

Richard Potter

Born 1778.

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This life story was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from Wikipedia and from the website of the Cross Street Chapel, Manchester.

1. Early Life

Richard Potter (1778–1842) was a radical non-conformist Liberal Party MP for Wigan, and a founding member of the Little Circle which was key in gaining the Reform Act 1832.

The fifth and youngest son of John Potter (1728–1802), Richard Potter was born on 31 January 1778, in Tadcaster, Yorkshire and he died on 13 July 1842, in Penzance, Cornwall. His father, John Potter, was born on 7 December 1728 in Tadcaster and died there on 28 November 1802. He is buried in grave 40655 at St Mary the Virgin's Church in Tadcaster. He worked as a journeyman in London and on the death of his father, also John Potter born 1691, on 16 June 1758, and his mother, Anne, on 2 May 1762, he succeeded to their draper's shop in Tadcaster.

He took a farm at Wighill where he dealt in sheep and wool. On 23 December 1785 an indenture was made for the lease of Wingate Hill Farm between Sir Walter Vavasour and John Potter "The produce of it (Wingate Hill Farm) having been successively on the advance, his shop, too, having been conducted by his wife and children, all his concerns prospered, and enabled him to set two of his sons (William and Richard) up in Manchester at the beginning of this year (1802) with a capital possessed by few beginners (£ 14,000). And he died worth twelve thousand pounds, which, on the death of his spouse, he left equally to his sons and daughters."

William and Richard Potter opened a warehouse in Manchester at 5 Cannon Street, and a few months later they were joined by Thomas. The firm of William, Thomas and Richard Potter was established on 1 January 1803. William stood down from the business in 1806 when it became Thomas and Richard Potter.

2. Campaigning for Electoral Reform



Cross Street Chapel.

The Potter family were wealthy Unitarians who attended Cross Street Chapel, and were concerned with the welfare of the poor. Thomas and Richard Potter became concerned with unfair representation of the people in parliament in rapidly expanding industrialised towns such as Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester and Salford in the Victorian era and decided to form a group to promote change.

First Little Circle

In 1815 the first Little Circle was formed, around a core of members from the Cross Street Chapel who were influenced by the ideas of Jeremy Bentham and Joseph Priestley. The founding members included John Edward Taylor (cotton merchant), Joseph Brotherton (a non-conformist minister and pioneering vegetarian), Thomas Preston, and Thomas and Richard Potter. Meetings were held in a room at the back of the Potters' Cannon Street counting-house, generally known as the "plotting-parlour", and its core membership was Unitarian. Group member Archibald Prentice (later editor of the Manchester Times) called them the "Little Circle"; other members were John Shuttleworth (industrialist and municipal reformer); Absalom Watkin (parliamentary reformer and anti corn law campaigner); and William Cowdroy Jnr (editor of the Manchester Gazette).

After group members witnessed the Peterloo Massacre in 1819, and the closure of the liberal Manchester Observer by successive police prosecutions, it decided the time was right to advance its liberalist agenda. In 1820, Brotherton, Shuttleworth and Thomas Potter founded the Manchester Chamber of Commerce. In the following year, the group supported John Edward Taylor in founding the liberal newspaper the Manchester Guardian to which they all contributed. Published by law only once a week, Taylor continued to edit the newspaper until his death.

Second Little Circle

In 1821, 12 merchants met in Thomas and Richard Potter's "plotting parlour" in Cannon Street, and began a fund to support the Manchester Guardian Seven were Unitarians, including five from the Cross Street Chapel: Thomas and Richard Potter; Absalom Watkin; Mark Philips, John Shuttleworth, John Benjamin Smith, and brothers Edward and William Baxter (all cotton merchants); Fenton Atkinson (prominent Manchester attorney); William Harvey; John Edward Taylor.

The group supported social reform issues discreetly: Taylor survived a trial for libel; Shuttleworth organised the defence of plebeian reformers accused of administering an illegal oath. The group initially proposed that the seats of rotten boroughs convicted of gross electoral corruption should be transferred to industrial towns, citing and later targeting example boroughs including Penryn and East Retford. But when Parliament refused to take action, in 1831 Absalom Watkin was tasked with drawing up a petition asking the government to grant Manchester two Members of Parliament.

