CHAPTER 7

Decline and Revival

We were in Sheffield today … and in all my life I never was in so stinking, dirty and savage a place. Altogether I never witnessed a scene of more
idleness and filth in my life.’ – Lady Caroline Stuart-Wortley, wife of James Stuart-Wortley MP, 1801.1

‘The glove contests of to-day, under strict rules that confine contestants to delivering blows with gloved hands and avoiding punishment … have become scientific engagements, testing the skill and powers of endurance, and men of culture, wealth and high social standing have become patrons of the manly art of self-defense.’—The New Orleans Daily Picayune, 1892.

The inclusivity and achievement evidenced in Sheffield boxing come at a cost. The city initially sought to reverse its 1980s industrial decline itself, rebelling against ‘Thatcherite’ dogma before a series of self-inflicted financial calamities saw it heading cap-in-hand to central Government for assistance. The late 1980s through to the 2000s thus brought private and Government-funded renewal to Sheffield in the shape of infrastructure, cultural identity projects and modern forms of industry. There was one contest, however, that Sheffield had to fight—and pay for—by itself, the long-term impact of which is still argued over 30 years later. This event transformed a dearth of sporting facilities into an abundance, but cost the city £150 million. The infrastructure of the city changed and to an extent so did boxing, in terms of the contrast between the indigenous (i.e. the local clubs that existed hand-to-mouth) and the imported (i.e. the lavish boxing training facilities enjoyed by Olympic hopefuls at the EIS). Issues of inequality remained and what wealth arrived in the city was often from distant lands and benefited niche industries and services. Physical strength was no longer in such demand in Sheffield’s occupational bedrock but it was still admired for its own sake.

**Student Bodies**

The 1991 World Student Games (also known as the 16th ‘Universiade’) was the first—and only—time the event has been staged in the UK. Before the 1987 award of the Games to Sheffield, few people in the city had heard of the event, despite the fact that two of the city’s best-known track and field athletes, husband and wife John and Sheila Sherwood, won medals at the 1967 Tokyo Universiade. If the staging of the 1991 Games is remembered in Sheffield at all, it is for the huge financial burden it left the city. Acquiring the Games proved easy—no other cities made a bid2—paying for it was more problematic.
In 1986, the British Students Sports Federation (BSSF) invited British cities to tender to stage the 1991 *Universiade*. Sheffield City Council was the only one to respond positively. There was a political motive. The BSSF’s invitation coincided with a period in which the council was looking for ways to promote and redevelop a city in the midst of economic and industrial turmoil affecting the trades Sheffield and its region were built on. The steel industry was in rapid decline\(^3\) and coal production had undergone major contractions following the 1985 end of the year-long miners’ strike.

The council pushed for the Games in the hope that sport and related cultural activities could be used as a catalyst for the regeneration of both the city’s image and its post-industrial economy in which four out of every ten households were reliant on state benefits. There may also have been an element of ‘bread and circuses’ in the council’s pursuit of the Games, *i.e.* entertaining the people with a major sporting event that the whole city could feel a part of, however vicariously. It might be argued that the Games provided an example of sport being used as a vehicle of political antagonism. This era was one of profound political division. Under Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative Government, Sheffield’s primary sources of manufacturing employment were decimated, in part due to Tory legislation. Large areas of derelict and sometimes polluted land appeared as factories were closed and demolished. During this period, Sheffield’s unemployment rate rose from 4% in 1978 to 15.5% in 1984.\(^4\) This cauldron of economic and social deprivation reinforced the city’s anti-Tory sentiments.

**Facilitating Debt**

The significance of these events may have contributed to the City Council’s determination to host the Games despite the potential financial shortfall, which was exacerbated by the collapse of a promised television broadcasting deal and commercial sponsorships. The Tory Government meanwhile remained virulently anti-Sheffield; a 1992 statement by Mike Bower, then leader of the Labour-controlled council, illustrated this: ‘The [Games] had the verbal backing of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister but the Government failed to offer adequate help towards direct running costs. We feel the lack of support is just one example of the Government’s hostility towards the city’. The 1991 *Universiade* was another
strand of the ongoing battle between left and right of the political spectrum. Without external funding, Sheffield was unilaterally committed to the financial costs of providing for the facilities. It was an investment that proved controversial. Sheffield’s taxpayers even today are covering debts from the Games to the tune of around £25–£30 million per year; it has been estimated they will continue to do so until 2024.

So where did it all go wrong? The council set up a private company by the name of ‘Universiade GB Limited’ to organise the event. Raising monies for the Games proved enormously difficult; in June 1990, the company folded with debts of £3 million, resulting in the council assuming responsibility. Later that year, concerns were raised in the district auditor’s report on Director of Games Administration Ray Gridley’s handling of finances. Auditor G. W. Sutton, whilst recognising Gridley’s commitment, accused him of ‘being less than candid about the financial state of affairs’. It was also reported that serious miscalculations had been made regarding income from sponsorship, ticket sales, marketing and merchandise. The audit report found that the predicted budget income from ticket sales of £1.663 million was based on high attendances at every event. However, ticket sales up to June 1991 generated just £40,000, suggesting that the level of public interest was negligible.

It was too late for the council to pull out of its commitment. There were originally three monetary projections for the event—£17 million, £21 million and £27 million—with each costing matched to an equivalent income to produce a ‘nil cost’. Yet even the largest projection was a long way off the eventual £147 million staging and construction costs. The district auditor’s report suggested that Gridley bore great responsibility for this financial mistake, yet others were also culpable. When the figures entered the public domain, protest graffiti was painted on city-centre walls proclaiming ‘Three weeks of games, 30 years of debt’. Unsurprisingly, council leaders came in for criticism from local taxpayers. Cutbacks in council services were inevitable as a consequence; hundreds of council jobs were lost, libraries and public toilets were closed and authority-run residential homes for the elderly were sold into private ownership.

