

KIDSGROVE

as it was

a short history

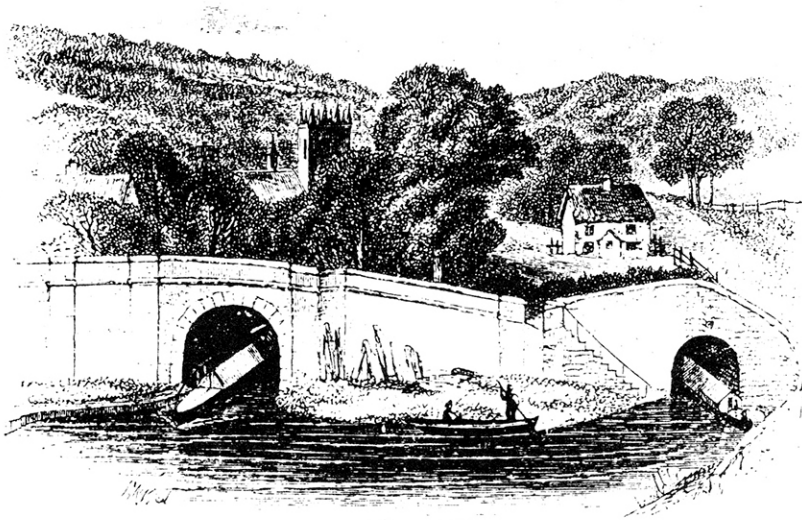
by

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1. INTRODUCTION

Until about 220 years ago Kidsgrove, often called Kid Crew, was an unregarded hamlet - a few farms, cottages and a cornmill set amid wooded hillsides at the northern end of the string of Potteries villages. To the west, a mile and a half away, the rich agricultural land of the Cheshire Plain begins; to the north east the gritty rock of the Pennines shows through the thin soil of the Staffordshire Moorlands. Kid Crew was hardly affected by the major road to Carlisle and the north which ran, a mile to the west, through the neighbouring villages of Talke and Butt Lane.

Then, with the arrival of the Trent and Mersey Canal, and particularly the opening of the Harecastle Tunnel in 1778, the reserves of coal and ironstone which lay beneath the area could be extracted and transported.

Kidsgrove became a typical small nineteenth century industrial town, at first littered with pit head gear, tram ways and spoil heaps, later to be dwarfed by the complex machinery of the Birchenwood Ironworks. The miners lived in narrow rows of brick cottages awkwardly sited on the steep slopes and valley sides, overhung with black dust, steam and smoke. Half a mile away, the local squire, Thomas Kinnersley, enjoyed the green seclusion of his estate at Clough Hall.

With his death in mid-century, and increasing problems of flooding in the mines, a period of decline set in. The ironworks closed before the end of the century, and Clough Hall itself became for a time a large public pleasure resort.

This century has seen the closure, often with tragic loss of life, of all Kidsgrove's pits; the coke ovens which had kept Birchenwood in business for most of this time finally cooled and died in 1973; the canals have declined, and even the railways which once threaded Kidsgrove's valleys now have an insignificant role in industrial transport.

New industries have come (electronics and aerospace, for example) but Kidsgrove has now largely become a residential area. The huge, mainly post-war, increase in the number of private cars enables people to travel some distance to their place of work.

Continuous change is often largely unnoticed, and it may come as a surprise to many that Kidsgrove was once a very different place. The major landmarks of its past have largely disappeared: Whitehall, Clough Hall, the Birchenwood Works, the many collieries, the once busy Potteries Loop Line and most of the original rows of houses. New housing or landscaped woodland often covers these sites without trace.

Remnants remain - the railway bridge at the lower end of Heathcote Street, Twelve Row, the Clough Hall Lodges, the canal tunnels - but it is hard to visualise Kidsgrove as it once was.

Luckily, there are written accounts, maps, photographs, buildings, census returns, newspaper reports, actual objects and peoples' memories, and from these something of what life was like 'in the olden days' can be recreated.

2. EARLY TIMES

The first people to move over the ground where the town stands now have left few signs. A stone axehead found on Bunker's Hill, Talke points to prehistoric man being in the vicinity, as does the fact that one of the largest Bronze Age barrows to be found in Cheshire is at Lawton crossroads, only a couple of miles distant. It is faintly possible that the bank and ditch crowning Harecastle Hill and easily visible from the A34 is a prehistoric earthwork, but this remains unproven.

The First Roads

The Romans had a small military camp nearby at Chesterton. Traces of roads leading from thence towards the Cheshire salt towns such as Nantwich and Middlewich and towards settlements in the Peak District have been reported, though their whole courses are uncertain. Either may have passed through or near to Kidsgrove. A section of track near the Coppice Estate at Talke has been suggested as part of the 'Salt Road'. Kidsgrove would be on a direct route from Chesterton towards Mow Cop, where hints of Roman road have been found, but until these have been archaeologically verified one could not say positively that the Romans marched through Kidsgrove.

The bridle path which diverges from the Clough Hall drive by Leg O' Mutton pool, climbing towards the Lodge Cafe on the A34, has also been spoken of locally as 'Roman', but again only research could validate the claim.

Mow Cop was certainly visited by the Romans; during their occupation limestone was quarried for use as millstones. This quarrying continued, flourishing in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and afterwards.

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Fragment relating to Audley from Domesday Book

Both Talke and Audley have early roots. They are mentioned in the Domesday survey of 1086, having then some plough land in clearings in the woods. The Audley family of Heighley Castle owned much of the land, including the area now occupied by Kidsgrove. Talke was granted a market charter by Henry III in 1253. The plinth of the cross still remains on the site of the busy medieval marketplace.

The village had the advantage of being on a major route through the Kingdom from London to Carlisle and the north, which entered Staffordshire near Lichfield and ran through Stone, Newcastle, Chesterton, Red Street, Talke and Butt Lane. Packhorse trains, wagons, soldiers, peddlers and farmers taking their goods to market all passed through Talke, which not unexpectedly was famed for the number of its inns. In 1714 this road was the first in Staffordshire to be improved by one of the new Turnpike trusts; in 1733 a traveller spoke of The Plume of Feathers at Talke as 'a great wagonners' inn' where he had seen 'above twenty teams of a night'.

The Calm before the Storm

Kidsgrove, meanwhile, remained almost unchanged by the passage of time. A few farms and cottages were scattered in the woodlands which covered the area and which have now left us hardly more than their names - Hardingswood, Birchenwood, Nabb's Wood. Woodshutts Farm is one of the few buildings to have survived from these early days. The Cornmill at Hardingswood, turned by the stream which still runs through Kidsgrove, occupied the site of the present Kidsgrove Workingmen's Club. Millstones from Mow Cop were used to grind the corn here until the mill was demolished in the 1880's. Between the hamlets of Kidcrow, Ranscliff, Oldcott, Newchapel and so on wandered a network of paths and narrow tracks.

One hint of why Kidsgrove was eventually to grow has already been noted; Simon Unwyn's 'colepitts'. His and others were worked all over the area on a domestic scale wherever the coal seams ran close to the surface. Doctor Plot, in A Natural History of Staffordshire published in 1686, briefly describes a coal mine owned by a Mr Poole at Hardingswood. This coal, and the ironstone which accompanied it, were to be the foundation of Kidsgrove's prosperity, once the Trent and Mersey Canal had created the means to transport them to larger markets outside the area.

