

Buying Huddersfield for the People

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‘IT IS OFTEN TRICKY to decide when an agglomeration of huts and houses becomes a town with a sense of itself as a community, with a shared identity and aspirations.’¹ This process was particularly short and dramatic for many northern English textile towns, and Huddersfield’s was one of the most truncated. When they received their first town charter as a municipal borough in 1868, many inhabitants celebrated this as a formal recognition of the threshold having been crossed, even though, as in every town, there were also significant numbers who resented anything which increased their outgoings and they perceived no personal gain from stronger administration. For ordinary people, it may all have seemed to be above their heads, but more and more of them did look forward to a time when real democracy would require the town’s management to reflect the wishes and needs of the whole population.

Certainly, those who valued the charter also took it as a recognition from central government of the enormous amount they had achieved over the previous century in expanding their manufacturing and trade. The more practical gift of powers to manage their own affairs much more actively than in the past was, however, now clearly needed, especially in the central area which was until then classed as nothing more than a hamlet.² The wider township had also seen its population multiply rapidly, an increase which showed no sign of tailing off. Much had been achieved through determinedly adapting systems designed for running feudal villages, supplemented by the setting up of improvement commissions and other ad hoc bodies.³ However, the age of muddling through in this way had to be superseded by forms of government more firmly embedded in the desires of the whole community. Even so, the powers and duties awarded were still limited compared to the present day, and this chapter recounts how Huddersfield was a pioneer in going further.

The Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 undoubtedly marked a sharp break with the previous history of towns in England, for charters awarded

since Tudor times had mostly been about ceremony and prestige rather than the practicalities of running a community. In effect, the reforms of 1835 recognised that the manufacturing and mining towns had reset the whole urban agenda on their own terms, rather than their being absorbed into an existing system. Huddersfield was thus recognised as a thriving industrial settlement when it became a municipal borough in 1868, and would go on to be given county borough status as part of the formation of the new West Riding County Council in 1889.

This removed the town entirely from the county's administrative apparatus, but this chapter recounts how, after a delay, one further step which few other towns could ever have considered, and hardly any ventured upon, was undertaken. As the town's Liberal newspaper, the *Examiner*, commented at the time, when the Corporation decided to acquire the Huddersfield portion of the landed estates of the feudal overlord, the Ramsden family, that was but 'another step ... along the path of municipal progress which has been so consistently and successfully followed even before, and certainly since, the incorporation of the borough.'⁴ The Ramsdens held extensive estates elsewhere, but the heart of their historic lordship lay, as the legal conveyance which ended their influence was to put it:

in and around the Town of Huddersfield and in the townships of Huddersfield, Almondbury, Lockwood, Honley, and Dalton, or the Parishes of Huddersfield, Almondbury, Deighton, Kirkheaton and Fixby, comprising or including the Manor and Lordship of Almondbury, the Advowsons of the Rectories or Vicarages of St. Peter's, Huddersfield, All Saints, Almondbury, and St John's, Birkby, and the lands containing in the whole Four thousand three hundred acres or thereabouts delineated in the plans specially prepared.⁵

By acquiring this estate, the Borough Corporation at a stroke came to own nearly half the territory which it administered, including almost the whole of the commercial heart of the town, which was estimated to cover about three hundred acres.⁶ It also acquired automatically what remained of the manorial system of administration from feudal times, and the right to appoint the clergy of three Anglican churches on the estate. In doing so it imposed a new unity across the chaotic mix of townships within huge ancient parishes which was typical of the industrial Pennines but very different from the arrangements taken for granted in the southern half of England. It effectively extended the practical powers of administration considerably further than even much larger urban areas enjoyed, or the framers of the reformed charters envisaged.

Clifford Stephenson, himself a councillor, looked back at the purchase some decades ago in a determinedly celebratory tone, setting out how it

originated and how it was brought to fruition largely through the efforts of Councillor Wilfrid Dawson. A re-examination of the bound volume of documents known as the 'Dawson File', which Stephenson relied upon, certainly supports the factual aspect of his account as far as it goes.⁷ However, he rather glosses over the manner in which negotiations both began and were carried through, almost to the point of completion, and leaves a number of important questions unanswered. In particular, according to Stephenson the process was nudged along by an astonishing series of coincidences which were apparently vital to its success. There are also some elements in the story which might suggest the possibility of sharp practice to modern minds used to suspicions of corruption and underhand dealing in such matters.

This chapter therefore goes over the process again, using an approach which would be associated today with the phrase 'due diligence' as applied to such enormous corporate financial dealings, in so far as such a thing is possible from such limited material. At the same time, it must be stressed that it was always clear that Dawson himself never stood to make any personal profit from the scheme. At his funeral the *Examiner* reported that

a rumour [had been] rife at the completion of the bargain to the effect that Alderman Dawson had "made a profit, or drawn a commission" on the transfer – an insinuation that had hurt [him] very much. "Not by one penny piece", said Councillor Barlow, "did he or his firm benefit. Even on the completion, when he was offered a cigar he declined it so that for all time he could honestly say "Not a farthing in any shape or form came to me or mine through this transaction."⁸

The lengthy report from which this comes also reminded readers that Dawson never actually fought a council election. He was unopposed when he first stood as a candidate for Newsome ward, and the dramatic events of his first term led to his immediate selection as an alderman, a status which he maintained for the rest of his time on the council. Indeed, after a year he became mayor and served two years (1921–1923) in that office. Dawson was remembered as 'a great administrator, and a man whose shrewd and sound judgement, wonderful insight and wide experience have been of inestimable benefit to the town of Huddersfield'. The reported views of those who knew him suggest a man who was energetic and determined, a hard negotiator and one who could at some times be impatient yet at others show 'a generous disposition'.⁹

By profession Dawson was a stockbroker who developed a wide range of business interests. He was involved in the speculative buying of Lancashire cotton mills during the brief post-war boom (and lost money in the subsequent slump), and he was a director of several textile companies. These included the Amalgamated Cotton Mills Trust Limited, of which someone



39. Wilfrid Dawson (1871–1936), in 1921. Councillor (1917); Alderman (1920) and Mayor (1921–3); honorary Freeman (1934); Chairman of the Finance and Watch Committees (1921–36).
West Yorkshire Archive Service, Kirklees



