

MEMBERS MEETING 1st JULY 2008

“Snapshots of 1895 Dronfield”

Talk by Ann Brown illustrated with slides

Ann explained that she had been the Chairman of the Old Dronfield Society for over 40 years – hence her interest in Dronfield. She began her talk by stressing the value of directories as a source of information to family historians when used in conjunction with the census returns. The directories were produced by firms like Glover’s or White’s for the earlier part of the 19c or Kelly’s for the latter part of the 19c and 20c. These directories have been superseded by the Yellow Pages or Thompson’s telephone directories but these do not give information about the political, social, educational and religious structures that directories did.

The directories were produced on the basis of counties or large cities and their environs like Sheffield. They were regularly updated and bought by businesses as reference books in their dealings with each other. County libraries have a good selection of them and in 1895 Bulmer’s Directory for Derbyshire (N.E.Section) was reprinted. In its introduction, Dronfield is described as an extensive parish comprising the township of Dronfield, Coal Aston and Unstone in the Hundred of Scarsdale with a population of 4166 from the census of 1891.

Two maps of Dronfield illustrate where it is. An 18c map shows it as 6 miles from Chesterfield and Sheffield. A later map shows its position in the valley before the coming of the railway. The opening of the Midland railway in 1870 was a vital stage in the transition of the town from a mixed farming and small industrial community to a more substantial town.

The monument in the High Street was put up by the townspeople in 1894 to commemorate the life and work of Sir Robert Peel whose government repealed the hated Corn Laws in 1846.

The Manor House, a Queen Anne building, was constructed at the turn of the 17c. It was built for the Burton family and occupied by the recently deceased Rotherham Cecil Esq. The 1895 directory shows his widow, Henrietta Jarvis Cecil, residing at the Manor House. The building is now the library. Two old photos of staff at the Manor House show the gardener, housekeeper and maids etc.

A view down the High Street shows the main route through the town. This became a turnpike in 1797. A farmer travelling to Sheffield would have paid 4d for his horse and cart at the toll bar situated near the Coach and Horses Inn. Stage-coaches travelled along the turnpike and there were various coaching inns like the Greyhound and Swan. Some public houses from the 16c, the Green Dragon and the Blue Stoops, survive to this day.

The Hall is a building across the street from the Blue Stoops. It was built about the same time as the library and is similar in style. The doorways are in the centre of the frontage and their windows have mullions and transoms.

After 1870 when the railway opened through the Drone Valley a great many people came to work in Dronfield. New houses were built for them and some old buildings were pulled down to make way for buildings intended for community use. Part of the range was the Town Hall whose name is over the door. It served as a meeting place for the Mechanics Institute, town meetings and dances. It is not known why these were called Taylor's Buildings but it could be that Thomas Taylor's blacksmith's shop once stood there.

Round the corner from Taylor's Buildings is Church Street. Here "Red House" and the old vicarage, now the parish-church office, were the first houses in the town to be built in brick and date from the 1730's. Red House was erected in 1731 for the usher or second master of the grammar school. An inscription over the door in Latin translates as "for the perpetual use of the Assistant Master of the Grammar School of Henry Fanshawe, Esq., the inhabitants of Dronfield built this house by voluntary subscription in the year of our Lord 1731". The former Tudor grammar school opened in 1579, and now no.18 Church Street, is next door to Red House.

The Green Dragon was not built as a public house. The canons of Beauchief built it and it was probably where the priests of the church lived in the Middle Ages. It became an inn in the middle of the 16c.

A picture of the church shows that it can be seen over the tops of the houses. It is the church of St. John the Baptist. There was a church here in 1135 and it has been altered and increased in size many times. It is described in Bulmer's as having the tomb of the 15c knight Sir Richard Barley who lived in Dronfield Woodhouse Hall.

The railway brought prosperity to Dronfield and an increase in population particularly when Wilson Cammell came in 1873 to Callywhite Lane. Sadly this did not last and Bulmer's directory commented that Dronfield lost much of its prosperity with the removal of the gigantic steel and rail making business to Workington in 1883. However, Messers Edward Lucas and Son, manufacturers of cast steel spindles and flyers for the textile industry and malleable iron castings, gave employment to a considerable number of hands. Other employment was provided by Dronfield forge and shovel works (which also belonged to Lucas) and Locock and Co's sickle and pruning works. The Lucas Arch is all that remains of the iron foundry owned by Edward Lucas and Son. The plaque on the upright gives some information on the firm's history.

The Fire Brigade, under its captain Samuel Lucas, had a horse drawn fire engine. This was housed at the bottom of Snape Hill. The alarm would summon the volunteers and they could fill the water tank at the town pump at the Monument on the High Street.

Chesterfield Road was the main shopping centre after the railway came. To the left of the shops is a fine stone house called "Chiverton" and to the right is a house named "Rosehill". Both were the homes of lead merchants during the 17 and 18 centuries.

"Princess Buildings" was the Meadow-Hall of its day. The building was named after Princess Alexandra the wife of Edward VII. She was very popular in Dronfield after her visit there and the shopping area and a road were named after her. The buildings housed a printer, stationers, iron- mongers, furniture dealers, dressmakers and a milliner.

The Grammar School was given a paragraph of its own in the directories. These mention its ancient foundation by Henry Fanshawe in 1579. By 1895 it is in handsome new premises, built in 1867, in the Elizabethan style.

Because of the expansion of the town its residential commercial and industrial development required improved communications. There was a Post Office, money order, telegraph, savings bank and insurance and annuity office in Mill Lane run by Mrs. Harriet Penistone.

Farming in 1895 was still an important part of the economy with 42 farmers listed in the directory. This position lasted until the Second World War but there are hardly any left now.

So Dronfield in 1895 was largely a self- sufficient urban community providing for most of their needs. It seems to be recovering from the trauma of the removal of a large slice of its population when Wilson Cammell's left for Workington 12 years earlier. Apart from the occasional excursion to Chesterfield, Sheffield or the Peak district most Dronfeldians lived within the frame outlined so meticulously by Bulmer's Directory.

A vote of thanks was given by Vera Rose.

