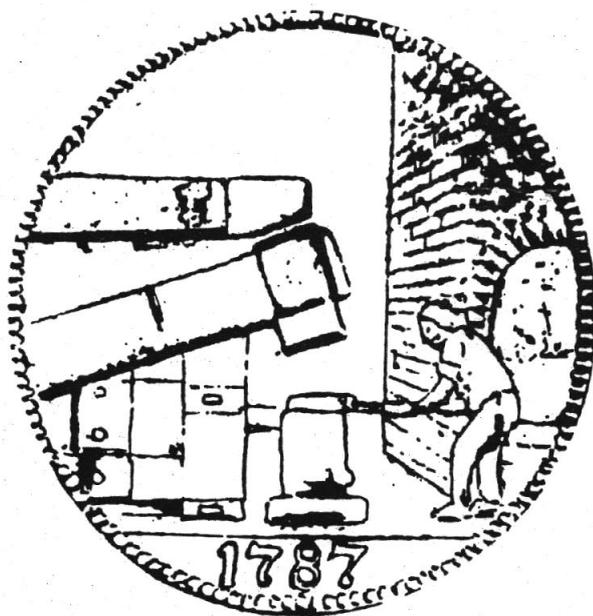


THE JOURNAL OF THE WILKINSON SOCIETY



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Editor : N.J. Clarke
(May 1985)

THE WILKINSON SOCIETY

The Society was formed in 1972 to meet the demand for an organisation to preserve the material and documentary evidence of Broseley's industrial past. Since an important part in this industrial past was played by John Wilkinson, who lived for a time at "The Lawns", it was decided that the organisation should be known as The Wilkinson Society.

The aims of the Society are :

- (i) to act as custodian of any relevant material and information and to make such material and information available to interested individuals and organisations ;
- (ii) to promote any relevant preservation activity and to assist individuals or organisations in such activity where deemed appropriate ;
- (iii) to provide a link with the community of Broseley for individuals or organisations undertaking local historical research.

Any available material will be added to the existing collection of Broseley and Wilkinson relics, part of which is on display at Broseley Hall.

Administration of the Society is by an annually elected committee. Membership is open to anyone interested in the Society's aims and activities. These activities include illustrated lectures, social evenings, researching and exhibiting the collection, field trips and coach tours. Members are kept informed by newsletters, and this annual Journal presents articles on the history of the Broseley area, John Wilkinson, and industrial archaeology in general.

NOTES AND NEWS

The Year's Activities (1982 - 83)

The Tenth Annual General Meeting was held at the Broseley Church Hall on Friday, 15th October 1982. Society officials were re-elected on an individual basis with no changes from the previous year, and the Committee was re-elected en bloc with the addition of one new member, Mrs. Veronica West. A proposal was made to raise the annual subscription to £2, but was withdrawn after some objections. It was agreed that an Extraordinary General Meeting should be called to deal with this matter at a later date. After the A.G.M., Mr. Chris Whall gave a short and very informal talk on "The Wem Cow Club and other Curiosities of Insurance in Shropshire", much appreciated by the audience.

On 9th November 1982 the meeting was held at the Cumberland Hotel, Broseley, by kind invitation of Mr. Ivor Southorn, who addressed us on "Broseley pipes and other interesting things". This was a fascinating meeting, well illustrated by a wide selection of specimens, documents and photographs relating mainly but not entirely to the clay pipe and ceramic industries in Broseley.

On 8th December 1982 we once again joined the Friends of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum for their pre-Christmas entertainment at the Severn Warehouse in Ironbridge. The subject on this occasion was "Local Dialects in the Black Country", presented on tape and video by members of the Redditch Historical Society. This was a most rewarding evening, completed by seasonal refreshments provided by the Ladies Group of the Friends.

The Extraordinary General Meeting referred to above was called for 18th

February 1983. At this meeting a resolution was proposed, to increase the annual subscription from £1 to £2 per annum for ordinary members, and from 50p to £1 for children and bona fide students, with effect from 1st October 1983. After a short discussion, the resolution was passed 'nem con'. The Social Evening which followed, on the theme "Objects made in the Broseley Area", was notable for the appearance of a catalogue from the former Benthall Pottery Works, brought along by a visitor from Nordley. We have since been able to obtain a photo-copy of this catalogue for the Society library.

