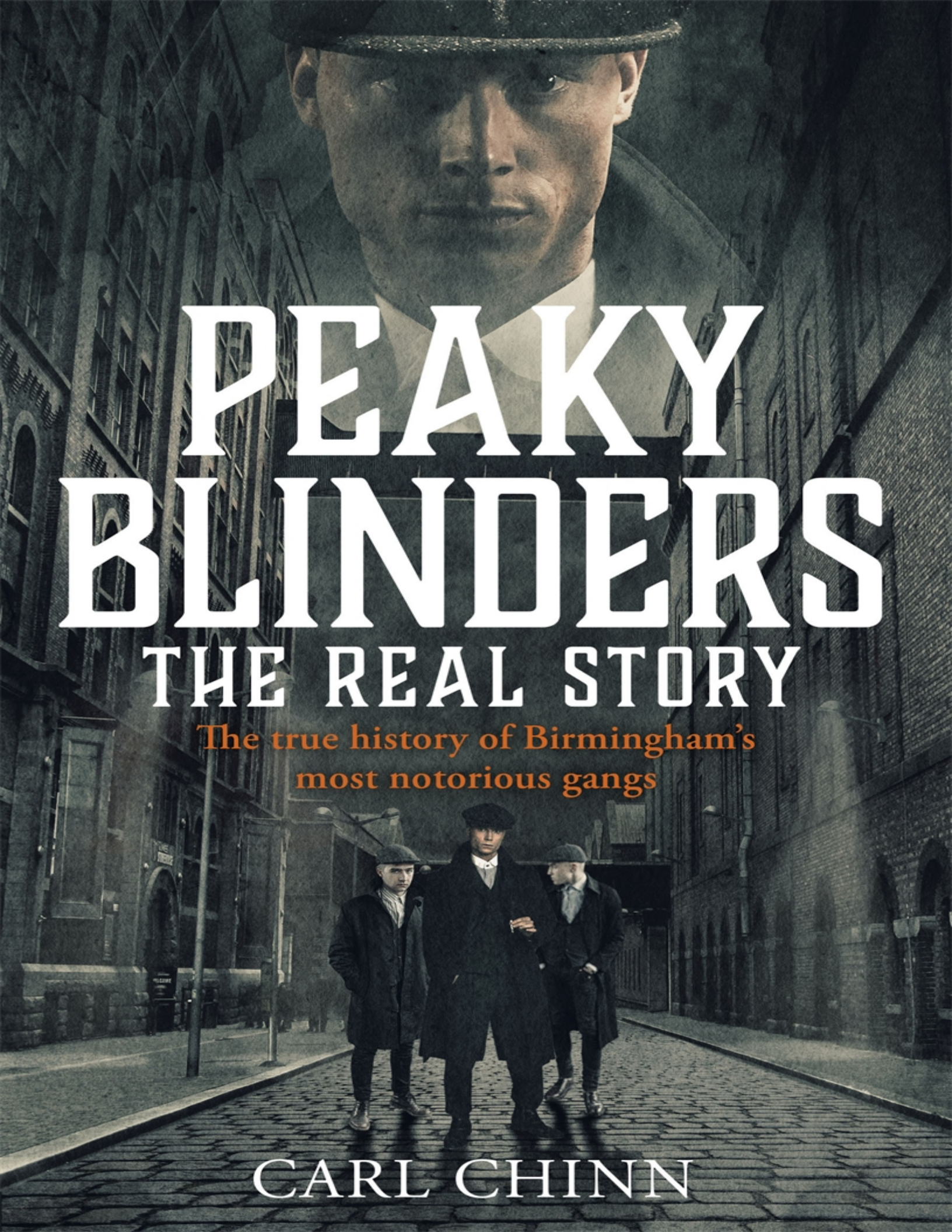
PEAKY
BLINDERS
THE REAL STORY
The true history of Birmingham's
most notorious gangs
CARL CHINN

PEAKY BLINDERS

Professor Carl Chinn, MBE, PhD, is a social historian, writer, public speaker, and teacher. An off-course bookmaker himself until 1984, he is the son and grandson of illegal bookmakers in Sparkbrook, whilst his mother's family were factory workers in Aston. His writings are deeply affected by his family's working-class background and life in the back-to-backs of Birmingham, and have earned him a national following. He believes passionately that history must be democratised because each and every person has made their mark upon history and has a story to tell. *Peaky Blinders: The Real Story* is his thirty-third book.

