Leigh's medieval parish church prior to demolition in 1870.

ASPECTS OF LEIGH'S HISTORY

These notes draw attention to some of the more interesting features of Leigh's past.

Early History

Little is known of Leigh in the prehistoric period but a **Neolithic** polished **stone axe** found **in** the **Beech Walk** area and a **Middle Bronze Age** (c.1500-1000 BC) **bronze spearhead** found to the **south of Gas Street**, suggest early activity in the area. To the south-east of Leigh, Bedford and Astley Mosses form the north-west corner of Chat Moss. Despite the attractions of this type of terrain for early settlement elsewhere in England, in the Leigh area there have been only limited finds. These include a late Mesolithic and early Neolithic site (from about the fourth millennium BC) at Nook Farm, near Astley and Mesolithic burnt stone and worked flint at Moss Side, Astley. In Leigh, only **one Roman coin** (from before 323 BC) has been found **at Butts in Bedford**. The Roman road from Manchester to Wigan passed 2 miles to the north of Leigh town centre. The place names of Leigh are all of Saxon origin. For instance, 'Leigh' derives from the Saxon 'leah' meaning meadow or pasture.

The Medieval Period till 1500

The Parish of Leigh with the Church of St Peter (later St Mary the Virgin) is known to have **existed by about 1189**. The medieval parish was extremely large and was divided into six areas - the townships of Astley, Tyldesley, Atherton, Bedford, Pennington and Westleigh. It was mainly the last three together with part of Atherton which made up the area of modern Leigh. The first stone church, probably built in the late 14th or early 15th Century, and its tower of 1516 survived until 1870. As the centre of this large parish, Leigh will have developed other important functions.

A market located near a church is often characteristic of an early date. No charter for Leigh's market is known but a **customary market** lacking an official charter but complete with market

Leigh's medieval parish church prior to demolition in 1870.

cross, is likely to have existed **prior to 1500** at least. The distance to official markets at Wigan, Bolton, Warrington and Manchester left a gap to be filled at Leigh. The church and nearby buildings were situated adjoining the important packhorse trading route between St Helens and Bolton. Another major influence over medieval life was that of the lord of the manor. **The Leigh area lay within the chief manor of Warrington** both before and after the Norman Conquest of 1066. The chief manor included **34 smaller dependent manors with Pennington, Bedford, Westleigh and Atherton** amongst them.

Each of the manors had **a manor house and a watermill** (2 in Westleigh and Bedford) compulsorily used by the tenants, **a dovecote, a manorial court** and a range of tenants in houses and cottages and a number of freemen. The area was largely agricultural and the large number of fields mentioned in documents suggests relatively early enclosed fields with **considerable areas of meadow and pasture**. In addition to farmers and their labourers each township supported **craftsmen such as smiths**. Whilst a limited number of buildings clustered around the market and parish church, the manor houses were outlying (Map 1). **The 1379 Poll Tax**, which was a direct tax payable by all adults except paupers, **lists 63 people in Pennington, 48 in Westleigh and 33 in Bedford**. Westleigh was divided between Higher Hall (1/2) Westleigh Old Hall (1/4) and Kirk Hall (1/4) and Bedford between Bedford Hall (7/16), Hope Carr (1/4), Brick House (1/4) and Sandypool (1/16).

In the medieval period at least five houses in Leigh were moated including Hopecarr Hall and Brick House in Bedford, Urmston l'th'Meadows in Pennington and Westleigh Old Hall and Parsonage Farm in Westleigh.

