

Please cite the Published Version

Warwick, Tosh (2010) Middlesbrough's Steel Magnates and the Guild of Help. *Cleveland History*, 98. pp. 24-35. ISSN 0966-0704

Publisher: Cleveland & Teesside Local History Society

Version: Accepted Version

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/622491/>

Additional Information: This article is published in *Cleveland History* the Bulletin of the Cleveland & Teesside Local History Society.

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CLEVELAND HISTORY
THE BULLETIN OF
THE CLEVELAND & TEESSIDE
LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Issue 98
2010

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ISSN 0966-0704

MIDDLESBROUGH'S STEEL MAGNATES AND THE GUILD OF HELP*

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In 1963, Asa Briggs, in his seminal *Victorian Cities*, declared that Middlesbrough's late nineteenth century industrialists' influence on the town had shifted markedly from its mid nineteenth century strong point to a significantly reduced role as the century drew to a close. The end of the Victorian period heralded 'signs that the will to control of the ironmasters was being blunted as they followed the pattern of other English businessmen and chose to live in the country rather than in the town'.¹ Moreover, the offspring of this generation of industrialists and the managers that succeeded them did not share 'the feelings of the older generation about the links which bound them to the town'.²

In identifying this 'withdrawal' from involvement in the life of the town during the late nineteenth century, Briggs' chapter on the 'new community' of Middlesbrough can be seen to have placed the town at the forefront of debates surrounding this notion of elite 'withdrawal' and the perceived 'decline' in their participation in the business, economic, social, cultural and philanthropic arenas. It is therefore surprising that the foundations laid by this work have not been explored in more depth than has been the case to date. The work that has followed has been somewhat critical of the town's ironmasters and steel magnates.³ Hadfield has noted that in spite of the wealth the town's works generated, 'the ironmasters appear to have been unable or unwilling to channel much of it into philanthropic works'.⁴ Stubley too notes the industrialists' 'exaggerated respect for the laws of economics'.⁵ Garrard, Gunn, Rubinstein and Wiener too have at different points stressed the decreased practical and visible participation in the urban environment by elites in other cities.⁶ Arguing ideologies shifted from an (apparent) concern for the locale to a detrimental national facing lifestyle, the second and third generations are seen as having become incorporated into a 'national elite', a grouping reinforced during the interwar period through education and cultural interaction.⁷

Conversely, historians such as Rick Trainor have moved to play down the extent of 'decline' stemming from 'withdrawal'.⁸ Instead, altered rather than severed civic and business ties are observed, the focus turning to involvement in the wider sphere of 'governance' rather than just activities centred on the town council and Parliament, a notion supported by the recent works edited by Morris and Trainor, Daunton, Doyle, Kidd and Nicholls.⁹

It is the intention of this article to argue 'withdrawal' by Middlesbrough's industrial elite has been overemphasised and that rather than representing a decline in engagement, the period saw a reconfiguration of involvement in the town that helped counter the decline in political representation. By means of heightened involvement in philanthropic activities in the 'Ironopolis' during the early twentieth century, it will be argued the industrial elite maintained an active role despite other groups emerging in positions of power in the town. Under particular focus will be the Middlesbrough Guild of Help and the involvement of the Dorman and Bell families – the owners of the firm that evolved into one of the major steel manufacturers in the world, Dorman Long.¹⁰

The Wider Context

The nineteenth century witnessed rapid growth in Middlesbrough. At the beginning of the century, the agrarian settlement on the site of Middlesbrough consisted of only 4 houses and 25 people, a figure that only increased to 150 inhabitants by 1831. The population reached 5,463 by 1841 owing to the development of the coal export industry in Middlesbrough. However, it was the development of iron works by Henry Bolckow and John Vaughan in the form of Bolckow Vaughan in 1850 that was to prompt a dramatic increase in population. The population reached 18,892 a decade later, nearly 40,000 by 1871, and exceeded 55,000 by 1881 as more and more iron producers flooded into the area including Sir Bernhard Samuelson's, Cochrane's, Bell Brothers' and Dorman Long, bringing with them the prospect of employment.¹¹

