

Unseen: Lives behind the scenes

'Unseen' is an odd title for an art exhibition. Art is something we see, something we look at. But there is more to it. Beyond – through - seeing there is thinking and feeling. Through art we empathise with the experience of others.

Art makes what is unseen seen.

This exhibition is part of the second year of the Scissors Paper Stone project set up to explore the history of St John's and its community. This year, the focus is on the people who lived in the parish towards the end of the 19th century, when both St John's and Ranmoor itself were still new. What do we see when we look back? We see first the rich and powerful of Sheffield – mainly white men, of course, at that period. We know a lot about them, these men who built Ranmoor's great houses, who ran Sheffield's industries and indeed Sheffield itself. Their names are preserved to this day in our streets, parks and art galleries. But important though they were, these people were the minority. Behind them we glimpse the many people who underpinned the lives of Ranmoor's wealthy few. They are shadowy figures, about whom we know very little. We catch sight of them only occasionally, in an old photo, a legacy in a will or a census return.

And this is what our 'Unseen' exhibition wants to explore. The exhibition turns the focus from the wealthy residents of Ranmoor, who monopolise the history books and archives, to the unseen people who made Ranmoor possible.

- The domestic servants - maids, cooks, nannies, laundresses, gardeners, grooms and coachmen who ran the comfortable homes of the wealthy. Lucy Lethbridge in her book *Servants* (Bloomsbury, 2013) says that:
'In 1900 domestic service was the single largest occupation in Edwardian Britain: of the four million women in the British workforce, a million and a half worked as servants, a majority of them as single-handed maids in small households.'
- The workers in the steel mills, factories and breweries who generated the wealth for the lavish villas all across Ranmoor.
- The miners who dug the coal to power the factories and heat the houses.
- The farmers who grew the crops and produced the food.
- And those who transported materials and goods on the railways, roads and canals.

Victorian society would not have thrived without the hard labour of these unseen people.

And there are yet more unseen whose lives are reflected in the exhibition. People in the colonies who would have used Sheffield's steel to grow and process the sugar, the cotton and the tobacco or to mine the valuable raw materials that helped make the British Empire so rich.

Our artists – all 19 of them – have responded in very different ways to these issues, including through artforms and crafts that unseen people used to express themselves and their creativity - embroidery, patchwork and rag rugs. These creative arts were not considered 'proper' art and were often dismissed as 'just women's work'. (In some circles, they still are.) Yet they required as much skill and artistic judgement as an oil painting or watercolour.

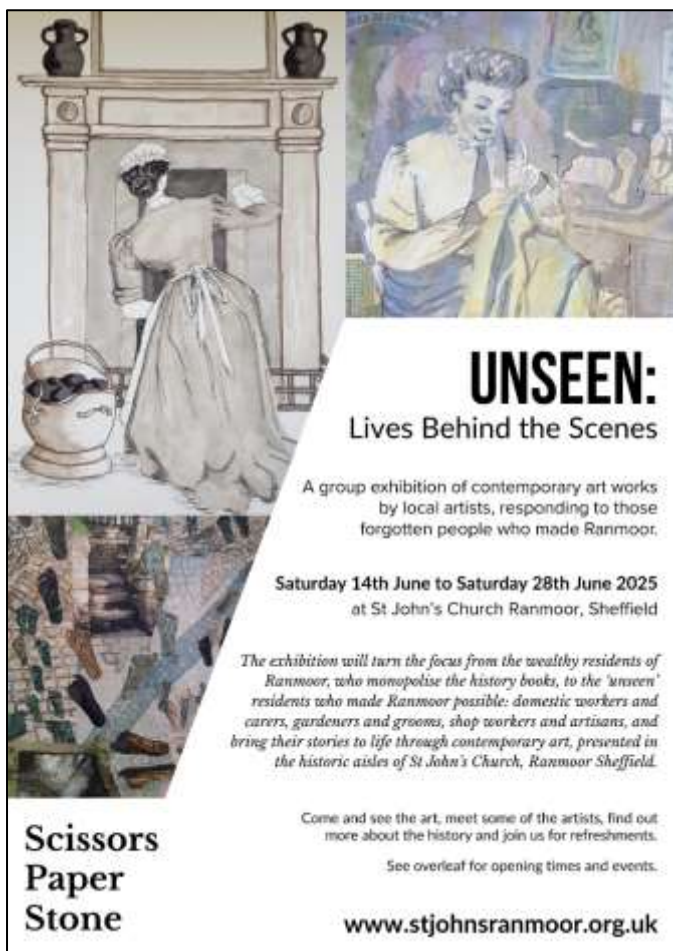
Complementing the artworks there is 'Kitchen Unseen': a display of the vintage recipe books that might have been found in Ranmoor's Victorian and Edwardian houses, great and small.

By reflecting on the lives of the unseen Victorians, we hope that the artworks will make visitors to the exhibition think about the unseen people of today. The people on the edges of our society, people who are old, sick or have a disability, who are poor or unemployed or homeless. Cleaners and carers. Those trapped in modern slavery or working in terrible sweatshops and the like across the world, to provide us with cheap goods and such a high standard of living. Their voices go unheard, their needs unmet, their lives unseen.

Art helps us see more clearly, and reflect differently, on the present as well as the past. Come and see the 'Unseen'.

Margaret Bennett

12 June 2025



UNSEEN:
Lives Behind the Scenes

A group exhibition of contemporary art works by local artists, responding to those forgotten people who made Ranmoor.

Saturday 14th June to Saturday 28th June 2025
at St John's Church Ranmoor, Sheffield

The exhibition will turn the focus from the wealthy residents of Ranmoor, who monopolise the history books, to the 'unseen' residents who made Ranmoor possible: domestic workers and carers, gardeners and grooms, shop workers and artisans, and bring their stories to life through contemporary art, presented in the historic aisles of St John's Church, Ranmoor Sheffield.

Scissors Paper Stone

Come and see the art, meet some of the artists, find out more about the history and join us for refreshments.
See overleaf for opening times and events.

www.stjohnsranmoor.org.uk

UNSEEN:
Events during the exhibition

The exhibition will be open from 2.00-5.30pm Tuesday to Friday with special events on the following days:

Saturday 14th June, 5.30pm
Exhibition Launch
Join us for drinks to mark the opening of this exhibition of works by local artists, curated by Margaret Bennett and Rowan Ireland. After a short introduction you will be able to explore the exhibition and talk to the artists who have responded to lives which are so often unrecorded and unseen.

Saturday 21st June, 2.00-4.00pm
Will Workshop
You are invited to examine the wills from some of Ranmoor's wealthy householders. All these men and women left money to their employees. What does the pattern of these bequests tell us about the relationship between employer and employee in this newly established suburb in late nineteenth century Sheffield? We will be guided by published local historians, Alan Crutch and Keith Pitchforth.
The workshop is free but places are limited so please book on TicketSource. **The church will be open for visitors to view the exhibition during the workshop.**

Saturday 28th June, church open from 2pm, ticketed event starts at 5.30pm
A Ranmoor Party
An evening celebrating the social gatherings which brought Ranmoor residents together from 1890-1929. Live jazz from Julian Sullivan and friends and refreshments available.
Tickets £5 from TicketSource or the Parish Office.

This exhibition is part of the **Scissors Paper Stone** project set up to explore the history of the St John's and its community.
You can read the blog and find out more about the project on the website.
www.stjohnsranmoor.org.uk

