Six generations pay tribute to man of steel

More than 100 relatives of a Victorian steel magnate have been celebrating the life of their illustrious South Yorkshire relative. **Ray Parkin** reports

HE WAS one of South Yorkshire's great Victorian entrepreneurs...

John Baker was a steelmaking giant who started work at the age of 12 – and ended up producing tyres and axles for railway locomotives all over Europe.

Today, steel products made by his company can still be seen on the famous Mallard in York's Railway Museum and on a Canadian Pacific loco in Toronto's National Park.

Tyres made by the company for Britain's mining industry can also be seen on old pit tubs at the popular Beamish Museum in County Durham.

Baker was also typical of so many of his Victorian counterparts. He was a benefactor of Rotherham's Talbot Lane Chapel and helped pay for the church to be rebuilt after it was burned down in the 1890s.

He was also a supporter of the town's hospital, establishing a link carried on by three generations of his family.

Baker died 100 years ago this month – and more than 100 of his descendants got together for a family celebration of their illustrious ancestor's life.

Some of his family are still engineers – representing six generations of industrial expertise that began way back in the 19th century.

Baker was born in Nottingham and gained some of his industrial expertise in Manchester and Preston before becoming works manager for George Owen in Rotherham – which became Owen and Dysons.

In 1874 he set up in business with Thomas Burnett of Doncaster making steel wheel products alongside the River Don in Conisbrough.

A short time later the partnership was dissolved and Baker moved his business to Brinsworth and occupied the site currently used by Booth's metal works.

"From here his trade developed well, and soon John Baker and Co were supplying railways and tramways right across Europe, particularly in Scandinavia," said one of his descendants, Anthony Baker.

"By the turn of the century his business had prospered so well that John required another works site, and in 1903 he bought the former works of John Brown and Co in Kilnhurst. He embarked on the building of an integrated steelworks – but it was while helping to clear the site in 1904 that he caught pneumonia and died.

"He had on order steelmaking furnaces, hammers and mills, and machine shop plant.

"All this installation became the responsibility of the three eldest of his seven sons, the other four still being at school."

During the First World War the company turned to making munitions under the chairmanship of the eldest son John W Baker and his brother George who was managing director.

In 1927 they bought out the famous company owned by Henry Bessemer in Sheffield – and became known as John Baker and Bessemer Ltd.

By then the company was supplying parts for railways and tramways all around the world – and again in World War Two produced vital parts for Allied tanks and armoured cars.

But by the 1950s the demise of the railways was already under way – and in 1964 Baker and Bessemer became the subject of a hostile takeover bid by the English Steel Corporation and the United Steel Companies Ltd.

It was eventually absorbed into the works of Taylor Brothers of Trafford Park, Manchester and Steel, Peech and Tozer of Rotherham.

Henry Baker – one of the twin sons of John W Baker was the last chairman of the company. He was a well known figure in and around Rotherham and died aged 94 four years ago.

Anthony said: "John Baker was one of South Yorkshire's great Victorian entrepreneurs and March is the centenary of his death.

"Many of his descendants still live in and around Rotherham and Nottinghamshire and we decided this milestone should not go unnoticed.

"Although there is no longer a family business, there are six generation engineers in a row out there. Obviously there are members of the family in all walks of life – and some of these are following in John Baker's footsteps and becoming entrepreneurs in their own fields.

"Succeeding generations hold their ancestor John Baker in such high esteem that were was a tremendous response to attend the special luncheon and reunion we decided to organise.

"In the end more than 120 members of the family attended from all over Britain. Relatives in Canada and Australia found it too far to travel – but a message of greetings from Dr Peter Baker in Zimbabwe was read out by his son Dr Andrew Baker."

BAKER FACTS

- He was born in Nottingham and started work at 12 gaining experience in the steel industry.
- He set up in business in 1874 with Thomas Burnett in Conisbrough making railway tyres.
- In 1884 he moved to Brinsworth and was soon supplying railways and tramways across Europe.
- In 1903 he bought former John Brown and Co works in Kilnhurst – but died a year later after catching pneumonia.
- The company was taken over by three of his sons, and during First World War turned to making munitions.
- In 1927 the company was bought out by Henry Bessemer's Sheffield company and was soon supplying railway parts across the world.
- In 1964 the company was again bought out and became part of Taylor Brothers of Trafford Park, Manchester and Steel, Peech and Tozer in Rotherham.
- Last chairman of the company, Henry Baker, died aged 94 four years ago.