40. Samuel William Copley (1859–1937), in 1933. Self-made banker and financier who funded the initial purchase of Huddersfield in 1919–20.
West Yorkshire Archive Service, Kirklees

else who was to play a significant part in the Huddersfield purchase, Samuel William Copley, was also a director. Another business associate and financier involved in cotton speculation was James White, who was also to enter the story of the Huddersfield deal.¹⁰

The existence of the Dawson File in itself leaves the researcher with a sense of confusion about motives and methods, which Stephenson largely ignores. Its creation shows that Dawson wanted to preserve a formal and comprehensive paper trail covering the course of his negotiations, which he knew were unorthodox, and yet it was effectively put away in a place where it was unlikely to be found, and where if found its significance would almost certainly be missed. It was thus far more likely to have disappeared for ever, than be utilised as it ultimately was – and presumably was intended – to be. Most of the 175 documents included seem unimpeachable individually, but the process they reflect, taken as a whole, is generally eccentric and at times bizarre. In that sense the File can sometimes seem almost designed to obscure the real significance of what was done. What is apparent is a fairly ruthless, driving urge by Dawson to achieve a personal goal which he knew his colleagues on the council did not actively share, much less the general public. A similar scheme had been proposed by Councillor E. A. Beaumont in 1894, apparently after talking about such matters to the financier Baron Rothschild, but it had then been firmly rejected as impractical.¹¹

What may have motivated Dawson to ignore this is Huddersfield's unusual continuing dependence on a single manorial lord. The Ramsdens owned most of the land on which the town centre stood and, although they had previously been closely and positively involved in various aspects of the town's development, they now seemed increasingly detached.¹² When Dawson had first joined the council in 1917, he had stated that such a purchase was 'his great ambition', but in all his later comments on the actual purchase, he said that the initiative really came from the Ramsdens, not him.¹³ The account given by Meriel Buxton in chapter 7 clarifies the issues by showing that Sir John Frecheville Ramsden had demonstrated a steadily diminishing emotional identification with his ancestral estate around the town, except perhaps for Longley Old Hall, which was not included in the sale.¹⁴ Instead, there was a growing engagement with other sections of the family's lands, especially in Scotland. With a shift in the Ramsdens' economic attention to the Malayan plantations which they had fortuitously acquired and which proved highly lucrative, even the practical significance of Huddersfield as a source of income was reduced.¹⁵ There is also some evidence in the Dawson File and elsewhere that the rise of socialistic politics in the town made it harder for paternalism to function in a way that satisfied the family. Finally, the rise of much larger, impersonal companies at the heart of the local economy

must also have diminished any possibility of maintaining any real control of development by a feudal lord.

The work of Springett also suggests that the estate had been run for several decades in a rather unrealistic manner, and its long-term financial value therefore was far from clear, something which almost wrecked the search for agreement over what was a fair price to be paid.¹⁶ In particular, when the Ramsden Estate had finally had to admit that tenancies-at-will were no longer acceptable to tenants in the commercial centre, their initial shift to 99 year leases in 1867 still did not actually go far enough to encourage developers and later owners to see them as long-term assets which would not depreciate discernibly over a short lifetime. Leases for 999 years were becoming the norm nationally, and were much preferred.¹⁷

Moreover, with regard to the development of housing, even though many contemporary commentators and historians have argued that developers should have built better houses than they did, it seems clear that when the Ramsdens set out to encourage this approach it had limited success. New North Road was developed in the 1850s and good villas were built around Greenhead Park from the 1860s and in Marsh from the 1880s, but most Huddersfield inhabitants could not afford such dwellings, and developers knew it. Consequently, whereas the adjacent Thornhill Estate became a scene of steady building, opportunities on the Ramsden Estate were neglected. Finally, the residual agricultural value of their undeveloped land was low, given the altitude and poor soils of the area. This remained true despite the relative success of the distinctive family dairying operations based on the direct retail of liquid milk to nearby consumers, which was the local norm. Whereas the Armytages of Clifton, for example, did feel a strong enough sense of history to resist the spread of Brighouse, and to accept the financial consequences, the Ramsdens no longer wished to maintain this approach.¹⁸ Therefore, a sale of the whole estate would be the easiest way out of an economic impasse, especially as existing investments in high-quality town-centre buildings had proved an expensive way to try to get the town economy to catch up with the older centres of Yorkshire textile manufacturing. The alternative possibility, of breaking the estate up at auction, also existed but as far as we know this was never suggested.

The man who made Dawson's plan possible was Samuel William Copley (known as Sam), like Dawson a native of Berry Brow but whose subsequent career had taken him to Australia and back. Copley was born in Parkgate, Berry Brow in 1859, the son of a weaver who had turned his hand to hairdressing and then speculated in mineral waters and oatcakes. The son showed the same initiative. Leaving home at 17 with £1 in his pocket, Sam worked as a barber in Manchester, Blackpool and Wales, and in Pontypridd he branched out as

a dealer in furniture, carpets and boots. In 1887, having saved about £400, he emigrated to Australia with his brother-in-law, where he joined his half-brother, Ben. He set up as a butcher and began cattle ranching and speculating in land, making and then losing money before starting out once more as a barber in Melbourne.

He continued his financial speculations and gradually became more successful, especially after moving to Freemantle in 1888 and Perth in 1890 where his business interests and speculative land purchases in the undeveloped suburbs were highly lucrative and he became a wealthy financier as well as owning the ferry across the River Swan. He returned to England for health reasons in 1914 and settled in London. He described himself as a banker in the conveyance which ultimately concluded the purchase of Huddersfield, having recently founded Copley's Bank in London, and in 1919 he was doing well in banking and insurance as chairman of both the Western Australia Insurance Company and the Atlantic Assurance Company as well as governing director of Copley's Bank. He died in 1937, having retired to Elstree in Hertfordshire where he farmed Red Poll cattle.¹⁹ He cuts an exotic figure as a Huddersfield native from a poor background with an unbelievable record of making, losing and making again large amounts of money. As his long-term secretary, Florence Barrowclough, told Clifford Stephenson in 1973, 'S.W.C. was always willing to take a speculative chance'.²⁰

If Ramsden's urge to sell the estate is credible, what is harder to accept is Dawson's assertion that the decision to sell to him in particular was a matter of pure chance. Since the paper trail in the Dawson File provides no evidence to support this, we are free to doubt in part or in whole Dawson's version that Charles Melville (referred to by Stephenson as 'The Mystery Man'²¹) was already 'acting in a confidential role for a vendor' by cautiously seeking out a credible purchaser for an un-named Yorkshire estate.²² However, in an alternative account, to which Stephenson did not have access until 1974 (after publishing his booklet), Sam Copley gave his version of events which, although suspect in some parts, does provide a more credible introduction to the sale process.²³ In Copley's recollection, written in 1934, Melville may well have been acting opportunistically in his own interest on the basis of knowing of Ramsden's general dissatisfaction with his Huddersfield responsibilities but without having Ramsden's specific instruction to find a buyer.