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The true history of Birmingham's most notorious gangs

CARL CHINN

JB
JOHN BLAKE

Published by John Blake Publishing,
The Plaza,
535 Kings Road,
Chelsea Harbour,
London SW10 0SZ

www.facebook.com/johnblakebooks
twitter.com/jblakebooks

First published in paperback in 2019

Paperback ISBN: 978 1 78946 172 5
Ebook ISBN: 978 1 78946 173 2

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data:

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design by www.envydesign.co.uk

John Blake Publishing is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
www.bonnierbooks.co.uk

The real gangs of Birmingham ruled the lives of backstreet Brummies for generations, and so it is to the hardworking, law-abiding and decent majority of the working class that this book is dedicated.

Unglamorous as their lives may have been, it is they who are worthy of our respect.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMNTS

Born in 1956, like other Brummies of my generation and those gone before, I had heard of the peaky blinders growing up, but I first wrote about them in 1986 in my doctoral thesis on the Ladypool Road neighbourhood of Sparkbrook. It was also in my thesis that I discussed for the first time the importance of Charles Haughton Rafter, the chief constable of Birmingham, who was credited with putting down the peaky blinders. That I was able to do so was thanks to the memories of my great uncle Bill Chinn and great uncle Wal Chinn, born in 1892 and 1897 respectively, who were amongst the first people whom I interviewed as a young oral historian.

Then in 1987, I began researching for my second book, a social history of illegal bookmaking – a subject relevant to my background. My granddad Richard Chinn had started up as an illegal back-street bookmaker in 1922, whilst my dad, Alfred 'Buck' Chinn, was raised in the game and went on to oversee the move into legal betting shops in 1961. I worked part-time in the business from when I was thirteen and later ran the family's betting shops in Sparkbrook between 1978 and 1984, when we sold up. Dad, though, remained involved in bookmaking affairs and became president of the Birmingham branch of the Bookmakers' Protection Association. It was through his contacts that I was able to interview a number of elderly racecourse bookmakers from London. Amongst them was Simeon Solomon, whose bookmaking name was Sydney Lewis and who was the younger brother of the real Alfie Solomon, fictionalised in the series *Peaky*

Blinders. He and the others I spoke with were the first to inform me about the racecourse war of 1921 that was fought between the Birmingham Gang and the Sabini Gang.

I am deeply grateful to all those people who shared their stories with me during that time and to all those who have done so since, because this book has been enriched by their memories. Similarly, my appreciation goes to those who have allowed me to include photographs from their personal collections. They are: Brian McDonald, who has also generously imparted his unrivalled knowledge of the London gangs; Juliet Banyard and her brother, Justin Jones, the great-grandchildren of the real Billy Kimber from his first marriage; Lesley and Robert Staight, the great-grandchildren of Birmingham Gang member Edward Tuckey; Tommy Garnham, whose father led a small gang from Islington that worked for Billy Kimber; and Mark Hanson, the great-nephew of the labour-movement activist, Jessie Eden.

For the inclusion of photographs from their collections, I thank the Library of Birmingham, the Islington Local History Centre and the West Midlands Police Museum, whose Sparkhill police station volunteers have also delved into their archives for me. The existence of that museum owes much to the indefatigable efforts of the late Dave Cross, who introduced me to its priceless collection of prisoners photographs. Other photos are from the Birmingham Lives Archive at the Library of Birmingham, which developed from my own personal collection.

A book of this type and scale could not have been published without the support and expertise of a highly talented team – in fact, two teams. From History West Midlands, I thank: Dr Jenni Butterworth for her thoughtful editing; John and Averil Maskew for the photographic retouching; Peter Bounous for securing the permissions for various photographs. I wish to pay especial tribute to Mike Gibbs, Publishing Director at History West Midlands, for his enthusiasm and commitment to the history of Birmingham and the Black Country and for his belief in my work. The second team is that of Bonnier Books UK and in particular, for their input, enthusiasm and support, I am grateful to: Kelly Ellis, Publishing Director – Adult Non-Fiction, Bonnier Books UK; Ellie Carr, Assistant Editor, Bonnier Books UK; and Liz Marvin, Copy Editor. Thanks to all those from other departments within Bonnier Books UK who have contributed to this book.

Finally, I thank my extended family from Sparkbrook, Aston and Highgate for all the stories that they told me and which inspired to be a social historian, and my Dublin wife, Kay, for her understanding of my passion for the history of Birmingham and the urban working class, for her insights into growing up in Finglas West, and for her unwavering backing.

