

3. Historic development

3.1 Origins and historic development of settlement

In pre-historic times Lancashire was sparsely populated and lowland areas like Ashton, were covered with forest oak and scrub. No pre-historic remains have been found around Ashton. The Romans opened up the area with their roads and one road linking their forts in Warrington and Wigan passed through the middle of Ashton near what is now the Red Lion Inn on Gerard Street. There is no evidence of a settlement at this time.

People lived in scattered farmsteads or groups of cottages and it is likely from the origins of the name (ash – tree; ton – enclosure or village), that the first significant community by the brook crossing formed when the Angles settled in Lancashire in the 6th and 7th Centuries.

As the Domesday book did not identify many settlements in Lancashire, there is little evidence of the history of Ashton until the first of the Gerard family settled in the area in the 14th Century. During the early 14th Century, Thomas Earl of Lancaster was the feudal overlord of Lancashire and wide areas of the county suffered from persistent and devastating floods between 1314 – 1316, followed by the impact of the Black Death during 1349 – 1351. It is likely that the small community at Ashton experienced the impact of these disasters.

Since the 15th Century, much of the information on the history of Ashton – in - Makerfield is based on the exchanges of land, marriages and the affairs of the Gerards, a strong catholic family. The Ashton coat-of-arms is an adaption of the Gerard coat of arms. In the mid 16th Century, Sir Thomas Gerard bought the remaining part of the manor of Ashton and became the sole lord. When in 1589, Robert Byrchall made a bequeath of money to found the Ashton – in – Makerfield Grammar School, Sir Thomas Gerard granted a plot of land near Seneley Green.

St Thomas's church had been an important focal point for the village and though it was first written about in 1515 as a chapel of ease, it is likely to have been at this location since the medieval times. Ashton-in-Makerfield or in the Willows, as it was variously called, had become the largest and most populous of the settlements in the ancient Parish of Winwick, and was originally included in the Diocese of York. About the beginning of the tenth century, the land between the Ribble and the Mersey was transferred to the Diocese of Lichfield then in 1541 to the new Diocese of Chester. In 1880 the Diocese of Liverpool was created out of Chester, and Ashton has been in the Diocese of Liverpool since that date. It was rebuilt in 1784, the chapel enlarged in 1815 and then completely rebuilt in 1893 with the present building. St Oswalds Roman Catholic church was first built in 1822 and replaced on the same site in 1930. The Congregational Church designed by Waterhouse was built in 1867 next to the brook on Gerard St, but this was vacated in 1973 and has now been demolished.

During the 17th Century, Ashton would have been a small village in a very rural and sparsely populated area. The impact of the Civil War must have been significant as the routes of both the Royalist and Parliamentarian armies passed through on a number of occasions, and the plague of 1649 also reduced the population. As the century continued, the first coal mines were sunk and small cotton mills built around Ashton, taking the few cottage industries into the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution. This started a rapid population growth of the settlement which was marked by the first Unitarian Chapel in 1697.

Ashton was greatly affected and the social and economic life of the community saw great changes during the C18. With the expansion of mining and cotton mills around the town came the growth of metal working and ironware, particularly the manufacture of hinges, locks, nails, door handles and files. Ashton became a centre for these trades with a concentration of dealers in a relatively small town.

A sketch map of the settlement in 1796 shows the current town centre and present day Conservation Area, based on Gerard Street, as built up, with surrounding fields and mines. The influence of the Gerard family on the development of Ashton continued through these centuries – particularly after they moved to New Hall on the edge of Ashton towards the end of the C19.

By the beginning of the C19, Lancashire was the most heavily industrialised county in England and by 1814 Ashton had grown to a population of nearly 5,000 people. Baines Lancashire Directory in 1824 described Ashton as ‘this large populous village forms the centre of a brisk manufacturing district, where the poor are industrious and their employers prosperous’. Coal mining was the main industry and it played a vital role in the life of the community. Even so, the Mannex Directory of 1855 described a wide range of employment in the town also including metal workers, cotton spinners, corn millers and farmers.

The Turnpike Roads and the later expansion of the railways with the nearby station at Bryn had a significant role in promoting the growth of Ashton.

The first Ordnance Survey map of 1849 showed a small town clustered around the main through road benefiting from the brook crossing. Most of the current Conservation Area was built-up with the main through road and junctions following the Medieval layout, including the unexpected bend in Gerard Street. St Thomas’s church and vicarage and the Roman Catholic chapel with its



Figure 3: Ordnance Survey map of 1849

Presbytery are important buildings as are the inns, including the Golden Lion, the Gerard Arms, the King's Arms and the Robin Hood, all rebuilt in the second half of the century and still standing. The nearby coal mines and cotton spinning factories are identified around the edges of the town.

