

Altrincham History Society



Life in Altrincham in 1872

To mark the 125th Anniversary of the opening of
the Dunham Road Unitarian Church



The Unitarian Chapel on the Dunham Road, Altrincham

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LIFE IN ALTRINCHAM IN 1872

By Hilda Bayliss

Life in Altrincham at that time, as now, was affected by events in the country as a whole. Queen Victoria had reigned for thirty-five years and the Liberal Party under William Gladstone was in power in Parliament. France and Germany were at war, but fortunately the prime minister had avoided getting the country involved in the conflict.

For the ordinary people there were many recent improvements, it was a time of great reforms. In education, for example, schooling was not yet compulsory, but there were church, chapel and private school education. Following the Education Act of 1870, the government doubled the grants to denominational schools and established Boards of Education to set up schools where there were none.

There had been a lot of bribery in political elections, so the secret ballot was introduced in place of open voting at the hustings. In Trade Union legislation, unions could now hold property and have the protection of the courts, for

example, against dishonest treasurers who embezzled funds.

A major problem in society was drunkenness (in part a reaction to the harsh working and living conditions) and to control it, public houses were closed where it was deemed there were too many,

JOSEPH HILL,
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opening hours were restricted and no salt was to be added to the beer! Many youngsters had the awful task of climbing and cleaning chimneys, but the death of a boy chimney-sweep gave Lord Shaftesbury the opportunity to appeal to the public through The Times newspaper to stop the employment of young boys for this task, supported by a campaign from Bowdon resident William Wood.

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With the improvement of roads by turnpiking and the building of canals, it was a lot easier for goods to be transported and for people to travel, but the greatest improvement was the expansion of the railway system. Around the towns people relied on the horse or walking.

Sea travellers had fearful journeys by slow sailing ships, and even though the steam engine had been invented a hundred years before,

only a seventh of the ships were steam driven.

In the arts many striking new pictures were coming from the hands of painters such as the French Impressionists Claude Monet, Pierre Renoir and Edgar Degas who aimed to paint directly from nature, and our own Helen Allingham from Altrincham. William Morris founded the Arts and Crafts Movement which aimed to bring together art and craftsmanship in everyday ceramics and furniture. Pre-Raphaelites like Burne-Jones painted heroic and

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historical canvases in bright colours or created new stained glass windows for churches. Famous poems were written such as *The Lady of Shallot* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson and well known hymns such as *Now the day is over* and

Onward Christian Soldiers were written by Sabine Baring-Gould, the latter with music by Sir Arthur Sullivan, and Gustav Holst wrote the music for Christina Rossetti's poem *In the Bleak Mid-winter*, now a Christmas carol. Verdi's opera *Aida* was all the rage. The first 'pop' concerts were held at St. James's Hall in London, where the new ballads were sung. The partnership of WS Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan had started the previous year but the first of their well-known comic operas, *Trial by Jury*, was to take London by storm in 1875.

For the first time it was possible to contact someone across the ocean quickly when Thomas Edison invented the telegraph. Charles Darwin had startled the world with his *Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871). Many people strongly disapproved of his findings, refusing to believe his theory that we had apes for ancestors.

In 1872 the town of Altrincham was densely packed with over 8,000 people. The better class of houses with croquet lawns were in the upper part of the town, but many people were cramped in poor

housing round George Street and Newtown. There were high-class residential parts of Altrincham — Mount Pleasant, the Downs, and the mansions developing around St. Margaret's Church. There was a busy woodworking and trans-shipment area by the canal at Broadheath, though it would be a decade before the first engineering works arrived.

You could buy alcoholic drink in forty-five taverns, pubs, hotels and beer shops, but there were only ten places where you could worship, for example, St. George's, St. John's and the Unitarian Chapel in Shaw's Lane, which was being replaced by a new building on Dunham Road.