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, the BBC2 series *Peaky Blinders* grabbed a riveted audience from its first scene, when Tommy Shelby rides into town like a feared outlaw from the American West. Frightened women scurry out of his way, children peer furtively at him from their hiding places and all that can be heard is the clopping of his thoroughbred horse. With nobody around, the rider stops. But he is not in the Wild West and nor is he a gunslinger: he is a man of power in back-street industrial Birmingham in 1919. Dressed distinctively and stylishly in a three-piece suit and a shirt with a stiff collar but no tie, he is a commanding yet mysterious presence – a feeling heightened by the newsboy-type cap overshadowing his eyes.

After a brief encounter with a deferential Chinese man and woman in traditional dress, Shelby rides off slowly to the theme tune of 'Red Right Hand' by Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds. With its clanging, pounding sound, haunting almost sinister feel and hypnotic bluesy beat, its foreboding lyrics seem as if they have been written specially for Tommy Shelby: 'He's a man, he's a ghost, he's a god, he's a guru'.[1] As he makes his way through a grim urban setting, steam swirls around, smoke disgorges from factory chimneys and the dark atmosphere is punched through with bursts of flame from a foundry. Disabled Great War veterans are begging, other men are drinking and gambling on the tossing of coins into the air and two uniformed police officers touch their helmets respectfully to 'Mr Shelby', who carries on along a street that burrows between brooding factories.[2]

This captivating opening set the standard for a gangster epic that is beautifully shot with a cinematic feel and which is enhanced by stunning set designs, clever direction, classy production, slow-motion fights and compelling performances by famous actors. Above all, the story by Steven Knight, a Brummie himself, is engrossing, telling as it does of a feared and dangerous gang called the Peaky Blinders that rules the Small Heath district of Birmingham in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. This name, infused with fear, is taken from the disposable safety razor blades stitched into the peaks of their caps. In a fight, they are whipped off and slashed across the eyes of their enemies, blinding them.

From their base at the Garrison pub, the Peaky Blinders are making much of their money from illegal bookmaking. They are gathered around the daunting Shelby family led by the second oldest brother, Tommy. Violent and menacing, he is haunted by his harrowing experiences in the First World War and is all the more dangerous because he is not afraid to die. Yet Shelby is no ignorant thug. He is shrewd, resourceful and motivated not only by a thirst to become rich but also by an intense loyalty to his family and a desire to move them away from the back streets and bring them legitimacy. Their path to do so is tortuous, and in a fast-paced drama over several series, the Shelbys' Peaky Blinders fight with other gangsters such as the Londoners Billy Kimber, Darby Sabini and Alfie Solomons; are embroiled both with the IRA and Russian aristocrats; clash with Chief Inspector Campbell, brought in from Northern Ireland to put them down; become factory owners and are challenged by the highly-intelligent trade union leader Jessie Eden; and survive a vengeful mission by a New York mafioso called Luca Changretta.

From the start, *Peaky Blinders* gained a fervent following in the United Kingdom. The rage for all things Peaky grew over the next three series, prompting *Peaky Blinders'* fashion, drinks, bars and tours. Now an international sensation, the series boasts celebrity fans and won numerous awards, including the BAFTA for Best Drama Series in 2015 and 2018. Such accolades have been matched by the praise of many critics, and have led some to declare that *Peaky Blinders* is a 'Brummie *Boardwalk*' because, like the acclaimed American series *Boardwalk Empire,* it is visually stylistic and dramatises historical figures from the 1920s.[3]

This approach has sparked an upsurge in interest in the real characters, events and places drawn from historical obscurity by *Peaky Blinders*. For

there was a real Billy Kimber, a real Darby Sabini and a real Alfie Solomon, and there was a real gang war involving them in 1921. There was a real Birmingham Italian family called Changretta. There was a real labour-movement activist named Jessie Eden. There were illegal bookmakers in the poorer neighbourhoods of Birmingham in the 1920s. There was a Birmingham police chief who did hail from Northern Ireland. And there were real peaky blinders in Birmingham. But they thrived before the First World War and not after it, when there was not just one gang, rather there were many. Moreover, these peaky blinders were neither glamorous nor powerful gangsters: they were back-street thugs. Although some of them were also petty criminals, most of them had jobs and none of them belonged to a gang in order to make a living from large-scale gangland activities.

