

THE JOURNAL OF THE
WILKINSON SOCIETY.

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Editor : N.J. Clarke

THE WILKINSON SOCIETY

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

The aims of the Society are :

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

Any available material will be added to the existing collection of Broseley and Wilkinson relics at the Lawns, Broseley. This collection is open to the public on the second Saturday of every month and by appointment.

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

NOTES AND NEWS

THE First Year's Activities.

A preliminary meeting was held in July 1972 and at the first general meeting of the Wilkinson Society on August 2nd a committee was elected :

President : J. Dugdale, Esq. Chairman : M. Sylvester Esq.
Secretary : C. Hardwick, Esq. Treasurer : D. Mason, Esq.
Curator : R. Pee, Esq. Committee Members : Messrs. Clarke and Cragge

Since then there have been six committee meetings, two general meetings (Oct. 27th - a talk by Barrie Trinder on John Wilkinson in Shropshire; and March 9th 1973 - a slide show by Ron Miles on the Severn Gorge); and a coach-tour of Wilkinson sites in the Wrexham area, organised by Wayne Turner (May 26th). The first A.G.M. is planned for Thursday, October 4th, at "The Lawns".

The Society has been responsible for erecting a notice-board on the site of the New Willey ironworks, with the kind permission of Lord Forster.

The Collection of Broseley and Wilkinson Relics

Material is constantly being added to the collection at the Lawns. Mr. Pee is listing all the exhibits and contributors, and details will appear in the next issue of the Journal.

The Journal

It is hoped that the Journal will make a modest contribution to research on the history of the Broseley area, John Wilkinson and industrial archaeology in general. In this issue Wayne Turner, who is currently working on a biography of John Wilkinson, gives an outline-survey of the great man's life and work; and Ralph Pee, founder member of the Society and resident at the Lawns, takes us round Wilkinson's Broseley home. One issue raised is the date Wilkinson took up residence there: both writers suggest 1763, the year of his second marriage. In his recent book, "The Industrial Revolution in Shropshire" (Phillimore, Chichester), Barrie Trinder states: "Wilkinson made one of his several homes in Broseley. He leased land from Thomas Stephens in 1778 on which he built a new house which he occupied until 1800" (;.39).

In this issue of the Journal there is also the first of a series of selected extracts on the history of the Broseley area.

Contributions to future issues of the Journal would be welcome, and should be sent to the Editor, N.J. Clarke, Cranleigh, Little Wenlock, Telford. (Tel: Malinslee 4135).

"KING OF THE IRONMASTERS"

There are probably more legends surrounding the name of John Wilkinson than that of any other industrialist, either of his own time or since: born in a market cart, later a discoverer of coal-gas, coal-tar, the coke-smelting process in iron, improver of steam-engines, and even (in one learned encyclopaedia) the builder of the famous Iron Bridge! The fact that few of these tales have any basis of truth must not, however, obscure the fact that Wilkinson's achievements were immense. He was, of course, what we in Britain call a "character"; he was also his own publicity agent and would be the last one to disagree with anyone who laid extravagant claims to his inventive genius. One notion that Wilkinson himself never claimed was the foundation of the "Wilkinson Sword" Company, a firm with which he had nothing to do, despite popular belief to the contrary!

Whilst remembering the fact that Wilkinson had an enormous industrial "empire" around which he circulated his own coinage (minted at Soho, not in Broseley, I hasten to add), it is with his doings in The Broseley area that this short article is concerned. Nevertheless, let us not forget the "chief cities" of his "Empire", before looking at his work in the Broseley region: Bersham, Bradley, Hadley, Hollinswood, Snedshill and Brymbo, where he ran extensive and important ironworks; Castlehead and Brymbo, where his agricultural improvements drew forth much contemporary praise from farming experts of the day; his ventures in copper and his big lead concerns at Buckley, and around Minera, Brymbo and Mold, as well as at Rotherhithe; his important share-holdings in three or four canals, and his banking enterprises. Add, too, that in his seventies he sired three children by his housekeeper at Brymbo Hall and one has at least a somewhat remarkable man!