On 18th March 1983, the Rev. L.F. Peltor gave a highly polished account of some of the items of information he had been able to extract from Parish Registers in the various parts of the country in which he had worked. The talk, entitled "The Parish Chest", included many references to our local parishes of Barrow and Willey. The evening was much enjoyed by all those present.

During the winter months of 1982 - 83 the Committee, assisted by Mr. Eric Cox, worked very hard to rebuild the Museum exhibits in the cellars of Broseley Hall. Special thanks are due to Fred Clarke, who masterminded the reconstruction of the main exhibit stands, and to Veronica West, who not only kept us supplied with coffee and biscuits, but also devoted much of her own time to provide the finishing decorative touches with the paint brush after the bulk of the construction was finished. The new Museum was formally opened on 1st May 1983, when 15 members of the Society accepted the invitation of Mr. & Mrs. West to be the first visitors, with guides and refreshments provided free of charge.

The Annual Outing was once again planned as a joint venture with the Friends of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum, this time to Chatsworth House in Derbyshire. Sadly, this had to be cancelled for lack of support.

On Monday 19th September 1983 the Society was very pleased to entertain Mr. & Mrs. Leighton Wilkie and Mr. and Mrs. Jon Henricks, from the Do-All Company in Des Plaines, Illinois. Guided by our Secretary, and for some of the time by the Director of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum, Stuart Smith, they visited the Old and New Willey Sites, the Museum of Iron at Coalbrookdale, The Elton Collection, The Coalport China Works, the Broseley home of John Wilkinson at "The Lawns", and, finally, the Society's Museum in Broseley Hall where Mr. & Mrs. West gave a sherry reception in their honour. Mr. Leighton Wilkie has been a lifelong admirer of John Wilkinson, and has published several books and other documents which emphasise the part played by Wilkinson and Watt in the Industrial revolution. He has also founded a very impressive Wilkinson/Watt Museum at his factory in America, and has instigated the publication of educational material relating to the development of machine tools. Mr. Wilkie presented copies of his publications to the Society, and we were glad to be able to reciprocate in a small way by offering to read the proofs of the next, revised edition of Mr. Wilkie's book "John Wilkinson, Ironmaster".

Most of the committee work for this year was done on an informal basis during the many sessions of work on the new Museum, but a formal Committee Meeting was held on 9th August 1983, to discuss the future of the Iron Roof Frame still standing in the yard at "The Lawns", and to plan the Society's calendar for 1983 - 4. It was agreed that the Iron Roof should be given to the Ironbridge Gorge Museum on condition that they would dismantle, transport and re-erect it on a site to be decided. The Quaker Burial Ground in Broseley was considered to be the most suitable site, if this should prove practicable.

Programme of events for 1984 - 1985

- 12th October - 12th A.G.M., followed by viewing of china collection bequeathed to the Society by the late Ralph Pee.
- 23rd November - "Portraits of John Wilkinson" - illustrated talk by David de Haan.
- 12th December - Joint meeting with Friends of Ironbridge Museum.
- 15th February - Social Evening - "Found under the floorboards".
- 22nd March - "Oral History in the Ironbridge Gorge" - illustrated talk by Ken Jones.
- May 1985 - Summer Outing to Bersham Industrial Heritage Centre.

The Journal

Whilst the editor is prepared to provide material from his own researches, he would prefer a steady flow of contributions from members. Unfortunately, these have been in short supply during 1984 and partly account for the delayed appearance of this issue of the Journal. Contributions (articles, short notices, letters, etc.) for the 1985 issue, now in preparation, should be sent to the editor, N.J. Clarke, Cranleigh, Little Wenlock, Telford.

Back numbers of the Journal can be obtained from the Assistant Secretary, Mrs. Freda Spickernell, 11 High Street, Broseley.

