

Scissors Paper Stone

Blog 7:

Who Was John Newton Mappin?

Part 2

First, the few personal details we know about Mappin. He was the youngest of 5 children of Joseph Mappin and his wife Hannah Newton. Joseph's father had been a plater and cup maker, and Joseph continued in the family business, becoming a Freeman of Sheffield's Company of Cutlers in 1787. By 1800 Joseph was an engraver and copper plate printer, and also made pearl buttons, spoons, and dessert knife handles using lustrous mother of pearl. He died of consumption in 1841, and at his funeral was said to have been 'a man of strict integrity of conduct and kind and gentle manners'.

John Newton Mappin's life is something of an enigma. Even his birth date is often mistaken - perhaps because throughout the nineteenth century there is a proliferation of Mappin brothers and nephews in changing business partnerships with similar names and close birthdates and a tendency to feud. But also perhaps the variations occur because he himself suppressed knowledge of it. The censuses from 1841 to his death, which give his age, imply a bewildering array of birthdates.

But the birth and baptism registers of the Howard Street Independent Church give his birthdate as 13 February 1803. He was educated at Sheffield's prestigious and progressive Milk Street Academy, where its Quaker principal, J H Abraham, advertised a curriculum which included English Language, penmanship, arithmetic, merchants' accounts, geography with the use of globes, French and drawing. A member of the Sheffield Literary and Philosophical Society, Abraham was among the first teachers in England to integrate modern science instruction into the curriculum. Luckily for his students, in his introduction to a book of boys' and girls' prize winning essays from the school, published in 1805, Abraham advocated offering pupils kindness and encouragement as a means to successful learning. The family names of the published students are those of Sheffield's leading manufacturing and professional families, and their younger siblings would have been Mappin's contemporaries at the school - for example, Thomas Jessop, later a great steel maker and philanthropist.



Milk Street Academy – with permission Picture Sheffield

There is evidence that John Newton Mappin initially worked with his father and older brother as a pearl button maker at J Mappin and Son, up to at least 1838. However, by this time it also appears he had decided to take a different path from the rest of his metal working family. By 1837, as a 'common brewer' and with his business partner William Bradley, a 'coach proprietor', he was lessee of the Old Three Pigeons beerhouse, in Carver Street, Sheffield. Together they built the Soho Brewery on Ecclesall Road. By 1846 Mappin had dissolved his partnership with William Bradley, and was ready to take the step that would propel him into wealth and gentlemanly gravitas. He took the lease of the Masboro Old Brewery, Rotherham, and, through business acumen and energy, developed a successful brewery. As the 19th century progressed, developments in brewing encouraged, and were encouraged by, the application of science. Maybe Mappin's early exposure to science lessons at school encouraged his interest in the complex process of beer making.

In a society where wealth was highly valued, brewing was one of the most lucrative of all the trades, but there was some ambivalence in Sheffield about the morality of the consumption of alcohol, which may have had an impact on Mappin. Around 1832 when he was 29 and not yet married (at 45 he married Mary Briddon, of Manchester), he seems to have adopted his infant nephews John Yeomans Cowlshaw and Joseph Cowlshaw whose parents had died (their mother was Mappin's sister). Later, after Mappin had become an established brewer, it seems that the boys may have been placed in the custody of their aunt, Elizabeth Mappin, Mappin's second sister. She, it is said, believed the boys were ill served being associated with the brewing industry.

As well as raising the question of whether the relationship between Mappin and his sister was harmonious, her belief implies that the brewing trade might have been denigrated in parts of Sheffield society. Did Mappin feel he needed to compensate - perhaps through charitable giving - for his association with brewing? The Temperance Movement's campaign against the evils of alcohol began in earnest in Sheffield in the 1830s. In fact, Mappin took no part in Sheffield's temperance struggles, though he was Vice-Chairman of the Licensed Victuallers Protection and Benevolent Society, which aimed to provide a home in Sheffield for 'decayed licensed Victuallers, their widows and orphans'. At the 1846 victuallers' annual Festival



Cherrytree Orphanage - with permission Picture Sheffield

a speech-giver remarked that 'time was when a licensed victualler was shut out from society as a man who dealt in poison and lived by drunkenness and debauchery', but that this was not the case now. Was Mappin (who did not speak at the Festival) tainted by this reputation? Perhaps in some quarters, but it is difficult to believe he was not a generous man.

I described in my previous blog how Mappin was a benefactor to the church. But he was generous in many ways, and his status must have risen accordingly. For example, he was a subscriber to the 'Sheffield Central Relief Committee for the general distress of the town' which was formed to alleviate poverty. He also subscribed to the Sheffield Fund for the Relief of the Lancashire Distress, for those suffering during the depression in the textile industry in the north west in the 1860s. In 1866 he joined a committee to collect subscriptions - giving £100 himself (about £11,000 at today's values) - for the bereaved families of Oaks Colliery in Barnsley, after explosions there killed 361 miners and rescuers. He gave an annuity to the Deakin Institute of £20 (about £2,200) for the relief of the poor. In a reminder of his generosity to his infant Cowlshaw nephews, he supported the Cherrytree Orphanage in Totley. He gave to the Public Dispensary and the General Infirmary, and was President and Vice-President of the Sheffield Public Hospital and Dispensary in 1861-71.

As a loyal wealthy Sheffield business man, keen to make Sheffield a memorable destination for the 1875 visit of the Prince and Princess of Wales, he contributed £250 (about £28,000) for the expenses associated with it. ARCHES He was chair of a reception committee, which erected triumphal arches on the route of the royal procession along Fulwood Road, quite close to the entrance to his house 'Birchlands' (demolished to make way for the Hallam Towers Hotel).



Birchlands - with permission Picture Sheffield



Sheffield Club - with permission Picture Sheffield

In a rare foray into public affairs he stood in 1856 as a Guardian for Ecclesall Bierlow, part of the arrangements for welfare under the Poor Law, but was not elected. He was a member of the Sheffield Club, one of the social institutions to which Sheffield gentlemen of influence and standing belonged. Here they could 'meet on common ground for an exchange of opinion on subjects of common interest', in its club house in the centre of town, which was said to mirror the comforts of the London Athenaeum or Reform Club. There were good opportunities for networking at the Club - in 1868 there were 8 substantial brewers among a total of around 200 members, who were 'merchants and manufacturers' and also professional men, such as solicitors. From the Club's records we know that Mappin voted for the Liberal Party in 1841 and Tory thereafter.

For my final blog I can report a little more about this shadowy character. Perhaps more than any other details, the choices and preferences of his Will tell us something about his personality. Next time, I'll look at this, how he came by his wealth, and his remarkable generosity in disposing of his art collection.

Loveday Herridge

6 May 2024