Before settling at "The Lawns" in Broseley, Wilkinson had been an iron merchant in Cumberland and an ironmaster under his father at Bersham. When he arrived at Broseley in 1757, it was to join several Bristol and Shropshire businessmen in the taking out of a lease from Lord Forester on a furnace site at Willey. This was confirmed in a further lease of 1759, where it appears that Wilkinson was to be a kind of technical adviser to a company which would specialize in the manufacture of guns for Board of Ordnance contracts, Britain having in the meantime gone to war with France. It is said that Wilkinson swindled his Willey partners by informing them that the yield from the Willey furnace was likely to be so poor that the whole venture was a waste of money: the partners therefore sold their shares cheaply and quickly to the ironmaster, who then unearthed a store of good-quality iron which he had buried under Willey, and sold it at a goodly profit! Wilkinson had arrived at Willey as a widower, with a small daughter who was being brought up in Shrewsbury, but in 1763 he married a Wroxeter lady of 40 and settled at "The Lawns".

In 1774, Wilkinson patented a new type of cannon-borer, an engine with which he could bore iron with astonishing accuracy. His skill as a caster and borer brought him to the notice of James Watt and the latter's partner Boulton whom Wilkinson already knew. Wilkinson now produced a cylinder-borer and, in doing so, provided Watt with cylinders "bored to truth". This was the answer to perhaps the most difficult of Watt's problems, and with this skill the Broseley ironmaster was to make himself indispensable to the Soho partners, who insisted that all of their engine parts should be made by, and bought from, Wilkinson.

The third Watt engine was assembled at Willey, where most of the parts had been bored and fashioned. Watt himself came over to look over the workmanship and the setting up of the engine, staying with the ironmaster at "The Lawns". He expressed his complete satisfaction with Wilkinson's results and in 1776 the finished engine was working at what Wilkinson had termed since his acquiring control in 1763, the New Willey Company. It was set up to blow his blast-furnace at Willey, the first use for a steam-engine other than raising water, whether for pumping or fountains or providing water for wheels to work bellows.

Between 1768 and 1770 Wilkinson set up a new ironworks, this time at Bradley, near Bilston, in Staffordshire. Here he had another mansion as well as coal mines and blast-furnaces, in which he used

coke, as he had at Bersham. In time, this became his mightiest iron-works. At Bradley in 1782/83 he set up another "first", in this case a steam-powered forge-hammer, driven by the new Sun and Planet gear.

Another house purchase was made in 1778/79, this time a solitary, marine residence at Castlehead, near Grange (N. Lincs.) on a piece of marshy land which became an island at high tide.

In 1779, Wilkinson's name appears as one of the chief shareholders in the Iron Bridge project over the River Severn, connecting the two parishes of Broseley and Madeley.

In 1787, the ironmaster produced the world's first iron boat; it was a long narrow barge, made at the Willey ironworks and launched at the Willey Wharf to a salute from Wilkinson's Willey guns. Other such boats appeared from Wilkinson, mostly for use on the canal near Bradley.

At about this time, too, he completed what was surely one of his most gigantic tasks, that of casting and making 40 miles of cast-iron piping for the Paris Waterworks. Most of these pipes were made at Willey, where they were taken down Wilkinson's Tarbach Dingle tramway to the wharf on the Severn and from there to the trans-shipment port of Chepstow. Other pipes were made at Bersham from whence they went overland to Chester and from there by sea to Chepstow.

In the 1790's Wilkinson's terrible fraternal war took place with his brother, William; and one of the results of this was that William informed Boulton and Watt that his elder brother had been erecting Watt-type steam-engines, not only for himself, but for other customers both at home and abroad, unfortunately without premiums! After a long, undignified period of wrangling, Wilkinson had to pay up, much to his annoyance, for, rightly or wrongly, he considered that his part in the eventual success of the steam-engine had been at least as important as Boulton's had been.

The end of the century found him spending more and more time between Bradley and his new ironworks (acquired in 1792) on the rich Brynbo Estate in North Wales, not far from Bersham which seemed to be declining in importance. It is not surprising, therefore, that in 1800 he leased his Broseley home to John Rose, the famous Coalport China manufacturer.

In 1804, Snedshill and Hollinswood having been relinquished some years earlier (1793/97), Wilkinson began producing iron again in that area, on the New Hadley Estate, acquired in 1791.

