

THE SALFORD GAS SCANDAL OF 1887¹

John Garrard

One hundred and one years ago, Salford was rocked by a shaming, extravagant and sometimes hilarious scandal with a significance extending far beyond its locality. It can indeed be taken as an indicator issue — a sort of litmus test for certain important aspects of society at the time. Causally, it emerged from at least three interconnected trends within that society — the relationship between councillors and their paid officials as this had been developing in urban corporations since mid-century; the continuingly hazy borderline between the professional and entrepreneurial middle class; and the rather tacky character of commercial ethics in late-Victorian England. Meanwhile, Salford's seedy troubles may well tell us something about scandals as phenomena.

visibility of the case was enhanced by Sir Edward Clarke, the Solicitor General, being engaged for the prosecution and by Sir Charles Russell — MP, future Attorney General and “brilliant showy man”³ — being employed for the defence.

At the end of a three day trial, Ellis Lever was found not guilty. He was immediately hailed, in the press and by large sections of the middle-class public, as a national saviour who had struck a great and cleansing blow for commercial ethics in an increasingly dirty and corrupt world. There was wild cheering inside and outside Manchester Crown Court.⁴ Upon his arrival at his splendid house in Bowden, he was greeted by a procession of tradesmen and the Altrincham brass band.⁵



Samuel Hunter.

However, before all this, let us first tell the story. In February 1887, prompted by his Gas Committee, Samuel Hunter, Salford Corporation's gas manager for the past eleven years, a Methodist lay-preacher and a man, as we shall see, of many business parts, sued Ellis Lever for criminal libel. Lever, one of the largest coal contractors in the North, had alleged, not for the first time, that “Bribery, corruption and fraud have prevailed in (the) borough to an enormous extent for many years”, and that Hunter for a long period had been guilty of accepting bribes on contracts for coal, canal and gas equipment such that no honest contractor could compete.² The case aroused extensive publicity from the start — in Salford, Manchester and throughout the North. It was also given extensive coverage in the London press. Due perhaps to Samuel Hunter's prominence in Cheshire hunting circles, even the *Sporting Chronicle* whinnied encouragingly from the sidelines. Important issues were involved, and the



Ellis Lever.

whilst “salvoes of minature artillery, flying rockets and vociferous cheering” awaited Lever near his second home in Colwyn Bay.⁶ At the other end of the social scale, deathless one-liners about Salford rendered audiences helpless night after night in several Manchester theatres.

In the months that followed, Lever celebrated his victory by charging that there was still much corruption to be uncovered in Salford. He also embarked upon a great crusade to cleanse gas contracting in other corporations elsewhere.

Meanwhile, after some hesitation, Salford's Gas Committee dismissed Samuel Hunter and, later still, itself resigned. However, in spite of increasingly unsavoury revelations from the Corporation's specially instituted Gas Investigating Committee and elsewhere, Hunter was not immediately prosecuted. This was partly because commission-taking left few actionable traces and partly because it was not then a criminal offence, — though it was subject to civil prosecution where the employer was involved in financial loss, and it was to come under the criminal law as the result of the Public Bodies Corrupt

Practices Act of 1889.⁷ The ex-manager's life went on "much as before": he "was seen frequently at the local theatres"⁸ and continued enthusiastically to hunt the more chaseable bits of Cheshire's wild-life.

When, in February 1888, criminal proceedings were commenced, he was charged significantly, not with bribetaking, but with perjury (at Lever's trial) and forgery (of the gas committee chairman's signature on a letter written in 1880 supposedly giving a coal firm official sanction to continue paying Hunter his commissions). In March, in London, Hunter pleaded guilty.

Sentence was not immediately passed. This was partly because Salford Corporation had a civil action pending against Hunter in Chancery. More importantly and using this action as pressure, the Corporation was negotiating with him to recover some of the money overcharged on contracts as the result of the commissions on coal and gas equipment paid to their ex-manager. For his part, Hunter was negotiating for an official plea from the Council on his behalf for clemency. Eventually, these negotiations failed — apparently because the corporation was demanding too much. This it was doing on the advice of the town clerk, John Graves — a man whom most councillors seemed to hold in almost as much awe as they had once held Samuel Hunter. In July 1888, Hunter having already spent several months in Strangeways prison, was sentenced to five years penal servitude.

Six weeks later, the town clerk resigned — decamping to Folkestone, Paris and eventually San Francisco, along with some £800 of Corporation money plus £15,000 that he held in trust for a family in Peterborough.

Some time thereafter, the Corporation resumed negotiations with Samuel Hunter. In August 1889, a strange deal emerged whereby Hunter was to deposit £10,000 in securities in a bank account — and begin naming those firms who had bribed him. Salford was then to sue them. This was intended to produce settlements out of court whereby each firm was to pay an agreed sum into the afore-mentioned account in return for release from all further legal action. At the end of the day, the Corporation was to take £10,000 from the account — and Hunter was to retain anything remaining over, whether it was more or less than he had originally deposited.⁹ Meanwhile and fervently denying that it was part of the deal, some of Salford's municipal elite signed a petition originated by Hunter's solicitors pleading (unsuccessfully as it turned out) for some mitigation of sentence.

Hunter carried out his half of the bargain, and named many firms nearly all of whom were prevailed upon to pay up in the way determined above. Eventually and in spite of vigorous efforts at dissuasion by the owner of the clay feet, Hunter named Ellis Lever. Salford Corporation joyously sued him, and this time pursued the case to its bitter legal end — in a Leeds court, rather symbolically "lit by an electric light which immediately failed". Here, in March 1890, Salford relieved its tormentor of some £2,300 — after the Court had heard evidence from a Samuel Hunter "pale with suppressed excitement". Lever, it emerged, had been one of the first and most generous of Hunter's tempters. His earliest bribe had actually enabled Hunter in 1877 to embark upon a two month pilgrimage to the Holy Land — dressed as an Arab.¹⁰ Indeed, Lever was said to have practised "the tipping system" in a generalized way "for years past".¹¹ He had begun alleging corruption in Salford back in 1879 after losing a long term coal contract with the Corporation, and after failing to maintain payment of agreed commissions to Hunter.¹²

As suggested, the Scandal firstly symbolized, perhaps in an extreme form, the growing power of municipal officials. Councillors might well have great influence over urban electorates by virtue of their celebrity and the dependency that their position as large, and even small, proprietors and employers engendered. The skills they had acquired as businessmen were also supposed to ideally suit them to understand and control the "business" of local government. Yet, from the rather early point when municipalities began to move beyond mere financial management into the general, but ultimately specialist, field of "improvement", such automatic understanding became increasingly precarious. From this point, we begin to see the town clerk, the medical officer, the borough treasurer, the borough engineer and the gas manager emerging as increasingly influential forces. Decisions and policies were increasingly made by specialist committees rather than the Council as a whole; within those committees, they were increasingly made by an inner group composed of the relevant paid officials, along with key committee members, especially the chairman and vice-chairman.