In an era when Birmingham was proclaimed as the ‘best governed city in the world’, as the American journalist Julian Ralph lauded it in 1890, Birmingham was also notorious for its street gangs and was damned as one of the most violent places in Britain.[4] Behind the façade of a council admired for its municipal socialism and activism, the lives of scores upon scores of thousands of hard-working and respectable citizens in poorer neighbourhoods were blighted by vicious back-street gangs.

These had not suddenly sprung up out of nothing. They had emerged from the late 1850s when the new Birmingham police, under pressure from the middle class, cracked down on the rough sports and gambling of youths in the open in the poorer parts of Birmingham. This police action was resisted by the roughs of the town, who banded together in what were called slogging gangs from 1872. But the sloggers did not just attack the police: they fought each other and also cruelly assaulted anybody who crossed them in any way, whether man or woman, young or old. Similar gangs had arisen in Manchester, Salford, Liverpool and London, and although there were violent men elsewhere, it was only in these cities and Birmingham that street gangs were rampant.

From 1890, the sloggers of the city were also called peaky blinders, a term that would soon be given to brutal bullies whether or not they were in a gang. In Birmingham folklore, their name arose from the story that they had they sewn disposable safety razor blades into the peaks of their flat caps and in a fight, the peak would be slashed across the forehead of an enemy, causing blood to pour into his eyes and temporarily blind him. With a name

pervaded with dread, the peaky blinders swiftly gained infamy across Britain as well as in Birmingham, where some families can still identify a peaky blinder ancestor. My family is amongst them as my great grandfather, Edward Derrick, was a peaky blinder and a third-generation criminal. His paternal grandfather was a habitual offender, who was once sentenced to transportation for stealing, whilst his grandmother was also a convicted thief.[5] As for Derrick's father, he was fined for assaulting a police officer after he had struck the wall with a tremendous blow with a poker during a row with his wife.[6]

Derrick's oldest brother, John, was also violent and was a leader in a slogging gang. In February 1891, at the age of 20, John Derrick was charged with assaulting a police constable who had a prisoner in custody in Thomas Street (later Highgate Road) in Sparkbrook. The incident occurred when he was amongst other roughs and had thrown a brick at the policeman. When Derrick was brought to court, it was stated that he was involved in nearly every row that took place in the district. He was jailed for six weeks with hard labour.[7]

At this time, my great-grandfather, Edward Derrick, was aged eleven and in the Penn Street Industrial School. Boys under fourteen were placed there when they had technically committed crimes, such as begging, or if they were beyond the control of their parents. It was hoped that, in this way, a child in bad circumstances would be saved from his surroundings.[8] That hope was dashed with my great grandfather. Although there is no evidence of him belonging to a slogging gang like his older brother, as with other peaky blinders, he was a thuggish petty thief.

In 1893, he was convicted of vagrancy and, in October 1894, he served seven days in prison for stealing five loaves. Just weeks later, the now sixteen-year-old Derrick was sentenced to four months' hard labour for burglary. Then, in 1897, he was sent down for five months and handed a two-year supervision order for stealing a bicycle. He was not out of prison long before he was convicted of using obscene language and, soon after, in October 1898, he was imprisoned for twelve months for breaking into a counting house. It was stated that he was 5 foot 3½ inches tall, had a blue mark on the back of one forearm and wrist, and a tattoo of a mermaid on the back of the other forearm.

Now a serial offender, in 1899, Derrick assaulted a police constable – constable baiting was especially associated with peaky blinders. A year later, he was arrested for drunkenness, and, in October 1901, under the alias of Fredrick Pitt, he was sent away for three years for bodily harm. Finally, in October 1906, he was sentenced to two months' hard labour for stealing a basket carriage – a basket on three wheels used by hawkers and others to move their goods.[9] Then aged fourteen, my Great Uncle Bill Chinn recollected seeing Derrick and his brother, Fred, with the stolen item and 'pinching a side of bacon from Payne's in Ladypool Road, corner of Colville Road'. He explained, 'I was up there selling *[Birmingham] Mails*. I seen Fred Derrick get the long arm, which they was hanging the bacon with outside for show. And he picked one up, they dropped it in this carriage and they went down Colville Road.'[10] Derrick then sold the basket carriage for eight shillings (40p), explaining that he needed that sum as the bailiffs were in his house. He did not use the money for that purpose, though, for he admitted in court that he'd 'blewed it in for the sake of beer'.[11]