**White Elephants and Assets**

With the annual debt payments continuing to eat into Sheffield City Council’s ever-restricted budget, many have questioned whether hosting
the Games was worth it. There is no easy answer. The Games left a legacy that helped put Sheffield on the sporting and cultural map. The city built several world-class multi-use venues and renovated the decaying Victorian-era Lyceum Theatre for associated cultural events. The Lyceum continues to stage nationally renowned plays and musicals. The city-centre Hyde Park flats complex was refurbished as an athletes’ village. Today, it is used for social housing. In 1995, the Sports Council awarded Sheffield the title of Britain’s first ‘National City of Sport’ in recognition of the city’s ongoing contribution and commitment to sport. Furthermore, due to the city’s investment in its sporting infrastructure, Sheffield won the right to become the hub of the EIS, as detailed earlier. Indeed, Sheffield City Councillor Peter Price claimed in 2012 on his personal website:

Sport was one piece of Sheffield’s regeneration jigsaw and I believe it was the economic catalyst that began the transformation. I am convinced that if the city had not taken the controversial decision to invest £150 million in new facilities, then our city would not be where it is today and would certainly be a much sadder place.

The city has become a centre for sporting excellence, attracting international sporting events to its venues and athletes from around the globe to the EIS. Indeed, the 1991 Universiade left a legacy that helped create Olympic champions Jessica Ennis-Hill, Nicola Adams, Anthony Joshua and Luke Campbell.

Nevertheless, what is essentially an issue of cost versus benefit can be argued both ways: the answer to the question ‘worth it or not worth it?’ is a matter of opinion, not fact. Facilities such as Sheffield Arena and the Ponds Forge sports complex proved to be assets for the city, but others did not. The Waltheof sports hall, a building also commissioned for the World Student Games, was demolished in 2006, and in November 2013, demolition commenced of Don Valley Stadium, the main site of the World Student Games and a facility that cost £29 million to build. The stadium’s running and maintenance costs had proved prohibitive. This not only exposed an absence of financial considerations concerning the maintenance of facilities but also a lack of long-term planning.
The positive impact of sporting facilities can, however, be measured in more than financial terms; sport possesses the capacity to do what we might term ‘social good’. To this end, recent years have seen the recognition of boxing in certain political circles as beneficial to the moral fibre of the nation, leading to its promotion in some state schools. Between its 2007 re-admission to the curriculum and 2015, the number of schools teaching (non-contact) boxing increased from 20 to 3,200. The 2015 All-Party Parliamentary Group on Boxing report titled *The Right Hook* spoke of boxing’s ability to reduce crime and keep the wayward on the straight and narrow, even advocating that boxing training be trialled in prisons in order to focus and control aggression amongst inmates. The anecdotal nature of the boxing-as-salvation lobby was perhaps recognised when the report called for the 900 or so boxing clubs in Britain to collect data so as to improve the evidence base for any applications for Government funding. It also highlighted the apparent contrast between the effectiveness of the social and community work carried out—sometimes inadvertently—by boxing clubs with the ineffectiveness of grand Government schemes designed to do the same thing. In general, the report would lead a reader to believe that boxing clubs achieved much better outcomes at a vastly cheaper cost.

Perhaps considerations around both community and individual welfare come naturally to the people who run and populate boxing clubs. On one level, this is because of where many of them are situated. England Boxing chief executive Gethin Jenkins explained to the *BBC* in June 2020 that around 40% of his organisation’s affiliated clubs resided in the 20% most deprived areas in the country. The boxing gym is thus embedded in the social reality of deprivation and inequality. On another level—as illustrated in this analysis—the gym is home to a plethora of redemptive processes; it houses that ambition as much as it does the pursuit of Lonsdale belts. The gym and its practices and people are transformative in so many ways. The crucial figures in such places know that the world is complicated. They also recognise that people who are struggling implicitly accept that what they are promoting and instructing can help in ways that do not require formal explanations. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic saw many boxing clubs set up food banks and mental health support services on their premises, which provided another example of the inherent good in their collective make-up. Jenkins commented: ‘I have come from football
and rugby [administration] and... if [these sports] did [this], it would be shouted from the rooftops. You go to [boxing] clubs and say, “Why did you not make more of this?” and they say, “This is just what we do”. They think it’s normal’.

And what this research has—hopefully—taught is the understated social welfare ethos of the boxing gym that in many instances finds a role for those seeking something intangible. It meanwhile ensures a place of safety and sanctuary and allows those who enter to learn that lives can be changed in various ways. The ever-present possibility of pain—and indeed death—we might speculate makes for an appreciation of mortality even if it arrives via inhaled droplets as opposed to punches.9

Whilst accepting that combat sports are the only ones wherein contestants deliberately try to hurt each other, the fatality rates of various sports were also highlighted in The Right Hook; horse racing led the way with 128 fatalities per 100,000 participants. The comparative rates for other sports were:

- Sky diving 123/100,000
- Hang gliding 55/100,000
- Mountaineering 51/100,000
- Scuba diving 11/100,000
- Motorcycle racing 7/100,000
- US college football 3/100,000
- Boxing 1.3/100,000

Such figures are instructive. The report concluded that boxing needed to overcome ignorance and prejudice amongst both the public and those with the power to make political decisions and award funding. Its central argument was that sport—and in particular boxing—could play a crucial role in turning individuals’ lives around. This conclusion was nothing new; much of a similar nature had been said in various Government documents since the Wolfenden Report of 1960 (see Volume One).

The perceived ability of a sporting practice to prevent certain behaviours had particular relevance in Britain towards the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, when evidence pointed towards a rise in violent crime against the person. In September 2018, London suffered its 100th homicide (murder or manslaughter) of the year. Police linked 22 of the deaths to ‘gang’ disputes. In the same period, Sheffield
saw eight fatal stabbings. Such numbers were disturbing, but perhaps not indicative of a trend. For example, in Sheffield, in 2013, there were eight cases of murder and three of manslaughter; in 2012, there were four murders; and in 2011, there were one manslaughter and 11 murders. Nevertheless, the public perception was that violent offences—especially those involving knives—were on the increase. A South Yorkshire Police report published in 2017 (South Yorkshire Police 2017) stated there were 2,047 non-domestic knife offences in the county in the previous year, adding that such volumes were increasing and reflected on a national scale. Part of the increase was attributed to a change in the method of recording such incidents, but the report admitted that ‘we have seen an increased social acceptance amongst our young people towards carrying knives’ because of a belief that they were ‘protecting themselves’ or because certain types of music tended to ‘glamourise’ violence. Economic and social factors come into play here.

