

WILKINSON, JOHN (1728-1808), 'father of the iron trade'

Name: John Wilkinson
Date of birth: 1728
Date of death: 1808
Parent: Isaac Wilkinson
Gender: Male
Occupation: 'father of the iron trade'
Area of activity: Business and Industry
Author: Arthur Herbert Dodd

John was the eldest son of ISAAC WILKINSON, a Cumbrian iron worker turned master in a small way. He was born at Clifton, Cumb., in 1728, and educated at the Dissenting Academy of Caleb Rotherham at Kendal. After working with his father from c. 1748 he found employment in Midland iron-works and himself established furnaces there in which coal was successfully used to displace charcoal. When, in 1753, his father took a lease of the Bersham furnace (Wrexham), which for over twenty years had been worked with coal but yielded poor results, and settled with his wife and younger children at Plas Grono, the ancient home of the **Yale** family on Erthig estate, John co-operated in the venture and went to live in Wrexham while retaining his Midland interests. Using ironstone from Llwyn Einion and coal from Ponciau, the firm made all manner of iron goods from ordnance downwards; and when Isaac failed (c. 1761) it was replaced by the New Bersham Co., with John as leading spirit and, eventually, sole owner. Within a few years munitions were being manufactured for the government at Bersham on a large scale, and John took out a patent for cannon-boring (1774) which extended to France (1775) the contracts for ordnance he had held from Russia and Turkey since 1768, and also enabled him to obtain a virtual monopoly of the boring of cylinders for Boulton and Watt steam engines at Bersham for the first twenty years after it was patented (1775-95). He used the engines extensively to replace water power (which he safeguarded by acquiring most of the neighbouring mills on the Clywedog), and was accused of pirating the engines for his own use and for sale. He had establishments in France and Prussia, while at home he secured his raw material by extensive purchases of coal - and ironstone-bearing land, and his markets by taking out shares in mines and other customer concerns. He rented the ancient Abenbury forge (down the river from Bersham) till he had set up his own slitting and rolling mills; he was a shareholder in the Ellesmere canal, which he hoped in vain to have brought past his works; and he tried (with poor success) to reopen the Minera lead mines and others near Mold. In 1792 he bought the Brymbo Hall estate, where he set up blast furnaces and installed the latest machinery and processes without the aid of partners, and sank extensively for coal; he farmed some of the land on improved principles, using the first steam threshing machine in North Wales. He was sheriff of Denbighshire in 1799, but soon afterwards he gave up his Wrexham house and lived mainly in the midlands, where he died on 14 July 1808.

He has been described as 'the first to realise and to obtain the accuracy needed in the making of modern machinery' (Mantoux, *Industrial Revolution*). A radical in politics, he was accused (but never convicted) of supplying cannon to the French during the American and revolutionary wars; the guinea notes which he issued in 1792 (as well as leather, copper, and silver tokens during the specie shortage of 1787-93) were also denounced to **Lord Kenyon** by neighbouring Tories as underhand radical propaganda. Arbitrary, dictatorial, and unscrupulous, he was reputed a good employer, and he showed great generosity towards his sister's husband Joseph Priestley, especially after his losses in the Birmingham riots of 1791. After his death his fortune was squandered in litigation between his mistress and her children and his nephew Thomas Jones (Wilkinson). The Bersham works were derelict within twenty years; those at Brymbo were bought out of Chancery and restarted by a limited company in 1841. Wilkinson's portrait hangs in Wolverhampton town hall.

His youngest brother, WILLIAM WILKINSON (died 1808) was educated under Joseph Priestley at Nantwich, went to Bersham with his father in 1753, and acted as representative abroad for the New Bersham Co. till 1787, helping to modernise the Le Creusot and other French munition works (c. 1776-81) - with a view, according to local gossip, of helping the French to liberate America; he was also a shareholder in the Paris water-works, which John supplied with cast-iron pipes (1788). On his return he had a violent quarrel with his brother (probably over the Brymbo scheme) resulting in the temporary closure of Bersham by court order (1795), migration or enlistment of unemployed workmen, and the exclusion of William when work was resumed. He retired to Plas Grono, where in spite of heterodox views and adherence to the local Presbyterian cause (of which he was a trustee from 1797) he was on good terms with the neighbouring gentry. His daughter married Matthew Boulton's son. He died in March 1808, and was buried in the Dissenters' graveyard at Wrexham, where his grave is no longer identifiable.

Author

Emeritus Professor Arthur Herbert Dodd, (1891 - 1975)

Sources

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