

# FRIENDS OF THE CENTRE FOR WEST MIDLANDS HISTORY

SHARING THE PAST WITH THE FUTURE

## A CABINET OF CURIOSITIES: BIRMINGHAM AS THE TOY-SHOP OF EUROPE



In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Birmingham was famous for making toys, small luxury articles for the adornment of the person and the home. These were not toys for children but trinkets for adults, and included items such as snuff boxes, watches and chains, buckles, buttons and corkscrews. This talk showed that these items were often referred to as 'curiosities', exploring examples from the 1730s to the 1830s.

During the eighteenth century cabinets of curiosities became popular with the consuming public; these were assemblages of objects including items of natural history, tribal items, historical objects, mechanical wonders and items of fine craftsmanship, which were brought together and displayed by collectors. The talk argued that it was through the skill of the maker and the beauty of the workmanship that Birmingham toys were seen as curiosities, and that the people who bought them were amazed by the novelty and ingenuity of these items. Consumers were also intrigued by the new technologies of production.

Many of the manufacturers of toys were also collectors of traditional curiosities, as well as curious in other ways by investigating the nature of the world around them, whether through scientific study or political discussion. Manufacturers, such as Matthew Boulton, used new scientific processes to make novel and ingenious items. Others, like James Bisset, used their insatiable curiosity to remain innovative and produce unusual items that excited the curiosity of their customers. Toy-shop keepers understood that treating toys as curiosities was a good selling point, and would sometimes keep the items under velvet to reveal them slowly, so 'not to pale the eye & exhaust the curiosity'.

Toys were productions of an age of wonder, discovery and curiosity, and their production and consumption is better understood within that culture.

Jenni Dixon

# THE BEAUTY OF LETTERS: TEXT, TYPE AND COMMUNICATION IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

13-15 MARCH 2015 | THE UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Taking the words of Birmingham's famous printer, John Baskerville as the starting point, this inter-disciplinary conference considered the development and significance of text, type and communication in the eighteenth century. The conference presented twenty-nine distinguished speakers from across the UK, Europe and the US; and an audience of just over seventy delegates with diverse interests in the written and printed word in the eighteenth century. The event opened with a splendid presentation of eighteenth-century cimelia - treasures - from the archives of the Cadbury Research Library, and delegates were invited to handle the material and share their knowledge of the books on display.

The main conference was divided into two parts: the beauty of writing; and the beauty of printing.

Day One was devoted to the 'Beauty of Writing' and opened with a keynote lecture from Dr Susan Whyman (Fellow of the Royal Historical Society) whose lecture [delivered by Janet Sullivan], 'The pleasure of writing is inconceivable: William Hutton (Birmingham 1723-1815) as an author', straddled both the written and the printed word. This was followed by talks which spanned the teaching of writing and penmanship; styles of handwritten script; copybooks; shorthand; handwritten documents such as diaries, account books and letters. The first day was concluded by guest speaker, Jenny Uglow, author and Patron of the Baskerville Society, who spoke about 'Thomas Bewick: book design, engraving & the printers'.

Day Two considered the 'Beauty of Printing' and began with a keynote lecture by Prof Lynda Mugglestone (Pembroke, Oxford), who considered 'Print and the construction of cultural identity in John Baskerville's Vocabulary, or Pocket Dictionary'. This talk paved the way for other lectures, which considered the work of Baskerville and his Birmingham contemporaries. However, the days talks were by no means restricted to the work of Baskerville; other speakers considered libraries, and education; publishing and bookselling; the role of newspapers in eighteenth century Britain and America; the effect of printed media on the cult of celebrity; the relationship between authors and the printed word; and the influence of eighteenth century and architectural lettering in the creation of printing types.

The conference was both stimulating and congenial; the diversity of the audiences provoked some original conversations on the nature of communication in the eighteenth century and collectively the papers brought fresh perspectives on printing history and print culture in the Enlightenment.

**Prof Caroline Archer & Dr Malcolm Dick**  
**The Baskerville Society, 3 April 2015**

# BEYOND BOULTON: THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF BIRMINGHAM'S INDUSTRIES

On Tuesday 13th January 2015, Dr Mike Hodder, formerly Planning Archaeologist at Birmingham City Council, gave a talk to a packed audience. He presented archaeological evidence, from Roman times to the twentieth century, including the Time Team investigation of Soho Manufactory.

