

A Word from the Editor...

So, here we are in July — our final meeting before the August break.

In last month's newsletter I mentioned the challenge of finding fresh material, and I'm pleased to say that our Treasurer, Graham, together with his wife Sue, has produced an interesting article exploring whether Charles Dickens did, in fact, visit Redditch.

A small anomaly in our arrangements is that our programme is organised by calendar year, while our membership runs from April to the following March. There are good reasons for this, but it does mean that when members join in April, they cannot yet see what is planned for the February and March meetings. To resolve this, the Committee has agreed that our programme leaflet will now cover the full calendar year *and* continue through to the following March. There will still only be ten meetings within the membership year, but this change allows members to view the complete programme at a glance. I have updated the website as I understand it at the moment.

When I changed the Newsletter from portrait to landscape format, I used the standard computer wide screen dimensions. If this is then printed out it leaves blank spaces at the top and bottom. I have therefore changed the dimensions so that they are A4 landscape, which means a printed copy fills the page and, also, gives me a bit more space to play with.

July Meeting

For our July meeting we saw another good turnout: 39 Members, and 8 Visitors, making 47 in total. Once again, we were delighted to see the Redditch Standard feature us with another great article, thanks to Pat's press release.

Our July speaker, Richard Churchley, an established local historian and regular Redditch History Society speaker, told the story of local law and order before 1850. This included rural crime, social unrest, class conflict, and how people made their voices heard long before anyone had the vote.

It was a fascinating look at how communities kept mischief-makers in line before there was a police force, and how ordinary people protested when the world around them started to change.





Exhibitions and Events

Exhibition: Fri 17 July to Mon 31 Aug
OUR FREEDOM AND YOURS

An exhibition by Sean Szmalc

An exhibition through the eyes of a soldier serving in the Polish Army through the WW2



Event: Sunday 13th September
11am to 4.00pm. Heritage Day

This forms part of the National Heritage Day Festival, offers free entry, and involves many members of our Management Committee. The leaflet for the event appears on page 7 and is also available at Forge Mill and at our reception.



Details of events and activities at the Museum including costs involved can be found at

<https://www.forgemill.org.uk/web/> 'What's On'



****** There is no meeting in August ******

Next Meeting – Monday 14th September

**The History of the Fishhook
by Anthony Green**

In this talk, I'll be exploring the history of the fishhook from the earliest times right up to the present day. It's remarkable that such a small object — essentially just a bent piece of wire with a point and a barb — can have such an enormous and far-reaching story.



Its history stretches back around **10,000 years**, and I'll be looking at how the earliest hooks were made and used, how they spread across the known world, and how they evolved from a simple tool for catching food into an essential part of a major international sport.

Along the way, I'll also be describing how **Redditch** became the centre of the fishing-tackle industry — and, sadly, how that industry eventually declined.

*'Local Law and Order and Popular Protest pre-1850
by Richard Churchley (1 of 2)*



*Above – Stocks at Winchcombe
Below The Old Lock Up Redditch at junction of
Alcester Street and Queen Street*



The full title of Richard's talk was *Local law and order and popular protest before 1850: manor courts, parish governance, riots and strikes*. His presentation explored the fascinating period before England had a centralised, professional police force focused on crime prevention and public order — a system that only began with Sir Robert Peel's Metropolitan Police in 1829 and became compulsory nationwide in 1856.

Richard began by explaining how law and order had long been administered at the local level. He outlined the manorial system of the Middle Ages, grouping its structure into five parts: the manor, the parish/vestry, the elite, the officials, and — forming the majority — those without influence. By the early modern period, the manor had declined as an economic unit but retained its legal authority.

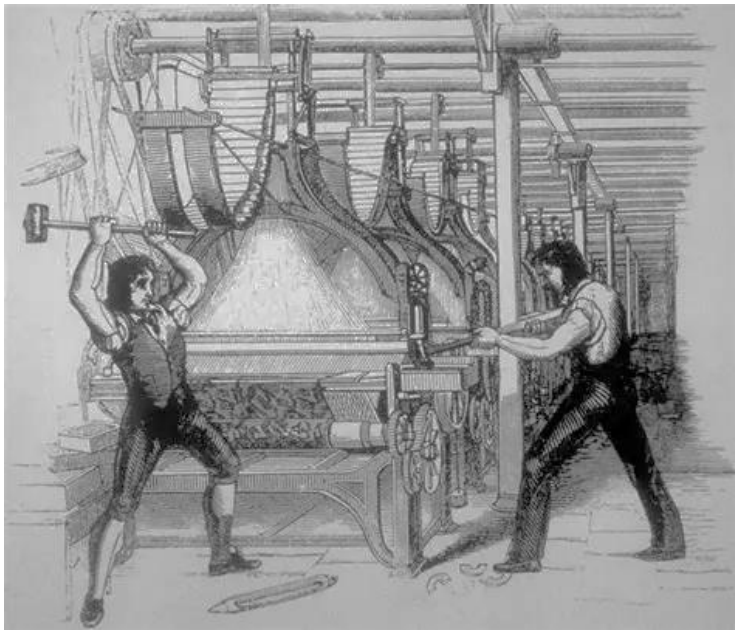
Within this system, villein tenure gradually evolved into copyhold and then leasehold land. Freeholders were not subject to manorial customs, and male freeholders worth at least 40 shillings a year could vote in local and parliamentary elections. From the 16th century onwards, leaseholding became increasingly common as landowners chose to let out land for a fixed term or for lives, reclaiming it once the term ended. Manor court officials included the Steward (appointed by the lord of the manor), a jury of householders, the constable, and various other officers. The constable's role was unpaid, though he could receive payment from individuals for tasks such as pursuing debts.