With such rapid population expansion, the initial grid-plan town, centred on a market place and church and consisting of 125 plots

north of the railway line, quickly proved inadequate. The town became densely populated with haphazardly constructed cottages crammed in between houses, yards, privies and in close proximity to an increasing number of beer houses. In turn, numerous social problems ensued amongst the migrant population that had flocked to Middlesbrough seeking work in the town's heavy industries. Overcrowding, poor quality housing, poor sanitary and hygiene standards, social disorder and a lack of regulated social and leisure facilities were just some of the problems the 'infant Hercules' encountered. Moreover, fluctuating employment levels, owing to peaks and troughs in the iron, steel and related industries, brought further hardship. In fact, unemployment on occasion exceeded twice the national average, reaching 40% in 1926 and again exceeding 40% in the early 1930s following a brief period of recovery in the late 1920s.¹²

It is important not to lose a sense of perspective when discussing the difficulties late nineteenth century Middlesbrough faced – all industrialised areas, especially relatively new ones, faced at least some of if not all of the above-listed challenges, with responses to the issues varying from town to town and coming from a number of different sources including the Town Council, Board of Guardians, Medical Officer of Health, School Boards and voluntary bodies. It is on the voluntary bodies and the role played by Middlesbrough's steel magnates (and their companies) in supporting such movements that attention will now turn.

Company Support

Throughout the later nineteenth and early twentieth century the various iron and steel companies contributed significantly to funding hospitals, schools, chapels, voluntary organisations and relief funds in the town. The town's early major firms – Bolckow Vaughan, Bell Brothers', Cochrane's and Sir Bernhard Samuelson's, later to be joined by Dorman Long - were consistently the biggest financial supporters of appeals from hospitals (Cochranes contributing the cost of entire new wing), distress relief funds and, along with Carnegie, the major benefactors of the town's library.

Through exploration of the various iron and steel companies' minute books, newly accessible at Teesside Archives,¹³ the role key figures in the town's industrial elite played in charitable decision making, details of philanthropic causes, both supported and those pleas for support refused as well as occasional insights into the mechanics of the giving process, can all be found. Furthermore, cross-referencing of subscriptions made by different firms can also provide a tentative indication not only of support for particular appeals by certain manufacturers, but also motives for philanthropic support.

In 1906, Lady Florence Bell, wife of the industrialist Sir Hugh Bell, issued an appeal to the town's iron and steel manufacturers 'for aid in the promotion of a Winter Garden for the use of the Working men of Middlesbrough'.¹⁴ Whilst Lady Bell duly received support from her husband's company Bell Brothers, financial commitment from the rival firm Bolckow Vaughan was not initially forthcoming, the minutes of August 1906 recording a reluctance to donate to Bell's initiative, Bolckow Vaughan's board deeming it 'unnecessary to make a grant for this purpose'.¹⁵ It would be over a year, in October 1907, that the issue would be raised again, it been 'resolved to contribute the sum of Twenty pounds per annum over a period of three years'.¹⁶ In the 1920s, similar company familial support can be found in the form of Dorman Long providing financial support to the Lilian Dorman's Girls' Club.

Another example from company minute books, this time those of Dorman Long, further highlights the influence of the Dormans and Bells in philanthropic decision making, the minutes recording 'the question of contributing to certain charitable institutions was considered and it was resolved that Mr Maurice Bell and Mr Arthur Dorman should settle as to future subscriptions'.¹⁷ The two men in question were the sons of the two figures at the head of the company, the industrialists Sir Arthur Dorman and the aforementioned Sir Hugh Bell.

The contribution of the companies owned by, or presenting an economic interest to, the industrial elite is without question an important factor in gauging the philanthropic zeal of

Middlesbrough's elite and is worthy of a more detailed study which due to limitations of space I do not intend to pursue here. Instead, I will focus on elite individual and familial involvement with the Guild of Help – participation that represented investment of their own time, money and resources.

Middlesbrough Guild of Help¹⁸

The Guild of Help movement was inaugurated in Bradford in 1904 in an attempt to address the problem of poverty in Edwardian Britain. Central to the Guild's ideology was 'personal service to individuals and families in need' through the 'development of responsible and professional social work... [Based upon] cooperation between agencies'.¹⁹ The Guild of Help movement quickly expanded, from 7 Guilds in 1905 to 61 at the beginning of 1910 (one of which was the Middlesbrough Guild of Help), reaching 70 the following year consisting of some 8,000 members.²⁰

The first meeting of the Middlesbrough Guild of Help was held on March 8, 1909 at the town's Council Chamber. Set up 'in response to a joint request from the Middlesbrough Church Council and certain leading townspeople', the people of the town felt the need for such an organisation 'adapted to the special local conditions of Middlesbrough' during this time of distress in the town.²¹

