

**BROSELEY
LOCAL HISTORY
SOCIETY**



**Journal
No. 26
2004**

CONTENTS

| | | | | | | |
|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|
| Editorial | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 1 |
| The Quarrels of the Brothers Wilkinson | | | | | | |
| by Frank Dawson | ... | ... | ... | ... | | 2 |
| The Hornblower Saga | | | | | | |
| by Paul Andrew Luter | ... | ... | ... | .. | | 28 |
| Thomas Turner and the Newdigate Connection | | | | | | |
| by John Willock | ... | ... | ... | ... | | 32 |
| The Lion Hotel in 1923 | | | | | | |
| by Mary Dixon | ... | ... | ... | ... | | 37 |
| Memories of a Shropshire Lad, part 1 | | | | | | |
| by Dennis Mason | ... | ... | ... | ... | | 41 |
| Correspondence | ... | ... | ... | ... | | 48 |

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*

The Journal

In this issue we present three articles which throw further light on late 18th century personalities connected with Broseley - John Wilkinson, Jabez Hornblower and Thomas Turner; and two written by local residents on their memories of the area. The articles represent ongoing researches and reminiscences of the members of our Society and others, and we are grateful to the individual contributors. 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 2005 to the Editor, Neil Clarke, Cranleigh, Wellington Road, Little Wenlock, TF6 5BH.

The Quarrels of the Brother Wilkinson

by Frank Dawson

This is an edited version of the Annual Wilkinson lecture delivered on 3rd March 2004.

Family relationships

The question has been posed by Challoner as to whether William Wilkinson was John's full blood brother of the same parents, or indeed a step brother with a different mother. The apparent twelve-year gap between Henry and the next sibling Mary, and the possibility that Henry was damaged in some way thus discouraging further child-bearing, is the evidence for this. It suggests that Isaac's first wife had died sometime after John and Henry were born and that a twelve-year barren period followed before he married another woman and emerged into the sunlight again.

Some recent research by Janet Butler, however, has constructed a family tree which indicates that no such twelve-year gap in child-bearing occurred and in that period two further children were born to Isaac and his wife, first a girl they called Margaret, and then a boy, Johnston. Isaac's wife is here listed as Mary, formerly Mary Johnston. Further supporting evidence for Janet Butler's research is the fact that a daughter Margaret is later included in the details of Isaac's will; and "... *my late sister, Margaret...*" is subsequently identified in the will of his son, William.

Isaac's Backbarrow years in that twelve-year period, after the birth of John and before the birth of Mary, were busy years in terms of his work as an emerging ironmaster. It was a period of great inventiveness and energy when his new box iron appeared and when he erected the first iron bellows at the Backbarrow Company's furnace and forge to the acclaim of his employers. However, no record of the death of a first wife has been found during this period nor any details of a marriage to a second, and indeed there is some evidence that his first and only marriage to Mary Johnston endured into old age.

It yet remains clear that John and William, who in their mature years were each to make so great an impact on the eighteenth century iron-making world, grew up apart as a consequence of the sixteen year age difference between them, sharing little or nothing of their childhood and teenage lives, and this may be more significant in their subsequent relations as men than whether they were full brothers, or step-brothers.

William's early years

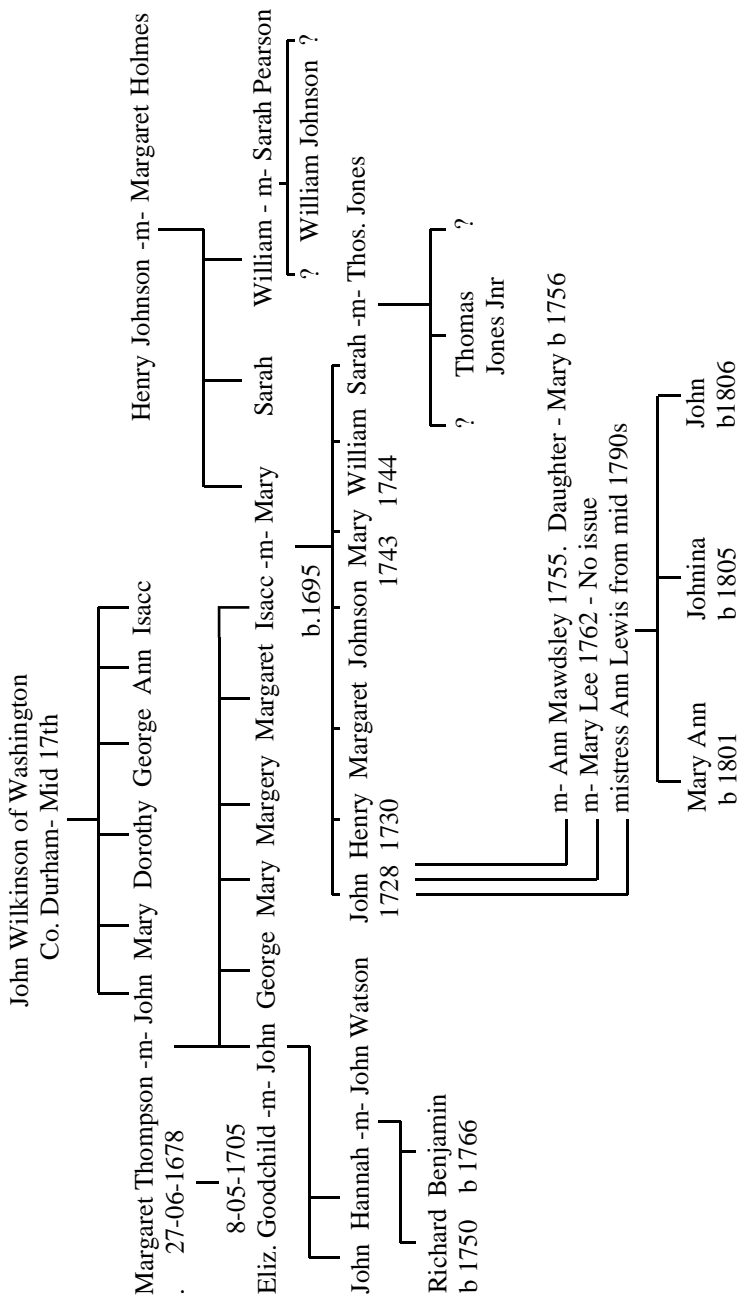
William's childhood years were spent at Wilson House in Cumbria a mile up the River Winster from Castle Head, when Isaac moved there from Backbarrow in 1748. Here William grew up with sisters much closer to him in age than John who by then had almost certainly left the family home anyway. When Isaac moved to Bersham with the rest of the family in 1753, John remained behind for a further three years at Kirkby Lonsdale, during which time he married Ann Mawdsley and established his own iron merchanting business there; and as William entered his teenage years at Bersham in a family dominated by girls it is likely that he enjoyed more of Isaac's favours and attention than either his sisters or his absent elder brother. Isaac subsequently sent him to school at the Dissenting Academy of the young Reverend Doctor Joseph Priestley (who later married his older sister Mary) and who provided William, as Isaac clearly intended, with the best education available to a Dissenter outside of the church-controlled schools and Universities. As a stripling of 16 or 17 William then returned to Bersham to learn iron-making under his father and his elder brother, John, who by that time had followed Isaac into Shropshire from the north.

The relationship between the brothers at this time, with John twice William's age, would be that of man to youth, master to man, with John by then a widower and a man of some worldly experience perhaps a touch jealous of the favours and attention bestowed on William by their father. There is, however, no immediate evidence of a rift between the brothers, rather the reverse. Though John was now beginning to forge a way for himself in the iron-making world independent of his father, he clearly relied increasingly on William to manage affairs at Bersham to their mutual advantage; and when Isaac left Bersham a few years later, the business was re-established without him under the control of the two brothers as the New Bersham Company. William was not immediately accepted as a partner into this new venture and had to wait until 1774 for such preferment, when he was granted only a 1/8 share by his brother; and it is from this later date that their differences began. However, that there was a quarrel in the earlier separation of father and sons is certain, though it appears to have been between Isaac and the sons, certainly between Isaac and John, and not at this time between the brothers.

An earlier family quarrel

The beginnings of this quarrel are found in a legal battle in the old Bersham Company (set up by Isaac and sometimes called the Bersham

Wilkinson Family Tree



(After Janet Butler, from her papers in I.G.M.T. Archives. Ref: Box3 1992 10018 33 p48)

Ironworks) between Isaac and one of his partners, William Johnston, his nephew, the son of his wife's younger brother, over shares purchased in 1761 from William Johnston by Isaac but never satisfactorily transferred to Isaac's name. The dispute became so bitter and protracted it discouraged two proposed new partners from joining the company, thereby depriving it of further capital that was clearly needed at the time.

Sometime after joining his father at Bersham in 1756, John had become "... a principal manager and acting person in the affairs of the said company...", though not until 1763 a shareholder. In that year, seven years after the death of his first wife, he married for a second time. His new wife, Mary Lee, was already a shareholder with Isaac in the old Bersham Company, and since her shares transferred to her husband on her marriage John thus acquired her $\frac{1}{3}$ shareholding in the company which gave him a say equal to that of his father. It may be that this was the trigger to the subsequent family quarrel, and that the conflict over shares between Isaac and William Johnston was the process by which Isaac, through the acquisition of these further shares, sought to retain control as principal shareholder of the company he had founded.

William Johnston held the remaining $\frac{1}{3}$ share equally with a fourth partner called Samuel Green. It is clear from the incomplete Chancery record that William Johnston believed it was Isaac's conduct and temper that led to the breakdown of the old Bersham Company, but it is not clear how far William Johnston's sympathies lay with John, or vice-versa, nor how far the dispute might have been provoked and engineered by John in an attempt to gain control himself. As cousins and near contemporaries John and William Johnston would have something in common, and as John's wealth and influence grew in later years William Johnston's name recurs as a trusted friend and employee within his business empire. If Isaac believed he had been betrayed by them, then the basis was laid for future uneasy relations between father and son, and for the litigation which eventually followed.

How far Isaac had encouraged the marriage between his son and his business partner, Mary Lee, through those seven years of John's grieving for his first wife, also has to be speculative; but it is likely that Isaac had known Mary Lee from his earliest years in Bersham, that she was his business partner from the beginning of the old Bersham Company and that he knew her long before his son, and might have introduced them.

William in France

Through the late 1760s and early 1770s William Wilkinson's name does not feature in these family quarrels, and it seems he immersed himself in the business of learning the secrets of iron-making and the iron trade with some success. These are also his salad days, his years between the ages of 20 and 30, but no woman emerges during this time as a significant influence or companion and little is known about his personal life. It may be that, in the single-minded way of a Wilkinson, he had dedicated himself to becoming as competent an ironmaster as his brother and his father and had put aside other indulgences until later.

His immediate and enthusiastic reception at the end of this period of Marchant de la Houliere's proposals for him to go to France and build a new iron foundry for the French government suggests that he recognised his time had come. He would be aware of the wider social opportunities the invitation opened to him, but perhaps more important was the chance to do something in his own right away from the dominant influences of his elder brother.

In a first contract with the French Government, which carried the hallmark of a seasoned negotiator and suggests that brother John might have been involved, William committed himself for no more than a two-year period initially. The contract is specifically for the preparatory survey and the setting up of a cannon foundry at Indret on the Seine below Nantes. William is to be paid 120,000 Livres, just less than £5000 in the then values, for two years work to be paid at six-monthly intervals in advance. In comparison with the £50 a year plus house, board and expenses he had been paid as manager at Bersham, this was riches indeed. There was more. All his travelling expenses in France were to be covered, he was to be paid a lodging and subsistence allowance of 1000 Livres a month, and on salary and allowances he would pay no French taxes. If the work was completed in less than two years, William was still to be paid the 120,000 Livres; if it took longer he would be paid pro-rata for the additional time.

