EDITORIAL

Made in Manchester

‘What Manchester thinks today, London thinks tomorrow’ (19th century saying)

This issue is dedicated to Manchester and its celebration of 60 years of academic occupational medicine. As a Mancunian myself I am particularly proud to be writing this editorial and introducing you to a special issue that has seen the people of Manchester respond to another challenge. Whether it is industry, art, music, football or academic occupational medicine, Manchester consistently produces the goods.

Manchester is a young city and was only officially granted city status in 1853. The industrial revolution of the eighteenth century saw it become the ‘shock city of the age’ and according to Disraeli ‘the most wonderful city of modern times’. The wonder lay in the way the city had changed economically and socially and had grown from a town of 90,000 people in 1800 to a city of more than two million within its greater area by 1900. When cotton was king, Manchester and its satellites spun half the cotton in Europe. A huge social revolution rode the back of the first urban product of the industrial revolution and featured significant signs of occupational health as early as 1790. An outbreak of factory fever due to typhus occurred in the Radcliffe district of the city in 1784 and proved a tipping point in conditions for workers [1]. Sir Robert Peel, then Home Secretary, declared himself aghast at the conditions in his own factories and his subsequent actions led to him becoming the father of industrial legislation. Dr Thomas Percival, a physician, polymath and friend of Voltaire, was appointed to form the Manchester Board of Health in 1795 [2]. The work of the board created the impetus that led to improved working conditions for factory workers throughout the world. When a new initiative on occupational health was taken by the Ministry of Labour in 1955, Meiklejohn argued for a revival of the ‘revolutionary’ ideas of Percival [3]. Strangely another Percival (Richard) a linen weaver, was the first casualty of the English Civil War in 1642 when Manchester was one of very few towns in Lancashire to support Parliament against King Charles I and suggests that Manchester’s revolutionary tendencies are somewhat deep seated [4].

In this issue the more recent history of Manchester’s occupational medicine is explored in a brace of articles by Andy Slovak, profiling the professors from the city and its academic work and achievements [5,6]. Less formal, but just as enlightening, is the account of daily life in the academic department written by Barbara Rigby a loyal servant of the university during many years [7]. The city’s not too distant industrial past is highlighted in a beautiful series of photographs by John Darwell who reminds us that whilst the city today is rejuvenating itself with breathing modern architecture its industrial heritage remains evident even if the satanic mills are increasingly silent and more likely to house young professionals than mule spinners. These photographs show us that industrial and social change continues apace and once again Manchester is at the cutting edge of urban life.

All the original research in this issue either emanates from Manchester or has some Mancunian connection, an impressive achievement in its own right. Of particular note are a series of articles from The Health and Occupation Reporting network (THOR). ODIN and THOR have done as much as any other initiative to further knowledge and understanding about occupational ill health in the UK in the last decade. They have also provided a model for other schemes around the world and their innovation and continuing contribution to the advancement of occupational medicine cannot be underestimated. The articles we publish demonstrate the rich seam of information now being mined and the ability to drill into that seam, whether regional [8], by workforce sector [9] or by health problem [10,11].

What Manchester thinks today the rest of the world thinks tomorrow! Idle boast from a big-headed city or as true today as when Manchester provided the economic muscle that clothed half the world? In this issue you can judge for yourself.

John Hobson
Honorary Editor

References

4. www.manchesteronline.co.uk


Acid bath: Part of the felting process for bowler and top hats using rabbit fur that covered everything including the camera gear. (Reproduced with permission from ‘Working Lives’ by John Darwell.)