

WORDS ABOUT WAKEFIELD: VOICES FROM THE PAST

These extracts span many centuries. They have been written by individuals with a variety of different reasons for recording their ideas and thoughts. Each offers us a brief glimpse into the period and the perspective of the writer.

The readings are divided up into five groups, Medieval, Tudor and Stuart, Georgian, 19th century and 20th century.

They were read by volunteers from Wakefield Historical Society at a performance in the Town Hall on 10th April 2024, and again at the final Centenary celebration on 14th December. Readers were trained by Aiobheann Kelly, Head of Participation at the Wakefield Theatre Royal.

MEDIEVAL

The Founding of the Town

Imagined by J W Walker, author of 'Wakefield, its History and People' 1934.

Introduction: According to J W Walker, the founder and first president of this Society from 1924 to 1948, there is little evidence for significant settlement on the site of Wakefield itself during the prehistoric and Roman periods. Following the Romans there is no written record for two centuries but it is known that Angles from Denmark travelled up rivers to find new lands. Walker imagines the arrival here of such Anglian invaders and speculates that their leader's name may have been used to name their settlement.

It was to one of these Anglian invaders that the township owes its name, one Waca, who in the sixth century, leaving his native Angeln, brought with him his kinsmen, his herdsman, his flocks and herds, and sailed across the North Sea in flat-bottomed long-ships up the Humber, and finally penetrated into the country by the river Calder to seek for a shallow place, where a ford with firm landings on either side might lead him to a district as yet unappropriated by those countrymen who had preceded him. Thus the future Wakefield owed its foundation and coming fortune to the river.

Disembarking by the rocky shallows, which had been used as a ford by Britons and Romans for many generations, Waca took possession of the left bank, driving back any opposing Britons. The selection of a site for a future home was not haphazard, though it is possible that he took over a settlement which may have already existed at some earlier time. There on the high ground, half a mile from the river, a spring was found, and there the little knot of kinsfolk settled down.

Wakefield, the Harrying of the North.

Written by Ordericus Vitalis in the early 12th Century

Introduction: Following northern uprisings after the Norman Conquest King William ordered the brutal devastation of the north. The English-born monk, Ordericus Vitalis, wrote in the early twelfth century about this period known as the 'harrying of the north'.

In the fulness of his wrath he ordered the corn and cattle, with the implements of husbandry and every sort of provisions, to be collected in heaps and set on fire until the whole was consumed, and thus destroyed at once all that could serve for the support of life in the whole country lying beyond

the Humber... My narrative has frequently had occasion to praise William, but for this act which condemned the innocent and the guilty alike to die by slow starvation I cannot commend him.'

From 'The Ecclesiastical History of England and Normandy of Orderic Vitalis,' volume II, editor T. Forester

The Domesday Book, 1086

***Introduction:** The name Wakefield "Wachefeld", referring to the huge manor belonging to the king, first appeared in the Domesday Book compiled in 1086 on William's orders. Domesday was designed to record who held the land, where it was and how much it was worth. This was compared with its value under Edward the Confessor before the Conquest.*

This manor was in the demesne of king Edward. There are now in the king's hand four villanes, and three priests, and two churches, and seven sokemen, and sixteen bordars. They together have sixteen ploughs. Wood pasture, six miles long, and four broad. Value in King Edward's time sixty pounds, at present fifteen pounds.

From 'The civil, ecclesiastical, literary, commercial, and miscellaneous history of Leeds, Bradford, Wakefield, Dewsbury, Otley, and the district within ten miles of Leeds 1834' by Edward Parsons 1797-1844

The Town Charter, granted by Hamlyn Lord Warenne, recorded as 1190-1195

***Introduction:** One hundred years later, Wakefield manor and town appeared to be greatly recovered, and between 1190 and 1195 the Lord of the Manor, Hamlyn, Earl Warenne, with his wife and son have been recorded as granting burgage rights to the leading townsmen in a Charter. Burgage tenure conferred freedom from feudal duties, and a right to deal with property as the burgess wished, for an initial sum and a small yearly payment. This freedom to buy and sell burgess property has shaped our town since then.*

Be it known to all present and future that I, Hamlyn, Earl Warenne, and I, Isabella Countess Warenne and I, William de Warenne the son of the said Hamlyn the earl and Isabella countess Warenne have given and granted by this our present charter have confirmed to our free burgesses of Wakefield, that is to say, to each of them one toft of one acre of land in our borough of Wakefield to them and their heirs to hold of us and our heirs in free burgage for sixpence paid annually to us and our heirs from every toft, freely for all rights of sale and purchase throughout our lands of Yorkshire.

