



‘Steel City’ to ‘Green City’ Looking at depictions of Sheffield Through the University Heritage Collections

by MA History student Millie Seller

The University of Sheffield Heritage Collections have acquired objects and artwork since its foundation in 1905. The collections include engineering artefacts, architectural illustrations, landscape paintings, modern art, and more. Using the collections, it's possible to see the change in Sheffield's status from 'Steel City' to 'Green City' as well as witnessing how Sheffielders lived years ago.

Sheffield is well known as the 'Steel City' for its industrial heritage. If you have never been to Sheffield, you would probably picture it as a great industrial hub in the North. To those who are familiar with the city, its surrounding landscapes and public environmental efforts make it one of the greenest in the UK. The artwork in the Heritage Collections shows Sheffield's industrial past, with older depictions of the city highlighting its immense steel manufacturing and more recent additions to the collections showing a greener city.

Pictures of Sheffield filled with chimneys and pollution date back to the 18th century when writer Daniel Defoe described the constant smoke and use of forges in his *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*. More artists depicted Sheffield as a smog-filled city as it became more affluent and influential in the steel industry. Sheffield historian David Hey (1938 - 2016) claims that by 1820 Sheffield was known internationally for its steel and cutlery and its pollution was worsening.¹ The Heritage Collections hold several artworks showing industrial Sheffield in this period.

Late-18th and Early-19th Century Steel City:

Sheffield From the Attercliffe Road, an illustration by Edward Blore (1787-1879) and engraved by George Cooke (1781-1834) in 1819, shows how Sheffield was seen and depicted by some artists during this time.

¹ David Hey, 'The South Yorkshire Steel Industry and the Industrial Revolution', *Northern History*, 42.1 (Leeds, 2005), p.94



ID: 1581: *Sheffield From the Attercliffe Road*, Edward Blore and George Cooke, 1819 (Reference Image)

Blore specialised in landscape and architectural drawings, having helped with the final erection of Buckingham Palace in the mid-1800s.² He manages to show both the industrial and natural landscapes which define the city, and we can see how his illustration depicts the ‘Steel City’ through the factory chimneys. The River Don runs to the left and people are walking into the city alongside it, presumably on their commute to work. Blore shows that despite the city’s industry and pollution, Sheffield’s environment remained important to its identity.

Blore’s depiction of the workers walking along the country lane towards the ‘Steel City’ is a motif in similar illustrations in the Heritage Collections from that period. Keith Snell, current Professor of Rural and Cultural History at the University of Leicester, argues that this more picturesque version of working life was to show the upper-class population that the lower classes were content workers.³ But Blore’s depiction of the commuters could also be as simple as showing their enjoyment of the countryside, despite the looming industrial city. Either way, the fact that the workers are heading towards the smog of Sheffield shows that their day-to-day lives were likely more industrial than the country scene Blore depicts.

Artist William Westall (1781-1850) and engraver Edward Finden (1791-1857) created a similar illustration to Blore’s. Westall draws viewers in with the peaceful country scene

² ‘Edward Blore (1789-1879)’, *The Victorian Web* (4 February 2020), <https://victorianweb.org/art/architecture/blore/index.html>

³ K. D. M. Snell, ‘In or Out of their Place: The Migrant Poor in English Art, 1740–1900’, *Rural History*, 24.1 (Cambridge, 2013), pp.73-100

that shows the river, fishermen, workers, and farm animals, but shows the ‘Steel City’ in the background as a constant presence.



ID: 1584: *Sheffield*, William Westall and Edward Finden, 1824

Both Blore and Westall show that the environment around the city was still the natural beauty we know and love today, despite David Hey’s description of Sheffield’s steel industry growing and polluting the city at this time. However, in both pictures the presence of the smoggy city in the background makes us question whether the average worker experienced more of the peaceful countryside or the overbearing factories. The artists illustrating Sheffield from these seats of nature leads us to wonder how they were trying to present Sheffield to the wider world. Were they displaying the contentedness of the working class to genteel society like Keith Snell argues, or were they simply showing that Sheffield had more to offer than its booming steel industry? Through continuing our journey through these artworks, we can see that Sheffield could not offer much more than its industry to the working class but for the upper classes it was a different story.

