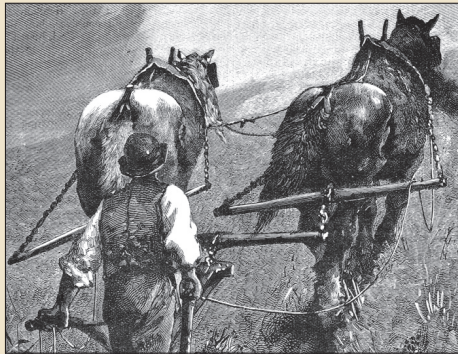


# 21. RUGELEY TOWN CENTRE

## Town of change

Rugeley's name, like that of hundreds of English places, comes from the Anglo-Saxon language. The word *Hrycg*, meaning a ridge or chain of hills, is put together with the word *Leah*, meaning a woodland clearing, to make Rugeley.

In Saxon times, this area was part of the kingdom of Mercia. When William I invaded England a rebellion was led against the Normans by Edwin, son of Earl Aelfgar of Mercia. This was crushed in 1071, and the Normans took control. The estimated population of Rugeley was then 35-40 inhabitants. Rugeley's prosperity grew first from agriculture and then from a variety of other industries. By 2001 its population was 23,000 people.



A 19th century illustration of a farmer walking behind his two shire horses ploughing sowing furrows in the field.  
Drawing courtesy of Cannasue

### From forest settlement to market town

In 1189, Rugeley was sold to the Bishop of Lichfield and Coventry by King Richard I (known as the Lionheart). At this time Rugeley was still a small settlement and was part of the Royal Forest of Cannock, which provided hunting country for the monarch and the aristocracy. Only seventy years later, in 1259, the town had grown big enough to be granted the right to hold a weekly market.

### Fire and flood

In 1709, Rugeley suffered two major disasters. The town was ravaged by fire, and the Rising Brook, the stream that runs through the town centre, burst its banks. The town had been devastated by fire only sixty years before.

### Hats, glass, iron and leather

Among the other industries that have played an important part in the history of Rugeley are glass-making and millinery (hat-making) and iron and leather production. Glass-making flourished near here in mediaeval times.

In the 1990s mediaeval glass furnaces were excavated two miles from Rugeley. In 1419 a large quantity of the glass made there was sold to York Minster, where it was painted and used in the windows of its chancel.

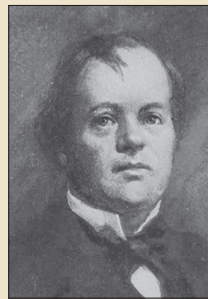
For a time in the 19th century, Rugeley's chief manufacturing industry was hatmaking. By 1834, there were about 30 journeymen hatters in the town. There were tanneries in Rugeley from the 12th century until the mid 1900s, and iron was produced here from the 12th century until the 1930s.

### The changing face of Rugeley

Most towns change over time, and Rugeley is no exception. Some of the views on this old postcard below have changed beyond recognition. Since the 1950s and 1960s many old buildings have been demolished and new ones developed. In 1973, the town centre was made a Conservation Area, an area of special architectural or historic interest.

### The Rugeley Poisoner

In 1856 the town was rocked by the trial of Dr William Palmer, who was born and worked in Rugeley. He was found guilty of poisoning his associate, John Parsons Cook, with strychnine - the first trial of its kind. The murder took place in The Shrew, just across the street from his house. Among other victims, he was also widely believed to have murdered his wife, four of his five children, and his brother.

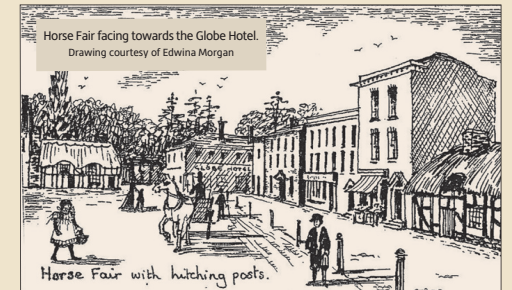


Dr William Palmer, the notorious 'Rugeley Poisoner'. This likeness was drawn from his death mask.  
Image courtesy of Staffordshire Arts & Museum Service



### An agricultural community

For hundreds of years, Rugeley was an agricultural community. Its sheep and horse fairs provided the opportunity for farmers from the surrounding area to meet and sell their livestock. Reaching its peak in the mid 19th century and lasting until the 1930s, the annual horse fair was known internationally, and attracted trade from far and wide. Until 1967 cattle fairs were held behind The Shrew. When afternoon business started after lunch, the market bell was rung from the steps of the pub to call the farmers back to the market.



Horse Fair in the early twentieth century. A tram-way taking coal wagons to the canal basin ran along the right side.  
Drawing courtesy of Edwina Morgan