

Newsletter

Newsletter of the Broseley Local History Society
Incorporating the Wilkinson Society



May 2002

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- 6 Nov The Great Exhibition of 1851, talk by David de Haan, Programme Director of the Ironbridge Institute.
- 4 Dec Annual Christmas dinner.
- 8 Jan More Memories of Old Broseley.
- 5 Feb Shropshire Quarter Sessions Records, talk by John Shearman.
- 5 Mar The Annual Wilkinson Lecture, Today Broseley, Tomorrow the World! given by David Lake.
- For further information, contact Neil Clarke (01952 504135).

Thirty Years Old

The Broseley Local History Society, formerly the Wilkinson Society, celebrates its 30th birthday this year. The original Society was started with a preliminary meeting held at The Lawns in July 1972. On 2 August the first general meeting was held at which the following committee was elected - John Dugdale (President), Martin Sylvester (Chairman), Colin Hardwick (Secretary), Dennis Mason (Treasurer), Ralph Pee (Curator), John Cragge and Neil Clarke (Committee members).

Meetings

Meetings of the Broseley Local History Society are held on the first Wednesday of each month at 7.30 pm at the Broseley Social Club, High Street, unless otherwise announced. Car parking is available at the back of the Club. Members are requested to be seated by 7.30 to allow speakers a prompt start.

Programme

- 5 Jun Jubilee Summer Soiree, at Rivendell, 2 Dark Lane, Broseley, by kind invitation of Michael and Gillian Pope. Please see details on page 6.
- 3 Jul The Wilkinson Trail in Telford - Part II. Summer walk led by Neil Clarke. Full details on page 6.

Provisional programme to March 2003

- 4 Sep Memories of Old Broseley.
- 2 Oct AGM, followed by The Severn Gorge Countryside Trust, talk given by Jim Waterson.

Previous meetings

At the April meeting Janet Doody gave a talk on her research into the Irish community in Broseley in the second half of the 19th century and drew attention to some of the differences between this and the community in Bridgnorth.

Although near neighbours, the two towns attracted very different types of immigrants and subsequently developed equally different types of communities. Bridgnorth's economy was agricultural, and immigrants to that town formed a tight knit community based around

the Catholic church and schools sponsored by the Acton family. Broseley on the other hand, being an industrial town, attracted immigrants with industrial skills who were less dependent on patronage and more entrepreneurial. Because they had no central focus such as a church or school, these people integrated more readily into the local community, an example of this being the china painter William Evans, who married a Broseley woman, also a china painter, and lived in Duke Street.

1851 saw a big influx when the number of Irish households rose from 12 to 40. These were mainly labourers with the women and girls working as pitbank girls or in the brickyards, but there were also skilled workers. One of the most interesting groups of these were boot and shoe makers who began to form a distinctive group of several families, living along Harris's Green and King Street. Some of these people were master shoe makers, employing others in the trade.

1861 saw another population influx when the railway was built, but these immigrants were mostly transient and had little lasting effect on the town.

The population of Broseley in the second half of the 19th century was about 4,500, and although the number of Irish inhabitants was not known, it seems likely that they quickly became integrated into the community, as there are few recorded incidents of racial disharmony. This was in contrast to Bridgnorth where, possibly because of the closed nature of their community, there did appear to have been a certain amount of racial tension.

At the May meeting the Annual Wilkinson Lecture, entitled *The Spirit of the Age - Ideas and Movements of the 18th Century* and John Wilkinson was given by Diana Clarke. John Wilkinson's life spanned a century of tremendous change. While every era has its own part to play in the making of history by producing its men of influence, the 18th century in England seemed to spawn more than its fair share of geniuses,

especially in the spheres of science and engineering. Among such geniuses John Wilkinson stands out as one of the great men of history, a giant of industrial and commercial enterprise alongside a century of such giants.

