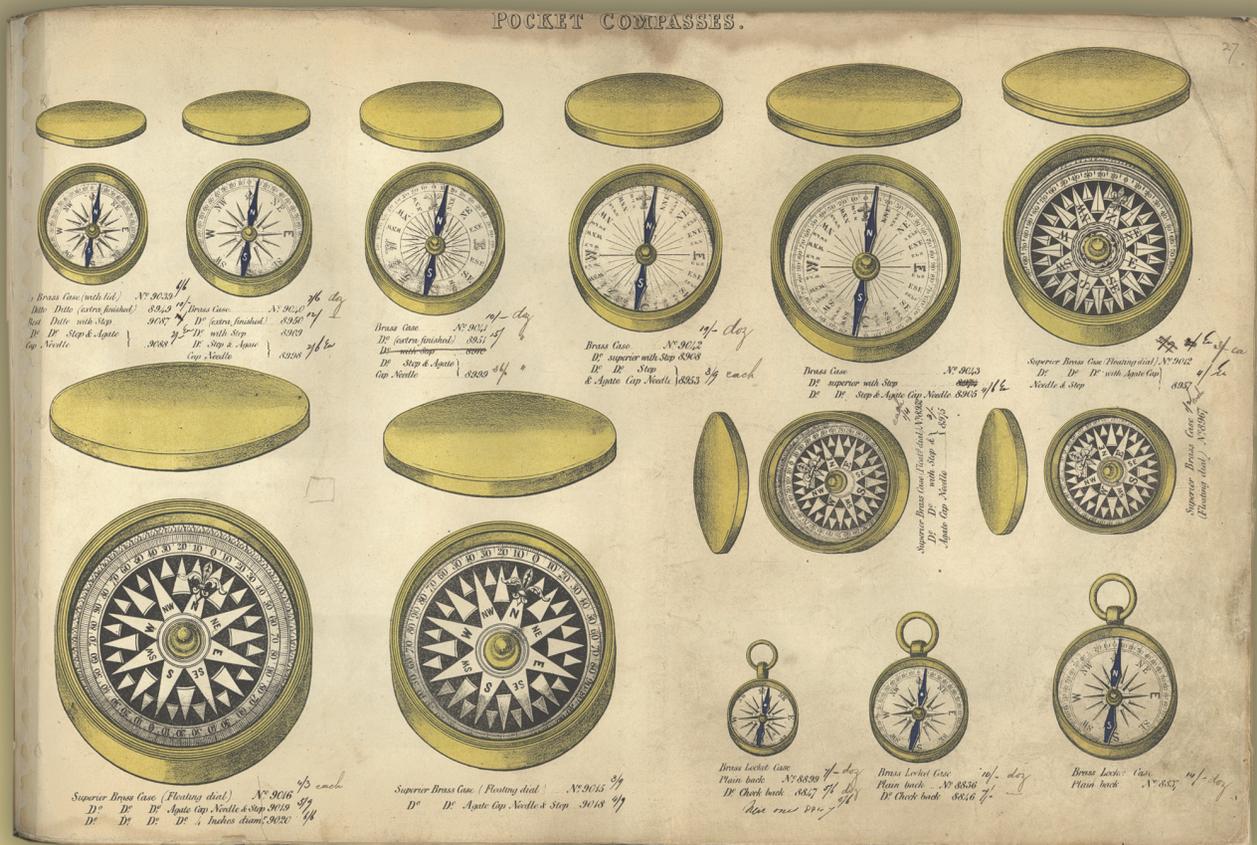


BIRMINGHAM BUSINESSMEN AND THE POLITICS OF THE BRASS INDUSTRY

Duncan Frankis

In 1866 W.C. Aitken concluded that 'what Manchester is in cotton, Bradford is in wool, Sheffield is in steel, Birmingham is in brass'. Historians have written about the key trades of Manchester, Bradford and Sheffield but the Birmingham brass industry has been a neglected subject. Brass, an alloy of copper, tin and zinc, was used to make products in Birmingham which were exported across the globe. It was made into fashion items such as buttons and buckles, musical instruments, everyday items such as locks and bellows, components for guns, and it could also be applied to naval vessels, primarily the sheathing of ships. Trading in this versatile metal became highly lucrative in the eighteenth century and manufacturers recognised the advantage of monopolising control of the industry.



Revolutionary Players/Library of Birmingham

Pocket compasses in plain, superior and locket style brass cases.