3. Political career



As a result of these and other efforts, Parliament passed the Reform Act 1832, and the group gave Manchester its first two post-reform MPs: Mark Philips and Charles Poulett Thomson. Richard moved into a political career while his brother Thomas continued to run the family business and became more involved in the business life of Manchester.

Richard Potter was elected MP for Wigan in 1832, he held the seat until 1839, replaced by the Radical party's William Ewart. He moved to Gloucester, where he

lost the contest to represent the Whig party in the constituency to Maurice Berkeley, 1st Baron FitzHardinge.

Whilst Richard applied himself almost exclusively to political movements and reform, becoming Member of Parliament for Wigan in 1830, his brother Thomas was left in more or less sole charge of the management of the warehouse. It developed into the largest concern of its type in Manchester.

4. Personal life

Potter married Mary Seddon, daughter of William Seddon, on 25 September 1814. They had five children, including a son Richard (1817–1892). Richard was a successful investor in the then booming railway system in Britain and abroad. He became chairman of the Great Western Railway and president of the Grand Trunk Railway, Canada; and a daughter Sarah Anne (1822–1846) who married Talavera Vernon Anson, an officer of the Royal Navy, and had two sons.

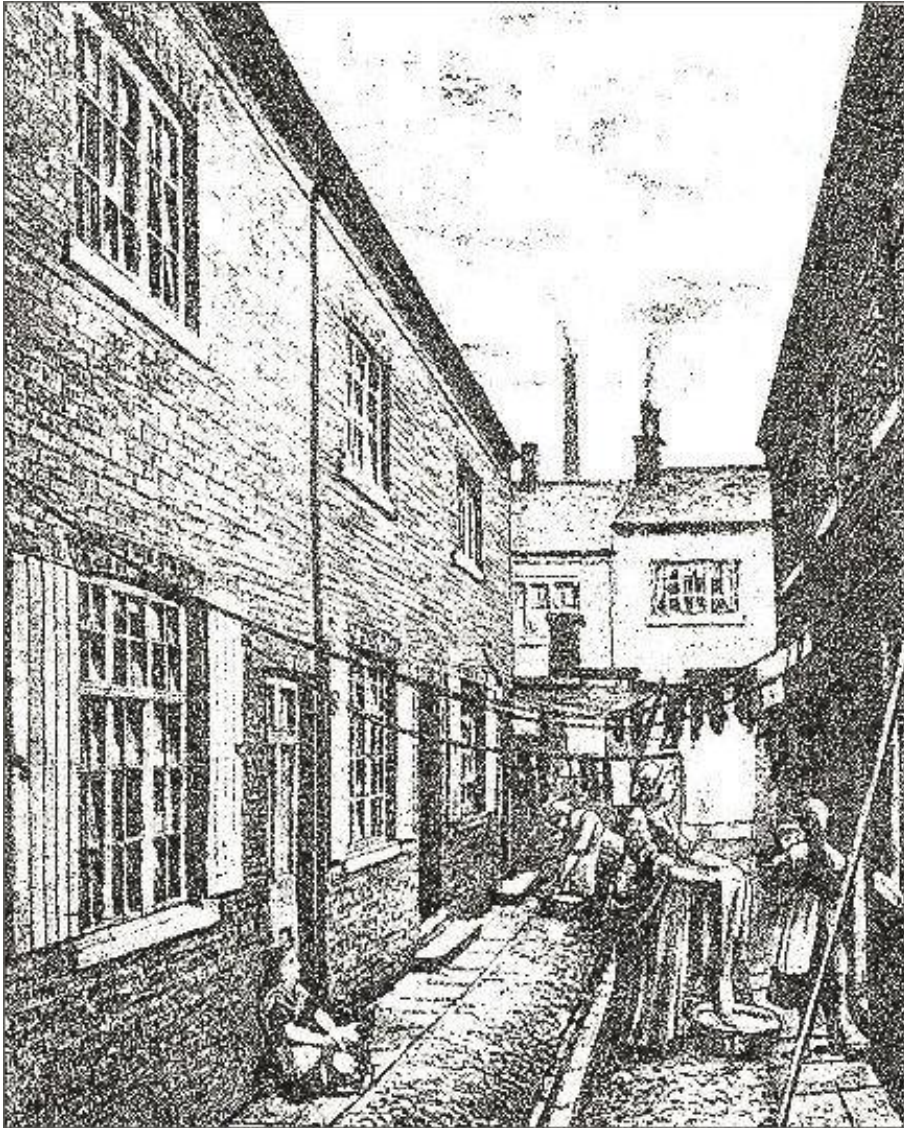
Richard Potter junior had nine daughters, most of whom had children, creating an extensive Potter clan. His youngest daughter Beatrice Webb (right) was the wife of reformer Sidney Webb, and was a formidable reformer in her own right. She was one of the founders of both the London School of Economics and the Fabian Society.



