

THE
MAKING
OF
ALTRINCHAM

1850 to 1991

From Market to Megastore?



Frank Bamford

THE MAKING OF ALTRINCHAM 1850-1991

From Market to Megastore?

by

Frank Bamford

Photographs by Colin Bamford

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Books by the same author

Trade for the People
Mansions and Men of Dunham Massey

PREFACE

In the introduction to my earlier book *Mansions and Men of Dunham Massey* I explained that I had intended to write a detailed, local study of the economic and social history of the Altrincham area from 1850 onwards but was waylaid by the fascinating story of the mansions in the township of Dunham Massey. I felt the latter had to be told first and could not wait upon the 'more leisurely process' of writing a book to cover a wider area, a longer period and many other classes of people.

In the event, it has not been such a leisurely process. The fact is that while I was writing *Mansions and Men*, and since it has been published, I have had the parallel story of the town of Altrincham developing in my mind. I realised that the two stories are really two sides of the same coin. Ideally, perhaps, they should have been integrated into the one book, but even a tolerant public will only take just so much at one time.

Something of the earlier history of Altrincham

Since being granted its charter by Baron Hamon de Massey in 1290 (which authorised the holding of a market), Altrincham was one of the many hundreds of market towns in England serving as a focus for the life of the farms and villages for up to five or six miles around. Apart from Manchester, there were also markets at Knutsford and Stockport. Some farmers might choose to take their produce to one market or another, depending partly on a measure of specialisation in some towns, but most of the people in the neighbourhood of Altrincham could be expected to come to it to buy and sell goods and services. The typical market town would be the only place where certain specialist services were available such as those of carpenters, wheelwrights, ploughwrights and other craftsmen, or domestic requirements such as the services of shoemakers, butchers and milliners. In addition there were the professional services offered by such men as surgeons and attorneys.

Until the late eighteenth century, there is little reason to suppose that Altrincham was very different in these respects from the general run of market towns. Nor was its government untypical, constituting as it did a baronial borough controlled by the lords of the manor of Dunham Manor, firstly, the de Massey family, then the Booths, Lord Delamer, the Earls of Warrington and, finally, the Grey family as Earls of Warrington and Stamford. By the early nineteenth century the local lord was the Earl of Stamford who owned most of the land and collected the market tolls. Under his sway the ancient Court Leet of Burgesses had certain legal powers to provide a minimum of local government.

The position of Altrincham was no doubt determined by the fact that it stood on

the turnpike road from Chester to Manchester where it was joined by the turnpike from Stockport, with another road going westwards to Warrington. It was in respect of transport communications that the latter half of the nineteenth century saw the first of the major changes which would make the town quite special. The Bridgewater Canal was constructed in the 1760s and 1770s, with the main purpose of facilitating the carriage of goods to Manchester, initially from Worsley in the west. Its extension southwards almost to Altrincham, before turning westwards towards the coast, was significant in that it betokened a growing commercial need for better transport in this direction and its construction greatly encouraged the business of market gardening in the area to provide food to the growing centre of the cotton trade as well as the other goods and services which the thriving market town could offer to such a vast number of consumers.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the greatest industrial revolution of all time had been substantially completed in the cotton textile industry of south Lancashire of which Manchester was first the industrial and later the commercial metropolis. With a plentiful supply of cheap labour as the population rose swiftly in the period and as important changes in agricultural land owning and practice drove many thousands of workers towards the mushrooming towns, many cotton masters became very wealthy with several thousands in the class of millionaires (in 1990 money) by the middle of the century. In associated industries and professions many other men made money too.

From amongst these newly-rich people there were a number, particularly from Manchester, who were tempted to escape the dirt, smog, noise and general degradation of the cotton metropolis to live in the pleasant surroundings of the Bowdon and Altrincham area. The opening of the Manchester South Junction and Altrincham Railway in mid-century made commuting much easier. So it came about that within the next thirty years or so there was created a grand estate or wealthy suburb of about 100 great houses stretching from the Higher Downs to Dunham New Park, with large villas progressing to huge mansions. All were designed to accommodate servants "living-in" and were as dependent on cheap labour for this purpose as their owners' wealth was on cheap labour in the factories. The story of these great houses and their occupants is told in my book *Mansions and Men of Dunham Massey*.

The purpose of this new book is to relate the development of Altrincham – its fast multiplying people and their employment, its streets, houses and civic buildings, its government, its education and much else – from the crucial mid-nineteenth century watershed up to the present day with some speculation about the future. Within this time span three principal periods will be distinguished. First were the three decades or so which were dominated in economic terms by the provision of services to Man-

chester, soon to be matched at least by services to the great mansions of Dunham Massey being constructed during the period. Secondly, came the beginnings of the industrial age based on Broadheath which progressively overtook services to the mansions as the economic driving force of the town and endured with considerable vicissitudes for almost a century. Finally, in recent decades we have moved at an accelerating rate apparently into a post-industrial age. The question is posed as to whether the town can prosper as a civilised place in which to live in the form of a greatly expanded market and commercial centre without a renewal of industry or whether it should change much at all.

Rather than deal separately with individual topics such as local government, education and housing over the century and a half I have sought, in the main, to proceed by giving as comprehensive account as possible of the development of the town as a whole over shorter periods of ten and twenty years, subject to the availability of information. I have tried to relate the expansion of population at each stage, which was always considerable, to the causative and enabling economic factors, particularly the employment opportunities. The physical extension of the town is chronicled virtually street by street, and it is noted that within the town the pace of change slackened considerably in the twentieth century as the lack of space inside its natural boundaries caused the impact of expansion to hit first Hale and then Timperley and Hale Barns which I have covered only very broadly.

Throughout the book I have been concerned to indicate, as far as possible, the effects of the various aspects of the great expansion of the town on its people and particularly those most badly affected by the concentration of so many of them in so small an area. Altrincham was conspicuously different from the general run of nineteenth century expanding towns in that its desperate overcrowding was not the direct result of industrial revolution and growth. The impact of these factors on our town was more indirect and it was essentially the late arrival of industry on its doorstep which brought relief from Altrincham's dependence on serving Manchester or its wealthy refugees.

The sources for this study, over and above those used for *Mansions and Men of Dunham Massey*, are mainly contained in Altrincham Public Library plus the 1861, 1871 and 1881 Census Returns in Sale Local History Library. To a greater extent than in the story of Dunham Massey I have drawn upon information in the earlier histories of Altrincham and particularly Charles Nickson's *Bygone Altrincham*. Taking the limitation of such information into account, I have used it in conjunction with my own researches. In some respects, the information is not available elsewhere.

I am grateful to a number of people who have been most helpful.

Mrs Joyce Ryan, Chairman of the Altrincham and Bowdon Civic Society, particularly for her recollections of past planning decisions and for corrections to my first draft.

Mr Robert G. Hill, to whom I have referred in the text, for fascinating discussions and valuable press cuttings.

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My son Colin Bamford for taking the photographs, as he did for *Mansions and Men of Dunham Massey*.

Lastly, I would like to include a note on the value of money, so that readers may understand the implications of the figures quoted. Very roughly, the value of the pound sterling has fallen some thirty-five to forty times since the second half of the last century, as measured by the cost of buying goods. The cost of labour has, however, increased something like three hundredfold, give or take a wide margin. There are two conclusions to be drawn from these bare facts. For all their uncertainty, they do demonstrate a massive increase in real wages, mainly from about 1880, in the country as a whole. Secondly, and perhaps less obviously, labour was so cheap over a hundred years ago that the wealthy minority of people – the cotton masters in particular – could command the work of very large numbers of working class men, women, yes and children. So a man who typically employed upwards of a hundred or more people in his cotton factory could effectively benefit from the efforts of a similar number outside the factory.



I

ALTRINCHAM IN 1850

The total population of Altrincham in 1851 was 4,488 according to the 1851 Census, although it was perhaps more as we shall see later. The real town centre was divided between Higher Town (essentially near the Market Place and comprising Church Street, High Street, Victoria Street, Stamford Street and Post Office Place) and Lower Town around George Street. In addition there was a quite heavily populated area around the eastern end of New Street and extending towards Railway Street, including Chapel Street and Albert Street as well as Chapel Walks, now Regent Road. On the outskirts of the town there were a few houses at the beginning of Ashley Road and Pinfold Brow (Lloyd Street). Beyond this small area there was New Town, towards the railway.

On the western and northern flanks of the quite densely populated central area where tradesmen and working class people lived, there were groups of better class houses. On the northern side of The Downs there had been an extensive development in the 1830s and early 1840s. In Normans Place to the north of New Street and Wellington Place to the south of it, as well as to the western end of New Street itself, there were also rows of substantial houses. In Sandiway Place off the Manchester Road near the George and Dragon (including part of what is now Sandiway Road) there was a mixed development of three rows of small, medium and larger houses. All these houses in the suburbs of the town have endured to this day, together with a substantial number of smaller New Street houses at its eastern end. Elsewhere in the town centre there is little that can be identified as early Victorian except some shop and inn premises in and around the old Market Place where in 1800 the Earl of Stamford built the Town Hall abutting the Unicorn Hotel. There is, however, an interesting little row of four houses on Victoria Street called Peel Terrace.

There were a number of mansions in more detached positions across the Dunham/Manchester road. The nearest to the town centre was the Italianate Mount Pleas-

Map of Altrincham c. late 1830s.

Higher and Lower Town can be clearly observed in the middle third of the map as well as the partial development of New, Chapel and Albert Streets to the south-west. To the south are some houses around the beginning of Ashley Road and Pinfold Brow (Lloyd Street). In the far south-west and north are the suburban developments along The Downs and around Sandiway.



Old Town Hall and Unicorn Inn. The Town Hall was built by the Earl of Stamford in 1800 adjoining the inn.

ant, later to be called Townfield House and now replaced by extensive blocks of modern apartments; this became the home of the Armitage family, notable Congregationalists. A little further to the north was Oldfield Hall, which used to stand in what is now John Leigh Park. This mansion was occupied in 1851 by Elizabeth Lloyd, a widow with two nieces, two governesses and seven servants. Finally, along the Dunham Road from around Groby Place going westwards, there were three large properties in extensive grounds as well as four houses on the east side of Groby Place itself.

There was no significant industry in the town although there may have been some very small-scale textile work including silk weaving. Many of the inhabitants worked as agricultural labourers. Market gardening had grown in importance, supplying fruit and vegetables such as potatoes and carrots to the fast growing cotton metropolis of Manchester. These were transported mainly on the Bridgewater Canal in barges which brought back manure to the fields around Altrincham. The canal itself, originally supplied with clean water from the River Medlock, had become horribly polluted. The waste products of industrial Manchester, tipped into the rivers, found their



Peel Terrace, Victoria Street. Built in the 1840s – it is not shown on the 1830s map.

way inexorably into the water flowing into the canal. In earlier days the Earl of Stamford had welcomed the canal near to Dunham Hall and made a bathing place on its bank. His young descendant would hardly have been swimming in it in 1850!

At this time Altrincham was largely self-contained from an economic point of view. Little could have been exported aside from the farm produce going to Manchester and the services inherent in its role of market town. It is hard to envisage that much was imported into the area except some foodstuffs and clothes. However, the scope for these must have grown as the wealth of the cotton masters percolated down. This would have been especially so as some of the rich men came to live in newly-built mansions after the middle of the century and provided employment for a growing population of servants and tradespeople. There was undoubtedly a flourishing wine trade, as evidenced in *Mansions and Men of Dunham Massey*.

Very little control was exercised on the building of houses or on their standards. Few access roads were provided nor drains, nor an adequate water supply. Even the recent development of New Town was without any regular form of road, sewer or drain.

The simple truth is that the town had no effective government. Legal powers had been vested in the ancient Court Leet of burgesses since the town's charter had been granted in the late thirteenth century. It is not altogether clear whether the Court Leet had adequate powers to act as a proper local authority in the modern sense. It seems that the principal and perhaps the only power to pave or cleanse the town derived from the Highway Act which did not apply to new streets. In this respect Altrincham was little different from most towns which were without any urban authority or had at best a corporation formed by ancient charter and long since decayed into a corrupt and self-appointed clique.

The expansion of population had indeed been rapid, with a doubling in the last quarter of a century. The causes of this fast increase are not entirely clear, but the general growth of population was undoubtedly important. Changes in agricultural organisation and land holding played a significant part in creating a surplus of labour in the countryside which could only hope to find employment in the towns. The vast development of Manchester obviously offered scope for increased business activity in providing services and food supplies from the Altrincham area.



Old George Street. Probably early seventeenth century. The two cottages started life as a simple house of one floor only including a barn or cattle shed at the righthand end.

Who were these people who lived in the increasingly crowded and insanitary streets of Altrincham? The 1851 Census gives us some very precise information. If we take a few streets as fairly random examples, in Police Street, Upper Town, we find two thread manufacturers, a grocer, a blacksmith, a laundress, a gardener, a market gardener, three agricultural labourers, another grocer, a general porter, a wheelwright, a stonemason, a bobbin turner and five more agricultural labourers.

In New Street, on the north-west side, we find a gardener, a land surveyor, a clerk, a curate, a cotton manufacturer, a corn merchant, a tea dealer, two stonemasons, a grocer, a sock manufacturer, a wine merchant, a plumber, a joiner, some lodging houses, two hand-loom weavers, an agricultural labourer, a baker, a Chelsea pensioner(!) and a mangler(?), plus many others. At this stage, New Street seems to have housed a mix of rather better-off tradesmen and skilled workers with a minority of labourers. The houses at the western end were clearly a cut above those nearer the town, as can be observed today.

In Chapel Street and Albert Street nearby, the population was definitely more of a working-class character with a surprising number of agricultural labourers alongside



New Street. These houses towards the Regent Road end of the street were built in the late 1840s. On the other side were older houses as shown on the 1830s map.

bricklayers, shoemakers, etc., but with an admixture of silk weavers and coal dealers as well as a laundress and a butcher who were paupers and a chair bottomsman.

If we move to the more affluent streets on the fringes, we find a distinctly different picture. The Downs, for instance, housed a Wesleyan minister, two gentlewomen, two lodging house keepers, a railway shareholder(!), a lady and two gentlemen as well as a calico printer and a cotton spinning manufacturer. The somewhat mixed development of Sandiway Place, on the other side of town, housed an interesting collection of annuitants, salesmen, a wheelwright, an architect, a chemist, a designer, a retired cotton broker, a commission agent, a landed proprietor and an innkeeper, presumably of the George and Dragon.

Every conceivable occupation and trade was represented many times over in this great miscellany of people, most of them already crammed into a few crowded streets. What virtually all of them had lacked was any say in the control of their local environment. Even at the national level the right to vote had been extended by the Electoral Reform Act of 1832 only to well-to-do people. At the local level power rested, as we have seen, in the Court Leet, in a system which had been basically unchanged for five and a half centuries since the granting of the town's charter. This



Albert Street (looking towards Regent Road). About half the street on the left is taken up by the schools. Built in the 1830s or the 1840s.



The Downs. Mostly built during the late 1830s; some houses were probably built in the early 1840s.

system was not far removed from feudalism in its reliance on the benevolence and wise overseeing of the lord of the manor and other notable and wealthy people in the area.

So long as society in town and country was fairly static, the system no doubt worked tolerably well and at least most of the people had learned to live with it. While many of them lived in villages and small towns the need for more sophisticated, even though simple, drainage and sanitary arrangements were not great, and water supplies were not too difficult to locate. But the agricultural and industrial revolutions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries wrought disrupting havoc amongst the even tenor of the established pattern of life. Specifically, the rapid growth of factory towns, particularly in south Lancashire, created the need for the social provision of basic necessities like sanitation and clean water which neither the factory owners and their associated developers of cheap houses nor the ancient local authorities, such as they were, were willing and able to supply.

The predominant political and philosophical mood among the middle and upper classes in the mid-nineteenth century was one of *laissez faire* on the basis that a free market and free enterprise would, in due course, ensure that all proper needs were

met. However, the fast-accumulating evidence from the mushrooming towns and cities enabled hard-working reformers like Edwin Chadwick to persuade Parliament that public action had to be taken. Progress was very slow and only the most disastrous consequences of neglect changed the established point of view. A fever epidemic in London prompted an investigation in 1838 into its physical causes, and a series of reports in the early 1840s recommended that urgent steps should be taken to ameliorate the health of the towns, especially their labouring populations. Opposition from the vested interests of parochial authorities and ratepayers continued to impede progress until, finally, the cholera epidemic of 1847-48 killed 55,000 people and forced the hand of the government which passed the Public Health Act of 1848.

A Central Board of Health was appointed with Chadwick as one of the Commissioners. He had for long advocated that every household should be provided with a piped water supply, that the streets should be paved and that efficient drainage works should be installed. Sewage should be led away in pipes, flushed by domestic and rain-water drainage and sold to farmers as manure. What paradise!

The Central Board was empowered to appoint local boards of health when re-



Normans Place. These four houses appear to be on the 1830s map as well as the two with long front gardens to the left. At the far end of this block of four Mr Thomas Marsden seems to have lived at one time – see Chapter 3.

quested by existing local authorities, or by one-tenth of the local inhabitants or if the local death rate was above the national average of twenty-three per thousand. Each local board was to consist of people of substantial property elected under arrangements made by a leading citizen. These provisions resulted inevitably, as Chadwick said in "the local government of a class, and that class the well-to-do-class". There was no effective means of ensuring that a local board did its job properly, since it was not really responsible to the local people and any semblance of central control disappeared when the Central Board itself was disbanded in 1854, the victim of reactionary *laissez faire* – or *laissez mourir*.

The only reason why the middle and upper classes (with a few honourable exceptions) began to look to the well-being of working-class people was that violent disease might enter their houses too. Abysmal sanitary conditions caused epidemics which spread from the grossly overcrowded lodging houses and 'courts' to the streets around and indeed to the comfortable villas and mansions themselves.

Altrincham was, of course, still quite a small town in mid-century and on the face of it perhaps unlikely to have been subject to the same perils as the Lancashire factory towns, which were much larger and had seen the enormous proliferation of tiny



Wellington Place. One of two rows of seven houses built between the late 1830s and 1852.



Sandiway. The middle size group of houses was built between the late 1830s and 1852.

houses without proper sanitary provision. Nevertheless, violent disease in the form of typhus, dysentery and other stomach disorders became rampant even in Altrincham from the mid-1840s onwards and caused the death toll to rise as follows:

year to 31/3/44	—	78
year to 31/3/45	—	76
year to 31/3/46	—	105
year to 31/3/47	—	135
year to 31/3/48	—	122

with the rate approaching thirty per thousand.

At this point some of the leading local citizens capitulated to dire necessity and decided to call in a Board of Health Inspector. In 1851, Sir Robert Rawlinson, a distinguished sanitary engineer, issued a report which must rank as a dramatic historical document. It merits a separate chapter.

THE BOARD OF HEALTH REPORT 1851

Sir Robert Rawlinson, the Board of Health Inspector, began his report noting the quite rapid growth in the population of the town in the previous century which had accelerated through the period with a doubling in the last twenty-five years. From the 1841 figure of 3,399 there had been an increase of 1,473 to 4,872 in 1849. Curiously, this figure is nearly 400 more than the 1851 Census total. The Inspector had clearly made a very detailed study because he was able to relate his figures to the number of inhabited houses, which had increased from 616 to 785 or 27% compared with a population increase of 43%. More specifically, he reported that there had been an increase of one-sixth in the number of people living in the existing 1841 houses. The overcrowding factor was clearly becoming ominous.

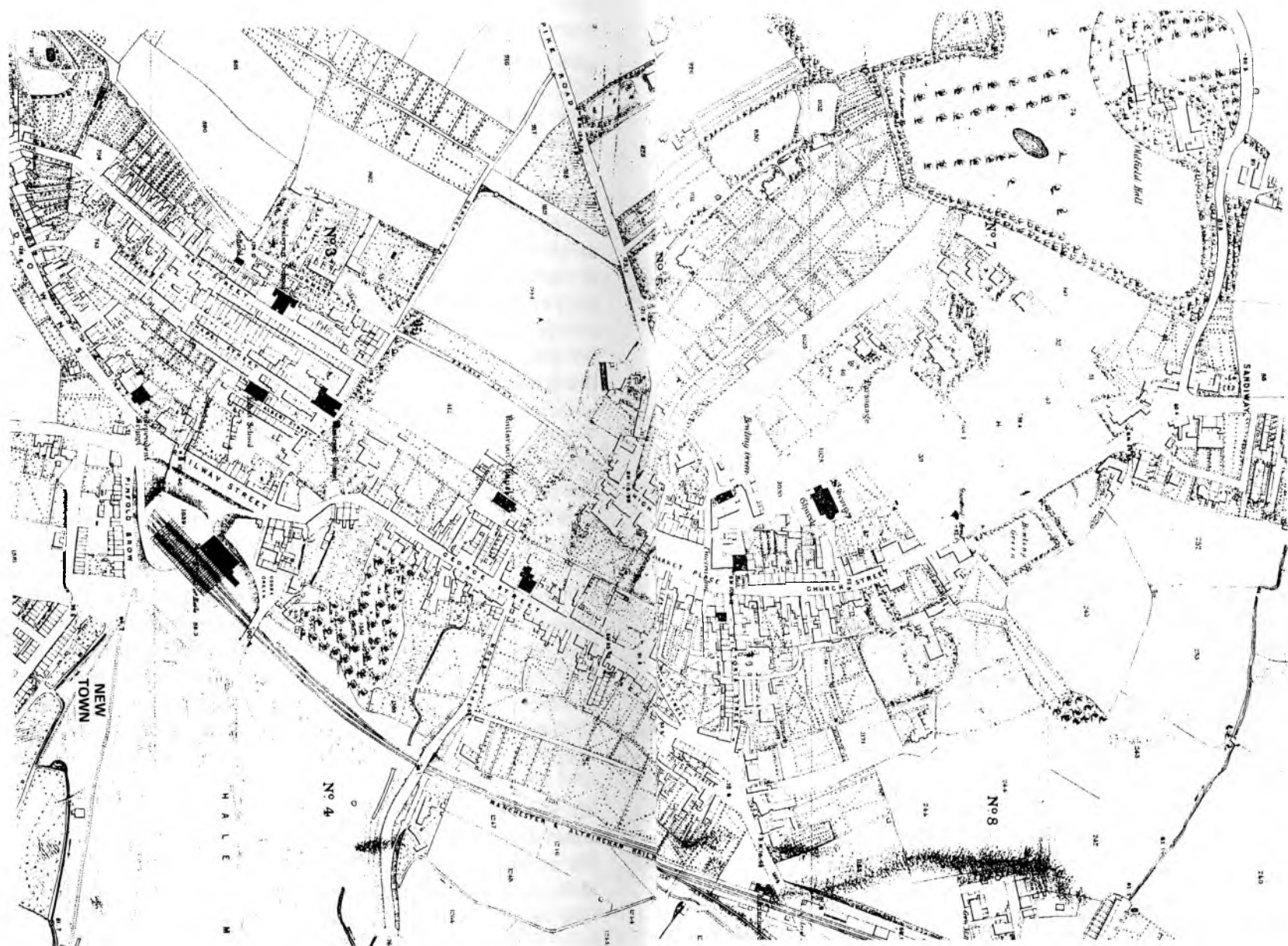
The report noted that the local death rate had increased to over 29%, or at least 25% on an alternative method of counting, whereas in well-regulated districts the figure was no more than 15%. A total of some 50 preventable deaths a year indicated about 1,500 preventable cases of sickness – certainly a high figure for a population of less than 5,000.

