co.uk was up for grabs so I bought it.

When I was happy that the whole site was working properly and there were no glaring mistakes I directed the Domain Name to my ISP and lo and behold our Society was available for people to see around the world. To avoid confusion I then closed down the original site created by the school children and deleted any remaining files. Amazingly as soon as I did this my original choice of Domain Name suddenly popped up as being available. There must still have been some linkage even though the licence had long since expired. So I jumped in and bought that as well hence the reason why we have two Domain Names but both point to the same site.

So if you have access to the Internet have a look at our site and if you would like to contribute something towards it's content then please let me have it. I will also welcome any suggestions or ideas you may have to enhance and improve it.

Geoff Oliver, Chairman

Visit the R.L.H.S. websites at www.roytonlocalhistorysociety.co.uk or www.rlhs.co.uk

Royton Lives Through The Ages - Project 2

Most of you are probably aware that we are hoping to make a 'footprint' of Royton Hall showing it's size and position, as a permanent reminder for Royton residents and for future generations. As stated in the last edition of The Bugle this is going to cost a substantial amount of money but we have received the good news recently that Royton Area Committee are giving us a grant of £5,750 towards this project. Everyone connected with RLTA 2 is elated by this generous offer and, although it will not cover the full cost, it will go a long way towards helping us achieve our aim. It is expected that the work will start sometime this summer but the project will not be completed until 2010.

Jess Wild, Secretary RLHS and RLTA 2

Famous Roytonians

The 'Famous Roytonians' feature continues with this piece written by Michael Higgins about:-

James Taylor 'The Royton Poet' 1794-1863

James Taylor was born in an old house situated in what is now Middleton Road, near to the corner of High Street. His parents were handloom weavers and he learnt to weave at home. When the handloom weaving trade declined he worked in a steam powered cotton mill until he was nearly 60 years of age. He then opened a shop selling his own manufactured shoe blacking at his house at Peter Row, just off Middleton Road behind the present Church Inn.

His parents did not send him to school so he did not learn to read until after he was 24 years old. Taylor once admitted that his parents 'indulged' him too much, allowing him to idle away his childhood instead of sending him to school. It was also said at the time that his parents 'neglected' his education, but friends later disclosed that his mother did not want him to learn to read or write lest he turn out like his 'atheistic' uncle Thomas, a political writer and versifier, and leading light of the Royton Jacobins. Ironically, when he later learnt to read he became a radical and stopped going to church. The Taylors were a notorious radical family and well known as political agitators.

Embarrassed by his poor grammar and the mistakes in speech he made to his political friends, particularly to his cousin Dr William Fitton the parliamentary reformer, he attended small 'dame schools' in the evening, learning to write and read in the company of young children. He used the Bible and books belonging to an illegal radical reading room in Cotton Street to practice his letters and also borrowed books of poetry, particularly works of Lord Byron and Oliver Goldsmith. He also attended the Village School on Chapel Lane in the evenings. By the late 1820s he was writing poetry and contributed to various magazines under the title 'poor poet'. In the meantime he had almost become what his mother feared - a political radical and atheist - until he was taken under the wing of the Rev Dawson, Vicar of St Paul's, a man Taylor never forgot, and rediscovered his faith.

His most noted work was the poem 'On My Native Village' which gives a brief description of Royton during the economic depression of the 1820s when many people in Royton were receiving help from the parish poor relief fund. Taylor himself was out of work during this period and for a while worked as a labourer constructing roads. He contrasts the Royton of his day, with it's smoky mill chimneys and polluted streams, with the rural days of his own childhood and the older past when the Byrons, and later the Pickfords, owned Royton Hall, and hunting, fishing, farming, and handloom weaving were part of everyday life. He praises the Vicar of Royton, the Reverend Dawson, who also ran a school at the vicarage and was instrumental in distributing help to the poor. He also laments the loss of many friends, some of whom were killed in the Napoleonic Wars, and some who did not survive hard times and lie buried in the churchyard.

When stating his occupation for the 1861 Census he declared himself a 'poet', which the enumerator duly wrote after his name and details. Later someone has crossed out the word 'poet' and replaced it with 'manufacturer of shoe blacking'. After his death in 1863 a public subscription was raised to publish a collection of his poems and provide for his widow. All the main families of Royton subscribed and his work became widespread round the area. The work includes, among many pieces, a poem on the old summer house of Royton Hall, an elegiac poem on Royton Churchyard, and epitaphs of worthy Roytonians of the day. This book is available in the local history collection of Royton Library.

Michael Higgins

Sources James Taylor, Collected Poems, 1861 Census, Oldham Chronicle Oct 24, 1863. Alpha, Notes on Old Royton.

Royton Hall and the Cotton Famine

The year was 1863 and the railway line from Oldham was still not finished, the work at Shaw Road being jeopardised by bridge and road collapses at Higginshaw. Despite all this the railway constructors carried on in hope, attempting to reach the site of the new railway station being built in the old tree nursery of Royton Hall, adjacent to the Park Inn (now the Railway). New cotton warehouses were planned but, as the American Civil War still raged and supplies were short, Royton mills could only work when supplies of American cotton got through and often were idle for days on end.

