



## DISCOVER ECCLESFIELD'S WORKING PAST

Until relatively recently, the village of Ecclesfield, now part of Sheffield's northern suburbs, relied on the exploitation of the physical resources within its parish boundaries: the land, the woods, the stone, the coal, the iron and the power generated from its small streams and brooks. These gave rise at an early date not only to farming, quarrying and woodland crafts but also to a tradition of light metal trades, and later to foundry work, engineering and coke and chemicals production.

This, the first of two leaflets, together with an accompanying information board, is designed to describe and explain the working past of the old village core.

For bus times to Ecclesfield contact South Yorkshire PTE Traveline 01709 515151 or find timetables online at [www.travelsouthyorkshire.com](http://www.travelsouthyorkshire.com)

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## FILE CUTTING

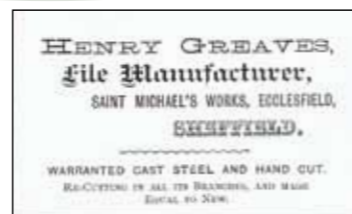
By the beginning of the nineteenth century nailmaking in Ecclesfield was in sharp decline. This was because American and French machine-made wire nails were now on the market. The makers of hand-made nails could not compete. Nailmaking smithies were then converted into file workshops and domestic file cutting grew rapidly. In 1834 a local directory listed five filemakers in Ecclesfield; the 1851 census listed 158 file cutters in the village core (32 % of the male labour force); and by 1871 the number had risen to 221 (nearly 40 % of the male labour force). By 1901 the number of file cutters had dropped to 121 (20 % of the working population), of whom 17 were named as machine file cutters.



In his workshop, the hand file cutter sat on a stool and worked on his files on an anvil on a stock. The blank file rested on a block of lead and was held in place by leather straps that were held tight by putting a foot through the leather loop. Teeth were cut into a blank file with a chisel and the distinctively curved-handled file cutter's hammer. The lead block was regularly handled, the thumb and index finger of the left hand were constantly licked to grip the chisel and so lead was ingested. The file cutters' disease was lead poisoning.



As with nailmaking, at first middlemen supplied the blank files to the craftsmen and marketed the finished products. Later, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the hand craftsmen became outworkers for factories that produced both hand-cut and machine-made files. And in an increasing number of cases, the hand craftsmen themselves were organised in small works like, for example, that of Henry Greaves of St Michael's Works, pictured above with his workforce.



In 1879 another local firm, that of David Parker, then at Wallet End, successfully bid to make some of the hand-made replacements for several thousand machine-made files returned from Russia because they were considered inferior to hand-cut ones.

In 1938 one of the last hand file cutters, John Birkhead, then aged 75, sold his tools to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Like nailmaking before it, hand file cutting had finally succumbed to the inevitable march of mechanisation.



## GIMLETS, AUGERS AND BRACE BITS

What is peculiar about these trades is they were monopolised largely by one family. For example, in the 1881 census Bernard Ridge, aged 29 of Wallet End, was recorded as a gimlet maker. Next door lived Thomas Ridge, aged 49, brace bit maker. Eleven doors away lived John Ridge, aged 61, and he and his son Morris were both gimlet makers. And finally, two doors further away lived Alfred Ridge, licensed victualler at the *Ball Inn*, aged 65, whose sons Henry, George and Tom were all gimlet makers.

The family trade went on into the twentieth century. Bernard Ridge's youngest son, born in 1879, was John Thomas Ridge pictured opposite in later life – making a gimlet. When he first started making gimlets he said he got 'tuppence a gross'. He finally retired in his nineties, the last of Ecclesfield's gimlet makers.



