

FRIENDS of THE CENTRE for WEST MIDLANDS HISTORY



Sharing the Past with the Future

The Making Sense of an Industrial Town: Birmingham - ‘The City of a Thousand Trades’ by Malcolm Dick

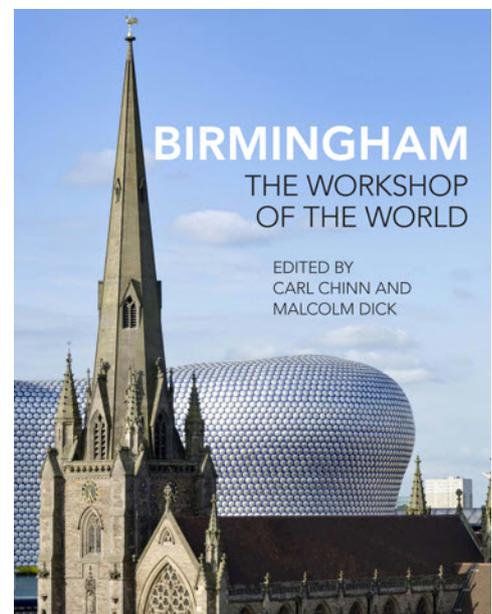
Malcolm’s presentation was based on a chapter in his latest book, *Birmingham: the Workshop of the World*, co-edited with Carl Chinn. His paper discussed the different ways in which the industrialisation of Birmingham has been explored since William Hutton wrote the first history of the town in the eighteenth century. Malcolm’s focus was on how the rapid growth of Birmingham has been explained in the past and he framed his approach on the stimulating effects of the interplay of both demand and supply factors, including the contribution of international trade. The involvement of local industrialists in the slave trade and commerce with the plantation economies of the Americas deserves exploration – a feature which has been ignored by historians of the town. Malcolm also focussed on the changing shape of manufacturing in Birmingham until the late nineteenth century and the different types of materials which historians might use to investigate and reinterpret economic life, including archaeological evidence, visual sources, ephemera and artefacts, which they have traditionally neglected.

Comparing Birmingham’s experience with that of other manufacturing towns, such as Coventry, Leeds, Manchester and Sheffield, allows the extent of Birmingham’s uniqueness to be evaluated. Despite Birmingham’s importance as a manufacturing centre, there has been little research into the metallurgical

industries, the impact of transport developments, especially the crucially important carrier trade and the role of small and medium-sized businesses in shaping the town. There is more to ‘the city of a thousand trades’ than the histories of well-known businesses such as Boulton and Watt and Cadburys.

Birmingham: the Workshop of the World (Liverpool University Press, 2016) is available to purchase from History West Midlands at <http://historywm.com/product/birmingham-the-workshop-of-the-world-by-carl-chinn-malcolm-dick/> or Liverpool University Press at <http://liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/products/80803>

(A PPT Seminar)



Cover of *Birmingham: the Workshop of the World*.



An Introduction to the Papers of James Watt and Family

This presentation introduced the audience to the provenance and arrangement of the papers of James Watt and family (MS 3219), held at Archives and Collections, Library of Birmingham.

It aimed to illustrate the different types of records in this collection and the different members of Watt's family for whom records have survived from his grandfather Thomas, (d.1734) to his youngest son, Gregory (1777-1804).

Watt's father, James Watt of Greenock (1698-1782) was a merchant, builder and ship's chandler with interests in the American shipping trade. He also served as a member of the Town Council of Greenock for over twenty years and there are a number of account books and papers for the town, especially regarding shipping.

Watt's own papers include financial records of his business with John Craig in Glasgow from 1757 as mathematical and musical instrument maker; accounts, surveys, reports and drawings illustrating his career as surveyor, especially for the Monkland Canal (1769); correspondence and notebooks which show his early experiments in chemical and steam engineering; and extensive correspondence with family, friends and others which gives a richly detailed picture of life and science at the time.

There is a lot of information about (ill) health and medicine as many of Watt's friends were medical doctors. Watt's own health was not robust and both of his children, Jessy and Gregory, by his second wife Ann, suffered from tuberculosis and died young. This includes correspondence about the Pneumatic Institute set up by Thomas Beddoes in Bristol, for which Boulton

& Watt manufactured the breathing apparatus.

