

**Gem from the Archives**

# A letter from America

Paul Stebbing, BMBC's Archives & Local Studies Manager, examines the letter of a Yorkshireman who left for America nearly 220 years ago.

**B**arnsley Archives holds thousands of letters written over the centuries by a wide variety of people, but very few are as informative and captivating as those written by Thurlstone-born Joseph Wainwright (1779-1866) who emigrated to the United States of America. From his arrival in the City of Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania) in 1805, the twenty-seven letters written by him to his cousins Benjamin and John Wainwright (father and son) back in Thurlstone form an almost continuous record from his arrival with his wife and two young children, when he was 25, until a few weeks before his death, aged 87 in 1866. The other historical items in the Wainwright collection make it possible to piece together Joseph Wainwright's Yorkshire family and economic background over the hundred years before he emigrated, and to follow the story of his Thurlstone cousins in the old environment for a further sixty years.

The first letter sent back

home to Yorkshire dates from 5 July 1805. Joseph begins with: *'Dear Cousin. On the first of June I with my family arrived safe here in good health and moderate spirits after a fatiguing journey of ten days from Philadelphia - distance 320 Miles in a one horse Chair which I bought there you may judge a little of our difficulties when I tell you the road the whole of the way except 70 miles at first is worse than the road from Middop to Holmfirth.'*

Joseph then remarks that Pittsburgh is nearly as large as Huddersfield, with resources including coal, ironstone and wood; and he is pondering whether to establish a milling business. He continues:

*'betwixt my Iland and the shore the channel is about 20yd wide & there is a fall in it of about four feet, the land on the shore is to sell. I have some thoughts of buying it to fix a mill on. There is no fear of being short of water the River at lowest is as large as the trent at Gainsbro'. Please enquire of the millwrights about you what sort*



Thurlstone, Penistone.

*of a wheel they think would suit such a place, say 3 feet head & fall & turn 4 pair corn stones'.*

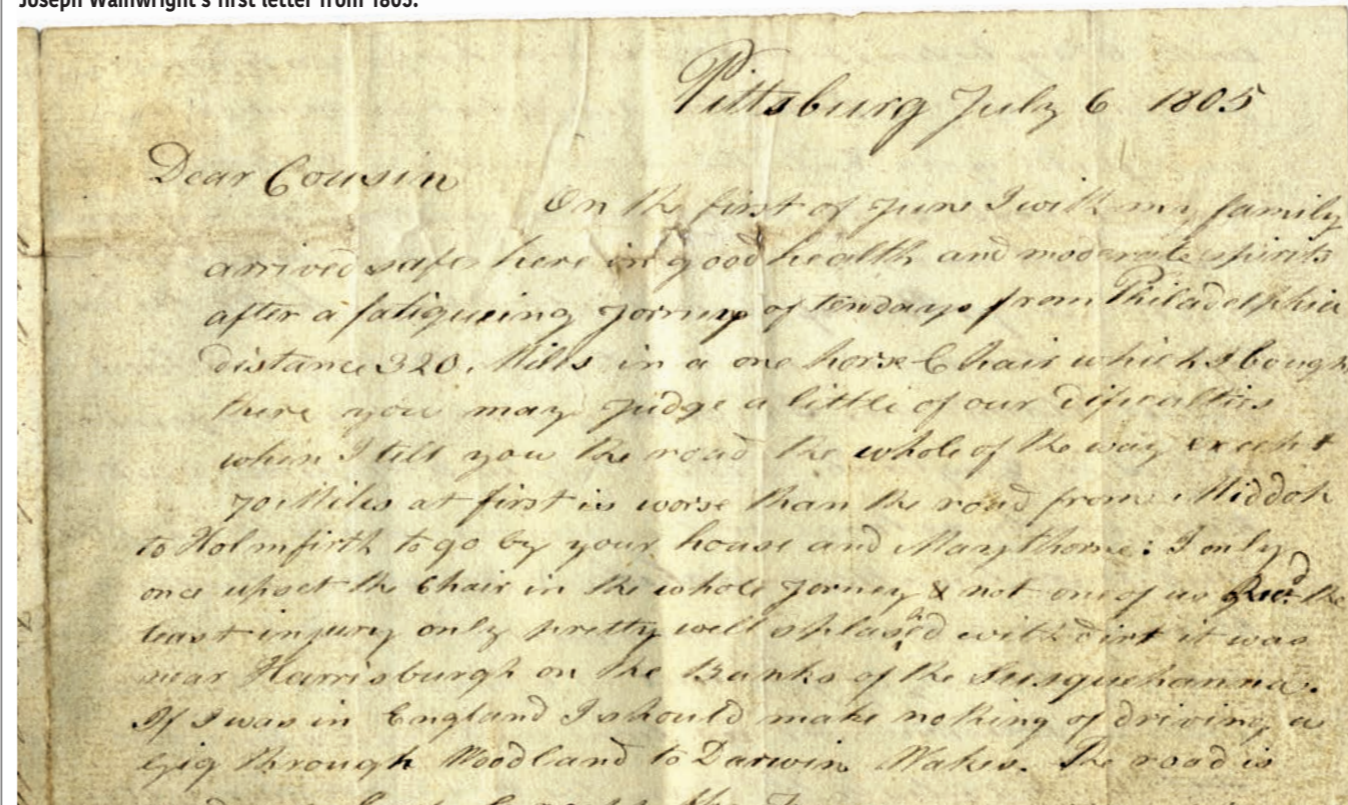
He goes on to instruct Benjamin Wainwright to sell his land in Lincolnshire. A note on the cover of the letter refers to the progress of Lord [Horatio] Nelson's fleet. Nelson was to lose his life at Trafalgar just three months later.