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1/-

All sorts of problems faced Altrincham, especially problems of

local government, water supply, sewage disposal and health. The Court Leet had administered the town for hundreds of years, but had largely been replaced in 1852 by a local Board of Health. However, the court appointed a mayor, who, for 1872, was Matthew Fowden, a solicitor of Bankhall, Hale. Market Lookers appointed by the court, maintained law and order and ensured that the rules were kept at the twice weekly market. The burgesses also walked around the town annually to make sure the boundary of Altrincham was inviolate.



Board of Health offices, High Street (now Market Street), Altrincham, to the right of the arch of the NT Estates office.

The Board of Health met on the first Friday of each month at its office in High Street (now Market Street). The chairman for 1872 was Mr J Gaskarth, assisted by Messrs.

S Barratt, W Armitage, R Burgess, J Ambler, D Pons, WH Holt, J Byrom, T Warrington, H Balshaw, JS Mort and J Davenport. Other services in the town were carried out by public organisations, for example, the town was policed by the Cheshire Constabulary under Superintendent Steen who was also in charge of the Fire Brigade. Water, purchased from Manchester Corporation, was stored at Devisdale and piped into the town, but there were problems of pollution.

South Trafford Archaeological Group has found that the public well in Victoria Street was still in use in 1880, but was sited next to a tippler toilet! Sewage was piped into nearby brooks or collected from middens behind people's houses and spread on the mossland and fields leading to good market garden produce such as rhubarb!

Health problems were handled by the town's eight surgeons, six chemists, one optician, one dentist, one surgeon-dentist, one bleeder with leeches and one apothecary. More serious problems were dealt with by the Altrincham Provident Dispensary and Hospital (APD&H) and Lloyd's Hospital.

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OF EVERY DESCRIPTION
ALWAYS ON HAND.



The APD&H had been built in 1870, funded by the sale of the workhouses at Broadheath. It was equipped with two stretchers, surgical instruments, splints, catheters, enema apparatus, stomach pump, night bell, bandage roller, tooth forceps and two stone grooved slabs for the dead-house. Mr John Allen, tenant of Oldfield Hall, was the chairman of the Board

of Management of the APD&H from 1870 to 1886. In 1872 the Board appointed Mrs Tatham as matron at a salary of £30 per annum with an extra 8s per month for beer. Her request to keep a pig in the hospital grounds was not allowed and she left within a year, leaving unpaid bills for beer.

The town was lit with gas lamps as were some houses, but oil and candles were also extensively used. Altrincham's gas works sold 17,000 cubic feet of gas in 1872, produced at its works in Moss Lane.

The rail links to Manchester and Northwich were well-established, and the Bridgewater Canal was mainly used for freight. Local traffic and places not served by train were reached by horse, horse bus or carriage, or 'Shanks's pony'. Local church and chapel schools were given grants by the government for pupils who attended regularly and who passed tests in reading, writing and arithmetic. In 1872 the passing of tests in other subjects, for example, geography, gained extra money for the school. The use of paper instead of slate improved the quality of the work. There were many private schools.

The market took place in what is now Old Market Place. Shops on George Street were beginning to replace houses and the attractive emporiums on Kingsway were well established. Shops were beginning to sell products such as Bird's custard powder, Hovis bread and biscuits from the Co-operative Wholesale Society. As well as twelve inns, there were twenty-one beer sellers, eight grocery and beer sellers, and four wine and spirit merchants.

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Bank in Lloyd Street dealt with money that was not kept under a mattress or floor-board.

People made their own entertainment, often connected with their church or chapel, but also in the confines of their own homes. The visit of a fair or circus was a welcome diversion as was the annual Agricultural Show which had been started a few years earlier to encourage the better production of crops and stock animals in what was still a largely rural area.

Residents could read local news reports in the Altrincham and Bowdon Guardian published every Wednesday at its works in George Street, and the opening of the new Unitarian Chapel by the Rev. William Gaskell (widower of Elizabeth Gaskell, the novelist) on 18th December 1872 would surely have made the headlines.

Sources

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Dunham Road
Unitarian Chapel

The new chapel
was
opened on 18/12/1872
by
Rev William Gaskell.

The preacher was
Rev. Charles Beard
of Liverpool.