In 1801, having retired from the steam engine business, Watt purchased his first estate in Wales and he continued to buy adjoining farms in Radnorshire and Breconshire near the river Wye. Although he rarely visited, and never lived there (that role was taken up by James Watt jr.) he invested particularly in planting trees and orchards in considerable quantities, and there is much regular correspondence with James Crummer, his land agent from which much can be learned about estate management, forestry, local tenants, taxes, travel, local foodstuffs etc.

James Watt jr. (1769-1848) left correspondence, especially from his father, giving information about his training in business skills in France and Germany; some records of his time as foreign agent in Italy for a textile firm in Manchester; notebooks recording the progress of his first paddle steamer on a journey down the Rhine in 1817; notebooks about flower and fruit planting at Aston Hall where he lived from 1819; and records of his activities to promote the reputation of his father in print and stone, with statues and a memorial chapel.

Gregory Watt, an excellent scholar was, particularly interested in geology and among his letters, travel notebooks and drawings left an early geological map of Italy and a published paper on basalt.

Some of the unexpected finds in the Watt papers were also illustrated, for example a long roll with a survey of the Fort of St John, Quebec, 1777, by John Marr, military surveyor and relative by marriage.



Birmingham History Day 2016

by Sarah Hayes

Andrew Reekes began the day presenting the basis of his latest book, *Two Titans: One City - George Cadbury, Joseph Chamberlain and Birmingham*. The book is a comparative study of the two industrialists, a study that has never been attempted before.

Birmingham – the Workshop of the World, co-edited by Carl Chinn and Dr Malcolm Dick, is the most important book to be written on the subject of Birmingham history in many years. The book has been dedicated to the late Dr Chris Upton, who had intended to write a chapter on the history of leisure and popular culture. Chris' book, *A History of Birmingham*, was the first single-volume history of the city for half a century, so it's fitting that he will also be remembered in the city's latest account of its history.

Norman Bartlam provided us with his usual witty update of his work with 'The News Team', which involves children from the across the city getting involved with history through the medium of film. Much of this footage, along with his work on *Doorstep History*, a local history show, can be seen on his website: <http://tntnews.co.uk/>

After lunch, we moved onto community projects, and first to kick-off the afternoon was Aftab Rahman and Mashkura Begum, talking about their latest project, *Old Wives Tales: Hidden Stories of Birmingham's Bangladeshi Women*. The project began in 2015 and explores the journey of how Bangladeshi women came to be in Birmingham. Aftab and Mashkura explained that while many previous accounts have focused on how and why men from the Bangladeshi community moved to Birmingham, the experiences of women have not been documented. This project has filled that gap.

A video documenting the official launch can be seen here: <https://vimeo.com/148642308>

Nicola Gauld, from *Women's History Birmingham* spoke about her latest project, *Birmingham Women: Past and Present*. The group was founded in October 2015 to promote and raise awareness of West Midlands women's history. Nicola welcomes any new members or anybody who would like to get in touch to share their stories. You can contact Nicola using the following email: nicola.gauld@hotmail.com

Tessa Chynoweth, Research Assistant for the 'Birmingham Manufacturers Project' at Birmingham Museums Trust, gave an update on the 18-month project, which seeks to identify objects in the museum collection that relate to Birmingham manufacturers and manufacture. The central aim is to create a website that will better inform researchers, students and visitors to the museum.

Corinna Rayner and Tom Epps from Library of Birmingham concluded the community aspect of the day. We're all aware of the significant budget cuts to the library and how this has impacted on the service that it can offer, but Corinna and Tom reinforced that despite this, their ambitions and commitments to improving the service haven't wavered. <https://theironroom.wordpress.com/>

The last talk of the day came from Malcolm Dick, Kate Croft and Jordan Thornton, which focused on 'James Watt 2019'. This is a significant year as it's the 200th anniversary of Watt's death, and to celebrate that, there will be a number of activities, including books, a website and a host of events.