Above: John Thomas Ridge's workshop



Opposite: gimlet making tools and stages in the production of a gimlet

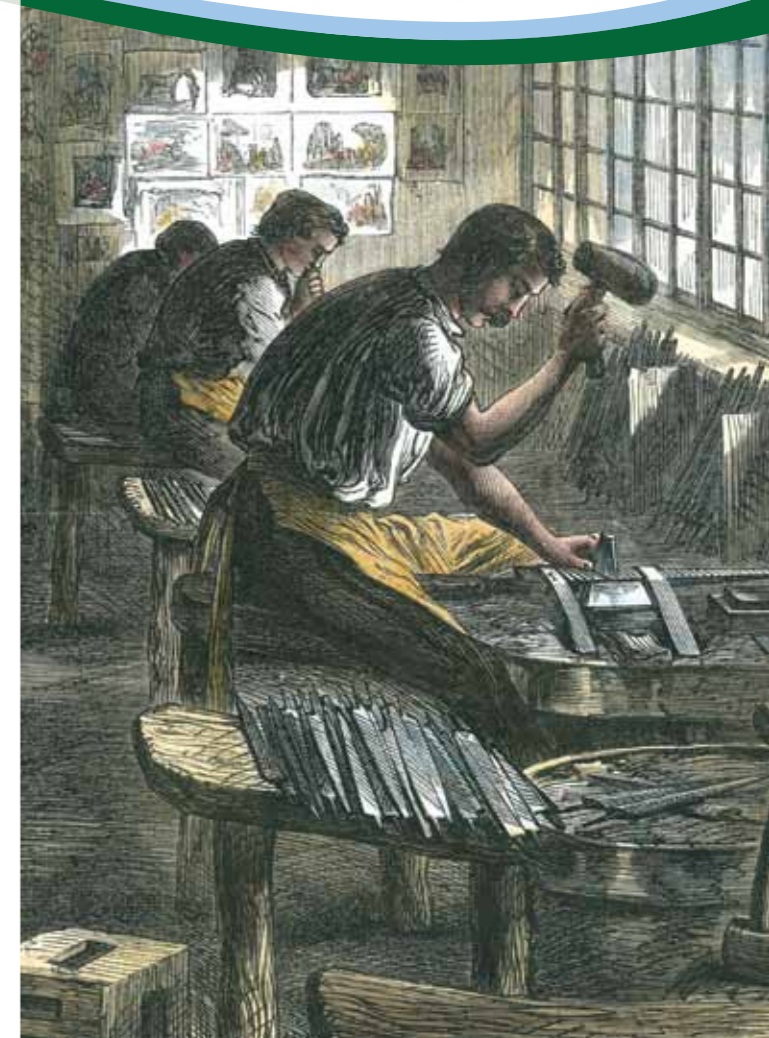
## WOODLAND CRAFTS

Most local woods were managed in the past as coppices in which grew multi-stemmed coppice and single-stemmed standard trees. The nearest coppice wood to the village was Lee Shroggs Wood. It was listed as a coppice wood as early as 1600. The uses to which the wood and timber were put were legion. The timber trees, mostly oak, were used in building projects such as timber-framed houses, barns and industrial premises such as forges and grinding wheels. There are still two cruck-framed buildings standing in the centre of the village. The bark of felled oak trees was peeled and made into a liquor for tanning leather to make animal hides workable. There are, as already noted, the gravestones of three tanners in the churchyard.

There were also many woodland crafts associated with coppice woods. These included basket making, besom making, chair bodging, coopering (barrel-making) and turnery (the making of wooden plates, dishes, ladles and spoons). These trades were all represented in Ecclesfield in the past. There are gravestones of a wheelwright, William Yeule (d.1717) and a leather dresser, James Crowther, (d.1802) in the churchyard. In an 1822 directory a wood turner/chair-maker, a basket maker, a cooper and two wheelwrights are mentioned living and working in the village and in the 1851 census three woodmen, one sawyer, 14 joiners, three coopers and one besom maker are listed.



# Discover Ecclesfield's Working Past



## A MYRIAD OF LOST OCCUPATIONS

There were a large number of crafts, industries and occupations carried on in the past in the village of Ecclesfield and now largely gone forever. As well as the usual farmers, shopkeepers, stonemasons and blacksmiths there were, for example, those employed in the making of nails, screws, files and gimlets, and from the late nineteenth century increasing numbers engaged in coal mining and foundry work. Women's work was often home-based – assisting in nailmaking and file cutting, dressmaking and even veil making. Some women were schoolteachers and many became domestic servants in other households. This leaflet is one of two planned by Ecclesfield Conservation Group to reveal Ecclesfield's industrial past. This one covers the village core. It is planned to publish a second leaflet covering the Whitley valley, the Common and the low-lying land between Butterthwaite and Smithy Wood.

