

5th January 2021

Welcome to the first of our Attleborough Heritage Group invitations to be 'Inspired by the Past'

Work is underway on creating online resources based on the 1881 Census of Attleborough. It will be a week or two yet before they emerge on this website, but many fascinating and surprising facts are revealing themselves already, not least family sizes, children at work and at school, the ages of labouring men, young entrepreneurs, women in business and the number of incomers to Attleborough.

Equally, there are many questions to ask, not least what were living conditions like in Attleborough in 1881? Some answers have to be inferred but in separate governmental reports they were enumerated and the Brecklands of Norfolk were persistently low in the ratings well into the 20th century.

The aim of improving people's lives by improving their living conditions has a long history, peppered with politics (the fight to ensure a supply of clean water in Leamington Spa took years because people making a profit from Spa-tourism did not want their assets disturbed for the sake of the health of the poor, whose lives were ravaged by disease, a situation exacerbated by the lack of sanitation and clean water). Prompted, or perhaps prefiguring the 'Garden City Movement', housing for employees became intertwined with personal ambitions labelled as '5% philanthropy' (5% said to be the measurable return on investment into decent housing for employees, for example). Paternalism was another label: William Hesketh Lever, driving force behind the development of Port Sunlight, the 'garden village' built to house the employees of his soap manufactory, imposed conditions designed to maintain the appearance of the village, including where and when to hang out laundry (definitely NOT in any of the front gardens, all of which were maintained by the company). George Cadbury, free-thinking 19th-century chocolate manufacturer and the force behind the village of Bournville, is said to have told his employees to improve their health by sleeping with their mouths closed... On the other hand, he provided 'drying rooms' at the factory so that workers who walked there in the rain and arrived soaking wet could dry their clothes. He also provided the village with a reading room and every house with a bath, some of which were concealed and fitted inside a purpose-built cupboard.

It may be apocryphal, but it's worth repeating: one recommendation of the committee whose task was to enquire into the condition of housing for the working classes (whose vast and influential report was published in 1885) was that housing for the working classes should include baths. Appalled by this suggestion, one member proclaimed that there was no point in giving the working classes baths because they would only keep their coal in them. Another member retorted: 'Yes; but their children won't'. For the FACTS, the University of Leicester's special collections once again provide riches for the enquiring mind with access to the report at:

<https://www.le.ac.uk/eh/teach/ug/modules/eh3107/rchousing.pdf>

Attempts by industrialists, most of them non-conformists, to improve the lot of their employees, took shape with the recognition that this year marks the 75th anniversary of the foundation of UNESCO; next year (2022) marks the 50th anniversary of their designation of World Heritage Sites. The link below shows when and where these were created subsequently in the UK. Among them are NEW LANARK and SALTAIRE - both of which could be described as villages of vision, emerging from the energies and ambitions of industrialist employers, driven in their attempts to build better lives whilst making better profits - and it started with housing, albeit overlain with rules about how people should live in them. Illustrations and details can be found at:

[World Heritage Sites – UNESCO in the UK](#)