Whilst it is difficult to gauge the full social and occupational composition of the Guild, with the helpers and some donors mostly anonymous in the records, we are able to identify financial support and affiliation of a number of the town's major industrialists through scrutiny of the minutes and subscriptions lists.²²

The financial support of the industrialists made up a considerable percentage of the individual contributions made up to the Guild. The individual financial support of the Bell family was a consistent source of income for the Guild. Sir Hugh Bell and Lady Bell donated £20 per annum to the Administration Fund from the very outset,²³ whilst Mrs Charles Lowthian Bell, wife of their son, later joined the ranks of Bell subscribers in 1913.²⁴ Similarly, the Dorman family, albeit at a much later date than the Bells, too provided a smaller but never the less reliable a reliable source of

income.²⁵ Further individual industrialists followed suit. Francis Samuelson, heir to Sir Bernhard Samuelson's and an active member of numerous other philanthropic bodies in the town, made a £10 subscription to the Benevolent Fund, whilst Mr Erasmus Darwin, Secretary for Bolckow Vaughan and grandson of Charles Darwin, also made an individual donation of £5 to each fund.²⁶ Furthermore, both lent their recognisable names and skills acquired in business to the Guild of Help, Samuelson serving on the Guild's Executive Council in February 1911 with Darwin Honorary Treasurer and a member of the Finance Committee from February 1911 until his death during the First World War.²⁷

Indeed, from the outset of its activities, members of the town's industrial elite were active in the Guild in various capacities, with the Bell and Dorman families having at least some form of representation during the entire duration of this study. As with other Guilds of Help across the country, the position of Guild President was occupied by the Mayor, whilst Vice-Presidents, District Heads and Officers of the Guild included key figures and former heads of other bodies in the town. Similarly the officers and members of the Guild's Executive Council consisted of local leaders and 'prominent citizens of the community',²⁸ including the Mayoress, Ex-Mayor and Mayor, Chairman of the Board of Guardians, Chairman of the Local Education Authority and the Lord Lieutenant of the North Riding of Yorkshire – for this period Sir Hugh Bell.²⁹ Furthermore, as with other Guilds, the Middlesbrough Guild membership featured the wives and daughters of key figures in the community.³⁰ In addition to Lady Bell, this included Lady Dorman and her daughter Lilian Dorman. However, the ways in which members of the two families engaged with the Guild was somewhat varied.

Turning attention to the Bell family, Sir Hugh Bell and Lady Bell were constantly represented in the Guild by their positions as Vice-Presidents (and in the case of Sir Hugh Bell, President, owing to his brief spell as Mayor of Middlesbrough following Sadler's death). However, the Guild's annual reports and minute books indicate their direct involvement in the personal, day-to-day running of the Middlesbrough Guild of Help was virtually non-existent. The surviving minute books of the Middlesbrough Guild of Help reveal

that Sir Hugh and Lady Bell rarely attended meetings of the Guild. In fact, between 1909-1919 Sir Hugh Bell attending only one meeting - a Special Public Meeting organised in order for the Archbishop of York to address the Guild during his visit to the town. Nevertheless, the significance of Hugh Bell's involvement is beyond question, the Guild expressing their thanks in writing for his attendance.³¹ The significance of Sir Hugh Bell's honorific role is further reinforced in the newspaper coverage that charted the event in the local press, with the speeches of Sir Hugh Bell and Archbishop of York receiving considerable coverage in the *North Eastern Daily Gazette*.³²

In stark contrast, the Dorman family's representation on the Guild was much more direct, the involvement of Lilian Dorman especially more personal, hands-on, frequent and diverse than that of Sir Hugh and Lady Bell combined. The daughter of Sir Arthur J. Dorman, Lilian Dorman very much fitted in with the typical characteristics of women involved in philanthropic activity elsewhere; she was a daughter of one of the town's leading lights, unmarried and her involvement with the Guild can be seen to stem from family involvement in its activities,³³ an engagement in philanthropy continued in the form of her own philanthropic enterprise.³⁴ Lilian Dorman was a member of the Executive Committee within a year of the Guild commencing activity in the town, having been nominated in May 1910 to replace her outgoing brother.³⁵ Dorman was also a member of the Ladies' Committee and served the Guild at regional level as the Guild's nominated representative at the Northern Federation of Guilds Conference (covering the Jarrow, Newcastle, Sunderland and Middlesbrough Guilds). She was also a regular attendee at the meetings of the Executive Council.³⁶ In addition, Miss Dorman, as with other members of her family, regularly contributed financially to the running of the Guild; Sir Arthur Dorman, Lady Dorman and their son Charles Dorman (who like his sister was on the Executive Committee prior to her succeeding him in this role) all regularly appearing on Subscription Lists of the Guild.³⁷