There is an interesting final item in the contract. William reserved the liberty to return to England on two counts, first if the Government demanded it, second if his brother died. He undertook, however, to provide a substitute to cover the work in France if this proved necessary. It is an astute point, providing evidence of an awareness of the state of tension between the two governments at the time, and proof for the British Government, should it be required, of where the priorities of this established firm of ironmasters lay in the event of war. John would not wish his assets and property in this country to be confiscated while his

young brother lived royally in France and waited for better times. And if he helped create the terms of this contract, he must have seen his brother William as his successor in England in the event of his own demise. John was approaching 50 at this time, William 34. There is still no evidence of a breach in their relationship, unless...

It is easy to underestimate William at this point in his life, and he might have negotiated the contract without his brother's help. If so, and John did not know the detail of it, things may be interpreted differently. First, it would indicate that William in his Bersham years had acquired not only the confidence to take full responsibility for a daunting business commitment in a foreign country but also the perceptive business acumen of his brother and father. The provision of a substitute to cover his work in France, then, suggests a temporary absence whilst retaining his interest there, until he can establish which way the British government will move with regard to his dual responsibilities; or on the other hand, until he has done what would be necessary to secure his succession in the event of his brother's death. His intentions, in either instance, may not have been known to John.

William left for France from Bersham at the end of 1776, apparently with his brother's blessing. He took with him a detailed knowledge of all the new technology of the Bersham Cannon Foundry, much of which during his years as manager he had helped his brother to perfect. It included the latest gun-boring lathe patented by John Wilkinson in 1774, and details of James Watt's new steam engine, the first examples of which were just coming into use, the second one in production at his brother's works at New Willey.

William's competence at this time is demonstrated by the sure and measured way in which he constructed the Indret Cannon Foundry and brought it into production working in close co-operation with a French engineer called Pierre Toufaire. The Bersham technology built and installed there included gun-boring lathes and reverberatory air furnaces to enable him to use molten metal from scrap in the final casting. Power was provided initially (according to a 1788 eye-witness) by water wheels turned by the tidal ebb and flow of the river, and only later by a Watt-type steam engine.

“Messrs. Espivent had the goodness to attend me on a water expedition, to view the establishment of Mr. Wilkinson for boring cannon, in an island in the Loire below Nantes. Until that well-known English manufacturer arrived the French knew nothing of the art of casting cannon solid, and then boring them. Mr Wilkinson's machinery for boring four cannon is now at work, moved by tide

wheels but they have erected a steam engine, with a new apparatus for boring seven more. M De La Motte, who has the direction of the whole, showed us a model of this engine, about six feet long, five high and four or five broad: which he worked for us by making a small fire under the boiler that is no bigger than a large tea kettle: one of the best machines that I have seen..."

The first cannon were cast at Indret from melted scrap in 1779. William thus fulfilled the terms of his contract, which then appears to have been extended to cover the arrival there of the first French manager of the works, the son of an important family of Lorraine industrialists, Francois Ignace de Wendel, who was granted a fifteen year lease from 1780. They were two wealthy young bachelors of about the same age, de Wendel a few years William's senior, and they formed a friendship which would introduce William to some of the most influential people in the country. It is not difficult to imagine the social opportunities open at that time to two such eligible young men.

Throughout this period William kept in contact with his brother John, a valuable kinship which will have given him status in the developing industrial world of France, and he was able to feed him with information which led to new steam engine sales for Boulton and Watt. It also enabled John to tender successfully for the huge quantity of cast iron pipework with bores up to twelve inches, and the associated pumping engines, that were required in the French Government contract to provide a new water supply to Paris from the Seine.

By this time France had aligned with the American states in the American Wars and was thus at war with England, but no Government recall had come for William who indeed may have been seen as a valuable source of inside information on enemy affairs. It would be a difficult course for William to steer though there is no evidence that at this early stage in his French career he acted as a spy.

Wartime activities

Much has been made of the Wilkinsons' dealings with France at this time of hostilities between the two countries and extravagant accusations levied against them, from merely treacherous sympathies with an enemy power to charges of actively selling guns to both British and French Governments during the war. Huge quantities of iron piping in bores of three, six and twelve inches and in lengths of six and twelve feet, required for the new Paris water supply, lay on quaysides at both the Severn and the Dee ports for long periods waiting for transport across the Channel. This trade had been sanctioned and it is probable that the pipes

were mistaken for cannon; and although John made huge profits in the heavy wartime demand for his new improved cannon from the British government, there is no evidence that he was involved in direct sales of cannon to the French.

However, a measure of the government attitude to continuing trade in time of hostilities between the two nations is shown in a letter reporting political gossip to John Wilkinson from Joseph Priestley when he was living in London close to the corridors of power as war threatened again during the early 1790s.

“... That the French do not fear the war is evident enough though it is as evident that they wish to avoid it and are sincerely desirous for our friendship. It is said that the last ambassador, M Manet, was instructed that in case he could not make peace to propose that during the war merchandise should not be captured...”

Certainly new steam engines were exported to France in William's time as a consequence of sales he engineered and approved under passports provided by both governments. It is at first surprising, though it is not difficult to find examples of it in the modern world, that business activity of this kind continued between two countries at war and was sanctioned by both governments. The transactions are, however, well documented.

The fact remains that during the war William was making improved cannon at Indret for the French with clear access to his brother's works at Bersham. It contributed to the wilder accusations and might have provided a basis for charges of treason, which is perhaps why William had carefully written into his contract with the French the point that he must be at liberty to return to England, if his government demanded it.

Far from returning home at this difficult time, however, William took on further work for the French Government. He was after all well known and well regarded in France following the success of the Indret works, spoke fluent French, and moved easily in the highest social circles. It is significant that when a second cannon foundry was planned by the French Government to be built in Burgundy, known as Louis XVI's New Cannon Foundry, William Wilkinson was asked to undertake the initial survey and bring the works into production. It suggests that William was known to, and approved of by the King himself. Such credentials would give him immediate authority in his new area of operations, and the detail and thoroughness of his initial survey will have enhanced his reputation further,

Recent research has located the original manuscript document in Le Creusot, signed by William and read and approved by his old friend Paul Toufaire, the French engineer who helped him set up the Indret Works. It is an impressive catalogue of requirements showing precisely how the preparatory work should be staged; where investigations should begin of the available ores, the local clays for brick-making and the building timber resources of the region; what labour, materials and buildings would be needed on site at each stage of the process, with cost estimates provided; how substantial savings might be made by good preparation; and how the latest knowledge on iron-making processes from England might be incorporated into the scheme. The survey is presented in sections with sub-headings, is sequential and systematic and concludes with the following:

“... Slag from Forges

For some years it has been recognised in England that the slag from fineries or bloomeries mixed with the ore for blending in the blast furnace produces great advantages as much in the yield as in the quality of the iron, especially when one is aiming to make wrought iron. I believe it essential to establish this method of working in the furnaces here and for that I request that we acquire slag from the forges of Mesvrin and La Mothe and that it should be brought to the works before the furnaces are lit.

It will be necessary to negotiate with the Masters of these forges in order to secure these slags for the future, for in all likelihood when they see the use that will be made of them, they will be tempted to put up the price or to keep them for themselves.

At Montcenis the 16th October 1781
Read and approved

WILKINSON
P TOUFAIRE ”

The intention was to use coke as a furnace fuel under Francoise Ignace de Wendel's supervision as at Indret, and William lists in the survey report how the coking experiments on local coal supplies must be carried out and stocks of coke accumulated before iron production could begin. It is also another pointer toward an aspect of William's character that the management team at Le Creusot is composed of the same professional colleagues he worked with so successfully at Indret. He was paid 50,000 Livres a year, just over £2000 at then rates of exchange, for the period of the survey which took place between 1779 and 1781, and 72,000 Livres (£3000) a year from the time he was appointed manager of the Le Creusot works in that year until he finally returned to England in 1789. William's total salary in France over a period of nearly thirteen years therefore amounted to almost £30,000 at then values, with allowances,

expenses and tax benefits in addition; but the approaching Revolution and the danger to life and property of people in his position threatened this livelihood and broke up his circle of friends. De Wendel fled to Germany. Others were not so fortunate. Arthur Young, travelling in France just before the storm broke, visited both the Indret and the Le Creusot works after William had left.

“Nantes is as enflamme in the cause of liberty as any town in France can be; the conversations that I witnessed here prove how great a change is effected in the minds of the French, nor do I believe it will be possible for the present government to last half a century longer, unless the clearest and most dedicated talents be at the helm ...”

In Montcenis near Le Creusot on the 3rd August 1789, three weeks after the storming of the Bastille in Paris and less than two hundred miles distant, he yet found men speaking approvingly of "*Monsieur Weelkainsong*", whom they knew to be a brother-in-law of Dr Priestley and therefore a friend of mankind, and that he taught them to bore cannon in order to give liberty to America. In that context there is, however, a note of warning in Young's description of the Le Creusot works.

“... The establishment is very considerable; there are from 500 to 600 men employed, besides colliers; five steam engines are erected for giving the blasts and for boring; and a new one building...”

When he returned to England, William had become accustomed to wealth and status, and had proved that he was capable of bringing into production and successfully managing ironworks to match those of his brother; and he would be looking for an opportunity within his brother's empire appropriate to his French standing and success. Almost immediately friction developed between them.

William's return to England

The question immediately arises as to whether John Wilkinson saw William's return as a threat to his own position, and how far the attitude and expectations of William provoked this. Undoubtedly the William who returned would be a prouder, more assured, more sophisticated man than the William who had left thirteen years before, and John might not have been able to treat this new William as an equal. Of itself that would be enough for differences of opinion immediately, and tension, ultimately friction. Their sister, Mary, from evidence in the Priestley letters, also quarrelled with William at this time. Reporting her death in America in 1796 her husband, Dr Joseph Priestley wrote to her brother John as follows:

“...She always warmly took your part and would never believe your father’s account of your using him ill. To your brother William she had the affection of a mother but his behaviour to her on his return from France shocked her in such a manner as I cannot describe and she never recovered it...”

It may be, therefore, that there was arrogance and insensitive braggadocio in the attitude and posture of William on his return to England which family and friends other than John found difficult to accept.

There is, however, evidence of a failure by John to pay William his due share of profits as a partner in the Bersham works throughout the period of his stay in France. John might have thought that William with his huge French salary did not need the money, but had acknowledged somewhat ungraciously that profits were owing to him from 1777 when William raised the matter at a meeting in Belgium in 1782. William had asked for a written acknowledgement of this and confirmation of his $\frac{1}{8}$ share in the Bersham works, and this seems to have been provided. Since nothing had been paid to William up to the time he returned temporarily in 1784, however, he went through the Bersham accounts (as he was entitled to do as a shareholder) and found many irregularities. He took these up with John, who then agreed that £800 should be taken from the Bersham profits and paid into their private accounts in the ratio 7 to 1. William said no money had been paid to him up to the time he left France for good in 1789.

An earlier return from France by William is recorded by Anne Watt in a letter to her husband in August 1786, when William dined with her before setting off for Castle Head, and it seems clear that during the three years between 1786 and 1789 he moved frequently between France and the Wilkinson properties in this country. It was during this period that he made a detailed inventory of the various ironworks in France and of the tonnage and type of iron made in each. The document dated 5th February 1787 is not signed and is not addressed to any person or concern. It might have been simply for William’s own reference on his return to England which he clearly saw as imminent, his prospects by then uncertain. Such detailed information would be extremely useful to any future employer.

William took the opportunity during these return visits to examine further his brother’s Books of Accounts, which in the case of the Bersham and the Snedshill Works was his right as a shareholder. The complaints of irregularities he made to his brother clearly fell on stony ground and their differences then festered until the point of his final return.