Behind these trends lay several factors, some of them familiar to the twentieth-century, others specific to the nineteenth. Amongst the former, the most obvious is the increasing technicality and scope of council activity, and the fact that, as the *Salford Weekly News* commented in 1887, permanent officials were "controlled by committees — more or less fluctuating". As a result, "what the committee know, they can only know, from the information imparted to them by the real master".¹³ The point perhaps was exaggerated, but it highlighted a general trend, particularly in gas administration. Here, the high technicality of gas-making was compounded by the high complexity of gas-pricing and the sheer volume of contract negotiations for the supply of raw materials. A few figures will help illustrate the point. In 1887, Salford's

COUNTY BOROUGH OF SALFORD.
(GAS DEPARTMENT.)

TENDERS FOR IRONWORK.

THE Gas Committee invite Tenders for the COLUMNS, GIRDERS, FLOOR-PLATES, BUCKSTAVES, RETORT MOUTH-PIECES, HYDRAULIC MAINS, and other IRONWORK required for the Liverpool Street Gas-Works.

The drawings and specifications may be seen on application to the Engineer, Gas Office, Bloom Street, Salford.

Sealed tenders, addressed to the Chairman of the Gas Committee, and endorsed "Tender for Ironwork," to be delivered at my Office not later than Five p.m., on Thursday, the 13th of June, 1889.

By order,
SAM. BROWN, Town Clerk.

Town Hall, Salford,
May 25, 1889.

From the Journal of Gas Lighting, 1889.

undertaking was producing some 836,245,000 cubic feet of gas. With the extensive modernization of the works undertaken on Samuel Hunter's initiative in the late seventies, this represented an increase in output of some 43 per cent since his first year as gas manager in 1876. By 1887 also, with a white collar staff of 14, the gas department was much the largest of any in the Corporation. It was supplying gas to some 6,741 street lamps, and some 28,633 consumers inside and outside the borough.¹⁴ The overall result, for members of the Gas Committee was ruefully described by Alderman Makinson, its Vice-Chairman, in response to one of the periodic attacks upon its administration in 1882: "At every meeting of the committee, there are no less than forty or fifty accounts comprising an expenditure of upwards of £3,000 regularly passed ... on the income side

there are no less than 130,000 accounts during the year."¹⁵

As a result, in many more places than just Salford, few councillors were either able or inclined to properly understand, still less to control, the decision-making process. In 1868, for example, Rochdale's new mayor had pledged himself not to attend the Gas Committee during his term of office because "it would take me all my time to understand the questions of gas ... and to be of any service would be beyond my power"¹⁶ — attitudes which perhaps explain why Rochdale's Liberal elite had permitted Samuel Hunter to spend several happy and apparently lucrative years as gas manager there before moving on to higher and more profitable forms of domination in Salford.¹⁷ Here, from 1877 onwards, he rapidly assumed a position of such influence over his Committee that he effectively became the policy-making centre — taking the major decisions in important areas like the modernization of the gas works, and having virtually total responsibility for contract negotiation. The Committee's trust in him was complacently described by Alderman Sharp, its chairman, at Ellis Lever's first trial:

*(I) called on the manager at the offices every morning to learn what was doing. If there was nothing (I) went away. The agenda for the committee was no doubt prepared from Hunter's information ... We always relied on our manager's advice for all contracts.*¹⁸

It was this overall situation that allowed Hunter, from the start of his employment with Salford, to begin routinely demanding and accepting "commissions" on contracts for coal and cannel at 6d, 1s 0d or 1s 6d per ton, along with similar inducements for the supply of gas equipment.¹⁹

SALFORD CORPORATION GAS-WORKS.
COAL AND CANNEL.
To COLLEBY PROPRIETORS.

THE Corporation of Salford invite Tenders for the supply of the COAL and CANNEL required at their various Gas Stations in Salford, for One, Two, or Three years.

Forms of tender, and conditions upon which only tenders will be received, may be obtained on application at my Office, Town Hall, Salford.

Tenders, endorsed, "Coal and Cannel Contract," addressed to the Chairman of the Gas Committee, to be delivered to me before Five p.m. on Thursday, the 30th inst.

By order,
SAMUEL BROWN, Town Clerk.
Town Hall, Salford, May 17, 1889.

From the Journal of Gas Lighting, 1889.

His visibly opulent life-style — which included the purchase of a splendid house on Bolton Road, Salford, and a hunting-box in Cheshire, travelling about in his own carriage decorated by a servant in livery, and regular tours abroad — aroused little suspicion from his somnolent committeemen, even though managed on an annual salary of no more than £800, even at the end.

The influence of expertise is familiar enough in the twentieth century. Yet the growing trend towards official power that underlay the Scandal also resulted from features specific to nineteenth-century municipal life. The most important of these was the relative weakness of party politics. Parties, in Salford as elsewhere, dominated council elections. However, they participated mainly from a desire to limber up for parliamentary contests and not from any conflict of principle. Thus elections were more often dominated by rival personalities, rarely by programmes. Partly as a result, party had little influence on council decision-making, beyond the periodic carve-up of the aldermanic bench; its impact inside committees was even weaker. Overall, the convention, as described by a Salford Conservative in 1874, was that:

*The proper duty of the councillor was to drop his politics before he entered the chamber and leave them outside in the (town hall) square to dry.*²⁰

Thus there was little by way of either caucus or mandate to protect councillors from pressures of committee-loyalty or the undoubted charms of men like Samuel Hunter. Given such *esprit de corps*, critics were fiercely resented. As the *Salford Weekly News* noted of the Gas Committee, "they resented what he resented; they treated as enemies those whom he regarded as enemies".²¹ Some even became friends with their official.

