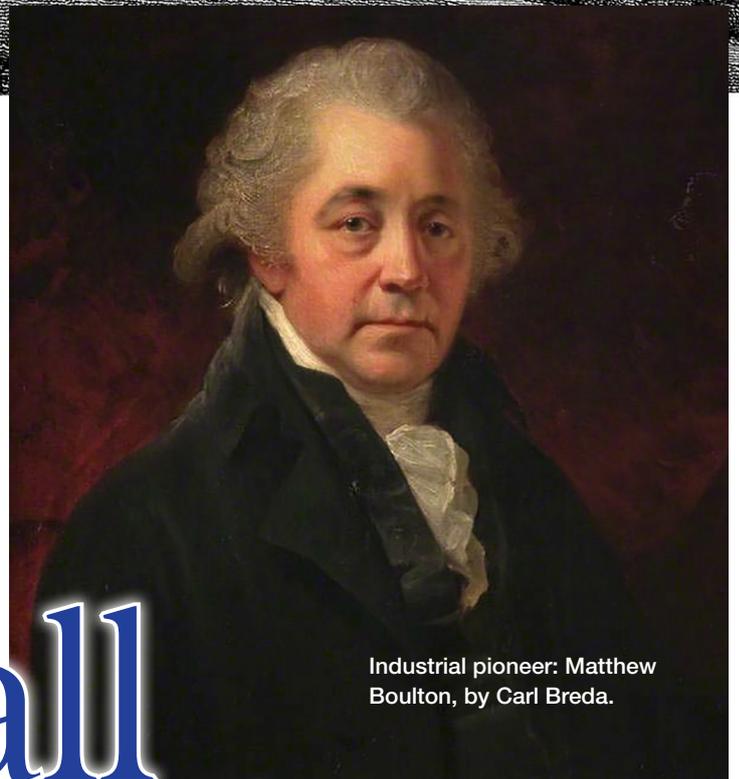




Powerhouse: An illustration of Matthew Boulton's impressive Soho Manufactory in Birmingham, 1808.

What all the world desired to have, according to the pioneering Birmingham manufacturer, Matthew Boulton, was 'power!'. With his entrepreneurial friends, Boulton helped to fuel the Industrial Revolution, transforming the lives of our ancestors. **Mike Sharpe** explores Birmingham's trade and industrial heritage, which left its mark on the world.



Industrial pioneer: Matthew Boulton, by Carl Breda.

What all the world desires...

Located at the geographical heart of England, Birmingham has always been a centre for industry and commerce. In 1186 a charter for a market was granted and the town's position at the hub of a network of medieval roads attracted traders from all around. Textiles, leather working and iron working were established and Birmingham became ►



Brass ingot casting, c1883.

an important centre for the wool trade. Visiting the area in 1538, the antiquarian John Leland wrote of seeing 'many smithies in the towne that make knives and all maner of cuttynge tooles'. Leland explained that, 'The smithies have yren [iron] out of Staffordshire and Warwickshire and see coale out of Staffordshire'.

Access to raw materials and skilled craftsmen – ingredients that would play a critical part in Birmingham's future success – were already in place. The breakthrough came with the so-called Midlands Enlightenment of the mid-18th century. Inspired by a spirit of inventiveness and innovation, enterprising industrialists and entrepreneurs, such as Matthew Boulton and James Watt, began to apply scientific knowledge to the way things were made (see panel opposite). This, in turn, brought the advent of mechanisation and factory-scale industrialisation and laid the foundations of the Industrial Revolution.

Where there's brass

Brass was one of the first industries to become established in Birmingham and underpinned many others with which the city became associated (see www.oldcopper.org). Most brass goods were made in a foundry by casting, which involved pouring the molten alloy into sand moulds. Braziers, a separate trade, wrought goods by hand from sheet brass. Later, demand was for more specialised products such as fittings for carriages, cabinets, furniture, keys and bolts. In the 19th century, huge new markets opened up in supplying brass fittings for steam engines, railway carriages and gas lamps. The brass trade was highly skilled, requiring both manual dexterity and technical knowledge. The production of an eagle for a church lectern, for example, involved a mould made up of 25 separate pieces.

