

# ‘THE ONLY PRIZE MEDAL FOR CUT NAILS’

Guy Sjögren

Many Birmingham industrialists entered exhibits for the Great Exhibition, though not all achieved the recognition they sought. One manufacturer who did, however, was John Reynolds, a maker of machine-cut nails at a small factory in Aston’s Newtown Row.

Awarded the only Prize Medal for his exhibit, Reynolds constantly reminded both competitors and customers alike of his unique achievement.

**B**irmingham! The very name has a metallic ring!’ So wrote a somewhat over-imaginative sketch writer in an 1863 edition of the *Birmingham Daily Post*. Over-imaginative he might have been, yet nineteenth-century Birmingham was, of course, the ‘city of a thousand trades’, and many of those trades were occupied with the manufacture of metal products: products ranging from buttons to bayonets, pen nibs to police whistles and candlesticks to cut nails.

Whilst the candlesticks produced in Birmingham were often items of exquisite craftsmanship, the same could hardly be said about the many millions of nails that were produced weekly in Birmingham’s steam-powered nail manufactories from the 1840s onwards.

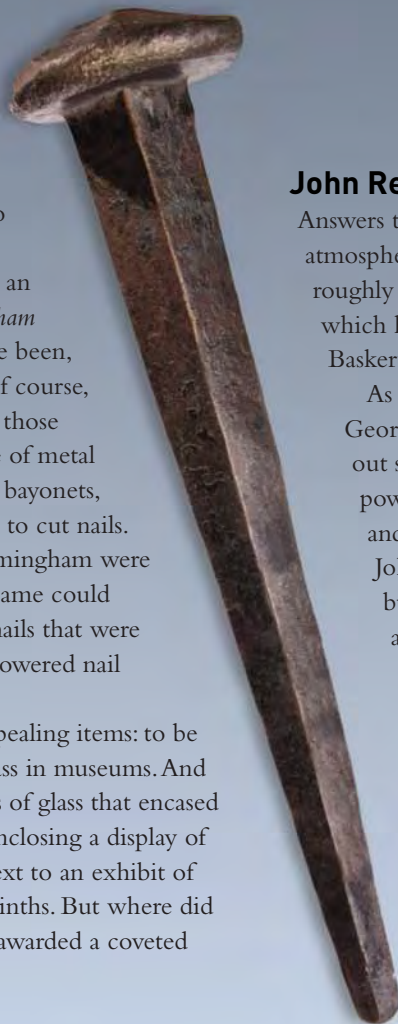
Nails are simple, unglamorous and unappealing items: to be found in ironmongers but rarely behind glass in museums. And yet, in the summer of 1851, under the acres of glass that encased the Great Exhibition, there was a cabinet enclosing a display of machine-cut nails, placed incongruously next to an exhibit of root-glasses containing wax models of hyacinths. But where did this exhibit originate from and why was it awarded a coveted Prize Medal?

## John Reynolds

Answers to these questions have their roots in the noisy, smoky atmosphere of Attwood’s Mill which, in the 1840s, stood roughly where the new Library of Birmingham is now, and which had risen phoenix-like from the ashes of John Baskerville’s house, destroyed during the riots of 1791.

As was fairly common during the mid-Victorian period, George and Thomas Attwood’s copper-rolling mill rented out spare capacity, both in terms of room space and steam power. By 1847, in the company of some glass cutters and spoon polishers, a cut-nail manufacturer named John Reynolds was established at the mill. Reynolds’ business clearly flourished and, two years later, he was able to purchase his own manufactory in Aston’s Newtown Row.

When the decennial census was taken, on 31 March 1851, John Reynolds was recorded as a ‘nail maker master employing 16 men’. Thus, when Queen Victoria declared the Great Exhibition open on 1 May, Reynolds’ business was both young and small, but not too youthful and insubstantial to prevent his submitting an exhibit.



THE ONLY PRIZE MEDAL FOR CUT NAILS.