By now Wilkinson was a father again: his housekeeper at Brynbo Hall produced three children between 1802 and 1806. His appointed heir, however, was his nephew, Thomas Jones, provided, of course, that he took the name of Wilkinson - which he did!

In 1808, the mightiest ironmaster of the day died at his home in Bradley and he was buried, after several attempts, in his huge cast-iron coffin in the front garden of his home at Castlehead. The grave was surmounted by a tall obelisk, also of cast-iron, on which was inscribed his own epitaph, or at least a watered-down version of the somewhat vitriolic original!

In the years between 1812 and 1817 the Wilkinson empire was brought down in ruins through useless, unprofitable litigation, largely the work of his heir and nephew. In 1828, his coffin and his obelisk were removed to the village of Lindale, in order to expedite the sale of his former house, and the end was complete.

Before his death, Wilkinson had threatened his Bradley workers that, seven years to the day after his death, he would come back to see his beloved furnaces, mounted on his big grey. It is surely a testimony to the power of the man's personality to read in the faded press notice of July, 1815, that several thousands turned up to see their former squire and master!

Thomas Telford wrote, when he went to discuss the plans for the new Ellesmere Canal in October, 1793: "I had the support of the great John Wilkinson, King of the Ironmasters....."

Wayne Turner

THE BROSELEY HOME OF JOHN WILKINSON

John Wilkinson was just under thirty when he came to Broseley as a partner in the New Willey Company in 1757, leaving his father and younger brother, William, to carry on the ironworks at Bersham. His first wife, Ann Maudsley, a woman of ample wealth, had died four years earlier, and his young daughter Mary was in the care of Mr. & Mrs. Flint of Shrewsbury.

He was by no means the senior partner in the new Company, but he was the only working Ironmaster among the ten partners and would no doubt have acted as Manager. Where he stayed or lived in or around Broseley for the next few years is not known, but in 1763 he married for the second time, having taken over the New House in Church Street. His second wife, Mary Lee of Wroxeter, was also a woman of wealth and in the same year he became sole owner of the Company.

The New House, now known as The Lawns, was then over thirty years old, having been built in 1727 by Mr. Stevens, a local mine owner. The name and the Phoenix embossed on the magnificent lead rain head, suggest that it was built to replace the builder's previous home.

The house was originally a typical square Georgian Mansion with the usual central front door, approached by a short flight of steps. The ground in the front was generally lower than it is now and what is now a cellar was then a basement with sunken windows. The area in front of the house was probably bounded, as now, by a low wall, but with a single entrance through a pair of drive gates. The present wall adjoining the road appears to be original, but that separating the stables and domestic entrances from the front lawn is part of the 19th century alterations. Wilkinson provided a new pair of iron gates.

The front door opened into a passage or lobby which, with the main stair well beyond, divided the house from front to rear. Three reception rooms of almost equal size occupied three quarters of the ground floor, while the remaining quarter accommodated what may have been a servants hall and a servants staircase direct to the second floor. The kitchen, back kitchen, scullery and shoe room appear to have been accommodated in a single storey domestic wing on the north side of the house, and one of two very small extensions at the rear. The second of these two small extensions provided what may have been an office, 'Mr. Wilkinson's Room' or 'The Smoking Room'. There was also a malthouse, a brewhouse and stables apart from the main structure.

With garden, paddocks and possibly orchards at the back, it was a well designed, compact and practical professional man's residence. It would undoubtedly have had an air of solid, homely comfort typical of the age.

In spite of extensive alterations around the mid 19th century, many features of the original lay-out can still be seen. The original and very fine main staircase with its twisted balusters remains, as does the panelling and beautifully proportioned overmantle in the one reception room which has not been altered. The large rain-head previously mentioned has the date 1727 on the square down spout and a lead pump in the cellar almost certainly dates from the time the house was built. This pump with its wooden piston can still be made to work. That part of the present outbuildings adjoining the road appears to be original, as does a small square building behind the later extensions. This attractive little structure has a bulls-eye glass window.

