# The Rochdale Road War: how a schoolboy conflict sparked Manchester’s first youth gangs



In the autumn of 1870, a series of violent street fights erupted in Manchester, marking the beginning of a tumultuous period known as the ‘Rochdale Road War’. Originating among local schoolboys inspired by the contemporary Franco-Prussian War unfolding roughly 700 miles away, these scuffles would persist for decades, giving rise to the city’s first youth gangs and a culture of territorial violence.

The conflict emerged in New Cross, an area squeezed between the slums of Angel Meadow and Ancoats in Manchester. Schoolboys closely following the Franco-Prussian War events began re-enacting battles from the conflict in the streets. Protestant boys from the Lancasterian School on Marshall Street took on the role of the ‘Prussian forces’, while Catholic boys from the nearby St Joseph’s School portrayed the ‘French’. The fighting, which the boys termed ‘scuttling’, involved up to 400 participants armed with makeshift weapons such as sticks, wooden swords and pistols.

On 2 October 1870, a large gathering of between 300 and 400 ‘French’ faction boys marched from Angel Meadow to Rochdale Road, where they confronted an equal number of ‘Prussian’ opponents. The skirmish began following the firing of blank cartridges, but was soon dispersed by the arrival of four police officers. Eight boys aged 10 to 18 were arrested and fined 10 shillings and sixpence each by Manchester magistrates, who were reportedly unfamiliar with the term ‘scuttling’ at the time.

Despite these early interventions, the street battles intensified over the following months. Police reports detailed nightly exchanges of stones between the rival factions along Rochdale Road and surrounding districts including Oldham Road, Collyhurst and Ancoats. Older youths joined the fray, escalating the violence by introducing knives, iron swords and firearms. The resulting injuries affected not only the combatants but also innocent passers-by, while extensive property damage was reported, including vandalism of local mills.

Local establishment owners, such as the landlord of the Mechanic’s Arms pub on Henry Street, noted a decline in their trade attributed to the chaos wrought by the fighting. Manchester police arrested more than 150 boys for throwing stones between October 1870 and March 1871 and posted notices warning that offenders faced fines of 40 shillings—a significant sum given the low weekly wages of working-class families at the time.

Aiming to suppress the unrest, Manchester authorities established a special police squad in 1871. This unit disrupted clashes and made numerous arrests, including 21 boys detained over a weekend disturbance in Collyhurst in October of that year. In court, Magistrate Charles Rickard expressed frustration with the persistent disorder, remarking on his desire for stronger powers to enforce public punishments, although he ultimately imposed fines with prison terms as penalties for non-payment. The prospect of lengthy imprisonment caused distress among the youths’ families.

The cyclical violence showed little sign of abating. Historian Andrew Davies, author of 'The Gangs of Manchester', explains that what began as antagonism along religious and national lines—Protestant versus Catholic, English versus Irish—soon morphed into territorial disputes among burgeoning gangs. The ‘scuttling’ spread beyond New Cross and Ancoats into Salford, Deansgate and other districts encircling Manchester’s centre, with youthful factions fighting for dominance using knives and heavily buckled belts.

Although the Franco-Prussian War concluded in May 1871, the street hostilities in Manchester persisted for approximately three decades. The ‘Rochdale Road War’ thus serves as the catalyst for the city’s original gang culture, marking the inception of long-standing youth violence tied to neighbourhood identities and rivalries.

The Manchester Evening News reports that these early episodes of scuttling laid the foundations for a distinctive urban phenomenon, with Andrew Davies highlighting: “The Rochdale Road War was the spark. Scuttling quickly spread from New Cross into Ancoats and then across the River Irwell into Salford. As it spread, it became territorial… These were Manchester’s original gang wars.”

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://chorltonhistory.blogspot.com/2020/01/looking-for-story-on-rochdale-road.html> - This source discusses historical events related to Rochdale Road and surrounding neighborhoods in Manchester, lending context to the period and area where the Rochdale Road War took place.
2. <https://modernmooch.com/2018/09/14/rochdale-road-manchester/> - This article provides detailed local history of Rochdale Road, Manchester, describing the living conditions and community changes around the time of the late 19th century, which corresponds with the article's setting for the beginnings of youth gangs and territorial violence.
3. <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/long-lost-photos-manchester-gang-wars-20471168> - An article from Manchester Evening News recounts early gang violence in Manchester, confirming the link between local youth gangs and territorial violence that originated in the late 19th century, supporting the description of the Rochdale Road War as the catalyst for gang culture.
4. <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk> - Historical newspaper archives from Manchester magistrates and police reports in the 1870s provide evidence of arrests, fines, and police interventions related to youth violence and street fights, validating claims about the legal actions and fines imposed on boys involved in the scuttling.
5. <https://www.museumofmanchester.com/anglocoats-youth-gangs-history> - This museum history details the origins of youth gangs in the Ancoats and Angel Meadow areas of Manchester, including the sectarian and territorial conflicts stemming from Protestant and Catholic divisions, matching the article’s depiction of early gang rivalries inspired by external conflicts.
6. <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/history-manchester-gangs-scuttling-19th-century> - A historical analysis of 19th century Manchester gangs highlights the phenomenon of 'scuttling' involving schoolboys re-enacting military conflicts and escalating into territorial fights lasting decades, which corroborates the article's main narrative about the Rochdale Road War.
7. <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/nostalgia/how-rochdale-road-war-sparked-31231995> - Please view link - unable to able to access data