The court leet oversaw freemen's oaths of peacekeeping and good trading practice, and it tried and punished crimes within its jurisdiction. More serious offences were passed to the king's justices. Although court leets technically survived into the late 20th century, the few that remained had become purely ceremonial. The court leet also maintained local standards for weights and measures, which varied widely before national standardisation.

Local enforcement was carried out by the constable and his assistants, but major disturbances — particularly civil unrest — were dealt with by the military.



Above – Swing Riots
Below – Luddites



This period saw significant unrest driven by poverty, low wages, and the introduction of machinery that threatened traditional skills and livelihoods. Richard highlighted two major movements:

The Luddites, textile workers who destroyed weaving machinery in protest at industrial changes that devalued their craft. Some mill owners responded with violence, and the movement was eventually crushed by military force.

The Captain Swing Riots, which followed poor harvests and the spread of threshing machines. Farm workers, especially in the South East, set fire to barns and hay ricks. The authorities responded harshly, with executions, imprisonment, and transportation to Australia.

Closer to home, Richard described local strikes in the Redditch area. In 1826, needle pointers struck for three weeks during a hot summer, resisting a wage reduction of sixpence per day. On that occasion the masters gave in, though later strikes met with mixed success. Eventually the masters united and fixed rates of pay, bringing the disputes to an end.

Richard also touched on nationally significant events. The **Tolpuddle Martyrs**, Dorset labourers convicted for swearing a secret oath, were transported to Australia despite widespread public support. Their case prompted one of the first successful political marches in Britain, and all were eventually pardoned. He concluded with the **Peterloo Massacre** of 1819, when cavalry charged a peaceful crowd of 60,000–80,000 gathered at St Peter's Field, Manchester, to demand parliamentary reform. Fifteen people were killed and hundreds injured. The meeting had been organised by the radical speaker Henry Hunt, against a backdrop of economic hardship and lack of representation in rapidly growing industrial towns.

As always, Richard's presentation was rich in detail, and this summary reflects only what I managed to capture in my notes. The audience greatly appreciated his talk, and we look forward to welcoming him back next year.

It has long been believed by many that Charles Dickens visited Redditch in 1850. This belief arose from an article published in Household Words in January 1852 simply entitled Needles. Household Words was a two penny weekly magazine published between 30th March 1850 and 28th May 1859. Its editor was Charles Dickens (1812-1870) and its sub editor was W. H. Wills. Unlike today where most articles in newspapers are credited with their authors, in this magazine the authors were not mentioned. This raises the question: did Charles Dickens write this article? that Dickens visited Redditch twice.



The article in question is a long, detailed account of the way needles were manufactured. It is based on a visit to the Victoria Works in Edward Street hosted by the owner, Mr John James.

The account involves much travelling around the town visiting the homes of factory workers where outwork was undertaken, and various mills where different processes were being carried out.

Mr James was proud of the fact that he did not employ anyone under 10 and all his employees had had a good school education.

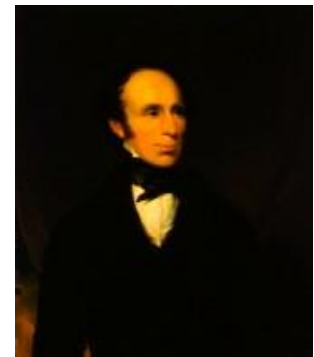
However, it was clear that the visitor, as they explored other employers in the town, did come across children of 7 or more undertaking simple tasks such as glueing labels onto packets of needles.

This was not the first description of needle making in Redditch.

In the 12th January 1843 edition of the Penny Magazine an article appeared entitled: A Day at the British Needle Mills, Redditch. (1)

We know that this was written by George Dodd (1808 – 1881), an English industrial writer, who was recruited by Charles Knight, the owner of the Penny Magazine, to write a series of articles entitled 'Days at the Factories' (2).

Like the later article, this was an extended and detailed account of social conditions in the needle-making industry. Dodd travelled with an artist so the article is enhanced with sketches of some of the workers they met as they worked at their bench. These two articles have led some to believe that Dickens visited Redditch twice.



In the nine years that Household Words was published, there were some 380 contributors, of whom 90 were women. Two of these were well known both then and now: Elizabeth Gaskell and Harriet Martineau (1802-1876).