At that point William offered to sell his Bersham interest to his brother “... *for a sum greatly below the value thereof...*”, but John’s response in a reply dated 30 October 1789 was dismissive: “... *have come to a Resolution not to sell or buy. I should decline the latter did you offer it for the cons’n of 5/- a sum in the Law used to convey a gift...*”. Their disagreements then steadily escalated into the bitter dispute which ended in the litigation of 1795 and 1796.

The escalating dispute

As the dispute with his brother deteriorated into bitter recriminations on each side, John must have realised that the days of the New Bersham Company were numbered as a hugely profitable enterprise effectively under his sole control, and he began to look around for alternatives. With his preference for locating in one place as many of the processes attendant upon iron-making as possible, he would be seeking a small estate in the area with its own mineral resources. In 1791 he bought such an estate at Hadley, though perhaps at that time with a view to replacing his Willey works as his lease there ended, and in fact he did not immediately build a furnace and ironworks there.

In June of the following year, however, he bought the Brymbo estate in Denbighshire. It came with an impressive mansion house, designed by Ingo Jones, and lands which provided him not only with a source of iron ore but also with coal deposits. He clearly intended to develop another large industrial complex just five miles to the north of Bersham. The estate cost £14,000 and he had to call in credit to pay for it; and an indication of a waning confidence in his affairs began to show in a new attitude by tradesmen to his money tokens by then circulating freely in local markets.

The worsening dispute between the brothers can be traced in the letters during this period between John Wilkinson and his young protégé from Kendal, then his Clerk of Works at Bersham, Gilbert Gilpin. With an obvious regard for both brothers while yet employed by John, Gilbert’s position was a difficult one and the letters make clear that in his attempts to avoid the extreme positions of each he lost the confidence of both. As the dispute progressed, his attitude to John, his employer, became less sympathetic while yet continuing to protest his loyalty and support, though it was William who would eventually threaten him with litigation for what he perceived to be an obstructive interference in his interests. Clearly both brothers made him listen to their own side of the case so that Gilbert was perhaps better informed about their dispute than anyone else. In what amounted to his resignation letter he made one last determined attempt to mediate.

“Sir,

As near as I can recollect the last time that W. W. was at the works was the 15th of last month. He did come into the counting hse but not attempt to look into the books. He was in the counting house when your letter ordering that he was not to see the books in future arrived, & I in course showed it to him. He intimated that such refusal was then of no consequence because he had paid sufficient attention to those matters for some years past; & that though you had denied him access to the books (which you had no right to do even if he was possessed of only a hundredth part of the concern) he would have all the information he wanted brought into court.

Untill very lately he used to come to the work as usual, & in all the conversations which we have had on the subjects of the dispute which exists between you and him he declared, that as you and him could not agree to settle it yourselves, he had proposed some years ago to refer the whole to Dr Priestley, but that you declined it, and wrote a note which is now in his possession (a copy of which will form a part of the amendment to the Bersham Bill) saying that you could not agree to have the business settled in that manner untill you had sent J. Priestley to the continent to learn what engagements he had entered into there that might be binding upon you. He had repeatedly requested that the matter might be settled by arbitration but that you always evaded it & which would be proved by your own hand writing at a proper time. That seeing no other method of procuring a settlement, and you having particularly advised him to (.....?) he had been under the disagreeable necessity of endeavouring to obtain it by the laws of his country. His reason for not answering Mr Harper’s letters was, that as you seemed determined to have no correspondence with him but through some organ of the law you should have an answer in that way at a proper time. Had you wrote to him yourself or were you to do so now, I am persuaded you would have an answer immediately; and I am pretty certain that he would have no manner of objection even now to have the matter referred to your mutual friends...

...I have come to a determination to try my fortune in the new world. The time of my departure I wish to make as convenient as possible to you, & could I get off with the ships that sail in the latter end of April or the beginning of May I should be perfectly satisfied.

I am sir, Yr .hble ser. G.G.”

Gilbert’s attempt at reconciliation was to no avail. He was summoned to Castle Head with the Bersham books and papers in April 1794 to study William’s Bills of Complaint and help to provide some answers.

This conference will have contributed to the strategy John evolved to deal with William's claims and complaints, in which he sold (or stated his intention of selling) his interest in the Bersham works to three of his relations in exchange for a bond from each of them. The three were Richard Watson, grandson of his father's eldest brother and by then his agent at Castle Head; Thomas Jones, son of his sister Sarah, and closely involved with the Bersham management up to this time; and William Johnston, son of his mother's brother and then manager of the Bradley Ironworks. From what Gilbert Gilpin says in a later letter, it seems unlikely that any money actually changed hands at the time and in fact the transaction in the later litigation put the affairs of all three of them at risk; while John continued to refuse to deal with William direct, referring to him as "... *a self created & violent turbulent Person bent upon Mischief...*" In the summer of 1795 the Hearings began.

The hearing in Chancery

William's Bill of Complaint to Chancery was detailed and carefully presented. He was owed a $\frac{1}{8}$ share of the profits in the Bersham Company from 1777 to date, and a $\frac{1}{8}$ share of the profits in the Snedshill Works from 1778 to the end of the lease in 1793. None of this money had been credited to him, and his attempts to establish his claim by reference to the Company Records had now been frustrated by his brother's denying him access to the Books. However, his earlier examination of the books had showed that the Bersham Works were very profitable and that the recent lead smelting furnaces there had increased profits; that John continued to shift money between his various businesses at his own financial convenience without proper accounting; that he had used £16,000 of Bersham profits to increase the Company capital without reference to William, who as a partner had been billed for $\frac{1}{8}$ of this amount when he should have been paid $\frac{1}{8}$ of it; that he had concealed transfers out of the Bersham accounts to his other businesses when the Bersham profits were high, particularly to the London Lead Company at Rotherhithe, thus avoiding tax and depriving William of his dues; and that clerks of works at all his business premises were now instructed not to allow William access to their books.

In his reply, predominantly with reference to William's $\frac{1}{8}$ share in the Snedshill company, which he acknowledged, John dismissed this "...*swaggering epistle...*" as clear evidence that William did not understand the detail of company accounting procedures. Since the Snedshill Company affairs were not finally settled and a closing balance sheet was not yet available to enable profits to be paid out, his claims were premature and unnecessary. Moreover, William had deliberately tried to create confusion between the two companies, "...*the said*

Furnace at Snedshill being always considered as part of and appendage to the said concern at Bersham..." This appears reasonable until John "...*humbly hopes...*" the Court will not require his "... *General Books of Account... which contain much irrelevant matter...*", though he agrees to produce his weighing books which show weights IN of raw materials and weights OUT of iron deliveries from the furnace.

John then denies to the Court any recollection of writing any of the letters attributed to him of which William had produced copies, and of the verbatim quotes used by William in further support of his claim. He answers William's claims of financial malpractice point by point, acknowledging his $\frac{1}{8}$ share in the Bersham Company but denying any fraudulent accounting, claiming again William had not understood the accounting procedures. The impression remains at the end of the evidence in this claim and counter-claim, however, that Bersham had been hugely profitable and that nothing had been paid to William for his $\frac{1}{8}$ share between 1777 and 1794.

Arbitration

Throughout the period of litigation John tried to frustrate the Court Directions again and again by delays in responding and requests for more time. The eventual outcome was an agreement from each side to go to arbitration. Since this had been urged from William's side before the costly litigation began, it must be that at this late stage John could see a decision of the Court going against him. Four Arbitrators were nominated and agreed, William Fawcett, Thomas Bennion, William Robertson and William Reynolds. Their Award, though largely in favour of William, did try to strike a balance.

The costs of the arbitration were to be paid out of the Bersham Ironworks business. John clearly objected to this since the value of their holdings in the business were 7 to 1 in his favour, and since these costs would be comparable it meant effectively that John was paying most of William's costs. Next, William's claim for back payment of monies due to him out of the partnership was accepted. He was awarded £8850 to be paid in two equal installments direct to him from the partnership bank, Messrs Eyton, Reynolds & Wilkinson, at six-monthly intervals over the following year. Each side was to bear its own litigation costs at law and in equity, including the costs of getting their respective bills and claims against each other dismissed by the end of the next(Trinity)Term. Finally, William was to be available as a future signatory to any outstanding partnership transactions that required it, with any costs involved to be paid by John. The Award was dated 2 May 1796.

In a letter to Boulton & Watt enclosing these details, William says it is “*the first Meeting of the Arbitrators,*” and that it indicates “*their Determination to sell the Works and dissolve the Partnership. And in the Mean Time to convert the divers Effects into Cash.*” Since this is what ultimately happened it seems that at least one further meeting was held. William’s account in the same letter of what happened at the meeting of 2 May 1796 is revealing.

“... *The Meeting was very amicable as far as the Arbitrators were concerned but My Brother would not join us. And he sat in an Adjoining Room where he had everything conveyed to him by Mr Reynolds and his Meat was sent him from our Table so that all heat was prevented and the Meeting was as pleasant as a Business of this Nature could be...* “

It did not end there. William had to go back to the Court for a further order against John’s non-compliance with the Arbitration Award before the matter was resolved, and there are interesting references in other letters of the mid-1790s to this bitter quarrel between the brothers, which endured until they died.

Gilbert Gilpin, whose sympathies in the dispute increasingly lay with William, left John’s employ shortly after judgement had been given with neither his permission nor his blessing. It was a cause of anxiety to Gilbert over the next few years as he tried to find another position among rumours that John intended to do him down. Gilbert’s rambling gossipy letters, mostly to William Wilkinson, may be neither entirely reliable nor impartial but they reflect a close knowledge of the late 18th century iron trade and the inter-connected personalities involved.

“...*In respect to your brother’s assertion...He may perhaps still have it in idea to prevent any person, or persons, who do not keep upon good terms with him from doing anything in the iron line in England France or America... But the most material matter which gave rise to my conjecture was the report of a Mr Wilson of Sheffield who I met with in the coffee room at the Shakespeare in Birmingham about three weeks ago. On hearing that I had been an agent of Mr W he informed me that on coming through Wrexham he heard two men discoursing on the subject of a Mr Gilpin who had lately left the employment of Mr W against his consent, & that it was the intention of the said Mr W to do him all the injury in his power...*”

It is perhaps not surprising in view of such rumours that Gilbert rejoiced whenever he heard anything to the discredit of his former master and reported it to his correspondents at every opportunity. The subject of the

following conversation is Mr Reynolds who will be the William Reynolds of the Arbitration Board, thought to be sympathetic to John rather than William.

"...I... then mentioned the offer of Mr Fawcett, which he recommended me by all means to accept, & then mentioned the probability of an opposition from J. W. in such case. This he made a laugh at & said, 'What does any of his oppositions effect? He is now selling his rods at 16/- & we ours at 22/-'..."

In the summer of 1794 Dr Joseph Priestley, who was married to the Wilkinsons' sister Mary, had emigrated to America. He was financially beholden to both brothers but more so to John who had supported him for many years. Throughout the following year he received at least three reports from Richard Watson about the progress of the lawsuit, clearly on John's instruction, as well as sets of accounts and complaints from both brothers

His sympathies lay with John, applauding what he sees as *"... the judgement and still more the excellent temper... of your several attempts to bring the dispute to an amicable reference..."* He had tried to reason with William from whom he had received *"...only short letters on the subject... from which it is impossible to form any clear idea of the nature of his complaints..."*, but to no avail. He then urged them to find a mediator who could lead them back from recourse to litigation and the ruin that he feared would ensue. Financial ruin for the Wilkinsons meant, of course, an end to the financial subsidies he received from them himself, and he clearly felt very exposed on this count as a pioneer settler in America. He mentions Samuel More as a possible mediator but he by then was seriously ill and not expected to live.