Mrs. Barbara Bale who has been associated with the production of the Journal since 1978, is retiring in September, 1985. The Society would like to place on record its gratitude to Barbara for making such a professional job of the Journal, and to extend its very good wishes for her retirement.

Stop Press

Change of ownership at "The Lawns"

John Wilkinson's former home at "The Lawns", Church Street, Broseley, was sold by the Pee family at the beginning of May 1985, to a private buyer. We understand that the new owner intends to use the house as his private residence, and that he is aware of its historic connection with John Wilkinson, John Rose and Thomas Pritchard, and of its subsequent importance in the history of Broseley and the Industrial Revolution.

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"AS OTHERS SEE US" : CONTEMPORARY OPINION

OF JOHN WILKINSON AND HIS ACHIEVEMENTS

The following account is adapted from a talk given by me to the Friends of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum in May 1984. References are to the selected extracts at the end.

Looking back over his life, the septuagenarian John Wilkinson felt that he had made a considerable contribution to human progress, but recognised that he had made many enemies along the way. He wanted to say as much in the epitaph which he prepared for himself (extract i), but which his executors watered down after his death. One imagines from the comment he made in a letter to James Watt (extract ii), and from other sources, that anyone who crossed him lived to regret it.

What did his contemporaries really think of the man and his achievements ?

Relatives

John Wilkinson's relations with members of his own family were bitter at times. He became estranged from his father, who died insolvent in Bristol in 1784; and for the last twenty years of his life his relations with his brother William got steadily worse. This was probably the result of William's fear of the effect John's purchase and development of the neighbouring Brymbo estate would have on Bersham Ironworks, which they jointly owned. The outcome of this dispute was the sale of Bersham, which John bought outright, raising the money from the sale of his interests in the mines and ironworks at Snedshill and Hollinswood. William appears to have done everything he could to get back at his brother: he let the cat out of the bag over John making 'pirate' steam engines at Bersham, which led to Boulton & Watt setting up their own foundry to make cylinders and to a long legal dispute with John; William also appears to have enticed many of Bersham's skilled workers to the Soho Foundry; and he ran down his brother whenever he could - as in a letter to James Watt in January 1800 (extract iii).

However, not all John's relatives were at loggerheads with him. His brother-in-law Dr. Joseph Priestley, a Unitarian minister and experimental chemist of some note, acknowledged Wilkinson's generosity on a number of occasions (extract iv) and felt that he had dealt fairly in the dispute with his brother William. Priestley and John Wilkinson appear to have corresponded regularly, and both sympathised with the French Revolution. Priestley no doubt would have concurred with Wilkinson's maxim that "manufacture and commerce will always flourish most where Church and King interfere least".

Fellow industrialists

Wilkinson's reputation for being less-than-honest in his business dealings went back to the Willey Partnership days. Many felt that some of his innovations were copied from others, e.g. the boring mill, copied from continental examples built on the plans of Jan Verbruggen; and that he made claims to have discovered processes rightfully invented by others. This seems to be the substance of Lord Dundonald's letter to William Reynolds in February 1800 (extract v) in which he goes on to slate Wilkinson in no uncertain terms - "I do believe him to be one of the most hard hearted,

malevolent old scoundrels now existing in Britain" !

However, that Wilkinson earned the respect of other industrialists and engineers at the time is shown by the fact that Thomas Telford was able to refer to him in 1793 as the "king of the ironmasters" (extract vi).

Employees

John Wilkinson's relationship with his employees was in general good. On several occasions he took action to overcome local shortages of small coinage by using his own notes and tokens; he was reported to have granted pensions to aged workmen who had served him well; and he was the only Shropshire ironmaster to be commemorated in folk song. Extract vii is the last verse of a popular song of about 1800.

But he did have differences with some of his more senior employees, such as Gilbert Gilpin, chief clerk at Bersham from 1786 to 1796, who was one of the victims of the struggle between the Wilkinson brothers. In the years following his departure from Bersham, Gilpin seems to have corresponded regularly with William Wilkinson and, in addition to providing news of the iron trade, also supplied tit-bits of gossip concerning John - as in the letter of May 1804 (extract viii), written from Old Park and referring to a visit by John and his house-keeper from Brymbo, Ann Lewis, to Benjamin Rowley's house at Snedshill. It was by this woman that Wilkinson, while his wife was still living at Castlehead, had three children, the youngest of them fathered when he was 77!