The causes of this sad state of affairs were clearly the absence of any general system of drainage, the lack of proper paving (which meant that contamination of the ground surface resulted in contamination of water supply), and a basic inadequacy of clean water. There were just two public pumps in the middle of the town plus the well water from Hale Moss. What water there was, was far too hard for proper use for drinking, cooking or washing.

As far as the local roads were concerned, a little over a mile was paved with boulders, four-and-a-half miles with broken stone and gravel and about a half a mile was just sandy.

The condition of particular areas were described. New Street, 407 yards in length and containing 104 houses was neither paved, sewered or drained. Chapel Street nearby was neither paved nor drained. Mr Charles Balshaw was quoted as saying that he had lately built ten houses in this street but had been unable to let them because of want of drains. Many of the existing houses were let as common lodgings and the cellars of several of them were used as distinct dwellings. In Hope Square, just off New Street, there were open middens (pits several yards in depth, bricked round and divided into compartments) into which the refuse from nearby privies was put and kept a year or more.

The report said that there were altogether some 26 common lodging houses with



546 nominal occupants, but in reality often many more. All of these were without proper means of ventilation, drainage or other sanitary convenience.

The appalling conditions in which a large proportion of the people of Altrincham lived can well be imagined without spelling them out too graphically. They were compounded by such accessory factors as the keeping of animals like pigs in and around the tiny homes. Further, there were two slaughter houses in the town centre without drainage or a water supply. Their refuse accumulated on or near the premises.

There was no doubt in the mind of the Inspector that typhus and dysentery originated mainly in the low lodging houses and in the dirty squares and alleys occupied by working-class people. He made specific recommendations for a comprehensive drainage system, like that installed in Bury, and advised that the liquid sewage could profitably be applied to local farming land in place of the solid manure brought from Manchester. This land would also be made more productive if it were deep drained. The need for improved water supplies was stressed. A local governing body – a Board of Health – was recommended to bring about these vital reforms.

Sir Robert's report was embellished by a number of other observations. The state of the rivers of the area was epitomised by the existence of thick surface scum over which birds walked, together with the presence of the putrid carcasses of dead animals. Nearer home, there were no public walks or gardens in the Altrincham area, a deficiency which surely needed to be remedied.

The Inspector also had a somewhat jaundiced view of the government of the town, or the lack of it. Possibly he exceeded his brief when he commented on such things as the local gas supply and the water supply. The first of these related to the local gas supply. It was Mr. George Massey, the proprietor of the Unicorn Hotel in the Market Place, who initiated the gas supply from a small plant in the rear of the hotel. In 1846 the Altrincham Gas Company was formed with a subscribed capital of £4,000, and in the following year production was transferred to a new works on Hale Moss, where British Gas still operates; and the capital of the company was increased to £40,000 (or some £1.5m in 1991 money value). In the early 1850s gas lighting was installed throughout the town in place of the old oil lamps.

In his 1851 report, Sir Robert Rawlinson commented that the price of gas supplied by the company was far too high and advised that the town authorities should negotiate to take over the operation and manage it for the benefit of ratepayers. In this respect he commended the example of Manchester where the price of gas was much

On previous two pages: map of Altrincham 1852.

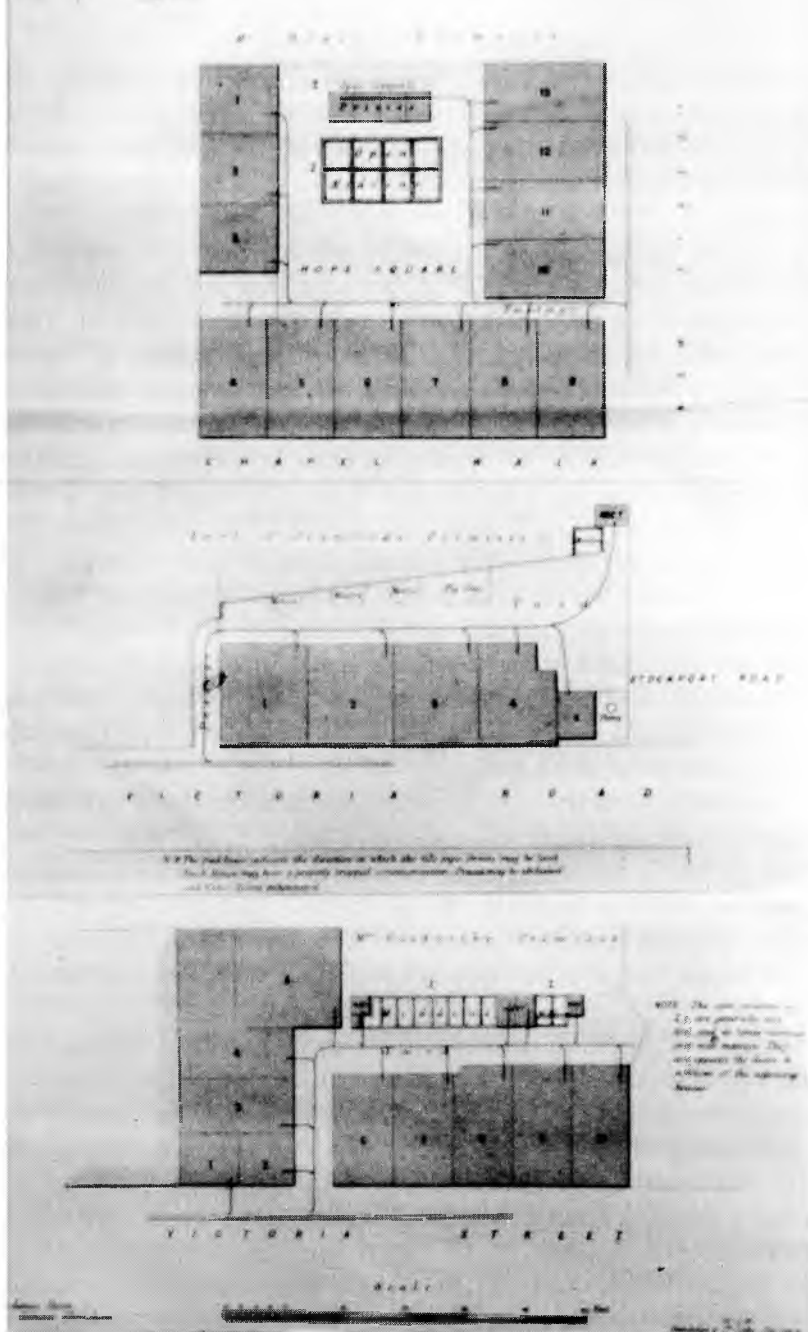
lower. What Sir Robert did not reveal was that Manchester was the solitary instance of a municipality which supplied its own gas from the outset, at first (1807) for its own offices and later (1817) for the public. Naturally the good businessmen of Altrincham did not follow this example. One wonders which of them had shares in the gas company.

The story is similar for the town's water supply. Apart from a few primitive pumps and open wells, there was, in fact, a copious flow of water from a spring on Hale Moss, the principal potential for an improved supply to the town. There was discussion about the possibility of pumping the water to a tower on The Downs. However, as Sir Robert Rawlinson had said, the water was too hard and the project was abandoned. Other suggestions were considered but fears of the public financial burden apparently paralysed the actions of the Local Board of Health. Charles Nickson commented, "Weak and timid counsels dogged the laggard steps of the Authority, and while it halted and hesitated, the opportunity was taken advantage of by private enterprise." In 1857 the North Cheshire Water company was formed and obtained ample supplies from the mains of the Manchester Corporation. One wonders who had shares also in the water company.

Municipal abdication took many forms. Perhaps the most absurd example was that of the Manchester fire brigade. This was provided by the fire insurance companies to quench fires in buildings insured by them. To buildings not bearing their plate they applied the principle of *laissez bruler*.

It is true that quite early on the new Altrincham Board of Health took steps to improve the drainage system, for which it raised a loan of £3,000. However, the initial solution – to convey the sewage to Timperley Brook – was clearly unsatisfactory. It was not until 1869 that the sewage was diverted to Woodcote Farm, at Sinderland, where the irrigation principle was followed with considerable improvement to the land. Sir Robert Rawlinson had proposed this solution eighteen years before. Such was progress!

The final topic on which the Inspector commented, the Mayor's Land, requires delving into more distant history. From the middle of the fifteenth century the Court Leet had elected a Mayor and in 1699 the Earl of Warrington had endowed the position with money for the discharge of its duties. This was invested in a number of plots of land to which others were added later. The largest plot of all seem to have been some six acres where Pennine Drive and Malvern Drive were built in the 1960s. By 1850 the annual income from all this land amounted to some £80. Casting around for the means to finance the drainage and other improvements he had recommended, Sir Robert Rawlinson suggested that the income from the Mayor's Land could make a contribution. At the time most of this income, by custom, was used to



Drainage plans from Board of Health Report. Note Hope Square to which reference is made above

defray the cost of the Mayor's dinners at the Easter and Michaelmas Court Leets. Each of these cost some £30 or perhaps £1,000 or more in today's money. (What is perhaps more pertinent is that it represented approximately the annual wage of a skilled man in the cotton textile industry of south Lancashire.) Sir Robert clearly considered it regrettable that these funds were, as he put it, "squandered in orgies".

His comments on this subject were an eloquent condemnation of a class and of a society. The members of the Court Leet held their positions essentially because they were among the wealthy of Altrincham society. Their power may have been somewhat limited, but they were the only people with any kind of responsibility for the well-being of the community. If they had wished to do something about the squalid plight of a large proportion of this community, there is no evidence of it. Money they did not lack, but will they did.

1851 was the very year in which the Earl of Stamford decided to spend a fortune on the building of a great church with no parish and no parishioners, but with the expectation that sufficient wealth existed in the neighbourhood to finance the construction of a large number of mansions around the new church. Yet so far from the wealthy local people proposing a scheme for providing the basic decencies of sanitation and water supply for the ordinary citizens of Altrincham, the members of the Court Leet, twice a year, squandered the equivalent of a skilled man's annual wages – money provided for the discharge of public office – in what a distinguished official termed 'orgies'.

Far from taking any positive initiative of their own to remedy the desperate plight of the townspeople, this tiny privileged local oligarchy had eventually felt obliged to call in external assistance in the form of a Board of Health Inspector. But what induced this despairing action? Certainly not a belated compassion for the suffering people of Altrincham. The final stimulus for the cry for external assistance came not from altruism but from the growing realisation that, as the death toll rose relentlessly in the late 1840s, typhus was, in the end, no respecter of persons or class.

As the result of the Inspector's report a new authority was installed. But as Edwin Chadwick had foreseen, the new local governors also came from the same well-to-do class that supplied the officers of the indolent Court Leet. Our earlier brief preview of their implementation of the Inspector's recommendations has not given us a great sense of confidence in the effectiveness of their operations. We need, however, to take a more detailed and closer look at what happened.

Before we do this, it is interesting to note the specific terms of the report of the General Board of Health to the Queen in Council at Windsor submitting the recommendation that a Local Board of Health should be established in Altrincham. The report recites that –

"it appears that there is no Act of Parliament in force within the said township for paving, lighting (otherwise than for the profit of proprietors or shareholders), cleansing, watching, regulating, supplying with water, or improving such township or any part thereof ..."

The terms of reference were clearly quite wide. Particularly noteworthy is the indication that lighting for private profit was not necessarily a sufficient arrangement.

THE LOCAL BOARD OF HEALTH

The first election of members of the Altrincham Local Board of Health took place in March 1851. It appears that some 400 odd citizens voted for nine members from the fourteen candidates. Since there were at least 4,500 people living in the town at the time it was clear that the property qualification excluded the great majority of them from voting, even allowing for that proportion who were children. Only about 15% of the adult population voted. However, since women could not vote, this figure is not really so low as it seems. There was an even more stringent qualification for the Board members – they had to own property worth at least £1,000 (perhaps £35-£40,000 today) or be paying rates for the relief of the poor of Altrincham on an annual value of at least £30.

The successful candidates were:

Samuel Barratt

wine merchant and a dealer in land, who had premises in High Street.

Jesse Blew

a calico printer and merchant who lived on The Downs.

Richard Broadbent

surgeon, who lived in a large house apparently called Oaklands, in over three acres of land on the west corner of Groby Place and Dunham Road. He also owned a large area of land on the other side of Groby Place on which four houses stood. He was fifty-three years of age in 1851, a widower, whose daughter lived with him together with five servants. He had a consulting practice in High Street.

William M. Millington

a landowner who lived next door to Mr. Broadbent on Dunham Road in about 1.5 acres of land. Aged forty-six, he lived with his wife, eight children and four servants including a teacher.

Robert William Bennett

aged 38, was an Attorney-at-law and Solicitor who lived in a house to the north of Normans Place in about 1.2 acres of garden on the corner of Normans Place and Garden Walk (now Regent Road). The property belonged to the Earl of Stamford in

1852. Bennett lived with his wife, a son and two servants. The house has disappeared.

Thomas Marsden

'gentleman', a neighbour of Bennett in Normans Place, owned much of the land and property on the north side of the Place. It included a row of four houses close to the street (in one of which Marsden apparently lived although he does not show up in the 1851 Census), together with two which have long front gardens.

Edward Joynson

who was unmarried and lived in Downs Cottage on the Downs with his mother, two sisters and a brother who was a silk manufacturer. Joynson himself is described as a Magistrate for the County of Chester.

John Mort

draper, who lived in Church Street (Manchester Road).

William Warren

'gentleman', who appears, in fact, to have been an agent for the Clerical Medical and General, Life Assurance Society with premises or a house on Victoria Street.

In an 1860 Directory Barratt, Broadbent and Marsden are named as three of the six principal owners of estates in the area apart from the Earl of Stamford.

Richard Broadbent was elected Chairman, a perhaps natural consequence of his having been Mayor of the Court Leet in 1849 and 1850. Yet we should remember that it was he who presided over the 'orgies' of eating and drinking pilloried by the Inspector, Sir Robert Rawlinson. It appears that the local leaders who chose him as their chairman were not unduly concerned about these activities. The Court Leet continued in being for a little time with criticisms of its dining habits being heard for many years afterwards. The question of the Mayor's Land was not quickly resolved. Such was the conscience of the ruling local class. But in this it was not very different from other baronial boroughs round about. Such criticisms were made of Manchester Court Leet towards the end of the eighteenth century.

It is not easy to understand how Richard Broadbent, who was born at Rostherne, became so wealthy as a surgeon by the middle of the century. However, he could not have become a surgeon at that time had he not come from a fairly well-to-do family, so he probably inherited considerable wealth. Broadbent was clearly attracted to the neighbouring riches of Dunham Massey, and his two daughters were married in St.

Margarets Church in 1856 and 1858. He remained as Chairman of the Altrincham Board of Health for eleven years, retiring only in 1862.

The Board, apparently with the minimal staff of a surveyor and a secretary, was extremely active, meeting every fortnight for the first few years and sometimes more frequently.¹ A great miscellany of items was considered, from a multitude of individual cases of control or transgression to the major topics of gas supply, sewage, paving and water supply.

It seems clear enough that an effective system of control of new building was put into operation. Individual applicants were frequently sent away to amend their plans. Some inspection of existing buildings was carried out, especially in respect of "cess pools and other nuisances", and certain property owners were ordered to remedy some of the worst defects of sanitary arrangements. A real effort was made to keep the streets in a better condition with transgressors being summonsed in respect of such misdemeanours as depositing coal or horse manure on the road and failing to remove it for many hours. Removers of "night soil" were prosecuted for not being out of the town streets by 8.00 am or for using leaky carts.

One poor woman was summonsed for causing an obstruction by selling oysters from a cart in Railway Street. A man was summonsed for keeping his lodging house in a dirty and filthy state and allowed to get off without a fine by surrendering his licence.

The Board expressed concern about the prevalence of smallpox in a current epidemic among the Working Classes (*sic!*) and the managers of schools were instructed to forbid children entry to the schools unless they had been vaccinated. In 1853 the Board decided to build Lloyds Fever Hospital at a cost of £600, part of which came from a gift by Elizabeth Lloyd of Oldfield Hall, whose husband had died in 1850. It was essentially an isolation hospital without medical staff, where doctors could treat their own patients. It was also available for cases of accident occurring to poor and destitute persons of the area, including Bowdon as well as Altrincham.

There were some interesting debates about gas supply. Clearly, the Board had taken some note of the Inspector's strictures on the price of 8s 4d per thousand feet initially charged by the new gas company; and his proposal that the municipality should take over the supply. In July 1852 a motion was passed requiring the company to restrict dividends to six percent on capital, and to discuss the terms of supply with the Board. Mr Mort dissented from this motion on the grounds that the company had already reduced the price of gas and could be relied upon to continue distributing only modest dividends. Interestingly, in view of what followed, Richard Broadbent voted for this motion.

A few weeks later the company was asked, as a condition of permission to install

gas mains, to reduce the price of gas to 6s 8d per 1,000 feet and lower, if practicable, and to commit itself to selling the whole operation to the Board later, at an independent valuation, if the Board secured Parliamentary power to supply gas itself. At the meeting of the Board when the relevant resolution was passed, only five members were present and two of them, Messrs Broadbent and Barratt did not vote because they were shareholders in the gas company!

The directors of the company demurred on the grounds that they could not commit the company to act in a future hypothetical situation, without a general meeting of shareholders. In the end the request was dropped and the company was allowed to proceed, subject to the proposed price reduction and to stringent conditions about the detailed construction arrangements. The board's resolution to this effect was carried unanimously with both Barrett and Broadbent voting. Several proposals were later discussed for the town to take over the operation, the last being unanimously rejected at a public meeting of ratepayers in 1893.

Of course the matters which most concerned the Board were the basic requirements for sewage disposal, draining, paving and water supply. After some hesitation, a decision was taken to call in an expert. The obvious man was Robert Rawlinson who had been the Central Board of Health Inspector. The Board appointed him as Engineer for the project in October 1852 after approving his proposals. A detailed survey of the town was undertaken, resulting in the wonderful map (reproduced on pp.12-13) which shows the shape of every house, the location of pumps and much else, at a total cost of £256.

Finally, in February 1853 the whole scheme was approved by the Central Board of Health at the costs of:

£2,600 for sewerage and drainage

£5,300 for a water supply from a spring on Hale Moss

This latter was said to produce acceptably soft water which was to be pumped to a tower on The Downs. The cost of redeeming a mortgage of some £8,000 to cover the total scheme was calculated as being equivalent to $2\frac{1}{2}$ d per week for each of the 900 houses in the town. In 1991 money this is less than 50p per week.

Even this modest cost was not without opposition. In December 1852, a meeting of ratepayers and owners of property was arranged by the Mayor at the Town Hall for the voicing of protests at the expense of the scheme. The meeting decided to send a deputation to the Board of Health to ask questions and express concern. The Board took umbrage at it all. By a majority of three to two it resolved that no proper meeting of ratepayers could be called except by the Board itself as representative of the ratepayers. The Board was, however, prepared to receive individual ratepayers. The

At the first Meeting of the Local Board of Health for the District of Altrincham held at the Office of Mr Isaac Furton in High Street Altrincham this fourth day of April 1857

Present

Mr. Samuel Barratt

Mr. Robert William Bennett

Mr. Edward Johnson

Mr. Richard Broadbent

Mr. Thomas Marsden

Mr. John West

Mr. William Mancu

Mr. William Melue Millington

All of whom made the Declaration severally required by the Public Health Act as follows.

I Richard Broadbent of Dunham Road Altrincham Surgeon do solemnly declare that I am rated to the Relief of the poor of Altrincham upon the Annual value of thirty pounds.

(signed)

Richard Broadbent

Made before us Samuel Barratt and William Melue Millington Members of the Local Board of Health for the District of Altrincham this fourth day of April 1857.

(signed)

Sam^l Barratt

William M. Millington

upshot appears to have been that the dissidents presented the Board with a long list of questions and suggestions which were answered in a somewhat summary fashion. This was possibly the last attempt by the Mayor to challenge the authority of the Board.