A year later, Derrick married my great grandmother, Ada Weldon, at Christ Church, Sparkbrook. He gave himself as a bricklayer, although previously he had said that he was a tailor and later he would call himself a scrap iron dealer and a rag and bone man. Marriage did not change him for the better. When I was researching my doctoral thesis in the early 1980s, I spoke with Lil Nead, née Preston, whose family had lived in the same yard of back-to-back houses in Studley Street, Sparkbrook as the Derricks and their daughter, Maisy, my grandmother. Lil recalled that Derrick was an abusive bully who often smashed up his home when he was drunk and that on occasions his wife and child had to hide from his drunken rages in the communal brewhouse (washhouse) or in the house of Lil's Granny Carey. Known as Old Mother Carey, she was beloved by all the folk of Studley Street and had several strong sons – so Derrick would not pursue his maltreated wife into that house.[12]

There was also a story in the family that my great grandmother went on to divorce him after he had abandoned her. I always doubted this, thinking that it was too expensive for a working-class person to be able to afford the high costs of a divorce. I was wrong. After suffering years of cruelty, she did divorce Derrick in 1922 as 'a poor person' under the rules of the Supreme Court. The divorce documents confirm that from the summer of

1913, he had failed to provide food or clothing for his wife and child. They got by on her wages as a press worker in the brass trade. Then, in April 1915, he had violently assaulted his wife and threatened to kill her at her house at 25 Studley Street.

Six months later, Derrick physically attacked her with his fist and caused her bodily harm. It was emphasised that 'he had frequently given way to drink and had used foul and abusive language' towards her and that he had also often smashed various articles of furniture and broken up two homes. Thankfully, from January 1916, he deserted his wife and daughter and moved to Coventry.[13]

Derrick lived until he was aged eighty-five, dying in 1964, in Nuneaton. As for his wife, Ada, she was later reported as stating that she had left Derrick for a better man.[14] Sadly, she died of stomach cancer in 1925, aged thirty-nine.

I knew of the Derricks growing up but knew little about them until my adulthood. However, they have made a mark upon me. My paternal grandfather Richard Chinn was tall, fairish skinned and blue-eyed. I am short, dark haired, brown-eyed and sallow skinned. So too was my maternal great-grandfather Edward Derrick, my peaky blinder ancestor and a man for whom I have nothing but contempt. As a wife-beater, thief, wastrel and violent ruffian, he was typical of the peaky blinders. Unlike the dramatised peaky blinders, they were not fashionably dressed, they did not have a certain charm, they did not have a certain sense of honour and they were not respected by Birmingham's working class, who were mightily relieved when the reign of the peaky blinders was ended.

Their disappearance by 1914 owed much to the forceful policing initiated by Birmingham's chief constable, Charles Haughton Rafter, who was credited as the man who cleaned up the city's black spots.[15] Yet though the real peaky blinders had been put down, some of them formed the formidable and fierce Birmingham Gang led by the real Billy Kimber. In 1921, they fought a bloody war against an alliance of London gangs led by the real Darby Sabini, and including the real Alfie Solomon, over control of the protection rackets and pickpocketing on the racecourses of southern England. However, no 'battles' in that war were fought in the Midlands or Birmingham, which by now had shed its reputation for violence.

As for the rest of the peaky blinders, some went on to fight for their country in the First World War and returned home changed and more law-abiding men. With the passing of the last of them, the peaky blinders drifted into local folklore. Some older folk used just the mention of their name, like that of the bogeyman, to scare children, whilst others told of the fearsome peaky blinders with disposable razors stitched into their caps. The story went that, in a fight, this weapon was slashed across the foreheads of their enemies, whose eyes were then blinded by blood pouring into them, allowing them to be beaten up.

Slowly, even this tale began fading away, as the children and grandchildren of those who had known the peaky blinders died – fading away, that is, until revitalised for a modern and wider audience by the gripping drama, *Peaky Blinders*. The reality of the gang differs somewhat from that portrayed on our televisions, for the real peaky blinders were unsavoury, unglamorous and unworthy of respect. Yet reprehensible as they were, collectively, they were major figures in late-Victorian and Edwardian Birmingham. Ignored or mentioned merely in passing in studies of the city, in truth the peaky blinders and sloggers affected the lives of scores upon scores of citizens for a generation and more, albeit negatively, and tarnished the reputation of Birmingham. Their actions are as inextricably bound up with the city and its history as those of its leading politicians and great manufacturers. This, then, is the real story of the peaky blinders.