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SOCIETY**



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## **EDITORIAL**

### **Broseley Local History Society**

The Society was originally formed as the Wilkinson Society in 1972 and was renamed in 1997 to reflect its main purpose:

*'the research, preservation and promotion of Broseley's unique heritage'.*

Meetings are held on the first Wednesday of each month beginning at 7.30 pm, at Broseley Social Club; and annual events include a summer outing, an autumn walk and a winter dinner. Members receive a quarterly newsletter and an annual journal. The Society's collection of artefacts is at present stored at the IGMT Tile Museum at Jackfield.

The Society has a web site which contains information about Broseley, copies of the newsletter and articles from previous journals. This can be found at [www.broseley.org.uk](http://www.broseley.org.uk)

### **The Journal**

In this issue of the Journal we present three main articles - a short history of our transmogrified society; an investigation into the shady world of industrial espionage and conspiracy in the late 18th century; and a detailed description of what is still to be seen at the Caughley China Works site. Letters relating to two of the topics in the last issue of the Journal, Shirlett Sanatorium and Le Creusot, are printed in the Correspondence section. Our thanks to Steve Dewhirst for designing and typesetting this issue.

Contributions for the next issue of the Journal would be welcome and should be sent by 31 August 2001 to the Editor, Neil Clarke, Cranleigh, Wellington Road, Little Wenlock, TF6 5BH.

## Beaumarchais and John Wilkinson - Strangers or Fellow Conspirators?

An investigation of some aspects of spying from the 1760s to the 1790s,

by Ruth Dodd

*Of the sources I have used in the preparation of this paper I am particularly indebted to articles in the Journal of the Wilkinson Society, Nos. 15 and 16 (Broseley, 1987 and 1988), and Wilkinson Studies, Vols. I and II (Merton Priory Press, 1991 and 1992), and to Ron Davies's study of John Wilkinson (Dulston Press, 1987). Beaumarchais' correspondence has been consulted in 'Beaumarchais et les Affaires d'Amérique' (ed. Jules Marsan, Paris, 1919), 'Lettres Inédites' (pub. Gilbert Chinaid, Paris and Baltimore, 1929) and 'Correspondances Beaumarchais' (ed. Brian Morton and Donald Spinelli, Paris, 1969). Other sources are listed in the references.*

It seemed at the outset that two such diverse characters as Wilkinson and Beaumarchais could have little in common — one a pragmatic manufacturer, the other a flamboyant playwright and courtier. But surprising similarities in upbringing and political attitudes (even paternal religion) emerge. Firstly, despite Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais' supposedly aristocratic associations, his name was in fact borrowed from some property owned by his wife. The 'de' was pure invention, but necessary for someone aspiring to hold a position at court. He was the ambitious son of a watchmaker, to whom, after a brief formal education, he became apprenticed at the age of 13. His cultured home background, particularly in music, seems to have compensated fully for this. Isaac, Wilkinson Senior, seems also to have provided a cultural background for his sons, not unusual in skilled artisans (as both fathers were), particularly Dissenters.<sup>1</sup> Isaac recounts how his pay was raised steadily until he realised his worth, and set up on his own. Consequently, John was not a semiliterate 'nouveau riche'. More significantly, both men were responsible for inventions which revolutionised their respective 'trades'. Few remember Beaumarchais for his innovatory watch escapement, the 'virgule' - a device shaped like a comma, which proved to be far more effective when added to the original escapement. It also proved to be very fragile and did not outlast its inventor in consequence. Wilkinson's invention helped to make him his fortune and his reputation as foremost Ironmaster of his time. He devised a method of boring cannon 'from the solid', in the same way as a wooden pipe, A. N. Palmer suggests.<sup>2</sup>

Their inventions had dramatic effects upon the lives of both Wilkinson and Beaumarchais. The escapement, or rather the inventor's complaint against the man who attempted to pirate it, brought Beaumarchais to the attention of the French King, and ended in his being appointed music tutor to the princesses. Wilkinson's air furnaces for blasting iron helped to speed the process of the Industrial Revolution, while his cannon-boring

machine resulted in the saving of many lives at sea. Previous inefficient methods had frequently caused cannon to explode on firing, injuring or killing the gun crews. This advanced technology put the French at a considerable disadvantage during sea battles, so Wilkinson, indirectly, could be said to have won some victories - before the French Government organised some successful industrial spying and began to catch up in or after 1776. This brings me to the major part of my theme and indicates that spying may have been endured more than practised by one of the two men - the industrialist.

Industrial spying was first initiated by the French. As early as 1764, a French engineer, Gabriel Jars, was sent to report on the 'improvements in metallurgy', which were felt to have assisted in France's defeat during the Seven Years War. His visits to British coal mines and metal works enabled him to take back - 55 years late - Darby's efficient process of smelting iron using coke. Within ten years, Wilkinson was able to cite the quality of French iron as a defence against accusations that he was shipping iron to France (of which more later). Further depredations occurred in 1775, when, according to a Report to the Government of Louis XVI (replacing that of Louis XV, whom Jars had served) not only had a certain Marchant de la Houliere had access to Wilkinson's reverberatory furnace, seeing for himself the toughening effect on the iron so cast, but he was also 'seized with the idea of bringing to France an experienced man' - head-hunting, 18th-century style.<sup>3</sup> Of course, John Wilkinson, not only 'eminent' and 'celebrated' but inventor of a new method of boring cannon, was Marchant's target. He had to satisfy himself with second-best - William, his brother. He set up a reverberatory furnace and cannon-boring machine at Indret near Nantes and at Le Creusot.<sup>4</sup>

In view of the fact that 1775 was the date of the Declaration of Independence, Bunker Hill and the meeting of the second Continental Congress, small wonder that Wilkinson earned Squire York of Erddig's soubriquet 'Wicked Will'.<sup>5</sup> It was three years before official French support for America was declared, but in fact, in the July of 1776, when William was installed in France, Beaumarchais was already delivering arms to America. He had visited some industrial sites while in England, apparently as a tourist.

Although both fathers appear to have been able men, the sons undoubtedly outdid their parents: ambition, perhaps spurred by the need to raise themselves above their comparatively humble backgrounds. There was not necessarily any snobbishness in this. Beaumarchais had no other chance of advancing himself other than through



John Wilkinson - Ironmaster

the French Court, and in fact it was through his skill as a watchmaker — he presented the Queen with a tiny watch he had made himself — that he introduced himself at Versailles. Wilkinson betrayed his pretensions to the aristocracy by adopting a coat of arms, although it could be said that this was merely a requirement of his position as sheriff and badge of his success.

The difficulties experienced by Dissenters in the 18th century were far greater in France than in England. To ensure the right not only to practise his trade, but to give legitimacy to his children (a Calvinist marriage was not recognised by French law), Caron was obliged to accept the Catholic religion. Isaac was free to send his sons to openly dissenting Academies. Dr. Rotheram's in Kendal in John's case, and later Dr. Joseph Priestley's at Nantwich in the case of his brother William. Prejudice in England was more invidious, however, a fact betrayed by a letter to Lord Kenyon, Lord Chief Justice, in 1790 written by a disgruntled shopkeeper.<sup>6</sup> He carped about John's connection by marriage with 'Doctor Priestly' (sic), and to the 'very large number of cannon' at

Wilkinson's Ironworks, Bersham. He finally points out that the workforce was paid with 'assignats', the inflationary paper money in use during the French Revolution.

These remarkable men, despite the diversification of their considerable talents, still had time to devote to political action and to 'speculation' or investment in various enterprises. Rather than 'Renaissance men', as they might have been termed today, perhaps Wilkinson and Beaumarchais were true Enlightenment men, keen to put their ideas into action. The aesthete and the artisan were (ideally at least) on a par. Wilkinson was praised by the Board of Agriculture of the day for his 'improvements' in the form of Land Reclamation. He and Beaumarchais were both highly imaginative, as their inventions (and literary output, in the playwright's case, on which, of course, Mozart depended for his better-known musical version of the original play) show.

Where investment was concerned, Beaumarchais and Wilkinson both had shares in the Perier brothers' Waterworks for Paris, a project embarked upon in 1778, a sensitive time for England and France, as the latter finally allied herself publicly to America. It is just possible that the two men met at a shareholders' meeting in Paris. Attitudes to visits between the two countries, even when unofficial hostility persisted, were ambiguous. Beaumarchais made several visits to London on clandestine missions; a French engineer visited Wilkinson's works in 1774; the Periers crossed the Channel in a vain attempt to see John Wilkinson. William, John's brother, was able to leave for France with all the latest cannon-boring technology in 1776, the year Independence was declared in America. Within three years, he had set up the latest cylinder-boring machine in France. Beaumarchais visited coal mines and 'manufactories' in Britain together with 'other places of interest'.

Wilkinson did produce the water pipes required by M. Perier, but more likely 6 miles than the 40 miles of pipe suggested by other sources.<sup>7</sup> It seems that the consignment was not sent in its entirety, however, as sections of pipe are sometimes turned up on the site of the ironworks, and many were reported abandoned on the quay. Echoes of the Supergun Affair of our own time (where a certain Gerald Bull produced parts for a vast gun to enable Iraq to take pot-shots at Israel) have been explored by James Pink in his article in *Wilkinson Studies* Vol. I.<sup>8</sup> The barrel was exported as iron pipes! There are various points in mitigation over Wilkinson's seeming treachery: one source reveals that Wilkinson did, in fact, export a few cannon to France, without repercussions,



Pierre Beaumarchais,  
Portrait by Jean-Marc Nattier

suggesting that, had he wished, he could have carried on with whole cannon. More important is the fact that any cannon France needed, thanks to Will's efforts, could soon be made in situ using John's inventions. What armaments were needed by America, Beaumarchais provided from France's armoury (from rejects). By 1777, the arms he shipped in are claimed by two sources to have been the cause of the American victory at Saratoga<sup>9</sup> a fact rarely acknowledged in the teaching of American history, even since Elizabeth Kite published her objections to the omission of America's debt to the French gun-runner.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, John Wilkinson condemns himself out of his own mouth in a letter to Watt where apparently despairing of successfully shipping the pipes to France, he uses the dangerous phrase 'unless smuggled' to evade customs.<sup>11</sup> This may have been an outburst of exasperation at the time it was taking to obtain the necessary documentation, but re-routing was suggested. He *claimed* to have found the experience 'A lot of worry for little profit'. His little cargo ships could never have coped with the huge loads he was accused of transporting, certainly.<sup>12</sup> Beaumarchais too had a tiny squadron – but his ships really did carry arms for the enemies of Britain. Interestingly, Beaumarchais made a remark so similar in sentiment to that of Wilkinson that it is worth perhaps quoting here: 'I exhausted myself with fatigue and

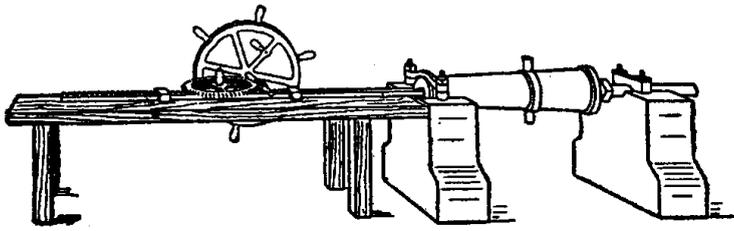
advanced little' (1779).<sup>13</sup> The contrasting extravagant style suggests the difference in character between the two men rather than the effect of translation.