In these circumstances, it was hardly surprising that the exposure of Hunter, in so far as it concerned councillors at all, was not undertaken by the Liberal opposition. In a world without party, they were as much tarred by his rather scruffy brush as the Conservative majority. Indeed, only two months before the scandal broke, prominent Liberals — in the persons of Aldermen Bowes and McKerrow, Councillor Rycroft and Salford's ex-*MP*, Benjamin Armitage — had repaired to Hunter's house for an intimate discussion over dinner of the possibility of his helping them found a new Liberal newspaper.²²



James Mandley.

In fact, exposure was undertaken by solitary mavericks on both sides of the political fence. Of these, by far the most prominent was James G De Thiballier Mandley. Mild-faced though he was, Mandley was an extraordinary figure. A close confidante of Ellis Lever, this rather conservative Liberal led the opposition to Hunter from his council entry in 1877. In council, he was sarcastic, prickly and bad-tempered — particularly on this, his favourite issue. Such behaviour was partly derived from temperament, but was partly also the behaviour of a man deliberately distancing himself from the socializing pressures of council members on the inside track.

Mandley's speeches on gas issues were rambling but skilful demonstrations of the art of walking the fine tight rope between insult and libel. He was loathed by Conservative and Liberal insiders alike. They groped for metaphors to express their fury at his constant insults. For them, he was "a dirty bird that tries all it can to foul its own nest by writing letters to newspapers showing that his colleagues are either incompetent or something worse".²³ Mandley returned their contempt:

*It has been said to me by a magistrate and alderman of this borough that he would like to smash my face (great laughter) Alderman Robinson, being bulky of body, may think he has the right to use such language ... Are we to be terrorized by big burly men without education?*²⁴

A second specifically nineteenth-century factor underlying the influence of officials, and thus the scandal, was the occupational character of the council itself. Salford's like most corporations, was mainly peopled by businessmen of varying levels of substance. Most were still economically active, and often found council-life burdensomely time-consuming. They were naturally inclined to leave complex areas like gas firmly in the hands of one who "understood his business" as well as Hunter (who was a very capable gas manager) seemed to do; doubly so because he achieved the one thing that they as businessmen could be guaranteed to understand and applaud — he turned an ailing business from loss into handsome profit. Through all the rows and recriminations, his defenders constantly drew attention to this rivetting fact: "No firm whose profits rose in two years from practically nothing to £22,000 would be very solicitous about the state of its affairs".²⁵

Hunter's power also rested upon a third important feature of nineteenth-century municipal life — the fact that paid officials were in the end very like their employers. Bureaucratic influence was certainly based upon superior expertise, but unlike its twentieth-century counterpart, it was also a very personal affair. Municipal establishments were quite small — a few hundred at most: individual relationships were thus the basis of power. Council officials were often on intimate terms with leading councillors. When James Farmer received a Jubilee knighthood during his mayoralty in 1887, he repaired to the house of his friend, the Town Clerk, there to receive lessons in Palace deportment.²⁶ Samuel Hunter, also, was on terms of friendship with some of his committee — with the much-revered Alderman Thomas Davies, for example, who rebuked Hunter's traducers during a debate on gas management in 1880 in the following significant terms:

*These are damaging charges to make against an absent man and one whom I count as a dear friend ... the use of such language is an outrage.*²⁷

Underlying such intimacy was the fact that leading officials could, in the intimate arena provided by the nineteenth-century town, become social leaders in the same way as their employers. In towns such as Salford, the carriages of the town clerk, the borough engineer, the medical officer and the gas engineer were almost as publicly visible as those of council leaders. Their names were widely-known and their participation in town life faithfully recorded in the press. Gas managers indeed might expect to be doubly honoured for — as the purveyors of light — they were natural hero figures in the same way that railway engineers were. This helps explain why, when the Gas Institute held its annual meeting in Ryde in 1890, it was greeted by a town hall dinner

THE HISTORY,
MANUFACTURE, DISTRIBUTION, AND
ECONOMICAL CONSUMPTION
OF
COAL GAS.

A LECTURE

DELIVERED AT THE REQUEST OF THE MAYOR AND CORPORATION,
IN THE
SALFORD AND PENDLETON TOWN HALLS,
JANUARY, 1878,
BY
SAMUEL HUNTER, ASSOC. INST. C.E.,
ENGINEER AND MANAGER OF THE SALFORD CORPORATION GASWORKS.

PRICE ONE SHILLING.

MANCHESTER:
PUBLISHED BY J. E. CORNISH, 33, PICCADILLY;
JAMES J. WILKINSON, GILES' LANE BUILDINGS, OXFORD STREET,
1878.

Title page of Hunter's lecture (1878).

preceded by a full Corporate procession, and overhung with the word "Welcome" in "bold white letters on a crimson background".²⁸ Similarly, when George Darlington retired as aristocratic Eastbourne's gas manager in 1887, he trailed clouds of admiration after him. As the *Sussex News* reported —

*Mr. Darlington will not soon forget his reception at the Conservative Club supper at New Hall on Wednesday night. Next to Admiral Field, MP for the Division, Mr. Darlington seemed to be unmistakably the most popular member of the club present, and 'the musical honours' which gave special effect to the toast might well inspire any man with regret at leaving a town where he has made so many friends.*²⁹

If social prominence such as this was readily available to a gas manager, we can begin to see why a man of Samuel Hunter's temperament should be encouraged to consume his ill-gotten gains as conspicuously as we have seen that he did. We can also understand why, as part of his gas works modernization, in 1880, Hunter built himself a palace — the resplendent gas offices in Bloom Street — and crowned its entrance with his initials in wrought iron.

His undoubted status as part of Salford's social leadership was one reason why many of the municipal elite consented to petition for Hunter's release in August 1889.

He undoubtedly suffered much in prison. Yet there was also a strong feeling that his tribulations were made doubly painful by his being a gentleman, and a man of refinement and taste. His champions were well equipped to understand the situation described in their petition: "Mr. Hunter has been pecuniarily and socially ruined by the conviction and he thereby suffers very heavy punishment in addition to the mental anguish inseparable from such a sentence".³⁰

If the Gas Scandal was symptomatic of the growing power of officials, it was also part of a wider pattern of corruption within the profession of gas-management and perhaps even nineteenth-century commercial life as a whole. In the wake of Salford's scruffy troubles, there poured into the local, regional and London press, and into the professional journals of gas engineering, a mass of heart-searching and confession that paints a very different picture of what made the Victorian economy go round from the one we are used to.

