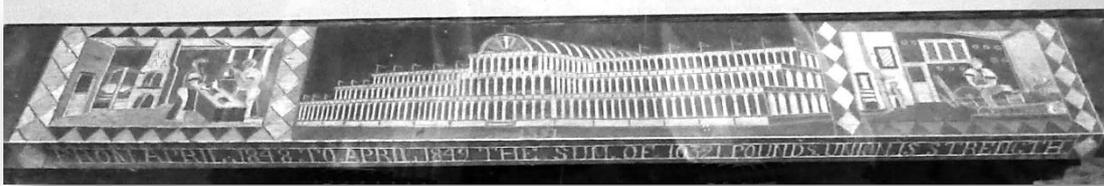


## Hiram Younge: Exhibition File Cutter

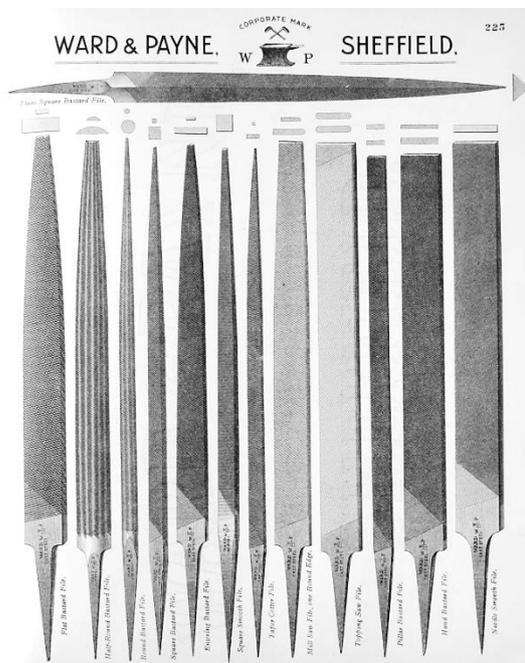
By Geoffrey Tweedale



By the late eighteenth century, file making had become the primary tool trade in Sheffield. By the 1850s, well over a hundred file enterprises were active in the town. At that time, about 4,000 workers were involved in file manufacture (from a total workforce in the tool sector approaching 7,000). By the end of the nineteenth century, the Sheffield file industry even surpassed cutlery as an employer.



This should not surprise. The file was the tool that made the tools. Almost every industrial product needed shaping, filing or abrading in some way. A craftsman's or engineer's cabinet or bench would not be complete without a file – or more usually an array of files (many of a specialised nature).



Until the late nineteenth century, these files were universally cut by hand. The process is depicted in the above engraving from *The Illustrated London News* (10 March 1866). A worker sat with knees either side of a 'stock' (a stone block or wooden pillar) into the top of which a steel block or 'stiddy' was inserted. The uncut file was placed on the stiddy and secured by leather straps. A key component – aside from the custom-shaped hammer and chisel – was a block of lead beneath the file. It lessened the recoil and protected one side of the file after cutting. The file was cut with a series of rapid blows with the chisel (the average rate was 60 to 80 blows a minute). Extraordinary skill was involved. Hand-cutters not only maintained an evenness and steadiness in the individual cuts, but also varied the cut according to the numerous classes of file (such as 'double dead smooth', 'bastard', 'rough', and 'middle cut'). In the nineteenth century, hundreds (indeed thousands) of variations in sizes and patterns existed.

Another rare class of files existed, which did not appear in trade catalogues. These were exhibition files, which were made to showcase a worker's skill or advertise a manufacturer's wares. The leading exponent of the exhibition file in Sheffield was Hiram Younge.