1500 to 1830 Agriculture and Domestic Industry

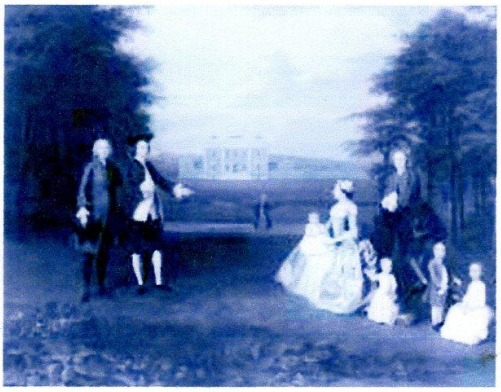
This period saw **a steady increase in population and wealth, considerable rebuilding** (not only **of the manor houses** but **also of farms and town property**), the formation of an identifiable town around the market and the development of small scale **local industries** including **coal mining, nailmaking** and **textiles** of various types. **Leigh also became renowned for cheese** amongst its agricultural products.

At Pennington, in 1652 the manor comprised 40 dwellings with land, 40 cottages, the watermill, a horsemill (for malt), a dovecote, 80 gardens, 200 acres of land (arable), 200 of pasture, 50 of meadow, 20 of moor, a rent of 9 shillings and 6d with market rights in Pennington and Hindley. **In 1726 Pennington was sold to Richard Vernon Atherton** of Atherton Hall. The Athertons and subsequently Powys's (Barons Lilford) thus became lords of the Manor at both Pennington and Atherton as well as a quarter of Westleigh. Pennington Hall was sold to James Hilton in 1726, a cloth merchant of Pennington and **in 1748** his son **rebuilt the hall as a grand Georgian mansion**.

In Bedford, the manorial estate in 1589 included the manor of Bedford, 40 houses, 20 cottages, 20 tofts or houses with land and outbuildings, 2 mills, 2 dovecotes, 40 gardens, 40 orchards, 500 acres of land, 200 of meadow, 500 of pasture, 60 of wood, 200 of furze and heath, 300 of moor, 1,000 of moss and 100 of turbary (rights to dig peat). **Bedford Hall** became the property of the Lathoms and their hall **survives as a typical mid-17th Century yeoman farmhouse or small manor-house** in dark red hand-made brick with wide mullioned windows and two gabled, cross wings (see p.16).

Westleigh Old Hall was sold to the Parr family in 1688 and passed by marriage to the Ranicars who, shortly after 1756, built an imposing Georgian mansion. Higher Hall passed from the Urmstons at the end of the 17th Century through a sequence of owners until rebuilt in 1832 in the late Georgian style by J H Kearsley, the MP for Wigan.

The grandest of the Georgian manor houses was, however, **Atherton Hall** with its entrance in Leigh at The Avenue. Atherton Hall was built between 1723 and 1742 by Richard Vernon Atherton and his son-in-law Robert Gwillym to designs by William Wakefield at a cost of £63,000.



Robert Vernon Atherton Gwillym, Lord of the Manors of Pennington, Atherton and part of Westliegh, his wife Elizabeth and their family in front of Atherton Hall 1745-6 by A Devis. *(Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection).*

Building and rebuilding on a smaller scale had been occurring especially **from the 17th Century in the rural area and in the town**. Indeed in 1606 Thomas Ireland as lord of the manor of Pennington, was in dispute with Thomas Radcliffe who had erected buildings along the streets of Leigh without permission and was now required to pay a fine and rents. **From the 17th Century, bricks were produced** in the Leigh area, as indicated in 1641 when amongst the fields allocated to Francis Sherrington was "Brickfields" and many Victorian photographs show 17th and 18th Century brick buildings (pages 3, 6, 16, 36, 44). **Up until 1870 most of Leigh's streets had a strong Georgian character** as the Georgian style persisted long into the 19th Century.

As a result of this building activity, Map 2 shows that **by 1825 King Street, Market Street, most of the south side and a small**

part of the north side of Bradshawgate, Bridge Street and around the Market Place and church had been built up. The map indicates that many of the houses were associated with sizeable gardens but **some backland infilling** had also occurred especially off King Street and around the market.

