

**THE
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OF THE
WILKINSON
SOCIETY**



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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.

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.

Applications for membership, together with £3 annual subscription, should be addressed to Mr David Shinton, Secretary, Gestiana, Woodlands Road, Broseley TF12 5PU.

Contributions to the Journal should be sent to The Editor, Neil Clarke, Cranleigh, Wellington Road, Little Wenlock, Telford TF6 5BH.

Our 25th Year

JOHN WILKINSON AND THE IRON BRIDGE

Part 2. The Background to the Bridge

by Michael Berthoud

Before looking at the apparent discrepancies between John Randall's account of the building of the Iron Bridge and the information contained in the Minute Book, it would be as well to consider why the bridge was proposed in the first place. It has often been described as 'a bridge to nowhere'. Indeed some recent writers have gone out of their way to suggest that there was no real need for the bridge at all and that it was built chiefly to advertise Abraham Darby's Coalbrookdale ironworks. In fact, the true state of affairs in the eighteenth century was very different.

In the eighteenth century Coalbrookdale (originally Caldbrook Dale according to Randall) was an obscure village about a mile to the north of the Severn and forming part of the parish of Madeley. The spelling 'Coalbrooke Dale' was retained until the end of the century at least, and the ironworks itself, usually referred to today as the 'Coalbrookdale Works', was in its day known as the 'Dale Company'. The company's reputation in the eighteenth century rested on coke, cooking pots and cannon, and Coalbrookdale was virtually unknown to the rest of the country until after the Iron Bridge was built.

The difficulty of defining Coalbrookdale geographically has bedevilled generations of historians. Not only did it apply to the village on the north bank of the Severn, but to both sides of the Severn Gorge for some distance upstream and downstream of the site where the Iron Bridge was eventually built. Obviously, before there was an Iron Bridge there could not have been an 'Ironbridge Gorge'. Once the bridge had been built and the area's international fame had become established, the name Coalbrookdale was used even more widely. By the early nineteenth century even the Coalport China Works was regarded as being in Coalbrookdale, and at one time John Rose, never a man to miss a good marketing opportunity, used it as a factory mark on his porcelain.

Across the river to the south lay Broseley, an important industrial town with fast-growing coal, iron and clay industries. John Wilkinson had been making cast iron at his Willey Foundry at Broseley since the 1750s.