Obituaries

Whatever his private shortcomings, Wilkinson certainly made an impact on the iron industry in the late 18th century. This was acknowledged in the obituary which appeared in Aris's Birmingham Gazette on 18th July 1808 (extract ix). But the hope expressed in the last line proved unfounded. In the instructions left for the guidance of the trustees of his estate, Wilkinson wrote: "I leave my different works as children in trust for 63 years - that a great example may be given of the importance to the world and benefit to the industrious workman arising from infant works being protected until their arrival at a proper maturity". He obviously foresaw a continued development of his works and yet, at the time of writing (1806), the seeds of the dissolution of his empire were already sown. Three factors other than the instructions to the trustees were to determine the fate of the works:

Wilkinson and his trustees' neglect of new processes developing in the iron industry, such as puddling which produced better iron at a cheaper rate;

litigation, largely the work of his nephew and heir Thomas Jones, over Wilkinson's attempt to leave his property in trust for his illegitimate children by Ann Lewis;

the depression in the iron trade which followed the Napoleonic Wars.

In fact, the turbulence that attended Wilkinson's life continued in death. He had prepared an iron coffin for his own burial. Gilpin, in one of his letters, tells us that: "He has two coffins ready in his hot house at Bradley,

the first being a blank, with spanners, etc., to screw him up. He sent the order from London, and was very pressing for its speedy execution, which made his people conceive the devil had at length sent him his route and passport". In the instructions for his executors, Wilkinson wrote: "It is my particular request and direction that wherever I die my body may be interred as privately as possible without parade or pomp, either in my garden at Castlehead, within a place I have there prepared for that purpose, or within a building called the Chapel at Brymbo, or in my garden at Bradley, in such manner as is directed in this book . . . and to the nearest of the said places I shall happen to die".

In the event, following his death at Bradley, he was buried after several attempts in a huge cast-iron coffin in the grounds of his mansion at Castlehead. His grave was surmounted by a cast-iron obelisk inscribed with his executors' version of his epitaph (extract x).

However - in the words of his enemies - there was "no peace for the wicked". In 1828 Wilkinson's coffin and obelisk were removed to the nearby village of Lindale in order to expedite the sale of his former home; and a further move of the obelisk was made to its present site in 1863. After years of neglect it has recently been repaired; but "the King of the Ironmasters" has an unmarked grave in Lindale churchyard.

CONTEMPORARY OPINION : SELECTED EXTRACTS

- (i) Delivered from persecution of malice and envy, here rests John Wilkinson, ironmaster, in certain hope of a better estate and Heavenly Mansion, as promulgated by Jesus Christ, in whose gospel he was a firm believer. His life was spent in action for the benefit of man and he trusts in some degree to the glory of God, as his different works that remain in various parts of the kingdom are testimonials of unceasing labour.

(Wilkinson's own epitaph)

- (ii) Peace is a most desirable thing and the more so to one of my constitution who cannot be angry by halves. Resentment with me becomes a matter of business and stimulates to action beyond any profits.

(Wilkinson to James Watt, 1784)

- (iii) . . . (he was) much taken up in scheming and is now decided to have eight furnaces in blast in the course of this year . . . being decided to have more furnaces than any one man in Britain of his own . . . I think before he makes new ones he ought to make the old ones turn out better.

(William Wilkinson to James Watt, January 1800)

- (iv) It was in consequence of Mr. Wilkinson's proposal, who wished to have us nearer to him, that, being undetermined where to settle, I fixed on Birmingham where he soon found a house for me.