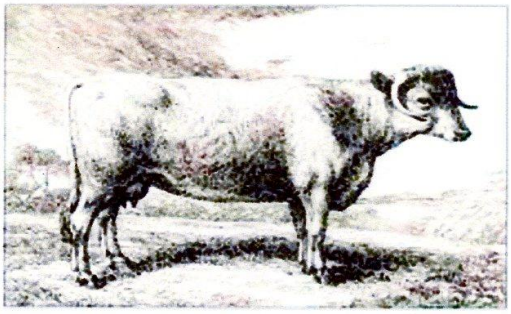
Map 3 of **1762** shows Leigh town centre with features such as the **toll house** opposite Bradshawgate with gates closing off Market Street and King Street, the ornate wrought iron gates to **the Avenue**, **the Smithy** at the corner of Bradshawgate and Market Street, the relatively **small and tightly enclosed Market Place** with a cross near its centre and on the north-west side backing onto the church yard the thin, curved shambles building housing the butchers. The town centre in Pennington contained a number of **shops** and records show a considerable range of goods stocked. Bedford also had a shop at Butts and its stock included hops, soap and gunpowder, cheese, ribbon and stockings in 1641. **In 1660 ten innkeepers are listed in Pennington**. **By the 18th Century** with its market, shops, inns and coaches, **Leigh was a local centre for the surrounding gentry** and prosperous professionals and traders resulting in **a theatre in 1770**, **assembly rooms** at the George and Dragon **and the Leigh Musical Society** formed in 1768.

The Civil War did not have a major impact on Leigh apart from skirmishes with both sides having brief control from November to December 1642. Under the Royalists no further action took place at Leigh, though it was associated with two later events. **The Royalist General, Sir Thomas Tyldesley** of Myerscough and Morley's Hall near Leigh was killed in the Battle of Wigan Lane on 25th August 1651 and **buried in Leigh Parish Church**. Subsequently **the Earl of Derby**, the commander of the Royalist forces in Lancashire, after being tried and sentenced to death at Chester **was sent to be executed in Bolton and spent his last night at the King's Arms in Leigh Market Place** on the 14th October 1651.

Sir Thomas Tyldesley was buried in Leigh after the Battle of Wigan Lane.

Leigh benefited from trade and transport on the **Bolton to St Helens Road**, especially after the **turnpike trust** was established in **1762** to improve and maintain the road, and the coaching trade. A boost to trade and industry was also provided by completion of the **Bridgewater Canal** to Leigh Bridge in **1795** and its continuation as the **Leeds and Liverpool Leigh Branch Canal** to Wigan in **1820**.

The wealth which stimulated these developments included **agriculture, mining and textiles** with **farmers** and their families often **combining economic activities in the rural area and sizeable communities of domestic hand loom weavers in the built up area**. The latter occupied terraces shown on the 1825 map (Map 2) at locations such as Windmill Street (St Helens Road), Back Salford, and part of Bradshawgate. Leigh's soils include rich but stiff loams and clay and as described by John Holt in his 'General View of the Agriculture of the County of Lancaster' of 1795 *"chiefly barren, being ebb of soil and clay under, which makes it cold and wet."* Combined with its rainfall, low and relatively flat, often poorly drained landscape the soils produced **rich grass suited to cattle pasture and dairying**. Crops of hay, oats, barley and some beans, rye and wheat are recorded. Holt warned however that *"a few years since some of the farmers, encouraged by the high price of corn, marled and ploughed their farms, which had been grazed time immemorial; the consequence was the plough soon wore them out, and left them poorer than ever"*.



A Lancashire cow ~ the source of Leigh's famous toasting cheese.

