

Organisation: Wessex Archaeology

Authors: Milica Rajic

Topic: Hollis Croft, Sheffield: an innovative approach to publishing



Background

In 2017 a team from the Wessex Archaeology Sheffield office investigated a site that tells the story of the city in miniature. Located on the western fringe of the historic core of Sheffield, Hollis Croft was agricultural land for centuries; first, open land – the ‘Town Field’ – and then enclosed. However, its character became radically different when it was swept along by the changes of the Industrial Revolution. Historic maps from the late 18th century onwards show steelworks, various toolmakers’ premises, workers’ housing and pubs appearing and proliferating on the site. Occupied by Footprint Tools Ltd for much of the 20th century, this part of Hollis Croft is currently gaining a new lease of life thanks to the construction of a multi-million pound mixed commercial and student housing development.

Working in collaboration with the South Yorkshire Archaeological Service, archaeological advisors to Sheffield City Council for Johnson Associates (UK) Ltd (on behalf of GL Europe RE2 Holdings SARL), our early works involved undertaking historic building recording followed by a scheme of archaeological evaluation trenching. This was undertaken by a team from Wessex Archaeology’s Sheffield office managed by Milica Rajic. The trenching revealed that substantial historic remains relating to the site’s steelworking past survived beneath the modern buildings. Open area excavation revealed well-preserved industrial archaeology comprising steelmaking furnaces and a network of brick-built flues, along with traces of the workers’ housing and their local pubs (*The Cock* and *The Orange Branch*). A wide range of finds was collected, indicative of both the technical details of the industrial processes taking place and also the everyday lives of Sheffielders who lived and worked at Hollis Croft in the past. Because of its proximity to Sheffield city centre, the site attracted a great deal of public and media interest. During the course of the excavations we were interviewed by ITV, BBC Radio 4, BBC Look North, BBC Radio Sheffield, and *The Sheffield Star*. Most importantly, members of the public were also able to see the site for themselves, thanks to a popular programme of tours and open days. All our findings have been brought together in a final report, with the finds from the site donated to Museums Sheffield. The site report is available for free download from Wessex Archaeology website.

Innovative publishing approach

In spring 2021 we published an updated technical report and a comic book with [Internet Archaeology](#) and the archive with [Archaeology Data Service](#) (ADS). *Hollis Croft: A Matter of Time* is a unique comic book, published as a final excavation report, which aims to engage new audiences with a tale of history, female identity and the survival of people who lived and worked in the UK’s industrial towns and cities during the 19th century. It is a thought-provoking look at both untold queer history and the universal experiences of many people living in harsh and difficult conditions in Victorian Sheffield.

The comic weaves a human story into the archaeological remnants and artefacts uncovered during the excavation of the site. The author, Milica Rajic, uses the factual historical and archaeological evidence from an excavation she managed at Hollis Croft, Ordnance Survey maps and written records to reconstruct the site and the local landscape and to inform the story.

The comic features a cast of historical characters including Pablo Fanque, the circus owner who brought his show to Sheffield and Madame Naomi, a palmist who lived on nearby West Street (see Figures 1-3 below for example images). The story itself follows an imagined young woman, Neive, who leaves the poverty of her parents’ home in West Ireland to seek work in the industrial cities of Northern England. She finds herself in Sheffield, having to hide her femininity to work in steel cementation factories, and she must also hide her forbidden love for Liz.

Appendix 3.8a

The comic is imagined as a different way of connecting people with the past and its archive, in a way that is hopefully easier to understand and more accessible. Technical archaeological reports rarely reach the wider public at the best of times, and when they do, they can be complicated and sometimes very dry. *Hollis Croft: A Matter of Time* was created out of a need to get more people excited and engaged in archaeology, because the stories and potential stories are just sitting there in archives, waiting to be explored.

The digital version of the comic, hosted by *Internet Archaeology*, links the historic Hollis Croft with its archaeological archive and historical records of the area and the time. Just as grey literature directly links with the actual site archive, an X on the 12 full page illustrations in the online viewer marks the 'clickable spot'. When selected, these take the reader straight to the archive or other documents and images concerning the site and the project.

The book is available free online via *Internet Archaeology* (<https://intarch.ac.uk/journal/issue56/4/comic.html>) and can be ordered from Oxbow Books [<https://www.oxbowbooks.com/oxbow/9781911137214.html>].



Figure 1 Comic book image (©Wessex Archaeology)



Figure 2 Comic book image (©Wessex Archaeology)



Figure 3 Comic book image (©Wessex Archaeology)