The traditional view of the Irish in Victorian Britain is a somewhat grim portrayal of demoralized and impoverished immigrants who represented a considerable social problem to their hosts and were subject to the enduring hostility of virtually all sectors of English society. While the situation of the Irish in Ashton-under-Lyne has not been directly examined, two studies of the English working class during this period, by Neville Kirk and Patrick Joyce, draw heavily on the example of Ashton and broadly concur with this view. However, more recent studies of the Irish in Britain have demonstrated the need to revise this picture, and it is hoped that an analysis of the social, economic, political, and religious aspects of immigrant life in the 1860s as well as their relations with the wider community leading up to the riots of 1868 will add to this debate.


4 The choice of the 1860s was dictated partly by a desire to view the situation after the refugees from the Famine crisis in Ireland had had time to settle in the town, and partly by the limitations of the sources and time available.
Throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth century Ashton was ‘merely a moderate-sized village’ situated in the south-east corner of Lancashire. However, its location on the bank of the fast-flowing river Tame proved ideal for the cotton industry, and it was soon growing at a rate that did not slacken until the Cotton Famine of the early 1860s. In 1775 Ashton’s population was 2,859, but this had grown to 9,222 in 1822 and 33,917 in 1861, while the number of mills shot up from nine in 1814 to thirty-six in 1861. Cotton’s dominance of the local economy was almost complete: in 1831 of 2,823 families residing in the town 2,784 had at least one member employed in the industry, while in 1861 some 31 per cent of the town’s total population worked in the mills.

Despite this phenomenal expansion, Ashton largely escaped the worst excesses of nineteenth-century industrial growth, winning praise from all contemporary commentators, including a reluctant Engels. This was due mainly to the efforts of the local landowners, the earls of Stamford and Warrington, who from the 1790s onwards built a planned new town in a grid pattern to the west of the old village centre, laying down strict regulations in their leases concerning the quality of construction, drainage facilities, and the level of rent that could be charged. Consequently, a survey of the mid-1830s found only 1¼ per cent of the population living in cellars, and less than 5 per cent of the houses ‘not comfortable’, a situation which compared favourably with other Lancashire towns, and especially Liverpool, at that time.

Although Ashton had its problems, they were largely confined to the older parts of the town, which were described as ‘filthy and dilapidated in the extreme’ by the Morning Chronicle correspondent

10 Lowe, Irish in mid-Victorian Lancashire, p. 16.
The Irish in Ashton-under-Lyne

who visited the area in 1849. Moreover, only those streets running at right angles to the river, intended for the middle classes, were sewered properly with main drains, while the desire for economy meant that many soil and ash pits were cleaned only once every three or four months. Sanitary conditions were also worsened by the nuisance created by cattle being taken to market, while the town’s water supply was often poor, with deleterious effects on health and hygiene. Nevertheless, in the context of the time Ashton was ‘as much a model cotton-working town as any we have’.

While Ashton had previously been renowned as ‘the most Chartist town in England’, by the 1860s it was considered ‘one of the most Radical constituencies in the kingdom’. Dominated by the chiefly Liberal and nonconformist employers of the West End, headed by the notoriously puritanical Hugh Mason, Ashton had returned a Radical M.P. ever since 1832. However, at the level of local politics the town was chronically divided along party lines, and the municipal wards were split evenly, two apiece, between Liberals and Conservatives, though the Liberals controlled the borough council and the mayoralty. Seemingly endless recriminations followed in the wake of each election, and in the words of the Liberal Reporter, ‘The community is ranged into two contending armies, and so bitter is the animosity that not only at the time of elections, but from week to week party spirit vents itself.’

The number of Irish in Ashton was insignificant until the 1820s, when immigrants began to arrive in such large numbers that by 1841 they formed 10 per cent of the population. Driven abroad by poverty, they settled in some of the most disadvantaged parts of Ashton, and their living conditions consequently came in for particular criticism from J. R. Coulthart’s Report on the sanitary

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12 Coulthart, Sanitary condition, pp. 7–14; Ashton Reporter, 12 Feb. 1859.
13 e.g. Ashton Reporter, 10 Aug. 1858.
14 Reach, Manchester and the textile districts, p. 71.
17 For Mason: Joyce, Work, society and politics, pp. 187–8.
18 Ashton Reporter, 10 Dec. 1864.
condition of the town of Ashton-under-Lyne, which was carried out in 1843. According to Coulthart, Irish labourers were generally to be found in back-to-back, one-up one-down houses, while houses of 'a worse description' were occupied by 'the lowest Irish and the most improvident class of cotton operatives'. Moreover, Ashton already possessed its own 'Little Ireland' where sixteen 'most unwholesome' cellar dwellings opened on to two tiny enclosed courts each inhabited by around 100 people.20

Although it is significant that a 'Little Ireland' already existed in the popular imagination,21 Coulthart seems to have overestimated the isolation of the Irish from the host community during this period. An analysis of the 1841 census books for one of the courts singled out by Coulthart, Worthington Square, shows thirteen houses occupied by seventy-six people, including fifty-three Irish in nine of them; the number of people per house was almost identical for Irish and non-Irish dwellings. Moreover by 1851, although there were twenty-three inhabited houses in the Square, the Irish only occupied seven and their number had fallen to thirty-five. Similarly, given the level of Chartist activity in the town, it seems unlikely that the Irish remained isolated from the working-class politics of the period, though immigrant participation at the mass level remains a matter of scholarly controversy.22 Local Chartist leaders such as Timothy Higgins and John Deegan were Irish-born, the local Confederate leader B. S. Treanor was also active in the Chartist cause, and there was extensive co-operation between the two bodies, particularly in 1848.23 Overall therefore, by the end of the 1850s the Irish appear to have constituted a large and well established minority in Ashton-under-Lyne. Even if not altogether

20 Coulthart, Sanitary condition, pp. 34–5. John Ross Coulthart was a local banker and magistrate and a prominent churchman, who stood unsuccessfully for the Conservatives at Ashton in the 1880 general election. For a general description of court dwellings of this period: Engels, Condition of the working class, pp. 65–6.

