

Kelham Island: a model case study?

Christopher proposes Kelham Island in Sheffield as the basis for a 'model' GCSE or A level case study on changing places.



Accompanying
online materials

One challenge facing geography teachers nationally is ensuring that GCSE and A level students develop their understanding of place and changing places rationalised through social, economic and demographical relationships. However, doing this is often quite perplexing, for both teachers and students. It would be useful if there was a 'model' case study that enabled students to conceptualise the geographical processes they are taught, and see how they can be applied to 'real life' geography.

This article focuses on the changes in one of Sheffield's smallest quarters, Kelham Island. The breadth and complexity of these changes help to make Kelham Island a model case study for geography students, allowing them to investigate a changing place in a '... broader context with a greater breadth and depth of knowledge and understanding' (AQA, 2019), which is a requirement in several GCSE specifications.

Background

One of Sheffield's oldest industrial sites, Kelham Island was the result of a goit, or millrace, constructed in the twelfth century to divert water from the River Don to the town corn mill. Over the centuries, numerous workshops and forges were established on this flat, 'greenfield' site, and in its heyday Kelham Island was a hive of industrial activity: edge tools, cutlery, iron grate casting and handmade process machinery. From 1845, under the impetus of the railways, the heavy steel industry developed in the Lower Don Valley to the east of the city, and for twenty years this was the heaviest concentration of steel-making in the world. Kelham Island became a centre for the cutlery, silverware and associated trades (Figure 1).

From the middle of the twentieth century Sheffield's steel industry, and its associated trades, settled into a long period of decline. Technological change, globalisation and China's 'industrial revolution' meant UK steel was unable to compete internationally, and by the early part of the current century the iron and steel industry had more or less abandoned Kelham Island. Its derelict buildings became the haunt of squatters, prostitutes, graffiti artists and a crime hot spot. Sheffield band Arctic Monkeys reflected its bad reputation in 'When the Sun Goes Down', which makes direct reference to an area 'on the river heading out of town' and its 'girls of the night'. This song is a useful resource: it gives context to a study of the area, and the music video is an excellent opportunity for students to engage with its demographic background. However, since the song was released in 2006 Kelham Island has undergone extensive regeneration.



Figure 1: Kelham Island in 1880 at its zenith – the centre of Sheffield's world-famous cutlery and silverware trades. **Photo:** © Sheffield Libraries and Archives.

Regeneration

Sheffield Council began attempts to conserve and develop the area in the early 1980s, restoring the Globe Works. Then in 1988 the Sheffield Development Corporation (SDC) was established. Its mission was the regeneration of the Lower Don Valley, an area covered with abandoned foundries and warehouses. At that time regeneration focused on major developments such as the Meadowhall shopping centre. It wasn't until 2008 that the Kelham Neepsend Action Plan (KNAP) recognised that to sustain and enhance Sheffield's economic and social future this area of Sheffield needed to change (Figure 2).

The Action Plan aimed to ensure that by 2018 Kelham Island had become an '... attractive place to live ... a thriving and accessible business location ... the home of a well-managed and ecologically rich river ecosystem ... nationally recognised for its history, heritage, food, fairs and festivals ... and all historic buildings restored' (ibid.). The document would be a useful introduction to the case study, as it describes the character of Kelham Island, gives the aims of the regeneration and lists the many urban change policies directed at improving, restoring and regenerating the area put in place by Sheffield's Liberal Democrat Council. Towards the end of the topic it could also be used to evaluate how successful the regeneration has been.

Extensive regeneration has taken place; listed buildings have been restored, the area's industrial character has been maintained, and new buildings incorporated with the old. Investors have bought up derelict buildings and brownfield sites for development. A significant element has been the conversion of old factories and warehouses into apartments for professionals and students, as well as spaces for galleries and markets which celebrate local innovation and business. Notable buildings, for instance the Green Lane Works and Cornish Place, have had their ornamental facades carefully restored (Figure 3).