3. JOHN GILBERT AND THE CANALS

The change from the tiny hamlet shown on Yates' map of 1775 to the thriving small town with collieries, workers' houses, church, chapel and school shown on the Tithe Maps of 1837-9, about sixty years later, was the result of the gathering momentum of the Industrial Revolution.

Britain's population was increasing, providing ever-expanding markets for food, fuel and goods of all kinds. Landowners were becoming manufacturers as well, helped by new ideas and technical innovations such as the steam engine. Locally the master potters of the as yet embryonic Five Towns were eager to get more of their crockery (unbroken if possible) to markets both at home and abroad. They were particularly hindered by inadequate roads, often muddy sloughs in winter or dry dusty ruts in summer. From the early 18th century interested parties had grouped to form Turnpike Trusts, improving the roads and charging travellers tolls to use them. A group of local businessmen headed by Josiah Wedgwood sponsored a turnpike from Burslem to Red Bull, where it met the Carlisle road in 1765. This, now called Liverpool Road where it passes through Kidsgrove, was the first decent road through the town.

The Trent and Mersey Canal

But a far smoother method of transporting pottery and its raw materials was by water. Encouraged by the success of the Duke of Bridgewater's canal near Manchester, Wedgwood and others fostered the idea of a 'Grand Trunk Canal' connecting the River Trent with the Mersey and thus forming an open waterway from the east side of the country to the west. Work on it commenced in 1776, with James Brindley the chief engineer of the scheme. One of the most difficult sections of the 93 mile waterway was the $1\frac{3}{4}$ mile tunnel at Harecastle. Accounts of the building show that it was a more complex task than Brindley had envisaged;

in fact, long before it was completed Brindley was dead (of overwork, a chill and undiagnosed diabetes) and buried at Newchapel near his estate at Turnhurst.

The pottery trade was not the only reason for the canal's construction. Brindley had acquired the estate in partnership with his brother John, Hugh Henshall, and the brothers John and Thomas Gilbert in 1760, before the Canal Act was passed. Part of this purchase was a colliery at Goldenhill, which was to benefit them greatly when the canal was constructed.

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John Gilbert

But the man who really benefitted from the hidden wealth of Kidsgrove was not Brindley but John Gilbert. He was Agent for the Duke of Bridgewater and the idea of building side tunnels from the canal into the Duke's mines at Worsley had been his. Believing rightly that the canals would be equally useful to Kidsgrove's coal, he began to buy property in the area.

The property he purchased was the Clough Hall estate. Unfortunately, there is some doubt about the exact date. One account says he built a house in Kidsgrove in 1765, another that he was able to buy part of the Clough Hall estate in 1783 and the rest three years later. The article in the Staffordshire Sentinel in 1879 states that 'somewhere near 1777 a Mr. Gilbert came to Kidsgrove and commenced mining...'

It is hard to sort out the truth of these contradictions but it seems likely that some of the confusion has occurred because there were two John Gilberts involved, father and son. John Gilbert the father probably bought some of the land (or was given it by the Duke of Bridgewater) in the 1760's or 70's. As he continued to work for the Duke and lived at Worsley, where he died in 1795, it seems most likely to be his son, the younger John Gilbert, who moved to Kidsgrove, building himself a house called the Brick or White Hall overlooking a wharf at Hardingswood.

The father seems to have been generally liked; the son is not spoken of with much respect. From his few letters he seems to have been somewhat hasty and careless. The 1879 account says, 'He never stopped to argue; he knew all about a lump of coal, could tell its quality and profit at once, nay, was able to measure a mine and reckon up a seam at view, but an argument was above his match. Instead of using words he used a large staff which he carried to walk with, having at the lower end a small paddle with which he enforced his logic.' This picture is corroborated by an eye-witness account, which also illustrates another aspect of Kidsgrove's growth.

R. Timmis recorded the beginning of Methodism in Kidsgrove as follows: 'About the year 1788 a daughter of Samuel Kelsall removed to Kidsgrove... and wished to have a meeting in her own house... But as soon as God began to work, the enemy marshalled all his forces and Mr. Gilbert was their generalissimo and roared against them like a lion and threatened to exterminate them out of the village... One night when they were very lively he broke in suddenly amongst them and shouted that he would have no meetings... But he had mistaken his men... he had no right there in that he came among a peaceable people in an hostile manner with an unlawful weapon in his hand (they knew he had his paddle with him)'.

Gilbert was not able to destroy the Methodist connexion and meetings continued in private houses until 1815, when the first chapel was built at the lower end of Attwood Street.

Industrialisation

The Harecastle Tunnel took eleven years to complete. Besides tunnelling in from both ends, 15 shafts were sunk into the hills between Kidsgrove and Chatterley. The miners lowered into these came across appalling difficulties, flooding particularly. Windmills were used to pump the workings, but when these proved inadequate, steam engines were used. The tunnellers also came across coal seams and these were exploited swiftly; coal from the side tunnel into the Goldenhill Colliery was fetching 3s.6d. (17½p) per ton in 1773. Soon new larger pits were open to feed their product to the canal via wooden railways along which horses pulled lines of small wagons down to the canal wharves.

Miners who had helped build the tunnel stayed to mine, and rows of small cottages began to appear amidst the woodland. Most of these have gone now, but they can be recognised by the fact that they were nearly all called Rows; Wharf Row, of 'back to back' cottages overlooking the canal, was later renamed The Meadows. By far the largest was Windmill Row, which some time between 1840 and 1850 changed its name to Long Row, and has now in the 1980's only just been demolished. There were also Forge, Stable, Stone, Ten and Twelve Rows.

The new Clough Hall

John Gilbert, too, was thinking about housing. In time White Hall seemed too small or not impressive enough for the well-to-do landowner he had become after inheriting his father's property. At some time before 1800 he demolished the old Stuart Clough Hall (described in a much later newspaper report as 'an ancient and ruinous farm house') and built on or near the site a new and stately mansion 'with some twenty bedrooms and the luxury of mahogany in all the downstairs rooms'. A letter from John Gilbert, which is now in Birmingham Reference Library, dated Jan 10th 1800, is written from Clough Hall so, unless he was writing from the old house prior to its demolition, he was then in residence. He surrounded it with park-like grounds, a walled kitchen garden, and an ornamental lake.

Perhaps it was the view from White Hall which persuaded him to move. The Rev R. Warner in that same year wrote: 'Kidsgrove, deep and dark in wood, had to lament the destruction of all its picturesque beauty by the introduction of the black and nasty apparatus accompanying coal mines, several of which, belonging to a Mr. Gilbert are worked here to a depth of five hundred and forty feet'.

However, Gilbert did not have long to enjoy his new home, for he died in 1811. It may be that he was also in some financial trouble before then, because he sold some of his mining interests in 1809 to Thomas Kinnersley, a prosperous banker from Newcastle.

4. THOMAS KINNERSLEY: MINES AND IRONWORKS

On Gilbert's death a sale catalogue of his estate in Kidsgrove was produced giving full details of his properties; apart from Clough Hall itself, these included the Mill at Hardingswood, over 120 houses, Foxholes Farm (which had belonged to the Clough Hall estate even while the Unwyns were in residence), Hayhead Farm,

and mines at Harecastle, Newchapel and Norton-in-the-Moors.