We grant also to them that they may have and take in our woods of Wakefield dead wood to burn. And therefore we will and order all men and our officials to allow our aforesaid burgesses this liberty well and in peace, to have without impediment. And so that this may be ratified and valid we have confirmed by the attachment of our seals,

And for this gift, grant and confirmation our aforesaid burgesses have given to me Hamlyn, Earl Warenne, a hundred shillings sterling and to me Isabella countess Warenne twenty shillings sterling and to me William de Warenne twenty shillings sterling.

From ' Transcriptions and Observations touching the Manor of Wakefield and the Wakefield Manorial records', by Brian Barber Vol 22 Yorkshire Archaeological Society

Extracts from Wakefield Manor Court Rolls, 1297, 1298 and 1275

Introduction: The Court Rolls for the huge Manor of Wakefield are recognised in the UNESCO UK Memory of the World register. They provide many insights into the life of the town during the Middle Ages. The court met in Wakefield's moot hall which was in Upper Kirkgate.

As the town's trade grew, the court gave permission for the enlargement of booths or stalls in the market place.

1297 "Robert the Lorimar gives 12d for license to lengthen his booth nine feet to the south, paying 1 ½d rent ..."

1298 "John Cussing has license to build an oven in his booth, which shall be common to everyone, on the following conditions, that he shall pay the lord at the following three terms viz: 2s 3d at Michaelmas, 2s 3d at the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and 2s 3d at Whitsuntide, for all service. And for the faithful payment of the said rent, John pledges all his tenements in the town of Wakefield, both in burgages and in booths, the said rent to be levied out of them if the oven does not suffice."

Introduction: Unlike some manor courts, the Wakefield court had the right to hear criminal cases.

1275 "Isolda de St Oswald against Jack de Ireland, who was seized and imprisoned for larceny, says that on the Sunday before Christmas, in the night, he stole a robe of burrell [red-brown cloth], trimmed with black lamb-skin, value 8s 6d, which was in her keeping. He came in full court, before the steward and before John de Horbiry, the king's coroner, and all the suitors of the court, and confessed it with his own lips. Therefore, let him be hanged."

From: 'Court Rolls of the Manor of Wakefield, volume I, 1274 to 1297,' and 'Court Rolls of the Manor of Wakefield, volume II, 1297 to 1309,' Yorkshire Archaeological Society

An account of the Battle of Wakefield, 1460

Written by a member of the household of Cecily Neville, Duchess of York

Introduction: On 31 December 1460 the fields between Sandal and the river Calder were the scene of a significant battle in the Wars of the Roses. A member of the household of Cecily Neville, the Duchess of York, relayed the news to a Yorkist ally on 9th January 1461. There are inaccuracies, and the writer certainly lacked knowledge of the north, but this may be the earliest record of the event.

'Some of the lords of the queen's party, rendered desperate by the victory of the lords here and especially the Earl of Warwick, assembled a force in the northern parts, eighty miles from London, to come and attack their opponents here who are with the king, and get back the king into power, as they had him before. Accordingly, the Duke of York with two of his sons, and Warwick's father, the Earl of Salisbury, went out to meet them. And it came to pass, that although they were three times stronger, yet from lack of discipline because they allowed a large part of their force to go pillaging and searching for victuals, their adversaries who are desperate, attacked the duke and his followers. Ultimately, they routed them, slaying the duke and his younger son, the Earl of Rutland, Warwick's father and many others. This news caused great alarm in these parts, although it seems Warwick was not there....this engagement took place on the last day of December near a castle called Pontefract.'

TUDOR AND STUART

John Leland's Account of Wakefield, 1538

Introduction: In 1533, Henry VIII authorised John Leland to visit the libraries of all the religious houses in England, and compile lists of significant books in these. So Leland spent several years travelling from library to library, keeping notebooks on his travels. In these he entered information from personal observation, and from books, charters and oral sources. This material is now included in his 'Itinerary'.

From Sandal to Wakefield about a mile. These things I especially noted in Wakefield.

On the Est side of The faire Bridge of Stone of 9 arches, under which runneth the Ryver of Calder is a goodly Chapel of our lady and 2 Cantuarie Presrtes founded in it, of the foundation of the Townes Men as sum say, But the Dukes of York were taken as founders for obteyning the Mortemayn.

The Principale Church that now is in Wakefield is but of a new Work, but it is exceeding fair and large. Sum think that whereas now is a Chapelle of ease at the other ende of the Towne was ons the old Parioch Church. The Vicarage at the este ende of the Church Garth is large and fair. It was the Parsonage House not very many Yeres syns: for he that now lyvith is the 4. or 5. Vicare that hath been there.

A Quarter of a Mile withowte wakefield apperith an Hille of Erth caste up, where sum say that one of the Erles Warines began to build, and as fast as he builded violence of Winde defaced the Work. This is like a Fable. Sum say That it was nothing but a Wind mille Hille. The Place is now calid Lohille.