There is an interesting glimpse into a significant moment in the dispute in one of the Priestley letters. After words of solace and re-assurance to John, Priestley says:

"... The same ship that brought Mr Watson's letter of June 26th brought me one from your brother of May 26th, a copy of my answer to which I enclose though I wish you would not give him any intimation that I have done so. What he says (and what you want to know) concerning your proposal to him to take back (?) is as follows: 'At the end of six days when he found things to go against him he decided I would take the whole works at Bersham and Bradley into his – he must have meant my – hands and that he would give up all the direction and give me a bond not to interfere and would even

withdraw his name from the concern. To this indignant offer I replied I would sooner put my hand into a fire than accede.'.."

Priestley's anxieties about the danger to his financial support from John Wilkinson if the dispute came to trial were justified. News of the settlement, which he clearly thought was too heavily in William's favour and unfair to John, was quickly followed by a letter from Richard Watson declaring that Priestley was more than £6000 in debt to John, this reckoning almost certainly a result of the legal process and the consequent listing of John's assets. With the spectre of further litigation looming, he seeks re-assurance from John about Richard Watson's letter and urges him to accept the result with resignation and sue for peace. It did not happen.

Continuing bitterness

Either in anticipation or as a consequence of the arbitration award, John first tried to dispose of his shareholding to his relations as described already, clearly with the intention of retaining ultimate control. William would have none of it and his dismissal of this plan appears to have been one of the issues the Arbitrators had to settle.

A sale of Bersham to take place at the end of November 1795 was arranged by the Arbitrators. In the weeks beforehand William appears confident of his position and increasingly disposed to bid for the Bersham Works himself. He secretly involves himself in a plan with James Watt Jnr to smuggle into the works a man "...*who you are sure my brother or his satellites did not know...*" to make an inventory of the goods and machinery on site, the better to enable William to make his bid. One can imagine all machinery stopped at the great ironworks at this time, the furnaces blown out and the place largely deserted and silent, locked up and under guard.

In the event William did purchase the Bersham Ironworks and so became responsible once more for the Works where he began his career as an ironmaster. There is sadness, disappointment, even bitterness in his brother's letter to Matthew Boulton the following week.

*"...8th December 1795, Dear Sir,
Your favour of the 29th ult. was delivered me by your son but my engagements during the sale of Bersham and the things attendant upon it, which put that place once more into the hands of its old Possessor, took so much of my thoughts that I had it not in my power to answer it on his return... There is now an end of all connection between W> W> and me, except in closing the Accounts which will be done prior to the meeting of the Arbitrators in April next..."*

John by this time had his new works at Brymbo in production and his policy before and after the sale to William would have been to claim the major part of the Bersham moveable goods and machinery as his own and transfer them to Brymbo as indeed he was permitted to do under the Arbitration Award. It would nonetheless be a further cause of continuing bitterness between them.

Both brothers appeared anxious to retain the goodwill of Boulton & Watt, who were now old men like themselves. John's approach, in measured language, is to reassure them as creditors of the New Bersham Company up to the time of the sale, with a concern to see their unpaid bills transferred out of the Arbitration process direct to him for payment. He refers to the long standing trust and friendship between them threatened in this dispute with his brother, and hopes that "*the Unity of the Trinity which once subsisted may probably again take place ...*" He re-assures them of his earnest wish to resolve all grievances between them and receives in turn from them the wish "*... to preserve that friendship, peace and harmony...*" of earlier days. William had a different approach.

As soon as the Bersham works were sold, he began a malicious process of turning opinion against his brother, particularly through his contact with the Boulton and Watt operations. He felt he had good allies there in Matthew Robinson Boulton and James Watt Junior, who had been deputed by their parents to find up and down the country the new Watt Steam engines that had been erected without licenses and were known as pirate engines. Because of the delays in obtaining the licenses and the consequent frustration to intended purchasers, John Wilkinson had been advising his friends, and notably James Stockdale of Cark, to proceed independently of Boulton and Watt. He then provided the iron cylinders and parts for the engines, either himself or through his contacts direct to the purchaser, with the services of an engine erector thrown in but without the knowledge of Boulton and Watt.

In granting a license to use their engines, Boulton & Watt contracted to receive premiums at half-yearly intervals for the remaining duration of their patent, calculated on the basis of a one third fuel saving on the old Newcomen engine. These pirate engines therefore cheated them of substantial revenue since no premiums were paid. Soon after joining the company, the two sons, with the help of William Wilkinson and other spies, were commissioned to find the pirate engines and by recourse to litigation, though often the threat of it was sufficient, secure the necessary premiums for the company and backdate them. William exploited these opportunities to discredit his brother in the mid 1790s,

and even succeeded in driving a wedge between John and his old friend and agent, James Stockdale of Cark. It came about in a curious way.

William and the Stockdales

On New Year's Day 1791, William, then 47 years old, married for the first time a widow, Mrs Elizabeth Kirkes, then living in Liverpool, a daughter of James Stockdale of Cark. This meant that as the dispute with his brother grew in strength and bitterness, William had close and regular access as an intimate within the Stockdale family to one of his brother's oldest friends. It is known that he provided information to Boulton and Watt about his brother's pirate engines but then came the curious twist in the story. Boulton and Watt found a clear breach of their patent in James Stockdale's Cark Engine and took action against the company. Although he might not have known until late that the Cark engine was a pirate engine, William had clearly decided to keep quiet about it. He then realised the difficulties of his position. On the one hand, he had supported Boulton & Watt in their campaign against these engines and was particularly friendly with the two sons who were leading the prosecutions. On the other, his own father-in-law, a well-respected figure in the industrial and commercial affairs of the day and an old friend of Boulton and Watt senior, now stood accused.

When it was clear that Boulton & Watt intended to proceed against Thackeray, Stockdale & Co, William moved quickly. First, he summoned his father-in-law to his home at Court near Wrexham.

"...I am particularly desirous of seeing you here upon a Business which I cannot write you upon and which concerns you. I think I can be of service to you therein and the sooner you come here the better..."

The letter has an urgent, even imperious, tone. William's intention was to set up a face-to-face meeting with James Watt Junior to try to settle the affair quietly and so protect his father-in-law. Perhaps surprisingly, there was massive goodwill towards their old friend from the Boulton & Watt camp, who chose to proceed against Thackeray, and also Bradley, the maker of the pirate engine parts, without naming James Stockdale in the litigation. This decision is confirmed in a letter from James Watt Junior shortly after the meeting, and a month later his father is also writing to thank William for his friendly interference.

"... We are very much concerned that Mr Stockdale should be implicated anyways in this matter...no unfriendly steps should be taken against him or the other innocent members of the Cark Company..."

William was able to be of further service to his father-in-law when Thackeray, after due procrastination, finally agreed to accept Boulton & Watt's nomination of him as arbitrator to establish what money was due in settlement; and managed to reduce their claim from £762. 10s. to £550, which Boulton & Watt accepted with perfect satisfaction.

It would be helpful to know how William and his father-in-law related to one another at this time. The slightly high-handed tone of William's letter summoning James Stockdale to Wrexham could suggest William's dominance and an impatience and embarrassment through his connection. On the other hand his wife had just produced their first baby girl, and it might have been a kindly intervention to support a well-respected old man who was failing. Certainly it will have given William some influence with James Stockdale, confirmed in a letter about this time to Matthew Boulton about the approaching Arbitrators' meeting in his own dispute with his brother.

"Dear Sir,

*I am desired by Mr James Stockdale of Cark to acquaint you that He and my Brother are about getting quit of each other and settling their Transactions in Business. They have ... copper at Stourport one half of which ...Mr Stockdale has ordered to be delivered to your care ...
...My Brother wants to postpone the Settlement of our Disputes until another year and objects to let me have access to the Books. As this is expressly provided for by the rule of Court I shall see Mr Reynolds on the way and in Case I cannot have that right without an Appeal to the Court of Kings Bench that must take place the next Term. I am more and more convinced that Nothing but Compulsion will ever induce JW to settle our disputes however I am not afraid of him ..."*

The Arbitrators meeting listed for the middle of April 1796 to close the Bersham books was further delayed at John's request but with William's concurrence, which means he, too, wasn't quite ready for the denouement. He had been busy in the spring and early summer breaking up the old loyalties to his brother at the Bersham Works by getting rid of key figures like Abram Storey, clearly a man of some authority there, Thomas Matthews, a borer and turner at Bersham for 26 years, and one Kendrick, who seemed to be completing orders that had been in hand at the time of the sale. Most of these men he tried to place in the Boulton & Watt empire. By July, Abram Storey was already there.

"...A. Storey by writing to Kendrick might have the choice of any men at Bersham as they are chiefly leaving it... (and then a new attempt to discredit his brother) ...Abram's successor was at Brymbo ten days but as he never was so sober as to get up and dress himself he has

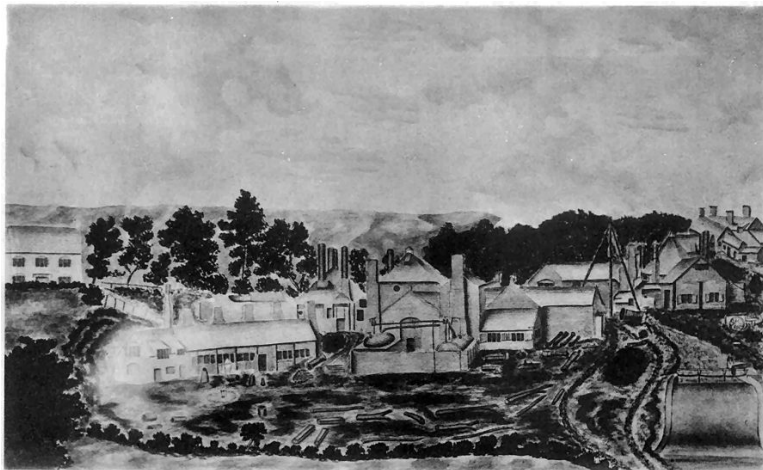
been discharged and is to be replaced by a family from South Wales whom Crawshay has discharged for being drunk and insolent. JW will have no other iron than that of Brymbo which on being remelted into guns is so hard as not to be bor'd, but none else will he purchased..."

The run down of Bersham

It seems likely that by this time William had decided to sell the Bersham Ironworks and would have had Boulton & Watt in mind as prospective purchasers. He was dealing with a canny businessman of course, and Matthew Boulton would have no scruples about accepting any early benefits of a potential transaction without committing himself. William meantime clearly wished to play down both the Bersham Ironworks and his brother's reduced empire as any kind of competition.

By this time the Arbitrators had pronounced on the complications of the Bersham Accounts, with the financial settlement between the brothers in the final closing of the books very substantially in favour of William. He is well pleased with himself.

"...JW is no Economist of harsh terms in respect to the Arbitrators whom he blames as having acted very unjustly, and sent for Mr Fawcett since you saw him at Soho to get him to sign a Voluminous Number of Observations drawn up by JW and Watson all tending to accuse the Arbitrators himself and Gilpin of partiality for me in the settlement. Fawcett went home much displeas'd at JW's ideas of his consistency as he informed me that he could not do it if he had given



Bersham Ironworks

him £20,000. JW stated the necessity of it saying in the present state of appeared he had acted unjustly and that he should be dishonoured amongst his acquaintance to whom he wished to shew Mr Fawcatt's Approbation of his Statement of the case between us.

This I hope will amuse you as well as that he sends the Creditors of the late concern to Me for Payment. I have wrote to Weston and expect we shall be obliged to move the Court for an Attachment against him for Contempt as the Time for his objecting to the Award is past and now he objects to the Performance (of) it in certain respects. He won't pay the Expenses of Fawcett or the Travell Charges of the Arbitrators which he is ordered to do. Watson and he are like to quarrel as the won't give him anything for his Time or pay him for his Living with him for he has not got the better of Me. His conduct is at once Mean and laughable..."

It is clear from William's letter that John was bitter about the Arbitrators' decisions and had begun a process of attrition to waste William's resources by forcing him repeatedly back to the Court for new and confirmatory judgments. The case of the Maas-y-fynnon lead mine is a good illustration. John Wilkinson had been the principal for thirteen years in this concern which had provided lead ore, prior to the sale of Bersham, to the very profitable lead furnaces he had established there.