21 There is some confusion about this: by the 1860s Back Charles Street, which was built in the 1850s and hence did not exist when Coulthart surveyed the area, was popularly referred to as 'Little Ireland'. It is therefore unclear precisely where Coulthart meant.


accepted by their hosts, they were at least proceeding towards some measure of integration into the life of the town.\textsuperscript{24}

Between 1841 and 1861 the size of the Irish community more than doubled to 5,290, representing 15.6 per cent of the population.\textsuperscript{25} It is clear that they still occupied some of the poorest parts of Ashton, with marked concentrations in the town centre and in the courts and yards off Glebe Street in the old town, an area of ‘closed-up yards with ashpits at each end’.\textsuperscript{26} The most notorious Irish ‘ghetto’ was at Adelphi Court,\textsuperscript{27} an area similar to those graphically described by Coulthart and hemmed in on all sides by cotton mills. There in 1861, seventeen houses were occupied by 127 Irish, with no English residents. That was in fact an improvement over 1851, when there had been 169 Irish living in fourteen dwellings, with up to twenty people crammed into a single two-roomed house. Furthermore, while only three cellars were named as such in 1861 (two of them occupied by seven Irish people), there were seventy-six Irish living in the thirteen houses of Bateman’s Yard which were described in the 1871 census as Bateman’s Cellars. The living conditions endured by a section of the immigrants were such that the town’s Conservative press felt able to invite its readers to visit Back Charles Street\textsuperscript{28} and Scotland Brook—both of which had large Irish populations, though were by no means ethnically homogeneous—and view ‘the terrible misery, the poverty, the filth, the habitations in which cattle would not be allowed to die, for they certainly could not live’.\textsuperscript{29} The immigrants’ poverty was reflected in

\textsuperscript{24} A judgement with which Kirk concurs: \textit{Working-class reformism}, pp. 313–15. On a national level this is also the conclusion of E. P. Thompson, \textit{The making of the English working class} (London, 1963), pp. 436–42.

\textsuperscript{25} The question of whom to include in a study of ‘the Irish community’ is disputed among historians, and attempts to arrive at a satisfactory formula, such as the inspired guesswork of Lowe’s ‘Widnes factor’ (Lowe, \textit{Irish in mid-Victorian Lancashire}, pp. 48–50, 72–3), have largely failed. In this study, ‘Irish’ refers to those born in Ireland, the English-born children of two Irish-born parents, and cases where the only surviving parent was Irish-born. It therefore probably underestimates the numbers of those who were culturally Irish.

\textsuperscript{26} Medical officer of health’s report in \textit{Ashton-under-Lyne corporation manual} (1896–7), p. v.

\textsuperscript{27} Also known popularly as Flag Alley. It is likely that this is the court referred to by Coulthart as ‘Little Ireland’. However, the 1841 census books are illegible and the court was not completely taken over by the Irish until 1861.

\textsuperscript{28} Part of which was wrongly listed as Charles Street in the 1861 census.

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Ashton Standard}, 26 Mar. 1859.
Daniel Osgood
	heir tendency to overcrowd their already cramped dwellings (Table 1). There is also evidence that ethnic considerations, as well as poverty, significantly influenced the immigrants' patterns of residence. Even in streets where there were also English inhabitants, some degree of ethnic clustering is apparent. Furthermore, although taking in lodgers was an important means of supplementing family incomes throughout urban Lancashire, especially among recent immigrants, Irish households in Ashton were far more likely to take in Irish lodgers than were their English counterparts (Table 2).

### Table 1 Average persons per household in 1861

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household type</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>With Irish lodgers</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>With English lodgers</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Ashton households</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish households</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Irish households</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.25</td>
<td>6.32</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2 Distribution of lodgers in 1861

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household type</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>With Irish lodgers</th>
<th>With English lodgers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>744</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>5,539</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>45.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: English households with Irish lodgers excludes the 31 with 32 Irish servants. Data for English households with English servants are not readily available.

The poorest housing conditions in Ashton were in Charlestown, a small outlying hamlet which was swallowed up by the town's growth in the 1840s and which became both the primary target of the move to eliminate back-to-back housing in the 1890s and the first area to be declared unhealthy in the 1930s. Yet in 1861 only 6 per cent of Charlestown's population was Irish, which calls into question Coulthart's contention that the worst housing was invariably inhabited by Irish immigrants. Moreover, although just nine of Ashton's thirty-five enumeration districts housed over half the Irish community in 1861, Irish residents could be found in each district,

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and no district was described as ‘being chiefly inhabited by the Irish’, unlike, for instance, the situation in Stockport in 1852. Even in 1868, when Ashton’s ‘Little Ireland’ was destroyed by English rioters, there were still some forty-two English residents in Hill Street whose houses were left untouched.

The marked tendency among modern commentators, following a trend set initially by Coulthart, has been to concentrate on the few areas of Ashton that undoubtedly were dominated by the Irish. For example, Kirk’s study singled out Adelphi Court, Worthington Square, and Back Charles, Back Portland, and Back Cavendish Streets as ‘all areas of dense Irish settlement’ which he regarded as representative of a wider ethnic separation among the population at large. Yet taken together those streets housed only 473 Irish people, under 9 per cent of the total community. That was less than the number (490) living in just one street, Fleet Street, which in its quality of housing and ethnic composition was far more typical of the situation of the Irish in 1861. Indeed Fleet Street and six long streets running parallel to Stamford Street in the town centre (Wellington, Wood, Church, Park, Charles, and Hill Streets) accounted for over 35 per cent of Ashton’s Irish in 1861. Although, like most of working-class Ashton, those streets were only partially sewered and lacked proper drains, there were no cellars, and in the main they were ‘regular, well-formed healthy streets’, intended for and inhabited by respectable working men and their families.