The Board took an initial mortgage of £2,000, later increased to £3,000, to help to cover the cost of the drainage system and the work appears to have been successfully concluded during 1853. Certainly by May the Board was arguing about resolutions to oblige the owners of property in streets which were not highways to connect their houses, etc., to the main drains, and also to pave, flag and channel the streets. The principal areas seemed to have been Sandiway and New Town (in the vicinity of Sainsbury's car park), although there was also Beggars' Square off George Street. The Board itself took responsibility for the paving of New Street, Chapel Street and Albert Street by a resolution of August 1853.

The Board spent some time discussing and negotiating with the representatives of the Earl of Stamford about the additional costs of receiving sewage from his land at Bowdon and Dunham into the new drainage system. Eventually, agreement was reached on the contribution to the total cost to be made by the Earl.

So, stumbling at first, the Local Board of Health had, within two and a half years of its establishment, made substantial progress towards achieving its obvious objectives, although, as already indicated, drainage to Timperley Brook was clearly not an enduring solution. There were still problems about water supply and the wrangling on this subject lasted for another four years. There were clearly doubts about the suitability of the Hale Moss spring water because of its relative hardness. At one point the doubts about this seemed to be resolved only for another protracted argument with Lord Stamford to develop about the terms on which he would allow water to be taken. There was also a problem about the land for building a water tower.

The first suggestion about taking water from Manchester came early in 1854 but nothing came of it. Two years later some rate-payers of towns bordering on the Washway Road sent a memorandum to the Manchester Water Works Committee about a supply and this apparently led in September 1856 to a formal proposal to the Local Board of Health signed by the Town Clerk of Manchester indicating the capital cost and terms of supply. The Board took fright at the idea of finding £16,000 and unanimously rejected the offer. A year later the Board agreed terms with the North Cheshire Water Company for the supply of Manchester water, and in February 1858 there was an additional agreement of the terms for water for street watering and flushing sewers.

So, although progress on the drainage and paving issues had been relatively quick, the more expensive business of securing proper water supply had taken a long time.

Undoubtedly the health of the people of Altrincham would benefit greatly from the provision of these basic necessities of a civilised life, but there were other pressing problems developing. Indeed, one could well say that this much progress had been made only in the nick of time. In the 1850s more than 2,000 extra people were added to the population of Altrincham, almost a 50% increase, and in little more than twenty years the number of inhabitants doubled. The problems caused by this great expansion were as nothing to what would have happened if the basic sanitary and water supply requirements had not been met.

The Local Board of Health clearly considered that its principal tasks had been accomplished. From 1855 meetings were held only once a month or even less frequently and were much shorter. Some arrangements were made for gas supply for streets. Rates were duly set each year, new building applications considered, a new road agreed to be built by the Earl of Stamford from Stamford Road to the Bridgewater Canal (presumably what is now Bridgewater Street) and individual misdemeanours penalised. Among the latter continued frequent occurrences of people taking in lodgers without being registered and the occasional summons for permitting persons of opposite sexes, not being man and wife, to sleep in the same room. In June 1863 Martin Stantering is accused of having eight lodgers in three beds in one room, two men in one bed, and two men and a woman in each of the others – all this in an unregistered house! Matthew Corrogon was in trouble on more than one occasion, most notably for having three people in each of two beds plus an undressed man concealed in a closet in the kitchen. Compared with these salacious wrongdoings, one can perhaps have more concern, and perhaps a smile, for the woman charged with hanging her washing across a street in New Town and a man penalised for ‘riding his cart asleep at night’.

Of course the membership of the Board changed somewhat as the years passed, especially as there was a legal requirement for one third of the nine members to retire or seek re-election each year. A possibly unique system of self-discipline was adopted, apparently to ensure maximum attendance at meetings. The three members who were present at the least meetings each year were the ones who had to retire! There were, nevertheless, four of the original Board who survived the first ten years – Messrs Broadbent, Bennett, Barratt and Mort. Somewhat curiously, both Barratt and Mort had been Mayors during the 1850s. Mort died in 1864 to be succeeded by Samuel Holker Norris, who lived in one of the big houses on Dunham Road along from Broadbent and Millington, together with six children, two cousins, seven servants and a nurse. He was one of the four original Trustees of St. Margaret’s Church.

We do not have the space nor the need to list or describe all the new members but one name in particular should be noted. From 1854 to 1857 Dr. Alexander H. Pater-

son, Member of the Royal College of Surgeons and Practitioners, was on the Board. As recorded in *Mansions and Men*, from 1856 onwards he lived at Oakfield (now Levenhurst) a very substantial house on St. John's Road. Before that he is recorded in the 1851 Census as living in the High Street, but today apparently the same house is known as 16 Market Street. On 15th May 1991, under an arrangement made by the Altrincham History Society in conjunction with Bellway Homes Ltd, who now occupy the house, and Trafford Borough Council, a blue plaque was unveiled on its wall, commemorating the fact that the family of Alexander Patterson's daughter, Helen Allingham, the watercolour artist, lived in the area between 1849 and 1862. It was another epidemic, of diphtheria this time, which killed both Dr. Patterson and Helen's youngest sister Isobel, aged three, bringing to an end the family's sojourn in the area.

There had been a fever epidemic in the previous year. A Board minute records that it had abated, although in Russell Street in New Town there had recently been thirty-three cases resulting in three deaths. All the ashpits and privies in New Town, Albert Street, Chapel Street and indeed "all the streets at that end of town" had been cleared, and a great number of pigsties in the town had been removed. It was intended to proceed to cleanse all the ashpits and privies in the rest of the town. Yet the diphtheria epidemic of 1862 is not mentioned in the minutes.

Applications for permits to build houses on the fringes of the town became more frequent in the early 1860s, for instance, at the near end of what are now Barrington and Grosvenor Roads, near Hale Moss and on Stockport Road. These occasionally drove the Board to conclude that a new road was needed.

In 1864 a fire engine was ordered. The salary of the Board's Surveyor, Mr Turton, was increased from £40 to £60 and that of the Secretary from £30 to £40. It was not evident that these changes were justified by increasing workloads, but the new salaries were hardly generous.

In pursuing these records of the proceedings of the Board, one is indeed increasingly impressed with the relative triviality and negative aspect of much of their short and less frequent meetings. Even epidemics got barely a mention. There were certainly no recorded discussion about the general health of the town nor about further measures to improve it. Individual housing applications were considered without reference to any kind of general plan, let alone any idea of positive action to ensure there were houses for the swiftly rising number of working people.

From the outset the Board had had a minimal organisation indicative of a general philosophy among the well-to-do ruling community in the town that the essential objective was to remedy the basic deficiencies of sanitation, drainage, water supply and street paving. There was no will nor enthusiasm for borough enterprise, only for en-



16 Market Street (formerly High Street).

abling and enforcing private action under contract – after all they could have shares in the monopoly suppliers, couldn't they? Once the basic objectives had been substantially achieved, the Board clearly felt there was little scope left for it. The immediate and glaring deficiencies of a *laissez faire* society having been remedied, the free market was clearly to be left to inspire further development subject to the minimum controlling role of a little more than token local government. It was to be a long time before the realities of an expanding, industrialising yet concentrating society were to bring about, with a gradual democratisation, a change of heart.

In respect of this general philosophy, Altrincham was quite typical of England as a whole, and in some respects it appears to have been rather more effective than most towns in remedying the basic deficiencies of urban life. It was one of 182 smaller towns which secured the appointment of Boards of Health under the 1848 Act, which must have left a considerable number which did not, although their problems may have been considerably less than those of the fast-expanding town close to Manchester. Those larger towns which were incorporated as boroughs had public health functions added to their councils' responsibilities, but many of them appear not to have exercised their powers very effectively.

Certainly the general situation was unsatisfactory enough to oblige Parliament in

1866 to pass the Sanitary Act requiring towns to appoint inspectors to check that water supplies and drainage were adequate. Disease and poor public health led to the appointment of a Royal Sanitary Commission in 1869 which concluded that generally speaking local authorities had remained inactive in remedying insanitary conditions in their areas. Its report led to the important Public Health Acts of 1872 and 1875 which greatly extended and codified the sanitary duties of local authorities.

There appears to be little evidence about the detailed operation of particular Boards of Health, but it is instructive to compare Altrincham's general progress with that of Congleton which had been a borough since the seventeenth century and by 1801 already had 3,861 inhabitants, rising to 10,520 by 1850 – over twice as many as Altrincham. The essential reason for its growth was its substantial involvement in textile manufacture, particularly of silk like its neighbour Macclesfield.

In 1849 Congleton petitioned for a local board of health under the 1848 Act. Unfortunately there is no record of the report of the inspector but in 1853 the former health committee of the council was reconstituted and it has to be assumed that the council itself was constituted as the Board of Health. The work of sanitary inspection was at first carried out by the police, but in 1860 a part-time special sanitary inspector was appointed. The first part-time medical officer of health was appointed in 1873.

Little appears to be recorded about progress in public health improvements in the town but to judge from the water supply aspect, Altrincham made more rapid progress. With the growing realisation that the contamination of wells was causing typhoid, various schemes for improved water supplies were considered and a plan to build a reservoir abandoned on grounds of cost. It was not until 1881 that a proper town water supply was organised by pumping spring water to a 200 foot high tower. By 1888 the medical officer of health was able to report a considerable decrease in the death rate and the virtual elimination of typhoid.

As regards gas supply, however, Congleton could claim more of a positive success than Altrincham. A private company had started supplying gas as early as 1834 and was soon successful in making a good profit out of supplying a wide area. Yet in 1866 an Act of Parliament was secured by the council authorising it to buy the gas works for £12,500. This apparently turned out to be good business with the council providing a plentiful supply of cheap gas to the whole town and making a profit which was available for social purposes including improved roads.

Manchester itself had, as we have noted, instituted its own gas supply system early in the century, but its progress with dealing with its tremendous public health problems was patchy and slow. Until it achieved borough status in 1838 it had been governed by Police Commissioners under whom a Board of Health was established to

cope with the cholera epidemic of 1832. A celebrated report by one of its members, Dr J.P. Kay, drew attention to the need for effective action by quoting numerous examples of horrifyingly insanitary conditions.

"In Parliament Street, there is only one privy for 380 inhabitants, which is placed in a narrow passage, whence its effluvia infest the adjacent houses and must prove a most fertile source of disease ... Many of the courts in the neighbourhood of Portland Street ... are not more than a yard and a quarter wide and contain houses, frequently three stories high, the lowest of which stories is occasionally used as a receptacle of excrementitious matter."

Of the working class districts as a whole, Kay reported that

"the houses of the poor are too generally built back to back, having therefore only one outlet, no yard, no privy, and no receptacle for refuse. Consequently, the narrow unpaved streets in which mud and water stagnate, become the common receptacles of offal and ordure ... The streets, in the district where the poor reside, are generally unsewered, and the drainage is consequently superficial."

Such was the cost of cotton wealth.

It is easy to see why it took so long to remedy these dire conditions. The cost of paving and sewerage was of course considerable and although theoretically it could be recovered from property owners, this was easier said than done. Between 1830 and 1844 more than thirty-four miles of sewers had been constructed, and by 1844 480 streets had been paved and sewerage, leaving 450 streets to be done. Nevertheless, a Dr Lyon Playfair, in a report of 1845 on the state of large towns in Lancashire, considered Manchester to be far ahead of such towns as Liverpool and Salford in the sewerage operations.

Stockport, Manchester's close neighbour and fellow textile town, though much smaller with less than 50,000 people in mid-century, had a public health record as bad, if not worse. Considering its modest size – although of course many times bigger than Altrincham – it is astonishing that by 1869 its death rate was up at 31.43 per thousand only fractionally less than Manchester's at 32.01. From the mid-1830s the new town council seems to have passed the buck backwards and forwards with the Board of Guardians. No local Board of Health was set up.

Until 1854 public health activity seems to have been confined to such sticking plaster operations as the covering of privies and cesspools, the cleansing of lodging houses and half-hearted attempts to limit the nuisance caused by factory smoke. In the mid-1850s a number of sewers were constructed in the town centre, to be discharged into the River Bollin. More extensive sewerage was undertaken in the 1860s so that in the 1869 a council representative could claim that the town was well se-

wered, but the flushing of the sewers was poor because the waterworks belonged to a private company and the water was expensive. The first proper sewage disposal works at Cheadle Heath was not opened until 1899. However, the council did buy the gas undertaking from a private company in 1836 and used the profits to subsidise the rates.

Macclesfield was a somewhat smaller town of over 30,000 people in mid-century. Here again the town council which took charge in the late 1830s was extremely weak and ineffective so that conditions in many streets were appalling causing the death rate to rise to 33% before a Board of Health was formed in 1852. Early progress was made on paving and draining the streets and improving the water supply system which had been instituted much earlier, but the sewage problem persisted much longer, again until a sewerage works was established at the end of the century.

So the specific efforts of different local authorities to deal with these new problems, created by the deadly and rapid concentration of people into towns and cities, obviously varied considerably. Partly, no doubt this variation was the result of widely different local circumstances which make it difficult to pass judgment. In any event we have to remember, as Sidney and Beatrice Webb wrote

"that all the disastrous changes in the environment of the common people, due to the Industrial Revolution, ... continued in operation, in some cases with accelerating speed during the whole of the first half of the nineteenth century and even later. The population, in spite of (and perhaps because of) widespread destitution and servitude, went on increasing, with more and more crowding into the urban slums. The devastating torrent of nuisances ... went on spreading over the land maintaining the sickness rate, and the accident rate and the death rate at appallingly high figures."

The Webbs went on to recall that to cope with the unprecedented problems there was no administrative science, no properly organised National Executive and only limited science and law. Perhaps above all there was no body of trustworthy and trained professional officials. Thus it was small wonder that there was much fumbling on the part of local councillors and members of local boards of health, even if their motives were always disinterested. In this respect also they were predictably imperfect.

On the whole, therefore, our general conclusion must be that the town of Altrincham, through its Local Board of Health, dealt with its unprecedented problems of public health in a manner which was certainly no worse and may well have been rather better than the general run of towns and cities. Its problems were, of course, considerably less daunting than those of larger cities with which parallels are difficult to draw. In comparison with the general run of middle-sized towns, Altrincham

appears to have moved with reasonable speed to remedy the basic deficiencies of sanitation, water supply and the paving of streets. The town was fortunate in the sense that its greatest rise in population came after the middle of the century, i.e. after the main public health lessons were beginning to be learnt, whereas most of the other towns, the growth of which was closely connected with the development of industry, had multiplied earlier, accumulating almost unbelievable degradation. The formidable remaining problems of urban poverty and attendant dire overcrowding in mean houses coupled with numerous specific instances of offensive insanitary conditions would not, as well shall see, be remedied until well into the next century, either in Altrincham or elsewhere.

Notes

1. Fortunately the minutes of the Board are stored in Altrincham Public Library. Very legible in near-immaculate copperplate handwriting, they have been rebound and are a pleasure to read, albeit somewhat time-consuming.

THE POPULATION EXPLOSION

It has been noted earlier that the recorded population of Altrincham increased by almost 50% between the censuses of 1851 and 1861, an extra 2,200 people or thereabouts, with a similar number added in the following ten years. The number of houses went up from around 900 in 1851 to some 1240 in 1861. All these people were within the area included in the Altrincham Ward in 1991, except for those in some seventy houses on or near the Washway Road at Broadheath which is now a separate ward, and, by 1861, a few on the eastern side of the railway near the level crossing or beyond Lloyd Street towards the gas works on what is now Stamford Park Road.

The additional houses built in the ten year period were mainly within the effective 1851 boundaries or on the close fringes. As indicated above, some of these were around the original railway station near where the footpath now goes across the old level crossing. These included houses at the beginning of what are now Barrington and Grosvenor Roads with a few as far along as the eastern end of the present Ellesmere Road.

The most substantial single 'estate' expansion was in the New Town area from Lloyd Street south eastwards towards the railway line. In 1851 there were eighty houses, mainly in what was called 'Islington', although there several blocks of houses, and in the ten years to 1861 about 120 had been added in Lord Street, King Street, Paradise Street, Royle Street, John Street and Rupert Street. There had also been significant new building in New Street and Chapel Street with some forty extra houses.

There is little sign of new large houses being built for the middle and upper classes in this decade. Already by 1850 the trend had set in for the better off to move away from the town centre, further away from the threat of disease. The story is told in *Mansions and Men* of the development of the Higher Downs and the surrounding area about 1850, followed by the speculative building of large villas on St. Margarets Road and Woodville Road and soon afterwards by specially designed residences progressively approaching the status of mansions as they invaded virgin land to the north-west.

So although a substantial ring of middle class houses had by mid-century been established on and near The Downs and Normans Place, with a few houses on Dunham Road and to the north-east, further construction of such larger dwellings was to wait until later (except for the Dunham Massey evolution).

The 1850s did, however, see some changes of significance in the occupation of the



William Armitage

two real mansions to the north of the town. William Armitage, cotton manufacturer, took over at Townfield House with his ten children and six servants; and Oldfield Hall had a new owner in John Allen, merchant, with seven children and eight servants. Both families were to become important in the life of the area, the Armitages as strong leaders of the Congregationalists at Bowdon Downs Church as well as in local politics, the Allens supporting St. Margaret's Church.

The working class did not have the option of living in the salubrious isolation of Dunham Massey. No houses were built there for them for more than another sixty years. The extra numbers simply had to stay in or move into

the already crowded town. Robert Rawlinson in his 1851 Report had drawn attention to the additional numbers of people living in the houses which existed in 1841 – one sixth more, he said. In the 1850s the process continued alongside the in-filling of vacant sites in the existing streets.

It is difficult to draw precise conclusions about the density of occupation in terms of total numbers of people and houses, particularly because of some discrepancies in the figures. Rawlinson himself drew attention to the likelihood that the number of people staying in lodging houses was under-recorded. It seems clear enough that the number of such houses was increasing, especially in the Chapel Street area and also in George Street. We have already noted the surprising number of agricultural labourers. There were also quite a few railway workers. In some small houses there was a second family recorded as lodgers, but in the main it was a question of a growing number of single people without proper homes of their own who crowded into an



Townfield House. Very 'Italianate' or classical.

increasing number of lodging houses. Men tended to predominate, perhaps because women were able to live-in as domestic servants in the houses of the well-to-do. The cases related in the previous chapter about overcrowding in the bedrooms of lodging houses may well seem amusing, but we should not fall into the trap of regarding them light-heartedly. Did eight people really choose to sleep in the same small room?

The situation was clearly most severe in the area from New Street down to Railway Street. In Albert Street, where there were thirty-two houses both in 1851 and 1861, the number of people recorded in the census returns rose from 157 to 189 in the period. As has been mentioned, some additional houses were built in New Street and Chapel Street. Taking the three streets together, 1851 saw a total of 992 people in 217 houses; in 1861 there were 1341 people in 255 houses, the average number per house rising from 4.57 to 5.25. (In New Street, of course, there were some larger houses at the western end, but all the rest were quite small.)

On the other hand, in Islington in New Town the population number was static – 400 in its eighty original houses in 1861, the same as in 1851, but the New Town area as a whole expanded considerably. In 1861 there were some 1080 people in 209 houses, a density only slightly less than in the Chapel Street/New Street area. In any event these were both very densely populated areas. In 1991 the number of adults in the equivalent to the latter area was no more than 180 and, even allowing for young-

sters under eighteen, this is a far, far cry from 1,341, although it is true that part of that area now forms a car park. In the modern equivalent of New Town the comparison is similar.

In pondering the density of occupation in these two areas it is necessary to have regard to the size of the houses. From the very detailed map prepared for the Board of Health in 1852, it is possible to observe quite accurately their overall dimensions. In Albert Street most of them had widths of around 12 feet and depths varying from 20 to 23 feet, whereas in nearby Chapel Street many were about 15 feet by 20-21 feet. Many of the houses in New Street were similar but those which have survived on the north side nearest to the town are about 15 by 35 feet. They were all built on two floors but many had cellars. A few of the smaller ones were divided into two and, as the 1871 Census makes clear, a number of the cellars were separately occupied.

In New Town virtually all the houses were comparatively spacious – about 15 by 25 feet! This was evidently the measure of progress.

There is no doubt that things were as bad or worse in some of the older streets in the town centre. In June 1866, for instance, a Board of Health minute records three dwellings behind the Red Lion Inn which were below ground level, the only natural light coming from skylights. The drainage and sanitation were primitive and a midden stood close in front of the door. In these 'houses' twenty-eight people of all ages lived in twelve rooms. Some urgent improvements were recommended but the Board made it clear that "no such alterations can make decent habitations of such houses which under the most favourable external circumstances must always be ill-ventilated, close and unhealthy". There is no indication that the Board felt able or obliged to do anything about the sorry state of affairs.

In December 1867 the Medical Officer of Health reported on a row of tenements between George Street and Beggars Square (near the Bricklayers Arms). These tiny houses were virtually destitute of light and air. Their situation had been worsened by the rebuilding of a wall four feet from their front doors so as to cut off light and air from the ground floors. After rain the narrow passageway, which had grills in its surface, was no better than an offensive drain from two privies and two stables at the top end of the passage. The tenements were described as being quite unfit for human habitation.

In the next ten years to 1871, there appears to have been little change in the areas to the west and southwest which we have examined in some detail. In New Town the total number of inhabitants had increased from just under 1,100 to well over 1,200 in about thirty extra houses which were apparently in a new street called Russell Street, although there is some confusion about the recording of street names. This area was

pretty well built up by this time. The New Street, Chapel Street and Albert Street area also seems to have been filled up by 1861 since there is no increase in the number of 255 houses by 1871. Albert Street was still static in numbers of people but according to the census figures there were about ninety fewer people in the rest of the area a reduction which we should judge with some caution in view of the notorious difficulty of accurate reporting of the number of lodgers. It would certainly seem, however, that the position had not worsened in the last ten years.

