

The Pye-Smith Family

We begin this history with the Revd Dr John Pye Smith, son of John and Martha Smith, and born in 1774 at the family home in Snig Hill. His father John was originally a grocer, but by the time that son John was born he had established himself as a respected book seller with a shop in Angel Street. His mother was the niece of the congregationalist minister Dr John Pye and it was after him that John Pye Smith was named. John junior did not get a formal education but grew up surrounded by books and was remarkably well-educated, though largely self-taught. As a young man, he was formally apprenticed to the book trade but during the 1790's felt increasingly called to pursue a religious vocation. During 1796 he took over the editorship of the Sheffield Iris, the leading abolitionist newspaper in the North of England, during the six month imprisonment of its editor, his friend James Montgomery, for libel. Shortly afterwards he realised his vocation to enter the ministry, being admitted to study at the nonconformist seminary at Rotherham.

In 1801 at the age of 26 John was appointed to the post of resident tutor at Homerton College in London, the principal nonconformist academy in England. He spent the rest of his life in Homerton but frequently returned to Sheffield to visit his parents, and later his children and grandchildren living there. John Pye Smith's brilliant career combined his twin passions for religion and geology and he wrote and lectured extensively during his life on reconciling science with religious faith. He was in active correspondence with the scientific leaders of the day and his work is well documented in books and archive collections. He was elected Fellow of the Royal Society, the first from a Nonconformist background, and was also elected a Fellow of the Geological Society. He was a leading figure in the movement for the abolition of slavery.

Soon after moving to Homerton, John Pye Smith married his first wife Mary and they had seven children, of whom only three survived to adulthood: Mary, Ebenezer and John William. Ebenezer Pye-Smith became a surgeon and pursued his career in London. His son, Rutherford Pye-Smith, also became a surgeon and moved to Sheffield, where he was one of the leading medical men in the city.

John William Pye-Smith was born in 1809 and was educated at Mill Hill School, a nonconformist school founded by his father and still in existence today. He moved to Sheffield in 1831 to train as a solicitor. In 1835 he married Caroline Baines, the daughter of Sir Edward Baines, MP for Leeds, and they set up home in Broomfield near St Mark's church. They had a total of 13 children. The family moved to Uplands at Tapton Hill, Broomhill, when it was newly built in 1853. J W Pye-Smith died in 1865 aged 54 years and his widow, Caroline Pye-Smith, continued to live at Uplands until 1877, after which she moved to Summerfield (off Ashdell Road). John William Pye-Smith was a prominent citizen and congregationalist, serving as deacon of the Nether Chapel, secretary of the non-conformist seminary at Rotherham and Mayor of Sheffield in 1856.

The eldest surviving son of John and Caroline, also called John William, was born in 1846 and after being educated first in Sheffield and then at the Mill Hill school he entered his father's law firm in Sheffield. He married his wife Harriet in 1867 and the 1871 census shows him living at 1, Taptonville Road with his wife and 2-year old daughter. He purchased his childhood home 'Uplands' in 1881 and lived there until his death in 1895. He and his wife

had four children. His lengthy obituary describes his many contributions to civic and cultural life in the City, including his election to Mayor in 1885 and appointment to the position of Town Clerk shortly afterwards.

DEATH OF THE TOWN CLERK OF SHEFFIELD (Obituary 8th September 1895)

The announcement of the death of Mr. John William Pye-Smith, the respected Town Clerk of Sheffield, at the comparatively early age of 54, will be received with intense regret. For some time he had been the victim of an insidious disease, and on his becoming seriously out of health a few weeks ago, his medical attendant considered that it would be advisable for him to take a rest. He accordingly left Sheffield for Wiltshire, but finding little relief he proceeded to Weymouth, in the hope that the sea air would prove beneficial. Unfortunately there was no improvement, and as his sufferings continued he returned home on the 24th August. On the 25th he became much worse, and it was generally recognised that his condition was extremely serious. He was attended by Dr. Rutherford Pye-Smith, Dr. Dyson, and Dr. Philip Pye-Smith, consulting physician, of London, and his last hours were soothed by the loving ministrations of his wife and family. Death took place from uraemia yesterday morning at Uplands, his residence in Manchester road.

The death of the late Town Clerk of Sheffield leaves a wide gap in the civic life of the city; a gap that will not easily be filled. He had the strings of the municipal government of Sheffield at his fingers' ends ready for the pulling. Few are acquainted with the difficulties that beset the work of a Corporation that is entrusted with the responsible task of governing a community of three hundred and fifty thousand people, but Mr. J. W. Pye-Smith was one of the few. The father of the deceased, Mr John William Pye-Smith, was carefully educated to the profession of the law, and commenced practice in Sheffield in 1831. By his assiduous attention to business, the extent of his legal knowledge, and his conscientiousness, he won for himself a high place in the profession he had chosen. In 1835 he married Caroline Phoebe, the third daughter of the late Mr. Edward Baines, M.P. for Leeds. He held the highest of civic honours, the Mayoralty of the town in which he lived, and died in 1864 at the comparatively early age of 55, full of honours.