Early 19th Century Green City:

By the mid-19th century, Sheffield produced 90% of Britain’s steel and nearly half of Europe’s.⁴ As a result of the successful industry and increased job opportunities, the city’s population rose to 135,310 in 1851 compared to 14,531 in 1736.⁵ Despite its ever-growing industry, artists still drew inspiration from Sheffield’s other assets. The opening of the Sheffield Botanical Gardens in 1836 brought much excitement to the city, as well as a

⁴ David Hey, ‘The South Yorkshire Steel Industry and the Industrial Revolution’, *Northern History*, 42.1 (Leeds, 2005), p.94

⁵ *Ibid.* p.96

green haven amidst the factory smoke, and this is depicted by J. & E. Harwood (biographies unknown).



ID: 1589: *Botanical Gardens, Sheffield*, unknown artist, printed by J & E Harwood, 1845 (Reference Image)

Harwood's depiction shows a Sheffield that is free of pollution, with elegant greenhouses and promenades. Through their work, they reveal that it was largely the upper class who accessed these havens away from the factory smoke. The Botanical Gardens were only open to those who could afford to pay a fee to enter, excluding much of the working class population except on a number of Gala Days when the entrance was one shilling per person which was still a significant sum for a family with mouths to feed.⁶ Even though Sheffield was portrayed by artists as a genteel society which embraced nature, it would seem that much of the city's offerings outside of steel were reserved for the upper class.

Henry Winkles and J. Rapkin represented more of these elite spaces when they used them to decorate their illustrated map of Sheffield. Winkles and Rapkin's map reveal Sheffield at the size it once was, and they use miniature illustrations of these spaces to frame the city.

⁶ 'Garden History 1833-1844', *Sheffield Botanical Gardens Trust*, (2022), <https://www.sbg.org.uk/garden-history/1833-1844>



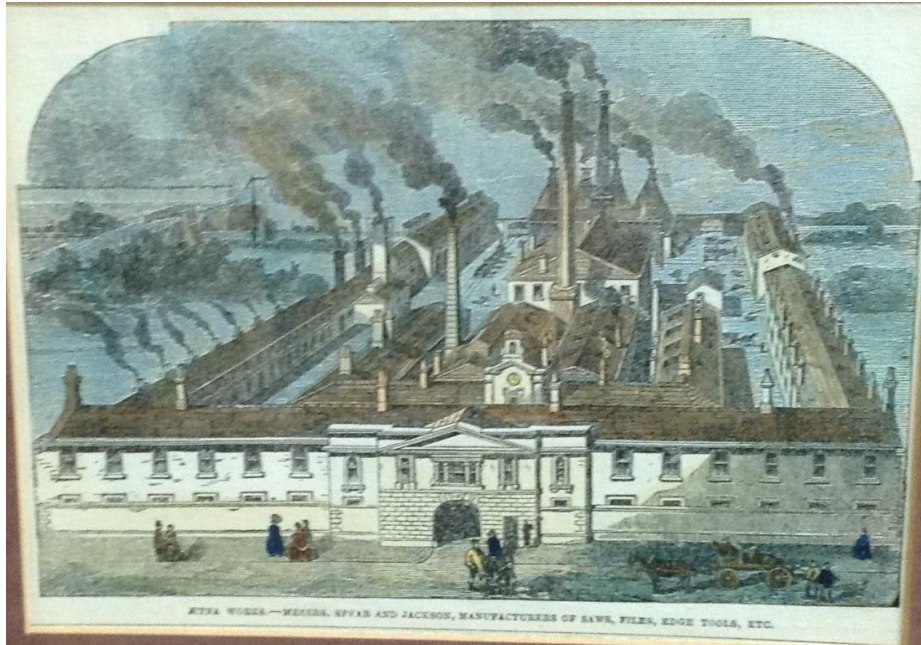
ID: 1854: *Map of Sheffield*, Henry Winkles and J. Rapkin, 1850 (Reference Image)

In this illustration, Sheffield's surrounding landscape and parish church (which was elevated to cathedral status in 1914 and still stands in the city centre) represent the city's cultural and religious offerings. Familiar spaces such as Broad Lane and Far Gate take pride of place on the map, as do all the churches and arts venues that the city could boast. However, what is most notable is that none of Sheffield's factories are highlighted on the map. Through erasing the presence of the factories, Winkles and Rapkin are able to show a Sheffield which is more suitable for the custom of genteel society rather than the working class.

Unlike Blore and Westall's views of Sheffield, the artists of these two illustrations represent Sheffield without any inclusion of the steel industry. It could be argued they are merely choosing to celebrate other developments in the city's past. Yet, in doing so, they erase working class contributions to Sheffield's successes and its reputation as 'Steel City'.