Interestingly, the estate was not sold outright in 1812; Thomas Kinnersley, who shortly after moved to Clough Hall, was only able to complete the purchase on the death of John Gilbert's wife in 1818. By this time the Napoleonic Wars were over and Britain was embarking on the era of Empire and Prosperity.

The Kinnersley family dominated the life of Kidsgrove for the first half of the nineteenth century. It is not certain which of two Thomas Kinnersleys, father or son, lived first at Clough Hall but, as the father died in 1819, it is clearly the son who presided from then on.

Thomas Kinnersley

Thomas Kinnersley was originally a hat manufacturer in Newcastle and a partner in his father's banking firm. He now took charge of the collieries at Kidsgrove and extended them: pits at Nelson and Bath Pools were opened. The Trent and Mersey Canal was now so busy carrying pottery, raw materials, limestone, salt, foodstuffs and coal that in 1822 Thomas Telford was asked if a second tunnel could be driven through Harecastle Hill to relieve congestion. Work began on this in 1824 and it was officially opened in 1827. By then the next transport revolution was gathering steam; in 1830 the Liverpool to Manchester Railway opened and Kinnersley rightly calculated that soon there would be a great demand for iron, both for the 'Iron Horse' and for the machines of Britain's roaring factories.

Kinnersley's wealth enabled him to achieve luxury for himself and improvements for his workers. At Clough Hall he entertained guests and took part in the social life of the County. On the death of his brother in 1823 he was elected Captain of the Newcastle and Pottery Troop of Yeoman Cavalry. He was a Deputy Lieutenant and J.P. and in 1833 followed his predecessor Simon Unwyn by becoming High Sheriff of Staffordshire.

He and his wife had about 10 servants at Clough Hall and employed a groom and gardeners to look after the gardens with their vineries, greenhouses and large kitchen gardens. Normally his privacy was strictly guarded by four Lodges, but on occasion the grounds were thrown open to the workpeople and their children.

Improvements in Education

Thomas Kinnersley's efforts to improve the life of his workers began with the erection in 1837 of a church and Sunday school in the Avenue. Beside the church was a capacious rectory with a well-stocked garden in which was soon installed Kinnersley's agent for improvement, the Rev. Frederick Wade. He was a good choice, being both energetic and forceful, and remained in Kidsgrove till 1880.

Within two years a large day school, now called Kinnersley Memorial School, was built on Sandhole Meadow alongside the main road. Two teachers and a trainee were appointed and here about two hundred children received, for the payment of 2d or 3d a week, instruction in reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, history and religion. Wade also helped to start schools at Goldenhill and Mow Cop. Previously, small 'Dame schools' had hardly scratched the surface of the basic illiteracy of the workers, but from now on education would make its mark.

We can see something of this in the replies given by some of the teenage workers in Kinnersley's mines to the Commission enquiring into the condition of Children in Mines in 1842.

John Vickers, aged 17, described his life thus: 'I come to work at 6 in the

morning and go home about 6. My business is to haul away the coal that come up from Delph (Mine). I get 11s (55p) a week for my pay. I am too tired after work to go to school in the evening. I go to church pretty regular. My father is dead. My mother keeps a child's school. I have 3 sisters; two of them work at the silk factories at Congleton. The youngest goes to the day school'.

Thomas Hancock, aged 14: 'I have worked down here three years; when I came first I opened and shut door to turn the wind on and off. If I didna do that the Sulphur (gas) would get in Delph. I drive horses now to and from the pit's mouth. I go to Sunday School. They teach me a b, ab.'

Daniel Knapps, aged 15, was lodging in Windmill Row: 'I have been working here in Delph 6 or 7 years. I drive horses now. I cannot read or write. I never went to day school; I go to Sunday School at the National, under Mr. Wade. They teach me from a book; I don't know what it is about. I begin to come to work at foive and by the time I gets down into Delph it's 'most six. I come up again to bank at six. I works as you see me, without any clothes besides my shoes; sometoimes I puts on some trowsers. My father is dead; I left mother because I was clemming (hungry); she has had four children before her was married. I got enough to eat and drink - tea for breakfast and bread and butter, beef and tatees for dinner, and a supper. Mr. Wade talks to us sometoimes and tells us to be good. I sometoimes takes his advice - sometoimes I dinna'.

The Rev F.T. Wade's own account of this progress perhaps reflects more his wishes than the facts but is probably substantially true: 'The people... are more regular in their devotional exercises, steady and domesticated at home, industrious and hardworking in their avocations and respectful and obedient to their superiors'. In 1849 Wade prided himself that 'he had neither policeman nor constable in the place, nor did he require one'.

Kidsgrove in 1841

By the 1840's the population of Kidsgrove was between two and three thousand, the majority of wage-earners working for Kinnersley in his coal pits and newly opened blast furnaces. People were moving into the village in large numbers, particularly from other coal and iron-working areas - like South Staffordshire, as perhaps can be deduced from the accent of Daniel Knapps.

From now on a picture of the community can be gained from the ten-yearly national census returns which record, street by street, people's names, ages, occupations and birthplace.

In 1841 the majority of workers in Kidsgrove were colliers, labourers or engineers, but other workers included blacksmiths, saddlers, farmers and agricultural labourers, a reminder that a large number of people still depended upon agriculture and that animals were still much used for transport; boatbuilders and boatmen, of which there was quite a community on the canal at Hardingswood; a spread of shopkeepers, shoemakers, publicans, and finally the equivalent of white-collar workers, the surgeon, works manager, clerks, schoolmaster and vicar.

As one miner said: 'This Kidscrew used to be a terrible place in former times. It is improved a soight sin' Mr. Wade a' bin here... A good many o' the children can read their Boibles and write a bit now, that's more than many o' the men can'.

The new iron industry

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furnaces in the 1790's, and there was even a furnace at Talke in 1815 which produced 'poor iron and little of it'. 'Mines or Beds of Ironstone' and an ironworks belonging to Mr J. Luckcock are mentioned in the 1812 Clough Hall sale catalogue.

In 1838, after several years' work, Kinnersley commenced production of iron at Birchenwood. He had picked an auspicious time in which to commence. John Ward, writing his History of the Borough of Stoke-on-Trent (1840) gives the reason: 'several blast furnaces have lately been erected... for smelting the iron ore with which the neighbourhood abounds; but which has been only sparingly raised until the recent demand for iron for railways etc.' The 1840's were to be the time of 'Railway Mania' when Britain's cities became linked by the iron network. The North Staffordshire Railway itself was built 1846-8, though it is said that Kinnersley would not allow it to disturb his peace at Clough Hall and ensured that it was decently hidden by the third tunnel through Harecastle Hill.

Robert Heath (1779-1849) had been manager of the Kinnersley Collieries since 1825, and he was now promoted to manage the ironworks too. His son, also called Robert (The history of Kidsgrove is plagued by fathers and sons bearing the same names!) worked under him as an apprentice and helped when his father expanded the works by the addition of rolling mills and other equipment. The coal to power the works was conveniently on site at Birchenwood. Soon after the arrival of the North Staffordshire Railway a line was built, partly underground, from the station up to Birchenwood, so that the finished iron could be carried away by rail. The course of the lower end of the line can still be traced, for example between the electrical shop and Post Office in the Avenue.

The elder Robert died in 1849, and his son was considered competent enough to take over his position as manager. Robert junior, though, proved too ambitious to work for Kinnersley long, and left in 1854 to begin his rise as ironmaster of Biddulph.