Beaumarchais delivered his first shipment of arms to the Americans in 1776. Now 'Durand' or 'Ronac', the noms de guerres he adopted in an attempt to evade his pursuers (Lord Stormont, England's spycatcher, was already monitoring Beaumarchais' clandestine activities) paradoxically attended rehearsals of his plays! He organised 2,500 guns, tents and uniforms, 30 brass mortars, 200,000 lbs. of powder and 200 cannon of *poor quality*, according to Lord Stormont's report. Such a description precludes the likelihood of their being from Wilkinson's ironworks. Furthermore, John Wilkinson's first delivery to the Periers was made two years later. Beaumarchais' little squadron was headed by *Le Fier Roderigue* (re-named after his 'firm', or 'commercial house', Roderigue, Hortalez et Cie, a cover for processing the large amounts of money needed for his arms deals). His wife assisted him, though it is not clear in what capacity. Fischauer confirms that weapons had been purchased in France - from French arsenals, in fact.<sup>14</sup> Cynthia

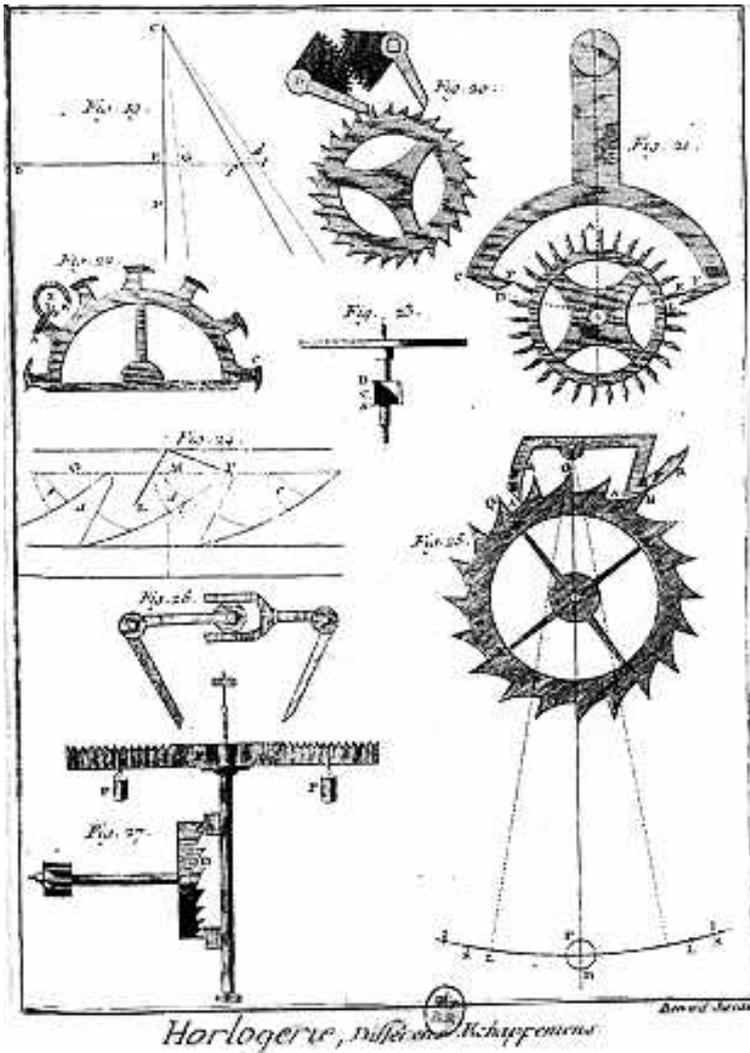
Cox also confirms this, claiming that the cannon actually had to be re-cast in order to obliterate the French coat-of-arms stamped on each!<sup>15</sup> They were paid for from his supposed 'contract business' to protect the French Government from any involvement. Beaumarchais signed with the name Roderigue, Hortalez et Cie, which caused him many problems when it came to payment by the Americans (in tobacco and sugar) later. The shipment left late in 1776 and arrived early the following year - certainly in time for that decisive battle of Saratoga of 1777. Another 5 million livres' worth of arms arrived in September of the same year. Biographers Cynthia Cox and F. Grendel assert that Beaumarchais' cannon, rifles and powder led to a turning point in the American campaign and 'weighed heavily in the balance.'<sup>16</sup>

It is strange that when Beaumarchais was on one of his many visits to London as a special agent acting on behalf of Louis XV in 1774, his tour of 'manufactories' bore no fruit. Perhaps he was indeed merely relaxing during complex negotiations.

Such tours of industrial sites were popular almost as Grand Tours were, though less prestigious; but it is a strange coincidence that Brigadier Houliere's investigation of Wilkinson's cannon-boring process occurred within a year of Beaumarchais' supposedly innocent little jaunt. Further, he and Wilkinson may have met over the Paris Water Project and certainly both had the Perier brothers as mutual



John Wilkinson's cannon-boring mill of 1774  
(from Dickinson, p.22)



Various types of Escapement  
(from Grendel, facing p.148)

business acquaintances. Marchant de la Houliere, in that Report to the French Government referred to earlier, used underhand methods to gain his information, admitting to awaiting the absence of the owners before getting 'on good terms with the workmen ... which usually succeeds', and was shown far more than he might have expected.

It is perhaps time that Beaumarchais' experiences as special agent in London were explored more fully, as he, unlike Wilkinson, really *was* enrolled as a spy by his

friend, Sartines, Minister of Police and spy-master, partly as an extreme measure to escape his legal problems at home. Not only did he prove highly efficient at the tasks set him, using his powers of diplomacy and high intelligence to achieve his ends, but he showed every sign of enjoying the whole business. Choosing 'Ronac' as one of his false names — an anagram of his real name, Caron - is an obvious example.

Gleaning information on the 'political scene' in England, Cynthia Cox claims to have been his 'real purpose' in London by 1775: certainly Lord Stormont was on watch in London as early as 1774, apparently in a vain attempt to prevent 'leaks' from such as the feeble Lord Rochford (no match for Caron!).<sup>17</sup> Significantly, Wilkes, then Lord Mayor of London, was a willing as well as more politically aware source than Rochford, although the latter was Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. Wilkes was in contact with the Sons of Liberty in America, no doubt revealing much of their information to Beaumarchais, and perhaps the origin of his interest in their cause. Stormont appears to have inhibited his activities in shipping arms from France eventually, but only until the Franco-American alliance of 1778.

He appeared to be concerned merely with French matters on behalf of Louis XV and later of his successor. Sartines had assigned him the task of silencing some troublesome blackmailers sheltering in London. The first was one Morande, claiming to hold the 'secrets' of the King's mistress, Madame du Barry. So successful was Pierre-Augustin that he soon had Morande informing on Angelucci ('Atkinson') who apparently had letters belonging to Marie Antoinette, queen of the new monarch. Again, he prevented a crisis, and went on to resolve the melodramatic situations presented by the Chevalier d'Eon, whose tendency to cross-dress was making him a thorn in the monarch's side, quite apart from his use of threats in the form of blackmail. (He was to remain permanently in 'drag' and was thus effectively silenced). As extradition of the offenders was sought, these early visits to England - based mostly in London - were permitted. Only when the agent's contacts extended to Rochford and worse, to anti-Establishment Wilkes, did he become a focus of attention. Had Stormont but known it, Beaumarchais first arrived full of a shared awareness of the humiliation of French defeat in the Seven Years' War, seen clearly in the letters of Louis XV. The desire for revenge seems

never to have left his subject and certainly lay behind his support of the Americans later.

That an Englishman could not only enter enemy territory — hostilities were on an on/off basis between England and France over a period of years — but teach them to make stronger cannon, does seem incredible, but the free access to all the latest technology at the ironworks meant that the French would have caught up one way or another. One source has it that not only was French iron adequate (by 1778), but France had her own cannon-borer: the Maritz.<sup>19</sup> An article in French by a Michel Decker claims that one was constructed by John at his own works, using plans drawn from designs by Verbruggen, sent presumably from France. The writer declares that an existing horizontal design was used and a vertical version had also been invented, it seems.<sup>20</sup> William had no need to take the Wilkinson cannon-borer to France, it would appear, as 25 Maritz machines were available. The writer provides much detail to support his view. The advances he does concede to Wilkinson are the re-smelting of iron in the reverberatory furnace he invented and his sand moulds. Against these arguments stands the puzzling fact that a French industrial spy was sent as late as 1775 to steal the latest method of 'casting excellent naval guns as practised in England' and that there was a need to 'head hunt' John Wilkinson. Quoted directly from Marchant de la Houliere's report to his Government, it seems to make a nonsense of Decker's assertions in D. Braid's article (Wilkinson Studies, Vol. I).<sup>21</sup>

John Wilkinson and Beaumarchais were very near contemporaries: born within four years of each other, Wilkinson survived his junior by nine years. The different circumstances of their lives obviously affected the actions of these two historical figures, their respective nationalities meant different laws changed the course of Beaumarchais' life in particular; but their respective personalities drove them in different directions, or at least gave them different priorities. Which of these pressures was uppermost, a psychologist might be able to reveal, but, despite his radical upbringing and probable sympathies, Wilkinson's love of profit and his position in society seem to have taken precedence. His letter to Watt, suggesting resorting to smuggling to evade tedious controls, conveys irritation at delays in carrying out the delivery of his iron pipes to a French port.<sup>22</sup> The tone of the letter seems to suggest that loss of payment rather than the wish to rebel appeared to predominate here. As he was enduring losses via English Press-Gangs as much as from attacks by French and American ships, perhaps his frustration is understandable! In a letter, he complained that he had lost three successive crews.<sup>23</sup>

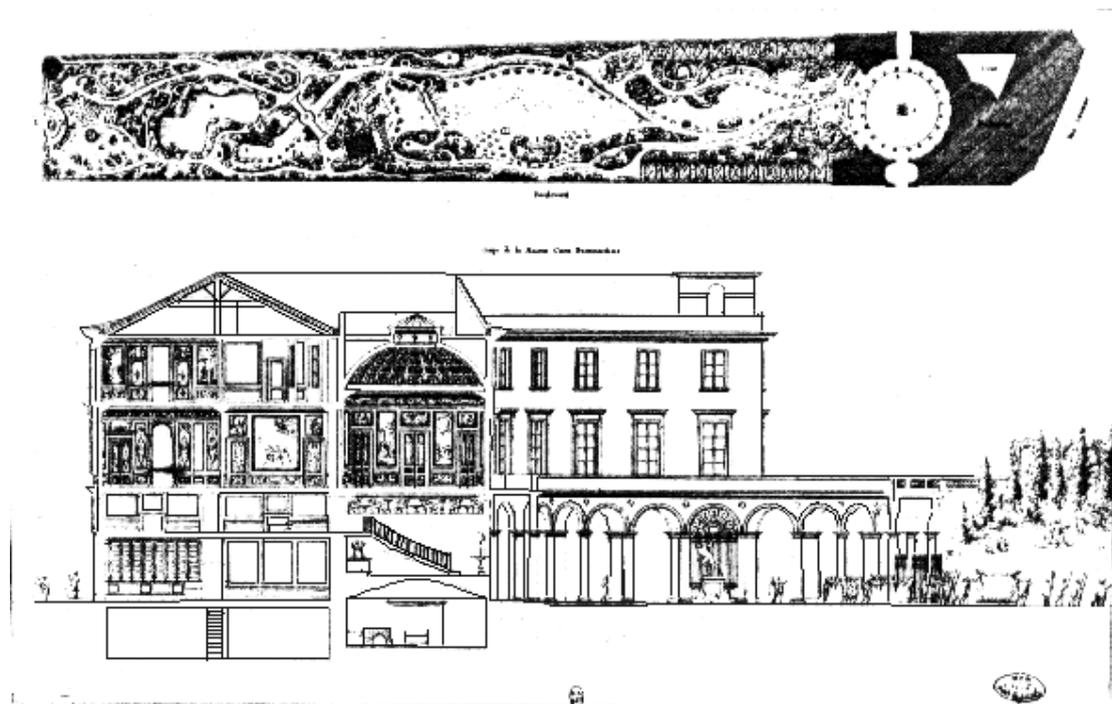
His acceptance of a position in the Establishment - even devising his own coat-of-arms — betrays either the need for power or for the useful business contacts it brought.

