

Crookes History Booklets

These short explorations of local history topics were compiled by Constance Hallwright

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The services we had and those we didn't

Piped water did not arrive in Crookes until 1900. Before that, you either had a well dug, which was a very expensive undertaking, or you collected rainwater from your roof in a large galvanised tank, or you walked to the public pump with your two buckets, filled them up, and walked back home with two heavy buckets of water, which had to last your whole family for your entire water consumption for the day – drinking, cooking, cleaning, washing up, washing clothes – all from just two buckets of water. When people learn about the way Victorians had a 'stand-up wash' using a jug and bowl, some people think the Victorians were averse to washing. It wasn't that they didn't like to take a bath – they couldn't spare that much water for bathing.

Sanitation; once you realise that there was no piped water, it becomes obvious that flushing toilets just could not exist in a country village like Crookes. Human waste was disposed of using what was euphemistically called 'country plumbing' – a brick-built privy at the bottom of the garden (ie as far away from the house as possible), with a bucket placed under a wooden seat, and squares of old newspaper on a bit of string on the back of the door. The bucket would be used for a week, or until it was full, whereupon you'd dig a hole in the garden, tip the contents in, and bring the soil from the hole you'd just dug, to dry out on the range. The bucket of clean soil would then be taken out to the privy, and each time you used it, you'd sprinkle a shovelful of earth onto the bucket, to keep it from smelling. This process continued to rotate, digging holes from different locations. The night-soil men who emptied privies in the towns did not come out as far as villages like Crookes, but they did bring their 'soil' out to farms, as the waste was a valuable fertiliser. When you think that Crookes was known as the fruit-growing area that supplied Sheffield with much of its fresh produce, it's interesting to learn why the soil is so productively fertile.

Gas was laid on for houses as they began to be built in the mid-1870s, as many householders deduce when they find discover narrow lead pipes embedded in the walls, particularly over fireplaces, indicating that a gas-powered wall light had been installed. The Sheffield and District Gas Company had their impressive offices and showroom on Commercial Street, where prospective purchasers could view the Wright's Patent Eureka Gas Cooker, the Ruud Hot Water Geyser, a 'Jewel' Parlour heater made by George Clark and even a gas-fired bath, all of which had been on display at the Great Exhibition.

Electricity and electric lighting didn't really take off until the late 1890s, and even then people did not have a great incentive to adopt it. The supply was erratic and when lights went wrong you had to call out an electrician to fix it. An electric light did not give out as much light as a gas lamp, but the main factor was that people already had the gas installed, it was laid on as the house was built, and

we tend to stick to what we know and what doesn't cause any disruption, don't we? Even when people had electricity installed, they held onto their old oil lamps for task lighting, because the illumination given out by a light bulb was little more than 3 or 4 candles.

The telephone was invented in 1890, but was slow to gain acceptance. This was because of two factors: the telegraph was already well established, and telephones have to be widely installed to be of much use. As telegraphs were delivered by letter carriers via the post office, it was a simple advance to implement, and the recipient did not have to be at home to receive it – servants could accept a telegraph if you were out. Businesses were the first to take up the telephone, but only larger ones at first, very few private households installed a telephone until well into the 20th century. Telephone lines had to be run across streets, and wires drilled through window frames; why would ordinary working people do this, if none of their friends had a telephone to rig them up?

Street lights arrived at the same time as water and sewerage; this appears to be evidence of what would now be called 'joined up thinking' ie get all the mess and disruption of a major upgrade done all at once. Street lights were initially gas-fueled, only converting to electricity in the 1930s.

There was no public transport of any kind in Crookes until 1910, when the first tram service commenced. Horse buses were used to offer days out to Crookes from the 1870s, but these were private buses, much like the day excursion coaches taking people to tourist destinations today. The nearest public transport came to Crookes was a tram service to Commonsidge, which was later extended to Walkley, followed by trams to Broomhill. Very wealthy people may have had their own horse-drawn vehicle, but most people just walked.

When it comes to refuse collection, the early to mid-Victorians would put us to shame in what they recycled, re-used, upcycled or otherwise prevented from going to landfill. Any food waste would be fed to pigs or chickens, or composted. Bones from a joint of meat could be sold to the Rag and Bone man, as bones were ground up and used in the china industry (yes, Bone China did actually contain bones). Clothes were sold on, patched, mended, re-made into children's clothes, then into patchwork quilts or patches for other garments, and lastly sold to the Rag and Bone man for making into high quality paper. Anything that couldn't be re-used or composted was burnt. Anything else like a broken pot might go in a midden, but even broken crockery could be used by gardeners to cover the bottom of a plant pot, so there was very little to actually throw away. Just as well, as local authorities did not instigate a service of collecting domestic rubbish until well into the 20th Century. But the mid-Victorian era saw the transition from making things at home, like sauce, jam, lotions and toothpastes, to buying it ready-made, which involved packaging, and created rubbish to be thrown away. In towns like Sheffield, this growing mound of rubbish had to be disposed of, and the only option open to a local authority was to dump it in 'landfill', preferably as far away from the town as possible. When Crookes Valley Park (the one with the boating lake in) was being laid out as a public park, the council hit upon the solution to two problems at once. The level of the road from just above where the Arts Tower now stands to where the bottom of Harcourt Road is now dipped quite markedly, creating a hollow and a steep slope. The council decided to bring great loads of Sheffield rubbish up the hill, dump it in a great mound, and put a new road surface on top. You'll notice how steeply the ground falls away on either side, down to the Ponderosa on one side and to Crookes valley Park on the other. But residents of a village such as Crookes did not have any such collection service, so they did what any enterprising householder would do – dig a hole in their garden, and dump the rubbish in there, to be found a hundred or so years later by another householder digging a pond.