

## *Families of Feoffees Passage*

### **Ellekers Yard, Walmgate, York**

This article records some of the work carried out by A.R.C. volunteers, principally Vicky Early and Simon Graham but with the help of other willing workers, to provide historical



information about the Ellerkers site in Walmgate, York. The excavation of the site is described by Kelly Powell in *Interim* Vol21 No3 p27. This work complements the information retrieved by excavation and brings to life the story of the people who occupied the site.

Although the Walmgate area appears to have been developed during Roman and Medieval times it is not until the nineteenth century that there was a real population explosion. The expansion of York with the resultant demand for labourers drew Irish immigrants escaping the after-effects of the potato famine and families from the surrounding countryside to the city.

The shop on Walmgate, formerly called Ellerkers, seems to have been a shop at least since the early nineteenth century. By 1858 Benjamin Oxtoby, a saddler, was occupying the premises, as his descendants were to do well into this century, indeed it is only in 1997 that the shop ceased to be a saddlers. The plot of land to the rear of the shop has been the subject of YAT excavations between 1997–1997



Here in Ellerkers Yard, cheaply constructed cottages were erected in the nineteenth century to accommodate poor immigrant workers. Precise dating of the erection of the cottages is difficult as the name of the passageway leading to them kept changing from Duke of Yorks Passage to Bleachers Yard to Feoffees Yard.

Who were the people who lived in these slums? A study of the Census Returns for 1861, 1871 and 1881 shows us the following picture. In 1861 the passage is called Bleachers Yard and the individual cottages are unnumbered. The properties are occupied as follows:

- Widow Sarah Smith aged 34; a charwoman from York with two daughters aged nine and four.
- Joseph Eland, a gardener, aged 60, from Lythe near Whitby with his wife, his adult children and nephew. The son of 30 was a coach lace weaver and the daughter, still unmarried at 34, a dressmaker. The nephew was a saddler's apprentice, presumably to the Oxtoby family.
- Thomas Brannan, a 53 year old farm labourer from Ireland with his wife and two small daughters aged 8 and 3. He had three lodgers, two farm labourers from Ireland and a sawyer from Great Yarmouth.
- John Leach and his wife he was a 62 year old sawyer from Ireland.
- George Calvert, his wife and baby son, aged 38 he was a woollen and linen web weaver from Huntington in Yorkshire.
- Henry Swales a 28 year old bachelor, a hawker of flax from Brompton-on-Sea.

The properties must have varied in size even allowing for the overcrowding. Widow Smith and Henry Swales may only have been renting one room, whereas Thomas Brannan, his family and lodgers, must have needed more space. The census also shows that there was a network of support, either for family (the nephew apprentice or the older spinster sister-in-law) or for the fellow Irish.

It is interesting to see if the pattern continues in the 1871 and 1881 Censuses. By 1871 the yard is called Feoffees Passage and the houses are numbered.

- No1 - William Thornton, a general labourer of 27 from Terrington, Yorks, with a wife and small child.
- No2 - John Leach is now 72 and is described in more detail as from Galway. His wife is only 50 but possibly one or other of them is unwell, as they have living with them a 64 year old widow housekeeper from Meath described as a boarder. However by now he has a daughter aged 8 who is a scholar.
- No3 - Mary Brennan from Sligo is now, at 55, living on her own with her thirteen year old schoolgirl daughter.
- No4 - a new family, the Jacksons, has arrived, he is a 27 year old tinner from York with a wife and a daughter of four who is already at school.
- No5 - Joseph Eland is still there but there has been a change in his fortunes, his wife Mary aged 51 in 1861, has died and now he is married to Harriet, aged 43, who works as a dressmaker. Two of his grown up children by Mary have left home, as has his apprentice nephew. Now living with him, is an older grown up son, a carver and gilder, his daughter in law and their six children aged from twelve to six. Two elder daughters of 16 and 14 are schoolteachers; the other children, all except the very youngest, are at school.

By this stage there is certain stability in the population, and although there are some newcomers, interestingly, they are not from Ireland. The children, when old enough, are at school; two are obviously bettering themselves by becoming teachers. All the children, including girls, worked as soon as possible.

By the 1881 Census there have been some changes:

- No1 - this is occupied by Bridget Tyrell, a 63 year old widow from Ireland living on her own. This always seems to have been the smallest of the houses.
- No2 - John Leach has died, but his widow, Mary, described as formerly a laundress, lives here still with her grown up daughter, now a dressmaker. She takes in lodgers; one is a 70 year old widow, an assistant and two young bricklayer's labourers. All three are from Ireland.

- No3 - the Brennans have gone, an out of work Irishwoman, aged 53 and her bachelor son, a Nursery Gardener, now occupies the house.
- No4 - The Jacksons are still here, he is now a Carriage Fitter and his wife a milliner, their children are at school but the baby of ten years ago has died.
- No5 - Joseph Eland is now venerable 79 and lives with his grown up granddaughters. The elder two works, one as a domestic, the other as a pupil teacher, the youngest is still at school. Teaching seems to have run in the family, although it looks as if the oldest girl has had to give up teaching to look after the family.

Once again, as in 1861, the support groups, both familial and geographical, are in evidence. However it would seem that economically the fortunes of the inhabitants have declined. The occupants of 1861 have naturally aged and are apparently being looked after by their families and supplementing their income by taking in lodgers. Apart from the Jacksons, a carriage fitter and a milliner, and the middle Eland daughter, a pupil teacher, all the other inhabitants are either too old to work or are labourers of one sort or another.

One interesting point is that both in the Parish of St Dennis Rate Books and in the York Electoral Registers for the period covered by these three censuses, there are listed a further three properties. These are described as limehouse, a tinner and a dyehouse. It is not clear whether these extra premises occupied that part of Feoffees Passage under the excavation or the extension now lost under the tramsheds. Certainly later on into this century the properties became workshops.

The research done so far reveals a glimpse into the lives of the families who lived on the plot of land behind the former Ellerkers shop. We can now see their fortunes change, not for the better, and how each family endeavoured to support and help its members of those from 'back home'. With so many people crammed into such a small area with few modern amenities life must have been hard, though some of the inhabitants lived to a good age. Further research now needs to be done in the subsequent census years to see how if at all

the character of the passage changed, but, at least, so far, we have view of the real people who lived, struggled to make a living and brought up their families on the excavation site.

*Ann Kirk*