In her talk, Diana put forward some ideas as to why 18th century England provided the unique context in which the entrepreneurial expertise of a man such as Wilkinson could flourish so spectacularly - the new thinking of the Enlightenment, the excellent education provided by the Dissenting Academies, the interchange of ideas through such groups as the Lunar Society, the wealth created by the growing empire, the challenge to the establishment by the French Revolution, the relative social mobility and the ease of raising capital.

The entrepreneurs who emerged during the 18th century had to depend on aggressive use of their talents in an unremitting hands-on situation as investors, managers and makers, a combination that lent itself not to sentiment, but more often to ruthlessness. Diana showed that John Wilkinson was such a man, whom few could match for energy and flair.

A Schoolboy Perspective

In April this year pupils from L'Ecole Jules Romains, in the town of Ambert in the Auvergne, visited Ironbridge on a school exchange. David Lake was one of those who helped show them something of the Ironbridge Gorge and, to keep them occupied during their second weekend, set a competition for them - an essay, to be written in English, on "How the Iron Bridge was built". The winner was Georges Tarris whose his essay - an impressive piece of understanding and fluency in a foreign language for a French 12 year old of Lebanese/Moroccan parentage - appears below, with all its original spelling and construction!

It's the first iron bridge in the world. It's 223 years old and from his construction to now it didn't have any problems. The

Iron Bridge was built because two towns were trading by boat and the river was very dangerous and a lot of people died. The river was very dangerous because it had strong currents and high tides. (note : the IronBridge crosses the river Severn) And one of the towns were producing Iron so they made an iron bridge. You have to pay a toll to cross it. The IronBridge crosses the river between Madeley Wood and Benthall. The architect was commissioned in 1775 : Thomas Pritchard and the builder Abraham Darby, started the construction in winter 1778 and finished in summer 1779. The builder won the gold medal of the royal society of arts and the architect died before its achievement. The pieces were associated like a construction game (they fit into other pieces) and were fixed with bolts and screws. To fix the pieces, especially the arches, they had to put 2 wood posts up to hold the arches up and one crossbeam to support them and for the builder when he had to fix them together. The dimensions of the bridge are 100 feet* span, 40 feet high above the river, and a width of 94 feet. The ribs of the bridge are nearly 80 feet long. There is 284 kilos of iron!

*(note : 100 feet is equivalent to 30 metres
so 1 foot = 30 centimetres)

The Mystery of the Iron Bridge . . . continued

Further to the exchange of correspondence regarding the Timewatch programme published in the March issue, we have received a letter from Frank Dawson of Cumbria in which he also expresses some concerns about the content of the programme. Perhaps more interesting, however, is his suggestion as to why John Wilkinson had not been involved in the actual construction. This is the relevant extract from his letter:

It is clear that Wilkinson was the major catalyst for the building of the Iron Bridge and

an important financial supporter of the scheme, from the beginning throughout. The question remains of course as to why, if he were so urgent that the Bridge should be built in iron, he did not undertake the construction of it himself. One answer may be that the scheme came to fruition precisely at the moment when his own iron-making operations were at full stretch. Orders were beginning to flow for Watt's New Steam engine for which he supplied all castings. Lucrative government contracts for his cannon were increasing rapidly. And his brother William was off to France leaving the whole responsibility for managing the Bersham works on his shoulders again. The Darbys were the obvious choice, perhaps the only other ironmasters with the capability in the area, their comprehensive Chalkbrookdale works close to the Bridge site. Far from seeking to overstretch young Abraham III into financial ruin, there may even have been an element of patronage in Wilkinson's relationship with him once the main agreements had been reached.

We have also received a further letter from David de Haan, Programme Director of the Ironbridge Institute, addressed to John Freeman in which he says:

My aim in sharing ideas about the Bridge is to further the discussion, debate and hopefully tease out new evidence - some of which has happened around the Timewatch programme. Much more was recorded than ever got to the final TV programme, as you might expect, in which there was of course due recognition of Pritchard and Wilkinson in the wider scheme of things. In the event, the BBC concentrated on what makes good television and only focussed on building the half-scale model. As you so rightly say, there are always (at least) two sides to any story and they are worth exploring, so I hope this is really the start rather than the end of lots of discussions.

