



**CHANGING  
PLACES  
OF WORK**

**STOCKSBRIDGE**

# INTRODUCTION

## KEY FACTS

- Located in South Yorkshire, north of the city of Sheffield (UK); population of around 13,000.
- Steel town identity forged over 160 years of steelmaking in Stocksbridge.
- Steelworks employed up to 10,000 people at its peak in the 1960s and '70s. Workforce now around 650.
- Workers and residents feel uncertain about a 'green' future, but community resilience helped the town respond to previous social and economic change.
- Decarbonisation plans at the Steelworks are not finalised but Liberty Steel Group has a company target date of 2030 for carbon neutrality.



*Inside Stocksbridge Steelworks*

## MAPPING CHANGE

Stocksbridge steelworks has a long history spanning over 160 years. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, industrialist Samuel Fox acquired a disused cotton mill in the valley and converted it into a wire mill. The expanding steelworks supported a growing settlement through building housing for workers and providing local amenities.

Currently owned by the Liberty Steel Group, the steelworks is renowned for producing speciality steel, serving aerospace, automotive and energy sectors, which require precision manufacturing capabilities to meet stringent sector demands.

During its peak years in the 1960s and '70s, the steelworks provided employment for 10,000 people. This has subsequently declined, and the steelworks has experienced several periods of significant change, including: nationalisation of the UK steel industry in 1967; 3-month national steelworkers strike in 1980; full privatisation of the industry from 1987; and several changes of ownership since then. Only around 650 employees remain at the Stocksbridge site today, following significant job losses throughout the past 40 years. The town has survived partly through its growing popularity as a commuter settlement, shifting from a past when many steelworkers commuted into Stocksbridge from surrounding areas – served by numerous works buses – to a present, where residents largely commute out for work, reflecting a transformation in the town's role and function.

The path towards decarbonisation and green transitions for Stocksbridge steelworks remains uncertain, although options are being assessed by current owners Liberty. There are two main options for heating and rolling steel: electrification and hydrogen. Electrification requires investment in new equipment and skilled workers to maintain it, plus access to green electricity sources. Hydrogen is reliant on developing the infrastructure for producing and transporting hydrogen. The steelworks' own Electric Arc Furnace (EAF) was closed in 2005 and raw steel is now sourced from EAFs at Stocksbridge's sister site, Aldwarke, in nearby Rotherham. The steel is produced using mostly recycled (scrap) steel.

## CHANGING PLACES OF WORK

Historically, working in the steelworks was perceived as a good career to get into. It was seen to be well paid, with a good pension, offering stable and secure employment. For some it provided good career progression opportunities too, and some workers recounted their experiences of starting on the shop floor and moving to management positions.

However, the situation began to change during the late 1970s and 1980s, as the nationalised British Steel was reorganised then privatised. Continual threats of redundancy and news reports of job losses at other UK steelworks began to change the reputation of the steel industry, leading to perceptions that it was a less desirable place to work.

One change that took place before the 1970s was the role of women in the steelworks. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, intricate assembly tasks were completed by a largely female workforce, often referred to as the 'umbrella girls'. By the end of the 1950s these jobs had largely disappeared, and work in the expanded steelworks was mostly allocated to men. Later, an increase in administration roles were taken up by women but the number of these have since also declined with digitisation and automation.