**JOHN REYNOLDS,**

MANUFACTURER OF EVERY DESCRIPTION OF

PATENT-CUT



**COPPER & IRON TACKS,**  
**NAILS, JOINERS' AND FLOORING BRADS,**  
**Clug and Coffin Pins, Gimp Pins,**  
 BUILDERS', SLATERS', COOPERS', & BOX NAILS, &c.,  
**CHUNK, CROWN, AND PHENIX CUT NAIL WORKS,**  
 NEW TOWN ROW,  
**BIRMINGHAM.**

An advertisement for John Reynolds' cut nails, showing the medal received at the Great Exhibition. Post Office *Directory of Birmingham* 1863, p. 53.

### Cut Nails

What are cut nails? For centuries, nails had been made by hand, notably in the Black Country. In 1811, however, machinery for making nails was introduced from America. Even if the technology was complex, the process was simple. Strips of metal were fed into a steam-powered machine, the nail shank was sheared off and headed, the finished product then dropped into a bin below.

Despite initial scepticism and subsequently outright opposition to the new method of producing nails, *The Times* noted in 1852 that 'cut nails have taken almost complete possession of the market'. Cut nails were five times cheaper to produce than their hand-made counterparts, and Reynolds' machines alone could turn out around twenty million nails per week.

Just as Charlotte Brontë had described the Great Exhibition as 'vast, strange, new and impossible to describe... a bazaar or fair as Eastern genii might have created', so another writer described

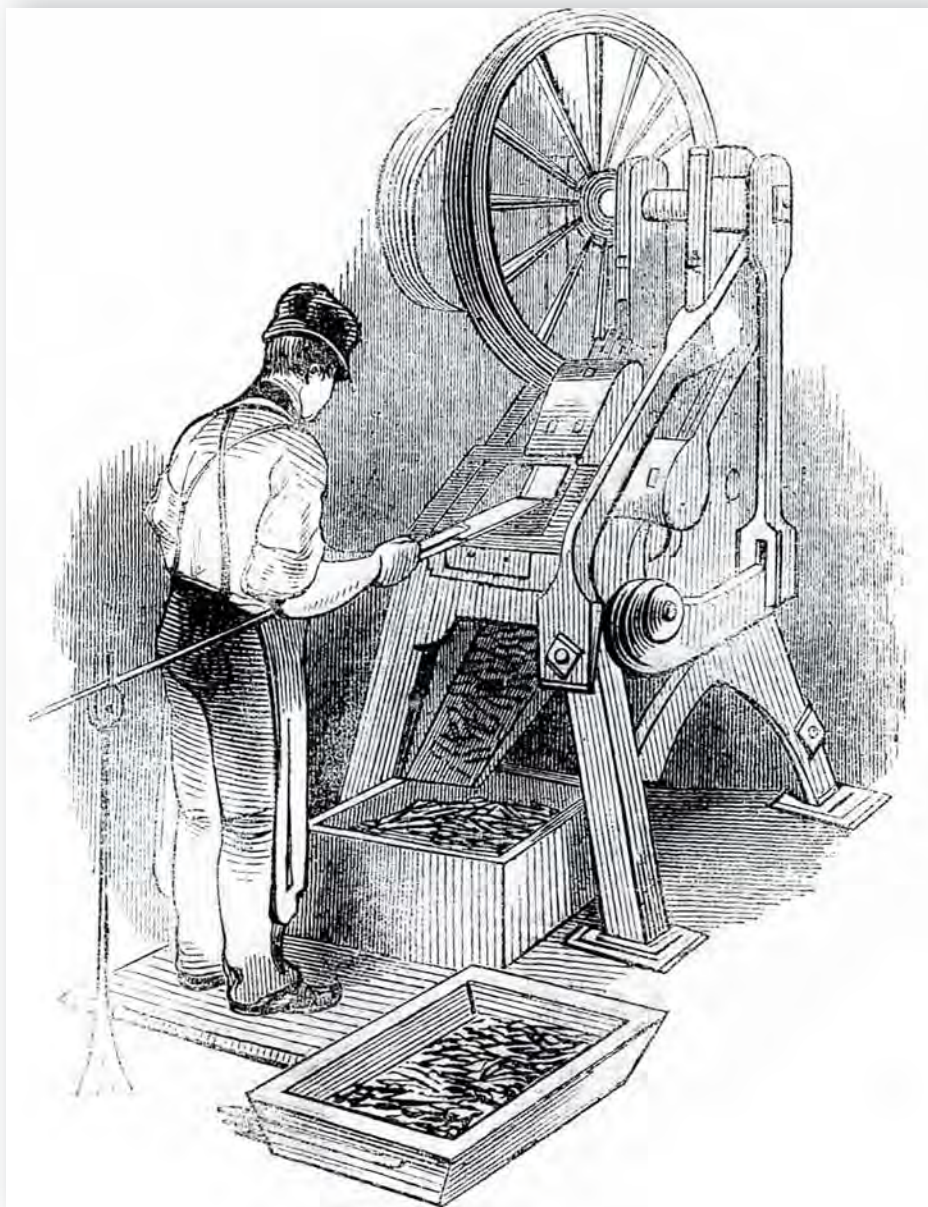
Reynolds' manufacturing process as having 'more the appearance of magic than reality'.