On the 29th October 1796, following the Arbitrators' settlement in the Spring and what was clearly a very stormy General Meeting with opposing sides present held that day at the Eagle Inn, Wrexham, John posted handbills in the area of the mine, dismissing Robert Burton as mine agent and appointing a Mr William Jones of Pwlygo in his place. John's supporters included Richard Watson and Thomas Jones, who was also claimed to have power of attorney for the votes of Joseph Thackeray and Benjamin Satterthwaite, principal defendants in the Cark Engine litigation.

William riposted immediately with another handbill in which,

"... The Public are hereby informed that the above Hand-bill is a total misrepresentation of facts, as John Wilkinson, Thomas Jones, John Jones, Richard Watson, Joseph Thackeray, and Benjamin Satterthwaite are no longer Partners in the Concern, having severally forfeited their shares therein for neglect in paying their quotas of a call to reimburse the expences incurred in prosecuting the work, being first thereunto required by notice in the London Gazette of the 17th of September last..."

The Public are also informed that at the meeting alluded to in the Hand-bill, Mr Burton was continued the Agent and Treasurer of the

Concern by a majority in value of the real Partners present; and it was the opinion of such Partners that it was unadvisable in them to admit Mr John Wilkinson director of the Concern, he having to the present time refused to render satisfactory Accounts during the space of thirteen years he was intrusted with the management thereof or even to permit the Partners to inspect and investigate the same, altho' required by several of their resolutions so to do; and for which legal proceedings are instituting against him. We shall now be silent and wait the event of a legal investigation..."

John Wilkinson's newly appointed acting agent to the mine, William Jones, posts yet another handbill, dated the following day, saying this is all nonsense. His principals paid their share of the costs in full, the account books show this and will be kept in a safe place until Robert Burton clears up his own accounts of expenses in the mine "*and which there appears no other Means of making him do but by Legal Proceedings.*" The stage is therefore set for yet another expensive legal battle which will waste the energies and resources of both sides.

Relations with Boulton & Watt

John Wilkinson's differences with Boulton and Watt were only partly due to the problems of disentangling his accounts with them at Bersham in the escalation of his dispute with William, who clearly wished to sour the long-standing business relationship if he could. With weasel words of derogation here and there in his own letters to Boulton and Watt, and particularly to their sons, he took every opportunity to do so and made no secret of it. John was certainly aware of what was happening but hoped his long standing relationship with his old business associates would be strong enough to survive such tactics. As his dispute with William reached a climax he writes to Matthew Boulton:

"... When the disagreeable business which at present takes up too much of my time is ended I hope to have an opportunity of seeing you, and am persuaded that all apparent clashing of sentiments and interests can easily be rectified and that you will be convinced I have at all times been much more your friend than the person who has taken such pains to injure me in your opinion, and to blow up if possible a flame between us. I trust however he will always fail in the attempt, and that when we meet a plan may be adopted by which our interests may more closely than ever united, both in the engine and foundry business"

In spite of John's expressly declared wish to resolve their differences and retrieve the old mutually useful harmony, Boulton and Watt were

polite, concurred where they could but maintained their distance. A number of issues were relevant. First, John Wilkinson, with his loss of Bersham and with the Willey lease ending, was clearly not the power in the land that he had been. Second, with William's connivance, there were skilled workmen available to Boulton & Watt with the running down of the Bersham works. Third, Watt's patent was due to expire in 1800, and with John Wilkinson involved in a host of pirate engines and with their sons' increasing success in obtaining the back premiums for them through litigation, there was money to be realised to replace any shortfall in profits from new engines. That, of course, could only be to the detriment of a continuing business relationship with John.

There is an interesting reference to John's closing of the Bersham works, during the litigation and before the arbitrators' judgment, in James Watt's memorandum seeking to identify the causes of the stand-off between Wilkinson and Boulton & Watt about the time the dispute between the brothers came to conclusion. He says:

"...his unfortunate contest with his brother made him suspicious of us and in a fit of rashness, probably with an intention to be revenged on both parties, he stopt his works at Bersham, which whether intended or not was a cruel stroke at our business, for engines which we had contracted for could not be executed in due time for want of the castings & the Coalbrookdale Company to whose solicitations for part of our business we had always given a refusal on account of our connexion with him, have not shown much alacrity in executing our orders when necessity obliged us to apply to them..."

It had never been a completely harmonious association and survived largely because it was mutually useful and brought good profits to both sides. They were never friends in the way that John Wilkinson and Samuel More were friends, and although they had social and family contact at each other's homes theirs was essentially a business relationship. When the two businesses came into conflict, profits fell and contact and friendships faded.

Bitterness to the end

The bitterness between the brothers endured until they died. Occasional references to it can be found in Gilbert Gilpin's later letters to William Wilkinson about the turn of the century. It is clear that Gilbert's continuing association with the Wilkinson family, which had endured since his boyhood in Kendal, was through William rather than John.

Both brothers retired, perhaps surprisingly, to the place of their roots in the north and in their last years lived within a few miles of each other on

the northern shores of Morecambe Bay, John at Castle Head, William just over the hill at Cark, where from the Stockdales' family home he mounted further aggressive and enduring litigation, this time against the Parish Council for their failure to maintain the roads. Randall gives a good account of this. John spent his last ten years in a determined quest for an heir, his wife at Castle Head, his mistress at Brymbo, he commuting regularly between... but that is another story. Both brothers died in 1808, John aged 80, William, aged 64, and still on terms with the Boulton & Watt empire since he named James Watt Junior and Matthew Robinson Boulton as two of his executors. John's will and its consequences are part of that other story.

Sources:

Birmingham City Archives. Boulton & Watt Collection. Correspondence with John and William Wilkinson.

Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust. Janet Butler Papers (1992.10018).

Lancashire Record Office. Stockdale Family Papers (DdHr).

Public Record Office. Chancery Records (C12 and C33). Bills of Complaint of Isaac Wilkinson (1768) and William Wilkinson (1794).

Shropshire Archives. Shackerley Papers (1781/6/10). Letters of Gilbert Gilpin.

Warrington Reference Library. Priestley Letters.

Aris's Birmingham Gazette (20 April 1829).

Young, Arthur, '*Travels in France and Italy, 1787-89*' (London 1794)

Braid, D., 'The Transfer of John Wilkinson's Technology: William Wilkinson in France', *Ordinance Society Newsletter No.9* (Jan.1990).

Chaloner, W.H., 'Isaac Wilkinson: Potfounder', in L.S. Pressnell, ed., *Studies in the Industrial Revolution* (London 1960).

Chaloner, W.H., 'The Stockdale Family, the Wilkinson brothers, and the Cotton Mills at Cark-in-Cartmel, c.1782-1800', *Cumberland & Westmorland Archaeological & Antiquarian Papers*, xxiv (1964), p.356.

Lake, D., Translation of William Wilkinson's Survey from the original manuscript in French (Le Creusot), *BLHS Journal No.23* (2001).

The Hornblower Saga

by Paul Andrew Luter

During 1779, while the Iron Bridge was being constructed at Madeley Wood, it is of interest to understand what was occurring in other parts of the Coalbrookdale Company Empire. Research by the author into the letters from the Boulton & Watt collection at Birmingham Reference Library has helped us shed light on occurrences involving the Reynolds and Rathbone families, who were involved in other projects at the time. At this time, the twenty-one year old William Reynolds (1758-1803) was working with his father Richard (1735-1816) and his uncle Joseph Rathbone (1746-1790) in refining working practices and expanding engineering facilities at the other Coalbrookdale Company enterprises at Donnington Wood, Horsehay and Ketley, where large ironworks needed updating with machinery to carry out orders successfully.

In a letter from William Reynolds to James Watt dated 10th May 1780, we discover the reason William Reynolds was not more involved in the construction of the Iron Bridge. William tells us that “*we are putting up a mill at the Dale to bore cylinders in the manner John Wilkinson bores his. We wish to give orders for cylinders, water and air pumps to the Dale Company.*” Other contextual information shows that during 1779 Richard and William Reynolds had been focused on improving company facilities at Coalbrookdale and were almost entirely consumed with the fitting of new process technology; and this helps us to understand other business conducted by the Coalbrookdale Company during 1779.

In that year the young engineer named Jabez Carter Hornblower (1744-1814), who was employed by Boulton and Watt at Soho Manufactory, Birmingham, first comes to our attention. He was the son of Jonathan Hornblower, an engineer of Stafford, and his wife Ann Carter, who was baptised at Broseley St Leonard’s church on 10th January 1744. His letters cover the period 1779-81, when he was working for the Reynolds family at Donnington Wood and Ketley. Prior to his arrival, in February 1778, Mr John Hall, senior engineer for Boulton and Watt at Soho, had visited the Ketley Ironworks and had inspected the proposed new engine site with William Reynolds.

Soon after this visit on 8th February 1779, Hall was informed by Soho that the parts would not be ready for another ten weeks. However, seven days later Hall had received the drawings for the Ketley engine from William Playfair, engineer of Soho. Earlier, in May 1777, Playfair had erected John Wilkinson's Snedshill Works blast engine. By April 1778, Playfair along with John Hall and a man named Peplow erected the beams and pump of the new Ketley furnace engine. At the same time at Soho, Boulton and Watt were also manufacturing a new engine, which they called on the "*Canal Engine*", for Donnington Wood. At this time Richard and William Reynolds were overseeing both these projects for the Coalbrookdale Company.

In 1779, the thirty-five year old Hornblower arrived on the scene and on 16th January wrote a progress report to Matthew Boulton, saying "*I have this day been at Ketley and Donnington Wood where I spoke to Mr Hall. He is going to Bersham tomorrow. Mr Gilbert is in Lancashire. I am rather at loss respecting my conduct at Donnington Wood as the workmen and the smiths want constant directions. I also waited on Mr Richard Reynolds who intimates that he has no desire of making any alterations in the engine. He thinks it has no fault, except what arises from the boiler. He has also observed that the report of a new boiler is premature and what I have to observe respecting the engine is that the boiler still continues leaking. The fire burns very deadly and the grates are very dark and full of ashes and the flues are very sooty. Mr Hall has intimated an intention of enlarging the injection in order to make a quicker stroke, but Mr William Reynolds says a quicker stroke will make the clacks smack harder. He added that the engine works quick enough to keep the water in check and it would be best to dispense with the quicker stroke. In all Mr Reynolds seemed to think a cataract unnecessary as he says it works slow enough, but upon enquiring I found that when the engines are at work the water comes up to the blast holes in the new engine, which they are obliged to stop sometimes as the engines throw up more water than expected by the wheels.*"

On January 21st, Hornblower expressed some concern as to whether he should be able to keep the workmen at Donnington Wood without some new drawing or design of the engine Richard Reynolds told Hornblower to communicate with Boulton and Watt the differences he felt as to the boiler. Reynolds told Hornblower, Mr Boulton would

appreciate his directions. Nevertheless, Hornblower complained that changes were needed as the condenser of the engine was leaking badly. Five days later, on 26th January, Hornblower wrote from Mr Joseph Taylor's house at Donnington Wood that Mr John Hall had secured the making of new parts for the Donnington Wood canal engine at Bersham ironworks, but needed to consult with Mr Thomas Gilbert, who would be in Lancashire until the 9th February 1779.

