

The Blue Plaque Trail

In 2026 the Chorley Town Trails were enhanced by the addition of 11 blue plaques drawing attention to key figures in the story of how Chorley developed from a small township to a significant borough. Two additional plaques, for John Hollinshead and Sir Walter Norman Haworth, will be added once building works are complete. Here there is more information about the people commemorated on the plaques, arranged in the order they arise as one follows the trail leaflets.

Town Trail One :

A. George Birtill, OBE (1912-2000)

Mr Birtill was perhaps the best known Chorley figure of the second half of the twentieth century. A journalist, he became a magistrate in 1967 and served as mayor 1995-6. He was editor of the *Chorley Guardian*, a publication he served for over 30 years, and this formed a base for his contribution to local history. He wrote a series of books which often combined extensive and interesting knowledge with pleasant walking routes. *Follow Any Stream*, a passage along the River Yarrow, is a good example, as is *Towpath Trek* on the Leeds-Liverpool canal.

He also gathered an immense collection of photographs on local topics, some 17 boxes housed as an aid to researchers in the Reference Library at Chorley. This work was supported by lectures on local history and he eventually gained the honorary title of Chorley's Historian. He was awarded the OBE in 1973.

B. Leo Baxendale (1930-2017)

Although born in Leyland, Leo went to school in Chorley, across from the Theatre. His imagination and artistic talent led him to create the *Beano's* Bash Street Kids, possibly the most famous children's comic strip of all time. Other creations were Minnie the Minx and the adult comic strip Willy The Kid. In addition to the *Beano*, Leo worked for *Lancashire Evening Post*, DC Thomson, Odhams and Fleetway Publishing.

Eventually he branched out to other interest and concerns. In 1965 he penned *The Strategic War Commentary*, essentially an anti-war newsletter. In the 1980s he founded his own publishing company, Reaper Books.



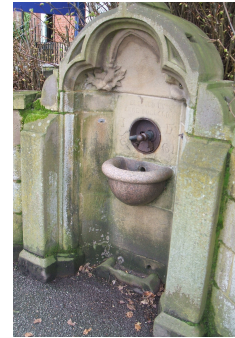
His importance was recognized in 2013 when he was admitted to the British Comics Awards Hall of Fame.

C. Oliver Cooper (1741-1825)

Oliver Cooper was educated at Rivington Grammar School and then St Peter's College Cambridge. As a young man he was appointed perpetual curate of Chorley chapel, dedicated to St Laurence but one of six subsidiary chapels in the parish of Croston. Oliver's salary was poor and he came into several conflicts with Croston's rector, Robert Master.

The major cause of conflict came over Oliver's campaign for church extension. The 300 seats in the old central nave of St Laurence's were too few to accommodate the growing population of Chorley's early industrial period. Robert Master considered his curate was simply trying to extend his chapelry in order to justify a larger remuneration and blocked all proposals. Then in 1793 he delivered a seemingly delicious blow in setting up a son as rector of an eventual new parish of Chorley. This came to pass on Robert's death in 1798.

Oliver Cooper led Chorley's protests at the imposition of a Master and chaired meetings of a vestry which had effectively run Chorley township since the 1770s. He also faithfully did duty at St Laurence's, standing in for the absentee rector. He had a fine house provided for him by his Chorley friends- St Laurence's Lodge where his plaque will be. Eventually the Church Building Act of 1818, allowed Chorley to extend its church seats by 2000 places at St George's chapel of ease. Sadly Oliver Cooper died in the month before the new chapel's consecration.



His daughter married t Chorley's first great doctor, John Pollard, and dedicated the drinking fountain near Astley Park Gates to her father.

D. Susannah Brooke (1762-1852)

Susannah was undaunted in finding herself the sole heiress to the Astley estates. She made judicious marriages, first to Robert Townley Parker of Cuerden and then Sir Henry P. Hoghton. However she was the dominant personality at Astley. The house gained its east wing in 1825, shortly after she had presided at the opening of the New Road (now Park Road) in 1822. This ran past the Park gates and provided a much straighter and flatter route towards Preston instead of the former way by Water Street. She also rented estate land at Walton to allow the Bolton-Preston Railway to progress.



She was a formidable and strong presence in Chorley's affairs. The third Anglican church, St Peter's, received land and stone from her estate and she also insisted on its eventual name being the one selected. The National School in Chorley benefitted from her largesse, as did the Liverpool Indigent Blind School (1845) and Whittle-le-Woods almshouses. Her particular church was the old parish church of St Laurence's and there are several accounts of her, as an old lady, being pushed along what is now the main drive from the Hall to church. She was duly buried at St Laurence's.

E. Abraham Crompton I (1649-1724)

The Chorley Family of Chorley Hall had stayed true to their Stuart allegiance and Catholic faith, which resulted in them perishing as a result of supporting the Jacobite Rising of 1715. Their forfeited estates were bought in 1718 by a banker from Derby, namely Abraham Crompton.

In 1662, a popular and decent minister of Chorley Chapel, Henry Welch, had found his conscience would not allow him to subscribe to the preamble of the new Act of Uniformity and he was ejected from his living. A significant section of the population elected to stay with him and for half a century arranged simple services where they could, one place reportedly being where the future chapel was to be.

Abraham Crompton thought the congregation should have a place of worship and so he provided a plot of land on Park Street to allow a Presbyterian chapel to be built. He also contributed to the building cost and the stipend for a minister.

The Crompton connection with chapel lasted a century, a third Abraham Crompton only leaving Chorley and the chapel in 1816, as the latter became Unitarian.



F. Sir Walter Norman Haworth (1883-1950)

He is reputed to have been a student at the Hollinshead Chapel School and there is already a stone plaque in Byron Street.