Dickinson concludes that he was more rebel than reactionary, emphasising that he held 'only one' post<sup>24</sup> It was a very prominent position, however, and as High Sheriff of Denbighshire he would almost certainly have been required to swear an oath of allegiance to the King. He also held a position in local government. It has been suggested that Wilkinson attended at least some meetings of the pro-French Revolutionary Lunar Society, whose members rode home from Birmingham by the light of the moon, as the name suggests. This must have been as late as the 1790s, of course, which does seem to lend some weight to the other view of the ironmaster.

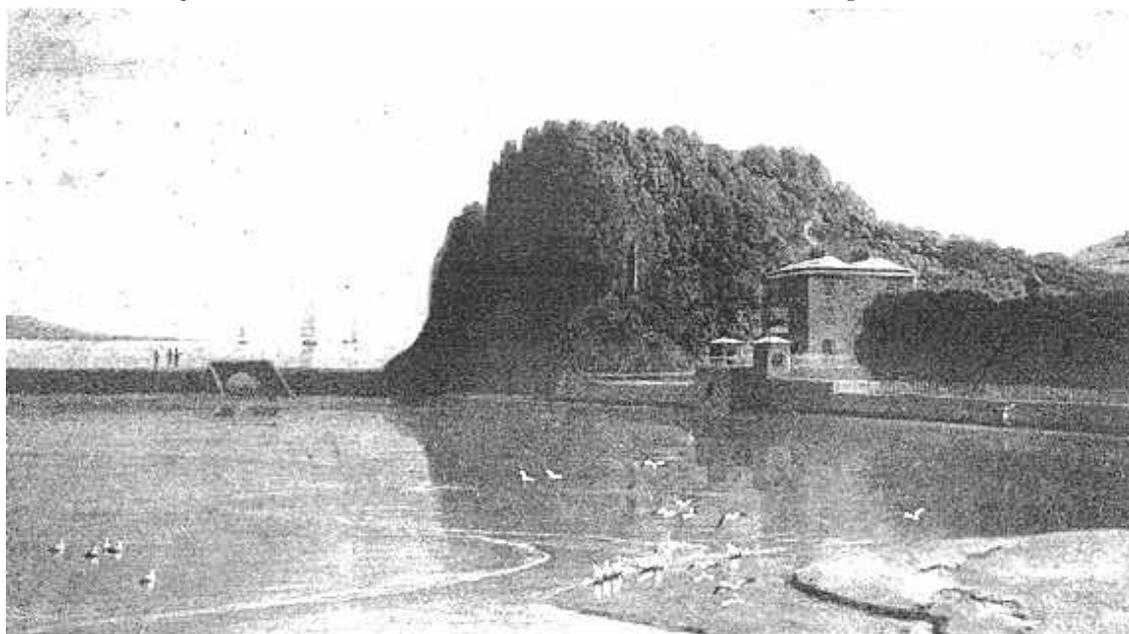
Beaumarchais' need to find a position at Court appears to have been mainly that — a necessity, enabling him to pursue his talents and act out his ideals. The 'de Beaumarchais' does appear to reveal the need to pose as an aristocrat; however, his introduction at the Court of Versailles may have been openly as an artisan. He presented the Queen with a tiny watch, run by his innovative 'virgule' escapement. Eventually, according to several sources, such was his influence that it was he who was ultimately responsible for the open alliance with America in 1778.<sup>25</sup> There is evidence to support this view. He certainly had great influence by the late 70s. He needed huge amounts of money for his arms deals, but his life-style was undoubtedly extravagant. He built himself a veritable palace, the talk of Paris. Wilkinson's mansion at Castlehead, though no doubt much admired by his contemporaries, could not compare, reflecting perhaps both diverse traditions and different personalities.

The different circumstances of their lives clearly affected the actions of these two historical figures; their respective nationalities meant that different laws changed the course of Beaumarchais' life in particular (beginning with his baptism as Pierre-Augustin, two saints' names in the Roman Catholic tradition). Ironically, John, with the freedom to choose, decided to conform, for the most part at least.

Their respective personalities drove them in different directions or at least gave them different priorities. Against his pragmatism, Beaumarchais' romantic idealism seems almost childlike at times. He took risks, such as that appearance at 'The Barber' rehearsal, taunting Lord Stormont by blowing his cover. Yet his ability to handle vast amounts of money and organise volunteer officers, arms, uniforms, etcetera, in time for the vital Saratoga campaign reveal his practical side. Initially, Beaumarchais became a special agent as a mode of escape, but while in London, he learned about the American rebellion and felt sympathy - or empathy - for any suffering at the hands of those who had humiliated France in the Seven Years' War. Official French attitudes to Huguenots may have increased Beaumarchais' ambitions, or his need to be accepted, whereas, although John Wilkinson undoubtedly encountered prejudice (the probable origin of the spy-cum-traitor rumours) he was nevertheless left mostly to his own devices. When his



An architect's drawing of the dream palace and *jardin anglais* that Beaumerchais designed and built a year before the French Revolution (from Grendel p. 180)



Wilkinson's mansion at Castlehead with the iron obelisk in the background. - William Daniell 1816. (from *History Today*, May 1951, p65.)

political enemies finally had him charged for illegally exporting cannon in the guise of cylinders in 1782, the case brought by Customs was finally dropped by Chester Assizes - but the export of pipes was stopped. His adoption of the French 'assignat' in the 1790s was also stopped. He was still able to support his brother-in-law, Joseph Priestley, forced into exile by Church, King and rioters who finally burned down his laboratory. John replaced his useless French shares with American ones, enabling presumably both Priestleys to survive in the New World. He was evidently prepared to rebel when it affected those he cared about most. It was 1799 when he became High Sheriff and put in occasional attendance at

Church. Perhaps respectability meant acceptance and useful business contacts.<sup>26</sup>

The circumstances of their early lives (including Isaac's open dissent), the brothers' advanced education (afforded thanks to their father's skill, which enabled him to raise the fees), and John's apprenticeship to an ironmonger. (an iron merchant in today's terms) moulded the first great ironmaster of the early industrial age. Of course, the timely increase in the demand for iron which came with wars and expanding populations had a dramatic influence on the iron industry.<sup>27</sup>

It has to be said that it was not unknown for him to supply both sides in a conflict, as in the Peninsular Wars! Suspicions become understandable in this context. However, there is no clear evidence that, despite the 'establishments' for manufacturing munitions set up on 'enemy soil', he also exported them to America. The French must have needed to renew their own cannon: they were obviously confident that they could replace the ones sent via the *Fier Roderigue* in Beaumarchais' small squadron to America. Perhaps the Wilkinson and/or the Maritz machine produced all the cannon needed. I have been unable to establish whether John and Pierre-Augustin ever met either at the cannon foundry, if the latter's industrial tour included it (for whatever motive), or even at a meeting of the Paris Waterworks shareholders; but I conclude that they were unlikely to have been 'fellow-travellers'. Wilkinson would exploit war situations, as mentioned above; Beaumarchais' motives in supporting America seem to have been more altruistic, apart from his desire for revenge against the British previously referred to. These men were obviously close contemporaries, but although both began as artisans and became highly skilled in their craft, Wilkinson retained his iron roots (while exploring many other fields, of course, in true eighteenth-century fashion). Beaumarchais left the watch-making behind him. Both would have seen themselves, or have wished to be seen, as entrepreneurs.

Wilkinson's treachery was never proved: a question mark remains over the cannon made on French soil, but the accusations are unconvincing, in my view. He was hardly a traitor by the criteria of the day. We are left with two fundamentally different figures - the romantic, seen as effete by Benjamin Franklin when he met Pierre-Augustin (in fact he was spy, inventor and brilliant playwright, as well as supporter of Franklin's own country); and the ambitious capitalist, keen to make his mark, also innovative farmer, mine-owner and inventor. Two men with many similar factors in their upbringing, but different destinies. Neither John nor Pierre-Augustin was afraid to challenge the Establishment or manipulate it, in the latter case. From his earliest years, Beaumarchais must have been aware that his father's success in his trade was due to formidable compromises he had been forced to make: his very legitimacy was gained by Caron's abjuring his religion.

Despite his intrigues, Beaumarchais is revealed as a compassionate as well as an exceptionally gifted individual, brought up in a cultured home, as was his contemporary. His plays have been discussed fully by those more competent to do so. More than one biographer has seen the playwright as his famous protagonist, Figaro.<sup>28</sup> The human side of John Wilkinson, evident in his practical concern for his retired workers and his ability to delegate responsibility,

suggests that the hint of arrogance in his portraits was tempered by a caring side. The Gainsborough portrait is significant. The fact that the fashionable artist accepted the commission to paint 'Squire Wilkinson' reveals that he had 'arrived' and confirms that he wished to be accepted. There was an image he hoped to present and it was not that of humble artisan and certainly not of a traitor. Boundaries could be crossed - in the name of business.

What would they have thought of each other? A casual comment of John's is most revealing: of the investors involved in the Paris Waterworks he is recorded as saying, "We have too many Dukes and courtiers involved in this enterprise which will, in the end, ruin it".<sup>29</sup>

These two were larger than life. They both played their part in changing history.

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16. Cox, p. 117 and Grendel, p. 197.
17. Cox, p. 113.
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19. Wilkinson to Watt, 17 May 1779 (*Wilkinson Studies II*, p. 71).
20. D. Braid, *Wilkinson Studies I*, pp. 35-37.
21. I find it difficult to reconcile these comments.
22. 17 May 1779 (*Wilkinson Studies II*, p. 71).
23. Letter to Watt, 4 September 1779 (*Wilkinson Studies II*, p. 72).
24. H. Dickinson., *John Wilkinson, Ironmaster* (Ulverston, 1914), p. 44.
25. Grendel, p. 198, Cox, p. 106, Fischauer, pp. 213, 215).
26. Palmer, pp. 26-27.
27. Dodd, p. 136.
28. Cox and Grendel.
29. Letter to Boulton, Jan. 1782 (*Wilkinson Studies II*, p. 73).