On 22nd February 1779, Hornblower communicated the fact that he felt Richard Reynolds engine at Ketley needed a cataract put to it. By 15th April 1779, some two months later, a new arch had been completed for the canal engine at Donnington Wood. However, further problems surfaced at Ketley after the arrival of Mr Logan Henderson from Hawkesbury Colliery, Bedworth near Coventry. The first technical assistant for Boulton and Watt had sent John Hall new drawings and then, because of some concern by Reynolds, decided to attend personally to discuss Reynolds's problems. On 3rd May 1779, Jabez Hornblower was asked to attend the Ketley engine urgently and later, on his return to Mr Taylor's home, an argument erupted with Mr Jones, Reynolds's Bailiff at Donnington Wood. Hornblower was so concerned that on 29th May he wrote to Matthew Boulton about the incident: *"I opposed the bailiff Jones otherwise the engine would have been all in pieces."*

During June 1779, Hornblower described the firemen of Ketley furnaces as very tardy in their operation of the engine. This comment became public knowledge and during June animosity toward him grew amongst the workmen. Although Hornblower busied himself during most of July, testing the capabilities of the new engine at Ketley, by late July 1779 the complaint against him had grown so loud that Mr Matthew Boulton of Soho was forced to re-assign him to Cornwall and bring in another engineer to help at Ketley and Donnington Wood. On 30th July 1779, Matthew Boulton received a letter from Hornblower about his re-assignment to Cornwall in which he stated he was sick of the complaining in Ketley and Donnington Wood *"because they have called me to their frivolous accidents in the middle of the night several times"*, and when he stopped the engine there were complaints. The bailiff Mr Jones stopped up the chimney with bricks and clay through malice, and the capstan broke. This and the fact the carpenters were frequently called away to concerns elsewhere and were never available. In all, Hornblower states he was ashamed of the Donnington

Wood engine and he felt nothing could be done at Ketley until some rain filled their pool. By 4th August Hornblower wrote that the “*infamous hypocrite*” Mr Jones had incensed the men who were dependent on him and had insulted Hornblower “*with the most insulting language*”. On 11th August Hornblower returned from Cornwall to attend a burst injection pipe at the Ketley engine, and later that month commented about the slovenly manner of the smiths at Ketley. However, on 18th August, Richard Reynolds returned to Coalbrookdale from a visit to Bristol and after this Hornblower seems to calm down.

Richard Reynolds requested Henry Williams, Engineer of the Coalbrookdale Company, to ask Boulton & Watt to send an injection pipe for the Ketley engine as soon as possible, and on 30th August Hornblower told James Watt that Donnington Wood was now managed in the vilest manner. Hornblower requested that Henry Williams be sent to inspect the Donnington Wood engine. Hornblower’s comment was again seen as offensive and soon was told he had again been assigned to Cornwall. However, this assignment was held up due the death of Hornblower’s mother, Ann, who he complained had left no will. Hornblower remained as an advisory engineer at Ketley, but did not dare visit Donnington Wood where he was thought of as an object of great hatred and distrust. Over a year later, on 16th April 1781, Joseph Rathbone of the Coalbrookdale Company wrote to Boulton and Watt describing Hornblower as a troublesome man and a tearaway, always quarrelling with the workmen. Eventually, on 28th March 1782, Boulton and Watt sent William Murdoch into Donnington Wood to replace Jabez Hornblower.

After his experiences in the Coalbrookdale Coalfield Hornblower left the service of Boulton and Watt and in 1790 went into business with Stephen Maberly. Together they developed a new engine to supersede Boulton and Watt’s 1775 patent. In 1796 Boulton and Watt took them to court - a case which proved their ruin. However, it is interesting to see the works of this Broseley-born engineer during a time of great industrial growth in the area.

Thomas Turner and the Newdigate Connection

by John Willock

An account of a recently discovered document confirming a genealogical relationship between Thomas Turner of Caughley and Sir Roger Newdigate of Arbury Hall, Warwickshire. This article was originally published in the Caughley Society Newsletter No. 17, March 2004. It is reproduced here, in slightly amended form, for the Broseley Local History Society.

As the result of writing a short article on Thomas Turner's grandson, Hubert Smith, for the Caughley Society Newsletter, I subsequently received, from a number of sources, a considerable amount of additional genealogical information on the Turner pedigree. A family tree, compiled by Hubert Smith and published in 1871, indicated that Thomas Turner's mother, Sarah, was descended from the Greene family of Burford, near Tenbury, in Worcestershire. Sarah died at Broseley in 1800 and was buried with her husband, Richard Turner, at the Parish Church of St. James the Great, Norton-juxta-Kempsey, Worcestershire. As a reference point for this article, it would appear that Sarah was related to both the Cornwall (Cornwall) and Newdigate families. However, more genealogical work is required to confirm the precise nature of these relationships. It should also be stated that Hubert Smith's version of the Turner family tree is not without error, and dates and family associations should be treated with some circumspection.

The Newdigates of Harefield in Middlesex, and Arbury Hall in Warwickshire, achieved considerable prominence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, not only as landed gentry but also as early and important industrialists; much of their wealth being derived from the rich coal seams that abounded beneath their estates situated between Bedworth and Nuneaton, in North Warwickshire. To service his coal mines, Sir Roger Newdigate, 5th Baronet, (1719-1806), instituted from 1750 the construction of a network of narrow canals within the Arbury estate. The estate canals, just over six miles in total length, were eventually linked into the main Coventry Canal system, permitting the coals obtained from his mines to be transported more expeditiously to the lucrative markets in the south.

In addition, and of national importance, the Newdigates were early users of the Newcomen-type atmospheric pumping engine, for mine drainage. In this regard there was certainly a Newcomen engine operating at Sir Richard Newdigate's Griff colliery by 1723, and a

second was added in 1725. It is possible that the earliest known illustration of a Newcomen engine, drawn in 1717 by Sir Richard Newdigate's friend and adviser, Henry Beighton, (1686-1743), may represent the earlier Griff colliery machine. However, LTC Rolt noted in his work, *Thomas Newcomen, the Prehistory of the Steam Engine*, that there were several other atmospheric engines operating in the North Warwickshire coal-field *prior* to 1717, and Beighton could equally have selected one of these for his illustration.

On an intellectual level, Sir Roger Newdigate, who was educated at Westminster School and University College Oxford, went on to found the prestigious Newdigate Verse Prize at Oxford. Arbury Hall itself, on which Sir Roger lavished so much time and money, is, arguably, one of the finest and most complete surviving examples of eighteenth-century Gothic Revival architecture in the country. Mary Ann (or Marian), Evans, (1819-1880), who later, using the pseudonym "George Eliot", became the celebrated Victorian novelist, was born at South Farm on the Arbury Estate. In a collection of short stories entitled, "Scenes of Clerical Life", published in volume form in 1858, her *Cheverel Manor* is Arbury Hall and Sir Roger Newdigate is portrayed as the character, *Sir Christopher Cheverel*.

Working on intuition, and with the kind assistance of the Warwickshire County Record Office, I recently found a document which tends to confirm the Turner-Newdigate relationship. In a letter from the Newdigate archive, headed "*Caughley Place, October 4th 1792,*" James Greene, a cousin to Thomas Turner, writing to Sir Roger Newdigate, reacquaints his Lordship of their kinship, and the fact that Sir Roger had previously granted him (Greene) permission to quarter the Arms of Newdigate with those of his own family. In a typically eighteenth-century convoluted manner, Greene prevails on Sir Roger for information on the Newdigate pedigree with respect to his own family, and that of Turner, and requests that any reply should be transmitted to, "*Thomas Turner Esq. at Caughley Place near Shifnall (sic) Shropshire....*"

The following letter, reproduced here in full, is from James Greene to Sir Roger Newdigate of Arbury Hall, Warwickshire.

Caughley Place, Oct 4th 1792

Sir,

It is a great many years since I had the honour of making myself known to you in Spring Gardens London as a relative; and if you will be pleased to recollect to note to you that I had a right to

quarter the Arms of the Newdigate family with my own which after some mature consideration you very readily admitted:-This was soon after the death of the Duke of Cumberland his present Majesty's uncle: and you as readily obliged me to sport upon your manors in Warwickshire at my request, and (?) you as very particularly enquired after the descendants of Mr. Newdigate (Stepson?) from whom I told you that I descended. On my arrival in Warwickshire I received every attention from your then steward one Wilkins that induced me to believe was your direction to him so to do on the principles of consanguinity, which I found very shortly afterwards not to be the case from a letter which he shewed me from the late Lady Newdigate in which she expressed her surprise to find me what she was pleased to note-a resident of Ardbury (Arbury). Being very sensible that she did not like to see, or hear of any of your relations paying you a visit, it was on that account that I did not visit you when often in Coventry with the late Lord Archer and the present Captain Windsor his nephew: and as I have not been in that neighbourhood since Lady Newdigate's death, I beg your excuse for not paying my compts to you previous thereto for the above reason, and I trust that my long absence from that and my native country since will be admitted by you as a sufficient plea for my not calling upon you in town or in that country (county?) which I so very highly esteem and where I have now some very old friends in (?). As there is a very singular trait of negligence in the whole of my family in not making themselves known and more communicative one with another, so it has proved itself to be the case in this instance as I have not called upon my relative Mr Turner of this place for upwards of twenty years who is my fathers sisters son and a very worthy Magistrate in this county and sole proprietor of the great China Manufactory here and has large concerns in the mines of Cornwall (sic), being the major part of my time abroad since I had the honour of being appointed his Majesty's Counsel at Law in the ceded Islands and that was a few years after I had the honour of seeing you last when I was an officer in this county militia and you at or about that time a Major in the Warwickshire Regt. My present visit into this country is on a matter relating to Government;-and I embraced this opportunity of paying my compts to my worthy relative who has been at no small pains to obtain a state of my pedigree and his so far as touches the Newdigate line: and as I have lost a very authentic part from my family house during my absence(s) abroad, Mr. Turner and I will be very much obliged to you to assist us in every deficiency which may be wanted from that

part of your own; and if you will be so kind as to transmit it to Thomas Turner Esq. at Caughley Place near Shiffnall (sic) Shropshire you will add to the obligations already confined on me. I am no stranger to the name of the second Lady Newdigate-and of her great good character; and I assure you, that it will give me no small pleasure to hear of your health thro' the honour of an address to me at the Post Office Birmingham where I shall remain till the latter end of next week on the business I am upon, from whence I shall proceed for Norwich and London. Mr. Turner is a gentleman of great opulence and respectability of character in this country (county?), whose sole motive and mine is to have a thorough trace of the family; and I beg leave to assure you that your former politeness has made the deepest impression on my mind in respect to honour, gratitude and esteem for your first attention to me when introduced without the least vestige of proof on the line of heraldic pedigree, what I have now the honour to lay before you for correction and amendment and transmission to my relative; and I hope to have the pleasure of hearing of your good health before I leave Birmingham. In the interim I have the honour to be,

*Sir, Yr Most Obt
& Very hble Servt
Jas. Greene*

PS

Be pleased to present my compts. to Lady Newdigate

James Greene appears from this letter to be an intelligent, cultured and much travelled man, who rubbed shoulders with the “movers and shakers” in eighteenth-century society. The death of William, Duke of Cumberland, occurred on October 31st. 1765, therefore the initial meeting between James Greene and Sir Roger Newdigate must have taken place shortly after this date; probably on Thursday, January 23, 1766. Greene’s reference to being appointed “... *his Majesty’s Counsel at Law in the ceded Islands* ...” is particularly interesting. This statement could just possibly allude to the Islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique, seized from France in 1759 and 1762 respectively, during the Seven Years War. These Islands were ceded, (i.e.) returned to France, as part of the Treaty of Paris in 1763. His assertion that “*My present visit into this country is on a matter relating to Government...*” suggests a man of some importance!

The letter, itself an interesting insight into the manners and social protocols of the time, certainly raises some intriguing questions. Did, for

example, Thomas Turner have any previous direct correspondence with Sir Roger Newdigate, as one eighteenth-century industrialist might have with another? Was there an earlier association with Sir Roger on a commercial basis, and particularly, was any Newdigate finance made available to Turner at the commencement of the Caughley venture? Did the Newdigates purchase any Caughley Porcelain? These are all very speculative questions which may be worthy of further investigation. The Newdigate papers held in the Warwickshire County Record Office are extensive and wide-ranging, and the possibility of other documents coming to light, appertaining to Thomas Turner and/or Caughley, cannot be discounted.