Though Copley places himself at the centre of affairs in his account, the Dawson File states firmly that formal negotiations for the purchase of the Ramsden Huddersfield Estate were 'conducted by Councillor Wilfrid Dawson from his personal business office'. The File itself shows both men playing a leading role at various times, and it is clear that Dawson was always acting in a personal capacity, not as a representative of the council. Dawson

later insisted that Sir John would never have approached the council directly, and it is probably true that if any other councillors had been the first to become aware of the possibility of the purchase then they would not have taken it up. Not only would the price have been completely unprecedented as an item of municipal expenditure, but also the council had no existing powers to proceed at all with such a large purchase. Only Parliament could enable such actions, and there was no precedent to suggest that it would. National government was at that time very wary of what could be seen as reckless spending by councillors sent giddy by the reformed local government system, even when identified as investment in their towns, for such things would have been quite unthinkable only a few decades earlier.

For Dawson to set the ball in motion as a private individual in this way, and then trust that the council would eventually endorse his action rather than condemn and disown it, was taking an enormous risk even though at the end of the process it was revealed that Dawson (who was deputy chairman of the Finance Committee) had had the support from the start of the mayor, Carmi Smith, and the chairman of the Finance Committee, Ernest Woodhead. Councillors Rowland Mitchell and Thomas Canby are also mentioned by Stephenson but their names do not occur in the Dawson File correspondence and they hardly constituted what Stephenson dignified as 'an unofficial very select committee'.²⁴ There is little to suggest that anyone on the council except Dawson was actively involved before the whole affair was made public in the local press. When significant difficulties over agreeing a specific price emerged, Sir John never implied that he knew of others who might be willing or eager to take over the purchase, which supports the theory that it was Melville who had initiated the sale and was driving forward the deal with Dawson and Copley in order to get his commission.

Stephenson's story, whereby a chance first meeting at a social gathering led to Dawson spending a night in Melville's flat in 1919, and there almost by chance hearing that an estate somewhere in the largest county of England might be for sale, must feel contrived.²⁵ Given that Dawson was already on record as wanting to buy the Ramsdens out, we might suspect that there was more to it than that, especially as Dawson's private office was in the same building as the Ramsden Estate Office, which was on the floor above.²⁶ On the other hand it is true that Melville did ultimately get a substantial fee, presumably in return for doing something. If Copley's memory is correct, the story as he told it is more straightforward: Melville was paid his commission by Copley 'In consideration of your services in negotiating on my behalf terms for the purchase of certain estates in Huddersfield belonging to Sir John Ramsden'.²⁷ In practice this meant in the end that it was Melville who took Dawson's name to Sir John and then let his own solicitor, H. Acland Hood, act as the go-between.

So, it would appear that Copley was playing an important part in the initial proceedings before 15 March 1919 when he appears in the Dawson File as an associate who was willing to take on the role of actual purchaser, but with the declared intention of passing on the estate if and when the Corporation could get the legal powers to buy it.

When Copley came to record his version of events in 1934, his memory and some of the details may have strayed from what actually happened and he almost certainly compressed the time scale and exaggerated his own role, but there is some contemporary corroboration for his story and there are points at which his account helps fill some of the gaps in the Dawson File.²⁸ Copley, Dawson and White were all business associates at this time, and it was at White's office in London that Melville (whom Copley remembered as Melrose) first met the three men.²⁹ How or why this came about is not clear but it would seem from Copley's account that Melville may have known White and may well have 'happened' to come to his office on business. This seems far more credible than the story of the social gathering and the night at Melville's flat. Stephenson later noted 'That Melville's contact with Copley and Dawson was deliberately "set-up" is an interesting speculation'.³⁰

The two accounts then diverge further, and here Copley may be exaggerating the extent to which he, and not Dawson, took the initiative. Nevertheless, Copley's dramatised account may contain a seed of truth when he recounted that Melville had said, on learning that Copley came from Huddersfield:

My word! I went to school with Sir John Ramsden who owns Huddersfield. My God! he would be glad to sell it – he is sick of it. He is sick of all the battling with the Socialistic Council, as they are always at him about begging a bit of land here and a bit of land there for town improvements, and they are always quarrelling about raising rates and that sort of thing on the Estate, and he has told me many times how sick he was of owning Huddersfield.

At this point, Copley recalled offering to buy his 'native town'.³¹ This gave Melville his opportunity, and he responded:

I believe he [Ramsden] would sell it cheaper through me than anyone else, as he knows I am needing money badly and he would like to see me get a Commission.³²

Copley offered a commission of £40,000 based on a purchase price of £1m and a net yield of 6 per cent. Both Copley and Dawson must have shared Melville's belief that if Ramsden would sell at all, it would be through him, hence their agreement to pay the commission for bringing the two parties together

through his solicitor, Acland Hood. Dawson, whose desire to end Ramsden control of the town was as strong as Copley's, must have been dismayed to learn of Copley's independent ambition. However, after the two men had discussed the matter further, Dawson felt re-assured that Copley would sell the estate to the Corporation when they were in a position to buy it.³³ Here the two accounts come together again and, according to the documents in the Dawson File, on 1 April Melville's commission was halved when Ramsden's asking price proved to be higher than Copley had hoped. Perhaps Copley was beginning to feel he had overreached himself. This is certainly what his family feared might be the case.³⁴ It may be significant that it was Dawson (not Copley) who then gave his bank details to Acland Hood.³⁵

A binding commission note was produced for Melville and signed by Copley eight days later, and the Ramsdens were then formally identified as the potential vendors.³⁶ Two days after that, the production of some figures on estate finances set actual negotiations in motion. A six-inch map of the estate was supplied, again to Dawson, not Copley, and a debate followed about the true levels of income being derived.³⁷ This opacity over who was really driving the deal runs through the entire transaction and there seems to have been no agreed procedure whereby one particular individual had the final say over the amount to be paid. Copley was clearly playing an active part in the negotiations to buy the estate, and was not merely a sleeping partner who would initially finance the deal, as Stephenson thought, which would support Copley's claim to have been involved from the start.