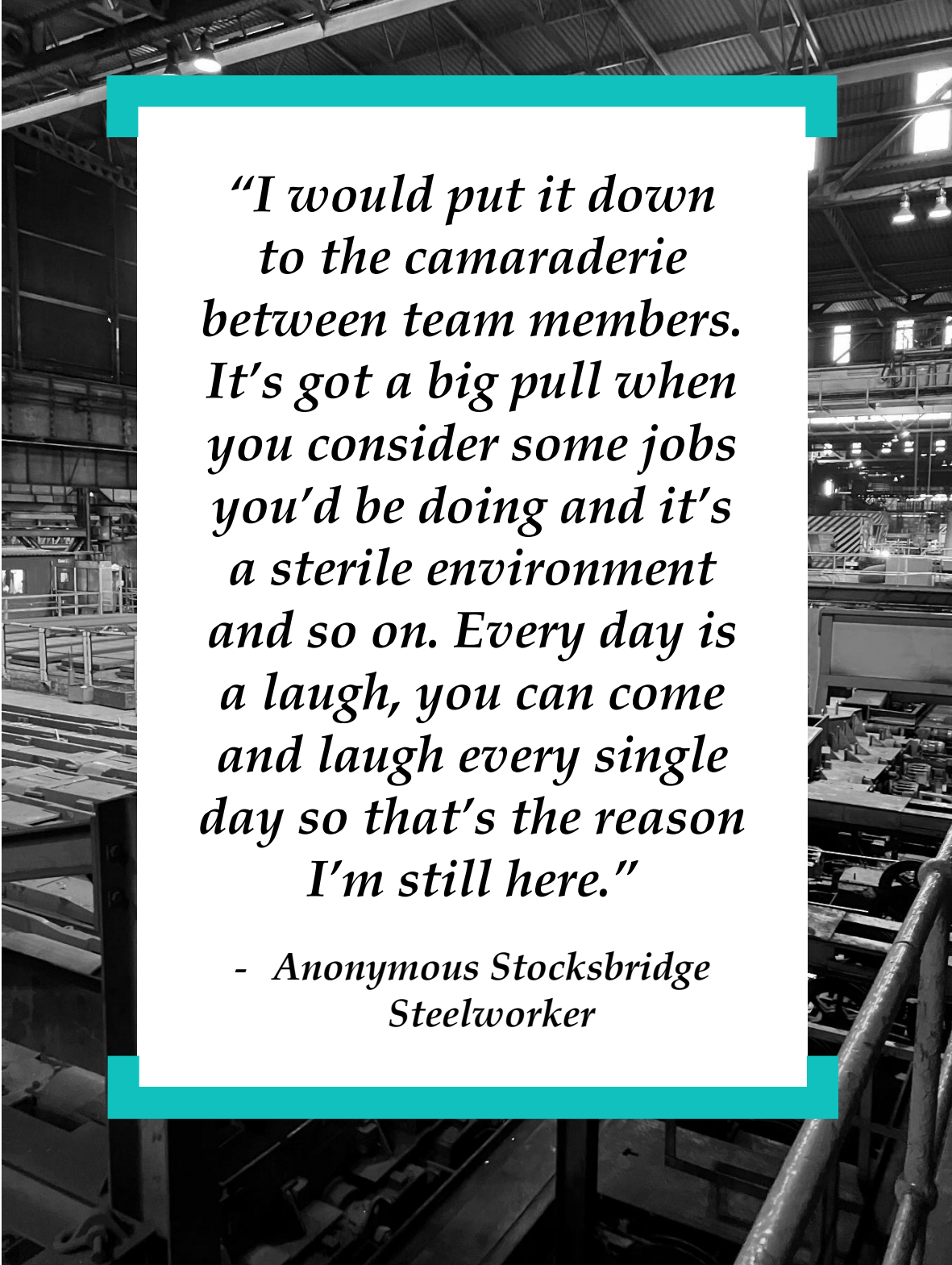
*Umbrella Department, Samuel Fox and Co. Ltd., Stocksbridge Works showing women operating the multi-stage machines used in the making of umbrella ribs and stretches (1940-1959).*

Despite regular periods of insecurity since the 1970s, there is also significant longevity among the remaining staff base. One reason for this is that the works has retained some sense of social connection and identity. Steelworkers and residents share fond memories of the works' social activities, which were historically important to employees' sense of worth and enjoyment. Much of this has been lost through decline in employment numbers. But despite the decline in social activities, workers still value the connections and sense of community felt within the steelworks.

Workers also expressed a sense of pride in the specialised knowledge they had built up through years of experience in the steelworks. However, they also shared concerns about the loss of this expertise as longstanding workers retire or leave the industry. They noted a growing skills gap between older employees with deep and practical knowledge and younger workers who have yet to gain comparable experience. This led to fears that invaluable know-how may be permanently lost, which could impact the future capabilities of the steelworks.

Workers have seen a reduction in departments at the site. Manufacturing has changed from high volumes of lower grade steel to concentrating on low volume, high grade precision engineered and higher priced steel in more recent years. Workers generally agree this was "*the right way to go*", to remain competitive.