From B to A

In September 2018, the website https://www.citymetric.com/, a spin-off from the political and cultural magazine New Statesman, published an article describing Sheffield as two economically and socially disparate entities (termed ‘Sheffield A’ and ‘Sheffield B’) divided by a ‘Berlin Wall’-type metaphorical partition. The article’s author Sam Gregory described ‘Sheffield A’ as:

... a healthy, wealthy and leafy mix of greens, golf courses and gastropubs stretching from Fulwood and Ranmoor in the west to Nether Edge, Meersbrook and Dore in the south.

In contrast, ‘Sheffield B’ was:

... an adjacent but almost entirely unconnected city running down the [River] Don from Upperthorpe to Hillsborough, up to Ecclesfield in the north and stretching to Tinsley, Attercliffe, Darnall and Gleadless Valley in the east. It is a place economically characterised by poverty, lack of opportunity, low-skilled work, poor quality housing stock and even poorer public transport.
The invisible dividing line, if not entirely straight, thus ran roughly north to south through the city centre. Gregory posited that in this respect Sheffield was unique amongst British cities; elsewhere—for example, London and Manchester—disadvantaged areas sit cheek by jowl with what he termed ‘moneyed comfort’. A prime example was London’s Grenfell Tower apartment block, in which a fire in June 2017 killed 72 of its hundreds of mainly low-paid or benefits-dependent residents within a few paces of the homes of some of Britain’s wealthiest citizens. Similar ‘have’ and ‘have-not’ discrepancies exist in Sheffield, but not in such close proximity. Gregory did not mention education, but the schools in ‘Sheffield A’ historically produce better examination results and more university attendees than those across the divide. Anecdotally, the disparities can be strikingly visual. A long-time Sheffield resident could hazard a good guess as to where in the city a stranger comes from based on the way they dress, their hairstyle and even their comportment.

Independent research supports Gregory’s assertion. Reports by the Resolution Foundation named the Sheffield region as Britain’s ‘low pay capital’, an epithet that is hard to believe for someone travelling west out of the city via Ecclesall Road South or Fulwood Road. The parliamentary constituency of Hallam through which these roads pass is one of the wealthiest in the country and one of the top three in the north of England. This discordance exists regardless of which hue of Government is in power. In 2004 Sheffield City Council reported that one-third of Sheffield households lived in the top 10% of the most deprived electoral wards in the country (Sheffield City Council 2004). Four years earlier Sheffield’s unemployment rate was 4.2%, compared with the national average of 3.4%. However, the inner-city areas saw unemployment above 6%, whilst the western suburbs’ corresponding figure was below 2%. As the global economic downturn began to bite in 2007, Sheffield’s unemployment rate rose to 5.8%, compared with a national rate of 5.2%. By 2015, the rate had not recovered to its pre-recession levels. Furthermore, many of those in work discovered that employment did not necessarily lift them above the breadline. The city’s average wage was some 10% below the national average due to a proliferation of poorly paid retail and administration jobs. Various studies have also shown that life expectancy is some seven to ten years less in the poorer districts of the city than in the west.

The reasons for Sheffield’s stark demarcation may be perplexing to an outsider, but to a local they are obvious: history and topography. Hemmed in by hills on three sides, from the Industrial Revolution
onwards the only direction for reliable mass transport of goods into and
out of the city was to or from the north-east, along the River Don plain
and later the South Yorkshire canal. Sheffield’s water-powered cutlery and
dge tools trade had developed in the area’s fast-flowing river valleys
further west but with the advent of larger manufactories the necessary
raw materials for steel and coal production were found to be in natural
abundance to the east of the city. Thus, the East End was where such
industries were built up; the workers who manned them lived both here
and in the city centre. However, the work that defined Sheffield was noto-
riously dirty and labour intensive. Hours were long and pay was low. The
city’s large working-class population possessed few home comforts. The
grime and deprivation prevalent in Sheffield’s central districts appalled
and repelled the privileged, such as Lady Caroline, the wife of the city’s
MP James Stuart-Wortley, who after a visit in 1801 declared: ‘We were
in Sheffield today … and in all my life I never was in so stinking, dirty
and savage a place. Altogether I never witnessed a scene of more idleness
and filth in my life’. Lady Caroline, who lived in a country residence with
an army of domestic servants to see to her every need, was not accus-
tomed to such squalor and—evidently—was both pleased and relieved to
return to her grand home after her excursion to the environs of the poor.
The scenes she witnessed endured throughout the nineteenth century;
in 1877, Socialist poet and social reformer Edward Carpenter wrote that
Sheffield was:

... finely situated, magnificent hill country all around and on the hills for
miles and miles (on one side of the town) elegant villa residences – and
in the valley below one enduring cloud of smoke ... tall chimneys and ash
heaps ... and dirty alleys and courts and houses, half roofless and a river
flowing black through the midst of them.13

Such vistas induced art critic and utopian John Ruskin to speak of
Sheffield as ‘a dirty picture in a golden frame’. The background to this
imagery was that from the early nineteenth century the factory owners,
as well as professionals such as solicitors and doctors, migrated to the
sparsely populated, hilly areas to the west, where they were both elevated
above the smoke and filth of the city and upstream of the stench thanks to
the prevailing south-westerly winds. Here, they could construct spacious
houses with large gardens and spectacular views. The westwards expansion
did not go unnoticed by G. C. Holland, physician to the General Infirmary, who in a published survey of the health and welfare of Sheffielders in 1843 commented that the newly flourishing suburbs had:

… numerous villas, which adorn the neighbouring hills – the expensive establishments – the costly equipages – the manifest command of luxuries and comforts unknown to the same class of manufacturer forty years ago.