I would particularly like to thank Lord Daventry for his kind permission to use this important letter; as far as I am aware, only previously reproduced once before, in my article for the Caughley Society Newsletter. My thanks are also due to the staff of the Warwickshire County Record Office who went unerringly to the correct Newdigate reference, despite my rather imprecise request for information. I am indebted to my old friend Robin Taylor, for his helpful suggestions regarding the question of “*the ceded Islands*“, together with information he provided on the chronology of the Seven Years War. Also I wish to thank my long-standing friend, Mr. Peter Chater, for his valuable contributions on Sir Roger Newdigate’s canal-building activities. Finally, but certainly not least, I would like to thank John and Nadine Shearman for the information and assistance they rendered to me on genealogical matters.

Sources:

Hickman D, *A Shell Guide to Warwickshire*, Faber and Faber, London, 1979.

Ousby I, (Ed.) *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Rolt LTC, *Thomas Newcomen, The Pre-History of the Steam Engine*, David and Charles, Dawlish, 1963.

Smith H, *Pedigree of the Turner Family and it’s Representatives in 1871*, Privately printed by Taylor & Co., London, 1871.

Warwickshire County Record Office, *Newdigate Papers: Letter from James Greene to Sir Roger Newdigate, Oct 4th 1792*, Reference CR136/B909.

(Copyright of Letter: Lord Daventry and Warwickshire County Record Office)

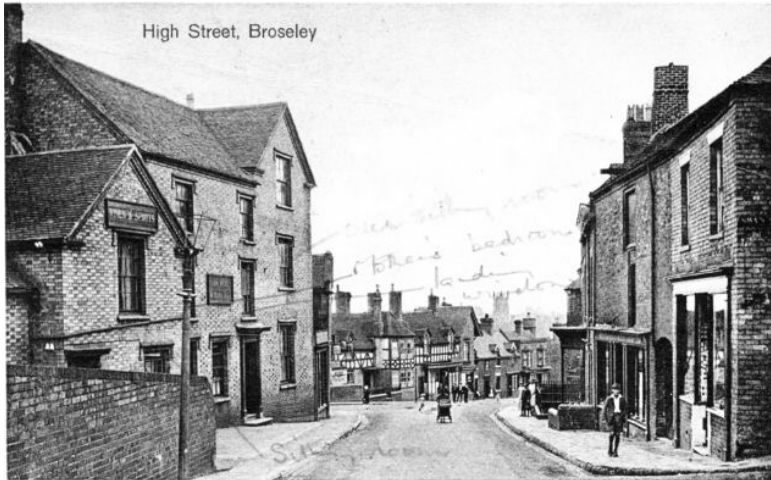
The Lion Hotel Broseley in 1923

by Mary Dixon

My father, Archibald Oswell, moved from the Hundred House, Bridgnorth to Broseley on 6th November 1923. He previously had to visit the Town Hall to obtain a licence. On November 6th, he caught a train from Bridgnorth to Ironbridge to collect the licence and take over. My mother, Edith Oswell, and I came in the furniture van later in the morning. It was a beautiful sunny day and as we drove up Linley Bank the hounds, in full cry, crossed the road in front of us. A wonderful sight.

Previously the Hotel had been run by Tom Instone whose wife, it was rumoured, had drowned in the water tank on the top floor. Presumably it was the source of water to the house before pipes from the mains. The house was very run down and needed a lot of hard work and attention. Our first maid was Fanny Hatton, whom I adored. She was with us for many years until she got married. The house was so cold and damp that I went down with rheumatic fever and was very ill. Dr Fox Davies (with his huge chin) was called, and Fanny spent many hours with me reading stories. We had huge fires in every downstairs room to try to keep warm. Warming pans were used in bed at night. There were no bathrooms so baths were taken in front of the kitchen range. It was a lovely house to live in and I was very sad to leave it in 1948, when we moved to 81,82 High Street.

Downstairs, the front door opened onto two beautiful, multicoloured glass swing doors into a circular hall. Immediately opposite the front door was the "golden" staircase, so called by Gillian because of the brass handrail which led to a bedroom and a large upstairs sitting room. Two rooms, one of which had a door from the front stairs, were on a short landing; then there were about 5 stairs leading up to the other 3 large bedrooms, and then the attic staircase. There were about 6 large attics, which covered the entire upper floor. The back staircase led to the Club room, and then another door led to all the bedrooms and toilet. Downstairs was the bar, small smoke room and large smoke room, which opened from back to front of the building when the partition was open. Flower Shows and my first dance were held in the large section of the back, which also had an outside door to the garden.



The Lion Hotel

Outside was a huge brew-house and the toilets. The garden was small but interesting. It had a lovely damson tree in one corner. There were some steps leading to the cellars, down which the beer barrels were rolled. The pigsties and coalhouse were behind the brew-house. Here the washing boiler also stood, and it was bitterly cold to stand there in spite of the fire which heated the water.

Facing the street, to the right of the bar, was our private sitting room, behind which was a kitchen with 2 grates – one each side. You could go from the front door to the kitchen, sitting room and then into the bar. The bar fascinated me because overhead was the clubroom (used by the tenants of the Willey Estate to pay their rents), which ran from the front to the back of the house; and next to the bar was a telephone, between the bar and the clubroom, which enabled them to order drinks when the room was being used.

Adjoining our sitting room were the stables. The Lion was the main posting stable for horses which stopped in Broseley on their journeys. Next to the house was one set of stables, probably holding four horses, then a cobbled yard and on the other side were more stables and a loose box. Behind was the harness room, then the pigsties in their own yard and a huge waterbutt. It must have been at least 2 yards circular

and high. Adjoining this, on the right of the stables, was another carriage building.

Christmas was a magical time there. Always it was let in by a dark haired man, who proposed a toast to the Festive Season. Then at the end of Christmas, he called again to let it out (more drinks for toast). As soon as he called, holly was strewn around the house (not before). The Morris Dancers arrived on Boxing Day. Carols were sung throughout the Christmas period and really were very devout.

My father would not allow any swearing in the bar. If anyone transgressed, they were soon hauled over the coals. Most of the men (no ladies were allowed in the bar, except my mother) worked down the pits and needed their pint of beer, but they were never allowed to go over the top. A kind word from my father told them when they had drunk sufficient, although they could seldom afford that much drink. The smoke room was more refined and ladies were allowed in there. In the hall was a small outdoor service hatch, at which drinks were bought to take home. In the hall was a door on the left of the back stairs. This was the dairy with the cold slab. Next was another door which led to the cellar steps, then a gap which led to the outside door.

When we moved in, everything was gas including a gas stove which seldom worked, so we cooked on a range in the kitchen. In the kitchen was a sink which stretched from one wall to the opposite, with only a cold water tap. Later, electricity replaced the gas and that was wonderful. Mother cooked all the dinners which were held at The Lion in the room at the back of the large smoke room; sometimes there was panic stations when the gas supply was poor. The grates were black leaded daily.

Milk was delivered twice daily by horse and dray (Mr Wilde of Benthall) and the butcher, Hayward Davies, called for orders. When eels from the Severn were available, a lady would come to the back door with a basket covered in a cloth selling them. For many years the auditors for Prestage Tile works came each spring to audit the company accounts, and they would stay with us for several days. Flower shows were held annually in the big downstairs room, and during the war hops were stored in the clubroom for safety for the brewers Wm Butlers of Wolverhampton. During the war, two teachers who had been appointed to teach the influx of evacuees

stayed with us for several years. My husband Jack dug an air raid shelter in the lawn and often we had to shoot down there if the sirens sounded. It was jolly cold down there.

Down our garden was a long path leading to Barber Street, where Dick Picken had a small grocers shop. I often went for ¼lb boiled ham (first class ham) which cost 6 pence. At the bottom of the path leading to Barber Street lived “Shook”, who was very short and fat but extremely light footed. Every lunch time she came up the path with her jug for ½pint of beer. Always when mother had finished washing in the brew-house, she used to scrub the yard with the suds after the Monday delivery of beer. Unfortunately, one day mother didn’t hear “Shook”, and just as she passed the brew-house mother hurled a bucket of soapy water through the door. Words will not describe “Shook’s” reactions or her language. (We of course roared with laughter).

Initially, the beer was delivered by Steve Garbett from Ironbridge Station on a horse and dray. The beer carriers always received 1 pint each of free beer.

Across the road, adjoining Swan Street, was a little shop which sold sweets. I would pop across for 1d. of Old Joes (black toffee) and I would have a big bag for 1d! They also sold paraffin but it didn’t seem to get mixed up with the sweets. The Co-op was opposite The Lion Hotel and it was always busy. Sometimes I went to “Jinner” Evans (Lena Fielding’s father) fish and chip shop in Duke Street for a 2d. fish and 1d. of chips which would be enough for a family. Mr Hurdley, who was a postman (James’ grandfather), walked around Willey and Barrow delivering the post, and he always called in at The Lion for a pint at the end of his round.

Memories of a Shropshire Lad, Part 1

by Dennis Mason



Dennis Mason, one of the founder members of the Wilkinson Society in 1972, died a year ago at the age of 88. A dozen or so years before his death, he had written down his reminiscences of a lifetime in the Benthall and Broseley area - over 30,000 words in total! This is the first in a series of articles on Dennis's memories, with the text printed as it was written in 1990. Our thanks to his daughter Bronwen for making the manuscript available to us. -Ed.

Introduction

The Great War of 1914-18, as we are so used to hearing, brought the end of an era and nothing was ever the same again. However, no condition in human society ends dramatically and, after a new era had set in, vestiges of the older one persist for many years. While the inter-war period was one of great change, many practices existed which had their inception in an older order of things. Especially was this so in a county like Salop, far removed from the centres of change, with little transport and still, even in mid-Salop, basically agricultural.

These social relics of an earlier age persisted with little diminution up to the outbreak of war in 1939. Thereafter, their demise hastened and few of them survived the 1950s.

The reasons for the rapid decline of an older mode of life are many, some technological, some social. In the area of which I am writing, the post-1939 war changes had been more rapid than in many places. The reason for this was undoubtedly the close proximity of an urban development of unusual growth and size and the influx into the area of people from many parts of the country.

It would be a pity if the older and long-established mode of life, peculiar to much of Shropshire until a few years ago, was not recorded for posterity, and I hope that I have done my little bit towards that end in this modest work.

The Countryside

Broseley was and still is one of those villages of small architectural distinction whose aesthetic appeal lies more in its surroundings than

in itself. To the west lies magnificent countryside stretching way beyond the Welsh Border to the coast itself. Take any road west, south-west or north-west and a panorama of beauty is yours until you reach the rocky coast of North or Mid Wales; and the 120 miles of Shropshire/Welsh Border is amongst the loveliest (and, being prejudiced, I think the loveliest) in the whole of Great Britain.

Broseley did indeed play a leading part in the early days of the Industrial Revolution. John Wilkinson, of iron fame, lived here for many years and it was from Willey Furnace, less than a mile from the centre of Broseley, that the first iron boat in the world emerged and the improved principle of boring began. The house in Broseley in which John Wilkinson lived still stands and is the present headquarters of the Wilkinson Society, a thriving historical society devoted principally to the district's important industrial history. But the district was basically agricultural long before then, and its customs and habits stem mainly from that fact.

Even today the area is a naturalist's paradise with its great variety of wild life, and also the adjacent Benthall Edge and Wyke, where many rare wild plants, especially orchids, grow. Like most other country places, it has lost much wild life over the last half century, especially in bird life. This is no place to go into the reasons for it, and the writer, being something of a naturalist, would fling quite a few darts if he did so. Suffice to say that there is much wild life, both botanical and ornithological, which has depreciated over the years.