## Perfectly retired from the World - A Caughley Itinerary

by Stephen Perry

“Perfectly retired from the world, situated in the midst of woods and wilds, almost unapproachable to strangers.” So the art historian, Llewellynn Jewitt, described the setting of the Caughley China Works in 1862, and very little appears to have changed in the meantime! The main factory building has of course gone, but much still remains that was associated with the works. On April 1st 2000 the inaugural meeting of the recently formed Caughley Society, a porcelain collectors' group, was held at Coalport. There was much interest shown at this meeting in seeing the site, so I devised a ‘guided walk’ which can be followed either on foot or from the comfort of the armchair! This article is a revised version of that walk. The whole route, including optional detour, is just under seven miles, but there is so much to stop and examine that it won't seem that long!

For those not familiar with the subject, a brief description of Caughley and its history is perhaps appropriate to set the scene, as it were.

By 1751, a pottery, the exact site of which is in some doubt, was founded in Caughley by Squire Edward Browne, the landowner, who lived at Caughley Hall. The pottery was managed by Ambrose Gallimore, originally from Staffordshire, who renewed a lease in 1754 for a term of 62 years. Early writers suggest a family connection, but recent research cannot confirm this. Ambrose's wife, Ann, was the sister of the famous Josiah Spode. A coarse, opaque earthenware, little different from the standard products of the area was made until 1772 when Thomas Turner, of Worcester, entered into partnership with Ambrose Gallimore, rebuilt the pottery as a porcelain factory, and proceeded to make fine, white translucent porcelain at Caughley from 1775. It was almost entirely tableware, particularly teawares, and most was printed in underglaze blue, with a range of fruit, floral or oriental-style patterns. A superb collection is on view at the Caughley Gallery of the Coalport China Museum, which now includes the 331 pieces of the late John Brierley's bequest. There is also a small, but interesting display at Benthall Hall. Turner married Ambrose Gallimore's niece, Dorothy, in 1783. In 1799, Thomas Turner, sole proprietor since Ambrose's death in 1789, sold the entire works to his former apprentice, John Rose of Coalport, who continued production at the Caughley factory until its demolition in 1814. Many of the references give a more complete history of the development and decline of Caughley (and the two Caughley estate maps of 1780 and 1795 are particularly useful in this respect), but this article is intended to provide an insight into what still remains, which is much more than most people imagine!

The obvious place to start is from the Foresters Arms in Broseley, on the road to Bridgnorth. Start down Pound Lane, formerly Lampas Lane, to the immediate left of the Foresters Arms. On the left, at the far end of the garden of Ivy House and directly opposite the gates of the bungalow is the square shrub-covered pound, set at an angle to the wall. There was a pound here in 1620, but I can't believe

it's the same structure! The bungalow itself has an indirect connection with the Caughley factory. It was built in the 1960s to replace a cottage, still then standing on the factory site, and which possibly was part of the original 1772 building, and which was demolished to enable the site to be opencast.

After a few yards pass the new, and very neat, driveway of Dunge Farm on the right. To the far side of the house, near the old barns, was Priory House, the ‘fair dwelling house’ of James Clifford, Lord of the manor of Broseley from the 1560s. Built by 1608, only the house platform now remains.

The modern houses on the left are built on the site of the former Broseley Tileries, founded in 1832 by the Broseley ironmaster, John Onions Junior, and which closed in the mid 1950s. Most of the site was cleared in 1972-75 for ‘The Tileries’ housing estate, but a low brick wall can still be seen alongside the road, shortly after which was a row of four small cottages, recently renovated and converted into one.

The rough track, for that is all it is for a while, forks left after a short distance. About half a mile down the right-hand track was a small timber-framed eight-bedded smallpox hospital, built in 1903, closed in 1928 and which subsequently burned down.

In the trees to the right are the demolished remains of the former office block of the Dunge Tileries. Established by the Davis family in 1760, the company was incorporated into the Broseley Tileries in 1919.

Soon the lane comes to open high ground, giving panoramic views. The 1320 foot high Wrekin is behind, then moving left to right can be seen Telford, then the high ground and telecom tower of Cannock Chase, with Sedgley and Dudley straight ahead. Shirlett High Park is to the right. At the slight double bend in the track, to the right, and running almost along the line of the pylons, was Lampers Field, after which, presumably, the lane was originally named. The hospital would have been visible across this field, slightly to the left of the pylons.

At the point where the second line of pylons crosses the track, and along almost exactly the same alignment, ran the Tarbatch Dingle railroad. This was an early horse-drawn wooden waggonway or tramway, commonly known as ‘railroads’ in Shropshire. Built between 1757 and 1759 to provide a link from John Wilkinson's New Willey furnace the three miles to the River Severn, this was no mere ‘tramway’ but a substantial enterprise. At least some of the line was double track, and it was up to ten yards in breadth in places. Laid originally with wooden rails (each 6 feet long, 8' wide and 4" thick, with a trotting path between the rails) and using wooden wheels, the Shropshire railroad system was one of the first in the country, dating from 1605 when James Clifford was in dispute with his tenants over a wooden railway between the River Severn at the Calcutts and a pit in Birch Leasows, Broseley. By 1780 a large proportion of the



Caughley China Works and Sagger Works (from 1780 Estate map)

railroad system in East Shropshire had been plated with iron, following the introduction of iron top rails by the Coalbrookdale Company in 1767. Local historian and accomplished Coalport artist John Randall, writing in 1879 when he was 69 years old, remembered these iron rails on wooden under-rails being used on lines in the Caughley area. These iron railroads were surprisingly expensive to construct - a visiting Frenchman wrote in 1784 that iron railways were 'estimated to cost upwards of a thousand pounds a mile'!

Shortly before coming to the cottage, the original lane veered off to the left across what is now open fields. The present lane follows the line of another railroad, probably connected to the New Willey Furnace via the Tarbatch Dingle railroad. It is likely that this part of the line supplied coal from the Caughley mines to the furnace, whilst the finished goods would be taken down to the river for onward transhipment via the Tarbatch Dingle railroad slightly further to the north.

Approach what was the boundary gatehouse of the Caughley Estate, a distinctive ornate square-shaped cottage, originally called Caughley Lodge, but now named the Roundhouse! This is now the only part of the Caughley China Works enterprise still standing above ground, though its original role is uncertain. Built between 1780

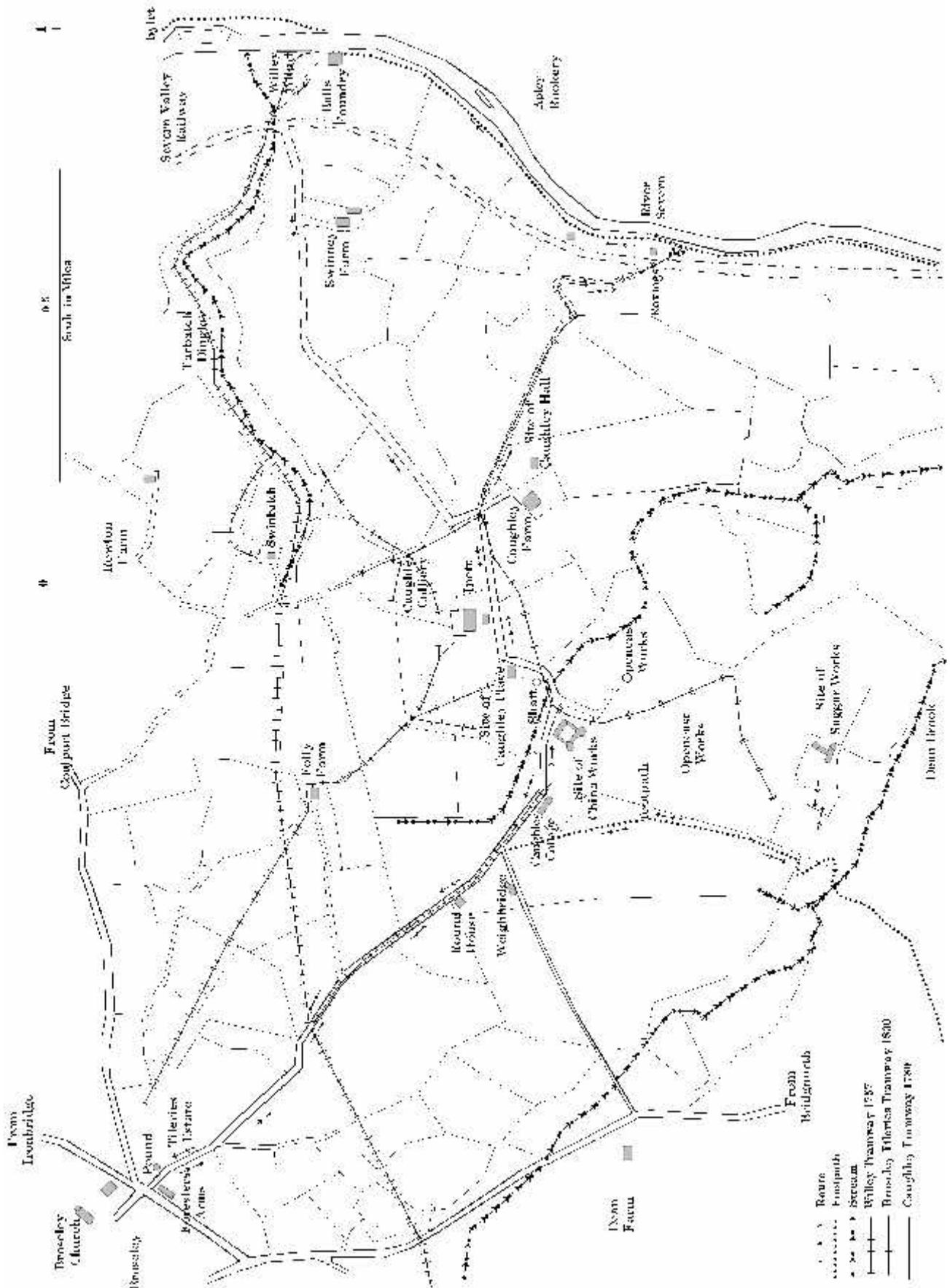
and 1795, the architectural style of decorative plinth of moulded brick, decorative quoins, pyramidal roof and blind windows repeats the motifs of the main works and of Caughley Place, the elaborate French-style 'chateau' which Thomas Turner, the founder of the porcelain works, built for himself, the sites of which we will come to later. Both the Lodge and Caughley Place were originally stuccoed, giving them the appearance of stone. For rainproofing purposes the stucco or 'Roman Cement' was given several coats of limewash, known locally as 'Lord Forester's Livery.'