The Death of Kinnersley

Kinnersley himself died on the 4th February 1855 and was interred, after an impressive funeral procession from Kidsgrove, in the family vault at Ashley. The business of Kidsgrove closed for the day; it was also suspended for a while at Newcastle, where the Mayor, Corporation and many prominent townspeople accompanied the cortege to the Ashley Road.

It is a pity that so few personal details are known about Thomas Kinnersley; there are no known portraits or photographs extant. The eulogy published on his death by the Staffordshire Advertiser is formal rather than acute: 'By the judicious application of an abundant capital his collieries and ironworks were so greatly extended that the population of Kidsgrove has of late years rapidly increased. He cared for the temporal and spiritual welfare of those he employed... and it must have been highly gratifying to witness the result of his benevolent exertions in the improved character of the people'. The Rev F.G. Llewellyn, writing about 70 years later, characterised him as 'a remarkable man; hardworking, capable, sagacious, generous and a Christian gentleman in the best sense of the term'. He certainly had a reputation for being both fair and charitable, but of his manner, his habits, his leisure interests very little is known.

Prosperity

Ownership of the mines and ironworks passed to his wife, who continued to live at Clough Hall and take an interest in the Kidsgrove folk. She added a memorial chancel to the Church in 1858 and a schoolhouse to the Kinnersley school. Her patronage was obtained when some of her employees wished to create a cricket club. Free use of the Windmill Field for the pitch was granted in 1874

when the Clough Hall Cricket Club came into existence, with the vicar's son as its first captain.

The business continued to prosper, though not without its ups and down. 1870 was the peak year for iron production in North Staffordshire, the Clough Hall plant being one of the 9 ironworks involved. In that year a big explosion in the boiler house at Birchenwood was perhaps an omen. In 1875 the Potteries Loop Line from Hanley down to Kidsgrove was opened, running straight through the centre of the Birchenwood works and giving Kidsgrove its third railway station, the Halt, by the Working Men's Club in Market Street. This busy line, which at its peak had a 15 minute service and carried millions of passengers, must have added yet more noise, steam and black dust to the centre of Kidsgrove.

In the 1861 census Market Street was still in process of construction and the enumerators of the schedules had to name it 'New or Market Street', the name not having been settled. In the same way some houses were termed 'Back of Chapel' and, rather dismissively, 'Waste Land'. But by the 1871 census the form of Kidsgrove and its street names had been decided. Its centre was a rough triangle on the steep slopes: Heathcote and Attwood Streets formed one side, Market Street its lower boundary and several smaller streets its third extremity. In this warren of houses with their cramped backyards were plenty of public houses, Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist chapels, and the 'handsome and commodious Assembly Room in High Street, at which public and private meetings, concerts and other entertainments are held'.

The shops serving this busy community of about 4,500 people were appropriately diverse; linen drapers, butchers, furniture dealers, several earthenware sellers, a clock and watchmaker, two stationers, fishmongers, chemist, ironmongers,



bakers and tailors. The canal trade was busy enough to keep two marine stores in business, and there were two pawnbrokers for those short of money before pay-day. A trade almost forgotten today but very important to workers in heavy industry was that of shoe and clog maker. Early morning in Kidsgrove then resounded with the clatter of the heavy shoes of the workmen, bought from 'Cloggers' Dean, Thomas Joynson, Joseph Middleton, Richard Taylor and the other boot and shoemakers of Kidsgrove.

Decline and Revival

When Mrs Kinnersley died in 1877, the Clough Hall businesses were briefly taken over by Georgiana Attwood, a niece of the Kinnersley's, but on her death in 1879 Edward Williamson became owner. Under his management the firm languished somewhat: though all four furnaces were still in use in 1880, production was down. Difficulties were also affecting the mines. A local commercial directory reported in 1887: 'For some time past the trade has been very quiet, owing to a variety of causes, but chiefly by the flooding of the Collieries in the neighbourhood'.

However, in this same year the business was bought (according to local hearsay, for the bargain price of £11,000) by Robert Heath, once apprentice and manager, but now owner of the famous Biddulph Valley Ironworks. The Clough Hall Colliery was opened with the help of new pumping machinery, but Heath had other ideas for the Ironworks. They were closed in 1894, the plant and blast furnaces being dismantled and transferred to Biddulph. The colliery's business now was to supply coke for the Biddulph Works, which it did by means of four batteries of 31 beehive ovens, the coke carried by a railway line built in 1897-8.

5. 'THE PARADISE OF THE POTTERIES'

Concurrently, great changes were happening in the once secluded grounds of the Hall. After the death of Miss Attwood the Hall and grounds had been allowed to run to seed but, as the industrial part of the estate was bought by Robert Heath, the other was bought by a consortium of Manchester businessmen headed by yet another Mr Heath. They planned to take advantage of the proximity of the Potteries conurbation and the good rail links which Kidsgrove had now acquired to attract people from a large area of the North West of England to a large public pleasure garden, a proto-Alton Towers complex.

A New Look for the Gardens

In 1899, therefore, an army of 200 workers descended upon the Hall and gardens. The Staffordshire Advertiser reported in May 1890: 'The work of restoring the magnificent gardens to something like their former grandeur has been carried on most energetically, the walks have been cleared, trees pruned, seeds set and plants placed in the ground. The pool above the meadow is already supplied with pleasure boats. A large dancing platform has been laid down. The roadway separating the Bath Pool field from the rest of the estate has been bridged over and the necessary boat house, dressing rooms and accommodation for the various kinds of diversion in the Bath Pool are being prepared. A switchback railway will be finished soon'.

A fountain, monkey house and aviaries were built, though not, alas, a pagoda meant for the island in Bath Pool (which would have been a real bit of Kidsgrove exotica to rival Alton Towers). A dancing platform, described as being large enough for 1,000 couples, was built above the lake. Another large hall, built for meetings, dances and concerts had a roof specially strengthened to take the strain of trapeze apparatus. Another large building housed tea-rooms and a bar, where you could buy the Clough Hall Company's own lemonade; when the gardens closed, this building was sold and taken to Congleton where it survived till 1974 as part of the Silver Springs Bleaching and Dyeing Factory at Timbersbrook.

The meadow below the lake was laid out as a sportsground, equipped for archery, cricket, lawn tennis and croquet; a running and cycle track was also constructed there later, as demand for the various sports waxed and waned.

At the far end of the pool a fairground was built, with what a newspaper described as 'special provision for the boisterous merriment of children' including rides, coconut shies, swingboats, and an 'Aerial Walkway'. Hovering over all was a captive balloon in which people could ascend to gaze down on Kidsgrove from a thrillingly unfamiliar angle.

The secretary of the Company, showing a reporter over the Park shortly before the opening, voiced the company's aims: 'Clough Hall Park and Gardens will not be opened merely for dancing and drinking, with fireworks as an adjunct; but the desire... is to carry out the venture on higher and better principles'. A full and enjoyable day out for respectable families was the Company's ambition.

'Open to the Public'

Interest grew as opening day, Whit Monday, 1890, drew near. The advertising campaign called Clough Hall 'the Paradise of the Potteries' and promised a lengthy

bill of entertainment, headed famously by 'Blondin, the Hero of Niagra'. The French tightrope walker, now aged 66, was past the peak of his career but even so, with four crossings of Niagra and appearances at the Crystal Palace, he was very popular and undertook to 'cross at a height of 70 feet a Cataract of Fire'.