There are also three wall plaques to local industrialists who lived in Ecclesfield parish. There is one in memory of James Dixon (d.1852) founder of the world-famous silverware manufacturers, James Dixon & Son of the Cornish Works in Sheffield. There are also wall plaques in memory of Jonathan Walker (d.1807) of the famous makers of cannons, whose family originally came from Grenoside, and in memory of Thomas Rawson (d. 1826), a very successful tanner from Wardsend.



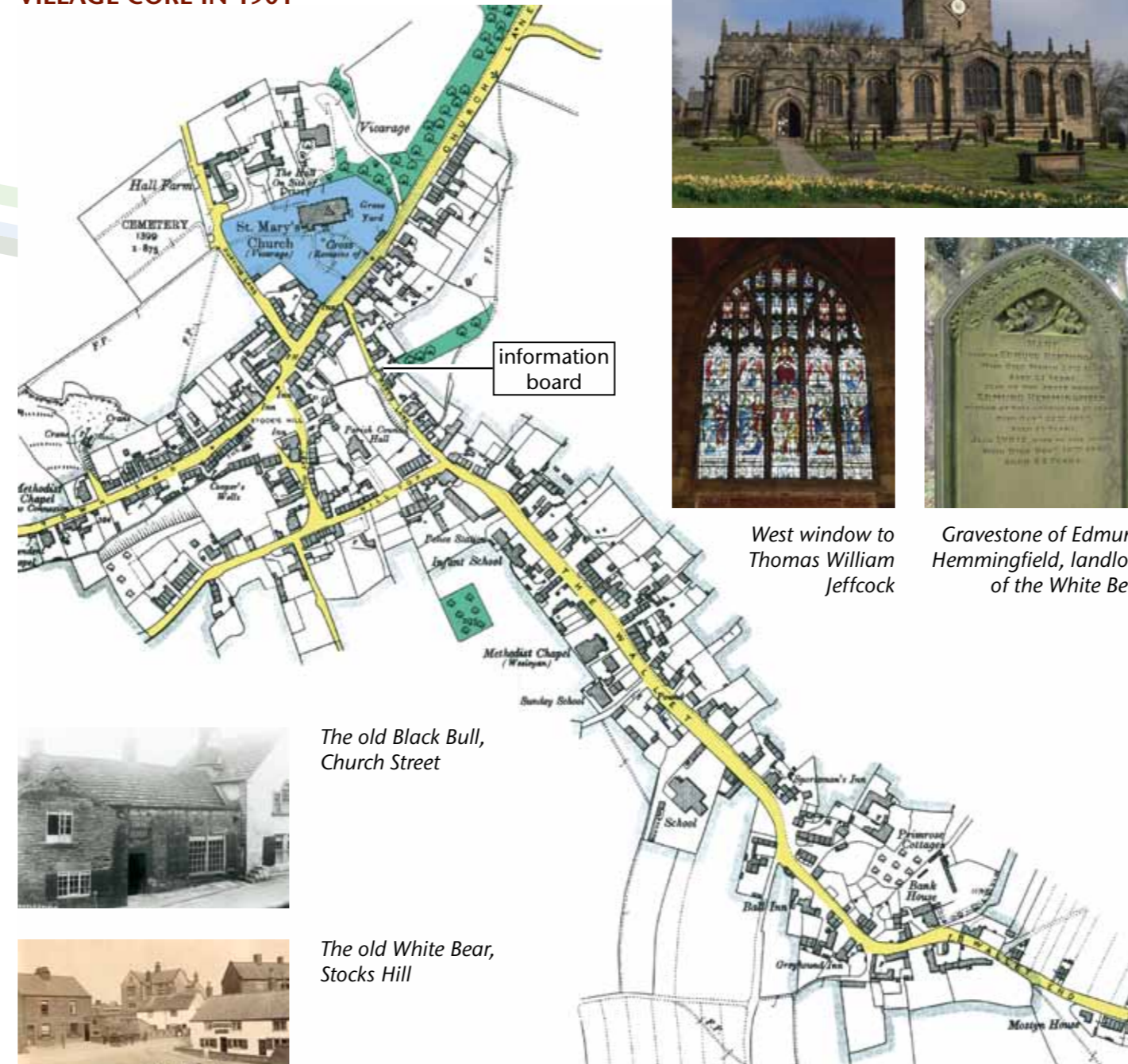
Wall plaque to James Dixon

Although most gravestones do not record the occupation of the deceased, the minority that do are of great interest. There is the grave of Parkin Jeffcock, mining engineer, who lost his life in 1866 attempting to rescue trapped and injured miners in the Oaks Colliery disaster at Barnsley. Among the industrialists are the graves of James Dixon and three tanners, John Kirk (d. 1778), Thomas Smith (d.1791) and George Abdy (d.1810). Among the workmen and craftspeople are an early coal miner, John Batty of Mortomley 'accidentally precipitated into a coalpit' in 1828; John Tyler, hammerman at Wadsley Forge (d. 1667) and Matthew Eadon, woodman (d.1774). The graveyard also contains the graves of Matthew Jepson and his son William, both landlords of the *Black Bull* who were also coopers, Charles Cooke (d. 1878) landlord of the *Tankard Inn* (now *The Stocks*) who was also a coal miner and Edmund Hemmingfield (d.1899) landlord of the *White Bear* who was also a file cutter.



Part of the gravestone of John Kirk, tanner

## ECCLESFIELD VILLAGE CORE IN 1901



West window to Thomas William Jeffcock



Gravestone of Edmund Hemmingfield, landlord of the White Bear



The old Black Bull, Church Street



The old White Bear, Stocks Hill

## NAILMAKING

For at least 500 years there were nailmakers in Ecclesfield. There are two sixteenth century wills of nailers in Ecclesfield, John Hill's (1506) and Thomas Cutts' (1583). But the trade had probably been around much longer than that. By the eighteenth century Ecclesfield was the centre of a thriving nailmaking area, with 40 nailmaking workshops listed in 1707 in *An Old Ecclesfield Diary*. In 1733 the Ecclesfield Nailmakers' Agreement was signed stating that apprentices should remain with their master for the full term of seven years. It was signed by 195 'hearth-masters' from around the region. But by the nineteenth century the trade was in marked decline and the 1851 census only records 26 nailers in the village core, and this had fallen to only four by 1871. By 1901 only one person is recorded in the nail trade, a nail merchant, Edward Fawley. Fawleys were recorded as nailmakers in Ecclesfield as early as 1696 and in 1851 there were three separate Fawley households within nine doors of each other at Town End where the heads of household were all nailmakers.