One possible measure of segregation between immigrant and host is the extent to which the two communities were linked by marriage. According to the 1861 census, 19 per cent of households within the Irish community contained a married couple in which only one partner was Irish. Excluding the thirty-one households headed by unmarried Irish people and the 200 headed by Irish widows and widowers, the proportion of mixed households was as high as 25 per cent. Many such marriages were among the better-off immigrants, and thus a sign of social advancement, but even allowing for the probability that many of the English-born spouses were of Irish

32 Ashton and Stalybridge Guardian, 16 May 1868.
33 Kirk, Working-class reformism, p. 330. He, too, struggles to place ‘Little Ireland’.
34 Coulthart, Sanitary condition, pp. 8–9, 14.
Table 3 Occupations accounting for more than 2 per cent of occupied Irish males in 1861

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cotton manufacture</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>49.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General labourer</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture labourer</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor excavator</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tailor</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bricklayer’s labourer</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoemaker</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 Occupations accounting for more than 2 per cent of occupied Irish females in 1861

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cotton manufacture</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>73.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charwoman, laundress, etc.</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic servant</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dressmaker, seamstress, etc.</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

descent, such a large proportion surely indicates that the Irish were not universally the social outcasts they are sometimes portrayed as being. Although pockets of poor housing inhabited mainly by impoverished immigrants certainly did exist, particularly at Adelphi Court and Little Ireland, the predominant residential pattern in Ashton by the 1860s seems to have been of English and Irish living side by side and in reasonable harmony, a pattern similar to that in other Lancashire towns during this period.\(^{35}\)

The quality of housing occupied by the Irish was determined chiefly by the type of jobs which they held. Irish employment in Ashton differed markedly from that traditionally ascribed to them.\(^{36}\) The expanding cotton industry, which had probably originally attracted many to Ashton, offered year-round, though poorly


\(^{36}\) e.g. Ó Tuathaigh, ‘Irish in nineteenth-century Britain’, pp. 154–7.
paid, employment, particularly for children, who entered the mills in ever-increasing numbers. Moreover, the security of income and job tenure which accompanied steady employment seems to have encouraged permanent settlement in the town, as can be inferred from the birthplaces of immigrants’ children in both 1861 and 1871, thus making it possible to build and strengthen community ties over time. In this the Irish of Ashton were very unlike their compatriots in York, for instance, who formed a highly transient community which replaced itself virtually every ten years; the crucial difference was that York had very little factory employment.  

To ascertain the occupations of the Irish, a sample was taken of all the Irish people resident in twelve of Ashton’s enumeration districts, giving a total of 1,839 people, or just over a third of the Irish community, of whom 867 were male and 972 female. Of the males, 131 (15.1 per cent) were recorded as having no occupation, and 109 (12.6 per cent) were schoolchildren. The main occupations of the remaining 627 Irish males are shown in Table 3. Of the 972 sampled females, 372 (38.3 per cent) had no occupation and a further 106 (10.9 per cent) were listed as schoolchildren, with the principal occupations of the remaining 494 shown in Table 4. The Irish were, almost without exception, to be found on the lower rungs of the occupational ladder. There was virtually no Irish middle class (as defined by the Registrar-General’s social classifications of 1921), only seven individuals being placed in Class II, and one, an ordnance surveyor, in Class I. Throughout the whole of Ashton only four Irishmen were listed as employers, of whom three had English wives and the other was unmarried. More typically, Irishwomen had taken unskilled and poorly paid work as domestic servants, needleworkers, or charwomen, while Irish males could be found attempting to earn a living as labourers or in depressed trades such as shoemaking and tailoring. Although in some cases shoemakers and tailors were

38 A 100 per cent sample proved impractical for lack of time. Notwithstanding its faults, the method used—a random geographical sample of census districts—seemed preferable to looking at (unrepresentative) areas of heavy Irish settlement (Kirk, Working-class reformism, pp. 325–8) or only at the occupations of household heads (Lowe, Irish in mid-Victorian Lancashire, pp. 81–9).
undoubtedly skilled craftsmen, it is more likely that the majority were in marginal sweated occupations, a contention borne out by the presence of another three shoemakers (not included in this sample) in the poor-law union workhouse. 40 However, it was work in the cotton mills which supplied most of the Irish with a means of support, providing jobs for a staggering 36 per cent of the community, an even greater proportion than among the English, among whom cotton employment stood at less than 30 per cent. 41 Irish cotton operatives were, however, overwhelmingly concentrated in the low-paid sectors of piecing, tenting, carding, and weaving. As Table 5 shows, Irish penetration of the supervisory and skilled levels was almost negligible, with only one overlooker (married to an Englishwoman) in the entire sample.

By the 1860s the occupational structure of the Irish in Ashton

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overlooker</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-acting minder</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spinner</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twister-in</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grinder</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stripper</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaver</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winder</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reeler</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Throstle spinner</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenter</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardroom hand</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blower</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piecer</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotton waste packer</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory hand</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


thus closely resembled that of their English contemporaries, with the younger and often English-born members of the immigrant community seemingly suffering little or no disadvantage in the labour market. Largely abandoning the declining trades of their parents, they were taking employment—often at a very early age—in the cotton mills which dominated the town’s economy. Although Joyce’s conclusion that ‘the Irish invariably had the most menial and lowest paid jobs, more often in outdoor labouring than within the factory’ may have been true in the immediate aftermath of the Famine influx, it was evidently no longer the case by 1861. Moreover, despite Kirk’s claim that ‘direct competition in the labour market . . . became more acute, and was more keenly resented by sections of the English’, throughout this period there was no hint of economic rivalry between English and Irish, nor any accusations that the Irish had the effect of lowering wages. Indeed the common suffering engendered by the Cotton Famine, which hit Ashton perhaps harder than any other town in the area, can have served only to heighten awareness of a community of interest, as is implied by the attempt of 15,000 English and Irish workers to rescue the (principally Irish) operatives arrested during the Stalybridge Relief Riots of March 1863.