Other acts included several acrobats, the Juvenile Excelsior Troupe (who danced round a maypole), Rae and Weston the Bedouin Bicyclists, The Royal Washington Trio of musical clowns and grotesques, two champion wrestlers (one of whom had an egg-shaped head, was cross-eyed, and occasionally titled himself 'The Terrible Turk'), the Yokohama Troupe of Japanese jugglers, La Belle Maud (who was to make a parachute jump from the balloon), performing pigeons, and the Blondin Donkey (whatever that did!)

Music was provided by the bands of the 9th Lancers, the Manchester Artillery, the 1st North Stafford, and Clough Hall's own house band. There were athletic sports featuring well-known runners and a novelty cricket match between two teams of lady cricketers.

The Grand Opening was commemorated by a medallion; Kidsgrove had never seen such a day. As the newspaper said, 'attendance exceeded all expectation. As the trainloads of people alighted on the Kidsgrove and Harecastle platforms and marched to the Avenue entrance the throng became so great that there was much crushing and delay in getting through the gates for nearly half an hour'. Admission was 1/- (5p), with children under twelve half price. Once inside, the crowds could stroll round the newly-restored grounds, row on the lakes, and listen to a varied musical programme. The fairground was crowded, and Blondin's act enthusiastically received. There was dancing in the evening and, to round off the day, a firework display 'on a scale unsurpassed in the district before'. A tableau in fire of The Defeat of the Spanish Armada was cheered by thousands before all concluded with the hopeful slogan 'Success to Clough Hall'.

Thus was inaugurated over ten years of summer entertainment.

Fame and Fortune

Blondin started a tradition of high wire exploits and his name is the first to be mentioned in any local reminiscences about the Park. On his second appearance in 1891 an estimated 30,000 people came to see him. By 1899 his place on the bills had been taken by Herr Granda and Mademoiselle Fedora with their daring feats on the high rope. Parachute descents were also a feature of Clough Hall; Miss Maud Devoy (or La Belle Maud, the Flying Lady) made several descents, as did Profesor Charles Baldwin, described as follows: 'His balloon ascended very gracefully and when at a considerable altitude the daring aeronaut launched himself into space. After falling with fearful rapidity for several hundred yards, the parachute became inflated and he was borne gently and safely to the ground, alighting in a field near the Harecastle Hotel'.

The cricket match went well, despite traditionally poor weather, though the correspondent who reported the game was more impressed by the ladies' costumes than by their playing: 'the batting lacked power and in most instances the style and finish were not good, few of the ladies playing with a straight bat'. Few runs were scored, perhaps because the ladies were 'somewhat hampered by their skirts and the width of their sleeves'.

Athletics, bicycle racing, flower shows, brass band contests, swimming galas, and exhibitions were regular features of the Gardens. The house band played selections from oratorios on Sundays. Advertisements speak of a Zoological Collection, including bears and monkeys, and in 1899 camel and dromedary rides were available.

An ever-changing stream of fancifully-named music hall acts provided variety amid the customary dancing and drinking. Victorina, the Strongest Woman in the World, climaxed her act at Clough Hall by catching a ball fired from a cannon, the feat requiring 'not only great courage, but wonderful strength and quickness'. John Clempert, the Handcuff King, undertook Houdini-like escapes from leg-irons, chains and ropes. Alar, the Human Arrow was 'shot from a Roman Crossbow and caught by another artiste swinging at a distance of 40 feet.' Mademoiselle Ladora, the Queen of Fire, performed her celebrated La Danse Illuminata; these and hundreds of other flamboyant spectacles amused the weekend crowds.

The Manager, Mr J.W. Heath, genially reported at a celebration dinner in 1891: 'These grounds are the largest in the United Kingdom devoted to pleasure seekers. Their object, of course, was first to make money, but next, to give those who visit Clough Hall value for money. The grounds were open... for anything except funerals'. Prices were low, to attract large crowds, and there were cheap rail fares to help further. For local people entrance could be even cheaper than the 6d (2½p) or 1/- (5p) usually charged; if they knew one of the men on the turnstiles he might let them slip through, whispering urgently 'Take y'tunity'. Take y'tunity'.

The Industrial Exhibition

Clough Hall's most grandiose effort was reserved for the end of the century, when in 1899 it staged a Great Industrial Exhibition, in emulation of the Great Exhibition of 1851 and its international sequels.

According to the fanfare of preliminary publicity, 'The Exhibition will represent progress, knowledge blended with refined healthy instruction and amusement' and 'No objectionable features or anything that can reasonably be taken exception to'. 'Exhibits from many of the Principal Firms of Great Britain and All the Up-to-date Firms of the District' were promised, with goods from Rome, Jerusalem, Ceylon, China, Japan and India on display. In fact, the whole event had a decidedly oriental flavour; a bazaar was built; a temple of the God of Shiva, and a fleet of jin-rickshaws to ferry visitors about.

The reality was not as all-encompassing as the advertisements, but nevertheless it was a triumph of enterprise on the part of the management. Suchard's cocoa had a stand in the form of a Swiss chalet, and the Indian manufacturing firm of Bhumgara occupied some 800 square feet with brassware, Cashmere embroideries, and carved and inlaid woodwork. The firm of Thomas Edison displayed the latest in sound recording and reproduction. The early cinema had also arrived at Clough Hall. The previous year a report commented on 'Edison's electrograph' with 'Pictures which are clearer and more restful to the eye than was the case in the earlier stages of this wonderful invention'. In 1899 the crowds were promised 'Animated photography of Day-to-Day incidents in Staffordshire'. A large display of bicycles included what was probably the first motor-bicycle to be seen in Kids-grove.

For some reason the pottery trade did not take advantage of the opportunity, only Enoch Pratt's Crown Pottery of Burslem and Pearsons Pottery Co. taking part, but many other local businesses were present. Louis Taylor displayed 'modern bedroom suites and artistic furniture'. Mr W. Durose, a metal worker of Tunstall showed ornamental gates made from Robert Heath's Crown Brand Iron. The exhibition organiser, asked about this patchy representation, replied defensively: 'If it is not fully representative of the staple trades of Staffordshire it is certainly indicative of the business enterprise which characterises the general trade of the country'.

It is doubtful whether the crowds were disappointed; there was a new con-

servatory full of palms and creepers, camel and dromedary rides were on offer, bears had been added to the Zoological Collection, and the 'Electrical illuminations' made Clough Hall 'a veritable Fairyland'. It is hard to imagine a whole street of Eastern Shops, threaded by rickshaws or even a monkeyhouse where the sober and respectable avenues of Clough Hall now stand.

By means of a constantly changing programme of novelties and the permanent attractions of the site, the management hoped to keep their turnstiles clicking. In 1898 over 10,000 people entered the park on its opening day, despite poor weather. Political meetings of various kinds were held. The North Staffs Working Men's Unionist Federation drew large crowds for several years.

'Murder'

However, a tragedy following one of these political meetings signalled decline. On June 9th 1902 the crowds were more colourful than usual due to the favours and buttonholes worn by the miners attending a demonstration organized by the North Staffs Miners Federation; Staffordshire knots were a favourite device, along with Peace favours of red, white and blue in celebration of the end of the Boer War in May.

As the late night crowds thinned, an apparently motiveless and brutal murder took place on the main drive from the Hall to the Avenue. Two things were particularly unfortunate about it; one was that it remained (and remains) unsolved, and the other was that during the trial facts came out which slightly tarnished the Hall's reputation as a venue for respectable folk.