Richard Potter died in July 1842, aged 64 in Penzance, Cornwall.

5. Cross Street Chapel

As explained above, Richard Potter and many of his fellow Manchester reformers were members of the Unitarian Cross Street Chapel. The role of the Chapel in the Manchester reform movement is described in the following article, archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Cross Street Chapel website.



Cross Street Chapel's Social and Philanthropic Role in Victorian Manchester

by Geoffrey Head

In many parts of Britain increasing industrialisation during the 19th century produced social conditions requiring urgent response from private individuals, religious and secular organisations. Manchester, however, presented particular challenges and it is apposite to refresh our minds as to their nature.

It has often been remarked, and with some justice, that Manchester was the world's first industrial city, at any rate in the modern sense. The rise of the cotton industry in Manchester and its hinterland transformed a market town feudally subservient to the Lords of the Manor, the Mosleys, with a population of 22,500 in 1773 to 84,000 in 1801. With Salford, Manchester had become the second most populous town in Britain. Cotton spinning and weaving, with their related dyeing, bleaching and printing trades, brought with them an infrastructure requiring builders and engineering works together with financial and other ancillary services. The town developed with astonishing rapidity from a predominantly manufacturing base to a regional centre.

The growing town had an insatiable demand for labour. From English counties, from Ireland and the Scottish Highlands men and women found a way out of rural poverty. From the continent of Europe people, often possessing commercial and industrial skills, sought refuge from religious and civil strife. A price had to be paid: the rivers of the Irwell, Irk and Medlock grew foul. Friedrich Engels, the associate of Karl Marx, when living in Manchester in the 1840's, wrote memorably not only of the appalling living conditions in the courts leading from the main streets to the banks of the Irk, but he also commented on the peculiar conformation of the town which insulated the business people and entrepreneurs from the working people's quarters.

But not all the employers, merchants and members of the middle class were insensitive to the suffering and abuses of an unregulated capitalist economy. Reformers, often led by non-conformists, systematically challenged and tried to ameliorate the worst abuses. Foremost amongst these were Unitarians associated with Cross Street Chapel and other Unitarian congregations. Michael J. Turner drew attention to a band of these reformers responsible for successful agitation in the field of the press and in the campaigns for democratic local government, educational improvement, poor relief, commercial and parliamentary reform. This band was eleven in number, of which seven were Unitarians.

As the Nineteenth Century progressed reforms bore fruit. Manchester had become incorporated in 1838, with elevation to City status in 1853; civic services developed, the city's boundaries extended and by 1891 the population within these boundaries had exceeded 505,000. Most of this half million were the workers stretching, in a hierarchy, from the unskilled hands to the skilled operatives. They provided the sinews of the vast industrial and commercial complex.

Their financial situation and consequential living conditions not only varied considerably from family to family but fluctuated widely according to the state of the economy. At the beginning of the century a male cotton spinner was earning £1.15s per week and a fine spinner could command £2.2s 6d, whilst a textile labourer was earning around 15 shillings.

Women and children, the greater part of the labour force, received substantially less. But the cotton industry was notoriously susceptible to the economic cycle from which the high earners were not immune. At the bottom of the cycle wages could be cut by more than 50% and in prolonged periods of depression, such as the cotton

famine in the period of the American Civil War, “hands” were simply laid off with immigration from the rural areas and further afield still continuing.

Throughout the century, despite the gradual progress of social relief and the increased educational provision following the passage of the Forster Act of 1870, a weight of social and educational care fell on the churches.