The Toune of Wakefield streachith out al in length by Est and West, and hath a faire Area for a Market Place. The Building of the Toune is meatly faire, most of Tymbre but some of stone. All the whole profite of the Town standith by Course Drapery. There be few towns in the inward parts of Yorkshire that hath a fairer site or soil about it.'

There be plenty of Veines of Se Cole in the Quarters about Wakefield.

Wakefield upon Calder is a very quik market toune, and meatly large; well-servid of flesch and fische both from se and by rivers whereof divers be thereabout at hande. — so that al vitaille is very good and chepe there. A right honeste man shal fare wel for 2 pens a meale.

From: 'Leland's Itinerary' edited by Lucy Toulmin Smith, 1906: First Volume p 40-41 (Internet Archive)

The Burgess Court

Introduction: A court run by the burgesses - the townsmen - existed for many years but there are surviving records for four years only during the mid-sixteenth century. Written as a series of misdemeanours with set fines (paynes) they give an idea of the day-to-day running of the Tudor town. Here are a small selection of the offences which came within the burgesses' jurisdiction in 1554.

Itm a payn is layed that the cherche mesters shall keppe the cloyke and chyme in good order In payn
40s

Itm a payne is layd yt every burgessus or other shall payve ye street from ye Channel to ye medyll of ye pavement before ys and medsom next in payn of 40s

Itm a payn ys layed that no man shall kepe too meassurs yt ys to say one to bye wt and one othere to sell wt but to kepe one lawfull messure in payne of everye one so doying, 40s

Itm a payne is sett yt Mr Vycare do see yt we have a common Bull to serve the towne and the parishe betwixte this and May days next in payne of xxs.

Itm yt ys ordered & agreed that the churche wardons of Wakefield do see there be no misorder within the church or churchyard by talking rangling or other misdemeanor in service tyme and especially for mens servants goying out of the church and standing gasing in the churche yeard.

(Itm we lay in payne that the pillory stockes gibbet and cowkeinstolle be well maid and set in such places as before they have bene accustomed by the bailie of Wakefield betwixt this and Michaelmas day next in payne of xxs.

Itm yt ys ordered that the baxter shall bake peny bread and halfe peny bread at the pleasure of the owners and that he bake iiij pies or pasetts for a peny in payne of iijs. iiijd.)

From: Papers in Wakefield Library, Ref. WAKW 347.99

Extracts from the Diary of Captain Adam Eyre, 1647, 1648 and 1649

Introduction: During the Commonwealth period Captain Adam Eyre from Thurlston near Penistone kept a diary recording his expenses. Wakefield was one of the places he and his wife seemed to visit quite often and his visits show the town as a retail, service, medical, postal and legal centre for a wide region.

Jan 27th 1647

We came to Wakefield, where we stayd all night, and spent 3s 3d

Jan 28th 1647 I bought some books in the towne, which cost mee 5s 6d; and some things for my wife which cost 1s 6d;

March 19th 1647

..in the afternoon I went with my wife to Wakefield where we lay at Jackson's all night. I bought cloth and other things of Danyell Ole, which cost mee £2 6s

March 20th 1647

This morne I gave to Doctor Browneloe, who undertook to cure my wife's leg, 22s, and promised him more. I gave my wife £2, and to a taylor, one Portington, for making mee a coate and breeches, 16s, and spent at our inne 6s 8d, and so came home, and left my wife there to stay till my retourne from London. This journey has cost me £6 1s 4d.

Aug 19th 1647

This morning I went to Wakefield to speak with the steward for the copyes of the tenants' leases at Scholes. Thence to Ned Binse's house, who promised mee a pair of bouls **or his** for this sommer, and spent 8d. Thence to the barber to cut my heare, which hath not beene cut this 3 yeres, which cost mee 6d. Thence to my dinner at Mr Ashenhurst's ;

Jan 29th 1648

On return trip from York to Wakefield, where I spent 2s with Capt Horsfall and Charles Nettleton, at the Mearmayd.

Sept 22nd 1648

This morne I went to Wakefield and in the way shod my horse, which cost mee 8d; there I stayed till past 4, of the post but received not my letters, so I bought peper, sugar and nutmeggs 2s 6d; spent 1s and came home late at night. This day was the greatest shaking wind that ever I knew.

Jan 12th 1649

This morne I went to Wakefield for my wife's father to the sessions, when the officers of Holmefrith complained of his treatment of Jane his apprentice, and thereupon the sessions made an order that he should give the towne to take care of her and payd for the order the copys which cost me 5s.

From: 'Yorkshire Diaries and Autobiographies in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries' a Surtees Society publication, 1877.

Extract from 'Wakefield in the Seventeenth Century' by S. H. Waters, 1933

Introduction: A book on Wakefield in the Seventeenth Century by S H Waters was published in 1933. Here are his conclusions about the town at the end of the 17th century.