The gun trade

Gun-making was another of Birmingham's traditional industries. It is said that during the English Civil War, Birmingham merchants supplied weapons to both sides before backing the Parliamentary forces. During the Napoleonic Wars, Birmingham

The friends who made the future...

At the heart of the Midlands Enlightenment of the mid-18th century was a group of intellectuals and thinkers who met in Birmingham on or around the full moon, and hence became known as the Lunar Society. They included manufacturer Matthew Boulton (1728-1809), Scottish engineers James Watt (1736-1819) and William Murdoch (1754-1839), master potter Josiah Wedgwood (1730-1795) and Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802), grandfather of Charles. Over the four decades from 1760 the society's members were responsible for pioneering advances in many fields. Foremost among these Lunar Men was Matthew Boulton, a button-maker from Soho in Handsworth. He introduced many improvements in the manufacturing process, including installing one of Watt's new steam engines. Recognising the potential of the technology, he then went into business with Watt and others to bring it to fruition. When the diarist James Boswell toured Soho, Boulton boasted: 'I sell here, sir, what all the world desires to have – power!'

The achievements of Boulton, Watt and their contemporaries changed our world forever and put Birmingham on a course to become the world's first town with an economy dominated by manufacturing. They also left a commitment to philanthropy and social reform.

The achievements of the Lunar Society are described in Jenny Uglow's award-winning book *The Lunar Men* (2002) and at two websites: Revolutionary Players (revolutionaryplayers.org.uk) and Soho Mint (sohomint.info).

gunmakers accounted for two-thirds of the firearms used by the British Army, with around 1.7 million guns being delivered to the Board of Ordnance. Large numbers of swords and cutlasses were also supplied for the Army and Navy. By the end of the 18th century, Birmingham was the foremost arms producer in the world, manufacturing a million more items than London, its nearest rival.

The jewellery trade

The precious metals industry started to flourish around 1660, when Charles II introduced fancy buttons and shoe buckles from France. These items soon became fashionable and opened up markets for Birmingham craftsmen who specialised in the manufacture of small metal goods. After a slump during the early 19th century, Queen Victoria's accession brought jewellery back into fashion. Many poorly paid industrial workers set up their own peg (workshop), often from home,

Boulton & Fothergill Sheffield plate beer tankard, made at Boulton's Soho Manufactory in the late 1760s.

allowing them to improve their standard of living considerably. In 1840, George Elkington developed a new method of electroplating silver at his works in Newhall Street. His patented process opened up new markets among the Victorian middle class for affordable gold- and silver-plated jewellery and brought the company great success.

Other industries

Alongside high-value items, Birmingham was a centre for the manufacture of all manner of metal



Thomas Fattorini & Sons, in the Jewellery Quarter, is a 189-year-old family-run business making badges and insignia.

articles, collectively referred to as toys. These included metal tools, domestic utensils, and household fittings of all kinds. The manufacture of steel pen nibs was another important trade on which many fortunes were built. As products became more sophisticated, engineering-based industries grew up manufacturing everything from bicycles to locomotives. In the early years of the 20th century a separate tier of companies, such as Dunlop and

Lucas, began to appear, supplying components and assemblies to fledgling motor manufacturers. Thus, Birmingham's reputation as Motor City was born.

As Britain grew into more of a consumer society, new industries developed. Foods such as Bird's Custard, HP Sauce and Typhoo Tea all had their origins in the city. Probably the best known Birmingham food business is the chocolate maker,

Cadbury, which started in a grocery shop in Bull Street in the 1820s.

Prosperity through collaboration

Manufactured goods were often highly intricate, requiring many skillsets. The production of a firearm, for example, involved numerous stages, from the forging and manufacture of components to the assembly, finishing and decorating of completed weapons. Initially, all operations were carried out by individual gunsmiths, but as production methods changed and different styles of weapons were introduced, workers began to specialise in the manufacture of the various component parts. These were then passed on to others for assembly and finishing. Each finished gun went through about 50 pairs of hands. Jewellery production, too, relied on many different trades and skills. As craftsmen clustered together in order to collaborate effectively distinctive quarters developed. The area around St Mary's Church, Whittall Street (long since demolished), became known as the Gun Quarter. Jewellery trades congregated in the Hockley district, now famous around the world as Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter.

