

Henry Steel and Tapton Court

Vanity Fair, a weekly "society magazine" published in London from 1868 to 1914 came to be widely regarded for its caricatures of famous people in Victorian and Edwardian society. Its "*Men of the Day*" series regularly included artists, athletes, royalty, statesmen, scientists, authors, actors, business people and scholars. Most issues featured a colour lithograph of a contemporary celebrity or dignitary often accompanied by a witty text, insight or innuendo. In fact it gradually became a mark of honour to be the 'victim' of one of its numerous caricaturists.



Why then did *Vanity Fair* decide to feature Henry Steel, an apparently ordinary Sheffield steel manufacturer in its October 1877 issue? Interestingly Henry was, at the time, said to be the richest man ever to have made his fortune in bookmaking!

As a young man Henry was known at every racecourse in the country. He befriended racehorse owners John Jackson and Harry Hargreaves and subsequently, in partnership with his best friend William Peech, acquired their extensive Turf business. By the 1870s Henry's enormous transactions led him to become celebrated as '*The Leviathan*' a bookmaker to the rich and famous with clients including Lord Rosebery

(who won the Derby three times) and the Prince of Wales (known for his drinking, gambling, horse-racing, shooting and other passions).

Henry Steel inevitably seems to have attracted numerous stories. One goes that after Blue Gown won the Epsom Derby in 1868, Henry strolled jauntily down to Tattersall's, the auctioneers, and deposited £90,000 (about £10.2million today) to buy a horse. Another tells us that when Henry moved to London, he was in a position to purchase the Archbishop of York's house, along with an extensive wine collection. And apparently when he returned to Sheffield his account with the Westminster Bank, was reputed to be its largest.

So why should we be interested in this larger-than-life character? Because, after first living at Westbourne in Broomhill, he purchased Tapton Court, the house that J H Andrew had built at the foot of Shore Lane, and thus joined the fraternity of steel magnates in leafy Ranmoor.



Here in Sheffield he was applying his astute business brain to the steel industry where his gaze had fallen upon the Phoenix Bessemer Company in Rotherham. This company had gone into liquidation in 1875 with liabilities of £140,000. Henry, with partners William Peech, Edward Tozer and Thomas Hampton, bought the works for £36,500, and converted it into a private company with a capital of £70,000. Steel, Peech and Tozer gradually became a successful business eventually combining with Samuel Fox and other companies in 1918 to become United Steel Companies before being absorbed into the British Steel Corporation.

Henry Steel died at Tapton Court in 1915. His will was worth £652,418, (c. £67.5million today). The house contents were sold from a marquee in the grounds in a four-day sale. The item that attracted most interest was a trophy, the Brighton Cup 1874, which sold for 72 guineas.

After several short term residents Tapton Court was converted into a hall of residence for student nurses in

1934. Since then it has been owned by the University of Sheffield who have largely maintained it despite it having been set on fire and vandalised in recent years. It was given a Grade II listing in 1995. Today the house and its annexe are in the process of being developed as up-market apartments by the P J Livesey group.

Inevitably for such a colourful character Henry Steel has been surrounded by a number of stories. When J.G. Graves, one of Sheffield's major benefactors, opened the nurses' home in 1934 he revealed that the Prince of Wales had made unofficial visits Tapton Court to see his old friend and that although his ascendancy to King had curtailed their friendship in the intervening years they met again in 1905 when Edward opened the University of Sheffield. Apparently *"He recognised Henry, left the procession, and shook him heartily by the hand."*

Another story, possibly apocryphal, was that when Prince of Wales, Edward paid discreet visits to Tapton Court and on occasions he and Henry used to venture surreptitiously into central Sheffield to visit a favourite old pub called the Shades Vaults in Hartshead which was approached via the narrow passage of Watson's Walk.

Whiteley Wood Hall

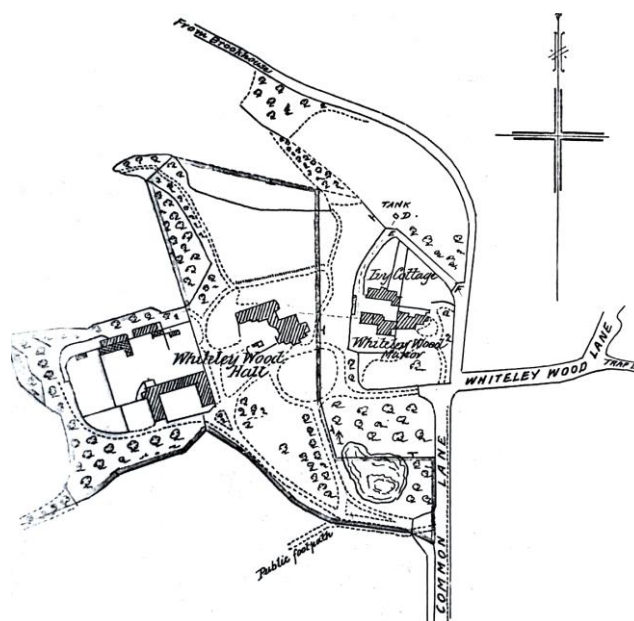
Roger Redfern's "Sheffield's Remarkable Houses" refers to Whiteley Wood Hall situated on the southern edge of the Mayfield Valley. Although sadly demolished in 1959 after many years of neglect it lays claim to some significant historical associations.

The substantial gateposts that still stand on Little Common Lane indicate the driveway to an imposing country house that once presided over an estate of 303 acres. The stable block and associated cottages have been preserved largely because the house was acquired by the Girl Guides Association in 1935. It was only able to afford it with the help of a loan from three benefactors including J G Graves. Unfortunately the Association never had the resources needed to maintain such a large building and when the roof was declared unsafe in 1936 demolition was only delayed by Second World War.



The Hall dated back to 1662 when Alexander Ashton, of Stoney Middleton, the High Sheriff of Derbyshire, built it. He had acquired the land as the result of marrying one of the daughters of Thomas Dale whose family had originally had owned it during the reign of Charles I. But both the Ashtons and the Alsibrooks who followed only produced daughters so the male line eventually fizzled out.

Thomas Boulsover, who by then had invented Sheffield Plate, purchased the Hall in 1757 for a thousand guineas. He increased his land holding and had soon established a forge and rolling mill at Wire Mill Dam whilst living in Whiteley Wood Hall with his wife and family. Thomas died in 1788 aged 84 and the Hall was rented to various tenants although remaining in the hands of the Boulsover family until 1861. Between 1864 and 1876 it was occupied by Samuel Plimsoll, MP for Derby who subsequently became famous for his work in formulating the Merchant Shipping Act that led to the establishment of the "Plimsoll Line" a mark denoting the maximum cargo load a ship can transport.



Boulsover family connections eventually led to the ownership passing to the Silcock family. In 1831 Phoebe Silcock offered the land and paid £2200 towards the construction of Fulwood Church which she would be able to view from the Hall across the Porter Valley.

Committee

Chairman	Mike Killingley	263 0454
Secretary	Gerald Eveleigh	230 1992
Treasurer	Nick Morris	07515 889 394
Planning	David Barber	230 4717
Membership	Peter Marrison	230 3238
Meetings	Helen Sweet	230 1252