Having experienced so many periods of change and turmoil over the years, many workers feel ambivalent, and sometimes cynical, about the idea of 'green steel' and its implications for the business. Hardly anyone thinks that green steel changes will significantly change their daily work. Lack of clarity about 'green steel' within the industry combined with wider uncertainties about the future of the steel industry, has left workers with conflicting images. They feel that the works could close imminently or continue indefinitely. They do not feel they could influence change either way.



*“I would put it down to the camaraderie between team members. It’s got a big pull when you consider some jobs you’d be doing and it’s a sterile environment and so on. Every day is a laugh, you can come and laugh every single day so that’s the reason I’m still here.”*

*- Anonymous Stocksbridge Steelworker*

*'Fox Valley Mural' by Sheffield artist Pete McKee*

## CHANGING PLACES OF WORK

The story of Stocksbridge is one of deep entanglement with steel. It has shaped the place, its heritage and identity. This contrasts with the harm experienced by workers and Stocksbridge residents over the last 40 years through job losses, redundancy, continual feelings of insecurity, and the steelworks' withdrawal from the social life of the community.

The challenges and changes faced throughout the history of Stocksbridge steelworks and its workforce has impacted on the local community. Some local services have been lost through the decline and changing role of the steelworks in the local community, including a further education college which had provided formal academic training and vocational qualifications that complemented practical skills training at the Steelworks.

There was also a “*big social side*” to the steelworks, and residents recall the many clubs, events and activities that were subsidised by the steelworks for its employees, their families and the community. Funding and organisational support for this began to decline from the late 1980s onwards following the steelworks’ transition from public to private ownership, and reduced employment numbers. However, Stocksbridge has retained a strong sense of place rooted in its steel history and many residents feel this has forged an enduring community spirit.

Although residents talk about the decline of the steelworks, some feel that Stocksbridge has continued to prosper through other regeneration and development opportunities. Community groups have also worked to restore elements of community life lost through both the steelworks’ declining presence and local government changes that affected the town.

Visions for the town’s future generally focus on continuing to survive and adapt to future changes, with some hope built on the feeling that Stocksbridge has a distinctive sense of community.

*“So it's a bit of a special place I think,  
it started off as this place attached  
with the steel but it's got a real  
beating heart to it.”*  
– Community Participant





## MANAGING CHANGE

Workers and residents partly link decline to changes in ownership, including privatisation. This has caused some distrust in both government and 'outsider' owners and managers. Workers have also seen a changing role for unions over time. While union membership has remained relatively high compared to many other sectors, their influence has declined.

Similarly, residents feel that the town has been neglected. Some feel that its relatively remote location distanced from the city of Sheffield has led to a lack of support and investment in the town. Recent investment and developments in the town have provided new amenities and housing, including potential employment opportunities. But imagining what a 'green' future for both Stocksbridge and its steelworks might look like is challenging for residents and for workers.



*View of Stocksbridge (by Johnthescone)*

This snapshot is one of a series of communication activities from the research project *Changing places of work: A place-based approach for re-imagining work in fossil free industrial towns of the future*. It presents a brief picture of one of the study sites examined within the scope of project. For more information, see:

<https://portal.research.lu.se/en/projects/changing-places-of-work-a-place-based-approach-for-re-imagining-w>

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#### Photographic References:

Liberty Steel (2024) *Inside Stocksbridge Steelworks* [Photograph]. Provided by Liberty Steel.

United Steel Companies Ltd (1940-1959) *Umbrella Department, Samuel Fox and Co. Ltd., Stocksbridge Works showing women operating the multi-stage machines used in the making of umbrella ribs and stretches* [Photograph]

[https://picturesheffield.com/frontend.php?action=printdetails&keywords=Ref\\_No\\_in\\_crement;EQUALS;s28732](https://picturesheffield.com/frontend.php?action=printdetails&keywords=Ref_No_in_crement;EQUALS;s28732)

Sheffield Hallam University (2024) Research Team photograph of the 'Fox Valley Mural' by Sheffield artist Pete McKee [Photograph]. Also available from:

<https://www.petemckee.com/blogs/gallery-exhibitions/fox-valley-mural>

Johnthescone. (n.d.). *Stocksbridge* [Photograph]. Licensed under CC BY 2.0. Retrieved from <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/?ref=openverse>.

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