On this evidence, gas engineers often lived in a world where the offering, demanding and accepting of bribes was normal. Samuel Hunter, in 1875, had himself taken over from a predecessor allegedly accepting 25 per cent on contracts for gas piping.³¹ Hunter's own demands of contractors had a casual air suggesting that commissions were customary not merely in Salford but also in the world of gas beyond. Richard Hartley, ex-managing director of the Silkstone and Dodsworth Coal and Iron Company, testified during Ellis Lever's trial to what had happened when he approached Hunter to ask about a possible contract with Salford:

*Mr. Hunter asked what the allowance would be to himself as manager. To that I replied what is the usual allowance, and his reply was 6d, 9d, 1s 0d, sometimes 1s 6d in the ton.*³²

Contractors too felt the force of custom. Even in the wake of the Scandal, S.Y. Shoubridge, Hunter's successor as manager, found that he too was "offered something" — a reflex which the contractor concerned described as "an irresistible urge".³³

Such habits spread far beyond Salford. In the weeks after the Scandal broke, the periodical magazines of gas engineering found themselves inundated with confessions from gas managers and coal contractors writing from all over the country testifying to the centrality of commissions in oiling the wheels of gas contracting. As a result, the prestigious *Journal of Gas Lighting*, having originally denied the existence of widespread corruption, rapidly declared itself so convinced by "the startling character"³⁴ of the contents of its postbag as to conclude that bribery was "a deep-rooted disease"³⁵ covering "the whole order of men interested in gas supply, from the chairman of the board or corporation committee down to the janitor in the engineer's office".³⁶ Similarly, the *Gas and Water Review*, in the wake of Ellis Lever's acquittal, suggested that, in its experience, "the giving and receiving of commissions is a practice which is but too common, if not all but universal".³⁷

In the wider local and daily press, coal and other contractors bore witness to the impossibility of doing business with gas-making concerns in the absence of commissions. On the basis of twenty years of such generous experience, one told the *Times* that his "business would not have risen to its present dimensions had these ... been refused" and declared that "in most gas works ... very little is purchased which does not pay a toll to one or more of the officials".³⁸ In the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the secretary and manager of a Yorkshire gas company

described his fellow professionals as "a corrupt lot and, although they are not alone in this respect in the commercial world, I am decidedly of the opinion that the gas fraternity stands at the top".³⁹

A variety of causes underlay this widespread venality. On what might be called the supply side, there lay the intensely competitive nature of the industries providing the raw materials and equipment — particularly coal contracting. In such situations, bribery might well seem cheaper than rock-bottom tendering. Moreover, competition also led to the influx of large numbers of "traders" into the professional meetings of gas engineers who increased the temptations likely to be set in the way of managers still further. At the 1889 annual meeting of the Institute of Gas Management, the *Journal of Gas Lighting* noted the presence of:

*plenty of these (traders) ... last week, notebook in hand, pouncing upon every opportunity for waylaying unwary gas managers and, in the usual fashion, utilizing the meeting for turning a penny.*⁴⁰

Six months earlier, the *Journal* had described how:

*traders — sometimes singly, sometimes in groups — have made the meetings (of the Institute) an excuse for forcing their scarcely disinterested hospitality upon members in various ways.*⁴¹

THE JOURNAL OF GAS LIGHTING WATER SUPPLY & SANITARY IMPROVEMENT

Vol. LI. No. 1290.] LONDON, JANUARY 31, 1888. [40th Year. Price 6d.

<p>SEE ADVERTISEMENT NEXT WEEK.</p> <p>MAKERS OF Every kind of GAS PLANT for Home and Abroad.</p> <p>ROOFS, GIRDERS, and STEEL RETORT-LIDS & SCOOPS.</p> <p>ASHMORE, BENSON, PERSE, & CO. LD. STOCKTON-ON-TEES.</p>	<p>ESTABLISHED 1830.—</p> <p>PARKER & LESTER, Manufacturers & Contractors.</p> <p>THE ONLY MAKERS OF PATENT ANTIMONY PAINT, Parker's Imperial Black Varnish, Oxide Paints, Oils, and Mineral Stores for Gas and Water Works.</p> <p>WORKS: ORMSIDE STREET, OLD KENT ROAD, LONDON.</p> <p>WOLSTON'S TORBAY PAINTS TORBAY & DART PAINT CO., Limited, 21, GREAT GEORGE ST., WESTMINSTER, W.</p>	<p>MORRIS & CUTLER'S PATENT.</p> <p>THE MOST EFFECTUAL APPARATUS FOR CONDENSING GAS.</p> <p>GIVES EVERY SATISFACTION AND IS EASILY ADAPTED TO ANY VARIED MAKE.</p> <p>TESTIMONIALS ON APPLICATION. S. CUTLER & SONS, CONTRACTORS FOR GASWORKS. MILLWALL, LONDON, E.</p>
---	--	---

"Abyssinian" Pure Water Supplies
Le GRAND & SUTCLIFF, 100, BUNHILL ROW, LONDON. Tube Wells.

C. & W. WALKER'S SPECIALITIES FOR PURIFICATION.

The attention of Gas Engineers is invited for the following Specialities:—

PATENT RETORT MOUTHPIECES, with secure Self-sealing Lids of any shape, and improved system of Abatement, Arch, and Dip Pipes, Anti-Dip, Eye Pipes, and Hydraulic Mains.

PATENT COMPLETE CONDENSER. The most effectual apparatus for cooling gas, communicating the gas to a tank, and building with water cooling.

PATENT CARBONIC ACID AND TAR EXTRACTING WASHERS for treating the gas essentially after the manner of the "Perfect" Condenser.

PATENT COMPLETE SCRUBBER. The most efficient, powerful, and perfect machine in the world for purifying gas from Tar, Carbolic acid, and Ammoniac.

PATENT PURIFIERS of apparatus placed and worked in any position.

PATENT CENTRE-VALVES, working all four Positions, or three on, and one off.

PATENT TAR SPRAYER BURNER, realizing eleven halfpence per gallon for Tar by its perfect combustion.

PATENT SULPHUR KILN, having eight to ten tons of chemically pure and excellent Sulphur for every 100 tons of bituminous substance, yielding 25 tons of gas and 100 tons of sulphur, and avoiding serious expenses and troubles.