Indeed there is significant evidence that the general housing position in the town had improved somewhat with an addition of 444 houses in the reported totals in the ten years, as a result of substantial extensions in the fringe areas of the town.

Near Altrincham Railway Station there was in the 1860s a large new building development around the beginning of Stockport Road, including some fifty houses on Oakfield Street. A short distance further away from the station a new suburban belt of modest middle class houses was developing around Orchard Road and in the 1870s in Osborne Road. On the town side of the railway, Barrington Road was also developing with large houses occupied by such people as a calico printer and several merchants as well as a boarding school. On the same side of the railway, along what is now Grosvenor Road, there were also further developments particularly in Mill Street and Mill Place.

The other major housing expansions came in the south-east towards Hale, along Ashley Road and Hale Road, where middle class houses appeared, and particularly in the new Byrom Street off Hale Road where some forty-five small houses were occupied by 1871. In this area an interesting appearance in the 1871 Census was British Schools Road, now Oxford Road. In 1861 the Bowdon Downs Congregational Church had opened a new school in the fields behind Ashley Road and Lloyd Street which became known as the British School. There were no roads leading to the school but by 1871 one had clearly been made.

A most notable increment of substantial houses came in Lyme Grove, a kind of extension of Normans Place reaching towards The Downs and running parallel to the path called The Narrows, which is part of the old direct route from Market Street in Altrincham to Bowdon Church which used to be called Bowdon Road, which was also known for a long time was known as Back Lane. The Firs, then called the Burying Lane, the continuation of this path to Bowdon Church, was also originally part of Bowdon Road.

In the following decade, from 1871 to 1881, came the biggest burst of population increase of all, with nearly 3,000 extra people in the town. It may well be of significance that this astonishing acceleration of an already rapid note of expansion was connected with a great increase in the building of mansions in Dunham Massey in the



Oakfield Street.

late 1860s and early 1870s. In this decade the provision of houses lagged behind in Altrincham, the records showing only 377 more. The major new developments were:

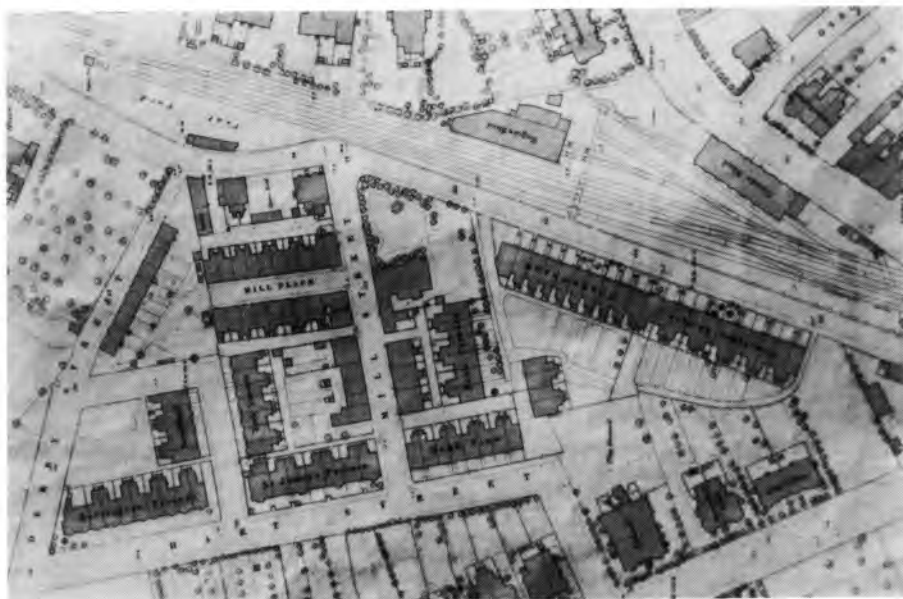
- ☐ In the south east adjoining New Town to its south and west towards Hale Road and Oxford Road, including John Street, Peter Street, Rigby Street, Pownall Street, Tipping Street and Heath Street (the area where Sainsburys, with its car park, now stands plus the area in the south-east towards the railway and Hale Road).
- ☐ Across Hale Road, Byrom Street had been joined by Bold Street, parallel to it and Bath Street at the far end. Brown Street was still to come.
- ☐ Near the beginning of Stockport Road, the developments of the 1860s were extended.
- ☐ Similarly the area near the southern end of Barrington and Grosvenor Roads was growing fast. Hart Street, Renshaw Street and Derby Street had been built and Hazel Road and Gaskell Road were beginning to take shape, together with the area across Barrington Road towards Church Street. Hawarden Road, Gladstone Road, Harcourt Road and Ellesmere Road as well as



Plan of New Town Area from a 1910 map.



Bold Street.



Plan of Mill Street Area from a 1876 map.



Derby Street.

Colwick Avenue, Poplar Avenue and Ashton Avenue had still to be built in the fields down to Navigation Road, on which there were a few houses. There was as yet no sign of Brunswick Road or Brien Avenue, although Bridge-water Road was beginning to take shape. On the canal some fifty people lived on boats; and at one time there was a church on the canal.

- ☐ From Lloyd Street to Moss Lane on the east of the railway there was a substantial development along and around Manor Road. There was also a Gypsy caravan in the area.
- ☐ There was a significant increase of larger houses for the upper middle classes either side of Dunham Road, with a few houses on Bentinck and Groby Roads, as well as on Booth and Grey Roads. Also Delamer and St. Johns Road appeared for the first time, although some houses had been built in the area much earlier.

In the crowded New Street and New Town areas there was little change. In the latter, apart from the extensions mentioned above, about 210 houses had 1,068 recorded inhabitants compared with 1,094 in 1871. In New Street, including nearby Wellington Street (not to be confused with middle class Wellington Place nearer The Downs), there were still nearly 500 people in 100 tiny houses. It is difficult to be sure about the number of houses in this area, since the census enumerator sometimes counts cellars as separate dwellings – there is a succession of nine of these in New Street in the 1881 census, each occupied mainly by one or two people including five charwoman, a laundress and a widow aged sixty-five shown as a ‘field labourer’. In Chapel Street, where some thirty odd houses seem to have been omitted, there are three ‘back houses’, presumably where the back halves of houses have been divided from the rest of the buildings – as well as one cellar dwelling. The one place where the record shows some improvement is Albert Street where the number of occupants was down to 140 compared with 190 in 1871, but this was an area well-known for its lodging houses or ‘doss houses’ and there may well have been some serious under-recording.

It should be noted that, bad as conditions were in the densely populated working-class areas of the town, they were not as horrendous as those we have described earlier in the acres of back-to-back houses in the sordid streets of Manchester and some of the larger south Lancashire towns, where poorly-built structures were hastily erected for the factory fodder of the newly mechanised cotton industry. Yet the Al-trincham conditions were wholly unsatisfactory as the environment for civilised living and stood in close and stark contrast to those in the same parish of St. Margaret only a few hundred yards away. In the thirty years since the Board of Health Report

some 100 great houses and mansions had been built around the Earl of Stamford's new church. The wealth for this lavish and indeed increasingly ostentatious life-style was dependant on the labours of the people existing in deplorable conditions further north, and supported by the services cheaply provided by people who dwelt in only marginally better conditions closer at hand.

A glance at the town map for 1882 will demonstrate that in these same thirty years the increase in the population of Altrincham by more than 150%, had necessitated the extension of the town's streets into the pattern which, by the end of the nineteenth century, would define its natural limits in relation to a shopping centre and a railway station to which most people needed to arrive on foot. The wealthy people of Dunham Massey, of course, had their horses and coaches or could use horse-drawn taxi-cabs, but they were in a small minority. When the internal combustion engine arrived it would all be different, but that was not yet. So for the time being over 11,000 people were crowded close in and around the old market town in streets which have remained essentially the same into the latter part of the twentieth century, subject to important additions in the north, of which more later.

What did they all do for a living? There was clearly a strict limit to the scope for doing jobs for each other, or even for their well-to-do neighbours. Substantial numbers commuted daily by train to work in Manchester. Yet it all seems hardly enough to sustain such a large population which was still growing, although at a somewhat slower rate in the 1880s, poor as most of them were. Indeed this slower rate may well itself be taken as evidence that the economic limits of the town were being reached. But help was at hand – one could say that the wider economic market responded to the situation, to the geographical advantages of Altrincham in terms of its natural environment and of communications, as well to the availability of people. What happened of course is that manufacturing industry came to Broadheath, but that is a story for another chapter.

However, before we proceed to that new phase of the town's history, we will review its major civic developments in the mid-Victorian era of 1850 to 1880 or thereabouts, a period in which almost all the 100 mansions of the Dunham Massey area were built, a process which probably involved at least as much capital and labour as the parallel construction of the 1,000 or so extra tiny working class houses in the same period and a modest number of middle class houses as well. That so much capital was available to finance all these buildings, great and small, is eloquent testimony to the mid-Victorian prosperity of a wealthy minority. Nearly all the houses, except the very grandest, were let by the builders – owner occupation was still rare.

CIVIC DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MID-VICTORIAN ERA

Slowly, and perhaps surely, Altrincham was adapting its local establishments and amenities to its greatly increased size. The year 1866 was auspicious in that the Local Board initiated two schemes which were finally achieved fourteen years later. These related to the need for a public park and for a new market place.

It will be recalled that in 1851 the Board of Health Inspector had remarked upon the lack of public parks and paths. No doubt the matter had been considered from time to time but it was not until 1866 that Joseph Gaskarth – he lived at Park Lea (White House) on Suffolk Road from 1873, though no doubt retaining his wine and spirit establishment in town – moved a motion that a recreation ground was necessary for the town and suggested Hale Moss as a suitable location.

Like most of the land in and around the town, the Moss was owned by the Earl of Stamford, subject, in this case, to certain ill-defined rights of access for all and sundry. For many years disputes had raged about the limitations these rights implied for the Earl's ability to enclose and sell the land for building houses, but in practice he had been proceeding to do this to some extent since his disputed enclosure of 1851. For the rest, the land was useless except for sundry sports and pastimes including cock-fighting and as a camping ground for Gypsies. The case for using a large part of the land as a proper park or recreation ground was quite evident, but it can well be imagined that the dispute about the rights of the Earl and the local people was a powerful reinforcement to the opposition which mustered against every enterprise which would cost the well-to-do citizens some modest expenditure. We are told that at a stormy meeting of the ratepayers in 1869 the latest proposal was rejected.

Of course, all proposals to use the Moss as a park involved, as virtually everything else in the town, lengthy negotiations with the Earl's agents. So it was not until 1878 that the matter was finally resolved by the gift by Lord Stamford of some sixteen acres of the Moss as a public park which was opened in 1880 as Stamford Park. The same Joseph Gaskarth was by this time both Mayor and Chairman of the Local Board and he presided at the opening ceremony. Charles Nickson wrote "every speech was full of the most fulsome and effusive praise of his Lordship for his munificence". This somewhat nauseating performance was not apparently in any way diminished by what must have been common knowledge, that is that his Lordship was incredibly wealthy, owning several great estates around the country, quite apart from Dunham where he did not live after the middle of the century.



Market Hall. Built 1880.

The story of the building of the new market hall bears some similarities to that of Stamford Park. Again in 1866 there was discussion at a Local Board meeting about the need for an improvement on the old Market Hall near the Old Town Hall in the Market Place. The old Market Place was obviously not large enough. Once again negotiations with the Earl were necessary on several issues. In the first place, he owned the existing Market Hall and collected the tolls. Secondly, he or his agents would certainly have views on the choice of a new site. Finally, the Earl would own the land for the chosen site. Once again there were more than enough problems to provide excuses for many years' delay and it was not until the same year of 1878 that it was agreed that the new Hall should be built on the corner of Market Street and Shaws Lane and that for the sum of £1,000 the Earl would transfer all his rights and privileges to the Board.

It is interesting, though of what significance is not known, that the new Market Hall was designed by Maxwell Roscoe, surveyor and agent to the Earl who lived at Downs Cottage on Woodville Road, a house built long before the Earl sold sites all around for the building of mansions. Like the new park, the market hall project had



Stamford New Road.

also taken fourteen years to bring to fruition when the new building was opened in 1880.

Another major development in the same year was the abandonment by the railway of operation of the separate Altrincham and Bowdon stations in favour of a new combined station where the present Altrincham Station now stands. This change made it necessary for the Board to create Stamford New Road to provide access to the new terminus of the MSJ & A Railway. So Railway Street, which had previously been joined to George Street in a kind of 'S' bend near the bottom of Regent Road was connected to the new road in a more or less straight line. The new siting for the station also had implications for the trade of the town, moving its centre to George Street in the old Lower Town. Although the moving of the station apparently had little or no involvement of the Earl, the new road of course had to bear his name.

In respect of hospitals, the Earl was inevitably involved. It was he who gave the acre of land in Lloyd Street for the first real hospital built in the 1850s as the result of a gift by Elizabeth Lloyd of Oldfield Hall in memory of her husband, Edward Jeremiah Lloyd. Soon afterwards, in 1858, it was Richard Broadbent, surgeon and chair-

man of the Local Board of Health, who suggested the establishment of a dispensary which was in operation by the following year. The first three doctors on the staff included Arthur Ransome, who at that time lived on The Downs but by 1870 was installed at Devisdale House, at the beginning of St. Margaret's Road (a very eminent medical man of the day, who was married in St. Margaret's church in 1862).

Eventually, by 1870, partly as a result of further bequests, the Lloyds Hospital and Provident Dispensary, as it became known, was moved to the site still today occupied by Altrincham Hospital on the corner of Market Street and Regent Road. The project, costing over £3,000, was financed mainly from funds in the hands of the Workhouse Charity Trustees received from rents of land and cottages and the sale of land. The land in question had originally been given by the Earl of Warrington, an ancestor by marriage of the Earl of Stamford, for a workhouse at Broadheath which was no longer required under the New Poor Law of 1834.

What then of education? In England, as distinct from Germany, there was no general provision of state education in the nineteenth century. For the well-to-do, as for the owners of the mansions of Dunham Massey, there were private schools including many local 'academies' and particularly the so-called public schools. We



Altrincham Hospital.

know that the Congregationalist parson at Bowdon Downs Church sent his sons to Rugby School, for instance, as did many of his parishioners. For the working class provision was dependant on private endowments such as Seamons Moss School, or the many schools provided by the churches, of which there was a growing proliferation in Altrincham.

All this voluntary endowment of working class education did not, however, ensure universal provision. Indeed this was recognised by the government which in 1870 passed the Elementary Education Act providing for the establishment of local school boards to fill in the gaps left by private provision with powers to pass bye-laws requiring attendance at school of all children aged between five and thirteen. The very mixed pattern of the application of this power forced the government eventually to pass general laws requiring, by 1899, attendance up to the age of twelve at least. This law obliged local authorities to provide 'board schools' to fill the remaining gaps.

The Altrincham Board of Health chose, in its wisdom, not to appoint a local school board under the 1870 Act, but it did establish a School Attendance Committee which we find reporting, as late as 1898, that its officer had paid 642 visits since its last meeting to parents of children who had been irregular in their attendance at school. It is not clear how much time had elapsed since the last meeting but either there had been a phenomenally long interval or a very high number of children were not attending school properly. Certainly it seems that something was wrong and that there was ample scope for the improvements which came after the turn of the century under the pressure of the new legislation and in the context of a new system of local government, of which more anon.

It is difficult in fact to know how effective was the haphazard pattern of local education which developed as the result of the uncoordinated private initiatives of churches and other well-to-do philanthropists. Undoubtedly Seamons Moss School had an excellent reputation and educated a fair number of men who took leading positions in the town. It had strong connections later with local industry for which it trained many of its pupils. Its eighteenth century founder, Thomas Walton, a local salt master, also endowed the village school at Dunham Massey. For the rest, it was the churches who provided and ran the schools.

As explained in *'Mansions and Men'*, there were two great rival churches in the new wealthy suburb of Dunham Massey – the Anglican St. Margaret's in the north for the support of which the suburb was developed by the Earl, and Bowdon Downs Church, the centre of a Congregationalist community which, unusually, dominated the development of nonconformism in the area. The Anglicans founded and administered the Albert Street Schools, supervised Seamons Moss School and established a night school in New Town. The Congregationalists established the British Schools in

Oxford Road. In Altrincham and district the Wesleyans were strongly established and built the church in what is now Woodlands Road as well as a school in New Street. They had, in fact, started one of the earliest schools in 1821 in George Street, much enlarged in 1860, on the site where Marks and Spencers now stands. In 1968, four Wesleyan churches combined to open a new church in Woodlands Road to replace those in Broadheath, Brough Road and George Street as well as the one across the road in what used to be called Bank Street.

In passing it should be said that the organisation of the Anglican church in the Altrincham area owed more to the middle ages than to the nineteenth century. Until the middle of nineteenth century a great area around the town (Altrincham, Bowdon, Timperley, Dunham, Hale and part of Baguley) was included in the parish of Bowdon centred on the mediaeval church there with a daughter chapel of St. Georges in Altrincham from the end of the eighteenth century. The incursion of the Earl of Stamford into this settled but developing pattern – other daughter churches were to be founded in the growing suburbs – meant that a parish had to be carved out for his new church of St. Margaret between Bowdon and St. Georges. In order to incorporate a significant number of people in the new parish of Dunham Massey, its boundaries were drawn so as to go well beyond the township of that name, which ended at the top of The Downs, to include Hale Moss and about half the town of Altrincham. When St. John's Church was founded in 1867 to take part of St. Margaret's parish, the redrawing of the boundaries resulted in Altrincham, like Gaul, being divided into three parts with George Street, for instance, falling into three different parishes. All this explains, among other things, why Altrincham has never had a major central Anglican church which its growing size and wealth would have seemed to merit before advancing secularism made it all somewhat irrelevant. So in the religious sphere also the imprint of the very visible hand of the invisible Earl was evident.

To return to education. As we have indicated, there seems to be no authoritative evidence about the standard resulting from the efforts of the churches. Clearly it is most unlikely to have approached that attained in Germany where technical subjects played a significant part in the general state system. As we have noted, industry played little part in the life of Altrincham in the nineteenth century, despite its tightening Manchester connections. All this would soon change dramatically, but one has to conclude that the town's people were unlikely to have been well prepared for the new era by the extent of their education resulting from the well meaning but limited and uncoordinated efforts of the churches and private endowments.

Thus by 1880 fast-growing Altrincham had its new market hall, its first public park, its first proper hospital and a patchwork of local schools. By 1892 it also acquired a real public library when, following the passing of the Public Libraries Act



Kingsway 1870. Classical and Gothic side-by-side, the latter dominating.

the operation and premises of the former Literary Institution were taken over and extended to include even some technical classes. The town had achieved a certain maturity, but as the slowing down of its population growth in the 1880s to a bare 1% per annum indicated, it was not obviously going anywhere. The employment provided by being a market town and furnishing food and services, even labour, to Manchester, had been supplemented by the engagement, one way or another, of some thousands of people in serving of Mansions of Dunham Massey. The 1882 map shows two velvet cutting establishments to the east of the railway. Yet all these together did not afford the basis even for providing the existing population, mainly very poor people living in very poor houses, with the means for any real prosperity. Continuing and worthwhile growth would require much more.

TURN OF THE CENTURY: THE COMING OF INDUSTRY

As the nineteenth century moved into its last quarter the dominance of textiles in the industrial scene had greatly diminished. The great railway boom had stimulated the iron and, by this time, the steel industry. Engineering was important for textiles, iron and steel and railways and was vital to the fast increasing application of the new technologies to an ever widening range of products to meet the requirements of a wealthier world. The advent of electricity and the internal combustion engine greatly quickened the pace of industrial change.

Initially British industry was quick to supplement its early dominance of the textile trades by advancing into the engineering and allied fields. Engineers like the Crossley brothers, featured in *Mansions and Men*, established businesses which flourished first in relation to the requirements of textiles and soon into those of other manufacturing industries and later into the making of motor cars. The fact that in these new fields of enterprise the British were soon to fall behind the success of the Germans and the USA, partly no doubt because of the poorer quality and less technical character of our education, was not incompatible with the fact that engineering was established on a major and increasing scale as a vital part of our economy for the future.

It was by no means surprising that a considerable number of engineering companies should be established in the Manchester area, close to the textile factories where it all began. but already by 1875 manufacturing industry was becoming less important in Manchester itself which increasingly became the commercial metropolis of south Lancashire. The environment of the inner city suburbs had become quite appalling with its dirt, its smells, and its noise and its disease amidst dreadful living conditions. For commercial men to work right in the centre and commute to houses out of town, life was tolerable. To operate factories in the inner suburbs became increasingly uncivilised.

So as the century moved into its last quarter, quite well-established engineering companies, especially if they were looking for space to expand and as well as more tolerable living conditions for workers and staff, new labour supply even, began to cast envious eyes on areas south-west of the city. After all, a substantial number of rich industrial magnates had moved in this direction to build their mansions. It is difficult to exaggerate the good fortune of Altrincham that at this vital moment it should have some ideally placed and undeveloped land available for industrial development.

It was also as well that the Manchester Ship Canal was not built until 1894, a cryptic comment which will be explained later.

Just north of Altrincham's main built-up area, but south of the small separate 'village' of Broadheath, was an area of a hundred acres and more originally in the triangle formed by the Bridgewater Canal, the main road towards Manchester and the Stockport to Warrington Railway, only a few hundred yards away from its junction with the Manchester South Junction and Altrincham Railway. This position was near-perfect for communications. It was also close to the developed town of Altrincham. There was even room for new housing in the immediate vicinity.