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The Beginnings of the Birmingham Brass Industry

Bristol dominated the brass industry at the beginning of the eighteenth century, whilst iron and steel were the core materials which were used by the metal workers of Birmingham from the early sixteenth century. There was a plentiful supply of iron ore in south Staffordshire and east Worcestershire. In the eighteenth century, Birmingham manufacturers, with their long and distinguished history of metal working, increasingly turned towards making brass items.

Metal manufacturing skills and techniques were passed down through the generations and could easily be transferred to brass working. In any case, brass was cheaper to work with and could be transformed into high-value intricate goods. Seventeenth-century Birmingham metal working had been based in small handicraft workshops, but in the eighteenth century the influence of Bristolian organisational methods began to be employed in Birmingham. Large brass foundries were established, the first of which was created in 1741 on Coleshill Street by the Turner family.

Bristol versus Birmingham

Excavation of sites in Birmingham and Bristol reveals numerous similarities between the brass manufacturing buildings, which suggests that Birmingham businesses incorporated many influences from their Bristolian counterparts. After 1741 more brass houses were established and a thriving brass-making and trading community developed in Birmingham. At the same time however, competition was emerging from continental Europe. As a result of increased economic rivalry and competition for, and from, foreign markets, tensions grew between the two great English brass manufacturing towns: Bristol and Birmingham.

Bristol brass families, such as the Champions, tried to force Birmingham manufacturers out of the market by patenting techniques and products. However, the manufacturers in Birmingham were not easily deterred and with improvements in the transport infrastructure because of canal construction, as well as a local co-operative effort, Birmingham began to thrive whilst Bristol struggled to deal with foreign competition.

Birmingham's Industrial Lobbyists

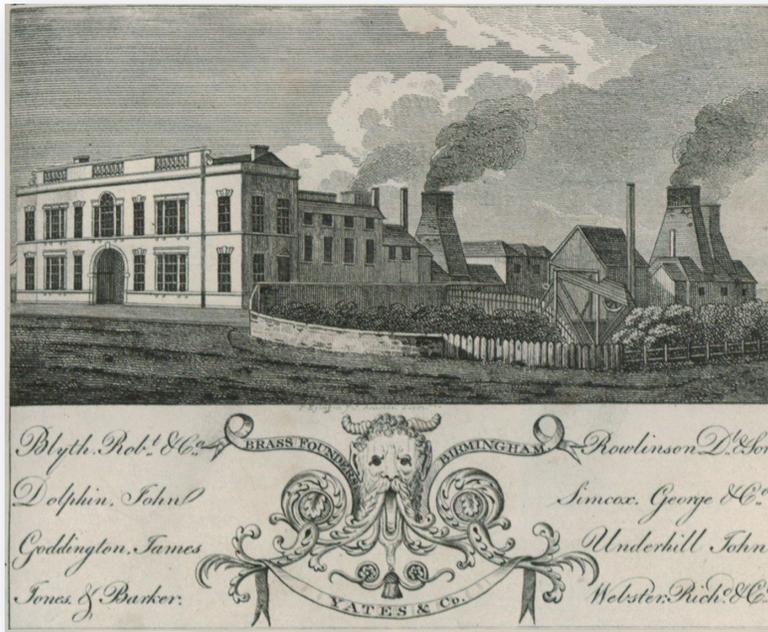
The success of the Birmingham brass community was due to the effective co-operation of local businesses, as well as the emergence of a politically conscious group of industrialists who used lobbying and networking to influence both the public and politicians, as well as to undermine their opponents. By the final decades of the eighteenth century regular meetings were held between brass and copper manufacturers to plan how best to safeguard their trade from external threats. Along with their development of a formal commercial committee for the town, the men who organised these meetings began to represent Birmingham and its interests, at a time when it had no MP in Parliament.