Mid-19th Century Industrialisation:

These paintings are not representative of all artworks of Sheffield from the period, however. The Heritage Collections boasts several artworks which take pride in the Sheffield steel industry and put the city's factories on display for all to see. Pawson and Brailsford were particularly good at representing the 'Steel City', probably due to them being successful stationers located in the Sheffield city centre. Their illustration *Ætna Works* shows the magnitude of individual manufacturers in the city.



ID: 1577: *Aetna Works*, printed by Pawson & Brailsford, 1862 (Reference Image)

The *Aetna Works* was the first of the great steel factories in Sheffield to be named after a volcano.⁷ Erected by Spear and Jackson in 1837, the factory gained its name after Mount Etna. Although it is not clear why this is so, Pawson and Brailsford's depiction of the factory churning out masses of smoke does somewhat resemble an active volcano. Other manufacturers continued to name factories after volcanoes with Hecla, Atlas, and Cyclops which you will see below. A similar artwork to Pawson and Brailsford's, *View of the Celebrated Cyclops Steel Works* helps viewers to understand the immensity of the steel factories even more.

G.S. Meason wrote in *The Official Illustrated Guide to the Great Northern Railway* in 1861 his own account of the Cyclops Works: "This vast establishment comprises almost a small town of factories, the premises occupying an area of upwards of fourteen acres of ground, and affording employment to over 1200 persons".⁸ The many chimneys which the artist shows in the background confirm Meason's description of the immense factory. This illustration encapsulates how we might imagine the 'Steel City' in its heyday, with thick smog showing the signs of working furnaces and a booming industry.

⁷ David Hey, 'The South Yorkshire Steel Industry and the Industrial Revolution', *Northern History*, 42.1 (Leeds, 2005), p.96

⁸ 'The Cyclops Steel and Iron Manufactory', *Classics & Class*, <https://www.classicsandclass.info/product/9/>



ID: 1572: *View of the Celebrated Cyclops Steel Works*, unknown artist, 1853

Both illustrations show prominent Sheffield steel factories from an aerial perspective so that viewers might be able to grasp their scale. Like Westall and Blore, the artists show people in the foreground before the massive buildings to help understand the perspective and scale of the factories even more. Unlike Westall and Blore, these figures also help us to understand the important role the factories played in the daily lives of Sheffielders who were a crucial part of the city where upper and lower classes could both conduct their business.

While *Ætna Works* almost exclusively depicts the factory, *View of the Celebrated Cyclops Steel Works* also depicts the surrounding hills of the city whose vibrant green contrasts the dark 'Steel City'. This piece was illustrated by the artist for *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion*, an illustrated periodical in the United States.⁹ Perhaps we can infer that the artist wished to reveal the duality of the city - industrious and successful, but not as polluted as one might think.

Late-19th Century Steel City:

During the latter half of the 19th century, the Sheffield steel industry continued growing and nearly all steel produced there was manufactured in factories, replacing individual skilled craftsmen with the many workers required to man the machinery.¹⁰ Henry Warren's

⁹ 'Illustration, 'The Celebrated Cyclops Steel Works' (Sheffield, England)', *Hagley Digital Archives*, https://digital.hagley.org/1986268_0085; 'Gleason's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion', *Wikipedia* (30 July 2024), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gleason%27s_Pictorial_Drawing-Room_Companion

¹⁰ 'Sheffield: A History of the 'Steel City'', *History* (2024), <https://www.history.co.uk/shows/forged-in-fire/articles/a-history-of-the-steel-city>

and J. B. Allen's *Sheffield from Skyedge* reveals this industrial metropolis which contrasts Blore and Westall's rural perspectives.



ID: 1585: *Sheffield From Skyedge*, Henry Warren and J. B. Allen, 1875

Warren and Allen show Sheffield from the perspective of people looking over the city, effectively displaying the magnitude of the steel industry from this aerial perspective. Their 'Steel City' features chimneys and blackened streets, as well as smoke pouring into a grey sky. Unlike the looming industrial presence in Blore and Westall's illustrations, the atmosphere of this picture conveys Sheffield as a place of opportunity and a figure proudly stands at the edge of the valley looking towards the city from the east.