(Dr. Joseph Priestley, his brother-in-law)

- (v) I dined with William Crawshay in London, Wilkinson was one of the party. I showed them drawings of the improvements in coking coals which I shall not patent and which gentlemen in ironworks are welcome to use . . . Wilkinson said my improvements were not new, but he had used them for some years. On

questioning it appeared his method was that which you employ at Ketley. This is not the only instance in which the Invidiousness, the Malevolence and the Badness of John Wilkinson's Heart has been apparent to me. He tried to set you and me at variance about 12 years ago and since that time John Wilkinson has never forgiven me and has it in his Heart to do me all the injury in his power.

(Lord Dundonald to William Reynolds, February 1800)

- (vi) I had the decided support of the great John Wilkinson, king of the ironmasters, himself a host. I travelled in his carriage to the meeting and found him much disposed to be friendly.

(Thomas Telford, on the cutting of the Ellesmere Canal, 1793)

- (vii) Then let each jolly fellow take hold of his glass
And drink to the health of his friend and his lass.
May we always have plenty of stingo and pence,
And Wilkinson's fame blaze a thousand years hence.

(Popular song, c. 1800)

- (viii) . . . He has lately been over at B. Rowley's for a few days, together with his girl. She, poor creature, while there had nearly died of indigestion from having gorged herself with eating salmon. Old Shylock and her withdrew from the table; and having laid on the bed together for a few hours, she returned perfectly recovered . . . Like Franklin and other great men, J.W. has written his epitaph, and I have been promised a copy of it. I have not heard its substance and am at a loss to devise what he can say in favour of himself. He reads it to all who visit him. In short, the epitaph is now the order of the day! Perhaps by making his own epitaph he conceives he shall avoid a part of the calumny which he would be subject to were he to leave it to the world to make for him.

(Gilbert Gilpin to William Wilkinson, May 1804)

- (ix) Thursday, at his works at Bradley, in the County of Staffordshire, at the advanced age of 80 years, John Wilkinson, Esq. Few men are more entitled to the praise and gratitude of his country, for unwearied and successful exertions in raising that important branch of our national production, the iron trade, to a height unknown, until that period which constituted the zenith of his useful powers. Frugal, though not parsimonious, he acquired an immense fortune, presenting to society the satisfactory testimony that, in this free and happy country, industry and prosperity go hand in hand. The loss of such a man, considered in his multifarious connections with the manufacturing class of society, must be great indeed; but the calamity will be in some measure palliated, as a very efficient trust has been appointed to carry on his vast and extensive concerns.

(Aris's Birmingham Gazette, 18 July 1808)

- (x) John Wilkinson, Ironmaster, who died 14th July, 1808, aged 80 years. His different works, in various parts of the kingdom, are lasting testimony of his unceasing labours. His life was spent in action for the benefit of man, and, as he presumed humbly to hope, to the glory of God.

(Epitaph on monument)

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N.J. CLARKE

RESEARCHING JOHN WILKINSON

The Society gets many enquiries from researchers into the life and work of John Wilkinson. The following list of sources aims to provide a basic guide. We would be interested to hear of any other relevant material.

(a) Manuscript sources in public collections

- (i) Birmingham Reference Library: Boulton & Watt collection
Correspondence with John and William Wilkinson
List of John Wilkinson's engines

- (ii) British Museum: Egerton M.S. 1941
Annotated drawings of John Wilkinson's blowing engine of 1776

- (iii) Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust: Lilleshall Company Collection
Leases, agreements and map relating to Hollinswood, Snedshill and New Hadley Ironworks

- (iv) National Library of Wales: John Wilkinson's Estates
A volume containing balance sheets of Wilkinson's estates, 1820 - 23 (MSS. 10822E)
A group of accounts relating to Wilkinson's estate, 1825 - 31 (MSS. 18023E)

- (v) Shropshire Record Office: Forester Collection (1224)
Leases, accounts and correspondence relating to John Wilkinson and the New Willey Company.
Shackerley Collection (1781): correspondence of Gilbert Gilpin with John and William Wilkinson

- (vi) Warrington Public Library: Priestley Correspondence Letters, chiefly written to John Wilkinson by Joseph Priestley.