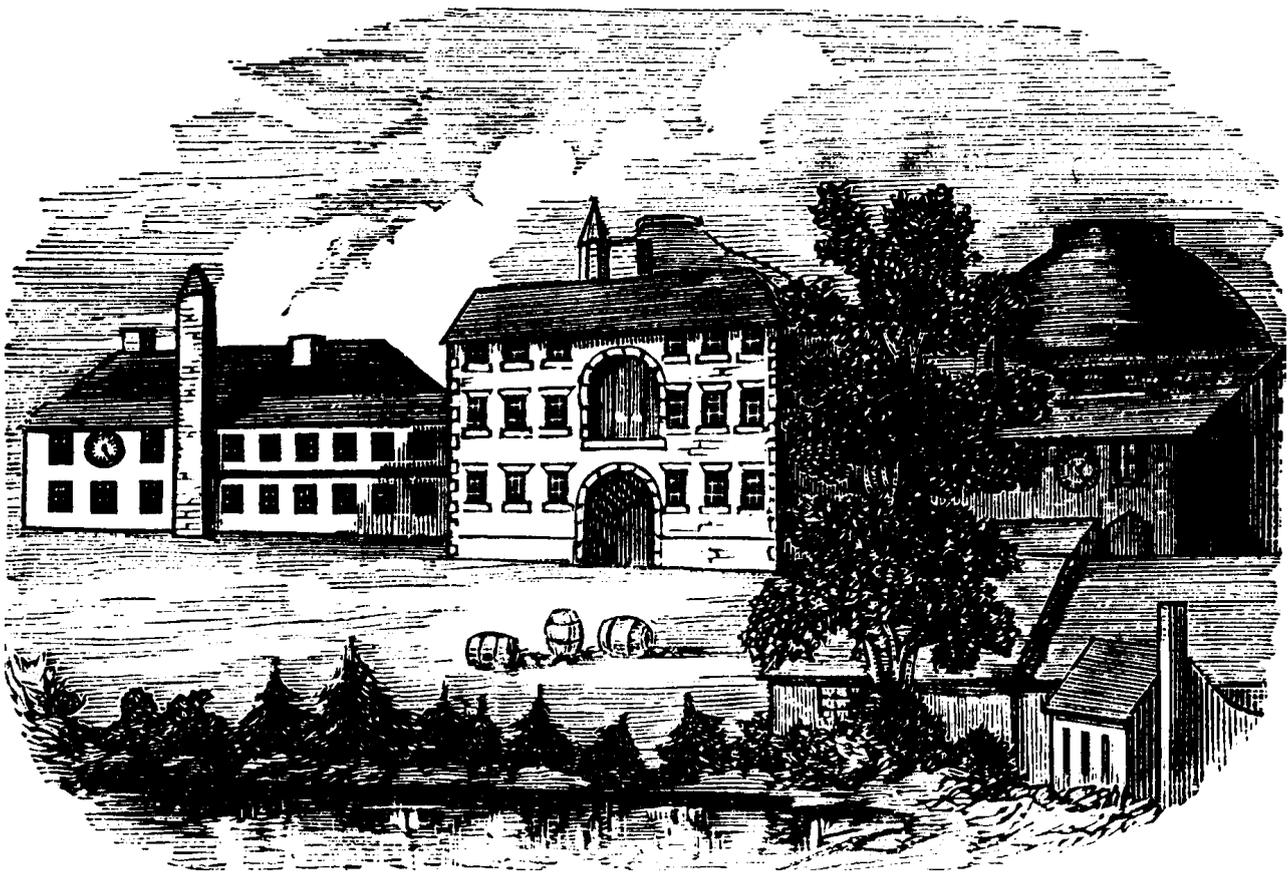
Local tradition has it that the Lodge was used to house prisoners during the Napoleonic Wars, which would explain the cottage's present name, since roundhouses were usually 'lock-ups' for prisoners, but the exceptionally tall chimney stack may provide another clue, for an enormous central fireplace

takes up about a quarter of the ground floor with the other rooms, possibly only one room originally, going round it!

The upper part of the factory itself would have been visible from this point, almost directly ahead. Proceed slightly downhill towards it, soon coming to a large open turning area for lorries with a weighbridge, associated with the current opencast operations. The weighbridge office is constructed of bricks made from the locally mined clay.

Just after this point, almost hidden in a gorse clump in the hedge behind the hedge on the right (yes-that's correct!) is a public footpath sign pointing diagonally across the field. This path leads south towards the site of the T-shaped sagger works which, before the building of the porcelain factory in 1772-5, may have been the Caughley Pottery, established in 1751 by Squire Edward Browne of Caughley Hall, and operated by Ambrose Gallimore. However, the current evidence is unconvincing, for in 1988 archaeologists found the foundations of buildings associated with kilns and kiln waste, evidence for the manufacture of saggars but not for pottery. Saggars are the thick walled, lidless fireclay boxes, of various shapes and sizes, used in the kiln to protect the ware placed inside. Sitting on an outcrop of fireclay with the coal just twenty feet below the surface, this was an obvious choice for siting a sagger works. In 1999, during opencast mining operations in the field to the north of the sagger works site,





Caughley China Works

(from a picture published in *The Salopian Monthly Illustrated Journal*, April 1875)

it was still possible to see the coal measures through which numerous vertical shafts had been driven. These shafts were all that remains of a scatter of 37 bell pits, the crescent-shaped line of which followed the outcrop of the coal seams. Difficult to date, these bell pits had been dug away by later mining on the clay outcrop, which can be linked to the saggar works on the site by 1780, giving a date before which working must have ceased. They may date to the early seventeenth century, when mining at the Caughley pits reached a peak. During much of the year 2000, horizontal galleries have been exposed slightly further to the north, through coal seams barely two-feet thick, the wooden pit-props still clearly visible.

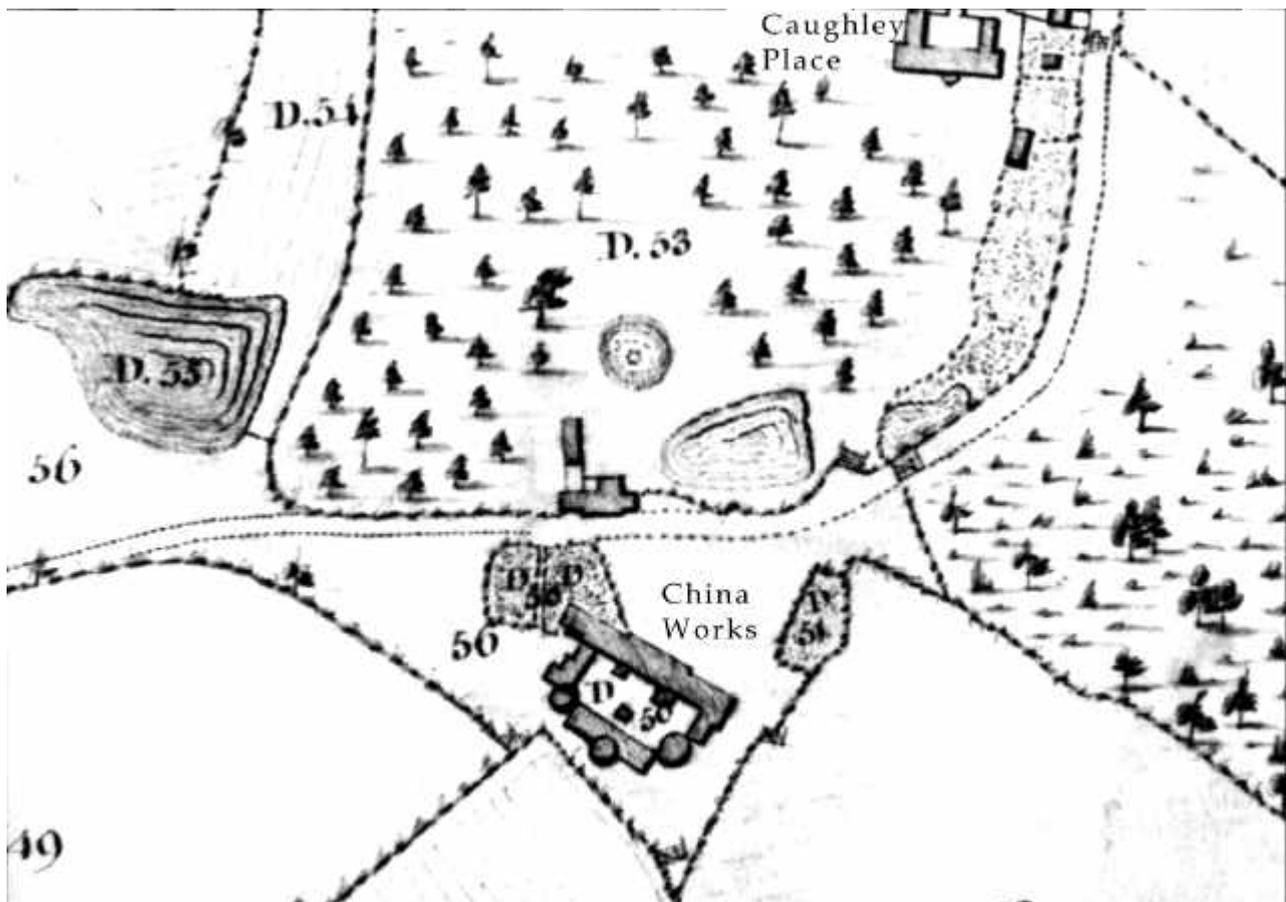
**The saggar-works site is on private land, so permission to visit the site should be obtained from the Willey Estate Office (tel:01952 882133). It is also simple courtesy to ask the tenant, Philip Morris of Honeypot Farm (tel: 01952 883534.)**

Those wishing to see the site should take this footpath, usually very obvious on the ground, to a stile in the far corner of the field, directly opposite an old barn, some half a mile away at Darley. Do not continue on the right of way which curiously zigzags its way ahead through the now abandoned hamlet of Darley, down the hillside towards Dean Brook and Honeypot Coppice beyond, but instead turn left, and, after a hundred yards or so, pass the remains of a brick shed. The saggar works were in the far, lower corner of this field, very close to the boundary line of the large open field beyond. This latter field,

cleared during the last war for pig-rearing and still known locally as the Pig Run, is pock-marked with old shallow clay workings. One 'leg' of the saggar-works lies along the line of the lower fence separating the planted area, with one kiln lying right in the corner of the two fields. The saggar works site was only clear-felled about twenty-five years ago, when, to the utter astonishment of the tenant who had no idea of its existence, the remains of walls and kiln bases was revealed. Though now covered with topsoil, much of the remains lie barely 2" to 3" below ground. Recently threatened from being opencast, the site is now protected. It is at the saggar-works site that the opening sentence of this article seems most appropriate - to me it is a most enchanting spot!

Retrace your steps to continue the walk.

Walk past a modern barn and grain silos to Caughley Cottage, recently rescued from dereliction. This cottage dates from after 1815, so could have been built of bricks from the main factory, just a few yards away. From here a track led to the Smithies on Linley Brook, its mills utilised for grinding the raw materials for porcelain manufacture, necessary as there was no power locally. These included china clay, soapstone and flint, though not bones, as used later at Coalport, since Caughley porcelains predate the development of bone china, introduced by Josiah Spode in 1800.



The site of Caughley China Works (from Estate Map 1795)

Continue on a few yards. To the left, the rough ground amidst trees indicates a shaft of Turnersyard colliery, still supplying coal by tramway to Broseley Tileries in 1883.