I enjoyed the Society's website and would be happy to come to a future meeting, either as an

observer or even a speaker. You are absolutely right that we should strengthen the links, and maybe we can mend some of the unnecessary rifts that go back now almost into folk memory!

You may be aware that some years ago I did a talk to the Wilkinson Society about the portraits of the ironmaster. Perhaps it may be of interest if we can share some of the other findings about the Bridge that have emerged from the recent historical survey. There is also a lot of new archival evidence about Wilkinson that is in the depositions relating to a Chancery proceeding in the 1760s.

Donation of historical documents

Les Pugh, who recently moved to Shrewsbury from Broseley, has donated a number of historical documents to the Society. These belonged to the late Mrs Thomas and related to the history of her family.

The collection includes documents dating from 1798 to the 1940s. They include various Conveyances, Title Deeds, Indentures and Mortgage Documents. A number of receipts are also in the collection, including some relating to the cholera epidemic in 1832. More recent documents include a scrapbook with leaflets and cuttings from the 20th century as well as various documents relating to the Second World War.

The items have been catalogued by Paul Luter and are at present being copied. As some of the documents are of historical importance the Society intends lodging them in the County Records Office in Shrewsbury where they will be conserved and openly available for researchers. It is also intended to put copies of the documents in Broseley library.

From the Archives

We are indebted to David Lake for this extract from a letter from John Wilkinson to James Watt, dated Castlehead, June 5th 1784,

which was taken from the Janet Butler Archive.

I purpose being here untill the 21st, then proceed to Bersham, Broseley, Bradley and to your House to be ready for Q^dday.

Meanwhile I shall consider the Contents of your last Favour of the 1st inst.

If a new Engine must be had at Chacewater and that Expense prove a BugBear it may induce Me to take a part - there is not I think for Me any other Motive without Work - Mr Wilson has said nothing to Me yet upon that Adventure. Before I can see you - Mr Bolton will have made (most probably) his report on this Mine.

I had occasion to go over to Chester & Bersham last Week - I saw your son of whom I read a very good account and from what I could observe he was deserving of that Report.

I really have a high opinion of James and though he may not be in the most fashionable way at his Age I think him in a much safer Road to useful Life.

Apedale Drift Mine

The Apedale Drift Mine, just north of Newcastle-under-Lyme, ceased coal production a couple of years ago and is now the nearest visitable Mining Experience. The Society is planning a coach trip there, the suggested date being Saturday 21 September. Anyone interested should contact David Lake, tel: 01746 762813, without delay so that we can ascertain the level of interest and whether this is a suitable date.

The Jackfield Slip

"Life has taken a crazy turn for the 800 people in this village by the swiftly flowing Severn. The village has gone topsy-turvy. Whole houses lurch drunkenly, line props and garden walls have heeled over, apple trees look more like weeping willows."

So begins one of the first reports on the Jackfield slip which occurred in 1952 when the clay hill-side on which part of the village stood began to slip, "cracking walls and toppling the houses over to crazy angles".

By 8 April that year, the News Chronicle was reporting that the main road through the village had cracked down the middle and the village was in danger of being cut in two.

A notice warned motorists that they used the road at their peril. The Post Office stopped all mail vans running into the village, and the post-mistress was instructed not to accept parcels. Deliveries of letters were made by a postman on a bicycle who had to ride along the edge of the cracked and potholed road.

Five bursts in the gas mains had resulted in a flexible pipe being laid above ground to bring the supply to the village, while water was being brought in through over-ground pipes supported by wooden blocks which had to be jacked up each week.

Despite dangerous subsidence, railway gangs were able to keep open the Severn Valley line

from Birmingham to Shrewsbury, a service which, as well as passengers, carried 10,000 tons of coal a month. But the deputy stationmaster had to chop 20 feet from the dangling end of the station's wooden platform!