Certain general conclusions may be seen to emerge from this story. The first thing is that the ordinary life of the people and organised local government in Yorkshire continued without as much interruption as might have been expected in view of the tremendous political upheavals of the century. With regard to Wakefield itself, it is interesting to note that by the end of the century it was coming to be regarded as the administrative capital of the whole Riding, which it later officially became. In 1704 when the Act of Parliament was passed setting up the Registry of Deeds for the West Riding – the first in the country – Wakefield was chosen for its permanent location, and thenceforth county business began more and more to be concentrated in the town.

We may say then that not only did the town maintain the high reputation that Leland gave it in 1538, but its prestige and importance increased during the century, and in the realms of religion, culture and general amenities of life it had a worthy place among the towns of the north, even though its industrial and economic expansion was not so rapid as that of some of its neighbours.

THE GEORGIAN PERIOD

Extract from 'A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain' by Daniel Defoe, 1724-1727

Introduction: Daniel Defoe, most famous for the novel Robinson Crusoe, collected information about Britain as he travelled around. From this he compiled a series of circuits between 1724-27 which he used in his "A Tour through the whole Island of Great Britain." This part of one circuit was from 'Black Barnsley' to Wakefield.

'We came to a most rich, pleasant and populous country, and the first town of note we came to in it was Wakefield, a large, handsome, rich clothing town, full of people, and full of trade.

The Calder passes through this town under a stately stone bridge of twelve arches, upon which is a famous building by some called a chapel, by others a castle; the former is most likely. The chapel is now made use of for civil affairs;

Wakefield is a clean, large, well-built town, very populous and very rich; here is a very large church, and well-filled it is, for here are very few Dissenters; the steeple is a very fine spire, and by far the highest in this part of the country, except that of Sheffield. They tell us, there are more people also than in the city of York, and yet it is no corporation town; and the highest magistrate, as I understand, was a constable.

Here also is a market every Friday for woollen cloths, after the manner of that at Leeds, though not so great; yet as all the trade is increasing in this country, so this market flourishes with the rest.

There is another trade in this part of the country, which is now very considerable since the opening of the navigation of these rivers and that is, that from hence they carry coals down from Wakefield especially and also from Leeds, at both of which they have great quantity.

'A Journey from Otley to Wakefield' a poem by Mary Masters, 1733

Introduction: Mary Masters, thought to have been born in Otley in 1694, described herself as a self-taught poet. However she became very accomplished, publishing two volumes of poetry funded by subscriptions. She moved in literary circles; Dr Johnson was a subscriber and he revised some of her work. This extract from a poem called 'A Journey from Otley to Wakefield' was first published in 1733.

At length I breathe sweet Wakefield's purer air,
The seat of joy and kind relief of care.
Its lovely situation I survey,
And still o'er new enchanting prospects stray.
See how the fertile meads lie smiling round,
With fragrant greens and flowery beauties crown'd.
Enamelled hills, high trees in shady rows,
A finished landscape near the town disclose.
A town with pleasure and with wealth supplied,
By limpid Calder's navigable tide.

Yet more than this, superior to the rest,
With sweet society 'tis highly blest.
Its kind inhabitants with winning art,
Attract the soul and captivate the heart,
Whose converse, easy, affable, refin'd,
Can both improve and entertain the mind;
Whatever can administer delight,
To glad the ear, or gratify the sight,
And make the hours of life pass smiling round,
O, happy Wakefield! may in thee be found.
There could I pass the dear remains of life,
Removed from care, from envy, and from strife.

From: 'Walks about Wakefield', by W S Banks, Wakefield Historical Publications

Extracts from the Memorandum book of John Brearley, 1758-1762

***Introduction:** An eighteenth-century skilled workman, John Brearley, cloth frizzer, was employed in the Upper Mill beside the Calder. He was new to the town, coming from Rochdale. He would jot down short observations about life in Wakefield in his memorandum books of 1758-1762. Just a warning - don't expect continuity – Brearley's observations are quite random!*

At Wakefield there is a market day on a Friday. People are generally all gone home at 3 o'clock in winter and 4 o'clock in the summer and if you go into town after then you can scarce tell it has been market day.

There is a deal of gentlemen's seats about Wakefield and a deal of gentlemen's sons comes from abroad which comes to schools there.

It is a very pleasant thing where they have the convenience for a boat to swim in on the river and to have a company of musicians on board to play as you swim along and it sounds charming and sweet to take a bottle of good ale aboard.

P 7 A proper thing to be observed by all mercers or drapers that when a customer has bought quantity of goods above 5 shillings to have a dram bottle so give them a glass - and it is a thing that pleases people and will keep them in your shop better.'

P 12 Wakefield is only for corn and wool.