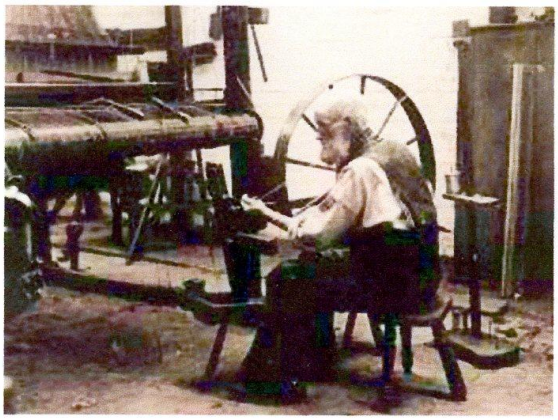
Added to the natural advantage for dairying in the area was the **increasing value of dairy products** - milk, butter and cheese - **for** the growing **town markets at Wigan, Bolton, Manchester and Liverpool** reached by canal. In the case of Leigh's cheese, for which its toasting qualities were nationally known, Holt reported that *"a great deal of it at this age (5-6 months) is sent to London, by persons who are commissioned to purchase it from the farmers"*. In fact Holt devoted a whole section of his report to Leigh cheese and its production. It is therefore not surprising that **cows, and cheese-making figure prominently in probate inventories in the Leigh area**. The goods of Henry Travice of Lightoaks Hall in 1626 for instance included: 20 milk cows (value £73), cheeses to the value of £22 10s, cheeseboards, milkhouses (2) a cheese chamber, churns and a cheese press. Byrom Hall south-west of Leigh still has an attic room with a door labelled "cheese room". At a lower social scale Janet Darwell, a widow of Bedford, had three daughters and three cows and of the £42 given to the daughters in 1660, £6. 8s was in cheese.

A further crop grown by many farmers was **flax** which was used to provide linseed oil and **for linen yarn**. By the **late 16th Century**, in place of woollen cloth Leigh had **a major linen spinning and weaving industry** with domestic loomshops in rural and urban cottages, farmhouses and the manor houses. The weaving industry was especially concentrated in Pennington but also had a strong presence in Bedford and Westleigh. Inventories indicate that **weavers slept in the loomshop** for example in April 1669 Robert Anderton of Westleigh had a ground floor loomshop with a loom, two beds, bedding, a churn and tub. They also show that **many farmers and linen weavers combined economic activities** - usually farming and weaving, but John Brown of Pennington d.1722 was a farmer and carrier, William Heaton was a farmer in Bedford and a nailor in Atherton in 1627 and at Hindley's Smithy in Bedford, the smithy was combined with weaving in 1683.

Fustian cloth consisted of a linen warp, running the length of the cloth and a cotton weft, across the cloth. **From 1600 fustians replaced linen as the main cloth produced in Leigh** and up to 1853 fustian manufacturers appear in Leigh trade directories. e.g. five in 1834.

By the **late 18th Century fustians were increasingly being replaced by pure cotton cloth** production and **in Leigh muslin**, made from very fine cotton thread, **became the most important cloth**. By 1825 there were 18 muslin manufacturers, declining to 15 in 1828. In 1825 there were also five cotton spinners

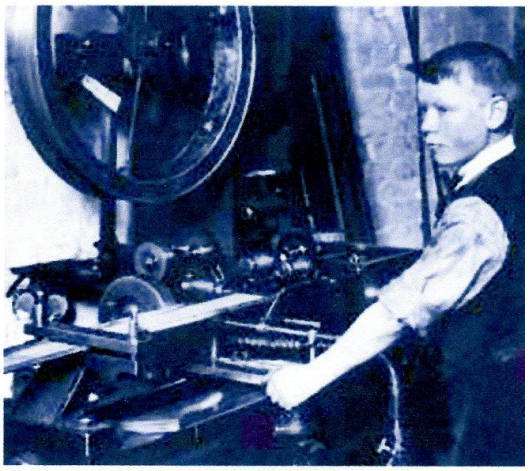
operating small mills. A further shift in textile production occurred in Leigh **in 1827** when **silk weaving arrived in Leigh** as a result of a wage dispute in the Middleton silk trade and the availability of spare capacity amongst Leigh's domestic muslin weavers who were used to fine thread and cloth and were therefore quick to adapt to silk weaving. **By 1835, with 10,000 silk weavers (mainly domestic) employed in Leigh and its surrounding area and 20 manufacturers based in the town, Leigh had become one of the principal production centres for the Lancashire silk industry.**



Silk hand-loom weaver operating a winding machine prior to weaving on the loom to left.