The excavations by Time Team in 1995 at Soho showed how archaeological evidence contributes to our understanding of a relatively well-documented industrial enterprise. The earliest of Birmingham's wide range of industries have left little or no documentation, therefore archaeology is our sole source of information, and even for more recent times archaeology can add to, and sometimes contradict, the documentary evidence. Archaeology is the study of all periods of the human past through structures (below and above ground) and objects (including finished products and waste), and their relationship to each other.

Birmingham's first industry, pottery making, took place in the Roman period. Kilns dating to the second century AD have been found in Perry Barr and Sutton Coldfield. Waste found in excavations shows that pottery was also being made in the thirteenth century in the medieval town of Birmingham, using local clay (one of Birmingham's few raw materials) and decorated with white clay from the Black County. A nineteenth-century brick kiln excavated in Saltley is part of a clay-using industry that continued into the twentieth century in south-west and east Birmingham. Distinctive pits and bone waste show that leather tanning was taking place in the city centre from at least the thirteenth century, using the abundant water which is another of Birmingham's under-appreciated resources and was also used to process flax and hemp whose seeds and pollen have been found.



Metalworking in the city centre from the Middle Ages onwards is indicated by hammerscale and hearth bottoms from iron smithing, and crucibles with residues from casting. Well-preserved remains of a nineteenth-century brassworks were excavated on the Library of Birmingham site, between former canal arms. Other canalside industries that have been investigated include lime kilns at Selly Oak, glassworks, and gasworks. The products of Birmingham's glassworks include collectors' pieces, and waste glass found at the Walsh Walsh glassworks shows how innovative colorants were used there. Well-preserved gas holders were found at the gasworks in Gas Street. Water levels on canals were maintained by pumping stations like that excavated on the Digbeth Branch Canal which contained a Boulton and Watt steam engine.

**Dr Mike Hodder**

**(Additional text by Sue Tungate)**

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**Read more in Mike's book, *Birmingham: the Hidden History* (The History Press, 2011)**

# Arts and crafts children's books: Birmingham women illustrators



The city of Birmingham became associated with finely illustrated books in the 1890s and continued this tradition into the early twentieth century. This participated in the revival of fine printing associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement which aspired to make the 'Book Beautiful.' Birmingham's Municipal School of Art trained the artists who became known as the 'Birmingham School' of illustrators.

In 1893, members of the School of Art made an important submission of designs and executed works in book-illustration to the Arts and Crafts Exhibition in London. This caught the attention of none other than William Morris, whose praise of Arthur Gaskin, Edmund New and Charles Gere in particular was reported in the press. Morris's bias towards these male artists was perpetuated in later scholarship, largely omitting the equally significant contribution of women artists Georgie Gaskin, Winifred Smith, Gertrude Bradley, Celia Levetus and Florence Rudland. These women specialised in the illustration of children's books, as well as the designing of bookplates. They sought to elevate children's books as works of art.

Their work was reproduced in illustrated periodicals and discussed in art journals including *The Studio* magazine. They collaborated with other members of the Birmingham School in the fruition of several projects like the *Book of Pictured Carols* published in 1893. This was representative of the group's predilection for black-and-white wood-engraved illustrations reminiscent of the richly decorated books of the Kelmscott Press. This found its full expression in the magazine of *the Quest* which was printed by hand at the Birmingham Guild of Handicraft Press.

The desire to produce high quality designs, which took into consideration the page in its entirety, from layout, to type and decoration, extended to advertisements, such as Georgie Gaskin's designs promoting Stickphast Sticks of glue. Birmingham women illustrators produced a varied range of work, not only in black-and-white but also in colour, notably in collaboration with the engraver Edmund Evans.

They carried out artistic work in other media, such as tempera painting, stained glass, metalwork or embroidery, in which the foundational role of book-illustration in their training can be appreciated.