P 12. Horses are used extremely hard as any part of the world. For in some places in the summer season the roads are seldom free neither night nor day. At 10 o'clock they are going one way, so by two in the morning the carriages are going the other way.

P 62 The gentlemen about Wakefield are of a covetous careful niggardly sort of men and does not care who sinks if they can swim

P 97 Wakefield streets are very bad that there is holes that often breaks cart axeltrees and in winter could be in over shoes top.

P 114 It is a very bad method for a man to be a soldier for if they make a fault they are sure to be whipped severely. I saw a man whipped at Wakefield which had 300 lashes before and 700 then that when he had the 700 the flesh was cut off his back that it flew in people's faces that stood watching him.

P 129 At Wakefield in summer time they duck many children. Some it does good some it does harm.

From: 'Woollen Manufacturing in Yorkshire, The Memorandum Books of John Brearley, 1758-62', edited by John Smail, Yorkshire Archaeological Society.

Extracts from the letters of the Reverend Benjamin Forster to his friend Richard Gough, 1767 and 1768

Introduction: In 1766 the Reverend Benjamin Forster came to Wakefield as the Camden Lecturer; paid to give Sunday afternoon lectures in the parish church. He was an antiquarian, who corresponded with his college friend, Richard Gough. Forster wrote from Alverthorpe Hall where he lodged.

Nov 1766

Dear Gough

You enquire in one of your letters about my Sunday's exploits. Never did I see the appearance of such a crowd gathered together as the polls of the 2000 auditors of Wakefield make from the pulpit. I have no conception myself that one of them can hear me; they tell me, however, that all before me do very well. There is no chance of admiration here for anybody but our Vicar, who has a thundering voice.

Dec 1766

Cliff tree is an ancient elm (if I mistake not) standing over a steep descent just without the town, and commanding a pleasant prospect of a rich, well-inclosed, not ill-wooded valley, bounded with high grounds all round.

The Law Hill (at least what is commonly called so, for the name may, perhaps, in strict propriety belong only to the artificial mound at the top) is a pretty considerable natural hill. Those that say it is nothing but a windmill hill, are surely mistaken. It is opposite to Sandal Hill and Mount, at the distance I suppose of about a mile, the Calder running between.

The 'fair area for the market-place' mentioned by John Leyland, has been shamefully suffered by the Lords of the Manor to be blocked with fine rows of buildings which do not belong in it. In them are chiefly shops. In Norgate, and about the church, live widows on their jointures, younger brothers, half-pay colonels, etc: at the bottom of Westgate (which is really well-built and handsome enough), rich merchants, physicians etc. Kirkgate is a beggarly place.

Jan 1767....

I find the atmosphere of this place, and almost every circumstance belonging to it, incomparably better suited to my constitution and my good-liking than I had expected.

May 1767

He that would enjoy life, let him come to live in Yorkshire.

From: Letters of the Reverend Benjamin Forster, Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century: 'Consisting of Authentic Memoirs and Original Letters of Eminent Persons, and Intended as a Sequel to the Literary Anecdotes', Cambridge Library Collection

Extracts from the 1770s and 1780s by Tate Wilkinson, Samuel Curwen, and Charles Dibden

Three short extracts from the 1770s and 1780s are full of the attractions of the town.

Introduction: *Tate Wilkinson, actor and theatre manager, was responsible for the construction of the first theatre in Westgate. In his memoir he writes:*

The neighbourhood (of Wakefield) is opulent, genteel and numerous; and whenever they please to patronise the theatre, a stranger even from London would be astonished at beholding the number of gentleman's elegant carriages attending the theatre to convey their wealthy and spirited owners to their neighbouring villas, several of which could be termed palaces.'

From: *'Tate Wilkinson, The Wandering Patentee, or, a history of the Yorkshire theatres, from 1770 to the present time: interspersed with anecdotes respecting most of the performers ... from 1765 to 1795', Vol 1*

Introduction: *Samuel Curwen was an America loyalist refugee who visited Wakefield in May 1777. In his journal he wrote:*

At Black Barnsley we took post chaises, and in two hours alighted at Wakefield, a clothing town, where appeared evident tokens of taste in building and of wealth; the avenues to it delightful, the roads like a carpet walk, on one side a raised terrace-walk for foot passengers flagged for two miles. The Westgate Street has the noblest appearance of any I ever saw out of London; its pavement in the best order, its length near half a mile, in width 10 rods. Were it not for some low buildings, London could not boast a more magnificent street.