In the first quarter of the 19th century Manchester had become the largest village in England, having neither corporate identity nor municipal underpinning to cope with the problems created by the enormous increase in industry and population. Its inadequate institutions were both oligarchical and corrupt. Reform was required across the board. In the circumstances of the time this could only be achieved by dedicated pressure from people with social conscience possessing the wealth and resources to tackle the vested interests head on. The Cross Street congregation was able to provide people able to satisfy these requirements.

Many manufacturers and merchants in the cotton and allied industries had become seriously rich. Often they came from humble origins. Typical was Sir William Fairbairn, son of a farmer in Roxburghshire, apprenticed as a millwright, moved to Manchester, established large works in Ancoats fabricating a wide variety of heavy industrial ironwork. A member of Cross Street for half a century, he also devoted himself to the cause of technical education, funding the Manchester Mechanics Institution and a chair of engineering at Owen’s College.

In Unitarianism, Fairbairn and others like him saw freedom of religious thought which matched their laissez faire business philosophy: they were naturally attracted to the liberal Cross Street congregation and it was from Cross Street that an informal group was formed to match social and political reform. As previously mentioned, Dr. Michael Turner in his book “Reform and Respectability” reckoned that the core group numbered about eleven in all, of which seven were Unitarians including five from Cross Street Chapel,

They met at the Cannon Street warehouse of Thomas and Richard Potter, wealthy cotton merchants and members of Cross Street. Other members of the Chapel involved included John Shuttleworth, Edward Baxter (both cotton merchants), John Edward Taylor (first Editor of the “Manchester Guardian”) and Fenton Atkinson (a prominent Manchester attorney). They controlled not only the “Guardian but even more radical papers).

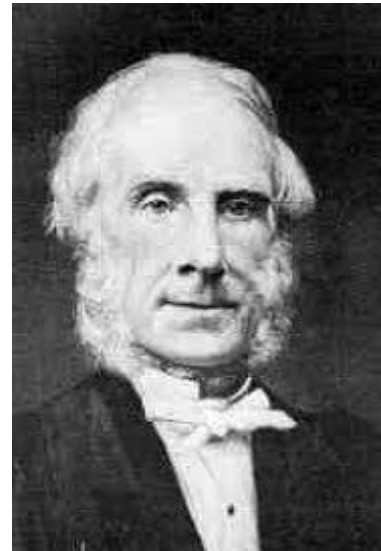
The endeavours of the group were assisted by the relaxed attitude of the dominant Cross Street Unitarians, never strongly sectarian, never allowing theological differences to prejudice co-operation with other Dissenters and reform movements. They used their wealth and respectability with discretion and judgment: yet they did not back off when their convictions took them to the very edge of the permissible and legal.

Taylor survived a trial for libel. Shuttleworth organised the defence of plebian reformers accused of administering an illegal oath. These were not the middle class people castigated by Engels as moving out to the suburbs and washing their hands of the central working class districts and the problems of poverty. By the middle of the century many of their objectives had been achieved. Manchester had become a

Borough, the first Reform Act of 1832 had extended Parliamentary representation, many social reforms had come to fruition. The agitators had become the new establishment, Thomas Potter became the first Mayor of Manchester on its incorporation, Richard Potter became MP for Wigan, Benjamin Smith became successively MP for Stirling and Stockport. Ten out of the first 28 Mayors of Manchester were associated with Cross Street Chapel.

The activities of such patrician and nouveau riche members of Cross Street were directed to providing the significant infrastructure needed to raise the living standards and social advance of the inhabitants of Manchester, including its underclass living in the most squalid conditions. They devoted themselves parliamentary reform, the widening of the local government franchise, to achieving borough and later city status and to greater accountability and transparency in the administration of the growing regional centre.