Some 50 years later, a Royal Commission on Secondary Education reported that there was ‘no other manufacturing town where the contrast between the dwelling places of the rich and poor are so strongly marked, or the separation between them so complete’ as existed in Sheffield. The citymetric.com article was thus not at all revelatory: such inequalities between east and west—born in the early 1800s—remain in place over 200 years later.

If boxing is to be in some way the antidote to both serious youth violence and economic disparities, as suggested in The Right Hook, then Sheffield had better open up a few dozen new boxing clubs quickly. And if the source of boxers is poor boys from deprived areas, then the talent stream will show no signs of drying up; it is no surprise that none of the city’s boxing clubs are to be found in the well-off S11 and S17 postcode areas. This, at least, is one category in which ‘Sheffield B’ scores higher than ‘Sheffield A’, and this is not radical thinking.

**Save Our Trees**

Sheffield’s history of radicalism dates back to the late eighteenth century—around the time that the ‘Sheffield A’ and ‘Sheffield B’ division began to take shape—and continued through Chartism, the ‘Sheffield Outrages’, early Socialism, women’s suffrage, the fight for access to the countryside, the strikes of the 1920s and 1980s and the establishment of ‘The Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire’ in the latter decade. Traditionally, such radicalism had its roots in the working classes or the unemployed. However, in the twenty-first century, resistance to authority occurred in the city’s wealthier suburbs in a series of protests both co-ordinated and spontaneous that saw arrests made, raids on domestic houses executed by police and prison terms threatened—all with the complicity of Sheffield’s ruling Labour council. The issue was trees, and ‘public safety’ the stated motivation.
The controversy arose out of a 2012 contract worth £2.2 million made by the council with infrastructure specialist Amey to renovate the city’s roads and pavements. The contract permitted the felling of thousands of trees—many over a century old. Both Amey and the council insisted that trees would only be removed if diseased, decaying or a danger to the public. By way of appeasement, at least one young tree was to be planted for each tree felled. However, when work got underway, healthy and perfectly safe trees—in the eyes of opponents—were chopped, which, according to critics, was done to both facilitate access for Amey’s plant machinery and, perhaps more significantly, fulfil the contract more cheaply.

Furious locals formed campaign groups to demonstrate against the fellings. Utilising social media, hundreds took resistive action, standing beneath trees to prevent their removal. Often, within minutes of an Amey crew turning up, dozens of people appeared to—peacefully—stop proceedings. Yellow ribbons, bunting, poems, children’s artwork and signs reading ‘Save Me’ adorned targeted trees, which were also given names in order to personalise the issue. At first, the protestors were tolerated, but when they showed no signs of giving up police were called in, at times to forcibly remove them. Footage on news programmes of pensioners being manhandled by police officers gained both sympathy and additional campaigners. Support came from an unexpected source in the shape of Conservative Cabinet Minister Michael Gove, who in a letter to Sheffield City Council urged the cessation of the ‘destruction of thousands of mature trees’ as it would ‘damage our children’s rightful inheritance’.

On one occasion, several ‘activists’ (as they were portrayed in the press) were subject to simultaneous police dawn raids, carried out under trade union legislation that criminalised the act of attempting to prevent someone carrying out lawful work. At times, those tasked with tree felling did so in the company of hired private security personnel, i.e. ‘bouncers’. ‘Fake news’ became an issue; one woman was investigated by police for allegedly giving tea laced with a laxative to three Amey workers who had become too ill to work. No evidence was found of the supposed ‘poison’ plot, news of which even extended across the Atlantic. In an interview with the New York Times, the ‘accused’ suggested that the episode was ‘designed to discredit protesters’. The council meanwhile refused to disclose full details of its deal with Amey, releasing only a redacted document that indicated that 17,500 trees could be felled over
the 25-year term of the contract. Protestors believed that the contract also allowed the council to sue Amey if the work was not carried out in full.

The dispute came to a head in November 2018 with the planned removal of 35 trees planted in the Crookes district of the city in 1919 as a memorial to soldiers killed in the First World War. The council, Amey and the Sheffield Tree Action Group (STAG) held discussions chaired by the Very Reverend Doctor Pete Wilcox, Bishop of Sheffield, following which it was agreed that just three diseased trees would be felled, with the remainder being trimmed and retained. The agreement heralded further talks that the following month resulted in what the Independent termed a ‘peace deal’ that would see many of the remaining 305 trees out of the planned initial 6,000 in the city earmarked for removal re-assessed with a view to saving as many as possible. In addition, STAG would take part in any subsequent discussions and Amey would foot the bill for devising alternative solutions to felling. The council meanwhile admitted that almost 2,000 healthy trees had been felled to prevent ‘dangers on the highway or on pavements’. Campaigners believed the figure was nearer 3,000. Meanwhile, South Yorkshire Police revealed it had spent £47,000 in a single month on overtime costs relating to the dispute, whilst in February 2019 in an out-of-court settlement seven protestors shared compensation amounting to £24,300 in connection with their claim for wrongful arrest and breach of the Human Rights Act 1998.

The affair had consequences in political chambers; Labour lost four seats in the 2017 local elections, two each to the Green Party and the Liberal Democrats. It also demonstrated that twenty-first-century activism orchestrated by the educated, liberal middle class reflects how both local and national political debate is often more concerned with environmental issues than those pertinent to employment and social class position.

∗ ∗ ∗

**When the Door Closes**

Most Sheffield boxers train in the run-down structures of former schools, spartan church halls or abandoned retail units. For many toiling in such premises, an amateur career is not an end in itself but a necessary step on the path to turning professional. However, professionalism is often
just a means to escape a poor situation or to supplement meagre day-job earnings until age or failing health decree otherwise. Few training night and day will make big monies from boxing, thus like all sports when ability succumbs to age, a career transition ensues. But what use is boxing ability away from the ring?