DOUBLE-FACED GAS-VALVES. | UNDERGROUND SCREW GAS-VALVES. | WOOD PURIFIER SIEVES.

INTERNAL RACK GAS-VALVES. | ORDINARY RACK & PIPION GAS-VALVES. | IMPROVED BOARDS FOR SCRUBBERS.

TELESCOPE AND SINGLE-LIFT GAS HOLDERS, with Cast or Wrought Iron Tanks, Iron Racks, and all the necessary and complete work of Gas Works.

MILNARD IRON-WORKS, DONNINGTON, NEAR NEWPORT, SHROPSHIRE; 8, FINCHBURY CIRCUS, LONDON. Telephone, Acton. "PERFECT" CONDENSER. "PERFECT" LONDON.

Front page.

THE GAS WORLD

The "Gas and Water Review and Journal of Electric Lighting."

Vol. XXV, No. 633.] SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 1896. [PRICE THREEPENCE.

TELEGRAPHIC ADDRESS: "DRAKEON HALIFAX." TELEPHONE NO. 43: "HALIFAX EXCHANGE."

JONAS DRAKE & SON

GAS ENGINEERS, CONTRACTORS.
IRONFOUNDERS, RETORT SETTERS, FURNACE BUILDERS.
ETC. ETC.

OVENDEN HALIFAX LONDON OFFICE: 60, QUEEN VICTORIA ST., E.C.

SOLE AGENTS BY: MITTON'S PATENT SELF-SEALING RETORT LTD. SETTLE'S PATENT COMBINED SEAL REGULATING AND FLUSH VALVE.

"HISLOP'S" PATENT REGENERATIVE FURNACES ENGLAND, WALES, & ABROAD.

GASEOUS FIRING A SPECIALITY.

THOMAS GLOVER & CO'S



PATENT NEW IMPROVED PREPAYMENT METER.

FOR 1d. 1/- OR ANY COIN.

Simple in Mechanism.
Positive in Results.
Price Changer *in situ*.

GUARANTEED FOR FIVE YEARS.

THOMAS GLOVER & CO., Ltd.,
DRY GAS METER MANUFACTURERS.

214 to 222, ST. JOHN STREET, CLERKENWELL GREEN, LONDON, E.C.
BRISTOL: 62, VICTORIA STREET. BIRMINGHAM: 1, DOZELL'S STREET. MANCHESTER: 37, BLACKFRIARS STREET.

Front page.

However, the willingness to corruptly supply was matched by an equally eager demand. An important factor here was the mis-match between the salaries normally available to gas managers from municipal corporations or private gas companies and the high social aspirations of these officials. As bringers of light to previously dark and frightening urban places, they could expect to ascend a long way up the local social scale, and Samuel Hunter was no exception in being able to move easily amongst the town's elite. Such elevation, however, was hard to achieve and maintain on a salary of three or four hundred pounds a year — or even apparently on Hunter's more princely eight hundred.

This meshing of supply and demand helped produce "a system" wherein commissions were seen as normal, even morally acceptable, and from which neither potential briber nor bribed found it easy to escape. The very name 'commission', as the *Journal of Gas Lighting* realized, robbed the thing of "most of its moral guilt"⁴² so far as managers were concerned. Meanwhile, as the *Gas World* noted of contractors, "they may regard the granting of such bribes as a legitimate factor in pushing business".⁴³ In such circumstances, and given intense competition, there was a persuasive argument that "the honest trader had no chance against bribing firms and venal gas-managers".⁴⁴

However, what may most fundamentally have underlain the venality of gas engineers was a wider pattern of corruption in large sectors of commercial life. The evidence is hard to use being mostly anonymous and

much of it of a rather gossipy character. Nevertheless, the spate of middle-class confession was sufficiently specific in terms of the quotation of time, place and especially personal experience as to suggest that "palm-oil" may have been a rather frequent lubricant of Victorian business life.

Not surprisingly, given where the Gas Scandal occurred, there was much baring of breasts about modes of conducting business in the cotton industry. Here, for example, there was said to be "a speciality chiefly carried on by mill-managers" whereby "a manager buys at, say, 5¼d but invoices his firm at 5¾d. This produced a profit of two shillings per bale of cotton, and £10 on a hundred bales, "which sum is divided between this honest manager and the equally conscientious broker".⁴⁵ Another correspondent regaled the readers of the *Manchester Courier* with tales of the extensive commission-gathering that he claimed to be "common property on the Manchester and Liverpool Exchanges". Amongst the bribes, "managers (of limited companies) form a by no means small proportion and, by most of them, the buyer for a limited company is made the pathway to a small fortune". It was also "commonly said that many managers who visit the flags at Liverpool have 1s per bale ... amongst them is every grade down to the man who makes no conditions but whose orders are missing if you neglect him".⁴⁶

However, though cotton was the most frequently mentioned, a variety of other trades were also accused. Commissions, for example, were said to be "rampant" amongst architects:

*It would astonish many a man who builds a big house to learn that the architect, whom he pays well for supervision of the work, expects — nay practically demands — more from the men who supply materials and fittings. This I know by experience to be often done and done by those who hold their heads very high ... and would consider it a disgrace to soil their hands by trade of any kind.*⁴⁷

A "legal practitioner" told the readers of the *Manchester Guardian* of "the rotten, unmoral and injurious system prevailing amongst estate agents and property repairers". He claimed that estate agents managing property on behalf of owners, were regularly paid commissions by builders for awarding them house-repair contracts. As was usual in these transactions, the bribe was then surreptitiously embodied in the builder's invoice to the owner. When challenged, the justification was always that of "universal custom".⁴⁸ Meanwhile, there were also tales of equally dubious goings-on in the railways, in shipping, in government purchasing departments, amongst solicitors and by contractors to the Poor Law.⁴⁹ Finally the *Pall Mall Gazette*, in late 1887, ran a series of sensational but specifically detailed articles on "Commercial Corruption" in all sorts of places. Amongst others, iron engineering was said to be riddled with the commission system, all the way from "managing directors of iron works (who) ... are constantly being tempted with offers" to foremen who were offered similar rewards in return for recommending the materials of particular firms to their employers.⁵⁰

As with gas management, so in these fields, writers often conveyed a strong sense of the normality and moral acceptability of such activity, and of a "system" which could be escaped from only with difficulty and at significant cost. In the *Manchester Chronicle*, "a manufacturer" spoke for many in describing the experiences of his own apparently extensive firm:

*We do not pay commissions and, for this reason, our travellers are forbidden to call on scores of the largest buyers. We have been told that our goods were preferred, but, so long as we refused to remember the buyer, no order would be given ... I believe the system to be almost universal in every trade ... we have repeatedly found it impossible to prevent manufacturers and travellers from getting at our foremen ... We are constantly asked to supply false invoices allowing a commission to the buyer, ... the thing has become so common that buyers will ask for it in the presence of witnesses ... considering themselves perfectly honest.*⁵¹

All of this suggests that gas managers were importing into their profession, and into municipal service, habits and attitudes that were commonplace in large areas of commerce. This they were well equipped to do because, as we shall now see, although a proud professional group, they also, like many others of their kind, existed on a decidedly hazy borderline between professional and entrepreneurial activity. This suggests that, far from being located above the market place in the way some have indicated,⁵² these professionals anyway were often enthusiastic participants.