The prerequisite for such advance lay in free education for the masses and it is said that much of the text of Forster's 1870 Education Act was drafted by associates of Cross Street and the nearby congregation at Strangeways. Street improvements, an efficient gas authority, the provision of public parks and an effective police force were amongst their objectives. Benjamin Smith was Chairman of the Anti-Corn Law League, R.D. Darbishire, made a freeman of Manchester in 1899, was a founder of Manchester High School for Girls and gave the University its first Women's Hostel (Ashburne House in Victoria Park). The Manchester Free Library was founded on the initiative of Sir John Potter (three times Mayor of Manchester), four out of the thirteen original trustees of Owen's College were members of the Chapel, Samuel Kay, for 46 years Secretary of the Cross Street Trustees, was one of the chief promoters of the Portico Library, of which William Gaskell (right) served as Chairman for thirty-five years. The list is endless.



But it must be conceded that such people in the upper strata of Cross Street life for the most part acted in fields one stage removed from the intended beneficiaries of their endeavours. Their influence was exerted in Committee Rooms of the House of Commons, in the corridors of Manchester's grand neo-Gothic Town Hall, which they themselves had in a sense created. They worked through a network of Unitarian and other liberal social reformers and through intricate family relationships.

They could from time to time be found on public platforms, such as those of the Anti-Corn Law League. Sometimes such as Sir Thomas Potter (first Mayor of Manchester) and Mark Phillips (MP for Manchester) attracted attention in particular contexts, for example when these two luminaries waged a protracted law suit in Chancery for 15 years against the misuse of the endowments of Manchester Grammar School, originally designated for the education of the poor.

These people did of course give lavishly out of their wealth to charitable undertakings such as the Deaf and Dumb Institute and the Chorlton Row, Salford and Pendleton Dispensaries for the Sick, but the amounts were rarely publicised. A not untypical example was that of Dr. Henry Schunk, who gave £20,000 (in modern currency about £1.4m) as well as his own laboratory to the University.

Below this wealthy segment of the congregation were, however, to be found people of some substance – tradesmen and the more modestly paid professionals – who were closer to the recipients of philanthropy. Many of them were active supporters of the Manchester Domestic Missionary Society, a body substantially founded and thereafter supported by Chapel members. Like so many other Unitarian charities it was specifically non-denominational in its thrust.. Inevitably the Chair and Treasurer came from the Cross Street establishment (James Darbyshire and J. Aspinall Turner (MP for Manchester in two parliaments). Rev. William Gaskell was its Secretary for many years. But there was much hands-on as well as financial assistance from members of the congregation.

A full time Minister was appointed and the extent of the need can be gauged from one of his early reports: “It was in a cellar in a street off Oldham Road. As soon as I entered the door I could just discover something rolled up on the floor — the man stirring the fire brought to light one of the most distressing and revolting scenes I ever witnessed. I saw a woman lying on a few bits of dirty sacking on the bare flags, herself almost in a state of nudity, and who had been delivered of a child only three or four hours. The infant was living, and all but naked, as was also another little child that crept out from beneath the slender covering”. Needless to say the Minister went home and with his wife was soon on the spot with timely help.

Over the years premises were built in Miles Platting, Rochdale Road, Hulme and Oldham Road, financed by the Trustees and members of the Chapel. Day Schools as well as Sunday Schools were founded. In times of depression, such as the so-called “Hungry Forties”, shoes, clogs, clothing, bedding and food were distributed. Soup tickets were given away. In the later 1840s there were typhus and cholera epidemics with a 10% death rate – one of the Trustees provided a public wash house and baths. Evening classes were given in the 3Rs, sewing and drawing.

By the time of the American Civil War and, the resultant Cotton Famine we read of women emerging not only as workers but as administrators: Mrs. R.D. Darbyshire as Treasurer raised for a sewing school for factory girls – 963 women attended of which 199 could read and write, 319 were able to read but not to write, while 445 nearly half of the whole could neither read nor write. New premises were built in the 1860s, for which the two Cross Street Ministers, Wm. Gaskell and S.A Steinthal, raised £3,328 (nearly £¼m in modern currency. By 1890 Mrs. Rayner Wood, wife of a Cross Street grandee, was organising clubs and activities to bridge the gap between the middle and working classes. At the very end of the Victorian era in 1900, the Committee was initiating a Police-aided Association for clothing destitute children.