So it came about that in the early 1880s the Atlantic Engineering Works, owned by Messrs George Richards and Company, moved from City Road, Manchester to Broadheath. By 1894 they were followed by Luke and Spencer, makers of abrasive products and grinding machines, together with Thornton-Pickards, manufacturers of photographic apparatus, and also H.F. O'Brien and Company, oil merchants. Inevitably these established companies, all moving from Manchester, found it necessary to bring with them many of their skilled and experienced workers and staff. Although Altrincham continued to be overcrowded in its many streets of tiny dwellings, new housing development in the northern sector had somewhat stalled since 1880 and there were still open fields both north and south of Navigation Road as well as on the west of the main road. Thus the way was clear for the building of houses in what are now Woodfield Road, Princes Road and Devonshire Road which began in 1897. Soon Navigation Road was being built up as well as the beginnings of Gladstone Road, Harcourt Road and Hawarden Road, all virtually just across the main road from the new Broadheath industrial site.

Even as all this new development was proceeding, there came about an astonishing industrial initiative which really seemed to belong much later in the twentieth century than to the nineteenth. The Linotype and Machinery Company, which had in 1889 brought the Linotype printing machine from the USA, decided to move from Manchester and by 1898 had completed its initial factory in Broadheath. Strictly speaking, it was more in Altrincham than Broadheath since it was south of the Bridgewater Canal. It is reliably reported that Mr Sparkes, the farmer who owned this part of the Oldfield Estate, incurred the odium of the Earl of Stamford by making thirty acres of it available to the Linotype Company, contrary to an undertaking not to allow industry south of the canal. Most fortunately, on this occasion the wish of the Earl did not prevail.

If it had we might never have had the benefit of the great Linotype venture. Only four out of the thirty acres of land were required for the factory. The balance was used for the construction of 172 five to seven roomed houses for the company's em-



Linotype Plant 1897.

ployees which were let to them at half the rentals prevailing in the neighbourhood, together with recreation facilities comprising two football grounds, a cricket ground, four tennis courts, two bowling greens, a playground for children plus extensive allotments. The generosity of these arrangements was matched by a management philosophy which organised a works committee in which employee representatives could have a say in how the company was run, as well as a system of profit-sharing involving giving employees a substantial part of cost savings. The Linotype estate could have been partly inspired by Port Sunlight, built by Lord Leverhulme for his employees in 1880 or by Bourneville which was built by the Cadbury family for their workers in 1893. There was, in fact, an even earlier unique example, not followed by other industrialists, in the 1850s and 1860s when Sir Titus Salt, a wealthy woollen textile manufacturer, was so appalled at the living conditions in and around Bradford, which he judged were calculated to deprave and debauch, that he built a town, Saltaire, around his factory which by 1871 housed over 4,000 people.

In the general industrial climate of the time all this was breathtaking even allowing for the fact that the houses were graded to some extent according to the level of their occupant employees. The typical attitude of English employers was to require from their workers no more than obedient compliance with the bosses' orders at the lowest wages the company could get away with. Too much education for the work-



Lawrence Road. Most elegant of the Linotype streets.

Gladstone and Hawarden Roads. This school, which is still thriving as a primary school, was clearly necessary for the children of Broadheath area.

One of the earlier occupants of the Broadheath estate was the Altrincham Electric Supply Company which built its generating station there and started to supply power in 1895 so that electric lamps began to appear barely half a century after gas had banished oil. The same kind of situation attended the launching of the electricity project as for gas and indeed water supply, that is, a private company was empowered to proceed subject, on this occasion, to a specific obligation to sell the undertaking to the Urban District Council if so requested at $7\frac{1}{2}\%$ above the cost expended. In 1904 the Council enquired what the figure would be and was told £99, 343. After hesitating for six months the Council, predictably, was unable to arrive at a definite decision and the company finally withdrew its offer in July, 1905. Thirty years later the Sale Urban District Council bought that part of the undertaking supplying power to Ashton-upon-Mersey.

In the new century important companies such as H.W. Kearns, the machine tool makers (1908), Castleton Steam Packing (1904) and the Budenberg Gauge Company from Germany via Manchester (1914) came to Broadheath. After the war the estate grew into a major engineering centre.

The arrival of industry in Broadheath must have been a major cause of a renewed acceleration of the rise in the population of Altrincham. After an increase of only 10% in the 1880s, some 4,400 extra people appeared in the census of 1901 almost a third more than in 1891. Since the details of the census returns after 1881 are not yet available it is not possible to discern what effect this expansion had on the already crowded streets near the town centre. What was quite remarkable was that there was an increase of over 950 in the number of occupied houses or 37% in the decade, which more than kept pace with the crude figure for the increase in population. This improvement was most likely associated with the great number of new houses which were initially occupied by relatively low numbers of people, for example, couples with no children or only small families. (It is worth noting, in passing, that nearly all these houses are still standing and coming up to their centenaries, indicating a serious potential problem.)

The first decade of the twentieth century experienced a substantial slow down in this breakneck rate of progress, with less than a thousand extra people and 360 new houses. Most of the increase came in the north ward with some in the east. In the central ward there was actually a reduction of 150 people probably connected with shops replacing houses. There was little change in the south and west wards where there were the most overcrowded streets.



Navigation Road School. 1906 and still going strong.

The town map of 1911 shows major extensions of working class housing in the north towards Broadheath and in the south-east towards Hale.

In the north, apart from the Linotype estate and the Devonshire Road area, around the turn of the century many houses were built between Broadheath village and the industrial estate. The main road was lined with houses and soon there were new residential roads on either side such as Sinderland Lane and Salisbury Road. South of the canal on the east of the main road, most of Navigation Road, Bridgewater Road and Brunswick Road had been built up as well as parts of Harcourt, Gladstone and Ellesmere Roads. Somewhat curiously there remained wide open spaces south-east of the new Navigation Road School towards the railway and Derby Street. However, by 1914 Colwick, Poplar and Ashton Avenues had all been built, leaving only parts of Gladstone, Hazel, Ellesmere, Harcourt and Hawarden Roads to be filled in.

The other major thrust of new development was surprisingly extensive. On the western side of the railway line to Hale and Chester, the 'B' street complex was completed with the addition of Brown Street and, at the turn of the century, the railway barrier was finally breached in this direction as can be seen from the dates on the houses just across the Lloyd Street bridge around York Street. By 1911 the new development had fanned out like a violent spray from the nozzle at the bridge to cover



George Street: turn of the century.

the whole area west and south of Stamford Park, from Manor Road to Charter Road and from Stamford Park Road to Hale Road. In 1906 the same year as Navigation Road School opened to accommodate 800 children the council opened Stamford Park School in Cedar Road for 900 children, both measuring the previous neglect. The opening ceremony at Stamford Park was performed by William Crossley of Glenfield, newly elected Liberal M.P. for Altrincham.

In the same period Hale village itself was developed with a variety of middle class houses in the streets around its centre. The somewhat curious fact is that Hale had had its own station on the Chester line since 1862 but for a time it served mainly the people living in Bowdon and it was for a time known as Bowdon (Peel Causeway) station. An 1882 map shows a large area east of the railway beyond where Victoria Road now lies as 'Bowdon Nursery'. It was only when Altrincham began to overflow that there was sufficient impetus to establish Hale village as a separate community which was only then viable because the station was already there. So the population of Hale which crept up rather slowly to 2,803 in 1891 rose to 4,562 in 1901 and a staggering 8,351 in 1911, nearly as many as Altrincham in 1871. Thus the creation of substantial village in Hale, as distinct from Hale Barns, came before the era of the motor car and in the early years of the century horse-drawn buses used



York Street 1900.

to ply between Hale Station and the Old Bleeding Wolf – by this time the ‘village’ had become a dormitory suburb of Manchester since there was little room for more commuters in the rest of the Altrincham area. Bowdon, in fact, which was substantially built up much earlier, allowing for the low density of its housing developments, barely rose above 3,000 people during the whole period.

It is certainly of some significance that the working class developments in or near Altrincham itself were concentrated in the two more or less opposites poles of the compass. To the north-east, perhaps fortunately, open spaces were preserved, of which more later. The western and south-western open spaces were clearly being reserved for middle and upper class development. The wishes of the Earl of Stamford, concentrating on the preservation of his wealthy suburb of Dunham Massey were no doubt reinforced by the predilections of the local residents who preferred to be somewhat apart from the crowded areas of houses which, although rather better in the newer developments, were still poles apart from what the professional and managerial classes expected. There was, of course, no room for middle class housing in the township of Dunham Massey itself, and Grey Road and Booth Road on the fringe were also boasting very large houses, but closer to town in Groby and Bentinck Roads there were somewhat more modest houses appearing. To the north of the cen-



Richmond Road. Plagued by cars in 1991.

tral area Richmond, Burlington and Springfield Roads had been developed. Far away to the south, towards Bowdon, the stately Portland and Winton Roads had appeared.

The perceptive reader will have noticed that several times we have referred to the 'Council' as distinct from the 'Board' and also to 'wards'. For Altrincham was by no means alone in the passivity and inadequacy of its Board of Health in dealing with the ever more apparent needs of the country's towns and cities as the nineteenth century drew towards its close. Once again the national government in London was belatedly obliged to take action to enable, if not to ensure, more positive action in the fields of education, housing and other social matters. So, on the passing of the Local Government Act of 1894, Altrincham became an Urban District with its own Council resulting from elections in five wards – North, East (comprising all the area east of the railway lines), South, West and Central each with an electorate of between 450 and 675, in 1895. These numbers were in total way above those who had been able to vote for the Local Board in 1852, partly because of the population increase but partly because of the widening of the franchise in the intervening years. In the 1850s few individual candidates in the annual elections received more than 200 votes; by the 1880s some got more than 1,000.

For education, the new regime provided a special arrangement. Altrincham and



Urban Road Estate. The first council housing.

the surrounding district became the responsibility of a committee of the Cheshire County Council called the 'Altrincham, Bowdon, Hale and District Administrative Sub-Committee for Education' which began operation in 1903. It was this sub-committee which the same William Crossley of Glenfield in Dunham Massey joined after being put on Cheshire County Council by agreement of the Tories and Liberals (the only effective political parties at that time) in 1901. It took on the first positive responsibilities resulting from the legislation of the late 1890s for ensuring education for all children up to the age of twelve. The effectiveness of the new regime was to be observed in the completion of the Navigation and Stamford Park Schools in 1906, and in 1910 was opened the Bradbury Central School in Queens Road, Hale, to which the pupils from the British Schools in Oxford Road were transferred and the latter was closed.

Particularly notable was the beginning of grammar school education in the town with a girls' school and a boys' school founded before the First World War. More on these in the next chapter.

The new town council, the Urban District Council, was also quite active, particularly in initiating the first municipal housing scheme for twenty-six houses in Urban Road, Hale, reclaimed from Hale Moss, near the extensive new private developments



New Town Hall 1900.

around Stamford Park. Aside from that the council was concerned with street improvements such as the widening of Ashley Road as that street and Willowtree Road were developed at the beginning of the century. In general the town centre enjoyed something of a face-lift in the early days of the new century, not least because the new council built itself a new town hall in 1900 to replace the one in the Old Market Place built by the Earl of Stamford just a century earlier. They chose a site opposite the market hall with the hospital just along the street. Market Street had certainly assumed a major significance since it was just the narrow path towards Bowdon. The Town Hall and the Market Hall had resumed their traditional propinquity not far from their original situation.

It is curious that just as the middle of the nineteenth century was such a major



The Revd. Hewlett Johnson, 1924 – when he was leaving to become Dean of Manchester. (Courtesy of the Vicar of St. Margaret's, Dunham Massey.)

turning point for Al-trincham so its end constituted another. With the advent of substantial elements of the engineering industry at the same time as political action was taken to strengthen local government, a new era had obviously arrived. There is little doubt as to which was in practice the more important. Certainly before the 1914 war intervened to stop all progress, the new council's activities fell far short of making substantial improvements to the town's housing problems. The slums were still bad enough, if not getting worse, to warrant the concern

of Hewlett Johnson, Vicar of St. Margarets, who tried hard to alleviate the damp overcrowded and vermin-ridden conditions of the poor inhabitants, as well as the continuing health perils of open middens for horse manure in the many stables close to the working-class streets. His efforts at private persuasion of councillors bore no fruit, so finally in 1914 he organised a petition to the town council, supported by leading members of his wealthy parish, alleging neglect of its statutory duties for public health and housing. The war no doubt forestalled any possible action. Certainly the slums remained for another forty years and more. However, some alleviation of the conditions came with the gradual phasing out of horse-drawn transport in the 1920s and 1930s as the motor car and truck progressively took over. Eventually the car would bring its own problems, as we shall see.

No, it was not political action, but the development of Broadheath industrial estate which made the vital difference to the town in the new century. It became a thriving centre of industrial excellence, with some thirty firms eventually established there. By 1930 almost 5,000 people were employed and in 1960 some 10,000 it was claimed, amounting to one third of all the people employed in Altrincham and Sale. The roll call of its members in the early 1960s sounds like a list of every kind of specialist, general and heavy engineering manufacturers, from electrical engineers to instruments manufacturers to makers of precision tools and gauges, of die castings, of contractors' equipment, of engineering packings, of machine tools, of pressure gauges and so on.

The contribution all these made to the economy of Altrincham was enormous. No figures are available to quantify the transformation which must have been made to the lives of the working people. Initially, of course, the companies transferring from Manchester brought many workers with them but great new opportunities arose for local people as the years went by, particularly as the new industries were of the skilled variety rather than mass production factories requiring only human robots. Prosperous and responsible companies, with Linotype setting a quite shining example, furnished working men and women with not only a higher level of wages than those afforded by serving the gentry in their mansions, but also a fresh dignity. It was at this time at the turn of the century that in many parts of England the new demands for labour coupled with the benefits of twenty years of lower food prices arising from the opening of world-wide supplies, brought the beginning of a tolerable life to the urban working people. Altrincham no doubt shared in this new hope especially as the new industry must have boosted the general level of wages in the town.

There was, of course, a long way to go before life for many people would become civilised although by 1909 the death rate at 13.8 per thousand was about half its level sixty years earlier. The onset of the war with its vast waste of lives and resources un-



Chapel Street. Built in the 1830s and 1840s, from this little street 160 men went to war in 1914. More than 50 did not return.

doubtedly delayed progress. Because of the existence of Broadheath, Altrincham made its full contribution to the provision of the equipment and munitions of war, as well as the loss of lives. Chapel Street, of all places, won the distinction of having the highest percentage of its men go to war of any street in the country – 161 from less than 100 houses, of whom almost a third did not return. It has been said that many of them were Irish labourers living in lodging houses. Certainly a 1914 directory shows eighteen of the houses being used as lodging houses – the ‘official’ ones of course. The sons of some of the wealthy mansion owners died too, including Brian son of William Crossley. Some of the mansions served a useful purpose as hospitals for wounded soldiers.

Later we shall return to the story of the great industrial centre at Broadheath. Before we leave it for the moment, however, an explanation will be given about the cryptic remark about the Manchester Ship Canal which opened in 1894. This extraordinary project had taken many years to bring to fruition with William Crossley and particularly his next-door neighbour Joseph Cocksey Lee of Park Gate playing major parts in realising it. Its eventual completion opened the way for the creation of the Trafford Park industrial estate with the blessing of the new transport system. Remember that this was many years before the internal combustion engine afforded a major new method of moving goods. Just suppose that the Ship Canal had been op-



Map of Altrincham 1911.

ened ten or fifteen years earlier. Would Trafford Park then have forestalled Broadheath? This is one of history's unanswerable 'what if' questions. We can only say that Altrincham was extremely fortunate that it is there to be asked at all. Of course, Trafford Park has given employment to significant numbers of Altrincham people and would have provided more perhaps if Broadheath had not developed but could not have rivalled the latter in its benefits to the town.

BETWEEN THE WARS

At first glance the history of Altrincham between the two world wars was like the story of the dog which did not bark. What was of significance was that so little changed. The street pattern had been basically settled and only a few rows of houses remained to be built in the town proper. Some bridges, at Broadheath and on Hale Road, were widened as well as some streets near the old Market Place. The overcrowded slum areas remained unchanged. In 1937 the town became a municipal borough but that did not change very much.

Perhaps the most striking happenings of the period related to the south-west and the north-east. In the former, the Oldfield area was the scene for particularly interesting events. The story is told in *'Mansions and Men'* of how Sir John Leigh, probably the wealthiest of the owners of mansions, who lived at Beech Lawn opposite St. Margaret's church, gave to the people of Altrincham the park which bears his name. The land became available because Oldfield Hall had become vacant after serving as a hospital during the First World War and the council had decided to pull it down.



Oldfield Hall. Built in 1759 by Thomas Walton, founder of Seamons Moss School.

One can speculate that wealthy people no longer found the former rural area so attractive after the establishment of Broadheath industrial estate including its nearby working class housing. At any rate the town, soon after the war, acquired its second significant park some seventy years after the recommendations of the Board of Health Inspector.

The land might otherwise have been used for working class housing but, in fact, the Countess of Stamford deferred to the wishes of Sir John Leigh and the council, choosing instead to provide land at Oldfield Brow, just below the ridge on which some of the great mansions were perched and so out of their line of vision. Eventually some fifty acres were provided on which the council over a period of about ten years built over 400 houses for working people, the first houses in Dunham Massey other than mansions to be built in three-quarters of a century.

This new estate was in many ways a striking advance. The standard of the houses is significantly better than that of nearly all the other working class housing in the district at that time. Each house has at least a small garden and there is nothing of the desperate 'closeness' and overcrowding so typical of nineteenth century housing. Oldfield Brow, in fact, compares favourably with the Linotype estate, which is, however, smaller and more varied. Its situation next to the countryside has certain advantages but it is a long way from major shops and civic amenities as well as medical services even now that a fair number of people have cars. It is a lot further from the employment opportunities of Broadheath industry than John Leigh Park but no doubt a high proportion of the tenants of the council houses have walked or cycled to work at the Linotype factory or even beyond the canal to the main industrial estate. Today they must have to travel much further to find jobs. The Oldfield Brow estate did, however, have the benefit of its own primary school from 1932.

There was no other major area of working class housing developed in the inter-war period although the council did build in small pockets. Every year a few houses were condemned as unsuitable for human habitation and either drastically reconstructed or rebuilt. According to Charles Nickson, by the end of 1934 the council had erected 686 additional dwellings since the war. Clearly this was not enough to enable more than a small number of the slum houses to be replaced, since the population was still increasing by about 100 a year during the 1920s, but it was undoubtedly a great improvement on the performance of the pre-war authorities. According to the reports of the council inspector, in 1933 there were still 439 houses "not in all respects reasonably fit for human habitation" as well as fourteen just unfit. By 1938 the respective numbers were 365 and fifteen. Obviously there was still a substantial problem left for the post-war generation to deal with, without allowing for the inevitable neglect of the war years.



George Street 1920s.

There was also a significant development in respect of Timperley in the north-east. The population of this residential suburb, still with many farms around and about it, rose steadily from 1,008 in 1851 to 4263 in 1921 and then took off to reach 7,080 in 1931. Clearly this was the second great wave of expansion out of Altrincham after that which began flowing to Hale twenty years earlier. It was undoubtedly related to the advent of the internal combustion engine which led to the first regular motor bus services from Altrincham Railway station to Timperley and Hale Barns in the early 1920s, although the first motor taxi had been licensed in 1910. The close links between Timperley and Altrincham were formalised when in 1934 the two were amalgamated – leading to the acquisition of borough status. By this time Timperley's population had risen to some 14,000 and Altrincham's to 21,461.

One of the most notable acts of the Council was also related to Timperley. Even as the amalgamation was proceeding it acquired for £38,650 the grounds of the Timperley Golf Club, the Timperley Cricket, Hockey and Tennis Club and certain farm lands. The purpose was to create "public walks and pleasure grounds and for cricket, football or other games and recreations". This was a project of major importance to the local community. A public golf course has been maintained at Timperley ever since as well as a cricket club and other sports activities. Quite apart from the considerable amenity to the people of Altrincham the land serves as an effective 'green belt' on the town's eastern flank.

An important civic development in the town centre was the extension of the public



Timperley Old Hall. Built on the site of the manor house of Timperley, formerly a farm house and now in the middle of the municipal golf course.

library in 1928 supplemented by an art gallery in 1934, together with a separate children's library and adult library as well as a library lecture hall. Along with the museum established earlier, the whole complex constituted a quite impressive cultural centre which included a public hall. However, it no longer incorporated a technical school since the classes had been transferred very successfully to Navigation Road Evening Schools.

The public hall had for many years been considered too small for the substantial and mature town of Altrincham. Various plans for its enlargement had been formulated since early in the century only for each to be abandoned in turn because of the cost involved. Finally, in 1936, somewhat more prosperous times encouraged the Urban District Council, eagerly anticipating its status as a borough the following year, to decide on a major expansion of the cultural complex including the construction of a modern new hall which was opened in 1940, despite the war, as the Stamford Hall. The cost was £10,000 – over £250,000 in 1991 money.

The main feature of the new building was "a spacious and beautiful assembly hall to the design of John Cocker ARIBA where functions may be held in dignified sur-



The Old Library.

roundings". The hall, 2,520 square feet in area, was accompanied by several reception rooms, a vestibule and a crush hall, with a grand staircase leading to a broad promenade. The foyer gave directly on to the assembly hall via three broad, shallow steps. At the front was a balcony from which the public could be addressed on suitable occasions.