At the time of which I am speaking, the corncrake was common. Its curious and unmelodious 'song' was a feature of the summer, its favourite abode being the Birch Meadow and the surrounding fields, not then developed as they are now. The complete disappearance of this bird in almost all parts of Britain over a period of two or three years represents a mystery which, so far as I know, has never been solved. I have not heard one for nearly fifty years.

Another bird which disappeared at the same time was the nightjar. This was always to be found (or rather I should say heard, for you practically never saw it) near the Mount, the area between Broseley and Jackfield. Its dry, grasshopper-like sound could keep you awake on a Summer's night, but I have not heard this ratchet-like sound for many years. Strangely enough, the third bird on my list which seems to have gone from us is the grasshopper warbler, also with a tuneless

rattle of a note. I have heard this bird in fairly recent years, but only very occasionally, whereas it was once fairly common.

With T.V., youth clubs and all the rest, country boys seem to have ceased many of their earlier preoccupations. Birds' nesting figured high on their programme from March onwards and many boys had quite formidable collections of birds' eggs. Though some of my nature-loving readers may frown at this statement, it must be said in all fairness that most boys "only took once". There were the hooligans, of course, and these would take eggs and nests, but they formed a small minority and were in any case not amongst the most skilled birds' nesters. There certainly seemed to have been more varieties of birds around then than now, quite apart from these which seem to have disappeared altogether.

Some complications were occasioned by the purely local nomenclature of the birds. I have mentioned the grasshopper warbler, but no boy of my day would have recognised it by that name. It was the 'nettle-creeper', well called because of its greenish eggs and the fact that its nest more often than not was to be found in a bed of nettles. Perhaps it is less common because there are fewer nettle-beds! The lesser whitethroat was the 'Peggy white throat', quite a common bird in those days, whose myriads of tiny gold-specked white eggs were almost always found amongst gorse bushes, of which there was certainly a greater abundance then. The 'cambottle' was the long tailed tit, then much more common than today, and the 'storm cock' was the missile thrush. A good name, this, because this bird always builds at the top of a tall bush or tree and specialises in singing up there at the top of its voice in the middle of a storm!

Country superstitions died hard and though wrens' and robins' nests were common, only the most hard-boiled character would rob them. It was unlucky to do so and they were usually safe from marauders.

Both pheasants' and partridges' nests were raided. This was not for collection purposes, though everyone had specimens in their collections. They were prized for the making of custard for some reason and in those impoverished days a nest of these eggs was a valuable addition to the family larder. Doubtless, they were used for other purposes than custard in some households!

The whole nest of eggs was taken. Everyone indulged in this piece of theft - even the majority who would not rob a nest at all or "only take

one". It probably was the result of a natural antipathy to gamekeepers (this area having a long history of poaching) or went even further back to days when common land was filched at the time of the Enclosure Acts. It was important, of course, to break one egg first to make sure that the clutch of eggs was not 'hard of sitting'! Plovers' eggs were also taken for eating, not collecting, though they were rather too strong for some palates.

Some gamekeepers set pole traps. These were traps set on the top of a hedge stake, on which hawks sometimes alight. We were well aware that these were illegal, and had great joy in smashing them on the few occasions when they were encountered, knowing that if the keeper found out he could do nothing about it!

Another favourite activity was fishing for 'minnows' in the local ponds, of which there were far more than there are today. The 'minnows' were in fact sticklebacks, savage little fish with spines which could inflict quite a painful wound. They were kept in a jam jar or larger glass vessel with pondweed or whatever we thought they would eat. The more knowledgeable or the more adventurous fished for newts. These were locally known as 'asgels' (a Montgomeryshire word which is doubtless derived from the Welsh word 'asgell', meaning a wing and probably referring to the crest on many of the newts). They were reputed to sting, but the better informed knew that they were harmless little creatures with far more intelligence than sticklebacks. Some made the mistake of collecting both sticklebacks and newts and keeping them in the same receptacle. The result was inevitable - the vicious little fish killed off all the newts. Frogspawn was collected and 'hatched out', and at Broseley School this magical transformation formed part of the natural history lessons.

'Sour Sal' (plantain leaves), 'bread and cheese' (young hawthorn leaves) and 'sweet brian' (peeled stems of the blackberry) were eaten with great gusto. This habit had an ancient lineage, in days when there was no fresh meat or vegetables in the wintertime and when Spring was not only joyfully proclaimed for itself, but as a season which provided something fresh, however humble it may have been.

Picnicking seemed then to have more imagination to it. A 'picnic' was usually a bottle of water and a lump of cake, but the delight of consuming even this humble repast in the boiling summer days, in the midst of our lovely countryside, was something which it is difficult to

describe today. There were side occupations such as making daisy chains, holding quaker grasses to see if they would remain still (they never did!), looking for four leaved clovers (seldom found) and trying to catch grasshoppers. We were a suspicious lot and avoided dragonflies, which, like newts, were also supposed to sting.

A favourite occupation on these jaunts was to pick a stem of the wild barley (*herdeum murinum*) and insert it upside down up some unsuspecting girl's sleeve. It would immediately ascend the sleeve and after a while give the impression of some large insect crawling up. Garments would be discarded with many shrieks before the offending grass was located. Much joy was occasioned by this rural pastime and it always seemed to have the desired effect.

Nothing, I think, has changed more in the habit of country people than the health-giving occupation of "going for a walk". Old and young did this with great frequency and many miles were often covered in the course of a week. Sunday evenings were the occasions particularly chosen for this pastime, and sizeable numbers of people would be found on all the roads around the town and in most of the lanes too. It must be said, of course, that the traffic then was minimal. There were many set walks. "Round the five miles" was quite a favourite. This actually is five miles in length and the attractive Barrow road was taken half a mile out of Broseley, turning a mile and a half from Much Wenlock and returning through Posenhall and Benthall back to Broseley. "Down the cutting" was another. This took the turn at the Dean Corner (resurfaced still) and meandered through lonely countryside to Caughley and back to Broseley. The 'cutting' was most probably one used by the ironmaster John Wilkinson, as one of his routes to the Severn, but the term had long since lost any meaning.

Most of these old routes still exist but are unused, and it is strange that in these days of overcrowded roads these old byways are lonelier than ever!

For young people to be 'walking out' meant exactly that, and as it took many years of saving before country couples could get married, most of them covered some hundreds of miles before their 'walking out' days ended. All very healthy though and one of the indirect benefits of poverty. There wasn't anywhere else for them to go even if they could have afforded it, except for the occasional dance or

concert in the Town Hall. Few cottages had parlours and, even when they had, their owners could not afford to heat two rooms in the winter. Most women wouldn't go near a public house. It was only with the advent of the War that such places became mildly respectable for women. In Broseley, at any rate, this may well have been a relic of the 18th century and early 19th century. Then about every fifth house was a pub or a beer house, frequented almost entirely by the colliers and ironworkers, who were a rough, tough lot.

One could be refreshed on walks quite cheaply. There were several places where one could call and drink a pint of 'skimmed milk' for one penny. "Skimmed milk" was the local term for buttermilk, the residue of the milk when the cream has been removed for butter or cheese. I haven't any recollection of local cheese being sold, though it may have been, but quite a few farmers sold 'farm butter' and beautiful stuff it was, far removed from that packed commodity which passes for butter today.

The farm worker in those days was the poorest of the poor. His wage in Shropshire was then about twenty-eight shillings a week (it was even lower next door in Montgomeryshire) and, though he sometimes had a free ration of milk and perhaps a row of potatoes in the field, he was at the bottom of the wage scale, which was low enough throughout the area. Many farm workers left the land for more lucrative employment in the years immediately before the War when the Great Depression was ending. These men were all highly skilled, for most of them could produce a real work of art in a re-laid hedge and dig ditches which looked as though they had received the assistance of a micrometer, and their knowledge of animals was something akin to that of a vet's. The land thus lost an immense wealth of agricultural skill, much of which has never been replaced. Farming then was in the doldrums and it was not until the War that it began to pick up. But even then the poor old farm worker did not receive anything like his share of what he should have been paid. Things are better now and his place in society is far higher, but he still has a long way to go before he receives his just reward.

Salop, in common with many other agricultural counties, had been changing from arable to dairy farming or more often, in this county, to 'mixed' farming, largely due to the influx of cheap wheat from Canada, the U.S.A. and some European countries. The change made itself most apparent when one stood on Wenlock Edge, which

presents an immense panorama of agricultural land to the Border hills, and eastwards to the Wrekin. The brown and black patches amidst the green grew fewer and fewer and the distant sight of plodding pairs of ploughing horses less common.

Farmers then seem to have been rather more tolerant than they are now. Probably the influx of ‘townies’ over the countryside in recent years has had something to do with it. Certainly no local boy or girl would have dreamed of leaving open a field gate, and a field which was ‘up for mowing’ (meaning it had been chain harrowed) was as safe from marauding feet as a church sanctuary. Such were the unwritten laws of the countryside and applied to the lout as much as to the gentle and law-abiding. On the other hand, no farmer minded the odd swede being filched and Sunday afternoon strollers generally took one in the season and ate it raw! Indeed, older people like me look aghast at the price of swedes in the supermarkets and reflect on the days when any farmer would let you have a sack full for a few pence, and if the farmer was your milkman he would generally let you have one free!

The whole point, I think, was that there was a far greater respect for the land and for private property than there is now. Almost everyone was poor - even the relatively affluent were poor to an extent quite unknown today; but there was very little damage to property and an inborn respect for “meum et tuum” which, alas has passed. I am delighted that “the good old days” with their poverty and repressions have gone, but I wonder if we haven’t thrown out the baby with the bathwater!

With the decline in walking has also appeared a decline in the number of paths and byways where you can walk. The Ramblers Association is doing an excellent job in helping to keep open some of those old walking routes, but many have already gone. Some which have disappeared have long outlived their usefulness, but there are many which should have been retained. While one can never go backwards, it may be, with the instability of some of the forms of energy which we use so wastefully, notably oil, that the next generation will need all the walking routes they can find!

CORRESPONDENCE

Boat builders in the Ironbridge Gorge

I was very interested in the article *The Unfortunate Barge Builder* by Richard Barker which appeared in Journal no 25(2003). My great-great-great grandfather, James Hough, is variously described through the census returns as a carpenter, boat carpenter, house carpenter and on his death certificate in 1886 as a retired boat builder. His son, James Cornelius Hough, my great-great grandfather, on the 1861 census is described as a barge carpenter, although after his marriage and move to Broseley he then becomes a carpenter.

James Hough senior was born about 1808/1809 and consistently states his place of birth as Bloxwich, although I have yet to find the baptism. He appears to have arrived in Shropshire before 1830, apparently 'out of the blue' and by himself. He married a local girl, Mary Wylde (Wild) and they had two children in Broseley, William 1831 and Francis 1833 and then moved to Coalport in a house, according to the Tithe Map, owned by Joseph Reynolds (House & Garden 1281 and Garden 1278).

In Coalport they had a further four children, James Cornelius born 4 July 1840 at Coalport (father's occupation – carpenter) Charlotte, Emma and Clementine. Mary Hough, his wife, died on 28 September 1882, as wife of James Hough, carpenter, and James himself died on 18 December 1886, ironically 'drowned in the waters of Madeley and Coalport Canal'. His occupation is stated as Boatbuilder-retired.

I have tried to trace the coroner's inquest reports, but unfortunately they have not survived in the Wenlock Borough. I couldn't find a newspaper report either, but I have yet to try a Bridgnorth paper. (I only recently obtained his birth certificate).

Janet Doody

52, HIGH STREET,
BROSELEY, Shropshire.

June 17 1938

Mr R. Smith.

Bought of **SANDS BROS.,**
(P. SANDS).

High-Class Boot & Shoe Specialists.

AGENTS FOR LOTUS & DELTA FOOTWEAR.

Gents Shoes

12. 6

*Settled same date
with cheque
P. Sands.*