Although tradition has it that he added two new wings, it is doubtful if Wilkinson made any extensive alterations to the original, and, if he did, they cannot now be traced. The ground floor of one of the small extensions at the back was, or later became, a butler's pantry with a steel door and barred windows. These and other security measures have been attributed to Wilkinson, but are much more likely to have been part of the later alterations. He certainly did, however, employ Thomas Farnolls Pritchard, the Shrewsbury architect who designed the Iron Bridge, to provide a new chimney piece of wood and marble in the panell'd room. This chimney piece can still be seen together with a copy of the original working drawing which includes a

time sheet for Pritchard's three workmen. There are signs that the chimney piece is a replacement, indicating that the panelling and overmantle are original.

In 1800 Wilkinson leased the New House to John Rose, China Manufacturer, for thirty guineas per annum, ..'the said John Rose paying the whole of the window tax'. We have a copy of the inventory of effects taken over by John Rose which mentions a best parlour with 'wainscotting all round from top to bottom of room', and 'a chimney piece and marble stone'.

The inventory also mentions a new grate in the kitchen 'in place of a very old one now believed to be in the malthouse', and in the garden 'two large furnaces for soft water'. Presumably these were water tanks and two very old cast iron tanks still to be seen may well be those referred to.

From the New House John Wilkinson could have seen the glow in the sky from his furnaces at Willey and from those at Bradley. It was here that Brigadier Marchant de la Houliere was entertained when he was investigating the superiority of British cannon on behalf of the French Government; as was James Watt when he was superintending the installation of one of his first two commercial steam engines at Willey. It seems likely that the first iron boat was designed in 'Mr. Wilkinson's Room' and in his many applications for patent rights up to 1794, he styles himself 'Ironmaster of Broseley'.

Although his Willey works were eclipsed in size by later enterprises and he moved on to more pretentious homes, the foundations of his fortunes were laid in Broseley, and Willey must have played its part in the development of his many improvements to the iron industry.

The New House was his home for over thirty of his most active years and the comfortable Georgian House seems to have served him well.

After a period during which debris from a nearby iron foundry appears to have reached almost up to the back door, the house was extensively altered during the mid 19th century. The enlarged reception rooms and huge kitchen with its elaborate, and in some ways impractical cooking arrangements, the high boundary walls and the separation of the main and domestic entrances, indicate a more formal way of life and a change in master and man relationship which would have been quite foreign to John Wilkinson.

Similar features can be seen in other contemporary buildings in Broseley and show something of the immediate local effects of the Industrial Revolution.

Ralph Poo

THE HISTORY OF THE BROSELEY AREA: SELECTED EXTRACTS

(I - THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES)

The following account is from "Shropshire: its Early History and Antiquities" by John Corbet Anderson, first published in 1864 and re-published in 1972 by E.J. Morten of Didsbury (pp. 64-65).

'It is conjectured that the following entry in Domesday refers to Broseley: "The same Helgot holds Bosle. Gethne held it, and was a free man. Here is i hide geldable. The land is (capable of employing) ii ox-teams. In demesne is one (team), and (there are) iiii serfs, and iiii boors, and i radman, with i team. In King Edward's time (the manor) was worth 16s. 1d., now 12s. He (Helgot) found it waste." Of Helgot's successors not a trace remains.

It is presumed, that the discerning Henry I bestowed the lordship of Broseley upon Varin de Metz, of Lorraine, from whom it is thought descended in after times many lords of Broseley; yet it is conjecture. Certain it is, however, that the Fitz Warins, de Burwardsley's, d'Eyton's, de Coven's and the de Pychford's, all, at one time or another, had an interest in the Manor of Broseley, beneath whom again held undertenants.

Broseley Church was subject to the mother church of St. Milburg, at Wenlock, within the bounds of whose vast Saxon parish it stood. The date of the foundation of Broseley Church is unknown. In token of its affiliation, and probably as a condition of its origin, the Incumbent was taxed with an annual pension of 2s. payable at the feast of St. Nicholas, to the mother church. No cure of soul^a went with new foundation, whose Incumbent was usually beneficed elsewhere.

In 1291, the church of Burwardsleye, in the deanery of Wenlock, was valued at £6.13s.4d. per ann. In 1341, the parish was assessed only 42s. to the ninth, for the growing corn had been destroyed by tempests; a large portion of the parish, owing to the poverty of the tenants, lay uncultivated, etc. In 1535, this preferment was valued at £8.5s.8d. per ann. less 7s.2d^s for synodals.

Early Incumbent - William, Parson of Burwardesleg, about 1230.'