



South Yorkshire: The river Derwent flows through Howden Moors on the Derwent Estate

BOOKS

## Socialist Republic

South Yorkshire used to be known fondly as a 'socialist republic'. Andrew Gamble looks at a book which deals with the reality behind the rhetoric and Alan Clarke provides a guide to a Yorkshire weekend break

Alan Clarke's, *The Rise And Fall Of The Socialist Republic* (Sheaf, Sheffield, £2.95 pbk) is a lively and interesting account of the South Yorkshire county council.

During the brief twelve-year life of the council, three elections were held - 1973, 1977 and 1981. All were won comfortably by Labour, although Labour's support was not always as strong as its tally of seats suggested. In 1973 and 1981 it won 82 of the 100 seats with 55.8 and 58.2% of the vote; in 1977 it dipped to 62 seats which were won on 44.9% of the vote.

Clarke traces the origins of local government reorganisation in the plans of the Wilson government and shows how these were modified by the Conservative government after 1970 to suit their electoral interests. He details the infighting that developed between the new county council and the districts. Although the county council was dominated by Labour politicians from

Sheffield like Sir Ron Ironmonger, fierce antagonism towards the new council was expressed by several Sheffield councillors who resented the headquarters of the new council being placed in Barnsley, rather than Sheffield, and the removal of many important policy matters from the control of the district councils.

The new council had to struggle to gain acceptance. What really established it as a presence within the region was the cheap bus fares policy - the decision taken in 1975 to freeze bus fares and increase the subsidy to maintain the level of services, with the eventual aim of providing a completely free bus service.

Clarke has much to say on the origins of this policy and the opposition to it from the Conservatives, from rate-payers' associations and from the local media. He also documents how strongly it was opposed by the Labour government. Bill Rodgers, the minister of transport,

withdrew all transport subsidy from South Yorkshire, while Peter Shore attempted to force major public spending cuts on high-spending local authorities by reducing rate support grant.

The longer the cheap fares policy lasted the more support it gathered within South Yorkshire. The local newspapers became much more sympathetic and even the Conservatives at the 1983 election were forced to admit that they were in favour of a subsidy for transport.

The council was often pilloried for its extravagance and the absurdity of some of its spending decisions by the national press, fed with material by local Conservatives.

Clarke shows how almost all of the charges were wild exaggerations and often deliberate distortions of what was actually being done.

Alan Clarke uses archive material and newspaper cuttings to provide a vivid picture of the personalities and the issues during the council's short life. When it was abolished it excited little protest in the region. But its loss is being felt, most dramatically through the deterioration of the bus service, but also through the absence of any overall planning authority for the region. •

### A Weekend Away

Sunny South Yorkshire may not be everyone's ideal for a holiday but there is more going on here than you might suspect.

One of the curiosities in the county is its peculiar mix of urban areas and open countryside. Even in the middle of Sheffield you are no more than twenty minutes from the surrounding fields and hills. This means that even on a short visit you can take advantage of the wonders of the country pubs both for food and accommodation.

But do not let the celebrated 'golden frame' distract you from the importance of the industrial heritage in the county, with its roots set deeply in the coal and steel industries. In the summer, Caphouse Mining Museum will open just across the county boundary between Wakefield and Barnsley. In Sheffield the origins of the steel and cutlery industries are documented in the working museums of Abbeydale Industrial Hamlet and Kelham Island.

For the more energetic, the heritage trails of Barnsley and Sheffield are full of interest, with Sheffield's including the landmarks of its radical past. The Anvil, Sheffield's civic cinema, produces a programme for its three screens which brings films to the city which would not normally reach the mainstream cinemas. If the Anvil caters for the cinema goers, the Leadmill - a multi-purpose arts centre - covers music, performance and theatre.

Sheffield also has two of the best football grounds in the country - with Hillsborough featuring Sheffield Wednesday, whose controversial style of play has made them one of the most talked-about teams in the football league. We also have a successful rugby league side for the first time and, with the development of the excellent facilities for the World Student Games, the sporting amongst you will be well looked after. Do not believe all you hear about Yorkshire puddings - some of the best can be found, filled with stew, at the Maynard Arms in Grindleford. A visit there will leave you very close to Calver craft centre where the coffee shop sells an excellent lemon meringue - and after a (brief) walk in the Derbyshire hills, there are few better ways of spending Sunday morning.