The victim was William Smith, a married man with seven children who lived in Heathcote Street. The only witness was Bertha Peters, an acrobat's wife, who was staying with a friend in Hanley. They struck up a casual acquaintance at the bar, where he bought her a brandy and asked if she was going down to the station. When she replied that she was, he offered to walk her there and was doing so, with his arm round her waist, when the attack on him took place. Although Peters' testimony is confused, it appears that as she and Smith were nearing the Park gates three men appeared and attacked them. She fainted and, when she came round, found Smith dead beside her, killed by a blow or kick 'of great force' behind his right ear. Peters then had a gruesome and ironic vigil as she tried to persuade the few passers-by to fetch help. Several people paid no attention to her, thinking that she and the man lying in the drive were drunk, and it was some time before a doctor and the police were summoned.

Bertha Peters was herself arrested on suspicion of the crime but the case was dropped for lack of evidence. The crime remains an enigma. There is only Peters' testimony that there were three men; if there were, robbery may have been their intent perhaps, or one of them may have been an acquaintance of Smith intending to teach him a lesson about the ethics of married men escorting other ladies late at night. But whoever did aim the fatal blow, whether in greed, anger, drunkenness or perhaps by mistake, is now dead, the crime almost forgotten.

But the idea that an uncaught murderer might still frequent Clough Hall, and the public disclosure that drunkenness and possibly soliciting might be amongst the Hall's less publicised activities was bound to put a tarnish on it.

Paradise Lost

There is little sign of decline in custom in the advertisements which continued to appear in the newspapers just before Whitsuntide every year. The 1903 advert featured 'Darligan looping the loop. The only Englishman who has ever attempted this startling feat'.

However, Pains, the firework company, took over the management just before it closed, endeavouring to woo the crowds with an airship, water pantomime and firework extravaganza.

The 1904 season opened as usual, despite the rival attraction of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show at Etruria. The Annual Champion Brass Band Concert offered £100 in prizes. There was a New Bioscope. 'A good attendance' was noted in the papers for the Miners Annual Tea Party held on September 17th, but this may have had the doubtful honour of being the last event held there.

The following year no trumpet blasts or showman's language proclaimed the usual Whit Monday opening. The Paradise of the Potteries was no more.

Demolition

The final history of the Hall is heresay and hints. Many Kidsgrove people have memories of it, but few can remember exact dates for their information. It may be presumed that the Clough Hall Co. went bankrupt, but some of the attractions remained and efforts were made until the First World War to keep the fairground going. Mr Harold Williamson, who remembers once fetching half a dozen coconuts from a shop in Kinnersley Street for use on the coconut shies, recalls other details. The fairground was to the left of the Hall by the lake, where there were rides and wooden animals for children to climb on. There was an Aerial Ride across the lake itself: 'lots of people fell off!' Other attractions included an Aunt Sally and swingboats. The rights to the fair were owned by a Mr Brough; it was open every weekend, though some of the rides, being mobile, were taken to other local festivities such as Endon Well Dressing on occasion. Among his workers was Billy Klondike, who owned an early version of a Juke Box, and someone called Cairo, for what reason it is not known.

During this period there was a Galloway Pony racing track round the cricket pitch which was also used for footraces.

The First World War put an end to all this. According to one source, the Hall was bought just before the war by the Johnny Walker Brewery and (part of it?) became a public house. Mr J.T. Johnson was owner of The Clough Hall Park Hotel in 1912. One of the outbuildings became the Clough Hall Steam Laundry with a staff of at least 45.

The Hall was used as a residential hotel during the war and at one time housed Belgian refugees. Mrs A. Timmis recalls that it was then owned by a seven-man partnership; all seven sent sons to the war, and only one returned.

Little is heard of the estate after the First World War. Kidsgrove Cricket Club used the pitch even during the War, and the Kidsgrove Wellington Football Team used part of the Hall as a changing room in the early 1920's. Though the Hall is still shown on a map of 1926, it was by then either gone or in the process of demolition, its stone going to help build the garden walls of the houses going up in Park Avenue, Clough Hall Road and Kinnersley Avenue. The sports grounds became the present Clough Hall Park.

The decay of the Clough Hall estate was paralleled by the town's industries, though the town continued to grow until after the turn of the century, adding the various churches and public utilities in its progress.

Public Utilities

The Police Station in Liverpool Road opposite the Harecastle Hotel was built in 1872, replacing 'the lock-ups at Long Row' according to one source.

By 1875 Sergeant Isaac Belfield and three constables were watching over the area, which has been (with the exception of a couple of notorious murders) on the whole more law-abiding than might have been expected. Reminiscences of Butt Lane about the turn of the century record P.C. Abrahams saying that he rarely had above one case a year and telling how, after he had locked up a vagrant overnight charged with begging, the man thanked him in the morning and said, 'If I'm ever this way again I shall come here to stay'.

A Committee was enquiring into the necessity for a Sewage Works in 1878; at that time about 10,000 gallons of sewage every twenty four hours, mixed with a huge amount of water drained from the mines, were passing through the mill pond at Hardingswood. The mill was demolished in 1880, and the pool drained; a site at Red Bull was later used for the Sewage Works.

Until the 1870 Education Act made education compulsory, parents paid for their children to go to the National Schools in Liverpool Road and the Avenue and a smaller Wesleyan school in School Lane; after some delay the Board School at Dove Bank was opened in 1879. After then school attendance for all Kidsgrove's children was compulsory. The Avenue School built by Kinnersley was pulled down and replaced by the present building in 1909.

In 1894 the town of Kidsgrove was officially incorporated, carved from Audley and Wolstanton parishes. By 1897 the clocktower on the Victoria Hall proudly proclaimed Kidsgrove's coming of age. Council Offices and a Public Reading Room (which according to a local newspaper of 1905 'enjoys much favour') were also incorporated in the handsome building, designed by A.R. Wood of Tunstall. The town badge, three young goats in a grove of trees, whilst a neat pun, has perhaps given people the wrong idea about the origin of the town's name.

The Streets of Kidsgrove

Late nineteenth century prosperity also showed in the variety of shops. Turn of the century advertisements include those of Samuel Watson, who sold pianos, organs and harmoniums in Heathcote Street; Thomas Joynson, funeral furnisher, who also hired out wagonettes, cabs, dogcarts and post horses; Mark Smith combined his funeral service with confectionery and fruit; R. Timmis, ironmonger, began a well-known local store; Isaac Brindley of Market Street was a watchmaker, jeweller and 'Inventor'; Hancock's, Hill's and Stanier's were all butchers. Another well-remembered shop was 'Hooke's Stores', a grocery and furniture business. It stood at the junction of High and Cooper Street, and above it was the Assembly Room, a 'handsome and commodious room' used for concerts and meetings. By 1912 Kidsgrove folk could also enjoy films at the Electric Picture Palace in Station Road.

We forget the rich street life of those days, the clatter of horse and cart on the cobbled streets; the delivery boys on their bicycles; the late opening hours; and the evening street traders who would sell crockery, ironmongery, household wares and hot snacks in the glare of acetylene lamps.

6. THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The town's life rested on its basic industries: without them there would be no

money for Sillito's bread, gloves from Prince's or hats from Farr's.