In order to gauge how significant this philanthropic involvement was and the potential motives for it, it is useful to here briefly outline the

vast array of influence the Guild exercised during this period. In its first ten years the Guild assisted the Medical Officer of Health by carrying out activities visits to the sick,³⁸ promoted 'the welfare of infants and children of school age in close co-operation with the Public Health Authority and the Education Committee',³⁹ assisted the Town Clerk with the Tuberculosis Exhibition in Middlesbrough,⁴⁰ and hosted events such as the meeting of the Association for Permanent Care of the Feeble-minded and National Health Week.⁴¹ More tellingly, labour and employment featured prominently in the Guild's psyche, the Guild meeting to consider the relationship between chronic poverty and casual labour, holding meetings with the Mayor as to how to deal with the distress, and having representatives on the Advisory Committee for Juvenile Employment.⁴² Concern for the younger members of the town's populace did not stop there, the Guild also visiting families whose children received dinner tickets from the Education Committee.⁴³

As the town's major employers, it is unsurprising that Middlesbrough's industrial elite sought to be involved with an organisation concerned with the consequences of industry, unemployment and ensuing distress, borne out in the key role they played at times of distress in the iron, steel and related industries. The Guild's access to power and confidential information from figures of authority, for instance the aforementioned case of the Mayor confiding in the Guild as to the approach the town council would adopt in response to the 1912 Coal Strike, can be seen, perhaps cynically, as a key motive for the town's major employers to engage with the Guild.⁴⁴ In short, employer involvement in the Guild of Help afforded influence in many spheres in which their company roles did not (or at least only partially did), areas such as education, public health, destitution, housing, law and order and mental health provision. Involvement with the Guild of Help was therefore undoubtedly beneficial to its subscribers, presidents, vice-presidents and district heads.

It should also be remembered that charitable gifts by employers during this period were well publicised.⁴⁵ We are only able to speculate as to the extent to which the subscribers and members participated in the Guild to receive public recognition, to further their

own careers or to reinforce their own social standing.⁴⁶ However, the sources used in this article, ranging from the iron and steel companies' minute books to citations from the local newspaper, are testament to the range of ephemera that recorded and reported the good folk who responded to calls for support by bodies such as the Guild of Help. As another historian of Middlesbrough has argued elsewhere, the aforementioned *Daily Gazette's* coverage of Sir Hugh Bell and the Archbishop Cosmo Lang addressing the Guild, 'Sir Hugh Bell's Tribute to the Guild of Help', served as a 'public pat on the back'.⁴⁷ Certainly, the inclusion of their names in newspapers, read by their employees, as men and women assisting movements attempting to improve the lives of the less well off, can have done little to damage their standing in the community. Similarly, their names appearing alongside other prominent figures in the various circulated annual reports and subscription lists can only have helped establish and reaffirm their status amongst their peers.

Conclusion

Whilst this brief survey of industrialist involvement with the Middlesbrough Guild of Help represents just one example of steel magnate philanthropic engagement, it is hoped that this article has illustrated the continued involvement of some of the town's key industrialists (and their families) during this period of supposed 'withdrawal', especially the much maligned second and third generation who not only joined their parents in supporting the Guild of Help financially, but also undertook positions within the Guild requiring varying levels of commitment, ranging from occasional appearances by these captains of industry that helped legitimise and heighten the profile of the Guild, to regular attendance at meetings and hands-on involvement.

Lastly, whilst not the main concern of this piece, it is hoped that some of the motives for involvement by the likes of the Bells and Dormans have been touched upon, be it in accessing power beyond the framework of their companies, self promotion, or genuine zeal to improve the lot of the working classes, as is suggested by Lady Bell's setting up of the town's Winter Gardens and Lilian Dorman's running of a Girls' Club.

References and Notes.

*This article is drawn from an earlier version presented at the Voluntary Action History Conference, University of Kent 2010, and is based upon work from my ongoing AHRC funded research 'Middlesbrough's Steel Magnates: Culture, Politics and Participation, 1880-1934'. I am grateful to the staff of Teesside Archives, Middlesbrough Reference Library and the University of Huddersfield for assistance offered in carrying out research for this article.

¹ A. Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (London: 1963), pp256-258.

² Briggs, p258.