**Claire Fitzgerald, University of Warwick**

## COMMERCE, CIVILISATION AND CHRISTIANITY: SIERRA LEONE COMPANY POLICY, C. 1791-1807

On 23 March, Professor Suzanne Schwarz of the University of Worcester introduced us to the Sierra Leone Company, established in 1791 to exploit the supposedly fertile West African soil in order to produce sugar to satisfy the sweet-toothed English. Based on fair trade and using free labour, this was a radical, commercial approach to the abolition of slavery. The company's coinage, minted by Matthew Boulton, and showing an image of a handshake between a black and a white hand, symbolises the idealism and optimism with which the company was established.

Professor Schwarz's particular focus was the apparently mundane question of who invested in the company. As we quickly discovered, however, her simple list of subscribers opened the door to a wealth of fascinating facts and speculation. The company's 58 West Midlands investors included Lunar men, women and 'reverends'. What was their motivation? Did they want to make a quick buck? Or to support an ethical enterprise which would help to spread Christianity? Or to atone for England's part in the evils of slavery? For many, it was perhaps a combination of all three. And why were familiar names, such as Joseph Priestley and James Watt, absent from the list? As Professor Schwarz argued, the answers to these questions will shed new light on attitudes to slavery and the place of Africa in the global economy of this period.

She also discussed the views of Africans and resettled slaves on the company's project, suggesting that they were sceptical about its aims, which did not correspond to what they wanted. Squabbles over land-ownership, in particular, soured relations between the company and local people. Meanwhile, Freetown began to develop naturally as an important trading centre, becoming the multi-ethnic society that exists today.

Ultimately, this lack of understanding contributed to the failure of the company. External factors such as the war with France, and the failure of the British government to abolish slavery when they had promised, played their part. But in many ways, the project was doomed from the start. For all their enthusiasm, the directors had no first-hand knowledge of conditions in Sierra Leone. After a few years it transpired that sugar could not be successfully cultivated in West Africa, not least because of the white ants that shared the English sweet tooth!

The many and varied questions which followed, ranging from Nova Scotia to Liberia, were testament to just how stimulating the audience had found Professor Schwarz's talk.

Sarah Bradley

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## Conservation and Research of the Staffordshire Hoard by Ian Dillamore

The event which took place on Thursday 29th January on Conservation and Research of the Staffordshire Hoard was described by the chairman of the Birmingham Metallurgical Association as the first of a series to be held annually, combining the interests of the Association and the Centre for West Midlands History. No better start could be offered than this, in which Pieta Greaves and Dr Ellie Blakelock of the Birmingham Museums Trust brought the large audience up to date on the understanding of the artefacts that form the renowned Staffordshire Hoard.

Pieta started proceedings using pictorial slides to remind those present of the nature, quality and contents of the hoard. Most of the material is clearly military in character, and there are some religious artefacts that straddle the transition from pagan to Christian. The material is dated from between 580 and 740AD. The art work is mainly based on animals and shows evidence of Swedish and Germanic influences. Pieta emphasised the fineness of many of the

artefacts, many of which comprise wire filigree soldered onto backing plates in intricate patterns. Some of the wire is as thin as 0.1mm.

Ellie Blakelock then described the work she has carried out at the British Museum on what the metallurgy tells us of the provenance of these materials. They vary in content and are not pure gold, but contain significant amounts of silver and copper.

In discussion there was much interest in the source of the material, which Pieta thought must have come from re-melting of coinage originating in Europe. The nature of the material, such as the pommels from swords, suggested to her that it had been collected from the fallen in battle.

The presentations were warmly received by the assembly and we wait with interest to see how the series maintains the high standard set by this first example.

# Committee Member Profile: Sarah Bradley



I feel very much the new kid on the block. Not only am I almost the newest member of the committee, but it is less than three years since I embarked on an MA in West Midlands History at Birmingham University, and became 'An Historian'. Before that my academic credentials amounted to an O-level in history in 1968 and a module in French history as part of a French degree at Durham University in 1974. The much more accomplished historians on the committee have been very welcoming and I feel have already begun to make my mark by spending a day drinking tea and stuffing envelopes for the last mailshot!

The MA was a wonderful experience and I learnt a huge amount through it. It also confirmed my view that the social changes of the nineteenth century make it a fascinating period to study. My dissertation explored the early days of the Bromsgrove Poor Law Union. Like others, I found that the new poor law system, introduced in 1834, did not really work, but that conditions in the workhouse were not as quite grim as Dickens suggests. Meanwhile I became quite attached to the efficient clerk, Thomas Day, and to the kindly Dr Fletcher who tried hard to improve the inmates' diet having tried it himself and suffered dreadful pangs of hunger.