There were many figures responsible for the development of the culture of politico-industrialism within Birmingham, who came from all manner of social backgrounds. The meetings of the commercial committee and brass manufacturers included rich savants (thinkers) and working-

class fabricants (makers). The creation of this public sphere in which social status was disregarded, allowed a degree of inclusivity in which a variety of men could interact to frame a common agenda. The way in which the brass manufacturing community dealt with threats to their interests is revealed in correspondence, booklets and official enquiries located in the Boulton and Watt archives in the Library of Birmingham. The threats came from foreign competition and wars, trade restrictions

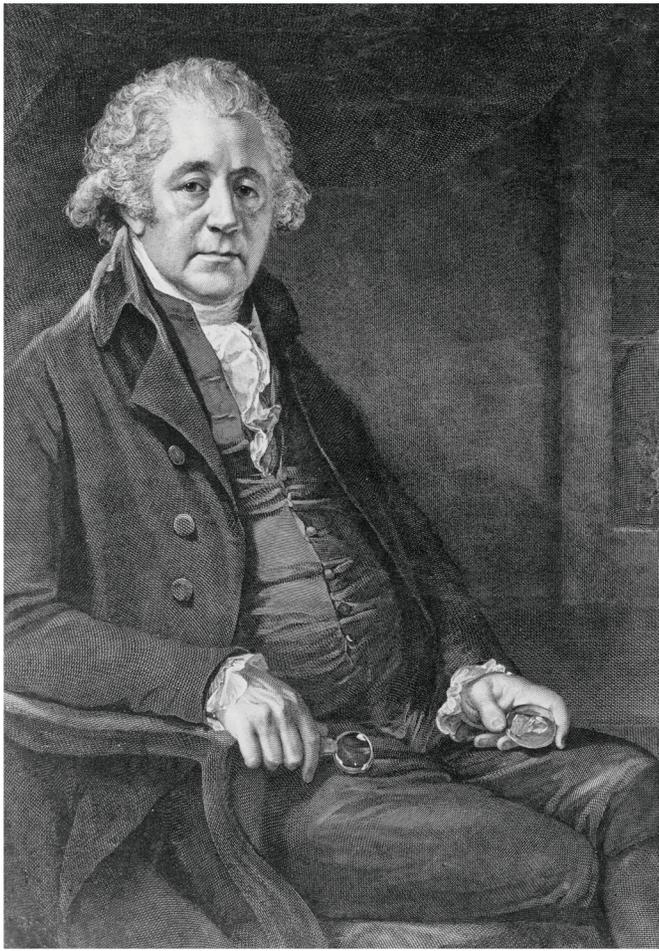
placed upon the industry by the British Parliament, as well as financial disputes with the Cornish mining community who supplied the Midlands manufacturers with the copper. Some of the famous names who helped to co-ordinate and mobilise the organisation and defence of the Birmingham brass trade were Matthew Boulton, James Watt, Samuel Garbett, John Wilkinson and members of the Galton family.

These industrialists were successful businessmen and innovators: Boulton and Watt created steam engines, and made money through minting coins and making luxury items. Garbett made significant contributions in the

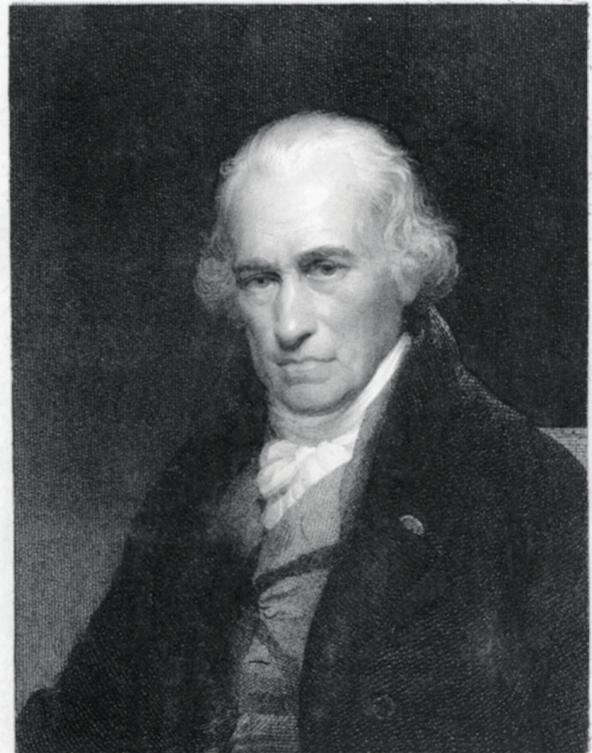


The Brass House, Broad Street, Birmingham, from Bisset's *Magnificent Directory or Literary and Commercial Iconography* (1808).

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Portrait of Matthew Boulton.



Painted by Sir W. Beechey, R.A.

Engraved by T. Wright.

JAMES WATT.