This is a part of the narrative where Stephenson exhibits the complacency of hindsight, for the consequences for Huddersfield could have been very serious indeed if it had all miscarried. If Parliament had refused to pass the Act enabling the Corporation to buy the estate, then Copley would have replaced Sir John in his crucial role as virtual monopoly landowner in the town centre, but without any commitments made as to what would follow. Copley took this possibility seriously and claimed to have benevolent plans to allow tenants to buy their freeholds, but he also had a record for swift action, not prolonged engagement, and the reverses he had suffered previously show he was a gambler rather than a far-sighted investor.³⁸ Dawson was later to admit publicly that Copley had made his money 'buying and cutting up estates' – what a later generation might term 'asset stripping' – and as he would have been so heavily committed financially, he might well have had to seek rapid sales for sections of the estate at the very least.³⁹ Because Dawson was acting in a personal capacity, the Corporation obviously had no power to intervene at any point, but would have been presented with a take-it or leave-it deal if Copley were indeed set to take over.

At this point, we should turn our attention to the solicitor, Acland Hood. His initial link was just to Melville, but he soon offered his services to Dawson for more general liaison with Sir John. The implication was that he would prove more effective than anyone else, which is what Melville had claimed for himself at the start, though why anyone should have been needed to act in this way is hard to understand unless it is true that Copley had agreed to pay Melville for liaising with Ramsden. Moreover, it was to become evident that Hood's role had never been clearly defined, not even how his fee would be calculated. That would be disputed even as negotiations reached a climax, adding an unwelcome distraction to an inherently unsettling process. Indeed, at one crucial point Hood effectively refused to do any more work, though this threat does not seem to have been carried through.⁴⁰ Admittedly, if any one person did liaise with both sides to keep the negotiations going, it was Hood, and a large number of the documents in the File originate with him. However, had this been an official Corporation negotiation, it would have been handled entirely without him. As Dawson presumably did not wish to involve his own staff, it was convenient to leave the negotiations to Hood.

An exchange of letters with more financial details during April 1919 showed that the serious work had now begun. On the 15th Copley commented that the estate revenues were 'way below what we were led to believe they were', though whether this was simply a negotiating ploy is not clear. Acting as buyer, he now stated that he wanted a personal profit of £40,000 from the deal if he did pass on the estate, a very substantial sum echoing Melville's original demand, and one not really subject to negotiation.⁴¹ However, he did commit explicitly to giving 'sufficient time for the Corporation to obtain statutory authority for the purchase'.

While Copley was communicating his terms to Woodhead, Dawson also remained deeply involved, receiving detailed rental lists for inspection which he then passed on to Copley, and he took the initiative to suggest an opening bid of £1,000,000 for the estate, 'free of all encumbrances'. At this point he was assuming that net income would be about £55,000 a year, which at 20-years' purchase meant £1,100,000, so £1,000,000 was 'well worth it'.⁴² This was the price he said he felt the council would accept. Informally, Ernest Woodhead, thought they could go up to £1,250,000, as 'we have to look not only at the present income but also at the future development of the town & at the advantages of control when building schemes and public improvement are desired'.⁴³ His recommendation carried weight even though Copley would have to find the extra money.

Melville was still hovering around the fringes of the bidding and now talked directly to Copley, with Dawson wanting what was discussed to be passed on. This may bear out Copley's later view of how the purchase had

started but it was a very unlikely way to run a coherent negotiation, especially as so far Sir John himself had not yet come to the fore on the Ramsden side. Dawson feared the possibility of a secret deal getting out, and wanted to push on, but on 28 April Hood stated that they were bidding too low to hope to reach agreement. On their side, they queried whether sales of Woodhouse Mill and the Lion Arcade had been reflected in the price asked. Copley, however, was now satisfied over levels of outgoings.⁴⁴

On 6 May it was agreed that a personal meeting might break the logjam, but nothing seems to have come of this before Sir John Ramsden's own solicitors, Capel, Curie and Bell, intervened on Sir John's behalf, explicitly demanding £1.4m.⁴⁵ Dawson insisted at this point that Copley was now in charge. He in turn pointed out that the return on the sum involved was less than would come from buying war bonds, hinting at that side of Copley which was simply looking for a good investment. James White was consulted and advised that sentiment due to the Ramsden connection might raise prices at an auction sale, should the sale fall through and the Ramsdens still wish to be rid of the estate.⁴⁶ It is not clear if this was mere speculation but, as already noted, such a course certainly never emerged as a real possibility. A summary of rentals less outgoings suggested an annual income of just short of £60,000 which at 20 years' purchase would amount to £1,200,000. Sir John now proved personally very determined not to reduce his price – 'If your side are really anxious to buy they ought to be able to come up to my price'⁴⁷ – so nothing was achieved over the summer. From early August to mid-September renewed attempts to meet also came to nothing as Sir John was spending most of the summer at Ardverikie. Finally, on 1 October, Hood commented that 'it is a shame' that the two sides were now stuck just £50,000 apart, with Sir John having brought his price down to £1.3m, and Dawson evidently having gone up.⁴⁸ There is a lack of documentation here. On the 16th Dawson was still adamant that he could not go any higher as his 'friends' would not sanction it. This is a possible reference to Woodhead and the wider Corporation, but it could just refer to Copley. In any case, the latter suddenly came round to Hood's view and gave in, which does seem to have been the only possible route to resolution.⁴⁹