Like the earlier linen, fustian and muslin trades whilst there were some local masters or manufacturers the silk industry was mainly organised from the central warehouses of **Manchester merchant-manufacturers** who **employed agents in Leigh to put out work, receive finished pieces or cuts of cloth from the domestic, hand-loom weavers and to pay them**. In Leigh Bickham and Pownall (from 1833) and le Mare's (from 1851) were locally based manufacturers. The silk and indeed muslin **agents and local manufacturers occupied receiving houses of three types** dependent partly upon the size of business. The building had to provide a secure area for money, a waiting space for weavers and an area for one or more warping mills (which ensured that the warp threads extending the full length of the cloth were evenly tensioned and wound onto loom beams) and winding machines (which wound thread onto bobbins held in the shuttle which travelled across the cloth) as well as space for storing beams and finished cloth. In the simplest case **a cottage could be converted** and two of these survive as pubs at the Musketeer, Lord Street, and The Britannia Inn, St Helens Road. Other cases involved **the top floor of a substantial three storey agent's house having a taking in door**, a hoist and a large space as found at 5 Wild's Passage off King Street and the rear section of Monks Travel, Bradshawgate. Lastly some **purpose-built warehouses** were erected as formerly at Duke Street.

In addition to the main activities, **the textile industry produced a range of associated businesses** including, in Baines directory of 1825, two **fustian cutters** and **dyers**, six **reed makers** (reeds being a comb-like loom part through which the warp threads pass), three **sizers** and two **shuttle makers**. The Leigh reed-maker **Thomas Highs invented early versions of the Spinning Jenny and the Water-frame**, in the 1760s, prior to the generally accepted inventors, James Hargreaves and Richard Arkwright



Reed making at Leather's reed works in Mansley's Passage off King Street c.1920.

respectively. The Leigh and District Postal Directory of 1885 emphatically stated *"It is to Highs' ingenuity we may trace the leading position Lancashire now occupies in the cotton trade."*

From the **late 18th Century** Sutton or **terras lime** was obtained from the local limestone in Bedford and Astley and a number of lime kilns operated in these areas. The lime sets hard under water and was used extensively in lining the Bridgewater Canal completed in 1795. More significant was the presence of **coal** underlying Leigh. On a small scale, mining had occurred in Westleigh from the medieval period and in north Bedford from the late 16th Century and there are many references to coal in documents. In 1534 in Westleigh a court case established the right to dig coal and transport it along Six Acres Lane for Piers Hamson and David Pennington. Coal mining benefited from the construction of the canals and collieries were connected to them by tramways. The presence of **peat in the mosslands** of Bedford and Pennington gave another valuable source of fuel for the manors and tenants under turbary rights.

As well as the **local smithies, nailmaking** was another domestic industry in Leigh in the 17th and 18th Centuries. Amongst the local service industries several **inns brewed** their own **beer** but **in 1823 the Bedford Brewery was founded** and came to dominate the trade in Leigh.

The Victorian and Edwardian Period

In 1841 the population of the Leigh townships had **reached 11,025**, but as shown by Map 1 in 1847 the built area was far from continuous with large tracts of open land separating Pennington from Bedford and from most of Westleigh's dispersed development e.g. along Kirkhall Lane. **In Pennington much of the north side of Bradshawgate and both sides of Lord Street, Church Street and Twist Lane and the area of Down Croft** (Albion Street) **were still undeveloped**. In contrast **development around the Market Place was intense** and whilst some gardens remained behind King Street and Market Street premises, **backland infilling was continuing in the form of courts and rows either at right angles or parallel to the frontage properties**.

By 1911 the population of Leigh had **quadrupled to 44,109 and** as indicated on Map 1, by 1908 **the built-up area had expanded**

enormously. The large undeveloped plots along Bedford Brook and the canals in Bedford and Pennington provided sites for very large mills and engineering works whilst further out massive collieries developed as the main generators of Leigh's growth.

