

PRIVATE ENTERPRISE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY WIDNES

I

THE WIDNES GAS AND WATER COMPANY 1856-1868

BY J. R. HUNT, B.A.

Read 9 November 1956 to the Widnes Historical Society

JOHNS HUTCHINSON, generally recognised as the founder of the chemical industry in Widnes, was a man of many parts. The existence, after the lapse of a hundred years, of the West Bank Dock (Hutchinson Estate) proves that he was a far-sighted man of business. One of his ventures was the founding of the Widnes Gas and Water Company.

The first meeting of the provisional directors of the company was held on Monday, 24 November 1856. The members present were John Hutchinson, Chairman, James Trevelyan Raynes, Arthur Sinclair and Oswald Earle. William Pritchard, the manager, was authorised to sign an agreement with the Railway Company for laying pipes along the railway, and the bank of the canal. Shares in the new company were then allotted:—Robert Daghish 100, Edward Greenall 50, William Lupton 50, William Wright 100, William Gossage 50 and William Pennington 50.

Later in the year further shares were allotted to William Penn-Smith 100, Dr. E. Carr 50, Thomas Haddock 50 and David Gamble 50. Land was leased from Penn-Smith; a gas-holder was purchased from the St. Helens Gas Company and erected by Ebenezer Timmins, who also supplied water pipes for the well bored by John Bennett. In February 1857, it was agreed that street and road lamps be provided and lit at a cost of £2 12s. 6d. per lamp per annum. By November, the Company was supplying 180 lights had applications for 100 more, and, had 141 water tenants at 1d. per week.

In the early days of gas-making much depended upon the works manager, and great difficulty was experienced in finding—and keeping—a suitable man. In January 1858, William Morgan was appointed manager. He had a formidable list of duties, and a salary of £15 a year.

I. WIDNES SUPPLIED

In October 1859, it was resolved that an act of parliament to enable the Company to supply the township of Widnes with gas and water be applied for in the next session of parliament. The application was made in May 1860, and the royal assent to the bill was reported in June. Under this act, a new company was formed having for directors John Hutchinson, Oswald Earle, Rev. E. Carr, Arthur Sinclair, James Trevelyan Raynes and James Cross.

The year 1860 was one of progress. John Hutchinson agreed to supply the railway with water; a ten-inch water main was laid along Ferry Road and a new gasholder was purchased. Seven additional street lamps were to be erected on the Ferry Road between the Toll Bar and the Ferry, four to be paid for by the railway; one opposite their new office to be paid for by Hutchinson and Earle; John Wright to pay for the one opposite West Bank House; the lamp opposite Snig Pie House to be paid for by John Wright or by the tenant. All this time John Hutchinson, chairman of the Widnes Gas and Water Company, had been operating a private gas works near his residence in Appleton Village. Negotiations had been going on for the purchase of this works by the larger company. In the meantime, it was agreed that the Company would not supply any customer within 400 yards of Hutchinson's private gas works at Appleton without first offering to purchase such works from him.

The expansion of industrial Widnes can be read in the list of places being supplied with gas and water:—Hutchinson's cottages in Anne Street, Earle Street and Penn Street; the cottages of Mr. Fleetwood in Snig Lane; Mr. Harding's cottages in Water Street; gas service to Lambert's works; Muspratt's works, where the gas had passed through the meter, but where leaking pipes had been plugged with wood; gas supply to Gossage's works from Waterloo Road over the foot-bridge through Mr. Gossage's garden; a light at the police office, and mains to the Wesleyan chapel, the Vineyard public house and the new Roman Catholic chapel in Lugsdale Road. The list throws some light on some of the small industries of Widnes that have long since disappeared.

In March 1864, Mr. Shaw, the owner of a hand-loom factory in Farnworth, wished to convert it to a steam factory. He enquired if gas mains could be laid to Farnworth and thought other parties in the village would be likely to take gas.

In October, an estimate was prepared for laying a gas main

along Hutchinson Street past Kershaw's Saw Mill to West Bank Iron Works.

In April 1865, there was an estimate for laying a gas main from the corner of Kaludah Terrace to a public house some seventy yards further on in the direction of Widnes, and rented by Messrs. Kidd and Woodhouse, brewers, of Farnworth.

John Hutchinson died in March 1865. The directors had already agreed that their secretary should keep the accounts for the chairman's private works, and receive remuneration. Two years before his death, the private works were taken over by the Company. In August 1865, estimates were prepared for extending the gas mains to Appleton Village and connecting the same with the mains already laid by the late Mr. Hutchinson.

II. THE LOCAL BOARD

Hitherto, all undertakings in Widnes had been private. We now reach the beginnings of local government and of public control. The first intimation we have in the minutes of the Gas and Water Company is in February 1863. At the February meeting a letter was read from Henry Deacon, chairman of the Highway Board, calling attention to the Gas Works Clauses Act 1847, and asking for notice to be given before highways were broken up or opened, and requesting that such portions be maintained under the inspection of the assistant surveyor.