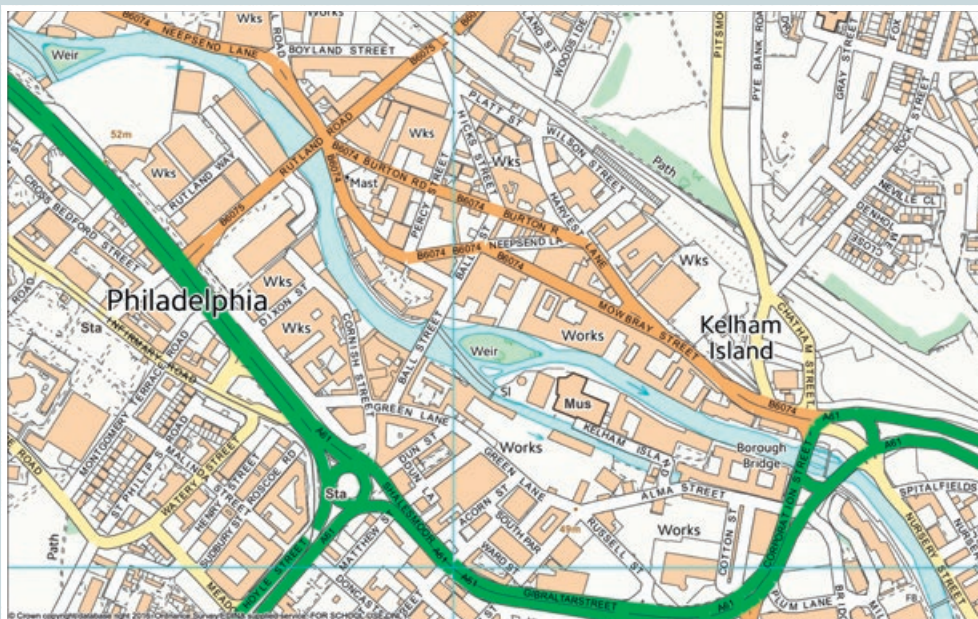


Figure 2: Map of Kelham Island and foreword to the *Kelham Neepsend Action Plan 2008–2018* (Sheffield City Council, 2008).

Kelham Neepsend is a place unmistakably of Sheffield, a place that brings together both its proud history and forward looking business, living and leisure. This document sets out clear guidance for the protection of the area's rich heritage, for the growth and development of its residential and business communities, and for improvements to public spaces and the river. All of this will help build and sustain Kelham Neepsend and its emerging community.

Councillor Tom Rippon, Cabinet Member (Economic Regeneration, Culture and Planning)



Figure 3: The restored entrance to the old Green Lane Works.
Photo: © Chris Hoare.

Perhaps the most innovative project has been 'Little Kelham'. Little Kelham sits at the heart of Kelham Island and in 2018 won the Academy of Urbanism 'Great Neighbourhood' award for the best social, economic and environmental governance and commercial success in an urban community. Partnering with Historic England, Citu, the company behind the project, vowed to '... restore these beautiful old buildings in a way that retains their original features, but integrates the latest sustainable technology to ensure they're ultra-low carbon' (Citu, 2019a). The polluted soil and groundwater of the industrial era was decontaminated, and the development focused on sustainable living to ensure a residential area 'built for our time'. Citu has built 214 carbon-neutral homes with triple glazing, solar heating, green roofs, carbon offsetting timber frames and recycled insulation, averting the emission of 'two tonnes of CO₂ per year' (Citu, 2019b). The houses have won a number of design awards based on Citu's principles of communal living, creating car-free landscapes and promoting sustainability (Figure 4). The modern, sleek, industrial look has been a success: houses and apartments costing over £300,000 quickly sold.



Figure 4: Little Kelham houses and apartments.
Photo: © Chris Hoare.