While there may have been increasingly little to distinguish the Irish and English working classes along socio-economic lines, Gilley has claimed that ‘the Irish remained a distinct cultural phenomenon’. One of his defining characteristics was that of the ‘wild Irish’, fond of drink and disorderly behaviour, and disrespectful of the properly constituted authorities. That the reputation was based at least in part on fact is demonstrated by the annual reports of the chief constable of Ashton for the period (Table 6). Although the figures refer to the whole borough, making direct comparison with the numbers of Irish residents impossible, in 1861 the Irish formed 15.6 per cent of the population of Ashton town while committing,
on average, 35–40 per cent of the crime within the borough, an over-representation similar to that in towns such as Manchester, Liverpool, York, and Bradford. Moreover, the Irish formed an even more disproportionate share of the numbers arrested for particular types of crime (Table 7).

Once the prosecutions for gaming and obstruction—almost invariably linked to the predominantly Irish activity of ‘pitch and toss’—and those for petty theft—perhaps a reflection of the continuing poverty of many immigrants—are accounted for, the predominance of offences involving rowdy behaviour is clear. For many contemporaries the terms ‘drink’ and ‘Irish’ were synonymous. On one occasion following an ‘Irish Row’ in Worthington Square, Ashton’s mayor commented that ‘it was very grievous of him to see Irishmen brought up under such circumstances all evidently more or less originating in drink’. Intra-communal disorders among the immigrants were also very common, with large numbers of Irish,

48 e.g. Ashton Reporter, 3 Nov. 1860; Ashton Standard, 20 July 1861.
49 Ashton Reporter, 9 Nov. 1867.
### Table 7 Crime in Ashton town, Oct. 1860–Sept. 1861

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crime</th>
<th>Total convicted</th>
<th>Irish convicted</th>
<th>% Irish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rescue from police</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assaulting police constable</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>77.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaming</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>62.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obstruction</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disorderly</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>47.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>46.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wounding</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drunkenness</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>32.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beerhouse offences</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>383</strong></td>
<td><strong>133</strong></td>
<td><strong>34.7</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Information taken from local press, using the methods set out by Finnegan, Poverty and prejudice, p. 144. Only information referring to offenders residing in Ashton town was considered, thus permitting a meaningful comparison between census data and press reports.

frequently armed with pokers and other weapons, fighting in the street in front of an appreciative crowd. One ‘Riot in Cavendish Street’ in 1860, involving a dozen Irish and watched by a crowd of several hundred, saw ‘blood flowing in all directions’, and led to two prosecutions for riot, seven for assault, and one for wounding. The Irishman convicting of wounding, Thomas Rippingham, helped to give the community as a whole a bad name, since over a seven-year period he was also convicted of manslaughter and half-throttling a policeman. The magistrate in 1860 expressed his regret that ‘the Irish in this town caused so much disturbance’. 50

When the local constabulary attempted to intervene in ‘Irish Rows’, communal wrath was often turned against them. In 1861, following an assault on two constables and the rescue of their Irish prisoners, the chief constable stated that ‘rows and rescues were become quite common, especially among the Irish’, a complaint repeated five years later, when after a twenty-minute struggle in

Back Portland Street between the police and a stone-throwing mob of Irish men and women, the magistrate declared that ‘the police had been used very badly, and such offences were becoming too common’.\(^{51}\) Events such as these seem to have reaffirmed the image of the Irish held by many middle-class commentators, which was reflected also in much prejudiced reporting of ‘those Irish cases of assault which crop up so abundantly in this court’\.\(^{52}\)

Despite the fact that levels of Irish crime remained fairly constant throughout the decade, the use of such derogatory language seems to have died out fairly rapidly—due, one suspects, to political necessities rather than any higher motivation. Middle-class concern about Irish criminality must also be set against the background of general dismay at the ‘increasing moral deprivation of our factory population’,\(^{53}\) of whom the Irish formed merely a part. Drunkenness was by no means a problem confined to the Irish: according to the chief constable in 1864 there was one public house to every 193 of Ashton’s inhabitants, and 80 per cent of the prosecutions in the previous two years had been related to drink.\(^{54}\) Irish crimes indeed tended to be less serious than, for instance, the long-running brickmakers’ dispute which culminated in the murder of a police constable,\(^{55}\) an impression borne out by the fact that in 1860–1 only six of the thirty-seven prisoners accused of offences serious enough to be committed to quarter sessions were Irish. There was also virtually no immigrant involvement in prostitution, the activity of most concern to the self-appointed moral guardians of the people.\(^{56}\) Despite the anti-Irish prejudice apparent in the press, it is significant that journalists never attempted to associate the immigrants with that activity, only one prostitute being reported as Irish during the whole of the period under review.\(^{57}\) Care must accordingly be taken to place anti-Irish sentiment based on supposedly inherent Irish lawlessness in its proper context of broader middle-class fears for the declining morals of the working-class and urban poor as a whole.

\(^{51}\) \textit{Ashton Standard}, 12 Jan. 1861; \textit{Ashton Reporter}, 31 Mar. 1866.
\(^{52}\) \textit{Ashton Reporter}, 22 June 1861; similar examples of Irish defendants exploited as sources of mirth for the court: \textit{Ashton Reporter}, 29 Jan., 5 Feb. 1859; 3 Nov. 1860; 11 May 1861; \textit{Ashton Standard}, 20 Oct. 1860; 12 Mar., 30 Apr. 1864.
\(^{53}\) \textit{Ashton Standard}, 19 June 1858.
\(^{54}\) \textit{Ashton Standard}, 3 Sept. 1864.
\(^{55}\) \textit{Ashton Reporter}, 2 Feb. 1861; 5 July 1862.
\(^{56}\) e.g. \textit{Ashton Standard}, 1 Dec. 1860; \textit{Ashton Reporter}, 15 Nov. 1862.
\(^{57}\) \textit{Ashton Standard}, 27 Feb. 1858.
By the 1860s the Irish were most easily visible to those around them as a religious body. While the loyalty of the English working class to any faith was often questioned, that of the Irish to Roman Catholicism was not. Although rural Lancashire was one of the strongholds of English Catholicism during this period, in Ashton the identification between Catholic and Irish was well-nigh absolute, as can be seen in the way that the progress of the Church closely mirrored successive waves of immigration. While there undoubtedly were some Protestants of Irish birth in Ashton (interestingly including two virulently anti-Catholic Anglican clergymen, T. T. Eagar of Audenshaw and F. H. Williams of Christ Church), it is likely that they remained a numerically insignificant minority. In contrast, the religious census of 1851 counted 950 Catholics in Ashton, at a time when services could only be held in the upper room of a house in Wood Street.

