

Open meeting 12th March 2026 on "The Last of the little Mesters?"



RVCG welcomed back Peter Machan for a talk on the surviving heritage of the Sheffield cutlery industry that he has charted over the last 40 years. Around 44 people turned out on a wild night to hear this excellent presentation. Peter started with his own family history which he had traced to Swan Morton who employed in the 1950s his father as a partner. Set up in 1932 this works is one of Sheffield great successes producing 1.5m scalpel blades a day for a global market.

Sheffield and its cutlery trade was different to many cities and their respective industries as its production was outsourced with individual items passing through the hands of multiple skilled independent Mesters. It was an immense industry in its time with a lasting legacy in the city. The white

aprons and red bandanas of the buffer girls lives on with the colours of Sheffield United football club. Buffing itself gets its name from the buffalo leather used on the buffing wheels. Many aspects of production were highly skilled with most serving a seven year apprenticeship to acquire their trade. Grinding was skilled and hazardous with many dying from exploding stones or grinders asthma. The best grindstones came from Brincliffe Edge and Wickersley as these were very fine grained sandstones.

Many works built grand buildings although these were mostly one room wide with windows both sides to maximise the light inside. Each successive floor up had smaller windows as the grindstones used on them were smaller and less heavy. Peak production for Sheffield was the 1870s when exports to both the Empire and USA abounded. Then came tariffs, a steady decline and then oversea mass production. Lots of cutlery works were demolished in the 1980s. Despite headlines claiming the death of various last Mesters including Stan Shaw in 2021 the trade is carrying on and Mesters do still exist. These now produce very high end and specialist knives, axes and swords which cannot be mass produced.

Mark Bateman