From: *'Journal and Letters of Samuel Curwen, an American in England from 1775 – 1783'.*

Introduction: *A composer and performer of one-man shows, Charles Dibdin, who wrote many of the most famous songs of the day, enjoyed his visits to Wakefield. In 1788 he wrote:*

Wakefield I confess is one of my favourite places. There is such a sprightly cleanliness about it, that the inhabitants seem as if they were born for the real purposes of life. The village of Heath, near it, is one of the sweetest spots for neatness and simplicity that imagination can form. The vicinity of Wakefield is filled with opulent and respectable inhabitants all of whom inherited or have accumulated fortunes by trade. Their manner appears to be simple and unaffected; their conversation is polished, and in their musical pursuits they go my way to work.

From: *'The musical tour of Mr. Dibdin, in which - previous to his embarkation for India - he finished his career as a public character' (1788)*

THE 19TH CENTURY

Extract from Pigot and Co.'s National Commercial Directory for 1828-9

Introduction: The nineteenth century directories usually carried a long description of the town as well as a list of businesses. In this extract from Pigot's Directory of 1829 he focuses on important buildings, the trade and population of the town:

In a large room over the cross the meetings for public business are held, and in the town hall the epiphany quarter sessions of the peace for the West Riding. The Duke of Leeds holds his courts of record here every three weeks, for the manor of Wakefield, and as lord of it receives tolls for cattle sold at the market and other fairs. The town is governed by a chief constable. The house of correction has been rebuilt and improved, within little more than twenty-five years, and is now a very elegant building in an airy situation. The other public erections are the court house, the register office for the West Riding, the Clerk of the Peace's office, the West Riding Pauper Lunatic Asylum, the theatre, the public rooms, the Tammy Hall, the Corn Exchange. The subscription newsroom is amply supplied with the London and provincial papers, and there is an excellent library attached. The wool market is considered the greatest in England. The market for sheep and cattle, which is held every fortnight, is considered but little inferior to Smithfield, in London. In the vicinity of the town are extensive collieries the produce of which is shipped to the Ouse and Humber. Two of the collieries by means of a railway, supply the town and its vicinity with coals at a very cheap rate.

The countryside around Wakefield is very beautiful, well wooded and watered, ornamented by many genteel seats and handsome mansions: the land is generally fertile, and although the district is a manufacturing one, yet it possesses none of the disadvantages of such a situation.

From: Pigot and Co.'s National Commercial Directory for 1828-9, Wakefield Library

Extract from the report of Dr James Fowler to the Royal Commission to Enquire into the Pollution of Rivers, 1866

Introduction: Nearly forty years later James Fowler reported to the Royal Commission on River Pollution of 1866 on the deteriorating condition of the Calder. Fowler had just been elected surgeon to the Clayton Hospital and Wakefield General Dispensary.

It would be difficult to find a more striking instance than that afforded by the Calder, of the extent to which our rivers have been defiled by sewage and refuse from manufactories.

In recent years on any warm day in summer, torrents of gas may be seen rising to the surface, and every now and then large masses of mud, which float for a while and then are re-deposited, or are at once carried down the river, stinking and putrefying in their course. At the bridge there has been a water-mill for at least seven hundred years, and anyone interested in the smell of partially oxidized sewage should not omit to stand over the spray which ascends from the wheel. Masses of solid faeces may be seen at the grating through which the water is strained.

Today looking from the bridge westward is a large, open, shallow, almost stagnant pond of the most offensive character, with tracks of dark-coloured mud constantly exposed. The sewer of the town and the West Riding Asylum, with the refuse of the worsted, woollen, and cloth mills, malt-houses, breweries, brew-houses, slaughter-houses, dye-works, fibre mills, soap mills, and grease works

enters by the drain just below; its surface covered with froth of every conceivable colour, overhung by willows, in whose branches are entangled and exposed to view the most disgusting objects. The scum may readily be traced down the river for a considerable distance.

...the putrefying carcases of animals—not only of dogs and cats, but of pigs, sheep, and calves—are allowed to drift along with their surfeiting smell, until stopped of themselves at Stanley Ferry.

From: 'Mr. Fowler's Report on the Condition of the Calder 1876' by James Fowler, Given in evidence before the Royal Commissioners at Wakefield, and published in their Report.

E.L.'s memories of Wakefield written to John Ruskin, published in his pamphlet 'Fors Clavigera', 1875

Introduction: In a pamphlet written by John Ruskin in 1875 he stated 'The two most frightful things I have ever yet seen in my life are the south-eastern suburb of Bradford, and the scene from Wakefield Bridge, by the chapel. This view inspired one of his readers, named only as EL, to send him her memories of her happy childhood in Wakefield in the earlier years of the century, and the changes she observed when she revisited many years later.'

What long years have passed since my eyes first saw the calm sweet scene beyond Wakefield Bridge! I was but a small creature then, and had never been far from my mother's door. It was a memorable day for me when, standing on tiptoe, I could just see over the parapet and look downstream.