The Sheffield tradition was that nightclub or pub doors provided work for both aspiring and retired boxers; such establishments welcomed the muscle of renowned fighters to deter troublemakers and deny entry to undesirables. Since the early 2000s, however, the ‘bouncing’ business has become far more controlled; it is no longer de rigueur to hire a ‘big bloke who can punch’ to man the door and keep a ‘good house’. Now known as ‘security’, such individuals must be trained and licensed and contracted to a recognised (licensed) company or agency. The customary attire is a dark suit jacket or waistcoat with shirt and tie in the summer, a long black coat in the winter. A regulation luminous armband bearing the man’s (or, increasingly, woman’s) name, licence number and image are compulsory. The industry is now more regulated and—it could be argued—more trustworthy than ever before. Other aspects, however, have not changed; it still helps if a doorman is large and menacing or, if not, adept at unarmed combat. Those who look the least threatening must by definition be the ones possessing the most considerable martial skills.

Following the 2005 change in the UK’s licensing laws to allow 24-hour pub opening, the days (or rather the nights) of the traditional nightclub—entry to which required an admission fee—were numbered. In addition, pub-owning companies such as Punch Taverns and Enterprise Inns would have one believe that the pub trade is in decline. Some of it undeniably is; between 2010 and 2015, some 46 Sheffield pubs closed for good. Pubs generally close for one reason: a lack of customers. Those that fall by the wayside are usually suburban or estate pubs where the alcohol-consuming demographic has changed, either due to the availability of cheap supermarket products consumed at home, or for cultural reasons, such as the concentrated presence of a large number of teetotal members of the Muslim faith. The latter perhaps explains why nine of the 46 failed Sheffield pubs were in the Darnall district. Another explanation might be the decline of Saturday and Sunday amateur football in Sheffield as costs of buying equipment and hiring facilities escalated and young men found other ways to fill their free time. Traditionally, many teams were based at pubs near where many of their players lived.
Along with a number of enterprising private pub owners, the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) has been partially responsible for one of Sheffield’s great modern-day leisure activity successes. Officially recognised by CAMRA for several consecutive years as the ‘Real Ale Capital of Britain’, Sheffield can attract a new breed of visitor—the ‘beer tourist’—who arrives from far and wide to sample the city’s extensive range of welcoming pubs and British-made cask-conditioned beers. The privately owned Kelham Island Tavern was twice voted by CAMRA members as Britain’s best pub, also gaining the ‘Best in Yorkshire’ accolade seven times and the ‘Best in Sheffield’ award on no less than 14 occasions.20

The second major Sheffield success in this sector of the leisure industry is the increase in the number of city-centre bars and restaurants since the new millennium. The publicans’ trade magazine Morning Advertiser noted that although nationally the number of pubs in the UK had declined in 2015 by 2.6%, there was a simultaneous rise of 2.9% in licensed premises, mostly driven by the expansion of restaurants, café bars and wine bars. The report listed Sheffield in the top ten ‘growth towns’ in this area. By day, such premises serve good quality food to workers and shoppers; by night, they attract the cocktails and out-till-the-early-hours set. Almost all employ licensed doormen. There are thus more than enough opportunities for the professional boxer to supplement his income in this way, albeit it is unknown to the authors how many do so. 21

Providing security can extend beyond the pub door. In a trade where pay is low and hours unsocial, work is often sought elsewhere. What American sociologist Jack Katz termed the ‘art of intimidation’ is a flexible skill (Katz 1988). For some whose main task is as a city-centre doorman, a change of scenery can be both welcome and relaxing. One café bar bouncer known to the authors earned extra monies standing guard at the annual world snooker championships at Sheffield’s Crucible Theatre. Snooker, perhaps the most passive of sports, is not known for its penchant to attract unruly crowds. This individual looked forward to the additional pay for little additional stress. Others spoken with and about in the course of researching this book tell of various avenues the well-muscled man might pursue. Some carry heavy items as part of their daily work in the building industry. Others may offer personal protection to the rich and famous, or escort debt collectors as they go about their sometimes dangerous business. A few can make a decent income from opening their own gyms offering paying customers the skills and moves they learned in boxing training. These tasks remind the astute that a disciplined life and
an ability to talk with people are far more profitable than being the unruly individual who doormen are paid to eject.

**Regeneration and Redemption**

Despite its industrial job losses and community upheaval since the 1980s and its transition to the retail and leisure sector, Sheffield is still a manufacturing city: over 12% of the working population is involved in making things. The profile of the city’s manufacturing sector has, however, changed vastly over this period, reflecting advances in both traditional manufacture and ‘cutting-edge’ digital and electronic technologies. For example, the Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre (AMRC), which opened in 2004 on a site once occupied by the Orgreave Coking Plant, was the result of collaboration between engineers at the University of Sheffield and the aerospace giant Boeing. The site also houses Britain’s primary nuclear power research centre. In 2019, the luxury sports car and motor racing giant McLaren opened a purpose-built production facility at an adjacent location.

Not all change is high-tech. The city centre is today host to the Cultural Industries Quarter, a Digital Campus and a Science Park, each established to promote innovation and research in traditional or novel forms of manufacture, design and art. Such facilities provide thousands of jobs. That said, at times Sheffield lacks the skilled labour capable of filling all such posts. According to City Council research, in the mid-2000s some 20% of the city’s residents had no formal qualifications. The number of 16-year-olds gaining five GCSE passes was 8% below the national average. Immigrant labour, both in skilled and low-paid employment, is thus often required. Sheffield’s population has grown continuously since 2001 after a period of decline: the 2014 population was some 49,000 higher than at the turn of the century. Much of the increase was due to the arrival of young people from abroad: students from the Far East and economic migrants, many of them from former Soviet Bloc countries after the opening up of the European Union (EU). How Britain’s departure from the EU affects the city’s population and its number of migrant workers remains to be seen.

How such changes came about is worth recalling. Sheffield began the recovery from the 1980s denudation of its core industries through both local and central Government initiatives. The council had a history of high
spending on municipal projects dating back to the 1920s but was unprepared for the economic devastation of the early 1980s. With so many private sector companies either closing down or leaving Sheffield, the council became the largest employer in the region. The 21,000 public sector workers numbered some five times more than the largest private employer in the city, Midland Bank (later HSBC). The council decided to spend its way out of trouble: if market forces could not sustain the city’s economy, then the council’s only option—it believed—was to step in. This was at odds with the ideology of the Tory Government, which embarked on a programme of regenerating British cities using private investment.