The fate of the **Georgian manor houses** surrounding Leigh was particularly unfortunate all being **demolished** starting with the majority of Atherton Hall in 1825 and ending with Pennington Hall in 1963 **leaving only Bedford Hall intact** and listed. In the

Bedford Hall.

built-up area **high status housing**, usually with large gardens, was developed **prior to 1847 at St Helens Road, subsequently at Orchard Lane and then further south on St Helens Road, Hand Lane and at Old Hall Mill Lane**, Atherton and eventually at Kenyon and Glazebury. **Parts of Church Street and Bond Street were also aimed at professionals and managers in the 1850s to 1870s and from the 1890s parts of Railway Road.**

Large numbers of sound and attractive workers' houses were developed from 1860 but the adoption of the 1848 Public Health Act in the byelaws of 1864 left the use of a water-closet or an ash midden privy as optional and rear accesses need not be wide enough for carts. The Medical Officer of Health, in 1898, recommended the Committee *"that water-closets be substituted for the present privy accommodation in all those houses from which at the present time the contents have to be wheeled along passages and deposited in front streets before removal ..... At the present time all this filth is removed by the contractors in any kind of open cart ..... thereby causing the nuisance to be accentuated. For the removal of nightsoil and other refuse I would strongly recommend the adoption of covered carts."* Such carts had been adopted by 1902 but the vogue for privy middens was still a source of danger and nuisance. **In 1898** for instance, there had been **109 houses disinfected after typhoid fever. In 1906 there were still 4,979 privies compared to only 2,349 water closets** and it was not until after 1917 that all privies had been converted to water-borne sewage disposal.

Added to these nuisances there were large numbers of horses in the town centre. As late as 1900 at the Boars Head Hotel a double decker stable block was being constructed for 20 horses and in 1891 at the rear of the Bulls Head on Bradshawgate a stable for 21 horses had been constructed. **Traffic was also congested on the narrow winding central streets** especially on Market Street so that **there was a need for action by the local government authorities**. The actions taken included **a privy conversion programme, closure or demolition of insanitary housing and a series of road widening schemes** using the 1875 Public Health Act. **As a result much of the town centre was redeveloped between 1890 and 1905.** Bridge Street, Market Place and Street and Bradshawgate were widened between 1898 and

Market Street, looking north, prior to widening.

1900 and Railway Road was widened from 1893 and **large housing areas beyond the town centre developed** as on both sides of Leigh Road, Railway Road, Chapel Street, St Helens Road, The Avenue and the Henrietta Street area.

Municipal enterprise flourished in Leigh in the later 19th Century. In 1874 the Leigh District Gas Company which had been established in 1834 was purchased and in May 1875 new police headquarters and courts were opened on Church Street and the old premises on King Street were purchased as the Town Hall. A good quality piped water supply was provided jointly with Hindley using Bolton water from Westhoughton in 1876 and Liverpool water from Rivington in 1894. Public baths at Silk Street were built in 1881 and later extended. In 1885 Lilford Park was developed on land rented from Lord Lilford and in 1888 the Leigh market rights were purchased from Lord Lilford. The Technical School and Public Library were opened at Railway Road in 1894 and by 1898, with Atherton, a £140,749 water-borne sewerage system with purification plant was established at Hope Carr, extended in 1910. The electric power station at Albion Street was opened in 1899 and Church Street Gardens in 1901. Between 1904 and 1907 Leigh Town Hall was built at a cost of £45,000 and Leigh Infirmary at The Avenue and Leigh Council or Board School followed at Windermere Road in 1908.