³ D. Hadfield. 'Political and Social Attitudes in Middlesbrough 1853-1889 with especial reference to the role of the Middlesbrough ironmasters', unpublished PhD thesis, Teesside Polytechnic, 1981; P. Stubley. 'The Churches and the Iron and Steel Industry in Middlesbrough, 1890-1914', unpublished M.A. Thesis, Durham University, 1979.

⁴ Hadfield, 'Political and Social Attitudes', p358.

⁵ Stubley, 'The Churches and the Iron and Steel Industry', p42 cited in J.J. Turner, 'The People's Winter Gardens, Middlesbrough', *Cleveland History*, No. 46, p31

⁶ J. Garrard, 'Urban Elites, 1850-1914: The Rule and Decline of a New Squirearchy?' *Albion*, Vol. 27, No 4, Winter 1995; S. Gunn, *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class: Ritual and Authority in the English Industrial City, 1840-1914* (Manchester: 2007); W.B. Rubinstein, 'Britain's Elites in the Interwar Period, 1918-39', in A. Kidd and D. Nicholls, *The Making of the British Middle Class? Studies of Regional and Cultural Diversity Since the Eighteenth Century* (Stroud: 1998), p186-202; M.J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit* (London: 1981). B. Doyle, 'The structure of elite power in the early twentieth-century city' in M. Daunton, *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, Volume III*.

⁷ W.B. Rubinstein, 'Britain's Elites in the Interwar Period, 1918-1939', in A. Kidd and D. Nicholls, *The Making of the British Middle Class?* p188, p194.

⁸ R. Trainor 'The "Decline" of British Urban Governance: A Reassessment', in R.J. Morris and R. Trainor (eds.), *Urban Governance: Britain and Beyond Since 1750* (Ashgate: 2000).

⁹ R. Trainor and R.J Morris (eds.), *Urban Governance*; M. Daunton, *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, Volume III 1840-1950* (Cambridge: 2000); B. M Doyle (ed.), *Politics in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Regional Perspectives* (Newcastle: 2007); A. Kidd and D. Nicholls, *The Making of the British Middle Class?* See also R. Colls and R. Rodger (eds.), *Cities of Ideas: Civil Society and Urban Governance in Britain 1800-2000* (Aldershot: 2004).

¹⁰ In the first thirty years of the twentieth century Dorman Long had come to own Bell Brothers and Bolckow Vaughan, the two forerunners in the town's iron industry.

¹¹ W. Lillie, *The History of Middlesbrough: An Illustration of the Evolution of English Industry* (Middlesbrough: 1968), pp473-474.

¹² K. Nicholas, *The Social Effects of Unemployment on Teesside, 1919-1939* (Manchester: 1986), p25.

¹³ For further details see <http://www.britishsteelcollection.org.uk>

¹⁴ Minute Book, Directors No.13 1904-1908', Bolckow Vaughan Co Ltd, 13/3/13 TA, p224.

¹⁵ Minute Book, Directors No.13 1904-1908', Bolckow Vaughan Co Ltd, 13/3/13 TA, p224.

¹⁶ Minute Book, Directors No.13 1904-1908', Bolckow Vaughan Co Ltd, 13/3/13 TA, p324.

¹⁷ Minute Book, Directors No.2 1913-1923', Bell Brothers Ltd, 16/2/3, TA, p90.

¹⁸ For a more complete discussion of the Guild of Help movement see K. Laybourn, 'The Guild of Help and the changing face of Edwardian philanthropy', *Urban History*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (April 1993); K. Laybourn, *The Guild of Help and the Changing Face of Edwardian*

Philanthropy: The Guild of Help, Voluntary Work and the State, 1904-1919 (Lampeter: 1994); K. Laybourn (ed.) *Social Conditions, Status and Community, 1860-c.1920* (Stroud: 1997) esp. chapters 1-3.

¹⁹ Laybourn, 'The Guild of Help', *Urban History*, p44; M.J. Moore, 'Social Work and Social Welfare: The Organization of Philanthropic Resources in Britain, 1900-1914', *The Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 6, No.2 (Spring 1977), p86.

²⁰ Laybourn, 'Introduction', in Laybourn (ed.), 'Social Conditions', p12.

²¹ 'Annual Report 1909-10, Middlesbrough Guild of Help', p7.

²² Laybourn, *Guild of Help*, p50.

²³ 'Annual Report 1909-10, Middlesbrough Guild of Help', p18-20.