Coke

The coke ovens built by Robert Heath in 1896 were the saviours of the Birchenwood works. The local coal was suitable for coking and the chemical by-products of the process were both varied and valuable, so the first quarter of the twentieth century saw great increases in production. The site became a complex of extractive and refining plant, riddled by rail-lines. The famous Mond Gas burners were installed, partly by German workers, in 1910, and one of these workers, Karl Kramer, became notorious locally when he committed three violent murders in a house in St. John's Wood.

The 13 Mond Gas Producers burnt the poorer local coal, thus producing a multitude of chemicals such as ammonia, tar, creosote and benzol, which were widely used in the pharmaceutical and chemical industries. The gas also powered engines and generating plant on the site. A brickworks was added, and another rail line to carry coke up through Harriseahead to Heath's Biddulph Ironworks. The size of the Birchenwood works can be judged from remaining photographs, and its importance from the fact that it was on the itinerary of King George V and Queen Mary when they toured the Potteries in April 1913.

The First World War affected Kidsgrove as all other towns. 114 names were inscribed on the War Memorial. Brindley's Harecastle Tunnel, and with it the practice of legging, went out of service due to decreased trade during the war years. Barge horses were fewer too; an electric tug towed strings of boats through the Telford Tunnel from 1914. Round this time, and after the war, Kidsgrove's Church made a name for itself among the bargees as 'The Runaways' Church' because marriages could be performed (according to one witness, without banns being called) after only a short residence.

Other Industries

Birchenwood was not the only industrial site in Kidsgrove. Woodhouse and Rawson's Union Foundry was producing electrical apparatus well before 1900. The Albion Foundry, owned by Henry Pooley & Son, was making weighing machines in 1912 at Hardingswood. By 1899, in the Avenue where the Library now stands, there was a factory producing borax for use in pottery glazes. Butt Lane had two fustian mills, providing work for local women, and in the 1920's a tarmac factory along Boathorse Road began to utilize slag to produce road-surfacing materials. Other local industrial workers could travel to the Potteries on the loop line or, after 1900, walk up to Goldenhill and catch a tram.

Coal

But the largest industry was mining, gradually changing from small single pits to larger centralized collieries. The Ordnance Survey map of 1890 shows dozens of old and disused pits, as well as active pits at Slappenfield, Nelson, Bunker's Hill, Hollin's Wood, Jamage, Head o' th' Lane and Moss Pit. The seams under Kidsgrove and Talke, though rich, were badly faulted, liable to spontaneous combustion, and prone to flooding. It was only the large capital outlay on the coking and by-product plant at Birchenwood, for example, which kept that colliery open as long as it was.

The hard lives of local miners are largely unrecorded, though their often painful deaths are briefly described in official reports and newspaper headlines. Talke lost 91 men in a coal gas explosion in 1866; a further 42 men and boys died at Bunker's Hill in 1875. Every year there were occasional deaths. In 1892 a 17 year old engine tender was crushed at Harecastle colliery, and a 29 year

old miner killed at Clough Hall No.6 Pit, when coal tubs ran loose down a sloping tunnel.

Just before Christmas, on the 18th December 1925, there was an explosion and fire at Birchenwood. Seven men died and another 14 were injured. The recovery of the bodies, after the fire had been closed off and allowed to burn out, was described as 'more hazardous and arduous than any previously recorded in the annals of mining in this country'. Ironically this same year, 1925, was the peak year for coal production at Birchenwood. It then employed 1,126 miners and almost as many surface staff.

Besides the bitterness of the National Strike, 1926 saw the start of swift decline. Dole queues began to lengthen as smaller businesses went under. Talke Colliery closed in 1928, throwing 1,000 men out of work. By 1929 only Birchenwood and Maryhill Collieries were still in operation.

Maryhill went first, and tragically. On the 17th January 1929, four men were trapped underground when water from the nearby abandoned Moss Pit mine suddenly flooded the workings. One, Swithen Rowley, managed to escape the rushing waters but Leonard Archer, Albert Copeland and Jonas Brown were drowned and entombed; there was no possibility of ever reopening.

In 1930 the Borax Works closed, followed the next year by Pooleys and the Tarmac factory. With the latter died the 'Old Alex Track', so named for one of its sturdy engines; its iron rails crossing the Avenue by the main-line bridge were lifted during World War Two.

But the heaviest blow was struck when Birchenwood Colliery closed. Two thousand men lost their jobs. Mrs Paskin relates a story about this time. Her grandfather, being Deputy Manager, was asked to flood 'B' Pit when the mine closed. Ten minutes after he had done so, Captain Heath telephoned to say, 'If you haven't done it yet, don't do it!' Mr Paskin replied, 'Too late'.

The depression closed in. Kidsgrove remembers hard times, children picking over the pit heaps for scraps of coal and slack. As the Rev Llewellyn wrote in his History of Kidsgrove in 1935: 'Against our will we have become a "residential" parish... people are coming to live in our housing scheme who have little or no prospect of being employed in the parish itself'.

Housing

The Town Council had already taken advantage of the 1923 Housing Act to begin building council houses. Among the first to go up were the large and well-placed houses of First, Second, Third and Fifth Avenue (Fourth Avenue was abruptly truncated by the building of the County Senior Elementary Schools, now Clough Hall Comprehensive, in 1932). The crushed rock to bed the new roads was quarried from the hummock on the Avenue corner by the Longshaws, father and son. While doing so, they uncovered the trunk of a large fossilized plant.

Over 400 houses were built before the Second World War in St Saviours Street, the Woodshutts Estate and Whitehall Terrace. In 1939, said the Town Guide, 'There are schemes in progress for erecting houses at Talke Pits, Harris-eahead and also small bungalow-type houses... for aged persons'. For the Coronation, Kidsgrove celebrated by building some of these old people's bungalows in Coronation Crescent. The population of the Urban District had risen from 15,000 in 1938 to 18,000 in 1958. In 1955 Kidsgrove's 1,000th council house (46, Galley's Bank) was opened and plans were already laid for 600 more houses. The generously spaced estates, by now requiring garages for private cars to be erected nearby, spread over the fields between Kidsgrove and Butt Lane, covering

the remains of coal shafts forgotten for almost a century. People are still occasionally reminded of them when unexpected holes appear in back gardens.

A 'New Road' (now Cedar Avenue) was built removing the necessity of 'going round by Red Bull'. In the 1950's also, a large miners' estate was built by the National Coal Board and Kidsgrove gained a sprinkling of Polish residents who settled here after the war. Although fewer miners live on the estate now, the miners' favourite sport is still evident in the number of pigeon cotes, with their circling squadrons, to be seen in this and other areas of the district. By the early 1960's over 1,750 council houses or flats had been built and at present (1984) the number stands at about 2,000. Not all the housing was council-built of course. The estate at Clough Hall was being commenced in the late 1920's. About 650 houses have been privately developed since then.

Other facilities were added as necessary. A market hall was built in the 1930's on the site of the present Post Office. Two nursery schools (in Wesley Street, Kidsgrove and St Saviour's Street, Butt Lane) were built after the war. Maryhill Grammar School opened in 1960 and, like Clough Hall, became a comprehensive in 1963.