Leigh Infirmary of 1908 was among many municipal enterprises of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

This increasing level of municipal activity was **facilitated by** a series of **important changes in the local government arrangements at Leigh**. The traditional form of local government in the townships involved an annual meeting of property owners and these voted on the appointment, compulsorily if required, of

township officers from the population of voters. The officers included churchwardens, overseers of the poor, constables, and a surveyor. The Local Government Act 1858 enabled ratepayers to resolve at a public meeting to establish a Local Board with powers created by the Public Health Act. **Meetings took place in the Pennington, Westleigh and Bedford townships in 1863 and a Local Board was created for each of them**. Eventually the major problems of water, gas and sanitation led the Boards to amalgamate **in June 1875** as **the Leigh Urban Sanitary District or Leigh Local Board** with six elected representatives for each township. The Leigh Local Board continued **for 19 years** and much of the improvement of the town was completed or initiated during this period culminating in the opening of the Technical School and Public Library and an agreement with Atherton's Local Board to move the northern boundary to Orchard Lane. In 1885 the Leigh Parliamentary constituency was created covering the area of the medieval parish of Leigh.

The Local Government Act 1894 replaced Local Boards with Urban District Councils and the new **Leigh Urban District Council first met in December 1894**. In May 1897 a petition for a Charter was sought and **on 2nd August 1899 the Charter creating the Municipal Borough of Leigh was signed**. The Borough of Leigh was to be governed by a Mayor, 8 Aldermen, and 24 Councillors elected for 8 Wards and the new Council met for the first time on 9th November 1899. The Borough coat of arms was granted in December 1899 and a new Borough Bench was created for Leigh with 33 magistrates in March 1903. Since 1974 Leigh has been part of the Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council area.

The growing size of Leigh not only led to changes in local government but also in the church. **St Mary's Church was rebuilt between 1870 and 1873**. The growing industrial population of Westleigh led to **St Paul's Church in 1847** and **St Peter's in 1887**. **Christ Church, Pennington** was built in **1853** and at **Bedford** a new church of **St Thomas** was created in **1839 and rebuilt between 1902 and 1910**. For the Roman Catholic population **St Joseph's Chapel at Chapel Street of 1778** was **replaced by the stone church of St Joseph in 1855**. **Our Lady of the Rosary**, Plank Lane, **1879**, **Twelve Apostles** Nel Pan Lane, **1877**, and **Sacred Heart, Walmsley Road 1929** followed and by 1901 there were also 18 non-conformist chapels in the Borough.

The growth of Leigh between 1841 and 1911 was sustained by the development of **large scale industries in the form of textiles, coal mining and engineering** and the development of these was enabled by improved transport links. Leigh already had canal links but more significant was **the arrival of the railway**. The Bolton to Leigh railway was opened for goods traffic in **1828** and as such is the oldest public railway. Passenger traffic followed in **1831** and in the same year the **Kenyon and Leigh Junction Railway** was opened linking Leigh to Manchester and Liverpool, very early, by train. Following the construction of the line from Eccles to Wigan via Tyldesley in **1864** the London and North Western Railway Company built a branchline to Leigh which continued to the Leigh-Kenyon line.

Textiles in the form of **silk** during the Victorian period involved both domestic hand loom weaving and weaving shed factory production. Leigh was never involved in silk spinning or throwing as the yarn was supplied from Macclesfield or Leek via Manchester. Estimates of silk weavers in Leigh Parish between 1828 and 1871 show the peak of 10,000 employed was reached in 1830, 8,000 in 1841 and 2,301 in 1871. In addition by 1836 20 firms were trading in Leigh, 15 in 1848 declining to five by 1876 and only two in 1897. In the mid 19th Century silk weaving was clearly a major industry in Leigh, domestic weavers travelling for up to 8 miles to and from the agents' warehouses. Changing fashions made the business uncertain and in 1870 a duty on French silk was lifted which meant that most firms could not compete. The introduction of powered weaving from the 1850s also meant that less work was available for the domestic weavers who suffered great poverty. Many of the manufacturers from the 1850s employed weavers both in their homes often on a large scale and in weaving sheds. For instance, Bickham and Pownall at Stanley Mill employed 1,000 with only 500-600 in the weaving shed. There were no fewer than 9 silk weaving sheds by 1870 and most of these were subsequently converted to cotton weaving and several were extended as at Brook Mill.