Safeguarding quality

With vast markets at stake, Birmingham industrialists became increasingly concerned about forgery and counterfeiting. To safeguard against this and protect their reputations, they came together to set up institutions providing independent verification of the quality of manufactured goods. The first such institution was the Birmingham Assay Office, established in 1773 to assay jewellery and other goods comprising precious metals.



The Birmingham Assay mark.

This saved the town's jewellers the time and expense of sending their wares to London or Chester for assaying. It also helped to change the perception of the Birmingham trade, which had acquired a reputation for shoddy workmanship. In 1813 the Birmingham Gun Barrel Proof House provided similar assurance for the town's gunmakers. Still situated in its original premises in Banbury Street, it is the only official proof house outside of London.

Key sources

Records relating to industry and commerce in the city can be found mainly in public archives. In addition, the area's many industrial museums provide valuable insights into how our ancestors lived and worked (see

panel, page 36). There are three main sources for family historians to consider:

- **Trade and business directories:** The Library of Birmingham (LoB) has a large collection of trade and commercial directories for Birmingham and the Midlands dating back to 1767. There is also a pseudo-directory for 1663 based on other sources. Digitised trade directories are available online (specialcollections.le.ac.uk) and to purchase on CD-ROM (www.midlandshistoricaldata.org);
- **Apprenticeship records:** Apprenticeship has long been a feature of Birmingham's economy. So-called trade apprenticeships were arranged privately, where a young person's parents could afford

the fees. Others, known as parish apprenticeships, were linked to the Poor Law: pauper children would be apprenticed either by the overseers of the poor or by the trustees of charities established for that purpose. Trade apprenticeships for the area are listed in the national series, which is widely available online. Staffordshire Name Indexes has around 12,500 entries, mainly parish apprenticeships in the period prior to 1838 (www.staffsnameindexes.org.uk). Worcestershire Archives has an index to county apprenticeships (tinyurl.com/lpu2js9);

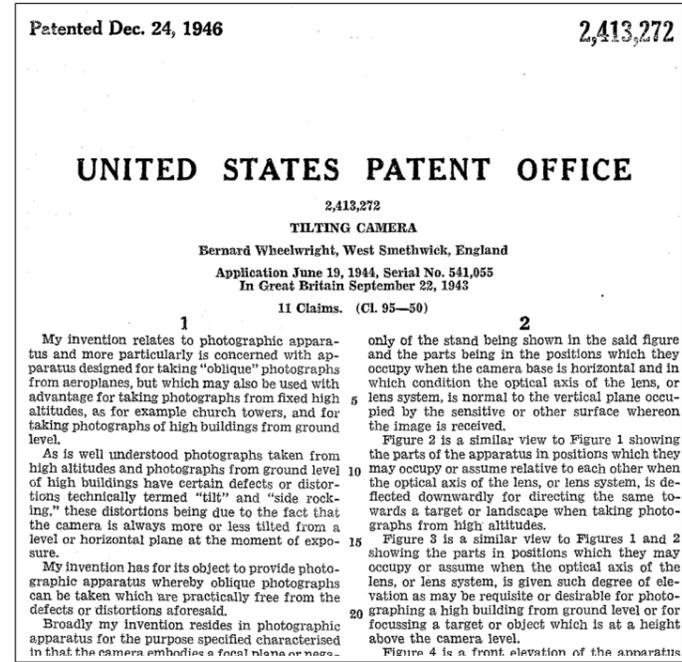
- **Trade Union records:** The Modern Records Centre (MRC) at the University of Warwick has substantial collections of trade union and labour movement archives. These files may include details such as membership lists, contributions books, minutes of branch meetings, wage rates, company files and accident and mortality reports. Part of this collection is now available online via Findmypast.