The council expected that their investment in this proud meeting hall complex would be recovered by the fees paid for its use. They stated, however, that – "Financial considerations apart, the inhabitants of Altrincham had a right to expect the corporation to provide a fitting venue for the functions inseparable from civilised communal life." Just so! Little did the worthy councillors suspect how their successors would treat their proud creation only a short third of a century later. What the German enemy did not manage to do to the town, more local vandals did.

The basic story of education in Altrincham in the twentieth century was quite typical of that of England as a whole. If anything the town was a laggard rather than a leader both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, possibly because its initial small size and its subsequent very rapid growth made it difficult for the authorities to catch up. In an earlier chapter we have noted that no local board schools had been established before the new legislation enforcing compulsory schooling was passed at



Stamford Hall Exterior 1940.



Stamford Hall Interior.

the end of the century. The comparative alacrity with which the new county council authority moved in its first ten years bore witness to a need to remedy certain deficiencies of which we have seen some indication.

Undoubtedly Seamons Moss School for boys was of great value to the community but it did not quite match the grammar schools which had been established centuries ago in many towns and cities under a variety of private endowments. Such schools often boasted spacious buildings and playing fields which enabled them, with appropriate extensions, to play major roles in local education right through the new system of the first half of the twentieth century to the somewhat more democratic system of the second half. Others developed into the so-called public schools. Whereas the latter became the preserve of the upper classes, the grammar schools were dominated by middle class people who could not quite aspire to public school fees and expenses but certainly aspired to a similar educational and social culture. Of course, the old grammar schools were also essentially fee-paying and there was no inclination on the part of the middle classes to facilitate the entry of working class children.

The 1902 Education Act introduced a national public system of secondary education, encompassing the old privately-owned grammar schools which were to be subjected to a degree of control by the new local education authorities. Where adequate secondary schools did not exist, the authorities were empowered to set up new county grammar schools. The quite crucial element in the new system, and one that must seem surprising to many people today, is that the new county schools, although entirely funded by public money, were to be fee paying subject to the provision of 'scholarships' for elementary school pupils to transfer to them at age eleven without paying fees, although the great majority of places would still go to fee-payers. Elementary school children who failed to secure a scholarship remained, for many years to come, at the same schools until they were thirteen or, later, fourteen.

This was the background against which the Altrincham Girls Grammar School (although it was originally called 'High School') opened in 1910. It was built around a small part of Bowdon Lodge, which was bordered by Cavendish and Bowdon Roads and Higher Downs, one of the very few buildings standing in the area in 1850. An indication of the modest expectations of those days is that it was designed to take a total of only 180 girls but by 1925 the complement had more than doubled with further increases to follow. Fees were set originally at twelve guineas per annum which in terms of what money will buy today is perhaps about £400 to £450, but which represented in 1910 something like a fifth or a sixth of a typical working-man's wages. On this basis the equivalent today is more like £2,000 a year. 25% of the places were allocated to bright children who obtained scholarships.

The Boys Grammar School, also originally called 'High School', was opened in



Seamons Moss School. Built in 1867; note the Gothic doorway. The school began 100 years earlier at Oldfield House nearby, not to be confused with Oldfield Hall built by the same Thomas Walton.

1912 in Marlborough Road. It was much more fortunate than its sister school in that it was endowed with spacious playing fields with enough room for the building to be extended without encroaching significantly on them. Clearly girls were not expected in the early twentieth century to play games requiring vast acres of fields! This spacious environment is all the more surprising when it is realised that the school started with only 57 boys and, like the girls' school, expanded very quickly, reaching 730 boys by 1970.

It is important to appreciate that there was no bar to children of middle class parents winning scholarships to these grammar schools so that the proportion of working-class children actually going to them was minuscule. Altrincham was probably fairly typical of the general pattern in England as a whole which was for only 2.5% of each age group in the elementary schools obtaining free places in the grammar schools. Even by 1939 the proportion had risen only to 10% and a fair proportion of this small fraction were the sons and daughters of parents who could afford to pay fees but saved their money by sending their children to the state elementary schools



Bowdon Lodge Gates (Altrincham Girls' Grammar School).

so that they could win scholarships. If they failed to do this, they went to the grammar schools anyway and their parents paid the fees. The result of all this was that only perhaps 6% to 7% of working class children attended grammar schools even by the Second World War.

In the 1930s there was some improvement in education for the older elementary school children who did not go to grammar schools, in the form of 'central' or trade and technical schools but the basic situation was not changed until the passing of the Butler Education Act of 1944 which abolished fee paying in grammar schools so that all places were theoretically to be awarded on merit. The unsuccessful were left to go to secondary modern or technical schools which inevitably at first were the same schools which had operated immediately before the war but subsequently they have been much improved in the shape of such schools as Wellington Road and Green Lane in Timperley. It cannot be doubted that the changes brought about by the Act were more apparent than real in the sense that children of parents who attended the pre-war grammar schools were very much more likely to 'pass the 11-plus' than those of parents who did not.

Of course, some children of middle class or 'professional' parents did, nevertheless, fail to win grammar school places and many of their parents were unhappy at



Altrincham Boys Grammar School.

the prospect of their children going to the secondary modern schools. A sufficient number of them, no longer having the option of paying for entry to state grammar schools, were willing and able to buy places at private grammar schools to ensure the success of establishments such as North Cestrian Grammar School for boys and Culcheth Hall for girls.

The story of North Cestrian is especially interesting. It was founded as a purely private enterprise in 1951 by the retiring headmaster of Altrincham Boys Grammar School to cater for boys who had "failed the 11-plus" – indeed this was a necessary qualification in the early years. Initially the school hired some rooms in Fernlea, a mansion on the Dunham Road occupied since 1926 by the Cooperative Wholesale Society as a Welfare Centre; after a few years the school bought the whole building. (Fernlea had originally been built in 1872 for one of the Armitage family, who were based at Townfield House nearby. It was next door to Highfield, which, in 1852, was the house of William Millington, member of the Local Board of Health.) North Cestrian continues to thrive as a private non-denominational grammar school taking boys from a radius of thirty miles. During its forty years it has certainly demonstrated that a large proportion of boys who 'fail' the 11-plus can successfully be educated to grammar school standards. In terms of the range of its intake it is, in fact, a kind of



North Cestrian Grammar School. Fernlea House built in 1872.

private comprehensive, though modelling itself on the traditional grammar schools. Some parents prefer it to the state grammar schools.

For a long time there have, of course, been other independent grammar schools available to a tiny minority of pupils from South Trafford, particularly the highly prestigious Manchester Grammar and William Hulme Schools for boys and Manchester High School for girls. Scholarship can be won to these schools from both state primary and private preparatory schools in Altrincham. In any event their entry standards are high so they tend to take a significant proportion of the brightest children from the town.

It seems appropriate at this point to anticipate even further the period covered by our next chapter to remark that whilst Altrincham, as part of Trafford since 1974, has been one of the few areas of the country to retain the selective system of secondary education, Cheshire, its former county, has moved to the comprehensive system. One significant result of these changes is that Altrincham people now have another option if their children do not 'pass' the 11-plus, i.e. to send them to schools in North Cheshire which have proved highly successful. Some people choose to do this in preference to sending them to local grammar schools. The upshot of all this is that hundreds of children go by bus or train daily from Altrincham homes to Cheshire

schools. It may well be said that the selective system survives in Trafford partly because of the major safety valve afforded by the comprehensives of our former county of Cheshire.

A special quirk of the selective system in Trafford is particularly favourable to Roman Catholic parents who normally wish their children to go to schools controlled by their own church. If such children obtain grammar school places as the result of the '11-plus' examination, the council pays for them to go to private Catholic grammar schools, inside or outside the borough, because there are no maintained Catholic schools in Trafford. A similar privilege is not, of course, available to children of other faiths or none. Attention was drawn to this somewhat anomalous situation in the 1990 report of an independent enquiry into the operation of secondary assessment operated by the borough council. The report commented on the high cost of £3 millions a year of sending bona fide Catholic pupils to independent schools such as Loreto Convent Grammar School for girls in Altrincham which is also open to fee-paying non-Catholics.

We will not take this topic much further because it involves a major issue of current party political debate, territory on which this book is not designed to trespass. However, it is important in a historical context to note that the educational system is a clear reflection, and indeed continuation, of the extreme social polarisation within Altrincham and district which characterised its development in the nineteenth century and was entrenched in its schools in the twentieth. The fact that most of Dunham Massey was incorporated into Altrincham in the inter-war period changed nothing of substance. More significant is the location of the two state grammar schools just inside Dunham Massey, as it was, and Bowdon rather than in the town itself.

There is no escaping the conclusion that the essential reason why the selective secondary school system has endured this long in Trafford is not purely educational but rather that the present situation well suits the comparatively well-to-do people who dominate the south of the borough – particularly in Dunham Massey, Bowdon and Hale, as well as much of Altrincham – who have the comfortable benefit of three principal options, i.e. state grammar schools, Cheshire comprehensives and private grammar schools including the prestigious Manchester schools, as well indeed as independent Catholic schools. Undoubtedly it is clear that very many of them for either educational or social reasons, or both, have not regarded secondary modern schools, even in their improved form as high schools, as acceptable alternatives. For the great majority of the children of Trafford, even of much of Altrincham, there is no effective alternative to them.

AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Having survived the war comparatively unscathed, Altrincham in the middle of the twentieth century remained virtually the same as it had begun the century, apart from some improvements to roads and a modest amount of building within its natural boundaries of the canal and railway to the west, north and east and Dunham Massey and Bowdon to the south. Of course there had been some house building in the nineteenth century beyond the railway near the old Altrincham station and there were further extensions later to the east and south towards and into Timperley and Hale. To the south-west Oldfield Brow estate had been built in what used to be Dunham Massey. But apart from this incursion into the countryside the old town remained very much as it had been rapidly built up during the second half of the last century. Even the densely-packed old working-class areas remained intact.

In the town centre inevitably there were localised changes. Some of the older cottages were replaced and, in general, houses were replaced by shops to serve the growing population of the town and its suburbs. Mr Robert G. Hill who in the early 1960s was the proprietor of Cowsills store in Upper George Street where the Grafton Centre now stands, commented recently that whatever you wanted you could buy in and around George Street. When you think about it, this is not too surprising since few of the many thousands of local people expected to have to go out of town to do their shopping.

This same Mr. Hill has lent to the present writer a number of interesting press cuttings including an article from the February 1955 issue of *Cheshire Life* which vividly described the old town as it was at that time. After noting the great disparity between Altrincham and the wealth of Hale and Bowdon, with the attendant snobbery and resentment, the author perceived a comparative harmony because

"there are few people in Altrincham who are really badly off. The number of houses in the town which could be condemned as slum dwellings must number well under a thousand – perhaps little more than half that – though where they exist they are not pleasant."

So, after two world wars and all the promises to ex-servicemen – a land fit for heroes and so on – several thousands of the citizens of Altrincham were still living in slums. Indeed at the end of 1960 a clearance order for 177 unfit dwellings in New Town was still awaiting confirmation.

This was the situation even after a major part of the Chapel Street and Albert Street area had been cleared, for the article goes on

"The small area reached through Goose Green and across the railway bridge towards Stamford Park takes some beating for sheer 'waste land' dreariness and decay, and there are bad pustules in the Regent Road area. Here, however, some clearance has already been made to provide badly needed car-parking space. The real problem, Mr H. Walsh, the Housing Manager, told me lies in the area bounded by Ashley Road, Lloyd Street, Ashfield Road and Hale Road."

The Council had a number of housing projects of which the most notable was the Broomwood Estate in Timperley which, when it was completed, would be a self-contained 'satellite' with its own churches, pubs, shops, community centre and primary school. It was, however, to be some years yet before the remaining slums were to be cleared and new council flats built beyond Lloyd Street and near New Street.

The same *Cheshire Life* article commented on the strong cultural life of Altrincham, one of the important supports of which was the "modern Civic Hall, the Stamford Hall, which is a great encouragement to dramatic and musical activities". It was noted that, together with the hall, the Public Library, Art Gallery and Museum in the same block of buildings, formed the hub of Altrincham's cultural life. There were regular Saturday night dances at the Stamford Hall drawing an average attendance of 300 to 350.

In one vital respect the appearance of the old town was changing markedly during the post-war period even though the streets and buildings were not significantly remodelled for the first twenty years. The motor car came to dominate the scene. In the century or so since the small market town had begun its substantial expansion, it had passed from the age of the horse and the barge, through the age of the train and the horse to the age of the car and the train, with the car becoming ever more dominant as the regular means of transport for goods and a majority of the people.

With all its great convenience for so many of us, the motor car has brought with it great problems which have become the more serious as it has become more popular. It has necessitated the use of vast areas of land for parking for shoppers and others. In the many old streets near the town centre the houses have no garages or parking space of their own, so they have become disfigured by the lines of parked vehicles. In a narrow street like Bold Street, cars parked on one side of the road have to have two wheels on the pavement which is strictly illegal. Yet the police have been known to prosecute someone for obstruction who insists on parking legally. A little later we will consider the special problems of parking in relation to the development of the town centre.

It is, however, not only in respect of parking that cars present a major burden on life in the town. The sheer volume of traffic in, around and through the town centre has inevitably created hazards for pedestrians, not to mention the cars themselves. Pedestrian crossings have helped to some extent but they force people into particular paths to traverse the shopping areas and inevitably add to the traffic congestion which becomes horrendous on busy days. To avoid the delays on the main thoroughfares many drivers take to side roads causing dismay to their inhabitants, particularly if, as in Navigation Road, their own cars have to be parked on both sides of the road and are often damaged.

Two major features of modern Altrincham in the age of the car are the lack of any real ring road plus the general inaccessibility of the town. There is no major access road from the west, no doubt an accident of history arising from the construction, two centuries ago, of the Bridgewater Canal running north-east to south-west in this sector which has clearly discouraged the building of even minor roads across it with no bridge between the main road at Broadheath and the stony humped back Seamons Moss bridge controlled by traffic lights. Even though the Broadheath industrial estate has an exit road to the west along Atlantic Street it goes nowhere except into country lanes.

To the south-west there is one of the town's greatest environmental assets, Dunham Park and Forest, which is also a great barrier to road communications as the Trafford planners discovered a few years ago when they proposed to build a new road by-passing Altrincham and Sale to the west so as to reduce through traffic on the main Chester to Manchester road which skirts the town centre passing through the Old Market Place. The protests of the National Trust and many local residents about the potential damage to the Dunham area caused the project to be abandoned. Currently the Ministry of Transport is proposing an alternative going further to the west.

The town is hemmed in on its eastern side by the railway lines and the existence beyond them of narrow streets of smallish houses again with many cars parked on the roads, a fact which renders the road from Wilmslow through Hale Barns and Hale unqualified to count as a significant access road. The only real access road from the east is in fact the Stockport Road, much improved in recent decades particularly with a diversion over the railway to Woodlands Road and the main Manchester Road thus removing the level crossing bottle-neck.

The latter road constitutes in fact the principal means of access to Altrincham from north and south. It is always busy and at peak times it is extremely difficult to join or cross by car and on foot. It is not easy to imagine it taking significantly more traffic without chaos developing. The only road which could take rather more cars is



Upper George Street – before modernisation.

therefore Stockport Road and it is a pity that its recent widening was not taken further alongside the public golf course at Timperley. All-in-all, the existence of just three substantial access roads to the town, with little spare capacity, represents a severe limitation to the potential for expansion of its retail and commercial facilities unless major new roads are provided. Recent experience demonstrates that proposals for new roads will arouse major public opposition.

To return to the town centre itself, it was not until the mid-

1960s that the first major disruption of its ancient face occurred. A developer bought a block of property in the area where George Street, Upper George Street and Regent Road met, and secured planning permission to build a new block of thirty-six shops and 36,000 square feet of office space – the Grafton Centre with its small central enclosed square capped by a glass dome and embellished in the middle by a fountain with turning wheels above. This was the first piece of modern architecture in the town and to many people it seems like a veritable cuckoo in a cherished nest. One fancies Prince Charles might have been more eloquent about it.

The writer had arrived with his family to live in the area a year or two before this beginning of a revolution in the town centre. Apart from the obvious visual and spiritual incompatibility of the new with the old, the development seemed a great irrelevant



The Graftons. Architecture of the 1960s.

ance in terms of what was really required at that end of the town. The first priority surely should have been to remove the row of shanty shops across Railway Street which had disfigured the area for so long. The opportunity could then have been taken to move the building line well back so opening up a spacious town square of the kind which gives character to many other market towns. For behind the shanty shops there had for some eight years been the unused site of the old Bowdon Railway Station. Further, even at that stage, traffic could have been banned except perhaps for public service vehicles and taxis.

That this latter was not such a fanciful idea is emphasised by an article in the *Evening News and Chronicle* of 23rd Fe-

bruary, 1966 which featured the building of the Grafton Centre in the context of the Council's plans for the future of the town centre which were described as follows:

"Crisply-styled new shopping terraces, wide pedestrian precincts where traffic worries will be a thing of the past. No significant changes in the shopping area involving redevelopment of buildings are envisaged but individual properties may be restyled, even rebuilt, and provision is made for a small expansion of the shopping area. Car parking is receiving special attention. Vast areas on the town's fringes are allotted for parking space in the new town plan. A chain of car lots will circle the central shopping area."

The same theme was taken up in another *Cheshire Life* article in October 1969, entitled 'Altrincham 1983' which declared:

"In 1983 there will be no traffic at all in the main shopping streets of the town, except possibly for some sort of slow-moving electric minibus on rails which will be for the use of aged, disabled and infirm people. Pedestrians will be in complete control – a thought almost as awe-inspiring as if it were announced that the Martians had taken over."

Yes, indeed!

It is worth quoting a little more from this article, especially in view of what was soon to come.

"The main shopping streets will cease to be roads with pavements on each side and will become 'landscaped' with paving, fountains, plants and trees, and they will be linked with the residential areas around the town by a system of footpaths, with foot-bridges and underpasses to cut out the problems of crossing the busy through traffic roads."

Further on:

"Old Market Place... will have a sort of central courtyard (what a contrast to the present-day pounding mass of traffic!) where people can really sit and look at the architecture. Stamford New Road will have its electrical minibus cutting a narrow line through a broad walking space."

Finally:

"to the north ... the entertainment zone with the library, Stamford Hall and a new swimming bath, to which other entertainment facilities ... will have been added."

What a totally noble vision! Yet within five years the Council had thrown it all overboard and condemned us all to the Petros Centre.

There can rarely have been such an astonishing volte-face, such a abrogation of municipal responsibility, such an abject surrender to commercial forces. The cultural centre, the library, the museum and Stamford Hall were all destroyed. True, we eventually got a new library but the town could not afford a meeting hall nor a museum. The concept of pedestrianisation was forgotten except for a very limited area. Car parking continued to be inadequate except in primitive areas far away across Stamford New Road.

Above all, we were left with a principal elongated shopping strip of a long narrow street with a small square at the far end, with traffic still crossing it. This was the soulless legacy of commercialism under Altrincham Town Council as it was absorbed by Trafford. One has to wonder, in particular, what the town's citizens were thinking about to allow their only proper meeting hall to be wantonly destroyed.

It is such a pitiful story that one really has to wonder at the motives of those who permitted it to happen. Mere neglect of this degree one can hardly imagine. One has to wonder whether there were more positive personal motives. Had anything changed since, a hundred years earlier, the members of the Local Board of Health had forsaken any kind of municipal enterprise in favour of private monopolies in which many of them had shares? If things had changed, if local representatives were different, how did they come to abandon their noble concept of civic design in favour of disfigurement of their town?

The clue may lie in the fact that Altrincham was about to be absorbed in Trafford. Obviously, this was a momentous change. For 675 years Altrincham had had its own town authority – court leet, local board of health, urban district council and borough council. The boundaries had varied somewhat but essentially there was a town authority. It had by no means been very effective for most of the time with complacency



Railway Street. Surviving even into the 1990s.

more of a keynote that positive action. Yet at least there had been a local responsibility for the town's affairs. With five separate wards there were enough councillors to ensure that everyone with a grievance or concern could at least get it heard by someone who lived and ruled close at hand.

Now things were going to be very different. Altrincham was to be absorbed into a much bigger area including a segment to the north of the Mersey with which it had very little in common, as well as another very different area south of the Mersey. Trafford was a most artificial and elongated concoction which was attractive to nobody but those who drew lines on a map in devising a supposedly more efficient system of local government. The result is that Altrincham is now represented by a mere three councillors who would find it difficult, even if they were so minded, to promote or defend its vital interests in a council of sixty-three members, even if they sought an alliance with their colleagues from neighbouring wards. Certainly it would be all too easy for them to shrug off their local responsibilities on the basis they had to bow to superior forces or party loyalty in Trafford Town Hall.

At the simplest level, there is no doubt that this was a severe blow to local democracy. It was also a sad disappointment to those councillors and officials who had hitherto played a major part in governing Altrincham, however responsibly or otherwise they discharged their duties. So it may be that the decision to proceed with the Petros Scheme was taken with a huge shrug of the shoulders in a mood approaching that of pique or resentment at the disaster overtaking the government of Altrincham. Undoubtedly it was a political and not a planning decision to surrender to the blandishment of the developers; and one taken in the knowledge of an end to the local responsibility of politicians and officials.

If absorption into Trafford was a bad blow for Altrincham, the early 1980s saw an even more devastating development in respect of the Broadheath industrial estate. After the boom years following the Second World War, the 1960s had seen the beginning of serious difficulties affecting some of the larger industrial units as technological progress and foreign competition posed challenges which were difficult to meet. A series of crises affecting the British economy were very damaging against the background of the post-war resurgence of Germany and Japan. From a peak employment figure of about 8,000 in the Broadheath area proper (with another 1,000–2,000 in nearby areas) the number of work people had declined to some 5,000 by 1979 with almost 2,000 job losses in the decade. It is a dismal commentary on our education and training system that there was still a shortage of skilled engineers, itself contributing to the decline of British industry.