These conversions greatly augmented the **cotton weaving** capacity in Leigh which had been concentrated at Kirkhall Lane Mills (Westleigh New Mill) built in 1836 and at Jones Bros. Bedford New Mills started in 1834 and developed as an integrated mill carrying out spinning and weaving in three large weaving sheds. In the early 20th Century three more large weaving sheds were constructed at Foundry Street, Elizabeth Street and Etherstone Street. Far more dominant in Leigh's townscape however were the **large number of multi-storey spinning mills** with massive floor areas. Only five of these survive today but there were many more. In Westleigh there were two groups - Victoria Mills **off Kirkhall Lane** developed by James and John Hayes from 1856 with three mills by 1887, and by 1902 the three Firs Mills, **off Firs Lane**, of Tunnicliffe and Hampson. Most impressive were the two groups of mills in Bedford **along the canal and Bedford Brook**. **From 1913 Leigh was at least the fifth largest spinning centre in Greater Manchester** as measured by the number of spindles. **In 1911** no fewer than **6,146 people** were **employed in the cotton industry** with 32 large scale textile buildings by 1925.

Butts Mill.

The other traditional industry of Leigh which showed phenomenal growth in the second half of the 19th Century was **coal mining**. In 1851 there were 17 active pits in Leigh, mainly in Westleigh. All of these were relatively small concerns, many with less than 10 colliers producing about three tons of coal each in a day. **From the 1870s the industry developed rapidly** partly because Wigan's coalfields were in decline. In 1873 John Speakman developed **Bedford Collieries** and in 1872 Ackers and Whitley began to develop the **Bickershaw Colliery** at Plank Lane, Westleigh. By 1899 the number of male and female employees at Bickershaw reached 2,500. In 1970, 1,489 men were employed and they produced 1,716,479 tons of coal in the year. **Parsonage Colliery** was developed between **1913 and 1920** with shafts exceeding 1,000 yards in depth and in 1970 953 men were employed and produced **444**,120 tons of coal in the year. In **1911, 5,782 men and about 200 women were employed in mining but the industry ceased in 1992**.

Bickershaw Colliery was developed by Ackers and Whiteley from 1872. Canal and rail links facilitated large scale mining.

The colliery buildings have been demolished and spoil heaps reclaimed to give little indication of this former mainstay of Leigh's economy. There are, however, wharves on the canal especially Bedford Basin built in 1858 to handle coal from the Atherton Collieries. Perhaps the most impressive reminder of Leigh's coal mining is Pennington Flash which resulted from the subsidence of the land as coal was removed over an extensive area. Streams such as Hey Brook previously crossing the area filled the depression until new outlets could be established.

Pennington Flash is perhaps the most impressive reminder of Leigh's coal mining industry.

The third major source of employment in later Victorian and Edwardian Leigh was **engineering**. At **Bedford Foundry of 1845, J Picksley and R Sims** made agricultural machinery and household items such as fireplaces until 1902. **In 1872 Harrison, McGregor was established at Downcroft** (Albion Street) off Bradshawgate and produced agricultural equipment which won numerous awards at international exhibitions. Smaller ironworks were located north of Brown Street, at Ellesmere Street, off Bridgewater Street and near the Three Crowns off Chapel Street. In 1877 the Bond Street brass foundry was opened. The Anchor Cable Company at Bridgewater Street was established in 1900 to manufacture electrical cables and eventually became part of British Insulated Callender Cables.

Three smaller **breweries** in Leigh in the late 19th Century were the **Bond Street Brewery, Jacksons behind the Lilford Hotel, and the Derby Brewery at Brown Street-Lord Street**. The Bedford, subsequently **Shaw's, Leigh Brewery** grew to a massive business in the early 20th Century. Other industry included a glue works in Westleigh between 1849 and 1876, the Westleigh Chemical Works from 1838 to 1886, and the Plank Lane Glass Works operated from 1833 to 1893. Steam corn milling was carried out at Butts Corn Mill and the Leigh Friendly Co-operative Corn Mill at Ellesmere Street. Bedford and Westleigh also produced bricks in the later 19th Century but the sites were developed for other uses soon after.