There were few, indeed, who have taken a more prominent part in the history of Sheffield than have the Pye-Smiths of the last three generations. The father of the subject of our sketch, like his son who has just departed, was a prominent Congregationalist. For years he was a deacon of that church successively under the Rev. T. Smith, the Rev. H. Batchelor, and the Rev. T. M. Herbert, and he succeeded Mr. James Montgomery as secretary of Rotherham College, continuing in office until 1869. In that year, when the failure of his health compelled his retirement, he was succeeded by the late Town Clerk of Sheffield. For years he was connected in an active capacity with the Sheffield Town Council, and it was in 1856 that he was elected Mayor of that body. Twenty nine years afterwards in 1885 his son, whose death Sheffield now mourns, occupied the same position, and presided over the fortunes of an even more important city with conspicuous ability. The grandfather of the deceased was the Rev. Dr. John Pye-Smith, an eminent Nonconformist minister, and the principal of Homerton College. near London. His great grandfather was Mr. John Smith, a Sheffield bookseller, of Angel street. The family originally came from Langley, in the parish of Ecclesfield.

The deceased, who was the second son of Mr. J. W. Pye-Smith, was educated in Sheffield, and afterwards at the Mill Hill Grammar School, near London. After completing his education

he was articled to his father as a solicitor, and on being admitted, about the year 1864, was taken into partnership. On his father's death he practised for some time alone, afterwards joining the firm of Burdekin and Co., which was henceforward styled Burdekin, Smith, and Pye-Smith. On Mr. Smith going out the firm became Burdekin, Pye-Smith, and Benson, and this was shortly afterwards contracted into Burdekin and Co., The deceased remained there until he became Town Clerk, about eight years ago. He married a daughter of Mr. Rawlinson, of Taunton, and he has a son, Mr. Edward Pye-Smith, who is a partner with Mr. Ibbotson, in Change alley, and three daughters. A daughter of the deceased is married to the Rev. Mr. Fox, of Bakewell.

For many years he was an active member of the Nether Chapel, Norfolk Street, and for some considerable time he officiated as one of the deacons. He was Mayor in 1885-6, and succeeded Mr. John Yeomans a short time afterwards as Town Clerk. He was at that time a member of the Corporation and an alderman, and resigned his seat in order to become a candidate. He has proved an exceedingly able Town Clerk, and was generally well liked by all classes of people. Mr. Pye-Smith early devoted himself to municipal work. In 1871 he contested the Upper Hallam Ward, but was defeated by a very few votes, only a small number of electors going to the poll. In the following year he was elected to the Council of his native borough without a contest, and proved so able a representative that in 1875, and again in 1878, he was allowed to retain his seat without a contest.

In 1880, eight years after he entered the Town Council, an opportunity came for Mr Pye-Smith to be elevated to the bench of aldermen. The voting for him and the late Mr. Robert Leader was equal, and the Mayor gave his casting vote to the latter. A few weeks afterwards Mr. Mark Firth died, and Mr. Pye-Smith's name and that of the late Ald. Brooksbank, were put to the vote. The numbers were again equal, but the Mayor on this occasion gave his casting vote to his opponent, and thus secured for him the coveted position. From that time until 1887, when he resigned his position in the Council in order that he might apply for the more onerous post of Town Clerk of Sheffield, Mr. Pye-Smith sat among the city fathers, adding dignity to their deliberations as much by his calm gentlemanly demeanour as by his skill in debate and his great knowledge of routine. It was in the dull drudgery of the committees that his best work was done. Much of his labour was unknown to the majority of his fellow citizens, only those who were closely associated with him in his municipal work could gauge with accuracy his great value.

The appointment of Mr. J. W. Pye-Smith in 1885 as Mayor of Sheffield, although at the time it gave rise to some heart-burning, on account of a minor difference of opinion between his supporters, who were mostly Conservatives, and those of the late Ald. Clegg, was a singularly happy one. He was a man of undoubted capacity and judgment; he had the full confidence of the Council, and beyond that there was a touch of sentiment in the proceedings when he was elected Mayor, which came home to all. Nearly thirty years before his father occupied the same office, and thus the highest dignity of the town descended from father to son. It was a great compliment for Conservatives and churchmen to pay to a Liberal and Nonconformist, a compliment which we are afraid would not be paid at the present time, when party warfare is so much in vogue.

His remarks when elected were to the purpose. He referred to the responsibilities devolving upon Town Councils, which, he said, "are heavy, and are becoming exceedingly great". Reference was made by him also to the question of the High street. In the course of his

remarks he said: "Any one who knows how the traffic of that street is conducted must be aware of its congested condition, and be convinced that something ought to be done with that central street in order to make it more in keeping with the size of the town and the greatness of our traffic. That subject ought to be taken up without delay."