The Catholic Church was at the centre of Irish community life in the town, providing, in addition to an opportunity for religious observance, a social and political focus for the immigrants and education for their children. By 1870 the day and night schools attached to St Ann’s church were teaching 523 and 257 respectively, while in the later 1860s the Sunday schools there and at St Mary’s had 550 and 600 pupils. The leading spokesman for the Catholic and Irish communities was the Irish-born parish priest of St Ann’s, Father William Crombleholme, who defended the Church in the local press in lengthy polemics against the assaults of ultra-Protestants, and protected the interests of the Irish poor as a poor-law guardian and on the Borough Relief Committee during the Cotton Famine. The conduct of the Catholic clergy throughout the 1860s won them the admiration of the Reporter: ‘They exercise a great influence, and it is used for the benefit of peace, law, and

62 e.g. Ashton Standard, 22 Feb., 5, 12 Mar. 1864; Ashton Reporter, 8, 15, 22, 29 Feb., 14 Mar. 1868.
order. Their unostentatious benevolence in visiting the homes of the very poorest in the town, relieving the wants of the inmates, as far as their means will allow, is too well known to need repetition here.\(^{64}\)

As well as tending to the needs of their flock and attempting to strengthen their faith, the town's Catholic priests also made strenuous efforts to render them culturally acceptable to 'respectable' society. This can be seen, for instance, in a Church-inspired drive to reduce drunkenness amongst the Irish,\(^{65}\) which probably accounts for the extremely low level of prosecutions—only two throughout the 1860s—arising from celebrations of St Patrick's Day.\(^{66}\) Part of the campaign was conducted in conjunction with Hugh Mason's Albion Chapel, one of several institutional links between Catholicism and Dissent during this period. During the Cotton Famine, Fr Crombleholme chose to sit on Mason's Borough Relief Committee (where he declared that 'he had never met with more fairness, more kindness, or more cordiality'),\(^{67}\) rather than on the Anglican Revd Williams's rival General Relief Committee. Catholics and nonconformists both held their Whit walks in the morning (while the Anglicans had the afternoon) and joined forces in the long-running controversy over the absence of burial places except in Anglican churchyards.\(^{68}\) Finally, among Ashton's newspapers the Ashton News, founded by Mason in 1868 after he had temporarily fallen out with the local Liberal party, was by far the most generous in its coverage of the social activities of the Catholic Church.\(^{69}\)

In a town so evenly divided between Liberal and Conservative, neither side, at least until 1868, felt that it could afford to alienate the potentially decisive electoral support of the Catholic Irish.\(^{70}\) In the early 1860s the Standard declared four times in as many months that 'Roman Catholics have their rights too', and on one occasion

\(^{64}\) Ashton Reporter, 1 Feb. 1868.

\(^{65}\) e.g. Ashton Standard, 20 Feb. 1864; Ashton Reporter, 26 Oct. 1867.


\(^{67}\) Ashton Reporter, 27 May 1865.

\(^{68}\) Ashton Standard, 24 Nov., 1 Dec. 1860; 29 June 1861.

\(^{69}\) In the first six months of 1868 it reported entertainments including lectures, tea parties, and concerts: Ashton News, 15 Feb., 14, 21, 28 Mar., 18, 25 Apr., 2 May 1868.

\(^{70}\) J. Vincent, The formation of the British Liberal Party, 1857–1868 (London, 1966), pp. 293–9, for the background to this election.
the Reporter voiced the fear that at the next election ‘the Catholics will support the High Tory and Orange candidates’. With both sides continually jockeying for the Catholic vote, expressions of overtly anti-Catholic sentiment by the town hierarchy were very rare, though on one occasion a Conservative councillor described Catholicism as ‘the fancies of a people’, drawing the retort from a Liberal alderman that ‘he was astonished, in this the nineteenth century, to hear so much bigotry in the town council’.3

The periodic attempts by Ashton’s small minority of ultra-Protestants to raise tensions seem for the most part to have met with little success. The town’s Orangemen, the largest of the myriad Protestant groups, numbered at most 150 in the 1860s and gained sustained press coverage only for their annual dinners, perhaps undermining Kirk’s claims of ‘significant advances’ for the Order.4

The local standing of Booth Mason (Hugh Mason’s brother), who was deputy grand master of the Orange Order, was sufficient on the occasion of a ‘Grand Protestant Demonstration’ in the early 1860s to attract a crowd of 3,000–4,000, who, according to the Standard, ‘conducted themselves peaceably’ and treated his wilder statements ‘with contemptuous laughter’.6 Booth Mason’s candidature in the 1865 general election singularly failed to occasion any interest, and some time later, having aroused little but popular apathy and the distaste of the local Conservative hierarchy, he appears to have lost heart and moved to Abergele. Other Protestant orators met with a similar lack of success. The only lasting legacy of the Baron de Camin’s visit to Ashton, for example, was a debt of £1 25.6d.

