

Scissors Paper Stone

Blog 30: Henry Wilkinson (1798-1873)

You might be surprised that I am writing about Henry Wilkinson: after all, he was not a pew renter or even Anglican. He was described in the press as an 'uncompromising' Liberal Unitarian. He worshipped at Upper Chapel and was buried in the General Cemetery. His link with St John's is through his niece by marriage, Miss Mary Keddie (Pew 59). He adopted Mary and she was his sole heir when he died in 1873. I was drawn to write about Wilkinson for his evident compassion and empathy for his workers and domestic servants.



Trade Mark from Eileen Woodhead – Trademarks on Base-Metal tableware.

Henry Wilkinson died before the first church was even built and was himself a Unitarian but his story is a model of philanthropy which illustrates the power industrialists had to improve the lives of their employees and family members. He enabled his adopted daughter, a key member of St John's first congregation, to take an active role in improving the lives of some of the most vulnerable

He was born 1798 at Norton Hammer, where his father was a file manufacturer; apprenticed as a scissor smith, he later joined John & Thomas Settle in the silver-plate trade. He went on to take over the firm which had its works in Norfolk St, eventually employing 125-140 men women and boys.

He played an active role in Sheffield's civic life: in 1844 he became the councillor for Ecclesall Ward and Mayor in 1846. He was an alderman and a J.P. He had a reputation as a kind and impartial magistrate and he was active on the Bench until a few days before his death. A member of the Board of Guardians for Nether Hallam in 1844, he became a Town Trustee and was a Collector for it at the time of his death.

In later years he purchased the original Endcliffe Hall but sold it to John Brown and moved to Endcliffe Edge, 391 Fulwood Rd which is where he died of a stroke in 1873.



391 Fulwood Road.

He was clearly well thought of by those who worked for him. At a party at Endcliffe Hall, on a Saturday in August 1854, to celebrate thirty years of the company, he was presented with a chest of silver items of their own manufacture, to the value of 200 guineas with a splendid salver with the inscription:



Presented Together with a tea & coffee Service to Henry Wilkinson Esquire of Endcliffe Hall, by his workpeople as a testimony of the high sense they entertain of his character as a gentleman & a magistrate.

And a token of their gratitude & for his liberality as an employer of labour. And for many acts of kindness to them & their families.

A similar set.

These items had been made by the workers, the money for the purchase being raised in a single day from an enthusiastic workforce. He was clearly touched by the gift and the accompanying speech. He wasn't interested in seeing the subscription list: every contribution, however small, was equally important to him. His response to the speech sums up the man and almost brings tears to the eye:

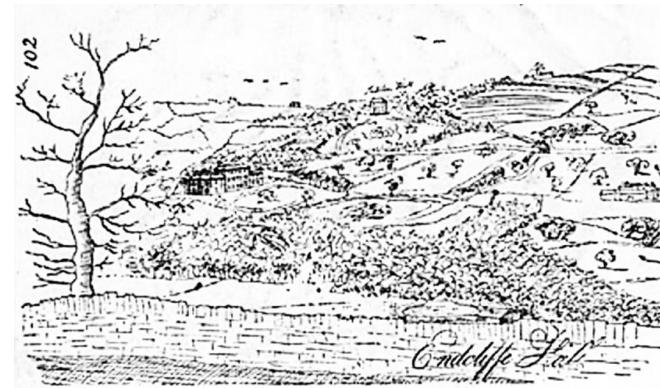
"I can buy silver with money. I do buy quantities every week . . . but there are things that money, almost all-powerful that it is, cannot buy. The good feeling and good will that have prompted this gift cannot be bought with money, they are beyond all price and, as such, I esteem them."

After the presentation, there was football, cricket, dancing and tutball (rounders) in the park until three when there was a substantial dinner, after which there was dancing and other amusements, followed by supper, the party breaking up at 11.00 pm. The workers clearly had such a good time that about 60 of them returned the following Monday afternoon. Mr Wilkinson was absent but, although they were unexpected, his wife provided tea for the women and sandwiches and ale for the men. Again, there were various games, singing and dancing until nightfall.

His generosity of spirit is also evident in his will: he endowed several charities including educational institutions, for example the Lancasterian Boys and Girls Schools, and the Boys and Girls Charity Schools. He also left £500 for the establishment and support of a School for poor children of both sexes at or near Sheffield to be conducted upon non-sectarian principles.

According to the terms of his will, the trustees were instructed to:

"...give preference . . . to a School in which females shall be taught domestic economy and in which small prizes or marks of distinction shall be given to the best makers of bread and of soup of the best quality at the smallest cost and to the best makers of a shirt and to those who show themselves to possess the qualifications required in the management of the household of a working man of small income."



Clearly a very practical man!

He was also generous to his workers: both domestic servants and his employees:

"To Elizabeth Fletcher employed in my plating room and who all but lost her life in my service an Annuity of Two pounds and two shillings for her sole use and benefit".

I was curious to know what had happened to Elizabeth. According to a report in the Sheffield Daily Telegraph - she was working as a gilder when there was an explosion, her face and body were badly scalded. The injuries were initially thought to be fatal. As soon as he heard of the accident, Wilkinson went to the West St Hospital to see everything was done to aid her.

I was also particularly struck one legacy:

"I bequeath to Edward Parker of Sheffield aforesaid Warehouseman or Bookkeeper the sum of One hundred pounds in consideration of his loss by the North of England Insurance Company his confidence in that Company having been partly based on the fact of my being at the time he insured therein a Director of that Company."

Obviously, Wilkinson felt guilty about the man losing money and blamed himself.

At his funeral, about 50 of his employees joined the cortege to the General Cemetery, and his coffin was carried to his final resting place by some of his oldest workmen.

This spring we are telling the stories of notable members of the community of St John's from the last two decades of the nineteenth century: the medical men amongst the pew renters, individual spinsters and widows, and another more famous industrialist: Edgar Allen. I will be giving a talk about him on 25th April.

*Sue Roe
9 February 2026*