

# WATSOOC

***Spreading the news about  
Absalom and Edward Watkin***



***Absalom Watkin (1787-1861) Edward Watkin (1819-1901)***

**Welcome to the tenth edition of the newsletter of  
the Watkin Society - deadline October 2023**

**As the summer of 2023, with its plumes of hot air  
from Spain, moves fitfully into autumn, it's time to  
settle down and report to all our contacts on the  
progress of The Watkin Society.**

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*It's been a great Watkin summer!*

## **NEWS FROM MANCHESTER**

**The Manchester Watkin Group organised a series of events spread over seven days to celebrate Absalom and Edward's lives in their home area. The first ever Watkin Week started at St Wilfrid's Church in Northenden, with a special commemoration service at the Watkin graves, conducted by the Rector, Revd Andrew Bradley, who is also the Vice-Chair of the Society. The Week continued with a Watkin Walk, taking in the former Watkin home, Rose Hill, and the Woods in front of the house, with the paths and trees that Absalom planted all those years ago, and the unique memorial that Edward erected in his father's memory. The Walk finished with a tour of St Wilfrid's church with the beautiful stained-glass windows commissioned by Edward in memory of his wife and his father. Members of the thriving Northenden Players wrote and produced a play about Watkin's pioneering work to create the first public Parks for the People in the industrial hell-holes of Manchester and Salford. Its 'world premiere' was performed by members of the Society and local schoolchildren in the Little Theatre in Church Road, just a few hundred yards from St Wilfrid's.**



**The enthusiastic audiences included classes from local primary schools and two members of the Grimsby/Cleethorpes Watkin Group who had travelled over specially for a tour of the Watkin sites in Northenden (including the Watkin graves in St Wilfrid's churchyard) and to see the play.**

**We gave a public lecture about Absalom and Edward, 'Manchester Great Reformers' in the Central Library in Manchester. It was attended by the Lord Mayor and the Deputy Leader of the Council.**



**There was a special Heritage Evening in Watkin's former Levenshulme South Station, which is now a great café and meeting place. The Week ended with a lively Quiz Night and celebration in a packed Crown Inn just a few yards from St Wilfrid's Church.**

## **FAREWELL AND THANKS TO THE FRIENDS OF ROSE HILL**

**Our parent group in Northenden, The Friends of Rose Hill, was founded in 2015 with the twin aims of reviving the memory of Absalom and Edward locally and preserving the Rose Hill Woods, the beautiful pocket handkerchief in front of the house and largely planted by Absalom in the years from 1832 to 1861. The terrific interest in the Watkins led naturally to the formation of The Watkin Society in 2019 (the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Edward's birth), with the Friends concentrating on the Woods.**

**The Friends have realised that their basic aim has now been achieved. We have seats to sit on, the paths are safe and covered in granite chips rather than muddy soggy wood shavings, the historic memorial that Edward erected in memory of his father in 1862 and which was for years lost in undergrowth, has been restored, with a new path of its own, making it easy for visitors to view its unique history. Three attractive information lecterns throughout the Woods tell the story of the Watkin family, their House and the Woods and reveal the astonishing fauna and flora, which have seen the Woods raised to the status of a regional 'Site of Special Scientific Interest'.**

**In August the decision was taken - with the unanimous agreement of those still closely involved - to 'dissolve' the Friends. However, this does not mean that the preservation of what we have made into a lovely community asset will be ignored. The new Manchester Watkin Group, which is chaired by the rector of St Wilfrid's Church, is taking over**

**responsibility for caring for the Woods (which are anyway owned and well-maintained by the City Council). Several of the most active members of the Friends' committee will have a place in the new Group as well as being members of The Watkin Society. We will be able to keep up our interest in the Woods.**

**Incidentally, the Council has agreed to put up signs at both entrances to the Woods, to show their name and point out that they are for everyone to enjoy.**

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## **NEWS FROM THE EAST COAST**

**The new Watkin Group in North East Lincolnshire did EW proud with two Watkin Days in July in Cleethorpes and Grimsby. Over 140 people came to see the events. We had a tour of 'Watkin's Docks' in Grimsby, which paved the way for the town to become the biggest fishing port in the world.**