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71 Ashton Standard, 12 Nov. 1859; 7, 14 Jan., 11 Feb. 1860; Ashton Reporter, 19 Apr. 1862.
72 Ashton Standard, 9 Nov. 1859; 28 Jan. 1865; Ashton Reporter, 10 Aug. 1861; 19 Apr. 1862; 2, 9 Nov. 1867. Frustratingly, in the absence of poll books it is impossible to identify Catholic electors.
75 Possibly ‘the most bizarre coupling in the whole political history of the period’: Joyce, Work, society and politics, p. 266.
76 Ashton Standard, 18 Oct. 1862; for fine examples of Booth Mason’s oratory: Ashton Reporter, 23 Nov. 1867; 8 Sept. 1888 (obituary).
77 As Kirk recognizes: Working-class reformism, p. 318. See also Ashton Standard, 7 July 1865.
78 e.g. Ashton Standard, 10 Aug. 1861; 18 Oct. 1862; 2 Apr. 1864; Ashton Reporter, 1 Nov. 1862.
which he was later sentenced to thirty days in prison.\textsuperscript{79} Finally, it should be noted that J. R. Stephens, who was still an influential figure and whose politics are often linked with those of popular Protestantism,\textsuperscript{80} consistently condemned anti-Irish sentiment, a stance which probably cost him the Conservative nomination for Stalybridge in 1868.\textsuperscript{81}

According to Kirk there were ‘repeated conflicts’ between English and Irish even during ‘the generally more placid years between 1860 and 1865’.\textsuperscript{82} An exhaustive search of the local press, however, reveals little to support this claim. Reported anti-Irish crime consisted of an incident in June 1860 when a group of Englishmen insulted and threw bricks at a group of Irish, and a drink-fuelled ‘riot’ two months later during wakes week between rival gangs of Irish and English colliers at Hurst Brook just outside Ashton.\textsuperscript{83} The only other disturbance between English and Irish in this period was that caused by the over-officiousness of an Irish policeman at the outlying hamlet of Lees, resulting in an attack on the police station by a crowd shouting ‘pull the Irish b—— out’, an incident which hardly sits well which the tradition picture of anti-Irish disorders.\textsuperscript{84} Kirk’s claim that a Catholic chapel at Ashton was stoned in 1861 appears to derive from a faulty reading of press reports of events at Oldham,\textsuperscript{85} and by the following year local commentators were able to praise ‘the good feeling that at present exists between the Catholics and Protestants in the town’.\textsuperscript{86} It would therefore appear that, while rather idealistic in tone, the Standard’s description of town life was a truer record of the relationship between English and Irish than Kirk’s claim of a marked lack of integration between the two communities:

\textsuperscript{80} e.g. Joyce, Work, society and politics, pp. 253–5.
\textsuperscript{82} Kirk, Working-class reformism, pp. 320, 330.
\textsuperscript{83} Ashton Reporter, 9 June 1860; Ashton Standard, 25 Aug. 1860.
\textsuperscript{84} Ashton Standard, 30 Jan. 1864.
\textsuperscript{86} Ashton Reporter, 18 Oct. 1862.
Many thousands of Roman Catholics dwell side by side with their Protestant neighbours . . . they work side by side with Protestants in our factories and on our railway lines; they wear the town’s livery in our police force; they march down in the Queen’s uniform from the barracks to their chapels, they buy and sell and associate in their condition and degree with their neighbours of similar condition and degree.

By the late 1860s, however, external factors were threatening this situation, the most significant being the growth of Fenianism. Although evidence of the extent of Fenian sentiment in Ashton is necessarily largely circumstantial, one modern source has claimed that the town was ‘a centre of Fenian activity’, and it is probable that, despite the fierce opposition of the Catholic Church, the movement enjoyed the passive sympathy of more members of the community than were prepared to give it their active support. The earliest mention of Irish Republicanism in Ashton came at the open-air Protestant meeting of 1862, when one of the orators asked if the National Brotherhood had reached the town yet, and a voice in the crowd cried out ‘yes’. Nothing more is then heard until after the Fenian rising in Ireland, when in early 1866 a rumour of forty or fifty Fenians drilling on Ashton Moss was taken sufficiently seriously for the ‘most strict inquiry’ to be made by both the borough and the county constabulary.

While Lowe’s study of the Irish portrays Fenianism as a healthy sign of a politically sophisticated and fully mature community, he probably underestimates the damaging effect that the existence of a conspiratorial group dedicated to the violent overthrow of British rule in Ireland had on inter-communal relations. Although in retrospect the idea of a Fenian uprising in the manufacturing districts seems almost risible, rumours were circulating in Ashton from 1866 of this possibility, and the attitude of sections of English society towards the immigrants was increasingly one of

89 For the reasons behind the Church’s opposition to Fenianism: Kirk, Working-class reformism, p. 345, n. 47; Lowe, Irish in mid-Victorian Lancashire, pp. 189–90.
90 Ashton Reporter, 18 Oct. 1862. The National Brotherhood of St Patrick was a front organization for the I.R.B.
91 Ashton Standard, 10 Mar. 1866.
suspicion and fear. This can be seen, for instance, in the hostile tone taken towards the Irish by Ashton’s new Conservative paper, the Guardian, which was launched in November 1867 at the height of the Fenian scare and was the only paper throughout the 1860s to tell an ‘Irish’ joke. As the Reporter prophesied, Fenianism turned out to be the ‘greatest enemy’ of ‘our Irish neighbours’, notwithstanding the considerable sympathy felt by many Liberals for Republican aims (if not methods) and despite the conciliatory efforts of the Catholic clergy, which culminated in a proposal for the Irish to volunteer as special constables and a declaration at a ‘largely attended’ meeting at St Ann’s school in January 1868 that:

We, natives of Ireland resident in Ashton-under-Lyne, deplore the calamitous occurrences which have recently happened, caused, as it is stated, by Irishmen banded together by secret oath … We have, as a body, long lived and worked in this town—our children are reared in it. We are desirous to meet together and to express our readiness to defend life and property, and to testify our loyalty to Her Majesty the Queen, and to declare our horror and reprobation of violent, destructive, or [sic] proceedings of any kind whatsoever.

The most important event in this hardening of the popular mood during 1867 was undoubtedly the Manchester Rescue, which sent ‘a thrill of horror’ through the district, not just for its audacity and violence but also because it took place so close to Ashton; indeed, two fugitives from the Rescue were captured in the town. Against the backdrop of the trial and execution of ‘the Manchester martyrs’, a constant stream of press reports of Fenian activities, most notably the disastrously botched Clerkenwell explosion, meant that by December even the Reporter could no longer deny that ‘there is a feverish excitement existing in the borough’. In the same week as Clerkenwell, two speakers from the Protestant Evangelical Mission and Electoral Union commenced their lectures in the district, and

the imminent arrival of William Murphy, 'of Birmingham, Bolton and Blackburn notoriety', was announced. It was therefore perhaps not surprising that in the following months the Reporter's plea that 'the good sense of the people . . . will enable them to bear in mind the grand old principle that the Roman Catholic has as much right to follow out his form of worship as we of the Protestant religion have to ours' went unheeded.