In 1981 the council set up the Department for Employment and Economic Development (DEED), which focused on developing cultural and media industries in disused cutlery workshops and industrial premises around the city centre. However, the council’s stand-off with successive Tory Governments scared off private investors. Around the same time, central Government made an example of what it considered rogue councils—of which Sheffield was one of the chief culprits—by introducing ‘rate capping’, thereby restricting the amount such authorities could raise from local taxes. In March 1985, Sheffield City Council passed a budget of £249 million, some £31 million over the Government-set ‘cap’ and refused to set a rate for the financial year. Sheffield joined Liverpool and ten London boroughs in taking such action to force central Government to intervene to fund its public services. After applications to the High Court by Sheffield and Greenwich for a judicial review were rejected, 20 of Sheffield’s Labour councillors voted with their Liberal and Conservative counterparts to set a rate within the cap limit. The ‘rate-capping rebellion’ had failed.

When further household and business rate reductions were imposed in 1987 the council was forced to seek help from central Government. The climbdown resulted the following year in the formation of the Sheffield Development Corporation (SDC). At the start of the decade, the Government had set up a series of Urban Development Corporations (UDCs), whose boards consisted of representatives of the private sector and both central and local authorities. Granted special planning powers, such UDCs had the authority to remove control of infrastructure and economic investment from local councils. Sheffield resisted their imposition until the events described above. The SDC was thus established to take charge of the regeneration of some 2,000 acres of former
industrial land in the East End that the council could not fund from its own resources. The council resented ceding its planning powers, so in response—and perhaps in desperation—handed over land formerly occupied by Hadfield’s steelworks to Tory-supporting multi-millionaire property developer Paul Sykes’ company British Land for the construction of the Meadowhall shopping complex, which opened in 1990.

This was—and remains—a symbolic structure. Standing on a site of a company that 80 years earlier employed some 13,000, this cathedral of consumption employed in its 280 shops, other outlets and ancillary activities more women than men in non-unionised, often poorly paid positions. In place of skilled and unionised steelworkers were security guards, retail staff and cleaners, many on ‘zero-hours’ contracts. The new mall—which attracts 30 million visitors annually—decimated retail trade in the city centre, from which it still has not recovered. The council feared such a negative impact but did not possess the resources to simultaneously upgrade the city centre. By its 1997 expiry, the SDC had demolished disused factories, constructed business units and major access roads and even built a small airport.

Two years before the SDC was formed, the City Council created the Sheffield Economic Regeneration Committee (SERC), which ostensibly worked with the private sector but was essentially a council-run committee. SERC was the body that made the successful bid for the World Student Games. The 1990 appointment of John Major as Tory leader and Prime Minister brought a mutually conciliatory attitude from both central and local Governments: SERC thus obtained £233 million Government money and £7 million from the private sector to fund the construction of the city-wide Supertram network, which began operating in 1994. Nonetheless, the 1990s heralded an era of tripartite cooperation involving Sheffield City Council, central Government and private business, a policy that was essential to the council’s desire to reduce unemployment and compensate for the financial failure of some of its own projects. Such partnerships were able to attract EU funding to develop the city’s—and the South Yorkshire region’s—infrastructure. There were jobs but many were unlike any before in the city’s history. Those who funded and managed the projects did not always have local accents.
Sheffield One and Sichuan

The service sector provided a lifeline for Sheffield in the new millennium. The Labour Government, which came to power in May 1997, oversaw the creation in 2001 of an Urban Regeneration Company (URC) named Sheffield One, its name signifying a concentration on renewing the moribund city centre (the S1 postcode) (Sheffield One 2001). This body—indeed of the City Council—was the successor to the UDC, but its terms of reference were tweaked to enforce consultation with private sector economists, designers, transport advisers and local community representatives. Supported by private, EU and Government funding, the project resulted in the building of the Millennium Gallery and the Winter Garden, the upgrading of the Peace Gardens, Tudor Square and Barker’s Pool, the refurbishment of the City Hall and the establishment of a pedestrianised ‘gateway’ from the Midland Station into the city centre. An examination of Sheffield City Council’s income and spending for the financial year 2007–2008 gives an indication of the sums involved in such infrastructure projects and what might be termed ‘essential services’. By far, the largest expense (£485 million) went on education, with social services (£240 million) the next highest figure. The sectors covering highways and transport, leisure and culture and planning and economic development amounted to £140 million combined. To pay for all this, the council relied on Government grants (including EU-allocated monies) of £864 million. Council Tax brought in £182 million and council house rents a further £113 million, paltry figures when compared with the level of external funding.

Meanwhile, other schemes planned for the 2000s did not get off the ground. A retail development in conjunction with London and Paris-based property developer Hammerson—to be named Sevenstones, the largest such venture in the city centre’s history—was proposed in the middle of the decade. Progress was arrested by the 2007–2008 global financial crisis and the subsequent recession before being abandoned in 2014. Instead, the City Council approved a simplified version. Work began in 2016 with the demolition of the concrete eyesore former Grosvenor House Hotel, empty since 2010 in anticipation of the ill-fated Sevenstones development. The Charter Square Retail Quarter on the site was to provide a new headquarters for HSBC as well as shops, restaurants and bars. In the same period, Sheffield planners approved the construction of numerous privately funded apartment blocks in the city
centre, Shalesmoor and Kelham Island districts, bringing with them an influx of new residents and the attendant establishments in which they could spend their disposable income. Kelham Island became such a desirable place to live that in January 2019 the *Daily Telegraph* described the area as ‘the new hipster capital of the North’, pointing out its ‘restaurant that serves foraged food to diners seated inside a repurposed shipping container, a vinyl record shop, an independent brewery, and far too many cocktail bars to consider counting’. Just a few years previously this had been Sheffield’s red light district.

