

BLACK COUNTRY HARDWARE, HOLLOWWARE AND HOUSEHOLD GOODS

David J Eveleigh

The Crystal Palace was made in the Black Country: the iron superstructure was cast in Cochrane's foundry in Dudley and Chance Brothers & Co of Smethwick supplied the glass (all 293,655 sheets) – but inside the Palace, the presence of the Black Country was muted.



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The Albert Lock by Carpenter & Tildesley, Willenhall.

Two massive slabs of the Staffordshire Thick coal from collieries in Tipton were displayed outside the western entrance. The largest weighed thirteen tons and had been brought up to the surface in one piece. However, the number of exhibitors from Black Country towns – despite its fame as an industrial area – was 68: less than the 230 from Birmingham.

There were 35 exhibitors from Wolverhampton, allocated across the 30 classes of material in the British section, with fewer contributions from Dudley, Stourbridge, Willenhall and Walsall. Whilst leading manufacturers were present, there were notable

gaps. Firms such as Salters of West Bromwich, famous for their weighing devices and roasting jacks, were absent. There were no animal traps from Wednesfield – and the manufacture of edge tools, an important Black Country industry, was represented by just one maker from Stourbridge.

Hardware and Hollowware

The Patent Shaft & Axletree Company from Wednesbury were present with their patent axles for railway carriages and Henry Parks of Dudley exhibited an anchor shackle and swivel with a wrought-iron mooring chain. Jonah & George Davies of the

Albion Foundry, Tipton, exhibited a patent steam engine. There were vice and anvil makers from Stourbridge and Wolverhampton (but not Dudley) and displays of guns by two makers from Wolverhampton; an iron implement for paring stubble and turf made in Brierley Hill and various items of saddlery, stirrups and spurs supplied by six firms from Walsall.

For the *Official Illustrated Catalogue of the Exhibition*, Birmingham was the 'metropolis for hardware', but it acknowledged that some types of hardware were also 'vigorously pushed' at Wolverhampton and Walsall and almost half the Black Country displays were located in Class 22 – General Hardware, including Locks and Grates – one of the largest categories of the British section.

Two of the region's leading iron founders, Archibald Kenrick & Sons of West Bromwich and T & C Clark of Wolverhampton, supplied samples of their goods. Both companies dated to the 1790s and were known for the manufacture of high-quality cast-iron hollowware or pots and pans. Both were also known for their iron coffee mills and Clarks' display of kitchenware included an ornamental box coffee mill and a crimping machine.

Pipes, Pans and Baths

Clarks were British pioneers of the coating of cast-iron goods with white enamel, which was fused onto the metal at high temperatures. Kenricks also became leaders in this field (patenting their process in 1846) and both firms came away with medals for their enamelled ironware. Kenricks' display included an enamelled tank and pipes which pointed to a future for this treatment of iron in sanitaryware.

The first Public Health Act had been passed just three years earlier and highlighted the need for cheap sanitary appliances for the urban poor. Enamelling the iron not only protected the metal from rust but provided a hygienic surface which was easy to keep clean: within a few years, Kenricks' catalogues were featuring simple enamelled iron WC pans and bath tubs.

Fireclay was another material which was to revolutionise the sanitary state of Britain after 1850. The pioneer was Francis T Rufford of Stourbridge, who had been awarded a Royal Society of Arts gold medal by Prince Albert in 1850 for his one-piece

fireclay bath patented the previous year. Rufford exhibited his baths at the Exhibition and this 'ingenious' invention won praise for its 'novelty and cheapness'.

Fireclay sanitaryware may have been cheap, but there were substantial practical obstacles in the way of successfully firing such articles. It was only from the 1890s that other leading makers such as Twyford, Doulton and Shanks entered this field: Rufford's achievement, therefore, appears all the

more remarkable. There were five other Stourbridge fireclay manufacturers present at the Exhibition and they displayed staple lines such as furnaces and crucibles for use in glass works.