The latter was a writer in her own right and is considered to be the mother of Sociology. She travelled abroad widely and wrote numerous books including "Society in America" (1837). In 1850 she agreed with Dickens to write for Household Words before the first edition was even published. There was a mutual respect between the two with Dickens saying her book on America was the best ever written.



Dickens regarded her as a 'forceful journalist' who had a 'ready pen, wrote clearly and was a firm believer in progress'. (3) Initially, she wrote stories for the magazine but found this unfulfilling. She suggested writing articles about manufacturing and contributed nine such articles. She wrote the article, 'Needles' which Dickens edited and published in 1852. It was Martineau who visited Redditch to research her article. The evidence for her writing the article can be found in Dickens Journal Online (4) and Hard Times and the Factory Controversy: Dickens vs. Harriet Martineau. (3) By 1853 Martineau had fallen out with Dickens and she never contributed to Household Words again.

By this time Charles Dickens had become a celebrity. The first time the term 'celebrity' was used was 1851 and he certainly fitted the bill.

He had already had huge success with novels such as 'Pickwick Papers' (1837), 'Oliver Twist' (1838), 'Christmas Carol' (1843) and 'David Copperfield' (1850).

With all his commitments in London and his writing it is unlikely he would find the time to visit that 'remarkable village in Worcestershire'.

It is always a little sad to have to dispel a myth that has given people pleasure and, of course, it is always possible that Dickens did visit Redditch, but not to write an article about needle making. While there is no evidence of such a visit we do have well documented evidence of his association with Birmingham where he expressed his admiration for its working people and their ambitions to improve themselves.

Redditch had its own celebrities who promoted education and pushed for change and progress.

Sources:

1. Supplement 33 of the Penny Magazine Vol 12 January 12th 1843.
2. Days at the Factories: a Tour of Victorian Industry with the Penny Magazine. Article by Geoffrey Tweeddale for the Society for the History of Technology. 1988.
3. Hard Times and the Factory Controversy: Dickens vs Harriet Martineau by K. J. Fielding and Anne Smith in Nineteenth Century Fiction Vol 24 No 4 The Charles Dickens Centennial (March 1970) pages 404 – 427.
4. Dickens Journal Online: Household Words. 28th February 1852. Vol IV pages 540-546.

**FORGE MILL
Needle Museum**
HERITAGE DAY
September 13th 2026



Forge Mill Needle Museum in Redditch illustrates the rich heritage of the needle and fishing tackle industries. Models and recreated scenes provide a vivid illustration of how needles were once made, and how Redditch once produced 90% of the world's needles.

On the same site, just a short walk from Forge Mill Museum, are the ruins of Bordesley Abbey - a medieval Cistercian Abbey which has been extensively excavated. The Abbey Visitor Centre, is in an original reconstructed 16th century barn. Our Community Supported Heritage Day runs from 11am to 4.00 pm on the day, the site opens at 10 am.

Activities

Amongst the wide range of local activities which we will have are:

- A range of iconic motorbikes from the Royal Enfield owners Club
- Meticulously built model boats from the Little Radford Model Boat Club
- We will have music throughout the day from Indigo Arts our local community charity supporting young people. They will be presenting 'The Eye of the Needle', a musical history of needle making at Forge Mill Museum from the 18th to 21st September (entry cost involved) and will giving a preview at our Heritage Day on the 13th of September.
- AIR (Arts in Redditch), a charitable organisation promoting and supporting arts, will be on-site with local artists and information on art in the town.
- Worcestershire Wildlife Trust will be promoting wildlife in Worcestershire.
- plus, other local organisations.
- Free entry to the current exhibition in the Museum gallery
- Free entry into the museum - with the only existing water powered scouring mill which has been refurbished for 2026.
- Tours by experienced volunteer guides of the Needle Museum and the Bordesley Abbey Ruins.
- Access to the newly refurbished children's play area plus activities for children.
- Gifts, local produce, and needles can be purchased from the Museum Shop.
- Refreshments and light lunches are available from the refurbished and extended Mill View Coffee Bar.

Needle Manufacture in the mid-19th Century

In the article *Did Charles Dickens Visit Redditch?* by Graham and Sue Smith (pages 5 and 6), two publications were mentioned that describe needle manufacture in Redditch during the 1850s.

Forge Mill Needle Museum in Redditch illustrates the rich heritage of the needle and fishing-tackle industries. Its models and recreated scenes show vividly how needles were once made, and how Redditch came to produce around 90% of the world's needles. The site includes the only water-powered needle-scouring mill left anywhere in the world, and much of the original Victorian machinery is still in place.

Below are three photographs of scenes from the museum that correspond with the period described in the article.



Needle Pointing using a water powered high speed rotary grindstone



Stamping out the needle eyes using a foot operated press.



The water powered scouring beds used to clean and polish the needles.

This Newsletter is edited and published by Anthony Green, Society Secretary, Redditch History Society and is produced on behalf of the Society.

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