My husband, James, is relieved that, with the MA behind me, and plans for further researches as yet unformed (more on the poor law perhaps, or the history of Belbroughton where I live?), I have more time for the rest of life. We head for the mountains when we can, but as these are somewhat lacking locally, the rolling Worcestershire countryside and the Malverns make a very agreeable substitute. Tuesdays see me at Cradley Heath Citizens Advice Bureau, where the parallels between the current benefits system and the poor law are only too evident. Rather inexpert bell-ringing, grandparent duties and work with asylum seekers combine to keep me occupied.

*If you would like to contribute to our next newsletter, please send editorial and news items to Kate Iles at [k.iles@bham.ac.uk](mailto:k.iles@bham.ac.uk). Please note we do reserve the right to edit material.*

# Malcolm X and Marshall Street: 50 years on

It is 50 years since the civil rights campaigner Malcolm X visited Smethwick in the wake of the notorious Smethwick election of 1964. The Birmingham branch of the History Association marked the anniversary with a special presentation by Dr Kehinde Andrews of Birmingham City University and Dr John Narayan of the University of Warwick.

Their lecture looked at the events of the time and also at Malcolm X's legacy as a serious thinker within the Pan Africanist tradition. They argued that, despite surface changes, there was still 'structural racism' in the West Midlands and the country as a whole.

A large audience made for a lively meeting and the discussion was enriched by the presence of many younger researchers as well as some veterans of the long campaign against racism in Smethwick. The latter testified to the much better atmosphere in the area today.

This was an interesting and enlightening foray into contemporary history and a controversial topic.

Sue Thomas

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## CWMH FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Friends of the Centre for West Midlands History will be informed of further details when they are available. Everyone is welcome to attend these events and there is **no need to book and all events are held at the University of Birmingham unless stated otherwise**. Events are held at the University of Birmingham, unless otherwise indicated. Seminars at the University are free. The best way of keeping in touch with events is via the Centre's website: [www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/activity/cwmh/index.aspx](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/activity/cwmh/index.aspx)

➤ Wednesday 29th April  
**Research Seminar. Nick Benbow, 'The Birmingham Book Club, 1745-1900: an influential but little-known society at the heart of Birmingham life'**.  
Lecture Room 1, Arts Building (Floor 2), 6.30-8.00pm.

➤ Tuesday 12th May  
**Historical Association Eric Hopkins Memorial Lecture. 'Fortunes of War: the West Midlands at the Time of Waterloo'**. Launch of a major new History West Midlands publication to coincide with the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo. Malcolm Dick, Emma Tyler and Andrew Watts.  
Lecture Room 3, Arts Building (Floor 2), 6.30-8.00pm.

➤ Wednesday 3rd June  
**Research Seminar. Sarah Hayes, Newman Brothers Coffin Works, Birmingham. An introduction to a newly opened heritage event.**  
Lecture Room 3, Arts Building (Floor 2), 6.30-8.00pm.

➤ Tuesday 14th July  
**Historical Association. Elaine Williams 'Ways to Remember: the First World War through the lens of Florence Camm's war memorial windows'**.  
An introduction to the work of an aspect of the work of an important West Midlands artist.  
Lecture Room 3 Arts Building (Floor 2), 6.30-8.00pm.

**FURTHER INFORMATION WILL BE PROVIDED ABOUT THE EVENTS BELOW AND ADDITIONAL SEMINARS FOR THE AUTUMN IN OUR SEPTEMBER NEWSLETTER AND MAILSHOT**

➤ Saturday 10th October  
**300th Anniversary of the Consecration of St Philip's Church and Anglican Cathedral, Birmingham.** Launch of film and presentations on aspects of the history of the Church and local Christianity.

➤ Thursday 15th October  
**Joint CWMH and History of Medicine Unit seminar/ book launch.** Jane Adams, *Healing with Water: English Spas and the Water Cure*, Manchester University Press.  
Lecture Room 3, Arts Building (Floor 2), 6.30-8.00pm.

➤ Saturday 17th October  
**Black Country History Day**

➤ Saturday 21st November  
**Birmingham History Day**