

VIVID IMPRESSIONS

VISITORS AND THE IMPACT OF INDUSTRY

Peter Jones

Most travellers carry with them a mental frame of reference designed to integrate new experiences within comfortable systems of belief. But there was nothing comfortable about the West Midlands as it stood on the cusp of the Industrial Revolution. The notion of the 'picturesque' provided no explanation of the awesome power of the steam engine or of labour division in the workplace. A visit to Birmingham and the Black Country came as a shock to domestic and foreign travellers alike.



The industrial landscape of the Black Country. *Dudley* by JMW Turner, c. 1832.

© National Museums Liverpool (Lady Lever Art Gallery)

Birmingham: a New Type of Town

To the traveller of the 1770s and 1780s Birmingham represented a new type of town. Its novelty and power of attraction lay chiefly in its workshops where metallic consumer goods known as ‘toys’ (buttons, buckles, watch chains, snuff boxes, etc) were manufactured *en masse* for distribution to retail merchants throughout Europe.

In coming to Birmingham the visitor was promised a glimpse of the future: of a world transformed by labour-saving mechanised industry. A detour into Birmingham’s westerly hinterland (the rapidly urbanising Black Country) with its mines and foundries and groaning steam engines merely heightened the impact of the vision. In this ‘land of the vulcans’ connected to Birmingham by canals, turnpikes and a near-continuous ribbon of industrial cottages, it was plain that the Industrial Revolution had arrived.

What did visitors to the West Midlands, whether male or female, native or foreign, comment on? Almost all of them would recall the assault on their senses once the carriage doors were flung open onto Birmingham’s teeming High Street: crowds of men, women and children pushing laden handcarts in all directions, smoke-begrimed window panes, the acrid odours of filed metal, a cacophony of anvils and drop stamps.

A ‘Noisy Unharmonious, Smoaky Town’

Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742 – 1799), Professor of Physics at Göttingen University and an admirer of local printer John Baskerville’s handsome editions of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, travelled to the West Midlands in 1775 by way of Oxford and Stratford-upon-Avon. Unfortunately he arrived just a few months after Baskerville’s death. However, he was well received by the printer’s widow and shown round the type foundry. The two most vivid memories of his tour were the visit to Stratford, where he purchased a splinter of Shakespeare’s chair for a shilling, and the encounter with the comely Mrs Baskerville in a black silk gown. Birmingham, he said, ‘is a very large and thickly populated town, where almost everyone is busy hammering, pounding, rubbing and chiselling’.

John Bicknell, a contemporary author and publicist, agreed, describing Birmingham on a tourist stopover in 1775 as ‘a most noisy, unharmonious, smoaky town where the harsh sound of the hammer and anvil, together with the incessant clashing of pots, frying pans and coppers ... was the only music I heard at my arrival’.



Birmingham, a new type of town. *View of Birmingham from Bradford Street*, 1816. Attributed to Sir William Dugdale.

The teenage sons of the Duc de la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, whose tutor brought them to the West Midlands a decade or so later, likewise recorded mean houses with sooty windows wreathed in clouds of pollution – the smoke belching, as one German visitor put it, from a hundred and more chimneys standing tall like so many ‘obelisks’. These were not necessarily intended as unkind or critical remarks. Most commentators acknowledged the extraordinary vitality on display in the mushrooming industrial towns of the West Midlands. The La Rochefoucauld boys claimed that Birmingham in the 1780s had as much life as London or Paris.

James Bisset (1762–1832), a migrant from Lowland Scotland, loved the town for its raw cheerfulness and intense devotion to recreational activity – even on the Sabbath. With his Presbyterian upbringing, Sunday church services were quite literally music to his ears. Only later, in the 1820s and 1830s, does admiration for man’s ability to command nature with machines, albeit at the price of urban squalor, child labour and industrial pollution, turn to doubt and pessimism.

Whilst acknowledging the incessant, restless movements of a work force motivated by ‘the fear of wasting time’, as another visitor put it, Astolphe de Custine (1790–1857) insisted that everything about the district was ‘sad’: the sky, the air, the ruddy colour of the brick-built houses. If Birmingham’s inhabitants should happen to visit hell, ‘they would have nothing to learn there’.

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859), whose verdict was delivered in more measured terms, reported in 1835: ‘the town itself has no analogy with other English provincial towns. It is an immense workshop, a huge forge, a vast shop.’