Portrait of James Watt.

technology of mass production, improving the process of making sulphuric acid and its containers. The Galton family manufactured guns that were sold across the globe and used in the wars in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as well as in the slave trade. Through their business connections and reputations, these men made fortunes and created networks of influence. They were able to affect national policy, especially when working collectively as a group. They all used brass within their businesses and had a vested interest in protecting the industry.

Methods and Activities

As a result of the American Revolution (1765–1783) the British Government enforced a number of restrictions on trade with America. The early attempts by Midlands-based industrialists in petitioning and lobbying against these trade restrictions were unsuccessful. As the eighteenth century continued, however, and their businesses and networks became more sophisticated, these men were able to enhance their pressure-group activities and thereby influence parliamentary decision-making more effectively.

At the turn of the nineteenth century brass manufacturing was a global phenomenon. Copper mines were established throughout Europe, South America and Asia, and metal manufacturers tried to gain advantages over their rivals. Industrial espionage was feared by the government of Great Britain for military as well as economic reasons. Birmingham had contributed to the technological innovation of sheathing the hulls of naval ships with brass and a concerned Parliament tried to keep the technique, and those skilled enough to implement it, within Britain.

They achieved this through restrictive trade legislation, which inadvertently proved to be the catalyst for other manufacturing centres in continental Europe to pour resources into their own trades whilst restricting the imports of Birmingham businesses. Birmingham workers suffered and many highly-trained and skilled fabricants moved to Europe where there were lucrative opportunities. French and Italian manufacturers in particular invited numerous Birmingham workers to join their workforce, in the hope that they would be able to teach the naval secrets that had given Britain a technical edge.

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Janet Sullivan

Parys Mountain, a copper mine in Anglesey, Wales worked by Thomas Williams.

The Parliamentary Enquiry of 1799

In the late eighteenth century copper prices fluctuated wildly, but generally they followed an upward trajectory. The high demand for brass products allowed copper mine owners in Cornwall to dictate their prices and threatened the profits of Birmingham brass manufacturers.

The threats to the industry led the politico-industrial elite of Birmingham to use their influence and contacts to promote their own interests. These contacts included Robert Jenkinson (who as Lord Liverpool became a future Prime Minister), his father Charles Jenkinson (a respected advisor of the King) and Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger. Through their links with politicians, the Birmingham brass manufacturers lobbied for change, to the fury of the Cornish mining community. This conflict led to a parliamentary enquiry into the state of the brass and copper trade of Great Britain in 1799.

The Birmingham manufacturers and the Cornish mine owners, led by Welsh copper magnate Thomas Williams, had publicly and unceremoniously clashed over the previous decade as the two groups fought for dominance.

In a political masterclass, the Birmingham industrialists exaggerated facts, twisted truths and created scapegoats to persuade the enquiry that they were in a much less financially stable situation than they were, and that the well-being of the entire Midlands region was at stake. Whilst much of what was revealed was hyperbole, the transcripts of the enquiry provide a compelling argument for how significant brass manufacturing was for the evolution of Birmingham as a town and the extent to which much of the population was involved in the trade.

Aftermath

As a result of the investigation almost all of Birmingham's requirements were granted by 1801, including their most significant demand for scrapping tax on copper imports, which freed them from dependence on Cornish copper mining.

There was a wider significance to these events. The Birmingham industrialists had become extremely influential within Britain and their products were found throughout the world well into the nineteenth century.

The trade, and those in charge of it, continued to be hugely important as the manufacturing elite became the leaders of local

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Brass nautical instruments and items.

By Triff/Shutterstock.com

social and political life. The Birmingham businessmen of the late eighteenth century laid the foundation for the prominent role Birmingham played in the industrialisation of Britain in the nineteenth century. Writing in S. Timmins, *The Industrial History of Birmingham*, Aitken concluded:

Its articles of cabinet and general brass foundry are to be found in every part of the world; its gas fittings in every city and town into which gas has been introduced, from Indus to the Poles – on the railways of every country and on every sea, its locomotive and marine engine solid brass tubes generate the vapour which impels the locomotive over the iron road, and propels the steam-boat over the ocean wave – its yellow metal bolts, nails, and sheathing hold together and protect from decay ‘wooden walls’ of our own and other countries ships – its ‘manillas’, once made in tons, are the circulating medium of the natives of the Gold Coast – and its rings and ornaments of brass, sent out in immense quantities, are the chief decorations of the *belles* on the banks of the distant Zambesi. ●

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Further Reading

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