The Domestic Mission Society activity was initiated, financially supported and fostered primarily from Cross Street, although over the years men and women from other Unitarian congregations increasingly played their part. There was another field of endeavour which more specifically demonstrated an underlying Unitarian conviction that poverty could in the final analysis be best alleviated by the spread of universal education. The congregation had at Cross Street since 1734 run so called “charity schools” for the lowest class of the people. The teaching of the 3Rs was not confined to Protestant Dissenters and the children, both girls and boys, were clothed out of chapel funds.

Such charity schools were not generally popular with industrialists in an age when child labour was significantly exploited. The other central Manchester congregation at Mosley Street (an offshoot of Cross Street) had similar provision and, as the Victorian era dawned, a custom built school was erected in Lower Mosley Street on a site where G-Mex now occupies the buildings of the former Central Railway Station. The location was well chosen, near to the factories and mills bordering the polluted River Medlock and the area which was to become notorious as one of the most deprived in the industrial conurbation – “Little Ireland” so memorably described by Friedrich Engels.

He wrote: “In a rather deep hole, in a curve of the Medlock and surrounded on all four sides by tall factories and high embankments, covered with buildings stand two groups of about 300 cottages, built chiefly back to back, in which live about 4000 human beings, most of them Irish. The cottages are old, dirty, and of the smallest sort, the streets uneven, fallen into ruts and in part without drains or pavements: masses of refuse, offal and sickening filth lie among standing pools in all directions; the atmosphere is poisoned by the effluvia from these and laden and darkened by the smoke of a dozen factory chimneys”. And so on. We get the picture.

Shortly after their foundation the Schools had to cope with the “Hungry Forties”. The cyclical nature of the cotton industry brought years of relative comfort for the worker, alternating with periods of deprivation, not only for the cellar dwellers of Little Ireland but for those laid off from skilled and reasonably settled work. The Gaskells and members of their flock gave what they could from their own kitchens and worked through the District Provident Society in providing relief through the distribution of food, soup tickets and clothing

As the Victorian era progressed, so did the Schools. In 1862/3 another period of deprivation was ushered in by the “Cotton Famine” resulting from the American Civil War and the cessation of the import of raw cotton for the mills. Manchester itself was becoming a commercial and regional centre, rather than a town relying on manufacturing, and the impact of the Famine was rather less than in the smaller Lancashire towns committed to a single staple industry.

But there were still gargantuan mills in Ancoats and along the Medlock valley. Fever and starvation were again rife and Elizabeth Gaskell had to decline her help towards some external charities so that she could concentrate on the more immediate need of the enterprises fostered by the Chapel and its associated Schools in traditional relief through the provision of food, soup kitchens and other

palliatives. The wealthier members of the congregation gave financial support, but there was much practical assistance from the less affluent members.

Increasingly the products of the schools, who had been enabled to find release from the poverty of their environment, identified with the Chapel and became a significant element in its evening congregation, from which payment of pew rents had been removed. Such recruits played significant roles in visiting the sick and needy in the deprived areas. The city west of Piccadilly and Market Street was split up into defined areas. The volunteers nearly all lived within a mile of Cross Street. Assistance, including monetary grants, were awarded when destitution was found.

The visiting was not for the faint-hearted. In the 1860s a Mrs. Allen was allocated an area including the courts, alleys and cellars at the Knott Mill end of Deansgate, including Cupid's Alley, now renamed Atkinson Street and adjacent to the current mammoth Spinningfields commercial development. Cupid's Alley was the prostitutes' quarter, the red light district.

Like Elizabeth Gaskell (right) in her novels, "Mary Barton" and "Ruth", the congregation did not close its eyes to such social problems, despite the qualms of a minority of its more sensitive members. One recalls the accounts in letters to Charles Dickens of her visiting New Bailey Prison and her efforts to ensure that a seduced 16 year old did not end up on the streets or, what amounted to the same thing, shipped out to Australia in the unsavoury conditions of the emigrant vessels.



The work of the Schools covered a broad spectrum. Both day and night classes had an emphasis on vocational teaching. Money was raised by the Cross Street Ministers for upgrading facilities including the provision of laboratories. Elizabeth Gaskell taught in the girls' Sunday School, held classes at her home in Plymouth Grove and visited them in their own dwellings. Two of her daughters taught in the Sunday School. There were cultural pursuits for the pupils and picnics in the grounds of the residences of Cross Street grandees.

