

SNODLAND AND  
'CEMENTOPOLIS'  
1841-1881



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INTRODUCTION

'Cementopolis' is a word coined by Victorian newspaper writers to describe the group of industrial workings which had grown up on the banks of the Medway, especially in the four parishes of Burham, Halling, Snodland and Wouldham. Some of the largest lime and cement factories in the country were developed here in what had hitherto been a predominantly rural area and their activities caused some amazement for visitors expecting the delights of the 'Garden of England'.

Encouraged and accompanied by travellers as enterprising as myself, I have recently employed a summer holiday in visiting a town known as Cementopolis, of which I had for years only heard dim, vague, and doubtful accounts. It is not unpleasantly situated in an amphitheatre of hills with a river branch for its base, filled with a flotilla of shipping. Its inhabitants are numerous and industrious, though what it is they are doing it is not easy for a stranger to discover. The courteous Alderman of the arrondissement I visited controls the Cementopolis and North Down Railway and chartered a special train for us, by which we were taken from the dockyards to the distant hills, passing serried rows of furnaces and mounds of coal; through realms of stacked wood and mighty masses of piled bricks, through tunnels, one more than half a mile long, over viaducts and under bridges, the latter giving a pleasant spice of excitement to the expedition, for if the traveller is too curious, or not careful enough in ducking, he runs some danger of being scalped. These perils surmounted, you arrive at immense excavations, which recall the quarries of Syene, and there you see scores of men, at various altitudes blasting (with gunpowder), picking, prising, and shovelling lumps of some cretaceous mineral, with which a long row of railway trucks is speedily filled. These lumps are carried away by a snorting Shetland-pony-like locomotive to a spot where the first of a series of gigantic and demoniacal machines takes charge of them and claws and scratches the lumps to pieces. The resulting mass is then mixed and macerated with a darker mineral, dug from a nearer spot, and twirled and drenched until it loses its pristine purity, the resulting compound being pumped to distant beds, where it rests for some days to settle. This peaceful period over, the water is poured off the stuff, which is toasted over plutonic fires in enormous kilns, the result being nodules as hard as iron. These again are taken to immense iron jaws and cracked and crunched and ground, and punched and stamped and triturated until they reach the stage of almost impalpable powder. Then it reaches something like rest and is stored into 2 cwt barrels.

These barrels are also made in Cementopolis and, as Pepys says, "it is mighty pretty" to see the strips of timber brought from the spreading stacks outside into the sawdust-laden atmosphere of the noisy cooperage and turned into barrels in the twinkling of a bed-post to the tune of six hundred a day. Swishsh ! sweeshsh ! the heated staves are shaped. Rattle ! thud ! thump ! bang ! the staves are forced into form and held by iron rings. Whirr ! whirr ! the edges are bevelled. Krunch ! prrsh ! kerrishe ! prrsh ! the head is rounded. Tap ! tap ! the wooden hoops are on. Tank ! tank ! the iron ones follow, and then the final tub is sent rolling down the gangway to be branded and stored in capacious sheds. I haven't space to tell you of all the resources of the place, the extent of its productions, or the ingenuity of its appliances. Suffice it to say that it is well worth a visit and of travelling some distance to see. If you want to go to this *terra incognita* you must take steamer to New Hythe or the coach to Burham, and when there seek the friendly aid of Mr. Butler, the energetic manager of the flourishing Burham Cement Company. He has something like a thousand men to look after, but, like all busy men, he can often

find half an hour to devote to interested tourists who desire to explore this wonderful but almost unknown locality.<sup>1</sup>

A former Rector of Snodland suggested that within the Garden of England Snodland might be considered as ‘one of the tool-sheds’. The description would not have been valid before the mid-nineteenth century when Snodland was small, like its neighbours, (a population of 300-400 in 50-60 houses) and dependent on farming for its livelihood. The years between about 1840 and 1880 were perhaps the most momentous in Snodland’s history. The village changed from relying on agriculture as the principal way of life to one in which the paper and cement industries came to dominate employment. It is true that both industries had gained a foothold here many years before, but then on a small scale and farming (as with so many other local communities) continued to provide the food, follow the seasons, and infiltrate the lives of all. Reporting on the opening of the Strood to Maidstone railway in 1856 *The South-Eastern Gazette* noted ‘The next conspicuous object [after Larkfield church] is the extensive lime works at Burham, [...] from which a large proportion of the builders of the metropolis are supplied. This is a flourishing little industrial colony, creating and diffusing wealth, both by what they consume and what they produce.’ Thomas Cubitt’s brick and lime works at Burham (in which many Snodland men worked) evoked much admiration from the writer of an article in *The Illustrated News of the World* (8 October 1859):

“... on viewing the whole field, with its various and numerous engines, buildings, tramways, kilns, wharves, &c., one cannot but see that here are what may be justly termed the model brick-works. Here are concentrated the results of near half a century’s experience and improvements. Everything is in the right place. Nothing superfluous. Every possible attention has been given to economise labour and material, and every advantage taken of the natural position of the estate. When in full work, between 600 and 700 men and boys are employed, and from 25,000,000 to 30,000,000 of bricks, besides tiles and pipes, can readily be turned out from the works; which, however, can be considerably augmented without any great outlay, or increasing the present steam power.”

At Snodland and Halling the lime works of Poynder and Hobson, one of the earliest in the district, began in 1819 and with a companion works at Northfleet again supplied materials for major building projects in London and elsewhere. This factory expanded after William Lee bought it in 1844 and he was one of three brothers also involved in major national building projects. Poynder and Hobson’s first manager William Peters went on to create his own works at Wouldham in the 1850s, which was said to have become the largest of its kind. Again Snodland men were employed there and by 1880 some 600 men were said to cross the Medway to and fro daily in the small ferry boats of Snodland, Halling and New Hythe. Meanwhile Charles Townsend Hook took over the paper mill in 1855 and built it into a large and successful enterprise.

These were years of social change too as the enterprising Victorians set about exploring and regulating communal life. The area Workhouse had replaced poor relief in individual parishes, schools were inspected, the conditions for children working in factories were investigated, the advent of the railways opened up business and travel for many, a plethora of newspapers spread news of all kinds, whether, local, national, or international. Societies were set up to assist parishioners in planning for hard times—the Foresters, Shepherds, Odd Fellows—and in seeking greater fulfilment in their lives—Gardeners’ Societies, evenings of lectures, readings and music, sport, and the creation of the Working Men’s Club.

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<sup>1</sup> *South Eastern Gazette*, 10 September 1889, by ‘Verax’.

This account is laid out as a series of interlocking essays, each focussing on a particular aspect, exploring Snodland's development in the years 1841 to 1881, and naturally taking in links with Halling, Burham and Wouldham. Of course local industry continued to expand at a similar rate between 1881 and the outbreak of the First World War, but its roots were founded in the forty years before that date. In particular in Snodland the leadership and philanthropy of Charles Townsend Hook (1832-1877) at the paper mill and William Lee (1801-1881) at the cement works gave so much to the local area, not only in employment, but also in enriching its social life. Both lived in the village and served as parish officers in several capacities, endeavouring to improve the lot not only of their workers and their families, but of the whole community.

#### Abbreviations

KAS	Kent Archaeological Society
KHLC	Kent History and Library Centre, Maidstone
MALSC	Medway Archives and Local Study Centre
ODNB	Oxford Dictionary of National Biography
SHS	Snodland Historical Society
SMM	Snodland Millennium Museum
THA	Smurfit Kappa Townsend Hook Archive (at SMM)
TNA	The National Archives, Kew

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