**Eastern Promise**

Kelham Island caters mainly for private tenants but many other developments were aimed at the city’s vast student population, a significant portion of whom were well-off Chinese or South-East Asian, a demographic that tended to spurn the hitherto accepted manner of student living—*i.e.* several people sharing an (often old) converted residential house—in favour of fully furnished, single-occupancy dwellings with *en-suite* bathrooms, Wi-Fi connection and on-site laundry, leisure and security facilities. China thus had an increasing role to play in the regeneration of Sheffield. In 2016, the City Council announced a 60-year development contract with the Chinese property company Sichuan Guodong Construction Group that would—they claimed—bring to Sheffield some £220 million in its first three years. The biggest of its kind outside London, the investment would initially fund ‘four or five’ projects, in the words of council leader Julie Dore. Councillor Leigh Bramall perhaps optimistically predicted that it would create ‘hundreds, if not thousands’ of local jobs. A project titled ‘Grey to Green’ got underway in 2016, designed to make the West Bar-Castlegate-Waingate-Haymarket areas more attractive by introducing pedestrianised access and planting thousands of trees and plants. The demolition of Castle Market to enable archaeological excavation of the former site of Sheffield Castle also took place, and by the end of 2018 independent traders and arts and cultural concerns began to move back to a once downbeat part of the city.

A separate Chinese-funded project was already underway at the junction of Bramall Lane and St Mary’s Gate on the edge of the city centre to create a 20-storey complex comprising shops, food and drink outlets, student flats and office space, situated to take advantage of its proximity to
Sheffield’s large Chinese and South-East Asian community based around London Road. With the economic uncertainty surrounding the UK’s exit from the EU, Chinese collaboration was one area where Sheffield was ahead of the game.

**TREMORS AND AFTERSHOCK**

Sheffield’s electoral returns in the 2016 EU Referendum mirrored the country as a whole, with a 51/49 split in favour of leaving the European Union. The majority ‘leavers’ included many older, working-class, traditionally Labour voters who, according to research by the political study website [https://policynetwork.org/](https://policynetwork.org/), had become disillusioned by social and economic change and ignored by the British political establishment, not least around concerns over immigration to Britain from the EU. As the ‘Brexit’ negotiations dragged on into late 2019, and with Parliament mired in a stalemate brought about by a series of inconclusive votes, Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson called a General Election that he hoped would give him a decisive mandate to leave the EU on his party’s terms.

Perhaps fatigued by the Brexit *impasse*, the UK electorate backed Johnson emphatically. Turning what was effectively a ‘hung’ Parliament into an 80-seat majority, the Tories took control of more than 20 constituencies previously considered Labour strongholds. Labour retained all five Sheffield constituencies—perhaps surprisingly in the case of Sheffield Hallam—with reduced majorities, but lost the adjacent Penistone and Stocksbridge and Don Valley seats to the Tories. Don Valley, once the centre of the South Yorkshire coalfield, had previously returned a Labour MP at every election since 1922. Thus, even in communities of dreadful indices of poverty and deprivation where street parties were held when Margaret Thatcher died and Boris Johnson was abused when he visited following severe floods in 2019, the people chose to be governed by a party controlled by the Eton and Oxbridge-educated establishment rather than by Labour. With the Brexit Party again taking a sizeable chunk of Labour support (but gaining no seats in Parliament), it was clear that the EU dilemma remained at the forefront of British politics.

For several months before and after the December 2019 General Election, it often seemed that Brexit was the only news story and nothing would relegate it until the UK’s departure from the EU was finalised.
However, the COVID-19 pandemic that began to spread in early 2020 sent Brexit tumbling in importance. The full effect of the pandemic is yet to be realised, but with the economy in decline, unemployment at its highest level for years and most forms of public entertainment suspended, the fate of boxers and boxing barely merited a mention. Sheffield’s many boxing clubs closed their doors, shows were cancelled and training at home became the norm. What happens next nobody really knows.34

Notes
1. Quoted in Grosvenor and Beilby (1927).
2. Edinburgh, Stockholm and Rotterdam expressed an interest in hosting the Games but did not bid.
3. The numbers employed in engineering and steel production in Sheffield declined from 82,000 in 1971 to 40,000 in 1986.
4. In 1978, the national average unemployment rate stood at 6%.
5. Sheffield’s hostility towards Thatcher was manifested in physical form in April 1983 when she arrived to make a speech at the Cutlers’ Hall. Some 2,000 demonstrators threw eggs and flour at her cavalcade. There were 13 arrests and a police horse was injured when it collided with a car.
6. Sheffield’s timing in hosting the Games was unfortunate. The £147 million of National Lottery money made available for the 2002 Manchester Commonwealth Games was not an option in 1991, a cruel irony considering this amount equalled the final cost of Sheffield’s hosting of the World Student Games.
7. Ennis-Hill won the world heptathlon title in 2009 and 2011 and the European title in 2010, before winning Olympic gold in 2012 and regaining the world title in 2015. The following year she won silver in the Olympic heptathlon, after which she retired. She did much of her training at the EIS.
8. Similar schemes have been tried at various times and locations. Perhaps the best known was at Rahway State Prison (now East Jersey State Prison), New Jersey, USA, in the late 1970s and early 1980s where professional contests took place inside the prison.
9. Many football and rugby clubs from the elite to the lower levels donated money or provisions to food banks but few, if any, were reported to have opened their doors to the needy and vulnerable in the way that boxing clubs did.
10. One of these instances was the fatal stabbing of an 85-year-old man by his 83-year-old wife in a domestic incident that was nothing to do with gangs or drugs.
11. See Clarke (2017) and D’Arcy (2018). The 2017 report stated that the gross hourly pay for Sheffield residents was £11.03, which was £1.15 below the national average. The 2018 report found that Sheffield (23%) was below only Nottingham (24%) in its percentage of employees in low pay. The Resolution Foundation is an independent economic ‘think tank’ established in 2005 with the aim of improving the standard of living of low- and middle-income families.

12. Figures published in June 2020 by the Office for National Statistics showed that a deprived area of Sheffield—the Crabtree and Fir Vale district—suffered the highest number of deaths (66) from the COVID-19 virus of any UK district in the three months to May. The figure was almost twice that of the next highest area, Church End in the London borough of Brent. The Sheffield figures are skewed somewhat by an unusually large number of care homes in Crabtree and Fir Vale.