Though we get glimpses of the city's hills in the background, its industry and tightly packed housing take pride of place. Part of the reason for this new perspective might be because the artists depict Sheffield from Skyedge, which is close to the Manor and where the poorer classes lived. The wealthier classes moved to the West of the city to avoid the trail of smoke from the chimneys. Another reason could be the later date of the illustration, meaning the city was more developed by the time this artwork was created compared to earlier works.

William Topham's (1808 - 1877) painting of Sheffield's city centre similarly depicts the heart of the city as a heavily polluted place, overshadowed by the industrial structures and smoke. The bustle in the streets shows how the factories grew Sheffield's working population and Topham depicts them all as shadowy figures.



ID: 836: *Sheffield City Centre*, William Topham, 1878

We can situate Topham's painting by taking notice of the Crimean War Column on the right. This was originally positioned in the city centre at Moorhead alongside the Crimean War Monument, but the latter has since been moved to the Botanical Gardens. Topham's more central perspective of Sheffield shows even more how daily life was affected by the growing steel industry. Small businesses opened up shop in the city centre while factories took root on the outskirts by the river. The shops we see in this work contrast the massive scale of the factories in previous artworks then, and they reveal the sort of establishments the working population would frequent. Despite this change of perspective, the factory chimneys still continue to fill the sky with smoke in the background.

Topham epitomises the 'Steel City' that Sheffield is known for, and we are given no indication of the surrounding greenery unlike in earlier artworks in the Heritage Collections. Topham's painting suggests how the lives of Sheffielders were defined by the presence of the steel industry, since even on an average shopping street we cannot escape the presence of the factories. By the time of this painting's creation, there were many steel factories and investors in Sheffield and new steels were being developed to ensure greater quality, with the Bessemer method of steel manufacturing having revolutionised the industry and completely cemented Sheffield as the global hub of steel.¹¹

¹¹ Ibid.

20th and 21st Century Steel City:

Today, the Sheffield steel industry isn't as prominent as it once was. More than 50,000 jobs in steel production and engineering were lost between 1980 and 1983 alone.¹² As a consequence, the industry has transformed from giant factories and machinery to individual skilled specialists. The period when the 'Steel City' was at its peak is still remembered for its contributions to Sheffield's legacy however, and Sheffielders still consider it as a part of their identity much like the people in Topham's painting might have. The working classes who helped steel manufacturing thrive are memorialised through the remnants of industrialisation across the city.



ID: 1220: *Clyde Steel Works Head Office*, Norah K. Rogerson, 1987

The Heritage Collections holds work by artists who depict the steel industry in a contemporary setting so that modern-day audiences can see how it exists today. Both Norah Rogerson (above) and Simon Clements (below) depict how the steel industry has survived in recent years. Rogerson celebrates the history and architecture left in the city as a result of industrial expansion and Clements appreciates the technical skills involved in contemporary steel manufacturing. Both artists continue to pay homage to the steel industry in its varied forms and cement it as a part of their identity. Through doing this, they remind us how the steel industry has transformed Sheffield to the city we are now familiar with.

¹² 'Sheffield: A History of the 'Steel City'', *History* (2024), <https://www.history.co.uk/shows/forged-in-fire/articles/a-history-of-the-steel-city>



ID: 1453: *Sheffield Steel I, II & III*, Simon Clements, 2005 (Reference Image)

Sheffield's identity now appears to be a mix of the two: 'Steel City' and 'Green City'. A glimpse through the Heritage Collections shows that both sides have always been present in the city but not necessarily representative of all Sheffielders' experiences. When the steel industry reached its peak by the mid-1800s, artists show us that much of the industrial work and manual labour fell on the hands of the working class while the wealthier portion of society could enjoy more outdoors based and genteel activities.

20th and 21st Century Green City:

Edward S. Billing's depiction of Sheffield University campus today shows that the city has now opened its green spaces to everybody. His sketch depicting Firth Court, and the Arts Tower tucked behind the greenery of Weston Park conveys this change in the city's priorities.



ID: 1857: *Sheffield University From the Park*, Edward S. Billins, c.mid-late 20th century (Reference Image)

Through many efforts, both Sheffield's environment and its steel industry have been preserved and made accessible to all. Sheffield University takes care of over 10,400 trees and the city claims to have more trees per person than any other city in Europe.¹³ Through the artwork in the Heritage Collections, we can see this greater appreciation for Sheffield's natural world as well as a preserved history of the 'Steel City' which can teach us plenty about Sheffield pride and identity.

¹³ 'Green Impact', *University of Sheffield*, <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/sustainability/green-impact>