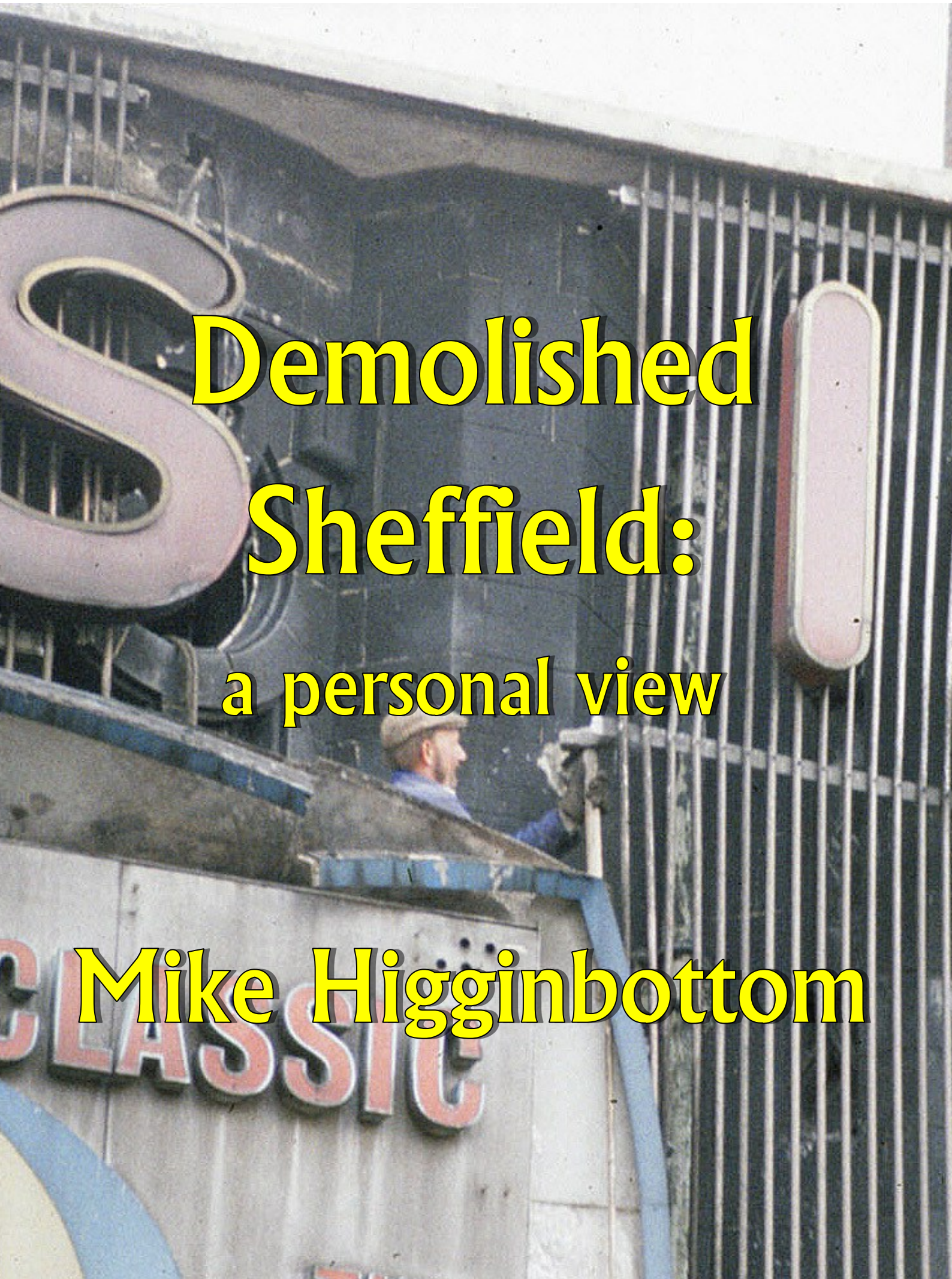

Demolished Sheffield:

a personal view

Mike Higginbottom

Preface

There is more to this book than its title suggests. Only the first twelve of the twenty-eight chapters describe Sheffield buildings that have actually been demolished. The sections which follow are set in a sequence that runs from pessimism to optimism:

- **Compromises** – buildings that were threatened with destruction but have been modified so that they survive in part
- **Concerns** – surviving buildings (at the time of writing, 2022) that are unprotected by planning law and generally unrecognised for their historic and architectural interest
- **Resurrections** – buildings that were threatened and have been rescued and made useful

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The bracketed dates in the captions indicate the year in which the photograph was taken.

Cross-references between chapters are provided by page-numbers in square brackets.