In August 1865, complaints were received from numerous water tenants about the quality of the water supplied by the Company. The secretary was instructed to write to Powell, the manager, and request him to pay attention to the condition of the well. The secretary and manager were also instructed to make enquiries as to where a good supply of water could be obtained. From this it would appear that the Company was still dependent for its water upon the original well sunk in the works by John Hutchinson. At the next meeting Powell, on behalf of the trustees, reported that he had done all he could to get the well clean, but the fault was in the water and was irremediable.

In November 1865, a letter was received from Henry Deacon, in his capacity as chairman of the Gas and Water Committee of the Widnes Local Board, respecting the bad quality of the water supplied by the Company. From the minutes of the Local Board we learn that Deacon had had a sample of this water analysed in his laboratory, and he reported to a meeting of the Board that it had been found to contain 171.5 grains per gallon of solid matter, salt forming the greater portion, and to be of 37° hardness. The letter stated that the members

of the Widnes Local Board were determined to have a supply of good and pure water for the township of Widnes as soon as possible.

In March 1866, the secretary produced to the meeting a notice which had been served upon him by the Local Board requiring the Company to supply the township of Widnes with good and wholesome water within one month from the date of the notice, and the notice, like the wasp, had a sting in its tail. It ended with an offer to purchase the Company's gas works and water mains. The meeting resolved to consider the proposal.

At this stage, if we wish to get a picture of the situation we must leave the minutes of the Widnes Gas and Water Company and turn to those of the newly formed Gas and Water Committee of the Widnes Local Board. This Committee had for its chairman Henry Deacon, and its two members E. Young and John McClellan. At the first meeting, held in November 1865, the chairman was requested to write to the Widnes Gas and Water Company to ask if they were prepared, and when, to supply pure and wholesome water for domestic and public use to the whole of Widnes, or to what part of it. Then follows a series of letters which were considered of sufficient importance to be copied in full in the Minute Book.

The Widnes Gas and Water Company had the right to supply water to the Board's district but the supply was both insufficient and bad. The only course was for the Board to make a formal demand on the Widnes Gas and Water Company, under Clause 75 of the Public Health Act 1848, to improve the supply or to leave the Local Board at liberty to do so. Protracted negotiations followed with delaying tactics and hard bargaining on the part of the Gas and Water Company. The Local Board was anxious to take over the water supply, but did not wish to purchase the gas works. They had neither statutory powers nor funds to do this. To petition parliament and obtain a new act was a costly business, and the Board wanted the Gas and Water Company to agree to foot the bill in the event of the failure of the petition. Simpson, the solicitor, acting for the Widnes Gas and Water Company, fell sick, the negotiations did not appear to be making any progress, and in July 1866, Henry Deacon sent this curt note to J. T. Raynes.

Dear Sir,

When are we to hear something definite from you? If Mr. Simpson's avocations and health are to cause longer delay, is it not your duty to go to some other legal advice?

Yours truly,

Henry Deacon.

P.S. With cholera amongst us, we want good water.

The postscript appears to be the most important line in the letter.

Raynes replied that he had no power to seek other legal advice, but, that, as agreement had already been reached in substance, there was no need for further delay. Acting on this assurance, the Local Board went ahead with its bill. One clause was very controversial, and threatened to hold up the whole bill. William Wright of West Bank had levied toll on every vehicle passing along Snig Lane (or Mersey Road) and using the Ferry. In this new bill, the Local Board proposed to abolish these tolls. Wright was a shareholder of the Gas and Water Company which felt bound to oppose this clause and could not be joint promoters of the bill. Eventually agreement was reached, the bill was duly promoted, and the result was The Widnes Improvement Act, 1867. By this act, the Local Board was empowered to supply with gas and water their district and places near thereto, and to purchase and acquire the undertaking, gas works, water works and property of the Widnes Gas and Water Company.

II

THE WIDNES TEMPERANCE HALL CO. LTD.

BY R. DICKINSON, B.Sc., Ph.D.

THE Widnes Temperance Hall Company Limited was incorporated 24 May 1876 with the objects, *inter alia*, of purchasing land in Widnes and erecting thereon a temperance hall. The promoters, each subscribing for one share were John William Coxon, manufacturing chemist, Thomas Hughes, assistant teacher, Thomas Reay, blacksmith, Thomas Stanley, foreman at chemical works, Thomas Hulse, dockmaster, and Thomas Steele Swale, printer, all of Widnes, and James Irvine of Manchester, woollen draper. The capital was £2,500 in shares of one pound each.

On 1 June 1878 the company leased from the trustees of the will of John Hutchinson (William Norwood, James Cross and Thomas Part) 1,886 square yards of land bounded on the north by Ditton Road, Widnes, (60 feet), on the east side by property of the Runcorn & Widnes Co-operative Industrial & Providential Society Ltd. (277 feet), and on the south by the L.&N.W. Railway, (61 feet). The land was part of a larger