There were two sorts of nailers, the **nail chapman** and the **domestic nailmaker**. The nail chapmen were middlemen who obtained supplies of rod iron from local forges, in the case of Ecclesfield from Wortley Forge, and distributed them to domestic nailmakers. The nailmakers made the rods into nails and then they were collected by the chapmen who sold them on to wholesalers. Two nail chapmen are buried in Ecclesfield churchyard, John Hague of Chapeltown who died in 1772 and George Smith of Hill Top who died in 1838.



The basic nailmaking process was a simple one and easy to learn. The iron rods were heated in a fire which was kept hot by means of a pair of bellows, and then cut into lengths on an anvil. The cut pieces were then placed in a hole in the anvil and hit with a hammer to form a head. This was done at great speed and there were numerous variations on the basic process to make different kinds of nail – horse nails, rose heads and flats, for example.



What is important to realise was that the trade required little capital outlay. All that the nailmaker needed were a small smithy (usually attached to a cottage or in a backyard), an anvil, a pair of bellows, simple tools and a supply of coal or coke. A good proportion of nailmakers also grew crops and kept livestock on small holdings. Traditionally the nailmaker carried his tools in a bag called a 'wallet', which may be the derivation of 'The Wallet' and 'Wallet End', the old names for High Street and the far end of High Street respectively where there was a concentration of nailmaking workshops when the trade was at its height.

## MEMORIALS IN ST. MARY'S CHURCH AND CHURCHYARD

In the church itself there are memorial windows – one to a locally-born engineer and another to a locally-born industrialist. There is an east window to Henry Fowler born at Wadsley Hall, formerly in the parish of Ecclesfield. He was a civil engineer who caught dysentery while working in India, never recovered and died in 1854. The window was paid for by his two brothers, one of whom, Sir John Fowler, was a famous railway engineer who co-designed and built the Forth Railway Bridge. There is a west window to Thomas William Jeffcock (d. 1900), Director of the Sheffield Coal Company and a director of the steel makers, Cammell Laird.