Some chapters are developed from articles in my 'Sheffield's Heritage' blog on my website www.mikehigginbottominterestingtimes.co.uk. Comments and corrections are welcomed.

front cover: Electra Palace Cinema – demolition (1984);

back cover: Britannia Music Hall, West Bar – demolition (1992);

this page: former Carver Street Methodist Church (converted to Walkabout bar)

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Huntsman's Gardens Schools assembly hall – demolition (1980)

Introduction

When I grew up in Sheffield in the 1950s I seriously believed that the buildings were built of black brick and stone. The sulphurous pollution that had poured from the chimneys of forges and steelworks for over a century had created a patina that made the place look dour and dirty.

The other distinctive feature of the city after the War was the empty spaces where buildings had been bombed in the Blitz and afterwards cleared. During the mid-1950s the priority was to construct housing, mostly on suburban estates until in 1959 the landmark Park Hill Flats behind Midland Station were begun. Redevelopment of the city centre began in the late 1950s, and resulted in undistinguished shops and structures that did not age well and are now being replaced.

I left Sheffield in 1958 and my return visits to relatives were sometimes disconcerting. I remember getting off a bus at Furnival Gate and having no idea where I was. It had been transformed from Moorhead, with its Crimea monument and its triangle of tram-tracks.

When I came back to Sheffield in 1973 I took to photographing the changes that were then taking place, particularly in the Lower Don Valley where the final clearances of terraced housing were quickly followed by the collapse of the steel industry portrayed in the 1997 film *The Full Monty*.

I was working full-time, so my coverage of the changing face of Sheffield is idiosyncratic but broad enough to illustrate a one-hour live presentation 'Demolished Sheffield'. I offer here a version of that material as a context for some ideas about conservation that I feel are not sufficiently aired.

We value the buildings in our environment because they're all we have. Though they may deserve their Grade I, II* and II listings, they weren't necessarily the best buildings of their time. We can only form a shadowy impression of the buildings that have gone.

Anyone who has known Sheffield over the past half-century can list the buildings they regret losing. Some of mine are included in the chapters that follow, and there are others I wasn't in a position to photograph such as St Paul's Parish Church (1721-40; demolished 1938), the Corn Exchange (1881, demolished 1964) and the Empire Theatre (1895, demolished 1959).

It's important to realise that there are attractive, potentially useful places that fall beneath the radar of listing and the attention of national conservation societies – buildings that gladden the eye and record past history, which need to have a practical use so they can earn their keep. This is important in a place like Sheffield which has rarely gone in for grand architectural gestures. Some of Sheffield's most characteristic architecture – its schools, churches and chapels and the quietly grand houses of the western suburbs – remains endearingly unobtrusive. Its Town Hall opened in 1897, decades after Leeds and Bradford built theirs; both its cathedrals were built as parish churches.

One of the purposes of this book is to draw attention to the way historic buildings slip away unrecognised and unregarded unless local people and politicians find ways for them to be used practically and profitably. When I give the 'Demolished Sheffield' presentation to local groups I try hard not to stir up controversy: I simply state that a vanished building seemed to me to have worth, and we lost it. No doubt there were often good reasons why an old building had to go, yet neglect, grand plans unfulfilled, short-sightedness and financial unscrupulousness have sometimes replaced a decent structure with something less pleasing, or simply left an empty plot.

The experience of the past fifty years, some of it recorded here, demonstrates that the greatest enemy of the environment is indifference.

Norwood Hall

Norwood Hall, a couple of miles north of the city centre, was built in 1713 for William Taylor, a mercer and Town Trustee who served as the Duke of Norfolk's court steward. The house was subsequently occupied by James Wheat, lawyer, and his descendants lived there from 1775 to 1915. The late Victorian owner, John James Wheat (1825-1915), built wings to either side of the original Queen Anne house to accommodate his family of thirteen children.

J J Wheat's eldest son and heir, James Clifton Wheat, inherited a depleted estate which was divided among his siblings, and lived only briefly at Norwood Hall before it was sold to Sheffield Corporation in 1916 and two years later bought by the newly formed Diocese of Sheffield as a residence for its first bishop, Leonard Hedley Burrows (1857-1940).

Renamed Bishopsholme, it was used as Bishop Burrows' home and headquarters until he retired in 1939.

In 1940, Sheffield Corporation bought the Hall and it was requisitioned, first for the War Office and then the National Fire Service. Afterwards it became a Sheffield City Council social-care hostel.

Its historic value was recognised by its early listing at Grade II in 1952, but by 1966 the City Council wanted to demolish it, and when the Ministry of Housing Inspector suggested that the eighteenth-century core should be kept, the City Planning Officer and Architect replied, "The central core does not possess sufficient architectural merit to warrant its retention, and I am surprised that anyone should consider it does."

