

Chainmaker's House

This house, originally situated alongside Gregory's Stores in Old Hill, was the first to be rebuilt on the Museum site. The house dates from 1886 but the period setting is 1914.

At the rear of this house lies a washhouse, coal house, privy, and chain shop. This house was once occupied by Edward Parkin, a fitter and anchor worker, but as there is now a chain shop behind the house it has been fitted out to represent the home of a fairly prosperous chainmaker.

The parlour was the 'best' room, normally reserved for special occasions or for use on Sundays - the front door was rarely opened except for special events like weddings and funerals. The focal point of the parlour is the decorative tiled fire grate. The surround and mantle are of slate, black enamelled and decorated with red paint marbled effect.

The floor has been covered with linoleum, a mixture of ground cork and solidified linseed oil on a canvas backing. The patent for the manufacture of linoleum was taken out in 1860 by the Scottish firm Nairn and Co, a company which is still in business today.

The warmest and most used room in this and other similar terraced houses was the back kitchen and people would normally walk up through the side entry and in through the back door to the kitchen.

This is where all meals were prepared and eaten and other jobs such as ironing were done on the central table shown below with the crochet covered milk jug, casserole, bread and the stone hot water bottle.

The father would work for 12 hours a day as a chainmaker and his hot midday meal would be taken to him in a basin by one of children in their dinner break from school. The father would get any meat the family could afford but often the children would just get bread dipped in sausage and bacon fat - 'a piece of dip'.

Very typical of houses like this is the built-in cupboard between the chimney breast and the front wall (on the right in the above photo). When gas and electricity were installed this cupboard often housed the meters.

The fire in the grate was always burning even in the summer. If it went out completely it could take up to 4 hours to relight it and get a kettle boiling for a pot of tea and hot water for washing and cleaning.

Coal could be bought from the local coal merchant who would have a yard very much like the one at the museum. Sometimes children, usually boys, would collect coal in a sack from the railway line where it often fell off from passing coal trucks. If the man of the house worked in the mines he would be entitled to free coal.

The pans for cooking were held by the hooks over the fire, probably made locally.

The grate was cleaned every day with a stiff brush and finished off by polishing it with a velvet cloth. Every Friday it was coated with a paste called 'blacklead' containing graphite (like pencils) to keep it shining and free of rust.

Girls would be expected to help every day with the housework, running errands and cooking and cleaning.

In the yard at the back there are outhouses including the privy - no inside bathrooms in those days!