²⁴ 'Annual Report 1912-13, Middlesbrough Guild of Help', p16-17

²⁵ Miss Dorman was the first individual Dorman subscriber, in 1917 donating £2.2.0, a familial involvement that expanded the following year by Mr Charles Dorman's £5 subscription to the Administration Fund.

²⁶ Middlesbrough Guild of Help Minute Book 1910-1937 (MGOH M.B) .

²⁷ MGOH M.B 1910-1937, p23 (1911).

²⁸ Laybourn, 'The Guild of Help', *UH*, p54.

²⁹ MGOH M.B 1910-1937, p2 (1910), p31 (1911). This is consistent with Guilds of help elsewhere such as those at Bolton, Bradford and Halifax.

³⁰ Laybourn, *Guild of Help*, p51.

³¹ MGOH M.B 1910-1937, p37 (1911).

³² MGOH M.B 1910-1937, p45 (1912).

³³ Laybourn, *Guild of Help*, p61 makes reference to the women involved with the Bradford Guild of Help.

³⁴ For a contemporary discussion of the Lilian Dorman Club see W. Lillie, *Middlesbrough 1853-1953: A Century of Municipal, Social & Industrial Progress* (Middlesbrough: 1953).

³⁵ MGOH M.B 1910-1937, p5.

³⁶ MGOH M.B 1910-1937.

³⁷ As discussed elsewhere, the main iron and steel companies contributed to the Administration Fund of the Guild of Help – Bolckow Vaughan (£100 per annum in addition to earlier contributions to the Benevolent Fund), Dorman Long and Samuelson's (£25-£40 each per annum). Indeed, even when plans for the setting up of the Guild of Help were in their infancy, the Minute Books of Bolckow Vaughan record the commitment of the Shareholders to assist the project, noting their willingness to guarantee 'up to the limit of £200 per annum for three years towards the expenses of the Guild of Help', formed to 'deal with the destitutions and other evils resulting from unemployment'.(Bolckow Vaughan Directors Minute Book 13/3/14, p74).

³⁸ MGOH M.B 1910-1937, p15 (1910).

³⁹ MGOH M.B 1910-1937, p21 (1911).

⁴⁰ MGOH M.B 1910-1937, p20 (1911).

⁴¹ MGOH M.B 1910-1937, pp25-32 (1911).

⁴² MGOH M.B 1910-1937, p17 (1910).

⁴³ MGOH M.B 1910-1937, p17 (1910).

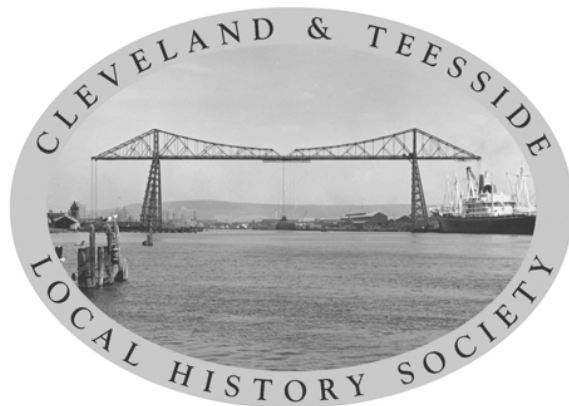
⁴⁴ MGOH M.B 1910-1937, p38 (1912).

⁴⁵ N. Evans, 'Urbanisation, Elite Attitudes and Philanthropy: Cardiff, 1850-1914', *International Review of Social History*, Vol.27 (1982), p306 notes the appeal of the publication of subscription lists and coverage in the *Cardiff Times*, citing numerous examples of individuals been singled out for praise, as a motive for philanthropic contributions.

⁴⁶ See R.J. Morris, 'Voluntary Societies and British Urban Elites, 1780-1950: An Analysis', *Historical Journal*, 26 (1983), pp95-118. Also H. Meller, *Leisure and the Changing City*

(London: 1976), p75 notes the way charitable effort helped reinforce the individual's place in society, citing the case of Mayor Symes in late nineteenth century Bristol. Similarly, R. Johnston, *Clydeside Capital: A Social History of Employers* (East Linton: 2000), pp96-98 has also identified involvement in charitable causes as both a 'stepping stone' and important to 'the network of capitalist influence'.

⁴⁷ *North Eastern Daily Gazette*, 30/05/1912 cited in M.I. Lowe, 'Morals not Money: Welfare in Middlesbrough 1892-1912', unpublished M.A. Thesis, Teesside Polytechnic, 1983, pp93-96.



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