**One part of the Watkin Days also included talks about Watkin's local achievements by two Society members who are experts in the local developments of the railways in Watkin's lifetime.**

**We also had a talk about the history of the statue in Grimsby Docks of Queen Victoria's Consort. This was unveiled by the future King Edward VII to celebrate the opening of Watkin's great docks in 1879. The**



## **NEWS FROM THE GREAT CENTRAL RAILWAY**

**Discussions are underway with the senior members of the Great Central Railway Company in Leicestershire, what remains of Edward Watkin's original great main line, closed in 1968 by Dr Beeching (Boo! Hiss!) but now a highly successful tourist enterprise ([www.gcrailway.co.uk](http://www.gcrailway.co.uk)). March 2024 will mark the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of the original line. The company has invited us to be involved in their celebrations and is looking at ways of publicising Edward's crucial role in creating the Great Central.**

***Watch this space!***

**The unofficial motto of The Watkin Society is 'Onward and Upward.'**

**So what of our plans for the future?**

**We have formed a Management Committee to oversee the development of 'WatSoc' into a national society, to get more people talking about the amazing achievements of Absalom and Edward. In addition to the Officers of the Society, one representative of each of the Watkin Groups where we are currently working (Grimsby/Cleethorpes, Manchester and the Great Central Railway in Leicestershire) are members and will be the link between their own area and activities in other parts of the country.**

**A key topic that the new Committee must address urgently is to explore the future financing of the Society's work. The National Heritage Lottery award**



**of £10,000 has been spent, as was required by the end of the grant period on 31 August. Much of our impact in the last year could not have been achieved without the generosity of the Lottery.**

**Our aim is to develop the Society outside its original base in Northenden but we will not lose our local 'roots'. Each of the Watkin Groups is currently making plans for further Watkin events in their own area. In Northenden we are exploring the possibility of installing a visitors' information stand next to the Sharstone in front of the Watkin former family home, Rose Hill, and Absalom's Rose Hill Woods. The Chief Executive Officer of the Manchester Central exhibition complex in the city centre, Edward's former Central station and one of the Manchester's iconic buildings, has given us permission to erect a blue plaque to commemorate in Absalom and Edward two of Manchester's great pioneers, who did so much to honour the name of the city.**

**Grimsby and Cleethorpes are beginning to emerge from what has been a dark time. The Watkin Group North Lincolnshire, which is active in both towns, is playing its part in the rediscovery of civic pride in the great local heritage. Its Watkin Days certainly got people talking. The Group is now drawing up a list of local community-based organisations with which it hopes to establish links. We are putting forward a suggestion that a major new public building should be named after Edward Watkin. We have decided to follow up this year's successful Watkin Days with another series of events in the summer of '24. Another exciting and unique prospect**

is that the Heritage Lincolnshire organization has been given a a major award by the National heritage lottery and will be working in five local schools to promote the heritage of the area. What makes it exciting for us is that the whole project is being built round the achievements of Edward Watkin - and the Society is its official partner! Have you had a look at the Society's brilliant new website and digital library? They show what the Society is doing to 'spread the word' about Absalom and Edward and will provide a handy resource base for anyone wanting to carry out their own research into the Watkin Story or who simply wants to know more about Watkin. Click on [watkinsociety.org.uk](http://watkinsociety.org.uk) The site is free.

Finally, a programme about towers built at the same time as the Eiffel Tower Paris will be broadcast on 18 November on the French- German TV channel 'Arte'. There is a piece about Edward Watkin's tower at Wembley and an interview with the Chair of the Watkin Society, Geoff Scargill.). The channel is not



**broadcast in the UK but we are trying to obtain an extract. In any case, the fact that a major European TV channel is interested in an aspect of Watkin's amazing life will give us a chance for some national publicity in the UK. We are going to chase British TV and radio channels!**

**We hope you have enjoyed our latest newsletter. Lots of exciting plans for the Society as it builds on its local roots and develops nationally. (We also have contacts in Germany and Australia - but sadly, none yet in Canada, which Edward did help to create!) Thanks again for your interest and support. We are all unpaid volunteers so we'd love to hear from you with any comments or suggestions. You'll find us at [watkinsociety.org.uk](http://watkinsociety.org.uk)**

*All the best from The Watkin Society*