Though Dawson had undoubtedly seized the initiative in the matter of the purchase, he had to be confident from the start for the realisation of his (and Copley's) dream that he could deliver the Corporation as the eventual purchaser of the estate.⁵⁰ This is why Dawson informed the Mayor, Carmi Smith, of the plan immediately after his meeting with Melville in April, and then felt able to proceed secure in the knowledge that Smith and Ernest Woodhead had 'authorised him to ascertain the terms on which the estate might be purchased'. The responsibility of the three men was admitted when

the minute of the General Purposes Committee came before the subsequent meeting of the Town Council and its adoption was moved by the Mayor, seconded by the Deputy-Mayor and carried unanimously: 'I think', said Councillor Robson, 'that the Council should accord its thanks to the three gentlemen who have carried through these negotiations – to the Mayor, Councillor Dawson and Alderman Woodhead.'⁵¹

The speed with which the deal was concluded owed much to that fact that, on 23 October the *Yorkshire Observer* reported that the Ramsden estate had been purchased on behalf of the Corporation.⁵² Ernest Woodhead, who was also co-proprietor and editor of the *Huddersfield Examiner*, had expected to break the news in his own paper when the time came, so he denied the accuracy of this.⁵³ This was, of course, correct in a literal sense, but it was clearly disingenuous, and as a consequence of the leak (though the *Observer* denied this) Ramsden's price was agreed next day. Copley then confirmed privately that a deal was being done at £1.3m, and that it would be finalised once a few small issues were sorted. On the 25th the news hit the national press and on the 26th Melville re-emerged to note that now things were completed, he hoped everyone was satisfied. This was presumably a hint to remember his commission.⁵⁴

Two days later, Copley then not only confirmed to Dawson that, after completion, he would immediately offer the whole estate to the Corporation but also that he would forego his premium if they allowed him £20,000 to cover his personal expenses (the sum he had promised to Melville), plus his legal expenses, and if they agreed to send all future Huddersfield Corporation insurance business to his two insurance companies, as well as any other insurance business they could 'influence'.⁵⁵ Though generous in one respect – 'I decided I would be big for once in my life' is how he later put it – Copley the opportunistic businessman was never far away and, despite having a rider that such deals would be at 'a market rate', this would not have been regarded as acceptable practice today.⁵⁶ To say that Huddersfield Corporation would effectively become a sales representative for Copley's businesses is truly astonishing. However, no-one seems to have objected on the record at the time.⁵⁷

Sir John now indicated his acceptance that he was actually selling to the Corporation when he agreed to delay completion till 24 June 1920 'to suit their convenience' to allow them time to obtain parliamentary approval. Clearly, he did not see Copley as his long-term successor as lord of the manor, though he must now have been aware that that might happen. On 30 October the *Yorkshire Evening Post* reported that

this afternoon, the question of the municipality of Huddersfield becoming the owner of the freehold sites of the town, will be

discussed for the first time by the Town Council. It can be said at once that, in responsible quarters in Huddersfield, not the smallest doubt is entertained of the scheme going through. The self-appointed committee of three, which has been conducting secret negotiations with Mr. Copley for some months past, decline to make any statement on the point, one way or the other; but it can be taken for granted that the three gentlemen concerned would count their labours as wasted, and suffer keen disappointment if the Town Council refused to ratify what they have done.⁵⁸

Though a few members of the Town Council were inclined at first to be incensed because, as they said, the negotiations had been carried on behind their backs by a committee which had no authority, they soon accepted that to buy the estate on behalf of the town the method pursued was the only practical one. The three members of the negotiating committee were all Liberals, and both they and the Conservatives were in favour of the purchase, as was the Labour group whose attitude was summed up by one of its members who was reported as saying that 'Surely, a proposal which means the land for the people is up our street.' There does seem to have been 'a small body of property owners in the business portion of the town who are not exactly enamoured of the prospect of their premises becoming municipalised and officialised' but there was no danger of letting slip what Dawson himself described as 'an unparalleled opportunity'.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, Copley would indeed keep the estate if they did not see their way clear to buy it themselves. Nothing suggests that he felt this was likely, but it was Copley who at this stage had to promise to provide the substantial down payment while Parliamentary sanction was gained.⁶⁰

The whole deal was put to a meeting of ratepayers in the Town Hall on 12 January 1920,⁶¹ but even then Sir John was still disputing what it was exactly that he had agreed to sell. At the start he had excluded Longley Old Hall and enough land to support it. He had also excluded a site he had promised to the Corporation for a war memorial in St Peter's Street and he thought he had excluded the advowsons of his three churches (the parish churches of Huddersfield and Almondbury and St John's, Bay Hall) which he intended to give to the Bishop.⁶² There was also the matter of who should pay the pension to Lady Georgiana Legge out of the £30 a year rental income from the clergy house at Almondbury, topped up to £50 by Sir John himself. He was holding out on both these issues as late as February 1920, but had conceded both by 12 March.⁶³ It is interesting to note that during these final negotiations, Hood felt he should warn Dawson that 'Sir John Ramsden is not a particularly willing Vendor and is opposed to the idea of the Corporation acquiring the

property.⁶⁴ This is the only clear evidence to support Dawson's belief that he should conceal the identity of the eventual purchaser of the estate.

Once the news had broken, the newspapers could not resist telling the Sam Copley story. The weekly version of the *Yorkshire Observer* ran a 'Special Huddersfield Supplement' about Copley⁶⁵ and the *Examiner* published a review of his life, the general thrust of which can be summed up by its comment that

few stories of the rise to eminence of great magnates of the last century possess such a romantic colour as the story of [his] career. The climax of his career, the purchase of the Huddersfield Ramsden Estate on behalf of his native town by one who little more than forty years ago was a barber's boy has a suggestion of a fairy tale about it. Not even Dick Whittington was more successful.⁶⁶

This was the man who, in his own words, 'started to buy [Huddersfield] for myself, not for them ... because it is my native town' but, as one of Dawson's circle of business associates, had then felt able to respond to the need for a wealthy benefactor to enable Dawson to accomplish the deal whereby Huddersfield bought itself.⁶⁷