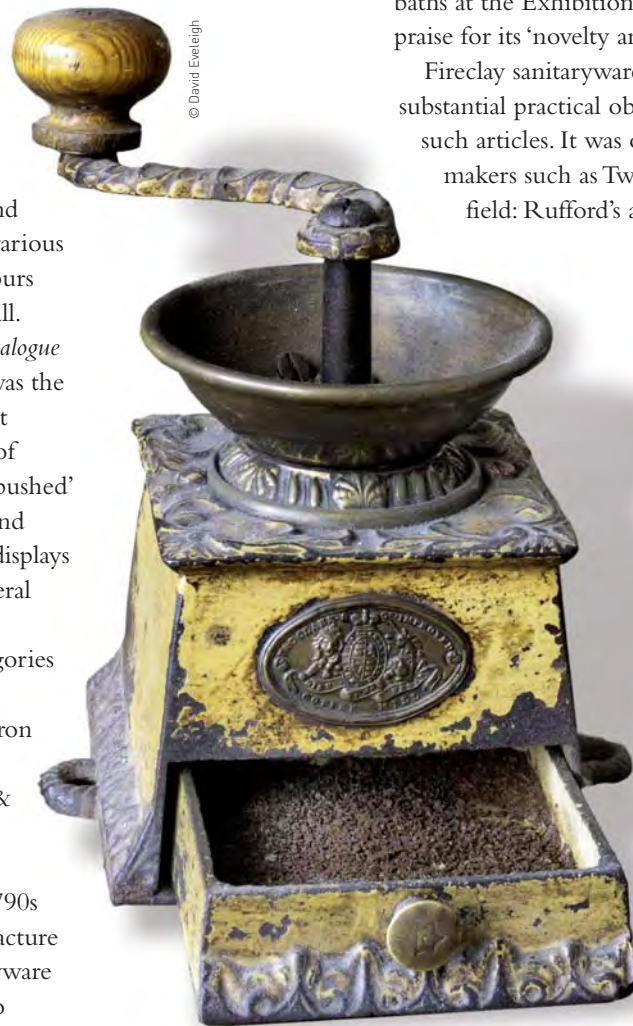
Household Goods

Whilst the potential for the artistic embellishment of pots and pans and fireclay baths was limited, other manufacturers brought high-quality design into the manufacture of mass-produced household goods. A brass chandelier with floral decoration exhibited by the Walsall firm Cowley & James was praised by *The Art Journal* for its 'light and graceful character', whilst their brass bedstead was awarded a medal. It also attracted comment from the journal for its simplicity and lightness.

Edward Hill of Brierley Hill exhibited iron bedsteads, and other domestic articles included a display of fenders and fire irons by Harper & Son of Dudley – a particular speciality of the town.

Household goods made of japanned ware – that is, of tinned and varnished sheet iron or *papier mâché* – were on display from three leading makers in Wolverhampton where the trade had been established in the 1760s. Henry Fearncombe's display included portable washstands, dish covers, tea trays, tea caddies and coal boxes. One was wrought as a magnificent nautilus set on a piece of coral with a sea horse for the lid handle: of this *The Art Journal* wrote lavishly of its 'novelty and beauty'.

Edward Perry built up one of the largest tinsplate and japanning concerns in Wolverhampton from 1827. His japanned ware was awarded a medal and included another three coal scuttles which caused *The Art Journal* to reflect that art has the power to 'confer dignity' to things of little importance. The stand of Shoolbred, Loveridge & Shoolbred included *papier mâché* trays, shower and hip baths, wine coolers, dish covers, a patent coffee pot – and more coal scuttles.



A cast-iron box coffee mill by T & C Clark, Wolverhampton.

Glass

Glass was arranged as a distinct class of exhibits. There were four Stourbridge makers and Chance Brothers & Co., who displayed preparations of soda and magnesia. Robert Lucas Chance introduced the manufacture of rolled-plate glass to Britain in 1832, which made possible the manufacture of large sheets of window glass. Chance also had displays elsewhere in the Exhibition of lighthouse glass and painted and enamelled window glass in the Gothic style.

The Stourbridge makers contributed a glittering display of highly ornate cut and coloured glass for which Stourbridge was acquiring a reputation. W H B & J Richardson of the Wordsley Flint Glass Works, who were awarded a medal, exhibited decanters, wine glasses, vases and other wares variously of cut and plain crystal, crystal cased with ruby glass and glassware painted in enamel colours.

Thomas Webb who had established his business at Platt's Glass Works, Amblecote in 1837, exhibited a wide range of table and decorative glass and won a medal for cut glass. The stand of Davies Greathead & Green included lustres with ruby and flint glass drops and – according to the Exhibition Catalogue – ‘a great variety of ornamental vases, white, opal, frosted, mazareen blue and topaz, painted enamelled, cut and engraved’. Their cut and coloured glass was also deemed worthy of a medal.

Locks

Returning to Class 22, the locks displayed by Black Country makers highlighted one of the oldest and most successful specialised metal ware trades of the region. There were thirteen Black Country lock makers present but as a further indication of

the random nature of the Exhibition, only three were from Willenhall, the undisputed world centre of lock making; the other ten came from Wolverhampton.

Two exhibitors – both medal winners – stood out from the crowd. Carpenter & Tildesley of Willenhall produced The Albert Lock, an elaborate and exquisitely finished rim lock containing

wards, levers and a Bramah mechanism (Joseph Bramah was a late-eighteenth-century London lock maker and inventor). This was displayed along with other patent locks.

The stand of Charles Aubin of Wolverhampton included a display showing the rise and progress of the art of making locks, but the crowning glory of their display was the magnificent Aubin Lock Trophy. Resembling a wedding cake in its tiered construction, it consisted of 43 separate locks, each of which could be operated individually or simultaneously with a single lever arm.

Both firms were awarded medals and both the Albert Lock and the Aubin Lock Trophy survive as icons of the Black Country at the mid-point of the nineteenth century, when its manufactures were entering the world stage. ●



Enamelled cast-iron WC pans of the 'hopper' type from a Kenrick catalogue, c 1870

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Further Reading

Jeffrey A. Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851* (Yale University Press, 1999).

Illustrated Catalogue of the Industry of all Nations (Art Journal, 1851).

Michael Leapman, *The World for a Shilling* (Headline, 2001).

The Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of The Great Exhibition, vols. 2 and 3 (Spicer Brothers, 1851).