Murphy's lectures of January 1868 incited a stone-throwing mob to break some windows at St Ann's chapel. Once thwarted there by the police, however, popular ire was quickly redirected against a group of (English) strike-breakers across the Tame in Dukinfield. Tensions were maintained after Murphy's departure from the borough by further Protestant meetings, rumours of a Fenian attempt on the local armoury, frequent street fights between English and Irish youths, and the presence of party ribbons in the streets for St Patrick's Day. Matters became more serious in April when two attacks by armed Irish (allegedly marching four deep and distinguished by badges) on 'Murphyites' in Stalybridge provoked serious rioting there which led to assaults on Catholic chapels at Dukinfield and Stalybridge. Finally in May, the day after a great Protestant demonstration in Ashton, an attack by an Irish youth on an English girl displaying party colours in her hair was sufficient to cause three days of riots 'unprecedented for brutality and destruction of property'. Hundreds of English rampaged through Little Ireland and Flag Alley singing 'Rule Britannia',

101 Ashton Reporter, 21 Dec. 1867. It is not the intention here to provide more than a sketch of the events of 1868. The best sources for a full description are Lancs. R.O., CPR 1; the local press; and Glover, History of Ashton, pp. 332–9.
103 e.g. Ashton and Stalybridge Guardian, 1 Feb., 18 Apr., 9 May 1868; Ashton Reporter, 2 May 1868.
105 Disorders were frequent in Ashton (Ashton and Stalybridge Guardian, 29 Feb. 1868; Ashton Reporter, 18, 25 Apr., 2 May 1868) and reached almost epidemic proportions in Stalybridge (Ashton and Stalybridge Guardian, 1, 15, 29 Feb., 21 Mar. 1868; Ashton Reporter, 21 Mar. 1868).
both Ashton's Catholic chapels were sacked, and 500 special constables and the military had to be brought in to maintain order. In all the riots left three dead and hundreds injured or homeless.\textsuperscript{108}

These events demonstrate that, however restricted the level of visible anti-Irish sentiment during the 1860s, there still existed a considerable amount of latent prejudice which with the right stimuli could be provoked into life, causing great hardship for those it most directly affected. The principal victims of the riots were the Irish whose homes were destroyed, while for a month afterwards it was not deemed safe for the Catholic clergy to visit the town.\textsuperscript{109} The damage done to St Mary's alone came to £3,500, a huge sum for an already poor congregation.\textsuperscript{110} Indeed, the financial situation remained so desperate that Fr Crombleholme was compelled to go on two fund-raising tours of North America, during the second of which he died.\textsuperscript{111}

The significance both of the events of 1868 and of Murphy's role in them has, however, been overestimated. Although Murphy made two further visits to Ashton that year, they passed off without note, and he probably alienated many supporters with his demand for £3,000 to fund his election campaign at Manchester.\textsuperscript{112} Both Kirk and Joyce fail to mention either the provocative attacks by suspected Fenians in April, or a particularly inflammatory occurrence in Stalybridge, when one of the town's Catholic priests shot an English rioter, as possible factors in the escalation of inter-communal tension prior to the riots in May. Furthermore, Joyce is wrong to claim that Christ Church, Ashton, was 'built much earlier than it would have been' because of the 'impetus' which Murphy gave to Protestantism in the town: it had already been standing for twenty-one years, and one suspects the reference should be to Christ Church in Stalybridge.\textsuperscript{113}
Although the trials of those arrested during the riots provided a continuing focus for sectarian passions, fresh attempts to raise feelings met with decreasing success. A proposed Orange march at Whitsun was banned, and a potential flashpoint when two youths dressed as monks paraded through Ashton was easily defused by their arrest. Despite Kirk’s claims of a ‘multitude’ of disturbances during the remainder of 1868, he cites only one example. Lecturers from the Protestant Electoral Union continued to ply their trade, but by 1870 their stock had sunk so low that their leader in Ashton was chased out of town by a group of irate Irish mothers. Even an incident only six months after the riots, when three Irishmen carrying Fenian documents were arrested after one of them accidentally dropped a revolver in an Ashton pub, passed virtually unnoticed, although it does perhaps give an insight into why Fenianism was never a particularly serious threat to the status quo.

One should not forget that the experience of 1868 also contained some positive elements for the immigrants, if only because the ferocity of the attacks on their beliefs and institutions caused them to rally round them even more closely. As one of some 300 Irishmen who flocked nightly to defend St Ann’s chapel declared in a letter to the *Ashton News*, ‘they can never pull our religion down, it will only make us cling to it the more . . . an Irishman is ready any minute to die for his church and his country’. The close links between the ‘No Popery’ agitators and the local Conservative party in the 1868 general election campaign, and a widespread revulsion against the excesses of ultra-Protestantism also served to cement the emerging alliance between Catholicism and Liberal nonconformity. This was sealed at an election meeting at St Ann’s, chaired by Fr Crombleholme and addressed by the sitting M.P., Milner Gibson, when a resolution was passed pledging Catholic support to the Liberal cause. It was also reflected in Liberal collections for the repair of

114 Ashton and Stalybridge Guardian, 6, 20 June 1868.
115 Ashton Reporter, 6 June 1868.
116 Ashton News, 11 July 1868.
118 Ashton Reporter, 22 Jan. 1870.
119 Ashton News, 21 Nov. 1868.
the Catholic chapels and by far more generous press coverage of Catholic events in the following months. By 1871 co-operation between Catholics and Dissenters had extended to such matters as elections to the school board, and the Reporter was able to declare that ‘Mr. Crombleholme has generally worked well with the Liberal party in Ashton’.