On 12 January 1920 a draft contract was finally circulated but, with some things still to settle, Dawson, Hood and Sir John agreed that completion should be postponed to 29 September, Michaelmas Day, the traditional legal quarter day for land transactions. This would simplify the financial handover, since it was the first half-year rent day after an exchange of contracts could be expected, and would mark a clean break in that respect, easing the strain on both the estate office and tenants.⁶⁸ The one remaining hurdle was to secure for the Corporation the legal power to purchase the estate. On 4 February the Ramsden (Huddersfield) Estates Bill duly started its course in Parliament, and it was at this point that Hood effectively refused to act any further until the purchasers agreed to pay him at the rate he felt appropriate. However, the sale business as well as his complaints both continued and in the end Hood's reduced demand was paid. The final stages were now set in motion. On 29 April, a 'brief for the Huddersfield Corporation Lands Bill', ten pages long, went before Parliament's 'Unopposed Committee'. The Bill was opposed in the Lords by the Bishop of Wakefield on account of the advowsons being included in the sale, so an amendment was agreed requiring the Corporation to sell them to the diocese for £4,000, which Ramsden then refunded. In the brief, the estimated annual rental income was raised to £65,000, equating the actual price paid to the value at 20 years' purchase. The Lands Bill completed its passage through the Lords on 22 July and received the Royal Assent on 4 August 1920.⁶⁹

On 6 May the Borough Treasurer had confirmed to Dawson the implementation of Copley's requirement about the Corporation's insurance business, though no promises survive about influencing others.⁷⁰ On 16 July Dawson was negotiating over mortgaging the Estate with the Prudential to expedite payment, insisting that this was a very short term expedient, with repayment promised 'when the purchase by the Corporation takes place'. This seems odd given Copley's commitment to provide the interim funding, and suggests Dawson's awareness of their vulnerability at this crucial time. On 21 July Copley also caused some awkwardness when his secretary revealed that her employer had already promised one of the advowsons to a friend 'before he knew the Corporation was taking over the Estate' - a blatant mis-statement unless she had been kept in ignorance of Copley's intentions.⁷¹ Was this to be a foretaste of potential asset stripping? On 30 July Copley was reported to be ill, which delayed things, for as the formal purchaser he needed to appoint a valuer to assess tenant right on un-let agricultural land, something then resolved by simply accepting the Ramsden figure. He also failed to deal with some mortgage issues, causing needless expenditure on interest. As late as 10 September such things were still arousing 'bitter complaint' from Sir John.⁷²

Although the headline sum for the purchase had been agreed as £1,300,000, this included the clearance of existing Ramsden mortgages, at least some of which were associated with inheritance settlements within the family. The Corporation thus agreed to pay Sir John £1,258,500 directly, though it seems that only a deposit of £50,000 was actually paid by Copley at that time. The Corporation also accepted liability for the mortgage debts and the interest thereafter falling due on them. It is therefore not clear from the File whether or not Copley did pay over any further funds before the contract between him and the Corporation transferred his interest in the Ramsden Estate to the Corporation, now with appropriate Parliamentary authorisation. Everything was brought together on 29 September, and the historic deal was completed. The borough treasurer, Ernest Dyson, made his way with Dawson and others to London with over a million pounds in open drafts stitched inside his waistcoat.⁷³ The conveyance named Sir John Ramsden of Byram Hall, as the Vendor; Samuel William Copley as the Purchaser; and the Mayor, Aldermen and Burgesses of the County Borough of Huddersfield (the Corporation) as the third party.⁷⁴

Was this a good deal for the town? The transaction was done at the peak of the short-lived post war economic boom, followed by a collapse leading into depression, so a higher price was probably paid than if the sale had been delayed a few years, even though wool textiles were less affected than cotton. Indeed, Dawson would soon have become aware of this personally through his own speculation in the boom and subsequent heavy losses. Moreover, the

ongoing inter-war depression created an environment where it would have been hard to make the substantial gains from better management that were anticipated. However, the bulk of the purchase money was borrowed from Cardiff Corporation at a variable $6\frac{5}{8}$ per cent and in fact interest rates had fallen to 4 per cent within two years – another gamble that turned out well. By 1970 almost all the loans had been paid off, a further £980,000 had been contributed to the rates and £435,000 to the capital fund. Two years later all debts had been cleared and almost £1,500,000 added to the town's revenue – enabling Stephenson to claim that literally 'the Town had bought itself'.⁷⁵

However, with increasing inflation, ground rents fixed for 999 years were a growing liability. Stephenson himself, as Chairman of Estates, was instrumental in establishing new leases for the town centre redevelopment in the 1960s, which included ground rent review clauses allowing for periodic increases, albeit for shorter terms. In contrast in the 1990s most residential ground rents, by then costing more to collect than they brought in, were sold off.⁷⁶ By then, moreover, pressures on local government finance made the realisation of capital gains attractive even at the expense of future rents, and the freeholds of the central area redevelopment were sold to financial institutions.

Beyond these financial considerations, the fact that the Corporation had no need to seek the consent of any other landlord for developments in the town centre, or for small amenity schemes on open space, was over time seen as a positive result. This was clearly an advantage in the 1960s when the Central Area Shopping Precinct Redevelopment was undertaken.⁷⁷

The vision set out in the brief for the Lands Bill had amounted to no less than a prescription for municipal socialism:

The purchase will secure to the municipality which creates it any further increment in value. It will preclude the possibility of exploitation by private individuals for private gain. It will secure to the public complete control of the laying out of the undeveloped areas and the preservation of the amenities of life so often overlooked by private speculators. It will give the Corporation so far as the undeveloped land is concerned the fullest powers in the shape of Town Planning. It will allow Improvement Schemes being carried out without insuperable obstacles being raised. It will allow the Corporation to give facilities for the establishment and expansion of industries. In short it will facilitate almost every function of the Corporation acting through its Council in connection with Town Planning, Housing, the laying out of streets, the laying of sewers, drains, water and gas pipes, electric cables and in short enable the Corporation to exercise their powers as such to the best advantage of the community.⁷⁸

In other words, it would resolve the tensions inherent in the position whereby a manorial landlord was able to inhibit the ambitions of an elected local authority in a rapidly developing town. Moreover, as the *Examiner* pointed out, this was a development in keeping with Huddersfield's proud history of pioneering municipal action, from the Model Lodging House opened by the Improvement Commissioners in 1854, to the first municipal tramways in 1882 and the production and distribution of municipal electricity in 1893.⁷⁹

