

INTRODUCTION

My long-standing interest in personal testimony was given added impetus during the mid 1970s as a result of private conversations with people who, by then long since retired, had at some time worked for differing periods in the ceramic industry of North Staffordshire. If they had one thing in common it was the richness of their individual experiences which fortunately they were usually able to recall with an impressive clarity. I was particularly conscious at this time of the sad fact that unless someone took the trouble to establish a permanent record of these memories valuable information would disappear with the holder's passing.

I was also concurrently carrying out research involving the use of documentary evidence compiled by Government Inspectors sent to the region in the mid-19th century to investigate conditions experienced by pottery workers, especially children. In the forefront of these investigations were Samuel Scriven and Robert Baker. Scriven had undertaken his survey in 1840s while Baker carried out a similar exercise in the early 1860s. What their investigations revealed was an industry in need of radical improvement, especially with regard to its attitude concerning the employment of children. Both Scriven and Baker interviewed child workers of both sexes who at the age of, for example, seven years were required to undertake heavy work that was invariably characterised by danger and by low or near non-existent pay.

It occurred to me at the time (the mid-1970s) that these children were, at least in chronological terms, of the same generation as the grandparents of the people I was holding conversations with. What I was told elicited the interesting and somewhat shocking evidence that little had been achieved in improving worker welfare during a period exceeding seventy years. Reading of the Scriven and Baker reports ran parallel with my then increasing interest in the writings of William Morris who, incidentally, had actually delivered a lecture in Burslem Town Hall in 1881 to which he gave the title 'The Art and Beauty of the Earth'. I suspect that Morris's intended audience was, ideally, those people for whom he had the greatest concern, essentially pottery workers possessing artistic aspirations who, as he saw it, were being exploited and dehumanised by monotonous routine. He was, of course, especially concerned about what he perceived to be the replacement of human labour by 'abominable machines'. In reality those who attended the lecture appear to have been the factory owners and others with a professional and perhaps cynical interest in his philosophy.

It was Morris's belief that most jobs in ceramic manufacture were exploitative and devoid of any creative satisfaction. One of my reasons for reading Scriven and Baker was to establish whether this was always and inevitably the case. Other sources suggest that this view of 19th century production was not entirely accurate. Indeed, Scriven's interviews with adult workers frequently reveal evidence indicating opportunities for self expression and even self improvement. Surprisingly, work that was routine and devoid of any obvious skills, often held for those involved a level of satisfaction that would not have been readily

apparent to the casual observer. However, there were jobs in the industry that were inherently dangerous and without any opportunities for rewards material or otherwise, work that might have taken place in an environment of extreme heat, or conversely in conditions characterised by damp and cold; sliphouse procedures being an obvious example.

Attempts to establish parallels between 19th century manufacture and conditions and practices in the 20th century may at first sight appear invalid. The exercise perhaps takes on a greater relevance when it is recognised that many early 20th century practices had changed little in their fundamental principles over more than a hundred years.

The interviews that follow provide a mixture of information, some of it not entirely relevant to the subject of job satisfaction. As the work progressed my aims were widened, given the quality of the evidence being provided, so that what began as a project with a specific purpose in mind took on an extra dimension.

Oral history does however have its critics. They make the important point that anecdote cannot be easily corroborated and is therefore often of limited value. Past experience and an innate caution in these matters mean that I can readily sympathise with if not totally endorse this view. A good example of the pitfalls inherent in any alleged fact that cannot be independently verified is provided by the writings of a 19th century historian named Simeon Shaw. He states in the preface to his book, *History of the Staffordshire Potteries*, 1829: 'This volume originated in the reminiscences of many aged persons, who witnessed the time and manner in which the art of pottery had attained much of its importance.'

It is, however, unfortunate for Shaw's credibility and hence reputation as an historian, that many of his stories are little better than rumours. In his defence it must be said that he lived at a time when public libraries, as we know them today, didn't exist. Even if there had been a library in Shaw's time it would have contained very few books relevant to his subject, simply because they had not in the 1820s been written. A present day historian has access to avenues for investigation that would have been inconceivable even fifty years ago. The computer is perhaps the most obvious example of a highly sophisticated technology with immense potential for anyone engaged in research. In Shaw's case, because he lacked reliable documentary evidence, handed-down stories still in circulation were his only source.

A much more recent comment on this aspect of oral testimony is provided by Stephen Caunce in *Oral History and the Local Historian*, 1994. He writes, 'What I know I can vouch for, what someone else tells me, I can pass on with a comment on their reliability, but what I hear from someone who heard it from someone else is really just a rumour.' A further point that the collector of oral testimony should be aware of is that a contributor may have a wish to please, in other words tempted to give the interviewer details that they believe are expected or required. The only insurance against placing unwarranted reliance on such contributions is a strong grounding in the history and traditions of the subject under investigation. I believe I was on the whole fortunate in receiving quality evidence from people who were largely dispassionate and objective.

A further point that must be considered concerning the quality of the evidence being provided is in instances where the contributor appears to be so authoritative that whatever