His fame arose from his career as a chemist: learning, teaching and researching at Manchester, Birmingham and Armstrong (Durham, later Newcastle) Universities. He focused on studying ascorbic acids.

In 1915 he created the Haworth Projection- a way of converting three dimensional sugar structures into two dimensional graphics. His major breakthrough came in identifying the separate properties of Vitamin C.

He was created a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1928 and awarded the Nobel prize for Chemistry in 1937.

G. Sir Henry Hibbert 1850-1927

Sir Henry was perhaps one of Chorley's most notable personages. Born the son of a millowner and educated at Chorley and Hutton Grammar Schools, he had a good start in life but also had to overcome a crippling leg condition in order to become a strong athlete. He was a prime example of Victorian self-help, seeking out additional science education in his holidays from Thomas Brown, the National School headmaster.

He had a successful business career and also became a Councillor and Mayor of Chorley. He was to be Chorley's MP in 1913, having already advised the government on education policy and legislation. His political career culminated as Chair of Lancashire County Council.



Within Chorley he was important as the founder of sports clubs, the creator of the Technical School in 1905 (soon to house the Grammar School and then the Library). He also promoted the first fire service Chorley had and was carried to his funeral on one of the engines.

H. John Hollinshead-1802

John Hollinshead was the first great Chorley entrepreneur. His estate was valued at over £40,000 after his demise.

With family roots at Hollinshead Hall in Tockholes, he branched out in as an investor in quarrying at Parbold, coal mining in Blackrod, house building in Chorley and the Lancaster Canal of 1796. Hollinshead Street is named after him and he leased land for properties there such as Burton's Mill or Chorcliffe House. It was the most sought after and salubrious street in the eighteenth century.

His most notable action was to give Chorley its first town hall, situated at the head of Market Street, one plot away from Union Street. The upper floor provided a meeting room- always useful when vestry meetings were too large for the church vestry room- and below housed a butter market and a lock-up.

Fittingly the New Town Square will cover the site of the first town hall and his plaque will stand there.

I. Monsignor Canon Thomas Crank

Thomas Crank was St Mary's parish priest for a record length of time, between 1897 and 1932. He also brought about additions to the Church building, including the Baptistry, 17 stained glass windows, the 14 Stations of the Cross and the marble altar rail. In 1913 the Statue of St Agnes was dedicated.



His plaque will be seated at the Mount Pleasant Arch on Market Street, for it was partly in his honour that the arch was erected in 1910. Modestly, he said he was happy to see it for it added to the beauty of the town.

By this time he had a strong record as a Poor Law Guardian and he was noted for his empathy with the poor people he encountered. After the First World War he was prominent in providing feeding stations for hungry schoolchildren and several of these were based at Catholic primary schools. He was also behind schemes for those orphaned by the war and early free medical services in the town.

J. Richard Smethurst (1756-1822)

A native of Bolton, Richard came to Chorley to found his own cotton mills. Shortly after his death the family business began Old Mill in Preston Street and was the basis for the Smethurst Cotton empire, around the North Mill.

A committed Methodist he brought about Chorley's first Methodist chapel, near the foot of the street which gave Chapel Street its name. He also assisted in the development of the street, building two large houses and occupying one of them (1799)

K. Luke Berry

Luke Berry's studio stood on the north side of Chapel Street at the junction with New Market Street. He ran a normal photographer's business but was to branch out into portraits and landscapes. His hobbies included fishing and skating, but his real contribution stemmed from his curiosity concerning all things Chorley, particularly its history and environment.



He eventually created a collection published as "The Album of Chorley" and our knowledge of Chorley at the turn of the nineteenth century is due greatly to the many postcards that he took the photographs for.

A committed Conservative he served for a term on Chorley Council.

L. Sir Robert Rawlinson

His plaque stands across from St George's Church where local tradition avers he served as a young mason, attached to his father's building firm, during its construction. He soon developed as an engineer and is connected with the railway construction from 1830.

His developing engineering skills saw him serve on Liverpool Docks, the London and North Western Railway and on the construction of the famed ceiling at Liverpool's St George's Hall (1847).

However it is his interest in public health which took him to local and national prominence. He produced seminal reports on the state of health in several large towns.

In 1853 he published a thorough report on the abject state of public health in Chorley, focusing on the inadequate water supply, drainage and sewage. He was particularly hard on the condition of cellars, there being classic examples in Chapel Street.



Chorley did not receive a local Board of Health as many northern towns did, but it did set up an Improvement Commission in 1852. This body did, under Rawlinson's guidance, provide a proper sewage system for the town. There was also the closing of overfilled church graveyards and the provision of Chorley Cemetery in 1860. The improvement Commission in effect governed Chorley until incorporation of the borough in 1881.

During the Cotton Famine of the 1860s Rawlinson was a member of the relief committee and a promoter of public works schemes to provide employment. This led to the early sports grounds in Chorley.

He became a leading public health adviser to the Government, serving on the Local Government Board and was duly knighted for his services.

M . Henry Rawcliffe

Coming from a successful brewing background, Henry became the owner of Gillibrand Hall in 1881. Much of the estate had already been sold off for building but he took an interest in the town its lands once reached the very heart of.

He was a Conservative Councillor and Alderman and suggested several facilities that the town required. His friend H.T. Parke of Withnell Fold agreed to take on the construction of the first library on Avondale Road. This left Henry the task of funding the first Cottage Hospital in Chorley, constructed really as two buildings between 1893 and 1898. Not surprisingly, the site was in Gillibrand Street. This replaced the first Dispensary, which had existed on Parson's Brow.