The population grew rapidly in the second half of the 19th Century - from 5,679 in 1851; to 7,463 in 1,364 houses in 1871; and 18,687 in 1901. Many immigrants came from Ireland and Wales for work in the expanding mines and cotton spinning industries. A Welsh community established on the Bolton Road at Stubshaw Cross where Welsh was widely spoken and chapels and eisteddfods supported the community. As a result of this expansion, most of the town centre was rebuilt during the period 1850 to 1905. The first redevelopments were on the north side of Gerard Street – Palatine Buildings 1863 at the Garswood Street junction, followed by the adjacent Commercial Buildings in 1876,. The development continued down the hill, to the north, with no's. 10 to 14 built in 1890, Central Buildings in 1899, the redevelopment of the Gerard Arms in 1895, and the Golden Lion Inn in 1905. Across the road, no's 3 and 5 Bridge Foot House were rebuilt in 1902, no's. 7 to 13 in 1872, the Red Lion Inn in 1893, and the Cross Keys on the corner site opposite the Wigan Road junction in 1900.

Civic buildings were added to this commercial expansion, with the Police Station on the Warrington Road and in 1906, the Carnegie Library on the Wigan Road and the Town Hall on Bryn Street – both outside the Conservation Area. This reflected the growing importance of the local Board of Health, established 1872, and the Urban District Council from 1894.

This period of major redevelopment reflected the fast growing economy based on the traditional industries and the rapidly expanding population. This confidence lasted until the First World War but the next half of the C20 saw the gradual failure and loss of the mining, cotton spinning and metalworking industries.

The last of the significant traditional industries was Cromptons whose building on the south side of Gerard Street was located on the site of Rock House, originally two houses built in the early C17, and demolished in the mid 1950's. Crompton's buildings have been replaced by the Gerard Centre shopping complex.