Industrial Renewal

The Council's awareness of the need to attract industry back into the area led to the beginnings of an industrial estate on the Cheshire side of Butt Lane and Talke. The 1962 Town Guide records that 'Kidsgrove was one of the first local authorities to lay out an industrial site'. Butt Lane children were somewhat annoyed to find the English Electric factory being built over a favourite 'tadpole pool' in 1958, but local employment benefitted greatly from the factory's arrival, as well as those of G.H. Heath, making nylon, and Talke Fashions, making women's and children's wear. By 1961 the industrial range included electronics, textiles, aluminium products and surgical dressings. Other small firms produced tiles, bricks and fireplaces. In the mid-1960's International Computers Limited took a site on the estate, so that by 1969 over 4,000 people were employed by G.E.C. Elliott Automation and I.C.L. between them. Kidsgrove was back in the world of technology. Now electronics and computers have been joined by space and defence systems at the West Avenue estate.

All this time, although the colliery had closed, Birchenwood continued to produce coke and chemicals, the firm becoming the Birchenwood Gas and Coke Co. in 1953. In later years, as the supply of gas exceeded demand, the flame of excess gas being burnt off could be seen for miles around at night. The arrival of natural gas put an end to the plant's profitability for ever and the last charge of coke was produced on May 1st 1973. The once mighty volcano was extinct.

Shopping

In the 1960's a further industrial site at Talke was created, adjoining a feeder road to the M6 Motorway. Here, amid other firms like Century Oils, the Michelin Tyre Co. and Queensway Warehouses Ltd. is the large Normid Hypermarket, hardly recognisable as the off-spring of the old Co-op. Branches like that at Woodshutts have been closed and stores like that at Butt Lane have been reduced in size as the new ability of shoppers to buy in bulk by car has fostered first super- and then hyper-markets.

This is only one of the changes affecting shopping. The flying change boxes whizzing along the wires at Swettenham's Grocers have been replaced by the computerized checkouts of Kwiksave. Fryer and Goodwin, blacksmiths, of the Meadows, gradually found themselves making fewer wheels for farm wagons and selling more petrol for cars and lorries. Of the dozen or so cloggers and cobblers

in the district in 1912 none remain today; the recent death of Mr Edmonds, who worked in a leathery-smelling hut in Wright Street, Butt Lane has brought to an end the tradition of local shoe-repairers. Where in the 1950's mothers would send their children out with a cloth covered basin for 'puddin'n' chips' or a mixture to Phillips' chip shop in Heathcote Street, or call at Molly Dean's for four penn'orth of chips after coming out of the Val, people now phone the Tung Shing Chinese Take-away to order chop suey. The early sixties brought launderettes, the early eighties bring Video hire shops.

George Mason's, the Maypole, Mrs Worrall's sweet shop, Talbot's grocery, Stubbs' fruit shops (one at either end of Market Street, run for many years by May and Winnie Stubbs), Cotton's Stationers, the narrow Post Office down Liverpool Road, where Mr F. Dykes was postmaster from 1938 to 1961: to some they will be names only, to others they will bring back vivid memories.

Ring out the Old...

All these and many more were cleared away by the urban renewal of the 1960's and '70's. As the Town Guide in 1965 said, 'Kidsgrove today is very largely a modern town of comparatively recent development... the older unsatisfactory types of houses have been swept away and a new town has virtually been erected'. During this period the original Victorian centre of Kidsgrove, the huddled streets of small houses with their cramped backyards on the steep slope, has been removed. Cooper, Napier, Chapel, Victoria, Gilbert, Wesley, Peel Streets all disappeared, though some of the names were to reappear attached to 'Courts' and 'Gardens' when rebuilding took place.

Many old landmarks are gone - the Surgery in King Street, with its steep flight of steps to crawl up when feeling ill; the Bridge, the Highland Laddie, the Roebuck Inn, dominating the junction of Heathcote Street and Liverpool Road; Dove Bank Board School; Shaw's flower shop in the Avenue; the Mortuary Chapel at the top of Attwood Street; the Cinema, called successively the Valentine (shortened, of course, to the Val), the Rex, the Queen's.

...Ring in the New

In their place Kidsgrove has acquired a new health centre, a supermarket, a site where an open market takes place every Tuesday, space for the Salvation Army Hall, and some open ground. At the time of writing the Lamb Inn and McNicholas's butchers shop look out over the gap where once a sizeable portion of Kidsgrove's workers and their families lived. The lower side of Market Street has been preserved, and Liverpool Road is recognisable as that on turn-of-the-century postcards.

In 1966 the Library emerged from a hut behind the Town Hall, where it was shaken on one side by dust carts and on the other by the loop-line trains, to occupy a larger building in the Avenue. For many residents memories of borrowing books will always be associated with Miss Rose Coates, Librarian from 1950 to 1981.

At the same time strenuous efforts were made to tidy up the unsightly spoil heaps and derelict buildings left by defunct industry. Many acres have been planted with trees and bushes, new 'birchen woods'. At the same time many of the older trees which once graced the area have been felled, the woods thinned and replanted. The Twelve Apostles, a row of poplars in the Avenue, have been reduced to two. People living 'under the Beeches' are under fewer beeches than of yore.

Bathpool valley also had to be disturbed in the late 1960's, when electrif-

ication of the railways led to abandonment of the rail tunnel under Harecastle in favour of a shorter tunnel and an open line through the park. The pool was drained for a time, and though it still retains its island and its popularity with local anglers, the functional concrete edge down one side and the loss of some of its trees have impaired its beauty. A new landmark appeared when, prior to Local Government reorganisation in 1974, an artificial ski-slope was built. Various problems beset it and it has never achieved its hoped-for popularity, but at the time of writing (1984) part of it is still in use.

In recent years Kidsgrove has been in the headlines only in the disagreeable context of a murder hunt, Bath Pool Valley being the scene of a particularly callous murder. In 1975, Donald Neilson, 'the Black Panther', kidnapped Lesley Whittle, an heiress from Shropshire. He hid her down a drainage shaft, intending to ransom her. Either by accident or design she died in this inhumane prison. After the largest police hunt ever mounted in Britain till then, during which every man in Kidsgrove was interviewed by the police, Neilson was captured 11 months later, charged with this and other crimes, and found guilty.

Kidsgrove is now part of the Borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme, and by and large sensational events pass it by. The trees planted 'up Kikroo bonk' in the late sixties are now well grown. The black remains of industry sink into the green covering or are hidden by the red rash of new housing, which continues to spread. The Meadows and Hollins Grange, opened in 1981 and 1983 respectively, continue the Council's policy of providing old people's housing.

Postscript

The town once had two aspects. One was a paradise, the 'Paradise of the Potteries'. The other was an inferno, visualized by Frederick Harper in his novel Joseph Capper as 'All over the hillsides great pillars of cloud and smoke would be going up... smoke, smoke, smoke, soot, soot, soot, and over all... a constant fall of tarry matter'.

Of the 'Paradise', Clough Hall Park, its Victorian lodges and the lake remain. At Birchenwood open-cast mining is at present taking place, as well as re-extraction of coal from the pit heaps, but after 1986 it will probably become a landscaped recreation area. And so, in 1984, Kidsgrove is neither Heaven nor Hell, but somewhere in between...



Clough Hall, Kidsgrove, c.1910

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In addition cuttings, leaflets and photographs in the Local History Collection of Kidsgrove Library; files of the Staffordshire Advertiser and Evening Sentinel Newspapers in Hanley Library; and material in the William Salt Library, Stafford, were invaluable.

The author is most grateful for reminiscences by local residents.

'There is more to be done'



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