However, evidence from the Estates Committee minute book for the next five years suggests there was no readiness to take advantage of the purchase to strike out in new directions, for it was simply business as usual under a new name, with no change even of personnel for some time. Sections of the borough's existing estate were gradually transferred into the remit of the new Estate Committee and two extra staff were added, but the business was very humdrum for at least the first five years. Much of it was simple conversion of pre-1867 99-year leases to 999, rather than the implementation of any transformative master plan for the borough, such as happened in the 1960s. Dawson chaired the committee from 1920 until 1932.⁸⁰

Taking all in all, the purchase does seem to have been decidedly in the long-term interests of the borough, despite Dawson's initial concern that they might be paying too much. However, we should still be careful of taking the contents of the Dawson File at face value. Dawson, with Copley's backing and support, in effect forced the hand of the Corporation by a purely personal initiative which he was known to favour. The mayor said that he and the chairman of the Finance Committee were informed at the start, but little in the File supports the idea that the informal committee of three was really in charge. So, it is important to consider what would have happened if this complex deal had not worked out as planned. As the *Yorkshire Evening Post* speculated on 25 October 1919, 'in the event of the Town Council not agreeing to the purchase, or anything else arising that would prevent the transfer, Mr. Copley would keep the estate. But no such contingency is anticipated.'⁸¹ On the 30 October it expanded that:

Mr. Copley, who is a far-seeing business man, is prepared for any contingency. This is only to be expected. If the estate is left on his hands, then, he says, he will give tenants of houses every opportunity to obtain final ownership of the premises they occupy, this by purchase in instalments. What his course would be in the case of the valuable business portion of the town he has not divulged, but there is no great apprehension on the point.⁸²

This would fit with Copley's known attitudes, but he would not have intended to lose by his investment, and in any case working-class home ownership was unusual because people could rarely afford it. It was also noted at the time that

there are a few who contend that the town has lost a good landlord, and that if the Corporation is able to proceed with the deal it may not perhaps be quite so considerate of the interests of individual lessees as was Sir John Ramsden. The larger number of people, however, hail this step with great satisfaction, even with exultation. They see in it an opportunity of becoming, by means of the Corporation, which they, through their elected representatives ought to control, virtually their own landlord.⁸³

Whatever the risks of the unorthodox methods adopted by Dawson, the outcome of the decision to buy the Ramsden Estate was all that the optimists believed it would be and Alderman Stephenson's uncritical celebration of Dawson's deal, written in 1972, was able to echo the *Examiner's* belief in 1919 that 'the ratepayers of Huddersfield have reason to congratulate themselves both on this wise decision and on the negotiations which have rendered it possible'.⁸⁴

Note

References to the 'Dawson File' [DF] in this chapter are to the bound volume of numbered documents in the West Yorkshire Archive Service, Kirklees, at DD/RE/420b, entitled 'The Dawson File. Purchase of the Ramsden Estate'. This contains 175 contemporary documents plus some added later by Clifford Stephenson.

Endnotes

- 1 Beard (2015), p. 117.
- 2 See Griffiths (2008) and chapter 2, p. 45.
- 3 See chapter 2.
- 4 *HDE*, 29 October 1919.
- 5 Conveyance, 29 September 1920 – copy in DF 175.
- 6 See the map published in *HDE*, 8 November 1919.
- 7 Stephenson (1972). Apart from the Dawson File, Stephenson's main source appears to have been the 'Notes for Talks on The Ramsden Estate' made in 1946 by Harold Taylor, Huddersfield Estate Manager, 1934–1953 (copy in DF, Appendix XI). Stephenson's booklet is now available on the Huddersfield Local History Society, Huddersfield Civic Society and Huddersfield Exposed websites.
- 8 *HDE*, 12 August 1936.
- 9 *HDE*, 12 August 1936.

- 10 Stephenson (1972), p. 10. For Copley's Lancashire interests, see *HDE*, 28 October 1919, and for White, see *HDE*, 12 August 1936.
- 11 DF 66A, *Examiner* interviews, Alderman Beaumont, *HDE*, 27 October 1919; Stephenson (1972), p. 10.
- 12 See chapter 2, pp. 76–7.
- 13 Stephenson (1972), p. 10.
- 14 See chapter 7, pp. 208–10.
- 15 Buxton (2017), pp. 313–26.
- 16 Springett (1992), pp. 452–8 and 466–76; Springett (1986), pp. 40–52.
- 17 See chapter 3, p. 99.
- 18 Crump (1924), pp. 105–35.
- 19 *HDE*, 28 October 1919; *Yorkshire Observer Budget*, 'Special Huddersfield Supplement', 1 November 1919; obituary, *HDE*, 5 November 1937. He had been wrongly diagnosed with cancer in Australia but then recovered after a successful operation in London – see DF 179, 'Notes of Interview with the Family of Sam. Wm Copley by Clifford Stephenson', 19 August 1974.
- 20 KC 592/2/15, Clifford Stephenson Papers, notes of interview, 27 January 1973.
- 21 Stephenson (1972), p. 11.
- 22 DF 1, Hood to Dawson, 3 March 1919.
- 23 Sam. W. Copley, 'How I came to be interested in Huddersfield', 27 July 1934, copy at the back of the Dawson File (DD/RE/420b) and in KC/592/2/15, Stephenson Papers, Sam. W. Copley.
- 24 Stephenson (1972), p. 13. His source for these names appears to be Harold Taylor, 'Notes', DF, Appendix XI.
- 25 Stephenson (1972), pp. 10–11; his source for the meeting between Melville and Dawson appears to be Taylor, 'Notes', DF, Appendix XI.
- 26 DF, note on reverse of Contents page; Stephenson (1972), pp. 9–10.
- 27 DF 8, Commission Note, approx. 5 April 1919.
- 28 Copley, 'How I came to be interested in Huddersfield'. On seeing Copley's account for the first time, Stephenson commented that 'it agrees in essentials [with the Dawson File], though, not unsurprisingly, with more emphasis on the part played by Sam Copley personally' – note in DF (1975).
- 29 *HDE*, 12 August 1936.
- 30 DF, note in 1975.
- 31 Copley made this same statement to a reporter in 1919 – see *Yorkshire Observer Budget*, 'Special Huddersfield Supplement', 1 November 1919 (also in Huddersfield Local Studies Library, 942.74, Samuel Copley file).
- 32 For Melville's financial circumstances, see chapter 7, pp. 211–12.
- 33 Copley later claimed that this conversation did not take place until negotiations were almost completed, in October 1919 – Copley, 'How I came to be interested in Huddersfield', but the contemporary evidence in DF does not bear this out.
- 34 KC/592/2/15, Clifford Stephenson Papers, Sam W. Copley, 'Interview with the Copley family by Clifford Stephenson, 1974'. It was on this occasion that Stephenson was shown Copley's account of the purchase.
- 35 DF 7, Hood to Dawson, 1 April 1919.
- 36 DF 3, Dawson to Hood, 15 March 1919; DF 7, Hood to Dawson, 1 April 1919; DF 8, Commission Note, approx. 5 April 1919; DF 10, Copley to Dawson, 7 April, Copley to Melville, 8 April, and Copley to Hood, 8 April 1919.
- 37 DF 15, Hood to Dawson, 11 April 1919.