Black Country History Day 2016

by Judith Watkins

Black Country History Day 2016 had very much a Black Country Living Museum theme, with many of the presenters having links with the museum and a sizeable contingent of museum staff in the audience. Dr Malcolm Dick, himself a trustee of the museum, began the day by introducing its Director and Chief Executive, Andrew Lovett. Andrew's presentation, 'Forging Ahead', gave an overview of the development of the museum from its earliest days as a derelict site containing forty-two disused mine shafts and a sewage works. Fast forward to the present and BCLM is now an Arts Council England Major Partner Museum. It has recently received significant funding designed both to strengthen the region's visitor economy and help the museum with its major new 1940s/50s/60s development, aimed at increasing visitor attendance from the current 306,000 up to 500,000. Alongside the museum's own funds, financial support has been received from the Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership, as part of the Castle Hill redevelopment project, whilst a major funding bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund is currently being prepared.

The second speaker, David Eveleigh, Director of Collections and Learning at the Ironbridge Gorge Museums Trust was previously Director of Collections, Learning and Research at the Black Country Living Museum. David's well illustrated presentation, *Stepping onto a World Stage – Black Country industry and art at the 1851 Great Exhibition* began by considering not only what manufactures from the Black Country were on display, but also those which were surprisingly absent, such as the weighing devices from Salters of West Bromwich. Objects that were present

included japanned ware from Wolverhampton, glass from Stourbridge and the elaborate Albert Lock from Carpenter and Tildesley of Willenhall, along with two massive slabs of Staffordshire thick coal, which stood outside the western entrance.

Andrew Homer's contribution to the day, *From Brew'us to Beerhouse*, was based on his research for his dissertation for the University of Birmingham's MA in West Midlands History. Andrew, a costumed demonstrator at the Black Country Living Museum, had used Joseph Bateman's *The Excise Officer's Training Manual* to identify the Black Country area for excise collections. Annual returns to Parliament show that the Black Country had many more beerhouse licences, even than London, and that, as Phil Drabble had once remarked, in the Black Country nearly every family brewed.

The final speaker, Dr Connie Wan, Programme Development Manager at the Birmingham and Midland Institute, was formerly a curator at Wolverhampton Art Gallery where she had organised an exhibition, in 2013, of the works of Edwin Butler Bayliss, *Poet Painter of the Black Country*. His widow, Lily, had left a large bequest of his paintings to the art gallery on her death. Although his best-known works included *Tipping the Slag* and *Evening in the Black Country*, Butler Bayliss also painted seascapes, including some for GWR posters. Although his work is not much known outside the Black Country, Connie showed how his legacy had inspired other artists from the area, including Paul Hipkiss, RBSA, Robert Perry RBSA, Arthur Lockwood, RBSA and Brian Steventon, RBSA.



Birmingham Object: Enamel Bonbonnière

by Jenni Dixon



Enamel bonbonnière, held at
Wolverhampton Museum and Art Gallery.

In the eighteenth century, Bilston, Wednesbury and Birmingham were all Midland towns with a strong industry of enamel manufacture. Enamel is made by fusing powdered glass onto another surface and in the Midlands, copper was usually used. These towns used enamelling in the manufacture of rings, snuff-boxes, nutmeg graters, and other trinkets, and a wide variety of enamelled articles are held at Wolverhampton Museum and Art Gallery. Bilston was possibly the first to practice the art, as in 1737 Dr Richard Wilkes of Willenhall recorded that japan-ware was being produced in Wolverhampton and Birmingham, but on noting enamel manufacture, he mentioned only Bilston. As a medical doctor, he travelled to many of the local towns, so would have had knowledge of the trades practised in each.

In 1751 an innovation in the trade was made in Birmingham, by John Brooks, who tried to take out a patent for transfer-printing onto enamel. The technique involved using copperplates, which were used for printing onto paper, to apply a kind of glue and coloured powder, which was then heated to fix the image. The

advance meant that imagery could be made quickly and more cheaply, but Brooks never got his patent, so the method spread to London and Liverpool, as well as being utilised in the pottery trade. The bonbonnière (sweet box, left) is considered to have been made in Birmingham not long after Brooks' innovation (c. 1750-1755). It has been transfer printed in red and over-painted in orange and purple, suggesting the transfer-print was of a poorer quality due to it still being in a period of development. The original engraving is thought to be by Robert Hancock, who was probably apprenticed in Birmingham, but made a name for himself producing transfer-prints for the Worcestershire potteries. The image itself was taken from a well-known painting of the period, *Les Fêtes Venetiennes*, by Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721), itself copied in print by Laurent Cars (1699-1771, see below). The bonbonnière is one of a vast range of beautiful enamelled objects made in Birmingham and across the Midlands in the eighteenth century.