Cultural Limitations

Towns that grow fast do not have time to build up much cultural capital and the West Midlands was seriously deficient in this regard. Even ancient municipalities such as Wolverhampton were overtaken by the all-enveloping effects of rapid industrialisation. In the second half of the eighteenth century that Black Country town’s active and enlightened professional elite found itself being swamped by self-made men thrown up by the booming mining and metal-working economy. Birmingham on the other hand had never had much of an elite to look up to.

As visitors repeatedly observed, it was not a 'polite' town. There were no nice buildings and few, if any, places where the well-to-do as opposed to the working population could disport themselves. Birmingham, like its fast-growing Staffordshire cousins, was a busy town not a leisured town.

Birmingham and its district was not a place where the printed word circulated very much either in the early decades of the eighteenth century. There were no established printers or stationers – a fact which encouraged the bookseller Michael Johnson (1657–1731), father of Samuel, to come over once a week from Lichfield and set up a market stall to sell pamphlets and works of literature.

Booksellers and Printers

Thomas Warren who was probably the town's first native bookseller started to publish a news sheet in the 1730s from premises above the Swan Tavern on High Street. It was shortlived, however, and not until 1741 did brummies have access to a locally-produced newspaper published at regular intervals. This was Thomas Aris's *Birmingham Gazette and General Correspondent*. Aris had relocated from London the year before in order to launch a bookselling and printing business.

We can take his move as evidence of the commercial opportunities that now beckoned in England's expanding provincial towns. In the same year James Jopson started up an advertising journal called the *Coventry Mercury*. Others followed suit, notably William Hutton (see Susan Whyman's article on page 8).

In the meantime John Baskerville (1705/6–1775), another migrant to the town, was beginning a career as a printer and letter cutter. In the 1750s and 1760s he became quite well known for elegant editions of Milton, Virgil and the Holy Bible printed on smooth wove paper in a typeface of his own devising. The following decade his reputation among connoisseurs of typography spread to the Continent. That decade also witnessed the appearance of the first serious competitor to Aris's *Gazette* when Myles Swinney who had trained in Baskerville's workshops launched the *Birmingham and Stafford Chronicle* in 1773.



© Birmingham Museums Trust

Birmingham 'toys'. Pearl and metal buttons made in Birmingham.



Blue Plaque on Waterstones to William Hutton who opened a bookshop in Birmingham.

James Watt (1736–1819), the steam pioneer and migrant to the West Midlands, never had any illusions about his adopted home. In 1783 he informed a Swiss acquaintance who was hoping to board his daughter with a local family that 'common English civility' could certainly be acquired in Birmingham; however, 'politeness must be learned in better company than this town affords'; in other words, somewhere like Lichfield.

A New Industrial Civilisation

Most of the industrial tourists of the 1780s came purely to see the button, buckle and pin manufactories, the jappanning works, the mines, forge hammers and rolling mills of the Black Country. Some were little more than day tourists wanting to gawp at the mechanical gyrations of Watt's improved steam engine, but others were perspicacious seekers after knowledge. They ruminated on

what they saw and drew conclusions. They even made sketches to take home with them and show to government ministers.

The other great 'secret' of the industrial West Midlands lay in the rolling, slitting and polishing of metals employing sophisticated machine technology. A Swedish traveller, Reinhold Angerstein (1718–1760) has left an unforgettable account of how this prowess was demonstrated to him on visiting a mill just outside Birmingham in 1754: 'one of the workers', he noted in his journal, 'asked me for a halfpenny which he rolled out to a length of 30 inches' – in other words, a wafer-thin copper strip.

Today, we read these visitor accounts for the factual information they contain about the history of the West Midlands in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is all too easy to overlook the psychological impact that rapid urbanisation and industrialisation must have made on a generation largely unfamiliar with either of these phenomena. ●

Dr Peter Jones is Professor of History at the University of Birmingham.

Further Reading

R. R. Angerstein, *Illustrated Travel Diary, 1753-1755: Industry in England and Wales from a Swedish Perspective*. Translated by Torsten and Peter Borg (Science Museum, 2001).

Peter M. Jones, *Industrial Enlightenment: Science, Technology and Culture in Birmingham and the West Midlands, 1760-1820* (Manchester University Press, 2009, 2013).

M. Letts, *As the Foreigner Saw Us* (Methuen, 1935).

Lichtenberg's Visits to England as Described in his Letters and Diaries. Translated by M. L. Mare and W. H. Quarrell (Clarendon Press, 1938).

P. E. Matheson, *German Visitors to England, 1770-1795* (Clarendon Press, 1930).