Continue a few more yards, stopping by the telegraph pole and tree, on the left. In Brook Field, to the left, can still be seen the faint imprint of the horse gin shown on the 1795 estate map. This is much more obvious when standing in the middle of it! Two small buildings, shown on contemporary drawings of the Caughley works, were just inside the hedge at this point. Close to the far, right-hand upper corner of this field stood Caughley Place, the highly ornate French-style 'chateau' built for Thomas Turner. Reputedly designed by a French architect who Turner brought back with him from France in 1780, together with other skilled French artists and workmen, Caughley Place was in the mid 18th-century French style with a projecting bow and a tall central feature surmounted by a mansard gable. Following the death of Turner in 1809, at the age of sixty-two, this too was reputedly pulled down by John Rose, in 1820, and moved to Coalport, but the recent Victoria County History suggests that in 1822 part of Caughley Hall was used as a Poor House. This is perhaps more likely, since Caughley Place does not appear to have been part of the 1799 sale. Either way, the house was gone by 1827! At the suggestion of Lady Forester, Katherine Clark, then an archaeologist at the Ironbridge Gorge Museum, and who lived at the Inett (next door!) conducted

a soil resistivity survey just a few years ago. This revealed the exact position and layout of the house.

At this point, a short stretch of holly in the hedge on the right of the road indicates the site of a little wicket gate through which a short garden path led to a gamekeepers cottage (the home, until its demolition in the 1960s, of Rosie Bingham), which is thought to have been the sole remaining part of the original Caughley factory. The site of the factory is best seen by walking on to the bend in the road, then doubling back to the right, and stopping at the gate. In the newly-restored field which, thirty years ago, was an opencast site some 70 feet deep, stood Thomas Turner's factory, latterly referred to as the Royal Salopian Porcelain Manufactory. It would have been facing the gate, about 30 - 40 yards in front of you and a few yards in from the inner hedge to the right. Built between 1772 and 1775, the works were built in the form of a hollow square; the main entrance was a large arch in the centre of a three storey building, with the same decorative quoins and hipped roof seen at Caughley Lodge. Above the main arch was another arched window, presumably for loading raw materials in to the upper floors. The buildings to either side, and presumably those to the rear, were plainer; to both left and right were two-storey ranges with hipped roofs, multipaned windows and each with a clock set into the facade. Three very large, fat bottle kilns were to the rear. The extreme right hand section of the original works is all that may have survived as a cottage, as suggested by

the brick recess between the two top windows into which a clock may have fitted, but, following the sale of the Caughley works in 1799 to John Rose, the rest of the factory was dismantled brick by brick around 1815 and removed to Coalport for building workmen's cottages and extending the works.

It seems an odd place to build a new factory, surrounded by fields on a hill above the river, until one realises that in 1772 this was a busy area; the coal-mines which Turner later leased were already well established, the network of railroads which linked the coal mines to the river were immediately put into service supplying the works and bringing imported clay up from the riverside. Turner also had to consider from where his workforce would come. In 1931 Caughley's population was only 48, and it was probably little different in Turner's time. Some of his 100-strong workforce apparently lived on the premises, but most would come from Broseley.

Retrace your steps back to the road, and ascend the short rise, from where, to the left, the 'beehive' cap of a disused shaft can be seen in Brook Field. (The adjacent wood-sided platform dates, however, to the late twentieth century!) This shaft, replacing the shaft to the far side of the field, seen earlier, supplied coal to the Broseley Tileries via a tramway in 1902, the line of which is still faintly visible diagonally traversing the field. It was in the underground workings of this shaft that a flanged wooden wheel was found at the turn of the 20th-century. It is now on display in the Geology Gallery of the Jackfield Tile Museum and is one of the few surviving artefacts of early railways still in existence. It is carved from a single block of elm, 9½ inches diameter over the flange, and 3¾ inches wide. The date cannot be fixed, but in view of the fact that the nearby Coalbrookdale Ironworks began turning out quantities of small cast-iron wagon wheels in 1729, this wheel may tentatively be ascribed to a date before then. It might possibly even belong to the 17th-century.

At the top of the rise, pass close to the site of Caughley Place which lay just inside the gate on the left (near the hay-stall) and follow the road round to the right to The Inett (pronounced Eye-net, not innit!) This plain brick house of three bays and three storeys, was probably built around 1790, when the earlier farm, 'completed but not yet fully furnished' in 1677, just to the north, was demolished. The Inett had no apparent direct connection with the Caughley factory, though Lady Forester believes the Inett was the home of Ambrose Gallimore, the former Staffordshire potter who managed the Caughley pottery from 1754, possibly 1751, and who later went into partnership with Thomas Turner. Ambrose died in 1789, so the connection must have been with the earlier Inett, the site of which will be more easily seen later. Ambrose had married Ann Spode, the sister of the famous Josiah Spode, and was clearly a man of some status - in 1785 he became Bailiff of Wenlock, as did Thomas Turner the following year, and as had Squire Edward Browne in 1747. A lease of 1787, however, (depending on one's interpretation) may place Ambrose Gallimore at Little Caughley, three-quarters of a mile to the south-east, close to the saggar-works.

It was in the extensive cow sheds and stable block to the rear of the present Inett that a large deposit of Caughley porcelain shards used as foundation rubble was found in 1992, during repairs to the stable floor.

Proceed about two hundred yards to the crossroads. The left hand track is the return route, so proceed directly ahead, along what was, by local tradition, the line of the railroad down to the river; indeed the track is known as 'the tramlines'.

**The remainder of this walk, apart from a short stretch by the river, is on private land belonging to the Willey Estate. Permission to walk the route should be requested from the Willey Estate office (tel: 01952 882133).**

To your extreme right is Caughley Farm, an early 19th century brick building slightly in the Tudor style and incorporating probably older stonework - and what looks like early 21<sup>st</sup> century uPVC windows! It stands on the site of the first Caughley Hall, a Jacobean mansion built early in the seventeenth century. Though no drawing of it has been preserved, the staircase was moved to other houses on the Willey Estate, part of the wainscot to Arlescott, and one of the carved mantelpieces to the lodge at Willey Park gates.

At the far end of the field to your right, almost always occupied by sheep, lie the grass-covered foundations of the new Hall, built in the early 1680s by the landowner of the Caughley estate, Ralph Browne. Later the home of Squire Edward Browne, who founded the Caughley pottery in 1751, the Hall was rebuilt or greatly enlarged about 1790, by the then landowner, Ralph Browne Wylde Browne, presumably with proceeds from the porcelain works and mining royalties. A plain building of seven bays and three stories, with a central entrance facing south, it must have enjoyed stunning views down the Severn Valley towards the Malverns, visible on a clear day. An adjoining coach house and stables, with pedimented front and gothic windows, faced west. All were demolished by 1833 following the sale of the estate to Lord Forester, who reputedly thought it rivalled his own Willey Hall too much! As at the site of Caughley Place, the foundations of this house are still *in situ*. The tenant, Gordon Ball, relates how in the drought of summer 1978, the layout of all the ground-floor rooms was clearly visible! The field, known locally as Caughley Lawns, was the former ornamental garden, complete with pond.

Just after the pond, a gap in the hedge on the left allows views of three churches. Almost ahead is Stockton Church, the estate church for Apley Park, restored in 1860 yet the chancel is Norman and the lower part of the tower 15th century. Half to the left is the Tudor tower (dated 1579) of Sutton Maddock church, though the rest of the church dates to 1882. But it is the church which lies some three miles away almost due left which is of greatest interest to the ceramic historian for it is in the churchyard of Kemberton Church that arguably the greatest figure in the field of early English porcelain is buried - William Billingsley. Born in Derby in 1758, it was while working as a china painter for the Derby Porcelain factory that

Billingsley introduced an entirely new style of flower-painting on porcelain, called the wiping-out process. It was a style of flower painting peculiarly his own, and led him to being considered the best flower painter of his day. As if that were not enough, he was obsessed from an early age with the desire to produce a superior English porcelain, his whole life and the happiness of his family being sacrificed to this end. After many unsuccessful attempts (and at other people's expense!) at Pinxton (in Derbyshire), Brampton-in-Torksey (Lincolnshire), Worcester, Nantgarw (near Cardiff) and at Swansea, he finally succeeded, and for just three years between 1817 and 1820 during his second spell at Nantgarw, Billingsley achieved, with almost no resources, a porcelain which was the equal in beauty to anything produced by the great continental factories of Meissen and Sèvres, both of whom had huge financial resources and Royal patronage to support them. However, by 1820 Billingsley was once more in financial straits, so when John Rose of Coalport, who had been losing customers to the Nantgarw factory, offered Billingsley and his son-in-law Samuel Walker a generous seven year contract, their acceptance was inevitable. Information about Billingsley's period at Coalport is limited, and authenticated decoration by Billingsley on Coalport porcelain for this period is rare, but it seems likely that he would have been at least partly responsible for the improvement of the Coalport body during this time and possibly acted as an instructor and consultant in decorating the ware. Billingsley died on 16th January 1828, almost unmentioned, and was buried two days later in an unmarked grave under the name he had used for most of his adult life, reputedly for the reason of eluding his many creditors, William Beeley. In 1948, Billingsley's biographer, W D John described him in these words: "*Without doubt one of the most talented artist craftsmen ever to have painted on English (sic) porcelain, and the originator of the most beautiful porcelain.*"

Continue along the 'tramlines'. This part of the route, in particular, is scattered with fragments of Caughley ware, both biscuit and glazed. The track enters the wood, following the line of the railroad on a well engineered ledge around the hillside, and dropping steeply (and muddily!) arrives at the disused Severn Valley railway line opposite the Malthouse at the Rovings. Look for the Caughley porcelain-decorated bird-bath in the garden and 'Caughley' collages by the garden entrance!

In very wet weather it will be easier to turn left along the line of the mainline railway, in which case, proceed along the line for about half a mile, then turn up a stony track on the left which brings you to Swinney Farm, and pick up the story later. However, much more can be seen by turning right, towards Bridgnorth, for some fifty yards, before taking the stile on the left, down the steps to the river's edge, the site of the Rovings wharf.

About twenty yards downstream of the steps lies one of Caughley's mysteries! A building is shown on the 1780 estate map, identical in size and shape to the 'upright' section of the T-shaped saggar works seen earlier, and only slightly altered on the 1795 map. At first sight it would appear to be an unidentified pottery, especially as there are

considerable deposits of saggars and kiln furniture in the vicinity. Other possibilities include a brick works, calcining kiln or malt kiln, though there are arguments against all three possibilities. Ambrose Gallimore is tasked, for example, in Jane Browne's will (Jane was the widow of Squire Edward Browne), with continuing with 'the brick and saggar works', though it is unclear whether or not this is one and the same building; Miles Taylor has uncovered what he believes was the malthouse kiln on the upstream side of his house (and has built an extension over it!); and calcining of flint would surely have been done at either the saggar works or the main factory, where there were five existing kilns. There must remain the possibility, however unlikely, that this is the former Caughley pottery, though this hypothesis too is contradicted by the terms of the lease on the main factory site!