Print of *Les Fêtes Venetiennes* by Laurent Cars.



The First Newhall Hill Meeting, January 1817

Two hundred years ago, on Wednesday January 22nd 1817, thousands of Birmingham people made their way to the natural amphitheatre on the west side of Newhall Hill to protest about the distress that pervaded the town and to hear speakers making the case for political reform.

Many students of Birmingham's history are familiar with the tales of the great outdoor meetings held on Newhall Hill during the campaign that led to the Great Reform Act of 1832. Headed by Thomas Attwood and the Birmingham Political Union (BPU), these meetings drew together men and women from all walks of life from Birmingham and surrounding towns. Their aim was to extend the franchise and ensure the new manufacturing towns were given their own MPs.

The earlier Newhall Hill meetings, held between 1817 and 1819, were the forerunners of those later BPU gatherings. But they were held in less auspicious times and under different leadership.

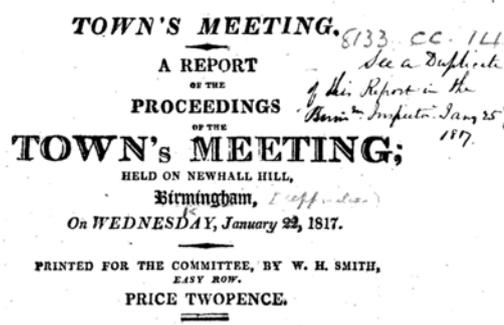
The years after the end of the Napoleonic wars were difficult ones, especially in Birmingham. Trade was slow to revive, returning soldiers swelled the ranks of the unemployed and poor relief was stretched to its utmost, despite the fact that, as Thomas Attwood himself remarked, "multitudes would rather perish than apply for parochial aid." Parliament compounded the problems by passing the Corn Laws, which kept the price of bread high. There was widespread resentment at endemic corruption. Discontent began to focus on the lack of political representation.

In the late eighteenth century, political reform had been discussed in middle-class and even aristocratic circles.

But the political atmosphere during the war years – and in Birmingham the memory of the 'Church and King' riots – had muted those voices. It was now a handful of radical artisans and small traders, schoolmasters and printers who came to the fore, organised in the 'Birmingham Hampden Club,' chaired by Baptist schoolteacher, George Edmonds. The High Bailiff refused their request for a Town's Meeting to discuss popular grievances. But with the support of a few better-off dissenters such as James Luckcock, and the family of Thomas Wright Hill, they went ahead and organised the meeting themselves.

This, the first mass meeting held in the town, passed off peacefully; "Perfect order and decorum prevailed." It passed resolutions against the Corn Laws and corruption and "for such a reform in the Commons House of Parliament as will restore frequent elections and general suffrage."

This was a promising beginning but there were many more hurdles in the path of the reformers. Political repression led to George Edmonds and his fellow-organisers being imprisoned in 1821. But eventually the pressure for change grew, and the thousands who had turned out in 1817 found they had new supporters and a new organisation in the Birmingham Political Union.



Title page of *A Report of the Proceedings of the Town's Meeting held on Newhall Hill, Birmingham, on Wednesday, January 22, 1817*, printed by W. H. Smith



Warriors, Warlords and Saints: some themes in Mercian history

by John Hunt

This book offers the reader not so much a definitive history and narrative of the Mercian kingdom, as a series of ‘snapshots’ of its fascinating story. It shows Mercia as a major power with stable foundations and strong traditions, powerful and sophisticated with a rich material culture, and by all measures well able to rival the standing and achievements of the neighbouring Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

The seminar based on the book discussed some of the themes that emerge from it, and provided entrées to examining the history and development of Mercia. It was suggested that the Mercian heartland lay in an area around the upper reaches of the Trent river system. The role of Lichfield as the episcopal seat and focus for the cult of Saint Chad, the particular significance of Repton for the Mercian royal house, and the enduring importance of Tamworth, all strengthen the sense of sentiment that seems to have been associated with this area throughout the history of the kingdom. This geography and its associations helped form the Mercian kingdom’s sense of identity.

The crucial role played by Christianity in building the kingdom was emphasised throughout; from the earliest period when it offered an important cultural context that gave a diverse community some additional ‘common ground’ and a basis for a shared identity, through to the powerful Mercian church as one of the pillars of the kingdom.