Gas managers were certainly a self-conscious and well-articulated group. They were a touchy, arrogant and argumentative lot, and their organisations were frequently riven with feuds about matters great and small. Yet this pool of anger was most frequently turned against outsiders, particularly against councillors and council committees whom managers saw (wrongly to judge by Salford's example) as constantly slighting managerial dignity and prerogatives. Their professional journals railed constantly against "the head-strong perversity of committeemen"⁵³ whom they saw as wanting to teach a gas manager his business even though they themselves had "rarely travelled beyond lighting a candle at night".⁵⁴ Committees also kept their manager's salary so low as to preclude the possibility of his becoming a gentleman ... "Is not the manager of a large works (who must of necessity be a man of considerable education and well versed in science) of equal social rank with men who happen to be taken from behind their counters ... (and) whose sudden elevation to a position which enables them occasionally to appear in good company is too much for them?"⁵⁵

Such sentiments assumed that gas committees were mainly composed of little men. In fact, gas managers — and here, as in so much else, Samuel Hunter was typical of his breed — saw themselves as the social equals of their town's elite. What underlay this was their sense of belonging to a unique profession with special skills. A "Lady Correspondent of the *Gas World*" (possibly the long-suffering wife of a gas manager) likened them to an ancient priesthood:

*The colleges and temples in which the neophytes study and worship before becoming ordained high priests are to the outside world known as 'the Gas Works' ... Little knows 'the consumer' (as the word is called) of the severe training and labour the ... manager is subjected to before he can be trusted with the task of keeping the 'Sacred Fire' alight in the streets ...*⁵⁶

These feelings helped produce a strong sense of fraternity. Gas engineers were joined together both nationally through the Gas Institute, and locally through a network of active district associations. Like the various gas journals (of which significantly there were no fewer

than four⁵⁷), their regular meetings provided a network for the exchange of technical information and professional experience. They also reinforced their sense of uniqueness and brotherhood by providing occasions when managers could "come out of their shells and live in the revivifying company of professional brethren ...",⁵⁸ and where "old friendships were renewed and new ones made".⁵⁹ The Institute tried increasingly to close the gates of the profession against the employment of 'mere foremen' by pressing for professional examinations. In the wake of the Scandal, it also rather belatedly began a campaign for the elevation of professional ethics.⁶⁰

Yet, alongside this fierce professionalism, there was also a strong entrepreneurial strand. Because of the mysteries of what they did, gas managers, for all their complaints about interference, had far more autonomy than those who formally owned and controlled the undertakings, even in the case of private gas companies, than was available to their counterparts elsewhere. They were often the effective point of decision-making about the award of a host of contracts each year. They were also central to decisions about innovations and even (as in Hunter's case) about the major redesign of their gas works. And often central to their role was the need to maximise profits — whether to reward the shareholders or to relieve the ratepayers.⁶¹ Overall, even in his professional life, the gas manager had to be "a good businessman".⁶²

Yet the entrepreneurial side of his activities went far beyond this. Thus, alongside his role as Salford's gas manager, Samuel Hunter was also extensively involved in business activity on his own account, and he used his ill-gotten corporate gains well. He had "started very low in life" as an errand boy. However, by 1887, as his own testimony at Ellis Lever's trial indicated, he was "the proprietor of the *Cotton Factory Times*" and of at least four other newspapers. He was also part-owner of the *Ashton Reporter*. He had interests in "three or four" shipping companies, and had previously been involved in up to twelve. Prior to arriving at Salford, he had bought and sold the Halford Gas works at a profit of £2,000. By 1887 he had investments in three London gas works and in "one or two" elsewhere.⁶³ Other sources suggested that he was a large shareholder in a Manchester theatre and "one of the principle guarantors of the "Wild West Show".⁶⁴

In all this, he was probably typical of his kind. Gas engineers were men who, in the nature of their jobs, were likely to invent gas appliances or pioneer new techniques of gas manufacture. They subsequently patented them and were thus drawn into participating in, or often setting up, appliance companies.

In this connection, it is significant that, throughout the 1880s, the Gas Institute was being literally torn apart (it eventually split into two) by an unsavoury dispute about the relative visibility given to gas lighting appliances marketed by two of its most prestigious members at a "competitive gas and electricity exhibition" organized in connection with the Institute in 1881.⁶⁵ During the long angry recriminations it also emerged that several of those involved in the dispute were proprietorially involved in gas manufacturing companies.

The issue became intermixed with an equally agonized and long-running debate in the Institute about the role of "traders" in coal and other gas supplies, who were seen as corrupting influences and thus partly responsible for the Gas Scandal. This led one side to propose that they be banned from membership: yet the terms in which the

proposed new rule was framed tell us much about the level of movement between professional and entrepreneurial activity:

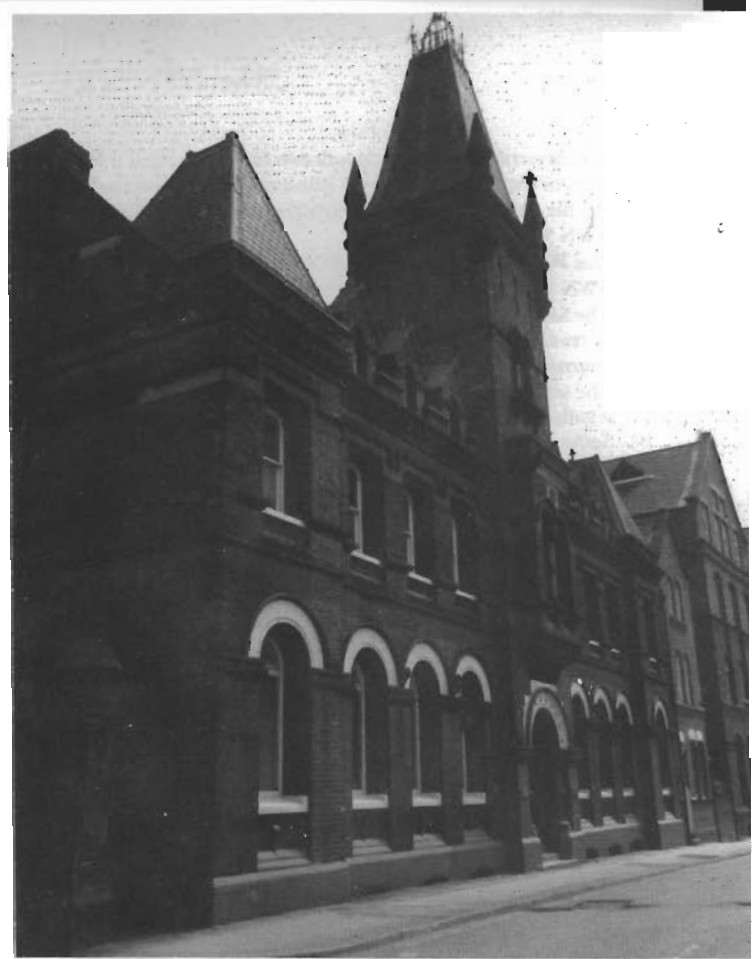
*In the event of any Member or Associate Member ceasing to hold the ... qualification (of being exclusively employed as a salaried or consulting engineer — author) ... his membership shall immediately cease; but his name may be placed ... in the class of Associates.*⁶⁶

Moreover, both sides — as is suggested by the final get-out clause and the unhappy debates about the issue — had to face the fact that any such rule change would catch not merely scruffy traders, but also some of the most distinguished members of the Institute. These, as a consequence of their very professional success, were also successful businessmen. Significantly, when the Institute finally agreed to relegate its trading members to associate status, it resolved to exclude existing members from the effects of the decision — after many had pointed out that they had originally joined the organisation as gas managers, were now “engaged in gas-engineering” (a synonym here for appliance manufacturing), but still took “great interest in the profession”.⁶⁷

In all of this, gas engineers had much in common with at least some other professional groups. The very word ‘engineer’ is ambiguous, capable of indicating *either* a consulting or salaried being, *or* an entrepreneur manufacturing some sort of machinery. In any case, for many besides engineers, the distinction between running and expanding a business, and doing the same for a practice must have seemed rather academic — then as perhaps now. Furthermore, there are indications that, for other professions besides gas engineering, the hazy line between professional and entrepreneurial activity produced an equally uncertain divide between legitimate and illegitimate modes of operation. Thus the peccadilloes of Salford’s Town Clerk in 1887 were spectacularly overshadowed in 1901 when Benjamin G. Lake, former President of the Law Society, was given twelve years penal servitude for defrauding clients of £173,772. The case arose when Lake secretly used his clients’ money for a land and building speculation that went wrong. This caused a crisis amongst solicitors in 1901 very similar to that produced for gas managers in 1887, particularly as it emerged that the tendency to mix their clients’ money (especially trust money) with their own in speculative operations was very common even amongst “very respectable solicitors”.⁶⁸

Thus Salford’s Scandal was the product of, and reveals much about, several broader trends in mid-to-late Victorian society — its increasingly self confident and powerful municipal officers; its significant venality, and the decidedly pervasive nature of entrepreneurial activity amongst its middle class. All three points may lead us to question somewhat notions about there being any clear-cut divide between the professional and entrepreneurial middle classes at any point in the nineteenth-century. Whilst the parts of those “classes” we have been looking at here were certainly separately organised and were rivals for certain sorts of power, they were joined together in the same local elites, shared many values and (far from being totally separated by source of income) had rather similar ideas about how livings were to be made.

Finally, the foregoing events may also tell us something about some of the phenomena that we call scandals. Salford’s troubles became of regional, even national, concern because the activity in question had two rather contradictory qualities. Firstly, the venal activity in



The Gas Offices, Bloom Street.

question was found to be widespread and widely tolerated. Secondly, however, there was also an alternative standard of behaviour available which “the public” — whatever many of its constituent groups may have believed or done in their own private occupational worlds — had been persuaded to accept as normative. There could not have been a similar level of scandal about, say, electoral corruption in the eighteenth or even much of the nineteenth-century because there was insufficient public consensus about its wickedness. Salford’s Scandal blew outwards because a private code of behaviour was in conflict with public norms. If this is so, and if Salford’s Scandal is typical of others, then these sorts of scandal may be a sign or cause of social change: they may become the means whereby public norms are reinforced and whereby private codes are shifted in their direction, whether by legislative enactment or public shaming. More specifically here, some scandals may provide a means whereby the borderlines of what is deemed to be legitimate commercial activity begin to be clarified or redefined.

The Gas Scandal had a sequel that said much about what it symbolized. Samuel Hunter was eventually released from prison, trailing after him, some said, a fat cheque, from those coal suppliers whose names and activities he had not revealed to the Council. He and his family then disappeared from view for many years. In 1955, Abe Williamson, a long standing councillor and alderman, recalled his time as a young Conservative member of the Council just before the First World War. When he arrived, he found that the meeting was to be chaired by the local squire. This individual turned out to be Samuel Hunter.⁶⁹ Salford’s ex-gas manager, having lived so long on the edge of entrepreneurial activity, had now joined the entrepreneurs in their final flight into gentility and into the Conservative Party.