### The Only Prize Medal

The Reynolds exhibit was entered in Class XXII, 'General Hardware, including Locks and Grates'. Among other criteria, Prize Medals were to be awarded 'whenever a certain standard of excellence in production or workmanship had been attained [in terms of] utility, beauty, cheapness or adaptation to particular markets'.

As nails have no intrinsic beauty, the jurists must have identified other features of the exhibit as worthy of reward. According to the official catalogue, the display comprised 'a case enclosing a card of cut nails consisting of upwards of 200 distinct varieties of the most useful strengths and sizes'. One must assume, therefore, that the award recognised the quality, 'cheapness or adaptation to particular markets' of Reynolds' nails.





An early cut-nail machine from *The Penny Magazine*, Vol. XIII, December 1844, p. 50.

Whether the medal made any real difference to John Reynolds' business is, of course, hard to say. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that he was determined to make as much marketing capital from the award as he could. A full-page advertisement in Shalder's *Birmingham Directory* (1854) proudly proclaimed that he was the winner of 'the only prize medal for cut nails'.

### Reynolds and Later Exhibitions

When he exhibited at the 1862 International Exhibition, held in South Kensington, Reynolds placed an advertisement in the official catalogue reminding competitors and prospective customers alike of his prior success. He clearly considered that the award retained marketing significance for, long after the Hyde Park bonanza, his advertisements continued to carry the same brief but unequivocal statement about the medal. After 1851, international exhibitions occurred with increasing frequency, such that Reynolds found it convenient to avoid being specific about precisely which exhibition had awarded him the medal.

His display at the 1862 exhibition failed to win an award. On the other hand, John Parkes, a cut-nail manufacturer in Smethwick, did win an award and his advertisements duly announced that, on this occasion, he had won the only prize medal for cut nails. But there is a problem. John Parkes is not mentioned anywhere in the official catalogue of exhibitors.

Interestingly, a few months after the exhibition closed, *The Ironmonger and Metal Trades Advertiser* carried a report noting that 'it is regrettable that no legal powers exist to restrain non-exhibitors from making fraudulent use of the medals'. John Parkes was a reputable manufacturer. Nevertheless, one is left to wonder.

### The Legacy

John Reynolds retired in 1875, leaving the business in the hands of his two sons, and the business went on to win further recognition at subsequent exhibitions: Highly Commended for 'a small but good exhibit of nails' at the 1879 Sydney International Exhibition, and a bronze medal at the International Exhibition held in Calcutta in 1883. John Reynolds & Sons continued to trade until 1959, during which time Newtown Row resounded to the deafening clatter – if not the 'ring' – of nail machines. ●

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### Further Reading

G. C. Allen, *The Industrial Development of Birmingham and the Black Country 1860-1927* (Allen & Unwin, 1929, repr. Cass, 1966).

Hugh Bodey, *Nailmaking* (Shire Publications, 2008).

Samuel Timmins, *The Resources, Products and Industrial History of Birmingham and the Midland Hardware District...* (Robert Hardwicke, 1866).