No trace of a wharf or landing-stage can be seen today at the Rovings, possibly obliterated during the controversial construction of the towpath in 1800 by William Reynolds, it having been originally proposed in 1772 but subject to much opposition. This is where Cornish soapstone from Gewgraze, on the Lizard, bound for Caughley would be unloaded from barges onto small wagons or trucks, to be hauled by horses up the track by which we have just descended. From 1788, possibly 1786, Caughley porcelain 'in the white' would be shipped down from here to Chamberlains at Worcester for decoration, a journey that would take about six to twelve hours when river conditions were favourable. River transport was not very predictable however. The reliability of the Severn was actually deteriorating in the late 18th century, according to Thomas Telford because of the enclosure and drainage of water meadows in north Shropshire. In the 1780s there was usually sufficient water for traffic to operate through the winter, but in the summer there were delays lasting for months at a time when no boats at all could use the river. In 1796 only eight weeks of navigation were possible in the whole year. There was a boat-building yard here too; in 1796 a half-completed 70-ton vessel was on the stocks at the Rovings.

Turn up river, along the right of way, passing the former public house, traditionally kept by a bargeowner, which opened in the early 19th century to replace one further upstream, and closed during the 1860s. Enter open fields. Half way along the second field. (the first arable field) was the start of Willey Wharf, the site of its warehouse to the immediate left. It was from here, on July 6th 1787, to the roar of 32-pounder cannon, that what was generally regarded as the first ever iron boat was launched by the great Broseley ironmaster, John Wilkinson. He could not get wooden barges built quickly enough, and was increasingly resentful of the barge-builders' monopoly of trade. Constructed by John Jones. (John O'Lincoln), a blacksmith at the Willey ironworks, *The Trial* was similar to canal narrow boats of the period, 70 feet long, with a beam of 6 ft. 8½ in. It was constructed of  $\frac{5}{16}$ " wrought-iron plates bolted together, and weighed eight tons. It was brought down to the river along the Tarbatch Dingle railroad, which connected Wilkinson's New Willey

furnaces the three miles to the wharf. Wilkinson, ever the showman, probably planted hired agents among the crowds who had come from far and wide to see his boat sink to the bottom of the river, to goad them even further into disbelief. Then, at the very moment of truth, their scorn and derision turned to great astonishment as the boat, it is said, 'floated lightly on the water'! John must have relished the moment, for he knew the boat would float, having built his first iron boat some forty years earlier for use on Helton Tarn near Cartmel, Cumbria!

Continue along the line of Willey Wharf to Foundry Cottages, shown on modern maps as Ball's Foundry. Benjamin Ball leased the warehouse and land at Willey Wharf in 1816, and between 1817 and 1838 he leased the former Swinney iron foundry which stood to the rear of the cottages, on the site of a former public house of 1790. Possibly he was the Benjamin Ball who managed the Barnett's Leasow furnaces in Broseley from c. 1820.

By the depth-marker, the public right of way suddenly crosses to the other side of the river, indicating the site of the former Swinney ferry, though some locals suggest there was a ford at this point.

The island which lies just upstream indicates the site of one of the 34 fish weirs so far identified in the county, of which seven were in Benthall and Broseley. In fact, all islands in the River Severn in Shropshire are on the sites of fish weirs, most of them medieval in origin. The island, or 'byelet', is created in the river to divide the stream. River traffic could continue to use the barge gutter, but the other half was then blocked by a wicker dam into which fish could be funnelled. There is another very obvious example opposite the Bedlam Furnaces, once owned by James Clifford. One consequence of fish weirs was that they impeded navigation, so in 1575 the owners were ordered to remove or modify them. This disapproval was nothing, however, compared to that of the rod and line fishermen who, according to Hollinshead, ranked third among rogues and vagabonds!

The wooded river bank opposite, known as Apley Rookery, is part of the Apley Park Estate which extends downstream almost to Bridgnorth. Apley Park was formerly the family home of the Whitmores, one of Shropshire's most illustrious political families, at least one of whom was returned as MP for Bridgnorth at every election between the Restoration and 1870. It was for Thomas Whitmore of Apley Park, according to Chaffers, that, in 1780, Caughley made the first blue *printed* table service in England. One of the artiled engravers who assisted in the completion of this service, of the *Nankin* pattern, was Shrewsbury-born Thomas Minton.

Leave the river at this point, taking the track across the field to the left, which follows the line of the former Tarbatch Dingle railroad. Pass under the substantial stone bridge which carried the main Severn Valley line. The arrival of the Great Western line, opened in 1862, led to the wharf losing its importance, but rather too late to invigorate the economy of the region. It remained little more than a by-way but never a main line until after its closure in 1966 when the southern section from

Bridgnorth to Kidderminster developed into Britain's premier preserved railway. Tarbatch Dingle, so called because of its tar springs, lies ahead. The track to the right follows the line of the railroad, but beware of the deep culvert.

Take the main, left hand track, which soon doglegs past Swinney Farm and a small pond. Swinney Farm was the birthplace of brothers John, Richard and Thomas Rose, the founders, effectively, of what was to become the Coalport China Company. All three had been apprenticed at Caughley in their time, John reputedly leaving after a disagreement in 1793, to found the Calcutts China Works, in conjunction with Edward Blakeway of Broseley Hall, before moving to a newly built factory at the new town of Coalport in 1795-6. There is some doubt, however, that the present Swinney Farm is actually the same building, as sometime between 1683 and 1790 the names of Swinney Farm and the now demolished Swinney Hall (which stood on the right hand side of the track, just inside the gate and to the right) were reversed. It was, though, to the present Swinney Farm that Thomas Rose retired from the porcelain business in 1814, following the sale of his factory (now the site of the main building of the Coalport China Museum) to his brother John, who ran the factory opposite (now the Coalport Youth Hostel), together with the main Caughley works. However, on John's death in 1841, Thomas again appears to have taken an active role in the business until his own death in 1843. Their inscribed tombs can be seen at Barrow Churchyard, next to each other.

Continue uphill. At the left turn, look across the field directly ahead, with the Inett slightly to your left and the spoil heaps of Caughley Colliery to the right. Worked from the 18th through to the 20th century, and leased in 1825 to Thomas Rose, the colliery supplied coal to the Broseley Tileries via a tramway, the embankment of which can still be seen, running directly away across the field, passing between the two small rough areas indicating where a one metre seam of limestone was worked. The site of the limekiln is still visible, too, just to the left of the tramroad. Another tramroad connected Caughley Colliery to the Tarbatch Dingle railway.

Across this field, shown in the 1780 estate map as Yew Tree Leasow and originally much larger, an avenue of yews ran diagonally halfway, from the near left hand corner towards the far right, to near where the former Inett farm of 1677 was situated, close to the present hedge-line on the far side of the field.

Turn right at the cross-roads reached earlier, retrace your steps past the Inett, and return to Broseley.

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## From Wilkinson Society to Broseley Local History Society

by Neil Clarke

The following is adapted from a talk I gave at a Local History Conference held at the Shirehall, Shrewsbury on 4 March 2000.

Local history societies come in all shapes and sizes. This is certainly the case here in Shropshire where there is a wide variety of organisations and groups whose aims include an interest in the history of their locality. In addition to what we might call the traditional local history societies in many of Shropshire's towns and villages, there are the County-wide organisations such as the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society; most of the civic societies in the county have local history interests; there are also organisations such as the WI, the Townswomen's Guild and the Rotarians who frequently engage speakers on local history topics; and finally friends groups have been set up to support museums, libraries and record collections in the county. In terms of size, local history societies in Shropshire range from those whose membership is numbered in thousands, such as the Shropshire Family History Society and the Friends of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust, to the more modest numbers of groups, at Ellesmere and Cleobury Mortimer, for example.

The Society in Broseley illustrates another feature of local history societies - their ability to change. Our Society was originally formed in 1972 as the Wilkinson Society. Three years ago it changed to its present name to reflect what had become its aim purpose - the research, preservation and promotion of Broseley's unique heritage. What I would like to do is, first, to trace the origins and development of the Society and then to describe its main areas of activity today.

The original society, the Wilkinson Society, was founded by the late Ralph Pee, a member of an old Bridgnorth family. His brother, Ernest, was for many years curator of the Bridgnorth Historical Society Museum. Following a distinguished career in the RAF, where he attained the rank of Squadron Leader, Ralph ran the family business in Bridgnorth and in 1959 moved into the former Broseley home of the 18th century ironmaster, John Wilkinson. At a time when much attention was being focused on the Darbys and the Ironbridge Gorge, Ralph began to research the achievements of his famous predecessor at The Lawns, and he utilised the technical skills he had acquired in the RAF to make models of some of Wilkinson's famous inventions - for example the boring mill, the first iron boat and the New Willey Furnace site. In fact, Ralph became the catalyst for a group of like-minded people with an interest in the history of the Broseley area to set up an organisation to promote the research and preservation of the material and documentary evidence of Broseley's industrial past. As a prominent part in that history had been played by John Wilkinson, it was decided that the organisation should be known as the Wilkinson Society.

A steering committee of seven, which included as president the late Sir John Dugdale, Lord Lieutenant of Shropshire, was confirmed in office at the inaugural AGM in the Autumn of 1972, and organised an annual programme comprising illustrated talks, a social evening and a field trip; and members were to be kept informed by an occasional newsletter and an annual journal. This Journal presented articles on the history of the Broseley area, the life and work of John Wilkinson and, what was very much in vogue at the time, industrial archaeology. Material which was acquired, usually by donation, was added to the collection of Broseley and Wilkinson relics and models which Ralph Pee had already set up in the old kitchen block at The Lawns, and this collection was at first open on one Saturday afternoon er month and by appointment.

No doubt much of what I've described is common to the setting up of many local history societies; and the pattern that was established in 1972 was little changed over the next 15 years or so. The illustrated talks were usually given by outside speakers, the very first in fact on October 27th 1972 by Barry Trinder, who delivered one of his masterly surveys, on that occasion covering John Wilkinson in Shropshire. Other distinguished speakers over the years have included the late Professor W.H. Chaloner, the eminent economic historian from Manchester University; Henry Sandon, the well-known porcelain expert; and Sir Neil Cossons in his days as Director of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust.

Meetings during the Society's first decade took place in the spacious and elegant surrounding of The Lawns, but Ralph Pee's illness in the early 1980s meant that the venue had to be transferred across the road to the more spartan All Saints Church Hall. Ralph's long illness and death in 1983 also meant that the Society's collection of artefacts and documents had to be moved out of The Lawns, at first to the refurbished cellar of nearby Broseley Hall, where they were displayed until 1986, and then back to The Lawns, where the new owner had agreed to the setting up of a Broseley Museum in the renovated stable block. Sadly, this plan eventually fell through and the collection had to be put in store at the Ironbridge Gorge Museum's Tile Museum at Jackfield where it remains to this day.

The Society's journal appeared annually from 1973 and acquired a readership beyond its members, including for example a subscription from the Science Museum; but a career move forced me to give up the editorship in 1987 and only one more journal appeared over the next seven years. In fact, the Society entered the doldrums about ten years ago, and it took a re-launching meeting to get it going again in 1993. But, launched on the same basis as previously, it did not appear to attract sufficient new members, and so it was decided to do a complete makeover four years later.

The 1997 re-formation of the Society changed a number of its basic features. First, of course, was the change of name. There was a general impression that perhaps the original Society had concentrated too much on the famous ironmaster; and it was suggested that local people would accept ownership of a Society whose name included the towns name more readily than one with the name of Wilkinson.