Future issues

However, the residential development has not been without controversy. Citu continues to own the houses, technology and land until the development is complete; then the development is handed over to a Community Interest Company (CIC) in which all households have an equal stake. Theoretically, this should reduce utility costs and promote the spirit of community living, but community-run enterprises can hold pitfalls. Some residents are worried that the company could create a 'community'-run business which may not uphold the interests of the majority living there. Investigating the pros and cons of CICs would be an interesting topic for students; other potential drawbacks worth exploring include being tied to one utility supplier, and 'hidden' costs of purchase such as annual ground rent and the £10,000 price tag on a car parking space. In spite of these possible downsides, however, it must be emphasised that Citu's Little Kelham has been pivotal in the development of the area into a unique, quirky and fashionable place to live that has '... done more than just preserve the character and the functions of the area ...' by ensuring '... that current economic demands can integrate with traditional ones and provide a sustainable base for a thriving and close-knit neighbourhood.' (Academy of Urbanism, 2018).

Gentrification

The effect of the regeneration hasn't all been positive. Kelham Island was formerly an industrial area with few residential properties; its workers lived in the surrounding areas to the north of the city centre. Its population now consists largely of students and middle-income professionals, working in the many design and architecture firms across the island. This is in stark contrast to its surrounding residential areas: in 2015 Sheffield ranked 26th in England for the most deprived local authority districts (HM Government, 2015), and most of these surround Kelham Island. They include Netherthorpe, Burngreave, Hillsborough and Park Hill, all in the top 10% of the UK's deprived neighbourhoods (Rae, 2011). If Sheffield has one of the highest proportions of deprivation in the land, is the creation of a sustainable urban area with bars, gastro pubs and galleries justified? This could be a prime example of a 'fertile' question (Enser, 2019) we could put to our students to spark a geographical enquiry or add a layer of depth to an investigation. However, the assumption that the people living in Kelham Island are wealthy incomers can only be tested through further investigation. Time and research will reveal the full picture of Kelham Island's changed demographics; it will probably not be until the 2021 census that the true impacts on the area can be reliably quantified.

Figure 5: Graffiti in Kelham Island. **Photo:** © www.rmc-media.co.uk.



Based on current interpretations, however, is it surprising that the regeneration has come up against some opposition? Recently, a wave of vandalism has hit Kelham Island (Figure 5). Slogans are insufficient evidence for the reality of the situation, but they have provoked debate about whether the regeneration has pushed aside Sheffield working people in favour of incoming professionals. Traffic congestion is also a concern:

References

All websites last accessed 20/06/19.

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hundreds of new apartments, businesses, shops, bars and restaurants have put parking space in the traditional narrow streets under pressure. Additionally, the area's historic cobbled streets are unable to cope with the huge increases in visitor numbers; this issue, yet to be tackled by Sheffield City Council, would be a great problem-solving activity for a student enquiry.

A model case study?

Kelham Island captures the essence of changing places, as outlined by Phillips (2019) in his report on A level geography subject content. Changing places is not only about how a space has changed physically, but also how its meaning is affected by economic, cultural and social influences. In my interpretation Kelham Island symbolises these influences, and offers the following advantages for a changing places case study:

- it is a living record of industrial prosperity and decline, reinvestment and changing social attitudes that can develop an extensive range of GCSE and A level skills and content
- it is a good place to conduct fieldwork: environmental quality surveys, land use mapping, crime data and public opinions on the area can all contribute to an effective and engaging human geography enquiry or NEA
- the Kelham Island regeneration is something young people can relate to; it symbolises the kind of sustainable living students may aspire to for their own local area
- progressive, engaging geography must be based on relevance and reality, and Kelham Island is a recent, ongoing development
- it provides opportunities for investigating geographical futures at the same time as developing students' understanding of the opportunities and challenges of urban living
- Sheffield being home to the GA and two universities, there is a wide range of material online to support a Kelham Island case study.
- an exemplar scheme of work for a Kelham Island case study, and guidance on fieldwork in the area, are available to GA members on the website.

Kelham Island will continue to evolve, helping students to understand the complex interactions of changing places. | **TG**

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Online resources

A scheme of work, key ideas for fieldwork and useful online resources can be found on the GA website. Go to www.geography.org.uk/Journals/Teaching-Geography and select Autumn 2019.

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