

Life in the Courts of Ock Street at the turn of the 19th Century

Written by Jackie Hudson

At various locations along Ock Street and immediately behind the houses which lined the main street, there used to lie varying sized plots of land which each contained between 2 to 13 dwellings. The dwellings in these plots were almost all accessed through small alleyways which were no wider than the doors of the houses located on each side of the entrance. These "hidden" plots and their dwellings were known as "Courts".

Initially, there were eight Courts located on the north side of Ock Street, called Courts 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13 and 15 and twelve Courts sited along the south side of the Street, called Courts 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22 and 24.

The "Courts" - were recorded more or less as described above as far back as 1838 on the St Helen's map, but many of the buildings were known to have been in situ from the middle of the 17th century.

For the purpose of this article, I have used the 1901 Census as my source of information. With one exception, all of the Courts were inhabited at that time. Only Court 2 had disappeared - although three cottages located in Brewery Yard in 1901 are believed to be remnants of this court. The 19 remaining Courts housed just over 100 dwellings and around 380 residents. These residents were a large proportion of the town's labour force and a look at their occupations provides a good insight into their life styles and their importance to the economy of the town.

Most of the women were employed in the clothing industry, probably the Clarke, Sons & Company factory in West St Helen's Street. This factory employed many women and some would have worked on a piecework basis from home. The most common occupations were variously described as: button hole maker; machinist; needlewoman; seamstress; slop worker; smockfrocker; tailoress; trouser finisher; etc. A handful of ladies were recorded as being charwomen; laundresses or children's nurses.

There was a far greater variation in the occupation of the men. A great many of them were employed as agricultural labourers and the census includes men who were cowmen; carters; oslers; ploughmen; and shepherds. There were bricklayers, carpet weavers; coal merchant's labourers; fishmonger's labourers; fruiterer's porters; gardeners; marine store labourers; mason's labourers; sawyers; shoe makers; etc. The town's breweries also accounted for brewers draymen, maltsters and even a brewer's engine driver.

There were records of children as young as 13 being in full time employment at that time.

The vast majority of the properties in the Courts were small - most with just one main room downstairs and one bedroom upstairs, but that didn't stop a number of very large families being raised in them.

A close inspection of the census information shows that many families had to foster their children out to neighbours - perhaps to a widow or widower living close by - or another member of their family, such as a grandparent or aunt. What is more, there are a great many examples of family communities

dominating certain Courts, which would have made the logistics for sleeping large families much easier.

This would have been a very sensible tactic. There were many benefits of living close to your parents, siblings, children or other relatives. Without any form of welfare state, these extended families would have pulled together and helped each other out when times were bad – acting, for example, as banker, cook, laundress, nurse, child-minder, gardener, etc.

There is no doubt that times would have been hard. The dwellings had no inside power – no electricity or gas – and no running water. Cooking would have been on a coal or wood burning stove and for many this would have been the only source of heating in winter. However, on Sunday mornings, when the ovens of local bakers were not being used to bake bread, children would often be sent along the street to one of the bakeries, carrying roasting tins or casserole dishes, and for just a few pence, the Sunday lunch, (which they would have called "dinner") would have been cooked in the bakery ovens.

The dwellings would have had a main room downstairs, which would have been the kitchen-cum diner-cum living room and would most likely have been lit with a paraffin lamp. Candles would have been more commonly used in the bedroom. By this time, most of the Courts had water pipes and lavatories outside in the yard that were shared between the residents. There were also shared washing lines and residents were allocated a day when they could use them – which must have been a pain if it rained on your allocated day!

Residents in some of the larger courts had small garden patches which were often used to rear chicken and rabbits. Also those on the south side had the Ock Stream and Ock River nearby and this encouraged the rearing of ducks and geese. Being so close to the River Ock and Stream had huge disadvantages as well. This area flooded regularly in winters and many of the houses – especially those closest to the watercourse – became unsafe and officially recorded as empty. In fact, in dry times, residents would have put them to some use. Certainly there are records of some of them being used as washhouses and there is no doubt that others would have been used as over-flow accommodation.

For the most part, children would have had to sleep in the same room as their parents and in large families the children would have slept three or four in a bed "top to toe", i.e. with one facing in one direction and the next in the opposite direction.

Virtually all of the dwellings in the Courts had been deemed slums and had been demolished by the mid 1930's – a life changing time for the residents, who all had to be re-housed – but more of that in a future article.

Today, the only evidence that remain of the Courts are three of the entrances to the alleyways. The entrance to Court 1, located between Nos. 39 and 41, is not a typical entrance. It is an ornate archway which is probably twice the width of the majority of entrances, making it wide enough for a cart or carriage. The entrance to Court 16 can be seen between the door of the Chinese Take-Away, formerly Walter's Café and the small cottage at No 152. The entrance to Court 6 can be seen adjacent to the door of No 92.

Many of the Courts were known to have had alternative names over the years. Court 5 went by the name of Willow Place. Perhaps there were willow trees in evidence here. How much better it would have sounded to have your address as Willow Place, rather than just Court 5! Court 9 was called Pump Court in

recognition of the Carswell Fountain that was located on the wall adjacent to the entrance.

On the south side of the road, Bakehouse Cottages was the popular name for Court 10, one of the largest courts, located behind the bakery owned by Albert Miles in 1901 and more recently by Mr Holmes. Residents in Court 12 were no doubt proud to live in Ock View Cottages. Other names existed over time which recognised owners of the buildings themselves or adjacent businesses.

The Ock Street Heritage Group have tried hard to find photographs of the Courts to no avail. If you have one that we can add to our archives we would love to hear from you.