Strenuous efforts had been made by many firms to modernise and become more efficient in the electronic age. Already a number of new companies, particularly of a



Petros Centre 1991. A small 'square'.

scientific and computer-based nature, had come into the area and a light industry estate had developed near Dairyhouse Lane to the north of the railway line. Thus the business of the Broadheath area was by no means standing still and was progressing in various ways in seeking to adapt to changing economic and industrial conditions, but its activities had become significantly less labour intensive. There had been strong pressures to increase efficiency and cut costs which had resulted in fact in a substantial reduction in labour. The pressure had been so great that several companies had gone out of business in the last twenty or so years, notably and most regrettably, Churchill Machine Tool Company which had been at Broadheath since 1920.

So when another recession came in the years 1979 to 1982 it was not a completely fresh experience except for the desperate severity of its impact. High interest rates and inflation over 20% were not exactly new but they were coupled with an astronomically high value of sterling, up by over a third in 1980 compared with a year or so ago. Together these conditions amounted to an unprecedented and savage blow making exporting, or even competing against imports, almost impossible in the short run. There was no way in which further reductions in unit costs of the great magnitude needed to offset these adverse factors could be made in the very brief period involved.



Atlantic Street in its early days.

The pages of the *Altrincham Guardian* for the early months of 1981 make sad reading. On 8th January members of the Broadheath Joint Committee met the M.P. Fergus Montgomery to complain about the value of sterling and interest rates as well as unequal foreign competition. Later in the month Montgomery went to see the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Geoffrey Howe, about the plight of the industrial estate. In that very week, 500 job losses were announced. Linotype dismissed 240 people, 45% of all levels, blaming the exchange rate of sterling against the dollar. Budenbergs were working seven days a fortnight and forty-one workers were leaving. On 5th March, Luke and Spencer makers of cutting and grinding equipment, the second firm to come to Broadheath in 1894, announced it was going out of business with the loss of 185 jobs, saying its orders had fallen shockingly in the last six months. Later in the year the Record Electric Company sacked forty-six out of 205 remaining staff reducing the total to less than half the level of three years earlier.

By 1990 only two of the old-established Broadheath companies remained in anything like their earlier shape, i.e. Linotype (now L & M Ltd) and the Budenberg Gauge Company. Curiously enough both are sited on the south side of the canal although Budenbergs also have a plant to the north of the old railway near Dairyhouse Lane.

The Linotype story is particularly fascinating. Although the company was originally British, it was sold in 1908 to Americans who also had factories in Frankfurt, Milan and New York. The business generally prospered until by 1960 there were some 1,800 people working in the factory by the Bridgewater Canal. Thereafter changing technology and foreign competition began to take their toll. By the 1970s many countries, other than Britain, had seen the adoption of computerised photographic type setting for printing newspapers and books, thus out-dating much of Linotype's technology. The parent company therefore closed its three other factories and concentrated production at Broadheath. By 1980 they had lost confidence in the latter operation, whose problems were greatly exacerbated by the British recession and the high value of sterling, and were unwilling to invest further in its technology. Thus the reduction of operations by almost 50% in 1981 was intended to lead shortly to complete closure.

The remains of the company were saved only by one of the earliest management buy-outs on the part of four of its senior staff after negotiations with the parent company lasting two years which involved the change of name to L & M Ltd. Since then the most strenuous management efforts have been made to adopt and develop new technologies as well as to diversify the company's business in the field of printing presses and related operations such as the fabrication of precision sheet metal enclosures for computer presses. Company acquisition and the establishment of agencies have been involved. Business has been sought and obtained in many parts of the world, which is just as well since for the period of nine months to June 1991, no UK orders had been received, so devastating had the latest recession become. The Production Director described the last twelve months as the worst business year he had experienced in forty years with the company. For a number of years in the 1980s L & M had given employment to 150 people, but the number was down to eighty-five in June 1991. It is still owned by the four managers who bought it out in 1983. Its future is very dependent on the future of the British economy.

There have been some important consequences of the retrenchment of the Linotype Company. Early in the 1980s the parent company sold off most of the amenity ground bounded by Oldfield Road, Lawrence Road and Norman Road, which had been used as football pitches, tennis courts and allotments, for the building of an estate of 180 new middle class houses known as John Leigh Gardens, presumably because it adjoins the park of that name. One wonders what Sir John, the most wealthy and right-wing of the Men of Dunham Massey, arch-opponent of Hewlett Johnson, Vicar of St. Margaret's, would have thought of this further perpetuation of his memory resulting from the decline of an old-established company which he must have known well for the last twenty or thirty years of his life.

The other result of the reduced production operation of the company has been the letting of factory space to tenants of whom there were eight by June 1991. The most successful of these and perhaps the largest of all the recent arrivals in the Broadheath area is the Nova Group making double glazing and conservatories. They started twenty years ago as a tiny operation in Bold Street but have been in their present plant for five years. They employ 150 people in a major part of the old Linotype factory – around 80,000 square feet or nearly two acres and have a turnover of around £10m per annum. They have substantial equipment ready for a significant expansion when the current recession is over, but they need more space which they are having difficulty in finding in Broadheath. The disused factory of Keams-Richards formed by a merger in 1967 with considerable redundancy, the last of the early Broadheath companies to disappear, was quite attractive but the Nova Group were outbid by a development company which has broken it up into small units.

The Group is an example of what can be done with enterprise and good management to meet the market requirements of the end of the twentieth century, typically the demands of middle class people with £10,000 to spare for a conservatory, although the company does also make vast sizes of double glazing for space-age commercial and public buildings. They have been careful not to overreach themselves; and they leave installation and even most of their marketing to others. They rely



Atlantic Street 1991.

upon quality and timely delivery.

Although the glass and double glazing business is very competitive within the UK, it has not as yet been much exposed to international trade. However, the Nova Group feel that, come 1992 and even freer European trade, strong competition is likely to come from Germany and France with suppliers from those countries offering lower prices which it will hardly be possible to match except by providing better delivery services to UK customers. The production technology advantages in such countries is indicated by the fact that virtually all the Nova Group's machinery has come from Germany and Austria, that 30% of their material – mainly plastic and glass – is imported and that until five years ago no UK company had the technology to supply plastic material of the right quality. A cautionary tale indeed for anyone who believes that 1992 will offer wonderful new opportunities for British industry rather than dire new threats to the survival of our under-invested and technologically ill-equipped companies and their under-trained workforces.

Budenburgs, the other long-surviving company, which also has factories in Wales and Australia, appear to have survived in essentially the same business of pressure gauge manufacturing, without much change in their basic products, by using up-to-date methods. Of course, this has meant employing much less labour – now only 200 people at Broadheath. They claim to be the largest makers of precision dead-weight testers in Europe and the largest makers of pressure gauges in Britain, exporting to over forty countries, although much of their exporting is indirect through customer companies. They have recently been taken over by Burnfields, a holding company, who seemingly intend to keep the business going but substantial redundancy is on the cards.

As the redundancies and closures accumulated during the 1980s many Altrincham people became unemployed or retired early. It became commonplace to see many middle-aged men strolling leisurely around the street with only time to kill. By the time of the 1981 census, taken in the spring, adult male unemployment in the town reached 10.3% and was still rising fast. In all, 287 men, 136 women and 117 young people aged 16-24 were out of work so far. The suburbs of the town were better off with only 5.6% unemployed in Hale and Bowdon, 6.6% in Timperley and 7.3% in Broadheath.

The extent to which the wealth of the area flowed out into these other 'villages' is demonstrated by some other figures from the 1981 census. Owner occupation of houses in Altrincham was less than 59% compared with 73% in Bowdon and 89% in Hale, with even 82% in Broadheath. In Trafford as a whole some 37% of households had no access to a car, with the extremes of 59% in Clifford ward and 18% for Hale; Altrincham was more deprived than the average in this respect with a figure of 42%

which many readers may find surprising. Perhaps even more 'eyebrow raising' is that 338 households in Altrincham were described as being "without the use of amenities" presumably meaning both toilets and bathrooms. Separately indicated is a figure of 236 households without an inside WC.

So we should by no means assume that because the 'slums', so-called, had finally disappeared, too long after the Second World War, that all the people of Altrincham were comfortably off, or even decently housed. Some modest progress has no doubt been made in the last ten years, but in some respects things have gone backwards with a number of houses destroyed to make way for new town centre developments; and new working-class houses have become a rare species. These facts we should bear in mind for future planning, as well as the realisation that a substantial proportion of our people cannot regard a family car as an essential amenity of life.

There were in fact several streets of houses dating from the 1870s which did not disappear until the 1980s, i.e. the Tipping and Rostherne Streets area. Their clearance was part of the development which brought Sainsburys store to the town. In the early 1980s there was a considerable debate about the choice of development on either side of Lloyd Street, with much argument in favour of the inclusion of a hotel and a public hall, the latter being strongly backed by the Chamber of Trade. In the event



William Walk, an example to be followed.

only the south side of Lloyd Street was developed leaving the old Bowdon Station site still derelict. One pleasant feature of the new development was a group of small houses for older people in the new William Walk which could well be repeated elsewhere near the town centre.

A Sale councillor protested vehemently in 1981 about the whole idea of more shops in Altrincham on the grounds that they would be detrimental to Sale Town Centre which should be developed instead, a point which is still significant ten years later when other shopping areas, such as Hale Village, have sadly deteriorated.

1991: THE REDEVELOPMENT OF THE TOWN CENTRE

The Charter Year of 1990 was celebrated by the refurbishment of the centre of the main shopping area, i.e. George Street. Until then the Graftons, the modern modest growth of the 1960s on the old face of the town, was separated from, rather than joined to, the vast concrete jungle of the Petros Centre by the quarter mile elongation of George Street with its broken back in the middle and the ill-mended fracture in its northern leg. The break in its back was where it was crossed by the dog-leg of Shaws Road and Cross Street where traffic has until recently been allowed to move hesitatingly, yet dangerously, across the long-pedestrianised George Street itself. The ill-mended fracture was and still is where the parallel lines of small shops with their pavement overhangs, failed to join properly and match the sides of the old street. What a nicety of commercial judgement should have created this 'fault'!



Town Centre Paving. Laid in Charter Year 1990.



George Street 1991. The narrow end of the strip.

Finally, in 1990 cars were banished from the central area and the near halves of Shaws Road and Cross Street effectively linked into the middle area of George Street by attractive coloured paving stones. At last the main shopping centre of the town had attained a kind of unity, a heart even, which softened the harshness of its narrow elongation and its ill-fitting modern extremities by relegating them to become less dominating features of the whole body of the town centre. The nearby presence of the market and, on the other side, the access to Stamford New Road contributed to the now modest harmony of the whole area. The best, one felt, had belatedly been made of the several bad jobs of partially integrated new developments which had spanned several decades. There had resulted, in the end, a tolerably attractive sense of a busy community. As one strolls along and around George Street at the weekend the place is thronged with a multitude of faces, most of them strange it is true, but one does stand a fair chance of meeting many friendly ones.

This is not say that many problems do not remain. First, car parking space near George Street is quite inadequate. There is a modest car park beyond Regent Road towards New Street plus a small multi-storey park to which access is difficult and two other 'private' parks are available to the public on Saturdays. As a minimum, the one behind the old town hall on Market Street should have an upper floor or two

added to it as should the New Street area. Thus the shopping centre is heavily dependent on vast areas of car parks mainly on rough ground on the far side of the main road, extending more or less continuously from Sainsburys dedicated park in the far south-east to the sports centre behind the station. All these are at a lower ground level from which shoppers have to climb, find their way precariously across narrow antiquated hump-back railway bridges and finally across the busy Stamford New Road which is used as a through route from the south of Altrincham and Hale to Sale, Manchester and Stockport. (It is almost unbelievable that the old bridge on Moss Lane with only one narrow footpath has survived almost to the twenty-first century without serious loss of life or limb as hundreds or thousands of people walk across it in a day.)

Secondly, the very concentration of this main shopping area into one narrow strip with its reputedly high rents, has made the other streets around into relative backwaters. Even Stamford New Road and Railway Street seem to be rather secondary in their appeal, whilst the little streets to the north and west are depressed fringe areas. Thirdly, the disastrous enclosure of the Petros Centre by a vast brick wall fronting on to Kingsway and Stamford Street has inevitably blighted the large island area reaching up to the Old Market Place, part of which has been taken over by modern office blocks. It is rumoured that the rest of this area of shops, either empty or used for non-retail purposes, is being bought up for development as a new shopping area which will somehow be linked to the Petros Centre: this could be a good idea, but it would exacerbate traffic and parking problems which already require attention.

Another major aspect of the centre of Altrincham which causes significant problems for many shoppers is the existence of Sainsburys about half a mile from the main Petros Centre. For the elderly, the partly infirm, or even for those many people carrying heavy bags, this degree of separation is too great for them to accomplish what shopping they would like to do in a single expedition, a fact which has implications for any proposal to develop a third sector so as to create a great triangle of shopping areas. Incidentally, it is almost certainly only the existence of Sainsburys and its car park which has kept flickering even a modest spark of life for the small shops at that end of the town which would fail completely if major new attractions were created elsewhere.

Finally, among this catalogue of drawbacks of the town centre, as has been already mentioned, the long existence of the line of shack-like shops along the east side of Railway Street is a disgrace to the town as is the similarly long-neglected site of Bowdon Station behind it which in quite recent years has been pressed into service as yet another rough car park.



The Bricklayers Arms. Beggars Square was around here.

The sum total of all these deficiencies is a picture of an old town which had haphazardly developed its basic configuration in the nineteenth century and which has undergone piecemeal modernisations in the twentieth without any overall plan. Each development has been treated as a separate entity without regard for the town's general and long-term requirements. Each time the major consideration has been that the new project should be profitable to the private developer. The major Petros Centre project has left us with a quite attractive but small square at one extremity of the shopping area, yet otherwise a large number of small shops. Within a few years of that development it was being said that the existing town centre offered no scope, without major surgery, for a major department store or the moderate sized units required by a number of multiple chains not so far represented in the area.

The only substantial opportunity for remedying the deficiencies of the present retail provision lies in the great area of rough land to the east which is at present use for car parking. How should this opportunity be exploited? Some major principles suggest themselves.

First, we need to decide whether to make the best of the existing centre based on George Street, with all its defects and with whatever enhancement or supplementation is possible. The alternative is to create a new centre to the east and find some

other use for the George Street area. Very few Altrincham folk would imagine it to be feasible to have two centres. On the whole, they would probably plump for improving the existing centre which has the benefit of familiarity if not affection. It also has the substantial advantage of the nearby market, although it needs modernising and improving in a manner which incorporates its overflow to a separate area next to Central Way. It is difficult to envisage a new town centre without the market. After all, this is still a market town!

The best course would seem to be to open up and supplement the present centre without a vast and separate expansion which would change the whole nature of the town. A vital aspect of this approach would be the bringing of new life to the nearby streets at present eclipsed by George Street. The first essential step is to take away the through traffic from Railway Street and at least most of Stamford New Road as planned twenty years ago. An alternative road must be provided, almost certainly by driving a major route across or around the existing car parks to the Stockport Road. The way would then be clear to create a large new pedestrian area which could be linked to George Street at several points including Regent Road which should also be closed to traffic probably up to Central Way. Among other beneficial consequences



Moss Lane Bridge. No pavement on the left.

the area around the Graftons remodelled only thirty odd years ago but now struggling could be given a shot in the arm.

Having gone this far, scope opens up for the major and imaginative stroke suggested earlier. The Railway Street shacks clearly have to go. Why not use much of the space thus created to make a broad open square? This could have been done long ago before the Graftons and the Petros Centre were perpetrated.

The way would then be clear for the provision of a moderate additional retail area immediately to the east of Stamford New Road and adjoining the new square taking the place of Railway Street. This would be closely linked to the existing town centre by the pedestrianised area. A large store would then be supported by the existing small units. There would need to be considerable car parking space close at hand, even underneath taking advantage of the difference in ground levels and with escalator or lift access.

The rest of the present rough car parking area would be available partly for improved car parks but mainly for an important non-commercial or civic area which could well include a hotel, a cinema, some restaurants and most certainly a new public hall. Some office space would be permissible. Many people would consider it reasonable to include some modest houses for elderly or infirm people, giving them easy access to shops and other facilities, similar to the pleasant William Walk development. Undoubtedly there should be space for people to walk and relax.

What then have Trafford Council proposed, after long years of deliberation, public consultation and discussions with various developers? In February 1990, a final development brief emerged which was reflected in a successful application by British Rail, a major owner of land in the vast car parking area. The proposal included provision for 250,000 square feet of new retail space, 100,000 square feet of office space, a hotel, a cinema, a town square, restaurants and a replacement pub. There were to be 2,300 car parking spaces in four multi-storey car parks just to serve the new shops, with more for the offices and other facilities. The new shopping area was approximately the equivalent of George Street from Shaws Road northwards, including the whole of the Petros Centre. The whole scheme was predicated on substantial capital and rental payments to the council for the privilege of using the land much of which belonged to it already. The rest, apart from that belonging to British Rail, was being progressively acquired mainly from small businesses under compulsory purchase orders.

By the spring of 1990 the number of interested developers had been reduced to two. By the summer one of these had gone bankrupt. By the autumn the last remaining one, Burwood House, effectively a joint company of British Aerospace and ASDA, had declared its inability to meet both the financial requirements of the coun-

cil and the physical constraints imposed on it, including the limits on retail space enshrined in the planning application. So the council discussed with Burwood House the extension of the new shopping area up to 350,000 square feet or the equivalent of the whole of George Street including the Petros Centre, with a consequential increase in the shoppers' car parking space to 3,000, presumably in five multi-storey car parks. It also appears that the council sought consultants' advice as to the feasibility of the new scope of development.

The inevitable question is what happened to require the enlargement of the retail space, especially as the original scheme of early 1990 had resulted from extensive discussions with developers? The answer is hardly in doubt. The scheme had been formulated in the heady days of the so-called economic miracle when many people were spending borrowed money as if there was no tomorrow. But tomorrow had come with recession and with it the hard reality that 250,000 square feet of retail space could not be let profitably enough to make the whole scheme remunerative to the remaining developer and to the council. But instead of hard reality causing the council to consider a different approach with much less retail space, they succumbed to the blandishments of the sole remaining developer and agreed to a vast increase!

Of course, people with suspicious minds might well fancy that the fact there was only one developer left with which to negotiate had not a little to do with the change of plan. By now the council must have been getting desperate since the years were running on, the great eyesore of the derelict development area was getting bigger and more intrusive, more and more money was being spent on land acquisition and clearing and in business compensation, and there was a continuing loss of revenue from developing the land. If the one remaining developer declined to proceed, the council would be left with a very large and expensive baby in a most embarrassing situation. Undoubtedly, Burwood House's negotiating position had become very strong, to say the least.

Clearly, in the autumn of 1990, the council felt itself already to be in a most difficult situation, to the extent that it was unwilling to make any public statement about the changed position. A small circle of officials and councillors knew the facts and one or two of them revealed then privately to people like the present writer who felt bound not to publish them for the time being. For the truth had been revealed to this charmed circle as being *confidential*. What proper justification there could be for this restriction is difficult to distinguish. If there had been two or more developers competing for the commission it could just about be understandable that discussions with each of them should not be released to the other. But with only one developer there could be no justification. Indeed this monopoly situation made it extremely important that the public should know what was going on.

Instead, the council was clearly at considerable pains to prevent them. No enquiry of the town hall could elicit any specific information although an official did, late in 1990, admit to a journalist the bare information that the original scheme was now thought to be too small to be viable. It was late in February 1991 when the basic facts about the revised scheme, known to some of us for many months, were confirmed by the Chief Planning Officer at a meeting arranged by a local political party in Bowdon. A number of people in the audience asked about the possibility of providing a concert hall, a meeting hall or a museum. The response of the Chief Planning Officer was that such amenities could not be expected to earn a profit. No major component could be included which would not be profitable. No public funds were available. Asked about the council's financial objectives, he simply replied that they had at least to get a market price for the land. In response to concern expressed about the traffic implications, particularly on the access roads to the town, he said there was possible cause for concern but the experts on the roads question had said that all would be well.

There were no press representatives at the meeting but the following week two local newspapers carried similar accounts of it which were quite bland, delivering the clear message that all would be well so long as proper attention was paid to the detailed design of the new development. No mention at all was made of the collapse of the plan for which outline planning permission had been given nor of its replacement by a new scheme including 350,000 square feet of retail space and 3,000 car parking places. Nor was anything reported about the major questions asked from the floor or the answers to them.

It is perhaps interesting to speculate as to why all this information was suppressed in the 'handout' passed to the press. One can only suppose that certain politicians and/or officials considered this to be appropriate. The decision was at any rate consistent with the absence of any public statement by the council up to June 1991 as to what had been happening during the fifteen months since the outline planning permission was given. All that had really been revealed in a public manner was that a new planning application should be forthcoming in the autumn of 1991. There appeared to be no intention of further public consultation until then. Possibly it was hoped that the application would slip through without too many people noticing.

At last, in July 1991, the project was brought back to the council committee, including the figure of 350,000 square feet of retail space. A few very significant points have emerged:

- ☐ No expert advice has been reported about access to the town for the great increase in shoppers from other areas proposed (two or three times the existing level)

- ☐ The number of car parking places has been cut from 3,000 to 2,600 to save money for the developer. It is recognised that this figure will be inadequate and that the council will have to provide more at its own expense.
- ☐ It is hoped to reduce or remove traffic from Stamford New Road but no major road proposal has been made in order to achieve this
- ☐ The inevitability of some adverse effect on the existing town centre is recognised with a postulated adjustment period of five years.
- ☐ The council has been unable to find any comparable example of a major new shopping development being placed alongside an existing town centre, which might assist planning, for example, of car parking requirements. In other words, no other town has been so foolish.
- ☐ A further 150,000 square feet of retail space is envisaged for Phase II of the new development north of Moss Lane, making a grand total of 500,000 or approximately the size of the present town centre.