Although the aims of the re-formed Society were not essentially different from those of the original one, it was thought that we should stress that our primary aim was the research, preservation and promotion of Broseley's unique heritage.

Again, there was no basic change in the constitution and structure of the Society, but there were new faces on the committee which was also to meet more regularly.

Perhaps the biggest change has been in the programme of activities. It was felt that to attract people to meetings not only a regular pattern, but also a fixed comfortable venue were needed; and so it was decided to meet on the first Wednesday of every month (except August) at Broseley Social Club, which in addition to a large meeting room had the advantage of an adjacent bar. The make-up of the programme was also changed; of the eleven meetings per year, nine are scheduled as indoor and held at the Social Club, of which seven are illustrated talks and two are reminiscence evenings, and the two gatherings away from the Social Club are a summer walk or outing and a winter annual dinner. This programme has gone down well during the last three years and attendance at meetings has been boosted by the additional publicity offered by the annual calendar of events produced by the Wrekin Local Studies Forum.

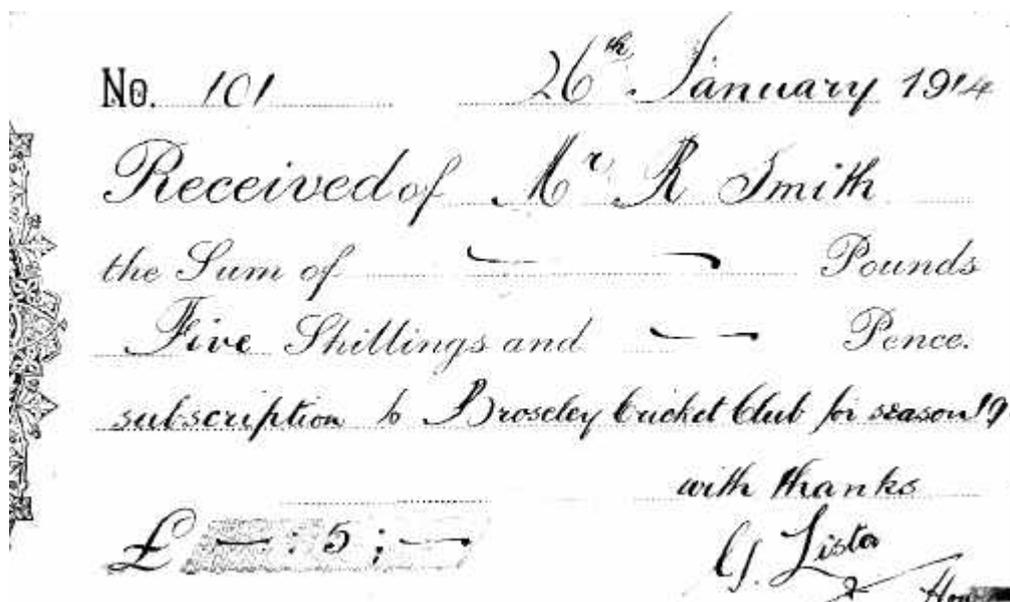
Another change which has consolidated the Society has been the publication of a quarterly newsletter. In addition

to keeping members informed of forthcoming events and developments in the area, this also gives resumes of the talks at meetings, particularly useful for members who may have missed one.

The development with which I have been most closely involved has been the revival of the Society's annual journal. I was able to resume the editorship in 1996 and we have produced four since then. As previously, the journal provides the opportunity for members of the Society and others to present the results of their researches into the history of the Broseley area and related subjects.

Finally, in listing the changes introduced in the last three years, a look at the effect on the Society's collection. Useful discussions have been held with the County Library and the County Museums Service as to how we should best proceed; and efforts have been made to find locations where we can display at least some of the items from the Society's collection - for example, some materials have been loaned out for exhibitions and very recently some artefacts were exhibited at a local history day in Broseley Library. But we can't pretend that we're any nearer to finding a permanent home for our collection. In conclusion, the changes I've described seem to have revitalised the Society. In the three years since re-formation, our membership has more than doubled and now stands at about 95\* - a result that can't have been hindered by maintaining the original annual subscription of £3 and the advantage of having a bar next to our meeting room! The Society's sponsorship of a recent competition to design a new Pritchard Memorial for Broseley, which was featured in the Shropshire Star, has also demonstrated to the town our commitment not only to its past, but to its present and future.

(\*Now over 100! - Ed.)



## CORRESPONDENCE

**Shirlett Sanatorium**

Ivan Hall (Ludlow) writes:

Reading Victoria Cox's article on Shirlett Sanatorium (Journal No. 21) triggered off a few memories. It must have been 1958 that I was there for nine months. I went there in January after travelling via three buses from Brimfield (N. Herefords.) to Much Wenlock, then the Sanatorium van. I had no idea where I'd been taken — neither did many other people. It was bitterly cold and not long before it began to snow, and we were spreading sheets of newspaper at the foot of the beds to keep dry - as in the article.

There was no graded work when I was there but the grade system still existed. 'B 1' was the unfortunates who were completely confined to bed. I went in on 'B3' which meant I could get up to bath, wash, use the lavatory and go to the day room for injections and medications. In that weather bed was the best place to be. After that, an improvement, one was promoted to 'hours': up for one hour and meals; later two hours, and so on. In January those on 'hours' had very important work to do - keeping the hot water bottles replenished for bed patients, emptying the 'wine' bottles and supplying mugs of hot tea. It became less spartan as the summer approached. I remember most the frustrating boredom and the monotony of the unimaginative food. I took up weaving.

The reminiscences in the article must pre-date my internment for I remember old timers yarning about characters who went on pub expeditions. I don't remember anyone caught in the wrong bed! Of course, the drugs revolutionised the treatment and we were confident of recovery. I was fortunate in that being a teacher I was kept on full pay so had no financial worries - my wife had all the worries and couldn't get to see me unless a kind friend offered carriage.

**Wilkinson's Barges**

Richard Barker writes:

Annales des Arts et Manufactures, Tome VII, about 1800, has the following interpretation of the iron barges of "the celebrated forge-master John Wilkinson ":

"...has built several iron boats in iron, employed on the Severn, and which navigate equally on the canals in Staffordshire and Worcestershire."

Clearly this excludes river barges exceeding 7 feet beam; but unfortunately still does not define how many were "several."

**Le Creusot: A Wilkinson Legacy**

Donald Harris (Shrewsbury) writes:

I read with great interest David Lake's article in the Society's Journal No.21, 1999, "Le Creusot: A Wilkinson Legacy." In the course of my research into emigration from Shropshire to North America before the First World War, I came across two brothers, Thomas and Joseph Higgs. They were born in Barrow, sons of a miner who took his family to Brierley Hill in the Black Country, where the brothers became puddlers. About 1820 they went, with their families, to the newly developing iron industry in France. I did not know where in France the Higgs went: Barrie Trinder told me that he thought it might have been the Le Creusot iron works, where a number of Dawley ironworkers went in the 1820s. <sup>1</sup> David Lake's article, describing the important contribution of William Wilkinson (brother of John) to the setting up of the Le Creusot plant, and, under his direction, the Royal Foundry's use of most modern, i.e. "the English method", makes it very likely that the Higgs did indeed go to Le Creusot. They were in France for about ten years. Thomas Higgs' daughter, Sarah, was born there in 1829.

Soon afterwards, both brothers and their families emigrated again, to the iron industry in Newcastle, Pennsylvania, where they were joined by several of their brothers and sisters and their families. All the menfolk were puddlers.<sup>2</sup>

Till the 1880s the most important advances in the American iron and steel industry originated in Britain, and British skilled workers were indispensable as the furnaces, foundries, mill and forges were set up in the USA. Later on, as America developed new methods, the British skills became outmoded; but in the words of an American historian, "In the interval these trained English, Welsh and Scottish hands were the puddler's rabble which stirred up the new heavy industry."<sup>3</sup> Pay was good by English standards, although conditions of work were harder.

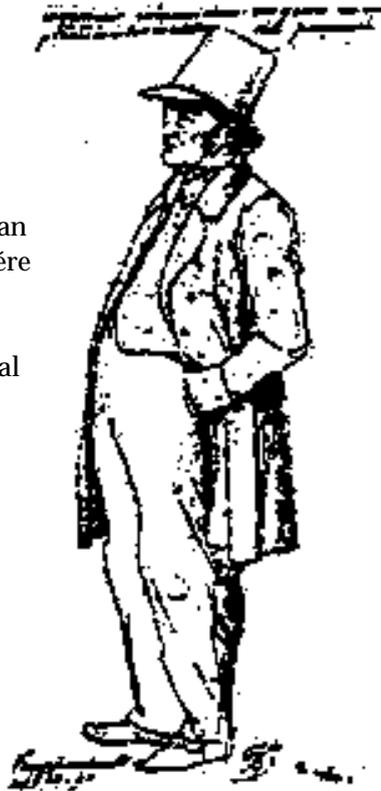
David Lake's article shows that British skilled workers and managers played as important a part in the early development of the French Iron industry as they did in its development in United States. As is shown in the Appendix, British skills were welcomed in France as late as the 1840s.

## NOTES

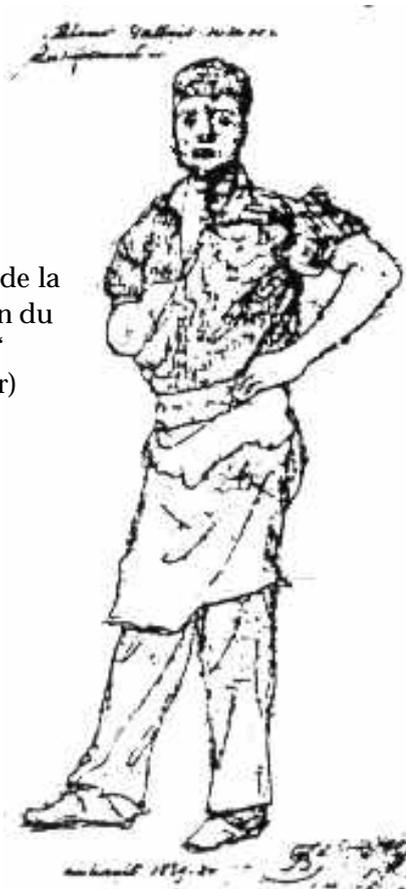
1. I have lost the source for this statement about the Dawley ironworkers
2. Information given to the author by a great-great-grand daughter of Thomas Higgs, California. She is descended from Higgs' French-born daughter, Sarah.
3. Rowland Barthoff, *British Immigrants in Industrial America 1790-1950*, Cambridge, Mass., 1953, pp.62-74.

François Bonhommé made the pen drawings shown below of such emigrants at the Fourchambault ironworks, 1839-40.

"Ingénieur mécanicien anglais de la première formation du personnel"  
(English mechanical engineer)



"Puddeleur gallois de la première formation du personnel chef"  
(Welsh puddler)



"Puddeleur anglais de la première formation du personnel chef."  
(English puddler from the first formation of the higher staff)

Marie-Laure Griffaton, *Francois Bonhommé, Peintre: Témoin de la vie industrielle aux XIXe siècle* (le Musée de l'Historie du Fer, Nancy-Jarville, 1996), pp.113-4.