Finally, although the spur given to Protestant feeling by Murphy has been widely believed to have contributed to the unexpected Conservative electoral victory of 1868, it should perhaps be pointed out that Tory control of the constituency was the norm for the next thirty years. With the exception of the 1880 general election, when Hugh Mason was victorious, Ashton elected Conservative M.P.s to the end of the century, Mason himself being defeated in 1885. Moreover, in 1873 the Conservatives also swept the board at the municipal elections, gaining a majority on the council which they kept into the next century. Despite the events of the preceding months, one of the town’s Catholic priests could write as early as September 1868 that ‘it is a pleasure that Ashton has returned to its original peace and quiet’. Indeed it had. On election day two months later there were four incidents of sectarian assault, not by English on Irish or vice versa, but by Conservative on Liberal.

It would therefore seem that Neville Kirk’s claim that ‘relations between English and Roman Catholic Irish workers from 1850 onwards were tense and discordant rather than relaxed and harmonious’ requires some modification. While a more in-depth study would require an examination of developments over a longer period, it is still possible to come to some conclusions over the situation in the 1860s, by which time the mass of refugees from the Famine crisis would have had sufficient time to acclimatize to industrial life. Indeed, that process was probably made considerably

123 e.g. Walton, Lancashire, pp. 257–62; Kirk, Working-class reformism, pp. 335–41.
124 List of M.P.s in Ashton-under-Lyne corporation manuals.
125 H. Heginbottom, Thomas Heginbottom: a few slight impressions of his life and times (Hyde, 1913), p. 42.
126 Ashton Reporter, 19 Sept. 1868.
127 Ashton News, 21 Nov. 1868.
128 Kirk, Working-class reformism, p. 323.
easier by the fact that there was already a sizeable Irish community established in the town, with the result that by the 1860s there were few visible discontinuities with the pre-Famine situation.

While their housing was in many cases decidedly inferior, and ‘Little Ireland’ continued to exist in popular culture, the living standards of the Irish were not dissimilar to those of the English working class and were certainly not ‘generally the very worst which the Victorian industrial slum could offer’, besides, Ashton was no industrial slum. Although the immigrants remained poor, there was some measure of economic progress as they became increasingly integrated into Ashton’s industrial structure, a process which could only accelerate as the next generation of Irish acquired more of the skills necessary for life in an industrial society. Their economic advancement is also indicated by the presence in the town of a large body of Catholic Irish electors. The fact that their votes were regularly sought and used is a further sign of their participation in normal town life, as are the large numbers of marriages formed between English- and Irish-born individuals, and the low levels of inter-communal violence.

However, the story of the Ashton Irish is not purely about their integration into town life, for they also sought with some success to build their own community. This was made possible by the security of employment in the cotton mills, and its strength can perhaps be gauged not just from the depth of the reaction to Murphy but also from the fact that, despite the continuing poverty of many of the immigrants, only twenty-one Irish were to be found in the union workhouse in 1861, less than 6 per cent of the inmates. With the sole exception of Fenianism, community life revolved around the Catholic Church. Despite an inevitable leakage among the immigrants (perhaps more so among second- and third-generation Irish) Catholicism remained the only religion in England able to command the loyalty of a major sector of working-class opinion. While it is true that the Church worked strenuously to preserve the Catholic identity of the immigrants and hence maintain the separation between English and Irish, it also attempted to reduce the cultural gap between the Irish and ‘respectable’ society through its teaching of the socially and politically conservative gospels of

130 Unlike, e.g., politically apathetic York: Finnegan, Poverty and prejudice, p. 164.
temperance, improvement, and 'loyalty to the Queen of England'. The success of this policy and the central place of the Catholic Church in the immigrant community can be measured by the testimony of one old Ashtonian, John Holland, who was born in Brook Street, near Adelphi Court, in 1908, when it was still inhabited by large numbers of Irish: 'They lost their imitation brogue, and it was only by their names that one recognised the country of their ancestry. But one thing held them basically together, and that was their Catholic faith, and from this they have never changed.'

Given the low levels of anti-Irish crime and the marked lack of success for ultra-Protestant orators for most of the decade, Kirk's claims of 'mounting tensions after 1850' between host and immigrant are increasingly difficult to sustain. Indeed, it may be the case that he overlooks evidence of a decline in ethnic tension in his attempts to give credence to his theory that conflict between English and Irish helps explain the lack of working-class combativeness after the demise of Chartism. This leads him into a number of inconsistencies, most notably when he himself points out that 'in periods of rising industrial militancy . . . Irish and English cotton operatives generally acted together against the forces of capital', which appears to undermine much of his argument. He is also a little confused when he claims that 'areas of dense Irish settlement' were 'the scene of repeated conflicts in the 1860s', only to contradict himself two pages later by stating that 'mixed streets often experienced some of the worst outbreaks of ethnic conflict during the third quarter of the century'. Moreover, to represent the riots of 1868 as merely the resurgence of a constant anti-Irish prejudice underlying all inter-communal relations during the post-Famine period, which was only temporarily quiescent due to the pacific efforts of the town's Liberal and Catholic leadership, also seems rather strange, as these efforts if anything intensified in

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1868. Similarly, Patrick Joyce’s view that the riots were a direct consequence of a long-delayed movement of ‘the 1841–1851 influx’ into south-east Lancashire can perhaps also be dismissed.  

While the events of 1868 showed that the Irish had not yet been completely accepted by all parts of English society, it was only the exceptional circumstances of that year which briefly made it respectable for such sentiments to be aired. The unfortunate coincidence of the proposals to disestablish the Church of Ireland, William Murphy’s highly inflammatory oratory, and the widespread suspicion in the wake of the Fenian atrocities that all Irishmen, especially those marching in formation on April evenings, were potentially disloyal breathed new life into a venerable but dying anti-Catholic tradition. Yet this proved to be no more than its final flourish. Within months of the rioting the Ashton Reporter was able to declare that ‘matters have assumed their normal aspect, and it is reasonable to expect that all classes will live in peace and harmony by mutually agreeing that difference in opinion shall make no difference in the treatment of men and sects’. There therefore appears to have been no reason why the gradual acceptance of the Irish community as a part of town life should not have continued.

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136 Joyce, Work, society and politics, p. 252.
137 Ashton Reporter, 30 Jan. 1869.