It is now vital that all the people of Altrincham fully understand what is proposed. The intention is to turn their modest old market town into a mega-shopping centre to which people will travel from many miles around, tens of miles probably, with two or three times as many cars coming into the town as at present. An increase of more than 2,000 car parking places implies an extra 10,000 to 15,000 shopping car movements into or out of the town every day quite apart from the extra traffic for the offices and other features, with insufferable results for the few access roads. Already many local people complain bitterly about the amount of traffic in the town, about business car parking in residential streets and indeed about the mounting tide of new office building. They simply do not want a great new town centre with a doubling of the number of shops and a vast increase in traffic.

In any event, if the new town centre is successful in attracting more people into the town, both the access roads and the town centre roads, already very busy, will become progressively snarled up. Anyone who has tried to drive around Altrincham on a Saturday will know the impossibility of taking any more traffic. Recent experience shows that local people will strongly resist the building of new roads, with the inevitable destruction of property. So the invading shoppers will be discouraged from trying to enter the town; the possibility that so many of them will be able to enter smoothly enough to ensure the viability of both the old and new town centres is negligible. For those who do come in, the principal car parks will be to the far east of the whole area, and few people are likely to be tempted to go beyond the new centre and

across Stamford New Road to George Street and the Petros Centre, even with the attraction of the market on two days a week.

Sensing this risk, the major retailers in the latter area will surely insist on places in the new centre and will abandon the old. Thus many local people who have been appraised of the extent of the proposed new development have quickly come to the conclusion that the George Street area will be abandoned and die. What will Trafford Council do then?

Let us reflect how this sorry situation has developed. Partly, as has been said, it is because the planners and councillors were presumably carried away by the euphoria of the great credit boom. This delusion of ever-increasing prosperity persuaded them all that Trafford Council, more than ever short of funds because of government restrictions, could make significant money out of exploiting the empty spaces of Altrincham. In any event Altrincham was considered to be the fortunate end of the borough and therefore could hardly complain about having to suffer a little discomfort in the interests of the borough as whole.

More deeply still, we are witnessing an inevitable consequence of the belief that tax reduction is all-important and that public expenditure cannot be afforded even for important community purposes and of the doctrine that every activity has to make a direct profit. To what a pretty pass have we come when the supposed mature and prosperous town of Altrincham cannot afford a proper public meeting hall which could be used for concerts, or a museum, or modest new housing for the less affluent near the town's centre or indeed anywhere.

Nearly 150 years ago there were those better-off citizens who thought the town could not afford minimum drainage or sanitation or water supply. But our forebears did find money, eventually, to provide these basic amenities, to remove slums and build many hundreds of houses and flats for working people, as well as to construct the civic buildings which, apart from Stamford Hall, still grace the town centre, or have been replaced. Why therefore in recent decades have we been unable to plan our town properly as a whole in a manner which respects the loved heritage of the past whilst introducing in a compatible fashion the amenities which modern affluence should surely be able to afford to improve the town as a civilised place in which to live?

Essentially it is indeed a question of the same lack of public enterprise and investment which delayed the social improvements of long ago. Rather than invest in and manage a project itself as part of a long-term plan for the town the council has wherever possible handed over a segregated area for exploitation by a private monopoly which has been enabled to make safe profits. This is precisely the situation with the town centre redevelopment project in respect of which the intention is to hand over

the vast area to a single company without even the benefit of competition at the vital stages. It is an essential aspect of the scheme that the new development should be self-contained and profitable without regard to the rest of the town. If a moderate amount of public money were available it would be possible to proceed more cautiously, step by step, and see how things developed. It would be necessary of course to have a broad plan but this could be modified as experience is gained. As it is, we are being told that it is essential to commit ourselves at once to a complete transformation of the town into a great commercial centre for a vast area and therefore to a great tide of extra traffic which will sink us all into a swamp of congestion and devastate our existing shopping centre. Surely it cannot be allowed to happen.

It has been said that the sole developer in the field, Burwood House, is in a position to bring considerable investment money into the town because it is effectively owned by two very substantial companies, ASDA and British Aerospace. Perhaps so, but no company is going to invest in a development without a near certainty of making a profit out of it. In any event the question has to be asked what happens if even this apparently well-endowed company should go bankrupt in the middle of the huge development project? ASDA certainly has significant problems of its own in the



Old Market Place 1991. Refurbishment arranged by the Altrincham and Bowdon Civic Society with the cooperation of Trafford Borough Council.

highly competitive superstore business. British Aerospace are of course in a very big league, but they are vulnerable to some extent in their dependence on defence contracts and their involvement in car production. Their chairman, incidentally, newly knighted Sir Roland Smith, is, according to a local newspaper, a local man. Perhaps he will, in the end, be concerned about the quality of life in his town?

10

CONCLUSIONS

We began our story of modern Altrincham, nearly a century and a half ago, when it was essentially a market town, stimulated from its slow and tranquil growth by the advent of the Bridgewater Canal over a half a century earlier and particularly by the huge industrial revolution in south Lancashire and the associated vast growth of Manchester. The commercial operation of an area market was extended by the opportunity to provide the cotton metropolis with food as well as with a variety of commercial and personal services. The opening of the railway line strengthened the link to Manchester, especially in facilitating commuting for those people who could do jobs justifying the expense of daily travel and the cost of living in the relatively attractive suburb.

Of local industry there was effectively none. There had apparently been, early in the century, three modest textile factories, no doubt encouraged by the advantage of the canal, but they had disappeared presumably because advancing technology and the strength of Lancashire had left them behind. There remained, struggling against the flood of industrial progress, some hand weaving mainly of silk which appears to have been concentrated in the cellars of the tiny houses in and around Albert Street. But long before the nineteenth century had run its course, even the larger-scale manufacture of silk in England had been largely destroyed by foreign competition in the era of free trade. In Congleton, for instance, where by 1860 5,000 people were employed in textile factories, mainly making silk goods, the numbers were reduced to under 1,300 by 1883 as the result of free trade with France. So all hope for domestic weaving of silk, as of cotton and wool earlier, had disappeared by the third quarter. So it became more remunerative, an economic necessity even, to turn the little houses with their cellars into cheap lodging houses, or even to let the cellars as separate dwellings.

For there were many poor people of the labouring classes who could not afford proper houses of their own in a housing market in which the pressure of demand was so great as the population of the town rose at an unprecedented rate. New house-building even of such small houses as appeared rapidly in New Town, could hardly keep pace with it. For the indigent women and girls there was increasing employment 'living-in' the new mansions or doing laundry work in their own little homes – even if the authorities did not like them hanging washing across the narrow streets. For young men who could not aspire to join the crowded ranks of skilled craftsmen or tradesmen or shopkeepers, there was little left but manual labour, especially in the

market gardens or building work and many of the labourers lived in the sordid lodging houses between New Street and Railway Street or in George Street.

It is eye-opening to perceive that in the third quarter of the last century a most obvious and direct source of extra wealth and employment in the area, probably rivalling the business of supplying Manchester with food, services and workers, was indeed the growth of the mansions of Dunham Massey. From *Mansions and Men* we know that a cotton magnate or business or professional man associated with textiles who could afford a great house in the wealthy suburb must have been 'earning' or taking out of his business at least several thousand pounds a year. The Congregationalist parson at Bowdon Downs Church was paid £1,000. A skilled cotton factory operative was receiving about £35 a year which was undoubtedly well above the average adult male wage in Altrincham, and women received far less still. In the 1851 report of the Board of Health Inspector we are told that a women could be paid as little as £8 pa. So the owner of a mansion was able to command, one way or another, the labour of 100 people or more, either as living-in servants, or as the providers of services from outside the great houses, or simply as the suppliers of food and household goods. By 1880 there were some 100 great houses in Dunham Massey plus a few in Altrincham. The annual income of their owners was probably at least twice that of all the people of Altrincham town. Even allowing for the fact that not all their money was spent locally, it is not difficult to appreciate that the wealthy families were responsible for the employment, in various ways including the building of the mansions, of several thousand people in the town, apart from 500 or more living-in, the population of which was no more than 11,000 in 1881.

It seems clear that the comparative lateness of Altrincham's main increase of population in the third quarter of the century was attributable to its being derived from its proximity to Manchester and not from any growth of industry of its own. Further, one can hardly doubt the significance of the fact that the greatest spurt of building of mansions, around 1870, was followed by a considerable acceleration of the growth of the town's population between 1871 and 1881. Moreover, there were few new mansions built after the early 1880s, so, allowing for the reduction in building work, employment related to the great houses must have fallen on to a plateau, although some somewhat smaller middle class houses were built. Again it must be significant that the population of Altrincham grew during the 1880s by less than half its increase in the previous decade. Clearly this degree of dependence constituted a very vulnerable economic and social position for the people of the town. For even those who had no obvious connection with work for the mansions were dependent to some extent on the general economy of the area which so greatly relied on the extraordinary phenomenon of Dunham Massey.

It was therefore unbelievably timely that industry should come to Broadheath from the 1880s onwards and provide the expansion of employment which could no longer come from the mansions. In a few decades the latter would become unviable in an age when rising economic activity, including that which developed in Broadheath, increased the price of labour in relation to the incomes of the wealthy. Fortunately, for the best part of a century from its inception, the industrial estate, with many ups and downs, flourished sufficiently to be a major support for the economy of Altrincham. Already in the 1890s its early development was associated with a new advancement of the town's population to its extremities – increasing by a third in the decade – so as virtually to fill it up.

Certainly the town continued to expand in the twentieth century with its population going up steadily, though more gently, within its natural boundaries, but exploding first into Hale and then into Timperley, especially as the motor car and bus diluted dependence on the horse. Many of the people living in these suburbs of Altrincham commuted for commercial business to Manchester and increasingly elsewhere, but economic change was gradual with little in the way of major breaks in the pattern of progress. Progress there certainly was with substantial extra wealth leading to a vastly great variety of products and services.

There were of course major crisis periods, in the great slump of 1929/31 and in the Second World War, but these did not break the developing pattern in the same way as the recession of the early 1980s. Technological progress and foreign competition had certainly made life difficult for some Broadheath companies and particularly for Linotype and Machinery Co. but the process of trying to adapt to changing trade conditions was never so rudely prejudiced as by the high interest rates and high value of sterling which only ten years ago also savaged Trafford Park, another substantial employer of people from Altrincham.

Of course our town has not been alone in experiencing the devastation of its industrial base and it has been more fortunate than some towns and cities in not being quite so dependent on a particular industry or trade, and in having a varied population, many of whom can seek a wide range of employment in many different places. Yet it may well be that the loss of most of the industry of Broadheath has damaged the local economy more than has so far been appreciated, although the great expansion of Manchester International Airport has clearly helped to provide employment.

The effect of this damage has been masked by the great credit boom of the mid-1980s which has led the planners apparently to believe that the gap in Altrincham's economy can be filled by a great increase in shops and indeed in offices. There are a number of points to be made about this quite apart from the obvious traffic problems implied.

First, the proposition depends substantially on the assumption that the present recession is a temporary affair and that within a year or two trading conditions will revert to the position of two or three years ago. There is an underlying belief that Britain can continue to improve its capabilities for distributing and selling goods without learning how to make more of them efficiently and competitively at home. To put it mildly, this is a very sanguine view of the likely future.

Improved distribution at home will simply facilitate the purchase of imported goods as incomes in the UK increase. It will therefore be necessary to restrict their increase unless and until our manufacturing industry can effectively meet our requirements more fully. The likely prospect for the foreseeable future is that retail trade, although improving significantly above the 1991 level, will not expand as rapidly as in 1987-88. Certainly there can be no assurance of a swift rise.

The second major point to be made about relying on a major increase in the town's retail capability is that the employment involved would very disproportionately consist of shop assistant jobs for women, including part-time jobs at comparatively modest wages, in a similar category as a substantial proportion of the increase in employment in the country over the last six or seven years before last year's down-turn. Welcome as such jobs would be, if they could be sustained in total – i.e. if both shopping centres could be viable, which is really inconceivable – they could not provide a long term solution to the need for more jobs for men, so many of whom have effectively retired early in the last ten years.

One is driven to the conclusion that it would be in both the national and local interest for more manufacturing work to be done in the area and particularly in Broadheath. The quite surprising fact is that the amount of available space there is very limited. We know that the Nova Group has had difficulty in finding room for its planned expanded operation. If one walks along and around Atlantic Street through the middle of the estate one can begin to see why this is so. The general impression is depressing, of course, once one gets beyond the new warehouse retailing operations. Everywhere there is the feeling of decay, with ancient run-down buildings jostling each other in an uncoordinated jungle, a cautionary tale from the past, lacking almost all the old names even.

It is, however, evident that a vast amount of space is taken up by distribution and transport depots including a huge area occupied by British Telecom. Some of the large old buildings are being broken into smaller units and refurbished. There are many smallish office buildings occupied mainly by information system operators, some of them with a small research and development activity. Quite a number of new buildings, mainly modest office units or starter industrial units, have appeared to the west as Atlantic Street has been driven further into the country. Only a handful of

the 200 or so companies in the whole area, including the part south of the canal and north of the old railway, are actually making anything, although there is a coach-builder and a maker of mining equipment. There appears to be no accurate figure of how many people are employed in this wide area but probably more than 2,000 but well below 3,000.

This is, of course, a far cry from the 8,000 or more of thirty years ago and there is no hope of the return of such labour – intensive operations. What is disturbing, however, is that in present circumstances manufacturing companies like the Nova Group, who would take more space, are considering moving elsewhere because they are finding it difficult to match the prices for land and buildings which developers are prepared to pay with the intention of providing small units especially for businesses which are mainly requiring office space. This is a difficult problem to resolve within the framework of existing national and local policies, but new initiatives to encourage investment in manufacturing industry could change the situation. Further, it is surely desirable that special efforts should be made to find room in Broadheath for new manufacturing operations which would make an important contribution to employment opportunities in the area.

In any event, some effort and expenditure is required to improve the infrastructure of the estate including the roads and the general appearance of the place. When a large area like this, the development of which began a century ago, has been abandoned by virtually all the operations for which it was constructed in the uncoordinated manner of the bygone age, it really needs a communal effort, some public expenditure, to bring it to a state appropriate to the twenty-first century. It is this kind of renovation which is being undertaken by the Trafford Park Development Corporation in the larger area of devastation to the north.

A new road out to the west to join with the motorway system is also desirable – there was to have been one to link with the proposed Altrincham and Sale by-pass which was abandoned – but the new motorway link road will be further away thus making it more difficult for Trafford Council to afford a road joining it from Broadheath without government support. Certainly such a road would help to relieve Altrincham's general traffic problems, now generally agreed to warrant a proper western by-pass.

It is a sobering thought that if Trafford Council succeeds in creating a grandiose new shopping centre which will be unsustainable without inflicting a new order of traffic chaos on the town and devastation on the existing centre, the beginning of the twenty-first century could see George Street taking on an appearance similar to that of Atlantic Street today with semi-derelict and unsuitably used buildings all around. The difference will be that it will not be so easy for the people of Altrincham to close

their eyes to the detritus of history and of ill-judged decisions of local government. Substantial public expenditure will certainly be required; indeed, there is a good economic case for making the monopoly developer of the new centre liable for the clearing up of the consequential decay of the old. We must look at the town as a whole and the need to preserve the value of its existing assets – and indeed to enhance them.

After its rapid expansion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, change had come slowly to Altrincham up to the rapid decline of Broadheath. Even now there remain many hundreds of small houses built in the great expansion period around 100 years ago or more. Many of these small houses are now occupied by one or two people. In popular language they have been largely ‘yuppified’, a term which this writer does not like because it implies a description which is slightly derogatory to the young couples or single people and which not many of them deserve. A high proportion of the couples have different surnames but when they marry and have children many of them no doubt look for more spacious accommodation.

Altrincham does have its housing problems even though they are perhaps not as desperate as those further north in Trafford. In the borough as a whole the waiting list for council accommodation continues to lengthen. Young people on modest incomes find it extremely difficult to afford to buy houses in Altrincham and few are available to rent. A two-bedroomed century old terraced house costs £55,000 to £65,000 or more, well beyond the reach of first-time buyers on incomes of £200-£250 a week who need the houses at £30,000 to £40,000 of which there are none. Many newly-married couples are simply leaving the area to live where houses are cheaper. Altrincham is in danger of becoming a town of geriatrics. Already it appears that there is a great increase in the number of older people and it would seem appropriate to use some of the vacant space in the town centre to provide more purpose-built accommodation for older and infirm people, giving them easy access to shops and social facilities, so freeing other accommodation elsewhere for younger couples. The pleasant little development around William Walk is one example of what can be done. Already many houses have been destroyed to make way for the projected new shopping centre. A proper development plan for Altrincham should certainly take account of the need progressively to replace for people on relatively low incomes large numbers of small houses rapidly constructed by the speculative builders long ago.

Finally, although this book has concentrated on Altrincham town, we should not forget that, without further enlarging its catchment area for shopping and commerce, it is already the natural centre of a broad community which embraces the enormously wealthy suburbs of Dunham Massey, Bowdon, Hale and Hale Barns, opulent offspring of a hardworking mother, as well as the somewhat less well-endowed sister

areas of Timperley and Broadheath. There must be very few districts of the United Kingdom to match this concentration of riches. Within this favoured area there are thousands of households whose financial position has been substantially further enhanced by major reductions in the national and local tax bills in recent years.

The question which arises there is whether it is really impossible to mobilise a little of this considerable wealth to create a town centre in which it is pleasant for both the rich and not-so-rich to walk and shop, in which provision is made for some of the not-so-rich to live rather than just endure. A recent study of British towns has stressed that councils should change their attitude to the use of their town centre by regarding it less as a 9 to 5 retailing and employment centre and more as an eighteen hour a day, seven days a week, regional economic, social and cultural centre. Social considerations should certainly be ranked alongside purely commercial factors and will involve an element of public expenditure. As was said by the councillors who built Stamford Hall, quite apart from financial considerations, local citizens have a right to expect the Corporation to provide facilities inseparable from civilised community life.

What would surely be quite unpardonable would be to create a huge commercial and retailing centre where no one lives and to which people have to travel from far around by car so that more and more space has to be devoted to roads and car parks around the centre, with more and more buildings torn down. This is the Doomsday scenario for the old market town. The lessons of past errors and missed opportunities should help us to foresee and prevent it.

As the population of Altrincham and district grew by leaps and bounds over the two centuries since the Bridgewater Canal was constructed to meet the commercial needs of traffic to Manchester, its own centre was made, little by little and somewhat haphazardly no doubt, to provide for the requirement of the people within its ancient catchment area of several miles radius. There has always been a proper role for local government in guiding and shaping the development of the town centre, in assuring a congenial environment and in providing the civic amenities which individual enterprises on their own cannot afford. Yet to propose that within a handful of years the evolved town centre should be doubled in size is an arrogant act of aggression upon a community hardly paralleled in history outside of the annals of military conflict.

Such a proposal represents also a complete failure to recognise that the position of the local community area has come full circle. Before the age of the train, and most particularly the car, the catchment area of the market town, with its sister towns seven or eight miles away, was limited by considerations of the time and energy required for travel on foot or even by slow horse. Modern means of transport have of course made it easier for people to pick and choose where they go to market. How-

ever, the press of population and the consequent multitude of cars have effectively imposed new constraints of lack of space for traffic and parking as well as of damage to the environment which are effectively as powerful as the travel limitations of long ago in restricting the useful size of the shopping catchment area, quite exceptional requirements apart, to the same few square miles as for our ancestors.

For the local council, supposedly representative of our community, to seek to decree otherwise, as some kind of *deus ex machina*, defying history and the community logic of the evolved modern conditions, is to display an arrogance oblivious of real human requirements which even this commercial age cannot possibly stomach.

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THE MAKING OF ALTRINCHAM

In thirty years in the mid-Victorian period, the population of Altrincham increased by 150% from over 4,000 to over 11,000. Even before this the growing concentration of people in a few streets of tiny overcrowded houses with negligible sanitation, water supply, drainage and street paving had sent the death rate from typhus and cholera soaring to the point that the local gentry called in a government inspector to recommend what should be done.

This book charts the slow progress of the town towards more tolerable conditions as the efforts of local government to deal with unprecedented problems contended with the rising tide of population attracted by the demands for goods and services of the cotton metropolis of Manchester as well as of the rich industrialists and others who fled its dirt, noise and general degradation to live in the Mansions of Dunham Massey on Altrincham's doorstep.

Late in the century other industrialists brought their factories from Manchester to Broadheath at the other end of Altrincham to take over from the mansions as the mainstay of the town's economy until well into the second half of the 20th century. As its resources gradually increased civic amenities were progressively provided and education improved to the point of social maturity and a reasonably civilised life for working people.

By the end of the last century the town had filled to its natural boundaries before exploding into its suburban villages as the motor car linked with the train to make commuting easier. As the 20th century moved into its second half, the nineteenth century town was beset by congestion on its roads and dubious planning decisions which now threaten to come together to produce a doomsday scenario for the old market town.

This is Frank Bamford's third book following the great industrial revolution in cotton textiles through to its conditioning efforts on the development of English society and industry even until today. The national story was told in *Trade for the People* which was followed by *Mansions and Men of Dunham Massey* telling the unique local story of the creation of a wealthy suburb around a new church built by the Earl of Stamford. This new book displays the other side of the local coin in its story of Altrincham town.