That was my first peep into fair, green England, and destined never to be forgotten. The grey old chapel, the shining water below, the far-winding green banks spangled with buttercups, the grove-clad hills of Heath and Kirkthorpe,—all seemed to pass into my heart for ever. There was no railway then, only the Doncaster coach careering over the Bridge with a brave sound of horn; fields and farmsteads stood where the Kirkgate station is; there were strawberry grounds and blossoming pear-orchards, among which the throstles and blackbirds were shouting for gladness.

In those days we were proud of the cleanness and sweet air and gentility of Wakefield. Leeds was then considered rather vulgar, as a factory town, and Bradford was obscure, rough and wild; but Wakefield prided itself in refined living on moderate means, and cultured people of small income were fond of settling there.

I can remember that the townspeople had simple merry-makings and neighbourly ways that this generation would scorn. Many a pleasant walk we had to the farms and halls that belted the old town; and boating parties on the Calder, and tea-drinkings and dances.

Tradespeople were different, too, in old Wakefield. "They expected to live with us all their lives; they had high notions of honour as tradesmen, and they and their customers respected each other. Now the richer ladies go to Leeds or Manchester to make purchases; the town tradesmen are soured and jealous. They put up big plate-glass fronts, and send out flaming bills; but one does not know where to get a piece of sound calico or stout linen, well spun and well woven. Give me back our dingy old shops where everything was genuine, instead of these glass palaces where we often get pins without points, needles without eyes, and sewing thread sixty yards to the hundred.

Insensibly life changed. Mills were springing up, and shops; and the houses had gone up in rent. The sleepy streets were thronged with workers; in short the town seemed new-born altogether. On the once green Calder bank, there is a desert of dross and ashes and twenty black throats vomiting fire and fumes into the summer sky; and under the big sheds you see hundreds of the liberated Britons of these improved days, toiling, half-naked, in sweltering heat and din, from morning to evening.

From: 'Fors Clavigera. Letters to the workmen and labourers of Great Britain. VOL. V 9. (II.)' by John Ruskin

Extract from 'Memories of Merry Wakefield' by Henry Clarkson, 1887

Introduction: Henry Clarkson's book 'Memories of Merry Wakefield', first published in 1887, is a nostalgic review of a long and eventful life which began in 1801. He describes the many textile mills which had gradually occupied the town's edges and then outlines other developments.

Many other important works have been established in the last thirty to forty years, foremost among which I may mention Messrs Green's Economiser, which possesses a worldwide reputation. The Cattle market ranks as one of the most important in the kingdom and the corn market still holds much of its former high position. The malt trade and brewing too are thriving. The town has now one daily newspaper and five weekly ones.

Public buildings have been wonderfully improved. Our beautiful town hall is a noble example of architecture, ...the bank of Messrs Leatham and Tew is an ornament to the town as are other new banks. The Clayton Hospital, for which a delightful airy situation has been chosen, is a great contrast to the former crowded and built-up site. The Probate Court, the New Police Offices, the Savings Bank and the Grammar School are all more or less modern buildings.

However I cannot but express a deep regret that Wakefield's naturally smiling and cheerful face should in the recent day be so often obscured and disfigured by the clouds of smoke which descend upon it. I think we may all confess that Wakefield has not advanced in some respects in the last half century.

When science has shewn the way to dispel the clouds of smoke and to clear the darkened streams, I earnestly hope that our old town may be truly described as 'this fair Wakefield'.

From: 'Memories of Merry Wakefield, an Octagenarian's Recollections 1801 - 1887' by Henry Clarkson

20TH CENTURY

Memories of a childhood in Scott's Yard Westgate, in the 1930s, by Audrey Keighley

Introduction: Wakefield Historical Publications is in the process of publishing a memoir written by a woman who as a child, lived in Scott's Yard in the 1930s and early 40s before it was demolished in the slum clearances. Today the Scott's Yard site is part of Mulberry Way above Westgate Chapel.

Most of my days were happy and we had some very unusual places to play. Westgate Station was behind our house and we often played on the forecourt and on the platform – which was quite easy to reach by going under the barriers. We were always chased off, but were soon back again as there were other ways to the station – including one which led from a door on Westgate, up a flight of steps (lit by very smelly gas jets) and out onto the station forecourt.

There were lots of small shops in Westgate; sweet shops, a jewellers, a barbers shop, a tobacconist, a cut-price grocers called 'Kino Stores' and a shop selling ladies hats, gloves and scarves (which we thought was very posh, because it was called 'London House'). Most of the shopkeepers tolerated us and never minded us playing outside their premises, but not so the owner of 'London House'. If we loitered there, a very formidable lady, who always dressed in black and had very red hair, would chase us away.