- 38 *Yorkshire Observer Budget*, 'Special Huddersfield Supplement', 1 November 1919.
- 39 DF 101, Speech at Town Hall, 12 January 1920.
- 40 DF 72, Hood to Copley, 30 October 1919; DF 125, Dawson to Hood, 20 February 1920; DF 145, Hood to Dawson, 19 March 1920; DF 149, Hood to Copley, 9 April 1920.
- 41 DF 19, Dawson to Ernest Woodhead, 16 April 1919. In 1934 Copley said Dawson had offered him £50,000 profit on sale to the Corporation.
- 42 DF 23, Dawson to Woodhead, 27 April 1919.
- 43 DF 21, Woodhead to Dawson, 18 April 1919.
- 44 DF 27, 28 and 29, 2, 5 and 6 May 1919, correspondence between Dawson and Hood; DF 30A, Ramsden Estate: Summary Rentals less Outgoings, May 1919.
- 45 DF 34, Capel-Cure & Ball to Hood, 22 May 1919.
- 46 DF 41, James White to Dawson, 19 June 1919.
- 47 DF 50, JFR to Dawson, 24 August 1919.
- 48 DF 54, Hood to Dawson, 11 October 1919.
- 49 DF 62, Copley to Dawson, 24 October 1919.
- 50 Copley spoke to the reporter in 1919 of 'the inspiring dream of his life': *Yorkshire Observer Budget*, 'Special Huddersfield Supplement', 1 November 1919.
- 51 DF 66, 28 October 1919, *Examiner* interviews, *HDE*, 27 October 1919, 'Local Opinions on Purchase of Ramsden Estate'.
- 52 *Yorkshire Observer*, 23 October 1919, repeated in *Yorkshire Observer Budget*, 25 October 1919.
- 53 DF 60, *HDE*, 23 October 1919.
- 54 *HDE*, 23 and 24 October 1919; DF 63, 25 October 1919; DF 65, Melville to Dawson, 26 October 1919.
- 55 DF 71, Copley to Dawson, 28 October 1919.
- 56 Copley, 'How I came to be interested in Huddersfield'.
- 57 DF 76, Huddersfield Corporation to Copley, 1 November 1919.
- 58 *YEP*, 30 October 1919; see also *HDE*, 28 October 1919.
- 59 *YEP*, 30 October 1919.
- 60 Copley's obituary wrongly stated that Copley had come forward for the first time to conclude the deal because of the leak on 23 October – *HDE*, 5 November 1937.
- 61 DF 101. Dawson's speech at Town Hall meeting.
- 62 DF 1, Hood to Dawson, 3 March 1919; DF 34, Capel-Cure & Ball to Hood, 22 May 1919; DF 106, Hood to Dawson, 24 January 1920.
- 63 DF 119, Hood to Copley, 13 February 1920; DF 129, Hood to Copley, 26 February 1920; DF 134, Hood to Copley, 12 March 1920.
- 64 DF 106, Hood to Dawson, 24 January 1920.
- 65 *Yorkshire Observer Budget*, 1 November 1919, supplement.
- 66 *HDE*, 28 October 1919.
- 67 *HDE*, 28 October 1919; interview with the reporter from the *Yorkshire Observer*,
- 68 DF 167, Hood to Dawson, 30 July 1920.
- 69 DF 156, J. Henry Field (town clerk) to Dawson, 28 April 1920; Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons 128, 3 May 1920; *Hansard*, House of Lords Debates, 9 June 1920 and Minutes, 22 July 1920; *HWE*, 24 July 1920; Taylor (2012), p. 52
- 70 DF 161, Ernest Dyson to Dawson, and Atlantic Assurance Co. to Ernest Dyson, borough treasurer, 6 May 1920.
- 71 DF 164, Florence Barrowclough for Copley to Dawson, 21 July 1920.

- 72 DF 167 and 169, Hood to Dawson, 30 July and 10 September 1920.
- 73 DF 169A, Ernest Dyson to Mr Johnson, 4 October 1941, and 'Delivery of Estate Purchase Money, 29 September 1920'.
- 74 DF 175, Conveyance – Ramsden Estates, Huddersfield, 29 September 1920. It then took several days for the loads of deeds to be physically handed over – *HDE*, 1 October 1920.
- 75 DF 176, Capital Account, August & September 1920; Stephenson (1972), p. 15.
- 76 Stephenson (1972), p. 19, and information from David Griffiths.
- 77 Stephenson (1972), p. 18.
- 78 DF 156A, Huddersfield Corporation Lands Bill – Brief, 29 April 1920.
- 79 *HDE*, 29 October 1919.
- 80 Stephenson (1972), p. 16.
- 81 *YEP*, 25 October 1919.
- 82 *YEP*, 30 October 1919.
- 83 *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 31 October 1919. One who contended that Ramsden was not a good landlord was G.W. Shaw of Botham Hall, Milnsbridge – see DF 84 and 162, Shaw to Dawson, 22 November 1919 and 3 July 1920.
- 84 *HDE*, 31 October 1919.