(b) Books and articles

- (i) John Randall, *The Wilkinsons* (1876)
A.N. Palmer, *John Wilkinson & the Old Bersham Ironworks* (1899)
H.W. Dickinson, *John Wilkinson: Ironmaster* (1914)

THE RALPH PEE CHINA BEQUEST

In his will the late Ralph Pee, founder and Curator of the Wilkinson Society, left to the Society "all my blue China (alleged to be Caughley) in the dining room at The Lawns".

When the china was collected from the solicitor acting for the Trustees, there were found to be about 40 pieces, falling into two main categories :-

- (a) late 18th and early 19th century oriental blue and white porcelain, including two slightly damaged teapots, several small teacups, a willow-pattern saucer, and a late Imari-style blue and white vase with overglaze red panels ;
- (b) early and middle 19th century Staffordshire blue and white pottery ware, including an early Spode Caramanian meat dish, three damaged butter boats, several willow-pattern soup plates, and a ginger jar and cover.

The collection was examined by Mr. R. Edmundson of Bridgnorth, and by Mr. J.L. Talbot of McCartney, Morris and Barker, Ludlow. Both came independently to the conclusion that there was not a single piece of Caughley or Coalport china in the collection, and that the total value might be in the region of £200.

Your Committee was therefore faced with a very difficult situation. The china collection had no connection with local factories, much of it was damaged, and in any case there was too much to put on display in the Society Museum. After obtaining the opinions of members at the meeting on October 12th 1984, and two committee meetings held specifically to deal with the problem, it was decided that the best solution would be :-

- (a) to keep three of the best and most representative pieces of oriental porcelain, as typical of the type of china that provided the patterns for English porcelain manufacturers in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and as a nucleus of the original bequest ;
- (b) to sell the remainder of the oriental porcelain and all Staffordshire ware, with the aim of using the proceeds to purchase a few good examples of Caughley porcelain as and when opportunities arose, for eventual display in the Society Museum.

Accordingly, the bulk of the collection was sent to the salerooms of Messrs. McCartney, Morris and Barker in Ludlow, where it was sold on 5th February 1985 and realised the sum of £221. 92p for the Society's account. This money will be used as soon as possible to purchase good examples of Caughley (or possibly early Coalport) china for the Museum, to be displayed in one case with the three pieces of oriental porcelain which were retained, together with a plaque acknowledging the original bequest as the source of the exhibit.

M.H.

- (ii) W.H. Chaloner
- John Wilkinson: Ironmaster (History Today, May 1951)
The Agricultural Activities of John Wilkinson, Ironmaster (Agricultural History Review, v, 1957)
Dr. Joseph Priestley, John Wilkinson and the French Revolution
(Transactions of Royal Historical Society, viii, 1958)
Isaac Wilkinson: Potfounder (Studies in the Industrial Revolution, 1960)
The Life of Gilbert Gilpin, chief clerk at Bersham Ironworks, near Wrexham, 1786 - 96, and his relations with the Wilkinson brothers (National Library of Wales Journal, ii, 1960).
- (iii) G.R. Morton & W.A. Smith
- The Bradley Ironworks of John Wilkinson
(Journal of the Iron & Steel Institute, July 1966)
- W.A. Smith
- John Wilkinson & the Industrial Revolution in South Staffordshire (West Midland Studies, v, 1972).
- (iv) Ralph Pee
- The World's First Iron Boat (Shropshire Magazine, July 1972)
The Broseley Home of John Wilkinson (Journal of the Wilkinson Society, i, 1973)
- Wayne Turner
- King of the Ironmasters (Journal, i, 1973)
John Wilkinson's Trade Tokens (Journal, ii, 1974)
- Maurice Hawes and Ralph Pee
- John Wilkinson and the two Willey Ironworks (Wilkinson Society Monograph, No. 1, 1974)
- N.J. Clarke
- New Hadley Colliery & Ironworks (Journal, vii, 1979)
- Ralph Pee
- The New Willey Ironworks: a reappraisal of the site (Journal, ix, 1981).
- (v) C. McCombie
- Report on the current state of the Wilkinson Monument at Lindale, Cumbria . . . (Foundry Trades Journal, 1981).

N.J.C

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