Five families had been evacuated to requisitioned homes higher up the valley and two hundred more might have to leave at any time.

On 12 April the Wellington Journal reported that although Salthouse Road in Jackfield was now extremely dangerous to traffic, the "top" road was still being used, albeit with difficulty. Five houses had already been evacuated and a number of others were badly affected. Workmen were still busy on the stretch of railway line by the Jackfield Halt, where hundreds of tons of ash were being used as ballast for the rails. Pear Tree Cottage, the first house to be evacuated in Salthouse Road, had been split in two with one part of it leaning at an angle of about 70 degrees.

Despite advice being sort from some of the country's experts, no practical way had been found to stop the landslip and on 7 February 1953 the Birmingham Gazette reported that "all hope had gone for the sliding village".

Alderman Tom Wedge of Wenlock Town Council said that they would gradually rehouse the people to a new estate being built in Broseley. He said that it had been very hard on some of those who had already had to move. Some had sunk their savings into their homes, which had been completely lost, and now had to pay 25s 6d or 29s 6d for a council house. "But," he added, "they are enjoying the modern conveniences they didn't have before. And in their new estate they know they will never be flooded again."

Publications

John Wilkinson, Iromaster Extraordinary,
by Ron Davies

Copies of this book, which was reviewed in the November issue of the Newsletter, are still available. This very readable, concise account

Anyone interested in joining the
Broseley Local History Society
is welcome to come along
to a meeting.

Further details may be obtained from
the Membership Secretary

Janet Robinson
26 Coalport Road
Broseley
TF12 5AZ
Tel: 01952 882495

or from any member of
the Committee

of the life of this genius of our early industry includes 24 pages of specially drawn line illustrations.

Copies are available from

David Lake
Stocking Lane
Nordley
WV16 4SY
Tel: 01746 762813
Cst: £6.95
P&p: £1.50

Cheques should be made payable to Broseley Local History Society.

Summer Walk

Date: 3 July
Time: 7.30 pm
Place: Meet at Telford Town Centre (Brown Elm Car Park, next to Focus DIY store)
Walk: Southwards along the Silkin Way to Southall and return via Stirchley village (and the Rose and Crown pub!) to the Town Centre by 10.00 pm
Distance: About 3 miles

The first walk in this series covered sites associated with John Wilkinson in the north Telford area, including his ironworks at Snedshill, Hollinswood and New Hadley and the Shropshire Canal between Wrockwardine Wood Inclined Plane and Snedshill. John Wilkinson was one of the leading promoters of the Shropshire Canal (authorised in 1788), the treasurer of the Company (1789-1793) and became its biggest shareholder.

On this second walk, we continue the theme of John Wilkinson and the Shropshire Canal and will examine further remains of the canal between Snedshill and Southall Bank, including Randlay Pool (reservoir), Hinkshay Pool (basin), Southall tunnel and junction and the stone aqueduct on the Coalbrookdale Branch.

Jubilee Summer Soiree

Date: Wednesday 5 June, 2002
Time: 7.30 pm
Venue: Rivendell, 2 Dark Lane, Broseley
Cst: £3.00 per person

Michael and Gillian Pope have kindly offered to host a Jubilee Summer Soiree and have invited members of the Society to their home Rivendell, 2 Dark Lane, Broseley. A light supper will be provided and members will be able to enjoy the garden. This has a number of interesting features from an historical point of view, including the old water cistem which was originally built to provide a water supply for Broseley. Cars can be parked in the car park at the top of Dark Lane.

To facilitate catering arrangements members are asked to return the form below, with their payment, to Janet Robinson by not later than Friday 31 May.

I/we will be attending the Summer Soiree and enclose payment of £3.00 per person.

Name(s):

Address:

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Payment enclosed: £

Please return to: Janet Robinson
26 Coalport Road
Broseley TF12 5AZ

by not later than 31 May.

Cheques should be made payable to Broseley Local History Society.