There were of course changes from time to time. The Day Schools were transferred to the local School Board after the 1870 Education Act introduced universal education. There was an offshoot in Hulme in 1874 with two Gaskell daughters and other Chapel representatives on its Committee. In 1898, as the Victorian era drew to its close, the Railway Company wanted to buy the School's site in order to build a grand hotel – the present day Midland Hotel. The Chapel could have applied the proceeds of sale for other purposes, but instead it chose to erect a new and impressive school building a short distance away in Lower Mosley Street. The work was to continue in various guises until it was acquired by Manchester Education Committee and became a College of Adult Education some half a century later.

Mention has been made of the volunteers who visited the poor in a swathe of the city, but these people were of course not medically qualified. Although the whole of

the area could not be covered by professionals, the congregation financed a nurse, supervised by one of its lady members, to visit poor families near the town centre, particularly in the area of wretched housing in Little Ireland and along the Medlock adjacent to the Schools. This nurse in effect performed functions which many years later were to be provided by District Nurses and Health Visitors.

William Gaskell avoided political involvement, but he was dedicated to the alleviation of health hazards resulting from poor housing and inadequate sanitation. As an inveterate committee person he worked through the Manchester & Salford Sanitary Association and lectured on health matters. In this activity he was closely associated with the Cross Street establishment - the Potters, the Philips's and the rest. Gaskells in varying degrees of relationship had been prominent in Cross Street Chapel since its foundation in 1694.

Many of them had thrived during the early years of the Industrial Revolution. Some has acquired landed estates or entered Parliament. As a clan, they were positioned either side of the tenuous dividing line between affluent trade and landed gentry. William Gaskell's immediate family lived and worked in Warrington and was engaged in the lucrative manufacture of sail cloth required by the Navy. He was not without family financial resources.

Within that family there was a common thread of commitment to the dissenting tradition with emphasis on the virtues of education. With Elizabeth's rise as a successful and well-rewarded writer the Gaskells were well positioned to bring together disparate strands within the congregation. Undeniably there was potential conflict. On the one hand there was the wealthy element, liberally minded, living exemplary family lives in their suburban retreats, dissenters by temperament, but in their business lives governed by a laissez faire economic philosophy, which contributed to the deplorable living condition of many of their workpeople. On the other hand there was that segment of their congregation of more modest financial means and nearer to the circumstances of their poorer neighbours.

At the beginning of Victoria's long reign, the wealthy resided in central Manchester or had moved to nearby suburbs – residence which did not preclude regular attendance at services and contact with their fellow Chapel members. They were typically concerned with creating an infrastructure conducive to the progress of social reform. They had to cope with a dichotomy between their liberal beliefs and their practices as employers in a cut throat capitalist economy. John Seed in 1982 drew attention to the complaints of Mr. Buckland, the Manchester Domestic Missioner, in 1840 about the ignorance of the middle class Of the sufferings of the underclass and of their inability to go beyond the generality of their liberal attitudes.

A few years later Elizabeth Gaskell was to complain about those who were unwilling to get involved in any kind of social work and salved their consciences with money instead, people who in her words “steadily refuse Mr. Gaskell's entreaties to give their time ... but will give him or me tens and hundreds that won't do half the good that individual intercourse and earnest conscientious thought would do”.

These strictures were of course particularly applicable to those seriously rich Cross Street worthies who migrated beyond the suburbs to more rural surroundings and were less able to attend regular worship and be exposed to regular injunctions from the pulpit .Such people over time were to be replaced by others of more modest means, people who had often escaped from poverty to more comfortable stations in life through the support of the Domestic Mission, the Lower Mosley Street Schools or the educational opportunities provided by William Gaskell and others in the Working Men's Colleges and Mechanics Institutes and the higher institutions sponsored by the Chapel.

The work of the Gaskells and William's colleagues in the Cross Street ministry (John Gooch Robberds until 1854 and later Samuel Steinthal) enabled the philanthropic and social outreach of the Chapel to be maintained in constantly changing social conditions. Queen Victoria died in 1901 and there began the long march to extensive involvement by the State in such fields. But all that belongs to a new century and is another story.