In June 1863 John Travis belatedly realised that he was liable for rates owing on land lost to the railway. Sir Joseph Radcliffe, Lord of the Manor, owned the land sold to the railway but Travis, as a tenant, was liable for the payment of any rates. He refused to pay the full rate and deducted what he thought he did not need to pay. Summoned by the magistrates he was forced in the end to pay for the original amount as he had not appealed when the rate was first set down.

Thomas Whittaker of Dryclough House (now Dryclough Manor) also lost land to the railway. He acted as estate agent for Sir Joseph distributing gifts of clothing and other items, which had been donated by the Radcliffe family, to the cotton famine unemployed. Mr Whittaker was also a builder and was heavily involved in laying streets and buildings sited throughout the old Park behind the Hall. He built those in Pickford Street (now the top end of Middleton Road) and the houses at the corner of Shepherd Street, resiting the old coat of arms from the Park wall in one of them. Building work was going on all around the Hall, with the new Hall Street Mill being built on the site of the old Top of Fold Mill and its reservoirs sited across the brook from the Hall (now the site of the bungalows on Brookfield Street).

Thomas, along with John Whittaker, were summoned by the magistrates for 'creating a nuisance' in Pickford Street in August 1863. A 'sandhill', which they had created, amounting to 'four or five cartloads', had been washed by rain on to Pickford Street forcing pedestrians, horses and carts to avoid it. There had been a wall round the place but it had lately been taken down. The defendants argued that it was the Highway Surveyors who were responsible as the road had been 'given to Royton' by Sir Joseph. They also claimed that a spout, used to drain the sandhill, had now disappeared. "Where had it gone?" asked the magistrates. The defendants suggested that the Highway Committee had "eaten and drunk it". Sensibly the magistrates offered a compromise whereby the defendants agreed to remove the sand from part of the road along its full length. Also during this period, the hill called Sun Low on which the old summerhouse stood (approximately in the area of old Market Street, now the precinct) was levelled and quarried away for building sand.

The Relief Committee, chaired by Reverend Hill, obtained use of the Wesleyan Day School as a recreational and reading room for the unemployed and most of the mill owners helped out with private donations of food. However things did not always go to plan, with the unemployed almost burning down the day school (sited under the Wesleyan Church) through careless smoking. Fortunately the blaze was caught early and there was only superficial damage. Then a 'domestic' named Mary Barratt stole clothing belonging to the committee and was sent to prison. On her release she claimed she had worked as a wash lady for the vicar, being paid partly in clothing and money. She summonsed him for non-payment in October 1863, a case the magistrates felt obliged to refer to the County Court where fraudulent claims were exposed, including navvies being employed on the railway. But all this was nothing compared to the bad start to the year, that had begun just before Christmas 1862, with Sir Joseph offering 'another £50 donation' to the Relief Committee. This ought to have been good news but was soon dashed by the bombshell, which one inhabitant of Royton writing under the name 'Argus', dropped shortly afterwards.

Writing to the Oldham Standard, under the heading 'Helping Themselves at Royton', he claimed that the Relief Committee had been paying the unemployed a pittance to 'remove earth, form a new street, prepare building land and other improvements' (maybe for the above mentioned Thomas Whittaker?). In other words, Sir Joseph was getting cheap labour in return for his 'donation'. Argus painted a pitiable picture of gaunt under-nourished men being forced to do work which was beyond their stamina. He accused the committee of being a 'liberal assembly' throwing a political hue on the situation. (Most of the committee were indeed Liberals). He also implied that the chairman was 'arrogant' and claimed that 'it is with great reluctance that the men go to work, for they also suspect it is without the cognizance of Sir Joseph that they are thus set to labour.' He claimed that as a result the men now had 'a different opinion of Sir Joseph to believe he would give a donation with such selfish views.' Argus ended by describing the men as ' half animated beings digging their own graves'.

This letter stung Sir Joseph, who replied that he had "nothing whatever to do with employing labourers who received assistance out of the relief fund on his estate". It had been done entirely without his knowledge and 'the Relief Committee alone were responsible for the employment of the labourers'. This put the ball firmly back in Rev Hill's court and forced the Relief Committee to look again at the wages they were paying the unemployed and where they put them to work. However, their work was cut out for them. By October 1863 only 1,335 persons were in full time work in Royton, 147 were working 4 or 5 days per week, 155 for 3 days per week and 1,008 were totally without work. In other words, half the working population were without full time work.

However, Royton was on the turn of events. The old local government set-up, with the vicar of Royton Reverend Richard Hill chairing the meeting of ratepayers and the lighting inspection committee, was coming to an end as was the Highway Surveyors, often under the chairmanship of Thomas Seville. These bodies met for the last time in November 1863 when the township applied to enforce the Local Government Act and was allowed to elect a local Board of Health to govern the town. Royton's relationship with the absent Lord of the Manor, Sir Joseph, 2nd baronet, Radcliffe, now living in Yorkshire, was destined to become more distant once the new body took over.

Again, these are only snippets of life surrounding Royton Hall taken from incidental newspaper reports, but what an insight they give us of Royton during the Cotton Famine.

Michael Higgins

Sources: Oldham Chronicle Jan 3, 1863, October 10, 17 & 24, 1863, Nov 7, 1863. Oldham Standard Dec 27, 1862, Jan 3 & 24 1863. Alpha, Notes on old Royton.