Norwood Hall (1976)

After the hostel closed in August 1968 the Hall was left empty. The lead from the roof was stolen within two years and the interior vandalised.

Only when a formal notice was published in April 1969 proposing demolition did the general public become aware that the building was threatened. The resulting controversy led to the formation of the Hallamshire Historic Buildings Society, which waged a campaign accusing the Council of attempting to demolish the building by neglect. The Society exploited the irony that the Council had a statutory obligation to protect listed buildings from negligent owners.

Two inquiries, in February 1970 and December 1972, each concluded that the Hall was worth saving. The inspector at the second inquiry declared that the Council's estimates of the cost of restoration were outlandish.

Despite these judgements, Sheffield City Council as guardian of health and safety overruled Sheffield City Council as protector of ancient buildings, and Norwood Hall was demolished as unsafe before dawn on June 6th 1976.

A housing estate now covers the site, which is remembered only in the street-names Bishopsholme Road and Burrows Drive. Norwood Hall figures in a couple of paintings in the Museums Sheffield collection – a charming oil-painting by an unknown artist that shows the building without its Victorian additions, and an impressionistic study by George Robert Vawser (1815–1893).

Norwood Hall (1976)

Castle Square

Castle Square, looking north-east (1993)

Sheffield was slow to adopt the grandeur of a major urban centre.

Towards the end of the Victorian period there were a number of road-widening schemes, some of them associated with the expansion of the tram system, that produced broader streets with imposing buildings on each side – High Street, Fargate, Surrey Street, Pinstone Street and Leopold Street.

After Sheffield became a city in 1897 there were several schemes to make its centre look more civic. The first of these was Professor (later Sir) Patrick Abercrombie's *Civic Survey and Development Plan* (1924): none of this was built, except for the Central Library and Graves Art Gallery (1934), which is not in the position Abercrombie proposed for it.

The Blitz of December 1940 flattened much of the city centre and the city planners responded with *Sheffield Replanned* (1945), which led to the 1952 and 1957 Redevelopment Plans.

Advice from Birmingham City Council's City Engineer, Herbert Manzoni, himself notorious for rendering his own city unrecognisable, saddled Sheffield with a plan for a "Civic Circle" centred on the Town Hall, together with an Inner Ring Road and Outer Ring Road.

One of the premises of this scheme, to be picked up by Sheffield's City Architect, Lewis Womersley, on his appointment in 1953, was that as far as possible pedestrians and motorists should move around the city centre at different levels.

Womersley's **Castle Market** (1960-65) achieved this, taking advantage of its sloping site to provide access on three levels to shops, clear of motor vehicles at ground level.

above: Castle Square, looking west (Christmas 1976) –
the inexplicable spacemen were second-hand from Blackpool Illuminations;

At the traditional Market Place, however, the idea didn't work out.

A dual carriageway, Arundel Gate, swept across the Duke of Norfolk's grid of Georgian streets, coming to an abrupt halt at the top of Angel Street, where a roundabout directed traffic downhill along Commercial Street or uphill past the Cathedral.

Against Womersley's wishes, motor vehicles negotiated this tight turn at ground level, and pedestrians were pushed below ground into a dramatic space with a circular oculus open to the sky, opened in 1967.

Though the planners called this circle **Castle Square**, Sheffield folk obstinately labelled it the **Hole in the Road**. The only decorative feature was a 2,000-gallon fish-tank which became a popular meeting place, replacing Coles Corner which had lost its *raison d'être* after the Cole Brothers' department store moved to Barker's Pool in 1963.

Despite the subway-level entrances to adjacent shops and a couple of sad little stalls for buying newspapers and cigarettes, this memorable piece of townscape proved to be dead space and as the years rolled by it became more and more grubby and threatening.

Promotional literature for the proposed Sheffield Minitram, a driverless elevated people-mover, showed the track supported by a single pillar in the centre of the Hole in the Road as it climbed High Street. This project was quietly dropped in 1975.

When the full-size, standard-gauge Supertram was planned, it was quickly obvious that the Hole in the Road would have to go. It was closed and filled in, possibly with rubble from the demolition of Hyde Park Flats, in 1994.

The generation of locals who met their date by the fish tank may regret its demise but even Lewis Womersley would probably agree that Castle Square was a dubious idea in the first place.


HOUSE OF FRASER
HOUSE OF FRASER


DON'T BE CAR LESS
YOUR CAR

Castle Square – demolition (1994)

Pavilion Cinema, Attercliffe (detail) – demolition (1982)