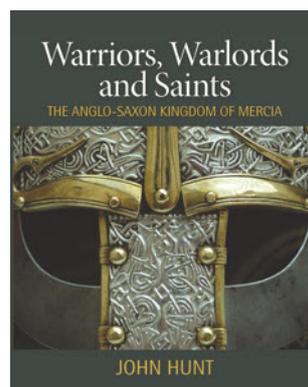
The theme of Mercian kingship and the sinews, expression and manifestation of power, was considered. In addition to the character of Mercian

kingship, particular emphasis was placed upon the importance of the wealth of the Mercian kingdom. Mercian kings understood that wealth, and the ability to reward, was the basis of power. Campaign booty was not a sustainable source in the long term, but this was overcome by harnessing the contribution of trade and commerce, particularly after Wulfhere had made London a Mercian town.

Fundamental to Mercia’s fortunes was military power and success in war. Entries from the *Mercian Register* show that this was as true for Æthelflæda, ‘Lady of the Mercians’, in the early tenth century, as it had been for Penda in the seventh century. Mercian success was reliant upon military power and Æthelbald and Offa were the first Anglo-Saxon kings to seek to ‘codify’ this capacity and move it away from dependency upon the person of the king. Furthermore, an essential aspect of this military power was the establishment of a number of substantially fortified settlements, *burhs*, supported by their hinterlands.

The session closed with a reminder of the rich artistic and material culture that developed in Mercia, and the possibility of a ‘Mercian style’.

(A PPT Seminar)



Available to purchase from History West Midlands at <http://historywm.com/product/warriors-warlords-and-saints-the-anglo-saxon-kingdom-of-mercia-by-john-hunt/>



Visit to J. W. Evans Silver Factory

by Sue Tungate



Victorian photograph of J. W. Evans's

On 19th October 2016, ten members of the CWMH visited J. W. Evans Silver Factory, one of the most complete, surviving, historic factories in Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter. We had been warned that the building had no heating, and that there were some uneven floor surfaces and a number of steep, narrow staircases. However, I don't think this prepared us for the rabbit warren of workshops hidden behind the façade at 54-57 Albion Street. It was a fascinating glimpse into what appeared to be a time machine, taking us back to the 19th century, although the factory only closed in 2006. There were thousands of dies stored in every nook and cranny, and a huge variety of tools scattered around, to manufacture metal into a great range of objects such as spoons, candlesticks, jugs, and ashtrays. The factory also has all the records of the business.

English Heritage have rescued the site, which was originally a family home. The firm was established in 1881, and expanded into the terraced houses next door. Remnants of the kitchen and outside courtyards are now incorporated into the factory, and the workshops retain their original drop stamps and fly presses. The jewel in the crown, so to speak, was the display room, where completed objects, now silver-plated, glittered in their display cabinets. One of our guides had worked at the factory, and described it as a very friendly place, where entire families were employed for several generations. The record seems to have been held by one worker who spent 72 years with the firm!

Find out more at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Szksrbkvfjg>



Our Stour

On a sultry evening in August, Graham Beckley launched his book, *Our Stour*, at the Bonded Warehouse, Stourbridge. At times the building was shaken by thunderous noise from road works outside which continued into the night but neither Graham nor the other speakers let it put them off.

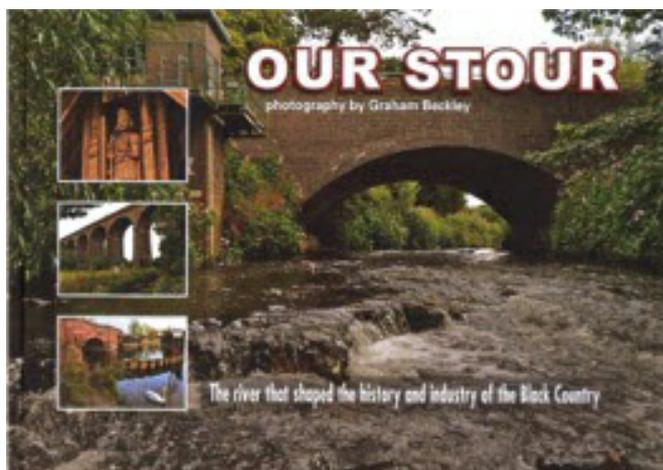
At some personal risk, Graham has managed to photograph the River Stour at virtually every stage of its journey from its highest point in the Clent Hills to its confluence with the River Severn at Stourport. What emerges most clearly from the book is the great variety of place and landscape through which the river flows. Graham has tried to rescue the river from the obscurity it occasionally sinks into. At the book launch he regaled us with tales of land-owners who did not know that they had it flowing through their land or, if they knew there was water there, did not know what it was! As a keen conservationist, Graham has not shied away from illustrating the river's less pleasant aspects and its use as a dump, including, as he put it, for the 'sport of trolley tossing'.