The main road can't have been that busy, as we crossed and re-crossed it dozens of times a day and were sent on errands by most of the people in the yard. My mum often sent me across the road to the butchers, sometimes for four pennyworth of stewing meat, or a pennyworth of beef bones. This meat might have been cheap, but it was very tasty and we always had lovely dinners – such as stew and dumplings, or meat and potato pie. Sometimes, Granny would send me for a sheep's head and although I hated watching her, she would clean it and cook it and the resulting stew or broth was delicious.

From: *Memories of Scott's Yard: Life in Westgate and Lupset 1926-1949* by Audrey Keighley, transcribed by Denise Brown. Wakefield Historical Publications

David Storey's childhood experience in World War Two, from his memoir, 'A Stinging Delight', 2021

Introduction: In the 1930s David Storey, the novelist and dramatist, lived on one of Wakefield's largest new Council estates, Lupset. His experience of the Second World War is recorded in his autobiography.

The war happened when I was six years old.

One evening, already asleep – the light still visible beyond the curtains – I was aware of a loud explosion and, simultaneously, of being lifted into the air. Moments later, lying on the floor, our mother was bending over me.

The air-raid siren began to wail.

A bomb had fallen several roads away. A house, we discovered later, had been destroyed. A second bomb had fallen in the park, a third on a house across the town.

The following morning I trailed my magnet through the gutters, picking up thin, grey shards of metal – pausing outside the local shops, examining their spectacularly broken windows, then finally outside the smouldering house itself.

Not long after, our mother, our brother and myself were crouched in the cupboard underneath the stairs, our heads bowed to the slope of the ceiling. Immediately below me lay our youngest brother's sleeping head in the hexagonal orange box fashioned into a cradle by my father. From overhead came the oscillating roar of German engines, passing, nightly now, en route to Sheffield and the south. Our father in his oversized, grey-painted warden's helmet, was somewhere in the road outside. Moments before, from beyond the door, we had heard his voice warning us not to come out. We heard a shriek.
Moments later it became a scream.
'This is it' our mother said.
The scream became a whistle.
We heard a rush of air.
The whistle became a crescendo, like a bulky metal object rushing down a chute.
The house shook.
'It'll go off in a minute,' our mother said.
The clatter of anti-aircraft guns, like the clashing of giant dustbin lids, came from the school playing field at the top of the estate.
The air grew still.
We waited.
The all-clear sounded.
We re-emerged.

From: 'A Stinging Delight, a memoir' by David Storey

A 'punk' going to a gig at Unity Hall, written by Andrew Viggars.

Introduction: In the last few decades of the twentieth century Wakefield, particularly Westgate, became an extremely popular centre of night time entertainment for young people. Unity Hall was the hub of music in Wakefield from the late 1970s, and other music venues, clubs and bars moved in until the street was a weekend throng of young people from far and wide out to have a good time.

Here is one memory of coming to a gig at Unity Hall.

My first gig at Unity Hall was when I was 16 to see Stiff Little Fingers. Being an angry disillusioned teenager I decided it would be a good idea to dress up as a Nazi stormtrooper. So I went to XClothes in Leeds and got all the appropriate garb.

I got off the bus in Wakey station and, being a true punk, tore up the ticket and threw all the pieces up in the air to loads of cheers from my equally silly friends. We walked down to Unity Hall and I took my place in the queue, but within five minutes the police arrived and pulled me out of the queue. "You, back up to the bus station and pick up all the paper you've just thrown in the air," they said.

I protested, "What? Don't know what yer on about, who says it's me?" Their reply: We've had a call saying a skinny lad who thinks he's Hitler was seen chucking rubbish in the air.' You can imagine my street cred took an almighty pounding in front of 100s of Wakey's punks.

From: 'Unity + Heritage written and compiled by Judi Alston, a One-to-One Development Trust project', extract written by Andrew Viggars.

Extract from 'Not So Merry Wakefield' by Kate Taylor, 2005

Introduction: Kate Taylor was President of our Society from 1992 to 2000, and 2003 to 2012. Her autobiography 'Not so Merry Wakefield,' published in 2005, ended in a review of the state of her home town at the start of the 21st century.

Today the drive for new housing is to serve commuters to Leeds. Much of the employment base in coalmining, engineering and textiles has gone too. The town centre is heralded on its main roads by bland glass car showrooms. The once familiar and distinctive skyline has become cluttered with high-rise flats.

The character of Wakefield – its individuality - is being eroded. It owed much to the developments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which bought not only the handsome terraces of St John's and South Parade, but the group of civic buildings in Wood Street and the fine commercial properties in Westgate.

When I began this book, I had Henry Clarkson's 'Memories of Merry Wakefield' in mind. Towards the end of his account Clarkson says,

'A very warm feeling for my native place fills my mind,... and I trust that firm friends and true will always be found to stand by her and that brighter days even than any she has seen may dawn and continue over her.'

From: 'Not so Merry Wakefield' by Kate Taylor; Wakefield Historical Publications