NOTES

1. The material for this article is drawn from the author's *The Great Salford Gas Scandal of 1887* (British Gas North Western 1988).
2. See correspondence between Ellis Lever and Mayor, published *Salford Weekly News* (hereafter SWN) 22 Jan 1887 p.3.
3. Profile *Salford Weekly Chronicle* (hereafter SWC) 9 March 1889 p.6.
4. SWN 5 Feb 1887 p.7.
5. *Gas World* (hereafter GW) 12 Dec 1887 p.197.
6. SWN 12 Dec 1887 p.8.
7. The Salford Scandal probably contributed to the favourable public mood helping produce this Act, but it mainly seems to have been a response to revelations about corrupt practices in the London Metropolitan Board of Works.
8. *Journal of Gas Lighting* (hereafter JGL) 7 Feb 1887 p.261.
9. The strange character of this deal seems at least partly to have resulted from the Council elite's belief that it would be very difficult to produce legally satisfactory proof that bribery had taken place to secure any given contract, and that the Corporation had been overcharged as a result.
10. *Salford Reporter* (hereafter SR) 20 March 1890 p.7.
11. C.W. Provis, ex-employee of Lever, in letter to Norbury Williams, quoted in *Manchester City News* (hereafter MCN) 12 April 1890 p.4.
12. See James Ward, letter JGL quoted SR 1 Dec 1888 p.6.
13. SWN 19 Feb 1887 p.4.
14. Figures taken from Gas Committee Reports in Council Minutes 1888, p.495f and 1887 p.81; Corporation Yearbook 1887/8.
15. Letter SWC 22 April 1882 p.2.
16. *Rochdale Observer* 14 Nov 1868 p.6.
17. Samuel Hunter was appointed manager at Rochdale in 1871. In October 1873 there were allegations of bribery on contracts from Conservative Councillor Johnson and other. The Liberal majority appointed a Committee of Enquiry which met in secret and exonerated Hunter. All of his accusers received writs for libel, but were never called upon to defend them. See *Rochdale Times* October 1873 and 8 Feb 1888 p.3.
18. SWN 5 Feb 1887 p.5.
19. SWN 5 Feb 1887 p.5.
20. Councillor Bonsor, SC 21 Nov 1874 p.4. For the further development of this point, see John Garrard, *The Functions of 19th Century Political Parties* (Salford Occasional Papers in History and Politics No.1 1987).
21. SWN 19 Feb 1887 p.4.
22. See SWN 19 Feb 1887 p.3 and SR 19 Feb 1887 p.3.
23. Letter from Councillor Snape SR 18 Jan 1890 p.5.
24. SR 19 April 1890 p.5
25. Alderman Husband, SWN 12 Feb 1887 p.5
26. 'Duncan' on 'The Borough Magistracy' SR 27 Oct 1888 p.8.
27. Alderman Thomas Davies c. July 1880, quoted SR 26 Feb 1887 p.8.
28. GE 21 June 1890 p.702.
29. Quoted *Gas and Water Review* 4 Feb 1887 p.111.
30. Quoted SR 24 August 1889 p.4.
31. See testimony of Ald. Sharp, Chairman of Gas Committee at Ellis Lever's trial SWN 5 Feb p.5. Sharp did not deny defence allegations that he had said that the then gas manager was left unprosecuted because it would only mean "lugging other people in".
32. At Ellis Lever's trial SWN 5 Feb 1887 p.5.
33. SR 22 Aug 1891 p.4.
34. JGL 7 Feb 1888 p.225. 35. JGL 22 Feb 1887 p.347. 36. JGL 14 Feb 1880 p.270.
37. *Gas and Water Review* 11 Feb 1887 p.138. See also Editorial GW 26 March 1887 p.392.
38. 'A Commission Abolitionist', quoted JGL 31 Jan 1888 p.199.
39. *Pall Mall Gazette* (hereafter PMG) 12 Jan 1888 p.11.
40. JGL 25 June 1889 p.1168. 41. JGL 8 Jan 1889 p.57. 42. JGL 25 June 1889 p.1168.
43. GW 12 March 1887 p.261.
44. George Bray, *Corrupt Practices in the Gas Industry*, pamphlet c. 1888 quoted by James Mandley SR Aug 1888 p.8.
45. Letter from 'Reform', *Manchester Courier* (hereafter MC) 12 Feb 1887 p.5.
46. 'Beta' in MC 11 Feb 1887 p.8.
47. 'Manufacturer' in *Manchester Guardian* (hereafter MG) 11 Feb 1887 p.6. The claim, like the others quoted here, produced no denials of sin.
48. 'Legal Practitioner' *ibid*.
49. On railways and shipping, see JGL 17 Jan 1888 p.7; on government purchasing, see Editorial GW 26 March 1887 p.392 and 'HL' in *Manchester Examiner and Times* 16 Feb 1887 p.7; for solicitors, see 'Legal Practitioner', MG 23 Feb 1887 p.7 and later in this article; for the Poor Law, see letter *Wigan Examiner* 9 Feb 1887 p.2.
50. PMG 2 Nov 1887 p.2.
51. 'A Manufacturer', MC 14 Feb 1887 p.3.
52. See H. Perkin, *Origins of Modern English Society 1780-1880* (London 1969) p.252f.
53. JGL 12 June 1888 p.1038.
54. 'Touchstone', JGL June 1888 p.1054.
55. 'CE', JGL 8 May 1888 p.823.
56. "The Vicissitudes of a Young Gas Manager", GW 26 March 1887 p.354.
57. *The Journal of Gas Lighting, Gas World, Gas and Water Review, The Gas Engineer*, were all publishing in 1887.
58. JGL 12 April 1887 p.665.
59. JGL 8 Jan 1889 p.57.
60. See JGL 15 Feb 1887 p.289 and 31 Jan 1888 p.181.
61. Maximisation of profit was not always central, some corporations chose to run their gas undertakings on the basis of low prices and profits.
62. T. Moore to AGM of Manchester Institution of Gas Engineers, JGL 8 March 1887 p.446.
63. Samuel Hunter at Ellis Lever's trial, SWN 5 Feb 1887 p.5.
64. SR 24 March 1888 p.4.
65. See Garrard, *The Great Salford Gas Scandal of 1887* p.52. The full story can be followed through the annual meetings of the Gas Institute via GW and JGL for June 1887, 1888, 1889, 1890.
66. "Proposed Amendments and New Rules" from the Reformed Council of the Institute, JGL 9 April 1889 p.660.
67. C.H. Hutchinson, quoted GW 21 June 1890 p.711.
68. *Solicitor's Journal* 2 Feb 1901 p.231. See also comments of Avner Offer, *Property and Politics 1870-1914* (Cambridge 1981) p.17. The various business activities of Soames in the *Forsyte Saga* suggest a similar commercial orientation amongst solicitors.
69. "Abe Williamson Remembers", SR 18 Feb 1955 p.4.