Younge was born in Sheffield on 31 March 1816, the son of George (a file smith) and his wife, Mary. Hiram's early life is not recorded (he never appeared in a Sheffield directory or operated

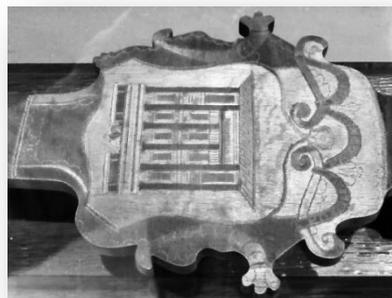
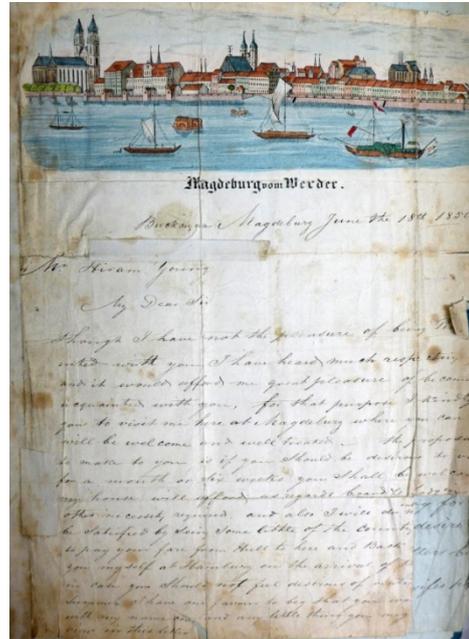
his own firm), but he became a file forger and then developed expertise as a file cutter. He worked for the leading file manufacturers: Ibbotson Bros, Turton & Sons, J. & Riley Carr, and John Bedford & Sons. Younge became renowned for his production of exhibition files, in which the flat surface of the file (and the edges) provided a 'canvas' for various illustrations and decorations – all cut with a hammer and chisel. By varying the depth and angle of cut, Younge conjured the illusion of light and shade in the finished work. For example, a ten-inch file, made for Ibbotson's, depicted its *Globe Works*: 'the light and shade managed so uncommonly well, that even the smoke ascending from the chimneys is perfectly visible' (*Sheffield Independent*, 15 August 1840).

As Younge's expertise developed, the files became bigger, heavier, and more ornate. He usually used the central panels of the file for a keynote building or landscape. A 32-inch file for Turton's depicted *Chatsworth House* on one side; *Wentworth House* on the other (*Sheffield Independent*, 20 April 1844). Alongside he then added an appropriate industrial scene, such as forging or file cutting. The ends of the file had some kind of final flourish, either a shield or trade mark.

Younge was known on the Continent. In 1850, John Watson, a file manufacturer at Magdeburg, Lower Saxony, invited him to undertake a commission to cut a file featuring the Palace of Potsdam. Watson's correspondence survives in a Younge scrapbook, which is currently in the possession of Kelham Island Industrial Museum.

However, Younge's greatest effort was reserved for the Great Exhibition in 1851. By now he was working for Sheffield file maker, J. & Riley Carr. But it was his trade union (Sheffield United Filesmiths), which commissioned him to produce a 54-inch file (3¼-inches wide and ¾-inches deep). It weighed 28 lbs and after forging it himself, Younge took four months to cut the file. The keynote scenes were the *Crystal Palace* and *Sheffield Infirmary*. The ends were embellished, *inter alia*, with a picture of *Cutlers' Hall* and the words: 'Designed and Executed by Hiram Younge'. The edges were cut with the following inscription:

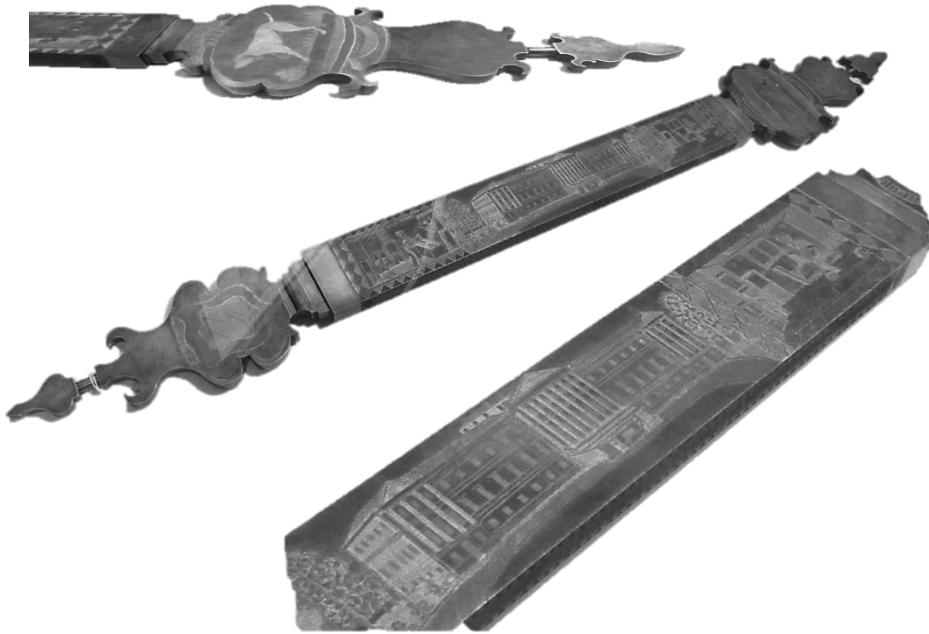
**THE SHEFFIELD UNITED FILESMITHS PAID TO THEIR UNEMPLOYED  
FROM APRIL 1848 TO APRIL 1849 THE SUM OF 10321 POUNDS. UNION IS STRENGTH.**



The trade union was so pleased with the result that Younge was awarded £30. The file was described in *The Morning Post* [London], 11 February 1851. *The Sheffield Independent*, 8 February 1851, provided this patronising encomium:

All the pictorial embellishments of this unique piece of workmanship are the designs of a self-educated man, whose delight it has been to employ his leisure hours in giving play to his genius. He has done himself great credit for industry, skill, and talent. We trust he will be induced to avail himself of the facilities which are offered for cultivating his uncommon talents, and we are confident the result will be equally honourable to himself and his class.

Not to be outdone by the trade union, Carr's asked Younge to complete another exhibition file for the Great Exhibition. It helped Carr's win an Honourable Mention. This file illustrated *Wesley College* in Sheffield and Carr's *Bailey Lane Works*. Carr's mark – a pointer dog – was expertly cut at one end of the file.



In Sheffield, Younge's next exhibition files (as recorded in the newspapers) were for John Bedford & Sons. These had scenes of its *Regent Works* and *Oughtibridge Works* (besides the *Houses of Parliament*). One of these files was displayed at the Paris Exhibition in 1855 (*Sheffield Independent*, 8 April 1854, 14 April 1855).

Hiram Younge's final years were clouded by illness. Almost certainly, he suffered from lead poisoning, caused by contamination from the lead blocks used for cutting. The symptoms – which were well known at that time amongst file cutters – included colic, paralysis of the hand ('wrist drop'), and pallor and wasting ('cachexia'). File cutters often suffered an early death. Younge died at *Cliffe Villas*, Ranmoor, on 12 February 1860, aged only 43. His death certificate recorded cachexia. He was buried at Fulwood. The newspapers noted the passing of a 'clever artistic file cutter' (*Sheffield Independent*, 18 February 1860). His work was apparently highly valued by his employers, as he left an estate of nearly £600 – a substantial sum for an artisan. He also left the legacy of his work.

*Younge's Turton file (1844) and his Riley Carr exhibition piece (1851) are currently displayed at the Hawley Collection (Kelham Island Museum). As part of its permanent display, Kelham Island Museum has Younge's Great Exhibition (1851) United Filesmiths' file, which is in its original glass case and mounted on a spindle (so that it can be rotated to view either side).*