Another question was the subject of allusion - that of the erection of a new Town Hall. He was prominent amongst those who were desirous to bring Sheffield up to the line of other towns in the matter of its municipal buildings. "We are," he said, "the fifth town in the country, and yet we have not a Town Hall in any way worthy of the name, but only a police court." In that respect he pointed out that Sheffield had been outstripped in the race by towns much less in size, and a great deal less in importance. He did not think the Corporation had shown a proper amount of public spirit in being contented so long with their inconvenient arrangements. Some of the municipal departments were, he said, divided a quarter or half a mile from each other, thus causing great loss of time and inconvenience, and he was surprised it had not resulted in more mistakes than had already occurred. They ought, he contended, most decidedly to meet that subject boldly, and to have a Town Hall worthy of the name and of the position which Sheffield occupied in the country. The credit of the town was good, and they had proved that by the way in which they had placed their stock at the very reasonable rate of 3.5 per cent. He asked if it was so terrible to face the question of raising enough money by borrowing to build a Town Hall, especially when they remembered that the payments were spread over a great number of years, and that those who would come after them would have to bear their share of the burdens in return for the benefits which they would have handed down to them.

During his year of office the new works for the treatment of the city's sewage were completed, and were opened by him in June, 1886. The same year saw great distress in Sheffield, and after a meeting in Paradise square, the Mayor opened a fund and established works for the relief of the poor. Mr. Pye-Smith was greatly in favour of the purchase of parks for Sheffield. The town was growing, and he foresaw the necessity of open spaces for the inhabitants if they could be provided on reasonable terms. The purchase of Meersbrook Park was a matter which was largely due to his exertions. He, indeed, took a broad view of every question in which the rights of municipalities were concerned. He expressed very frequently congratulation because of the action taken by Parliamentary candidates in favour of the extension of local government. This, to his view, meant extension of the responsibilities of the members of town councils and other local authorities.

In April, 1887, Mr. J. W. Pye-Smith was elected Town Clerk of Sheffield, at a salary of £1250 per annum. His letter of application for the post showed the modesty of the man. "To be permitted to serve my native town in the office of Town Clerk," he wrote, "would be an honour and a pleasure I should very highly esteem." The late Town Clerk was before all a Sheffield man, proud of his native city, and bound up in her concerns. Prior to his election as the law adviser to the Corporation he had practised as a solicitor in Sheffield for more than twenty-three years and during 1886-1887 he occupied the position of president of Sheffield District Incorporated Law Society. It is not to be wondered at that, with the high credentials he possessed, backed by his enlightened action with regard to the purchase-of the undertaking of the Sheffield Water Company, he should have been selected for the post. For more than fourteen years he had been a member of the Town Council in the varying positions of councillor, alderman, and Mayor, and as he rightly remarked in his letter of

application, he had had many opportunities of becoming acquainted with the legal and other departments of the municipal government of the town.

A graceful compliment was paid to him on his appointment as Town Clerk by the late Ald. Clegg, whom he had defeated in the struggle for the Mayoralty by a majority of 12 votes. Mr. Clegg remarked that when the Council remembered the length of time that Mr. Pye-Smith had been in practice in Sheffield and the position that he had made for himself, when they also remembered his long service in the Council and the honourable position he had attained, they must come to the conclusion that he was a gentleman of whom they would have every reason to be proud. The words of Ald. W. J. Clegg have proved prophetic, for the business of his office was discharged by the Town Clerk with such signal ability and courtesy as to stamp him as an organiser of a high order. The work of his department was carried on quietly and unobtrusively, for Mr. Pye-Smith was quietness and unobtrusiveness personified.

On the occasion of his appointment a writer in a Sheffield newspaper stated: "In electing Mr. Pye-Smith by a unanimous vote the Council did that which is well pleasing in the sight of the burgesses, and which is no less advantageous to the Council than to the public interests. In thus honouring Mr. John William Pye-Smith the Council honours itself. The new Town Clerk is animated by no selfish motives. That which he gains will probably be balanced by that which he loses. The Council, on the other hand, gain a legal adviser who is in possession of special knowledge and qualifications peculiarly fitting him for the honourable post and the onerous work to which he has been called." The deceased gentleman was the third Town Clerk of his native place. The first was Mr Edward Bramley, who held the office from 1843 until his resignation in 1859; the second was the late Mr. John Yeomans, who succeeded Mr. Bramley and retained the post until his death in 1887.

By a strange coincidence Mr. J. W. Pye-Smith was appointed the Town Clerk of Sheffield on the very day of the third reading of the Sheffield Corporation Water Bill in the House of Lords - a consummation for which he had fought strenuously for many months previously. The most memorable piece of municipal work with which Mr. Pye-Smith has been actively associated was undoubtedly the purchase by the Corporation of the water undertaking. He happened to be Mayor of the borough during the eventful year when that important transaction was formulated and settled, and that his colleagues on the Council had the fullest confidence in his legal knowledge and his peculiar ability to deal with matters of this complicated and delicate character, is seen in the circumstance that he was made chairman of the committee to superintend the Parliamentary proceedings. Mr. Pye-Smith took a very prominent part in the numerous consultations and in dealing with the multifarious correspondence and the knotty questions which are inseparable from business of such magnitude and the excellent bargain which the ratepayers secured - admittedly the best bargain that could be obtained - was largely due to his foresight and wise counsel.