Other business records

Solicitors' records of their business clients are a valuable source for the family historian. There are collections at the LoB and other Midlands archives. Locating these records can be difficult however, as you need to know which firm of solicitors a business engaged and where they were situated. The National Archives (TNA) Discovery catalogue at discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk is the best way in.

Running a business could be a risky undertaking: unforeseen events, such as a customer defaulting on a debt, price rises as a result of war or bad weather, or simply changes in fashion, led many businesses to go to the wall, with their owners declared bankrupt. Notices of bankruptcy were published regularly in the *London Gazette* and other newspapers, and original case files may survive at county record offices or TNA.

The LoB has a substantial collection of trade catalogues for Midlands businesses since the mid-19th century and a separate index of sales catalogues of properties and businesses. The LoB's Birmingham Collection contains many published company histories, including some



US Patent for photographic equipment granted to Bernard Wheelwright, a relative of the author, 1946.



Gillott's No 291 'Mapping Pens' with their holder.

Writing tables, electroplated dinner services and horse harnesses were just some of the goods made in Birmingham, as shown by these advertisements from *Birmingham Illustrated*, Cornish Brothers, 1851.

self-published studies not available elsewhere. Grace's Guide is a database of historical information on industry and manufacturing with profiles of industries and firms, as well as obituaries of prominent engineers (www.gracesguide.co.uk).

Like households, businesses paid rates and will be recorded in the rate books, many of which are now available as part of the Library of Birmingham Collection on Ancestry. If your ancestors sold jewellery to the public, they may have had their own hallmark. The Assay Office maintains the register of all hallmarks issued in Birmingham and is able to answer enquiries (www.theassayoffice.co.uk).

If your ancestor had an invention patented then their design will still be on record. The LoB's Science Department holds historical patents dating back to the 17th century and has access to specialist databases. Under an ongoing project, patents of historic interest are being added to the espacenet database (at ep.espacenet.com).

Virtually every industry or trade had an association, some of them highly specialised, and their records may list individual or company members, or provide insights into company history. In addition to those at the LoB, MRC holds the records of many UK trade associations, trade unions and employers; there is an online guide listing available sources by occupation (www.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc).



Exploring Birmingham's industrial museums

For a better understanding of your ancestors' working lives, visit one of Birmingham's many museums of industry and commerce. Some have their own libraries and archives:

- Birmingham Gun Barrel Proof House has a museum dedicated to the area's gun and ammunition trades (by prior appointment only, www.gunproof.com);
- Cadbury World, a heritage centre-cum-factory tour at the company's Bournville site, tells the story of the Cadbury family, their business and philanthropy (www.cadburyworld.co.uk);
- The Coffin Works, in the Jewellery Quarter, offers insights into the Victorian way of death. It is located in the restored premises of Newman Brothers, coffin manufacturers (www.coffinworks.org);
- Evans Silver Factory, a workshop maintained by English Heritage, displays working life in a 19th century silver workshop (by prior appointment only; visit tinyurl.com/znn2lm8);
- The Museum of the Jewellery Quarter tells the story of Birmingham's renowned jewellery and metalworking heritage and is housed in the artisan jewellery factory of Smith & Pepper (www.birminghammuseums.org.uk/jewellery);
- The Pen Museum, operated by the Birmingham Pen Trade Heritage Association, celebrates pen-making in the city (www.penroom.co.uk);
- Soho House, Boulton's former home, has been restored as a museum describing his life and work (www.birminghammuseums.org.uk/soho);
- The Avery Historical Museum was a private museum devoted to WT Avery Ltd, a leading manufacturer of weighing equipment, and stood on the site of Matthew Boulton's Soho Foundry in Smethwick. It is now closed and seeking a new home (see tinyurl.com/z59hzb7).

The Custard Factory in Gibb Street was formerly the factory of Alfred Bird & Sons and is now a business incubator and arts centre.



The Library of Birmingham.

About the author

Mike Sharpe is a professional genealogist, writer and lecturer specialising in Birmingham and the Midlands, and runs the Writing the Past research service. He is a member of the Society of Genealogists and several family history societies. His book, *Tracing Your Birmingham Ancestors*, is published by Pen & Sword. Visit Mike's website at www.writingthepast.co.uk.