13. Quoted in Price (2008).

14. Chartism was a national protest movement for political reform in Britain that campaigned from 1838 to 1857. Taking its name from the ‘People’s Charter’ of 1838, Chartism preferred constitutional methods to achieve its aims. However, some supporters became involved in violence to further their cause. Sheffield Chartist leader Samuel Holberry was arrested after arms and explosives were found at his home and later convicted of ‘riot and sedition’. Sentenced to four years’ imprisonment with hard labour, Holberry died of consumption (tuberculosis) in York Prison in June 1842, aged 27.

15. See Volume One.

16. Sheffield-born Socialist G. H. B. ‘Bert’ Ward (1876–1957) founded the Sheffield Clarion Ramblers in 1900. The club campaigned for public access to privately owned areas of the Peak District. In 1907, its members participated in an illegal mass trespass of moorland at Bleaklow. Ethel Haythornthwaite (1894–1986), the daughter of wealthy Sheffield industrialist Thomas W. Ward, campaigned against the development of countryside to the south-west of Sheffield and helped acquire land around the city that became its ‘green belt’. Appointed to the Government’s National Parks Committee, she was instrumental in the 1951 creation of the Peak District National Park, Britain’s first such entity.

17. See Volume One and Price (2008).

18. Licensing was introduced as a result of the Private Security Industry Act 2001, which sought to regulate both individuals and companies working in the trade.

19. For example, in the 1990s the Norfolk Park and adjacent Arbourthorne districts were home to a number of pubs from which Sunday football teams were run. None of these premises remain in their former guise. These included the Fellbrigg, the Vulcan, the Captive Queen, the Jervis
Lum, the Travellers and the Horse and Lion. Two are now Christian religious centres, one a Chinese restaurant and two convenience stores. The sixth was demolished in 2006.

20. In 2014 the *New York Times* mentioned the Kelham Island Tavern and its near neighbour the Fat Cat in its list of ‘50 places to visit’ in the UK.

21. How the COVID-19 pandemic affects the long-term viability of many such concerns is yet to be established.

22. In 1995 the corresponding figure was 19.8%.

23. The Cultural Industries Quarter lies between Sheffield city centre and the main railway station. It includes the Red Tape Central music recording studios, the Showroom Cinema, art workshops and galleries and film, television, graphic design, dance and theatre studios.

24. The precursor of the current Council Tax system, ‘rates’ enabled local councils to raise revenue by applying a ‘rateable value’ to every property based on the estimated annual rent each could actually or theoretically accrue. A council’s annual budget would then be divided by the total rateable value to produce the proportion of the rateable value that each householder or business would have to pay. This process was known as ‘setting a rate’.

25. A zero-hour contract is a type of contract between an employer and a worker, wherein the employer is not obliged to provide any minimum working hours, whilst the worker is not obliged to accept any work offered.

26. The *Supertram* network covers 18 miles (29 km) on three main lines, which reach a total of 48 roadside stations. A ‘tram-train’ extension to Rotherham opened in 2018.

27. Opened in 2001, the Millennium Gallery is an art gallery and museum complex with halls for both permanent and rotating exhibitions. In 2011, it was the 15th-most-visited free attraction in the country.

28. Opened by Queen Elizabeth II in 2003, the Winter Garden is one of the largest temperate glasshouses in the UK and the largest urban glasshouse in Europe.

29. Opened in 1966 for the football World Cup (some matches were staged in Sheffield), the 15-storey Grosvenor House Hotel was one of the city’s two four-star hotels, the other being the Hallam Tower Hotel, Broomhill, which opened in 1965. The Hallam Tower stood empty between its closure in 2004 and demolition in 2018.

30. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) statistics for 2016/2017, Sheffield Hallam University was the 11th-largest university in Britain with 30,815 students, whilst the University of Sheffield was 14th with 28,715. The overall total of 59,530 (some 10% of the city’s population) placed Sheffield behind London, Manchester, Cardiff, Glasgow and Nottingham in terms of total student numbers.
31. Labour’s Jared O’Mara took the Sheffield Hallam constituency from former Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg (Liberal Democrat) at the 2017 General Election. Two years later, O’Mara was suspended by the Labour Party following the publication of offensive comments he made on-line several years earlier. He then sat as an independent MP until resigning his seat in September 2019.

32. Labour’s fall in vote share in these constituencies was: Don Valley, 17.8%; Penistone and Stocksbridge, 12.5%; Sheffield South East, 12.4%; Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough, 10.8%; Sheffield Heeley, 9.7%; Sheffield Central, 4.2%; Sheffield Hallam, 3.7%.

33. In the early twentieth century the South Yorkshire coalfield employed over 100,000 people in 80 collieries. In the early 1980s, there were still some 50,000 working in the remaining 30 collieries. The last South Yorkshire colliery, Hatfield Main, closed in 2015.

34. British professional boxing returned in mid-July 2020, with fights taking place in a sterile environment in a television studio with just a few officials, journalists, pundits and technicians present. Promoter Frank Warren admitted that the event lost money but added: ‘It’s important the sport remains relevant and is seen.’

REFERENCES

All Party Parliamentary Group for Boxing. (2015). Boxing: The Right Hook—A Report by the All Party Parliamentary Group for Boxing. All Party Parliamentary Group for Boxing.

Clarke, S. (2017). Forging Ahead or Falling Behind? Devolution and the Future of Living Standards in the Sheffield City Region. Resolution Foundation.

D’Arcy, C. (2018). Low Pay Britain 2018. Resolution Foundation.

Grosvenor, C., & Beilby, C. (1927). The First Lady Wharncliffe and Her Family 1779–1856 (vol. 1). W. Heinemann.

Katz, J. (1988). Seductions of Crime: Moral and Sensual Attractions in Doing Evil. Basic Books.

Price, D. (2008). Sheffield Troublemakers: Rebels and Radicals in Sheffield History. Phillimore.

Sheffield City Council. (2004). Closing the Gap: A Framework for Neighbourhood Renewal. Sheffield City Council.

Sheffield One. (2001). City Centre Masterplan. Sheffield One.

South Yorkshire Police. (2017). Sheffield City Knife Crime Strategy 2018/21. South Yorkshire Police.