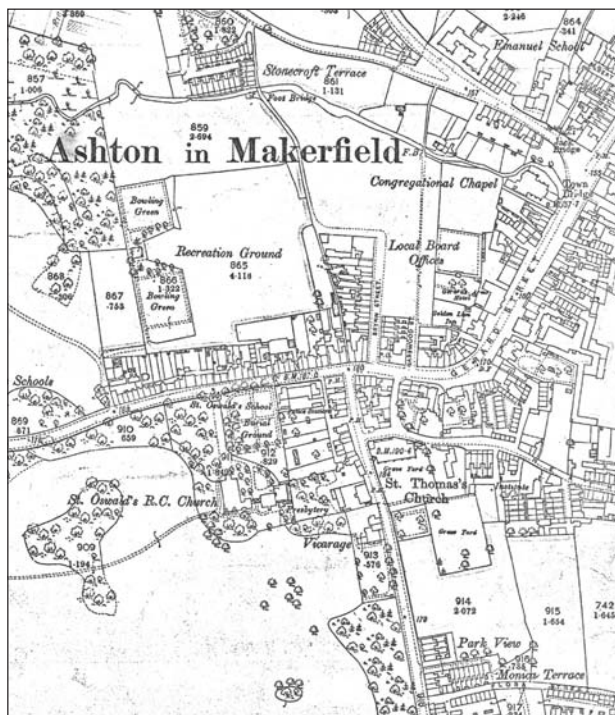


Figure 4: Ordnance Survey map of 1891



Figure 5: Ordnance Survey map of 1908

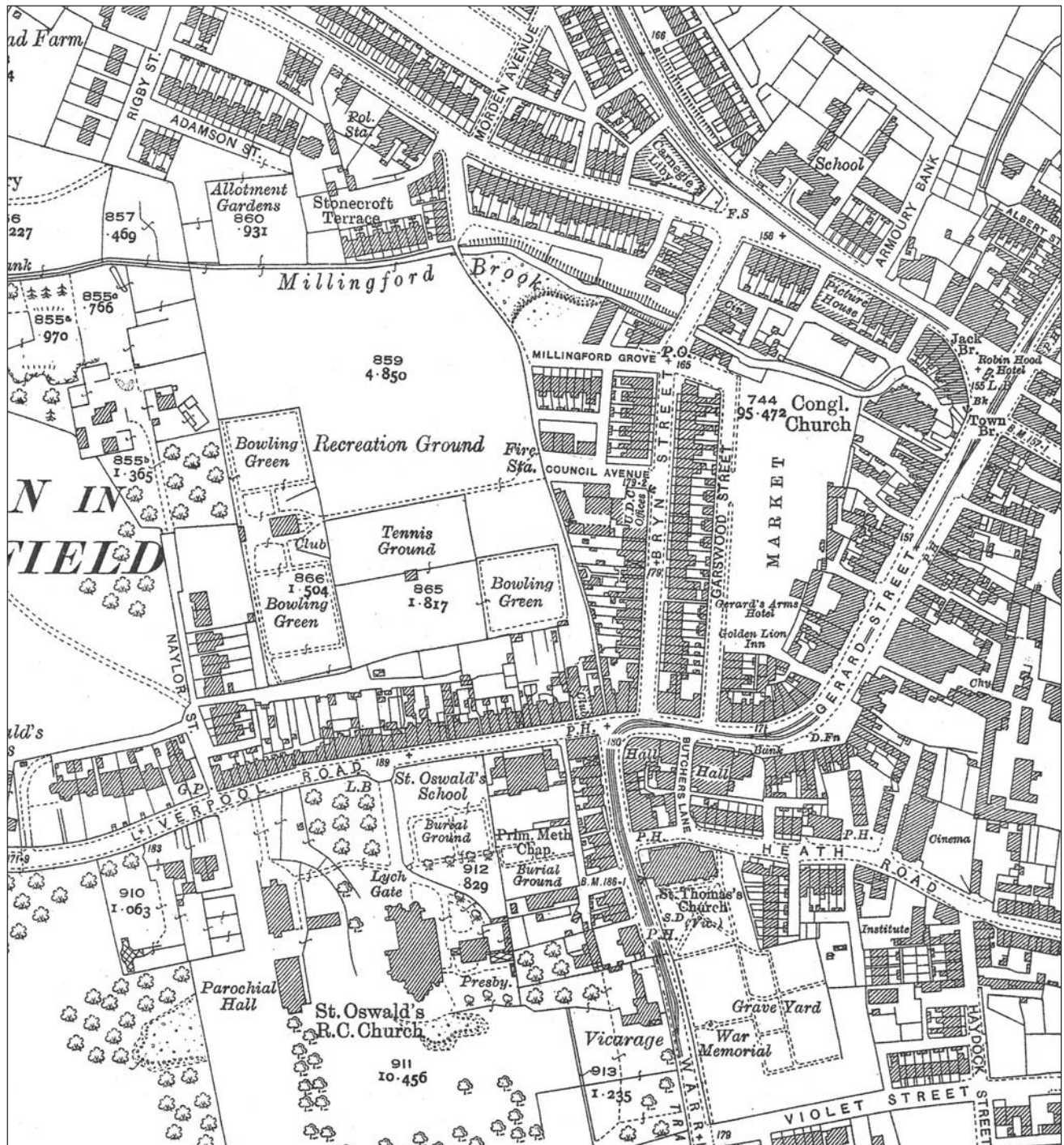


Figure 6: Ordnance Survey map of 1928

The Ordnance Survey maps of 1891 and 1908 show a few changes of note. A formal market location was established on Garswood Street, behind the Gerard Arms hotel, and the introduction of the tramway through the town centre along Warrington Road, Gerard Street and Wigan Road required the buildings on the tight corner of Warrington Road and Gerard Street to be demolished. This site was redeveloped by the 1928 Ordnance Survey (figure 6 overleaf) with the high brick Cooperative Hall which forms a significant corner feature to mark the off-set junction with Bryn Street – now an important through route for traffic.

Most of the examples of small terrace housing, along and off Heath Road were built by 1893. Of particular note are the oldest group called A Court which has a pedestrian link through the early Victorian shops onto Gerard Street. Between 1893 and 1901, the Commercial Inn and the distinctive Church Terrace were added to Heath Street with further infill housing. A cinema was built next to A Court by 1928, but this has now been demolished and the site being rebuilt with

housing. Just outside the Conservation Area is the Cave Browne Evangelical Chapel 1882 and the historic Hingemakers Arms with a fine wall plaque – listed as an active public house in 1869.

The Conservation Area includes important examples of this history and demonstrates the difference between the built up commercial centre of Gerard St, the traditional workers back street housing, and the surrounding open spaces to the west including the recreation ground and the two church grounds.

3.2 Archaeological significance

There is little current archaeological information on Ashton-in-Makerfield other than information and sightings on the route of the Roman road from Wigan to Warrington.

The line of the road crosses the Conservation Area though the most visible finds have been outside the boundary - across a field south of Nicol Road by its line of gravel; and at the west end of the Cotton Mill facing onto Old Road.

In 1993 Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit excavated a length of the Roman Road at Bryn Road. The road had a gently cambered profile and was over 5 metres wide with a possible surviving ditch to the west. It was constructed of irregular sandstone blocks bedded onto a sand and gravel base.

Further archaeological investigations of the historic settlement core will take place in the future. In particular, there may be sections of the Roamn Road that require trial trenching and more detailed excavation should significant remains be found that would be affected by development.

Development will be subject to PPG16 considerations and the Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit can advise on development proposals in the Conservation Area as part of the planning process.