Although most of the industry that the Stour once supported has now dwindled away, the book points up many historical associations. They are too numerous to list but include: St Kenelm's spring near Romsley; Cradley Forge, once worked by Dud Dudley; the remains of the Foster, Rastrick & Co works at Stourbridge which produced the *Agenorina*; the site of Richard Foley's hugely influential slitting mill at the Hyde, Kinver, and the once internationally-famed carpet industry at Kidderminster.

Book by Graham Beckley, article by Judith Davies

Graham's photographs were previously exhibited at Himley Hall and other venues. The exhibition contained some massive panoramas on a scale that is hard to reproduce in a book so if he ever holds the exhibition again I would recommend that too. Meanwhile this book is an excellent alternative.

Published by Graham Beckley and the Black Country Society, on sale from the Black Country Society, the Black Country Living Museum, Ashwood Nurseries, or Amazon, ASIN 1911309005, all priced £13.50.



Cover of *Our Stour*

If you would like to contribute to our next newsletter, please send details to Kate Croft at k.croft@bham.ac.uk. Please note we do reserve the right to edit material.



Forthcoming Events from January 2017

Centre for West Midlands History (CWMH) Evening Seminars. University of Birmingham, Arts Building: 6.30-8.00pm. There is no cost to attend these events

Thursday 19th January. Alice Insley (University of Nottingham), 'Putting painting in its place: exhibiting Joseph Wright in Victorian Derby'. ARTS LR6

Thursday 16th February. Jenni Dixon (Birmingham City University), 'Wedgwood's Development of Jasper Cameos and Birmingham Mounters'. ARTS LR3

Thursday 16th March. Dr Andrew Sargent, (University of Keele), 'The Mercian Minster: is there more to it?' ARTS LR1

Joint CWMH and Birmingham and Midlands Institute Study Day. Contact 0121 236 3561 or www.bmi.org.uk for booking details.

Saturday 25th February. The Kingdom of Mercia: People, Places and Things in Anglo-Saxon England, 10.30am - 4.00pm. John Lee Theatre. £32/£29 for Members of the BMI and Friends of the Centre for West Midlands History (includes lunch and refreshments).

Held at The BMI, 9 Margaret Street, Birmingham B3 3BS.

BMI Friday Lecture Series held at The BMI, 9 Margaret Street, Birmingham B3 3BS. £5* or FREE for Members of the BMI - drop in, no need to book.

3rd February, 1.00-2.00pm. Brendan Flynn, 'Pictures from Palaces'.

10th March, 1.00-2.00pm. Andrew Homer, 'From Brew'us to Beerhouse: Alcohol and society in the nineteenth-century Black Country'.

17th March, 1.00-2.00pm. Dr Sabina Stent, 'Emmy Bridgwater and the Birmingham'.

BMI Friday Evening Events held at The BMI, 9 Margaret Street, Birmingham B3 3BS. Contact 0121 236 3561 or www.bmi.org.uk for booking details.

Friday 3rd February, 6.00-8.00pm, 'An Evening of A.E. Housman' John Lee Theatre, the Birmingham and Midland Institute. £5/£3 for Members of the BMI (includes wine and refreshments). £5/£3 for Members of the BMI (includes wine and refreshments).

Tuesday 21st March, 6.00 - 7.00pm. SCIENCE SHORTS in partnership with the Friends of Birmingham Museums and Thinktank, Prof. Benjamin Wilcox, Professor of Molecular Immunology, University of Birmingham, 'Birmingham Pioneers' in Thinktank's Medicine Matters Gallery'. John Lee Theatre, Birmingham and Midland Institute. Details TBC £5/£3 for Members of the BMI and Friends of Birmingham Museums.

Future Date:

Saturday 6 May, Staffordshire History Day. Further details will be provided in due course.