Joseph's subsequent letters show him to have been quite a resourceful businessman. What they do not reveal is why he chose to emigrate to the U.S.A. or



Leppings, the Wainwright family home in Thurlstone.

Joseph Wainwright's first letter from 1805.



Nineteenth century Pittsburgh.



why Pittsburgh in particular was chosen. He had sold his property known as Leppings and other Thurlstone property in 1804, before his departure. He did retain his share in the family hair and bagging business which was continued by his cousin under the name Benjamin Wainwright & Co. They conducted their partnership affairs by letter. The hair and bagging business was quite specialised and there was a wide market for their services in England.

Joseph Wainwright's progress in America and the family businesses he established there, can be followed in the letters. He never fails to report to his cousin John, whom he knew to be a comparatively poor man, the state of his flourishing finances. The letters also give his thoughts on the development and politics of the United States, the British Empire and also other world events. It also emerges from the letters that numerous other families from the Penistone district followed Joseph Wainwright to the United States. Charles Greaves, probably his brother-in-law, appears to have gone out with him. Joshua Tinker, his sister Ann's husband, went out at Joseph's expense in 1810; the Tinkers' eldest child Uriah was left with his grandparents and later followed the family trade of joiner at Penistone. At least one of Uriah's children, Frank, later emigrated to Pittsburgh. John Hobson, William Shaw, Abraham Armitage and Christopher Wood are others who made the journey to the United States to start a new life.

The Wainwright archive collection was held by Sheffield Archives (and formerly Sheffield Libraries) for many years before being transferred to Barnsley. The full collection catalogue, with detailed descriptions of the individual letters, can be accessed via Barnsley Museums' online catalogue at [www.explorebarnsleycollections.com](http://www.explorebarnsleycollections.com).

THE COLLECTIONS of Barnsley Archives and Local Studies date from the 12th to 21st century and include records detailing everything from local families, to schools, local businesses, the police and councils. Explore the collections in the Discovery Centre, which sits alongside the Experience Barnsley Museum in the Town Hall.