

Blists Hill VICTORIAN TOWN

Introduction

Much of what you see at Blists Hill has been reconstructed by the Museum, but there are also unique remains of its own industrial past. In 1786 William Reynolds tried to connect the Blists Hill mines with the local River Severn by tunnelling through the hill from Coalport. By doing so he discovered a natural source of bitumen which today may be visited as the Tar Tunnel. This period also saw the construction of the Shropshire Canal which ran through the Blists Hill site. In 1793 the Hay Inclined Plane was completed, which connected the upper level of the canal with the lower level in the growing 'New Town' of Coalport, and from here it also connected to the river Severn.

Reynolds engineering linked existing mines and iron works in the area to the transport system of the river, and opened up Blists Hill to further expansion. Blists Hill mines supplied iron ore for the three blast furnaces close by. Brick and tile clay was also mined here. In the 1850's the Madeley Wood Company began to build large brick and tile works. In the 1860's a railway line to the local market town of Wellington was constructed. By this time Blists Hill was a busy place with over 500 people a day working here.

However, this was not to last long. The construction of the railway caused a decline in the use of the canal. The blast furnaces were finally blown out in 1912 and the canal closed soon after. The mines and Brick & Tile Works remained open during the two World Wars but in 1941 the mines were abandoned, followed in the 1950's by the Brick & Tile Works. 1960 saw the last goods train and Blists Hill was abandoned as an industrial wasteland.

The Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust was established in 1967 and the Blists Hill Open Air Museum was opened to the public in 1973.



The Town (Key exhibits)

Lloyds Bank

Banking developed during the eighteenth century, providing capital to industry, often by families such as the Barclays and the Lloyds. In the Blists Hill Bank you can exchange your twentieth century money for pre-decimal token coins which may be spent in Blists Hill's shops, workshops and even The New Inn.

The building is an exact copy of a bank still standing in the local town of Broseley on the south side of the River Severn. It was built by the first bankers in Shropshire, Vickers, Son & Pritchard in the late nineteenth century.

Work in a bank was a trusted, respected and strictly male domain.

Bates and Hunt – Chemist



A Chemist would have provided many services to a small industrial town: medicine was dispensed from the back counter, herbal remedies, ready made medicines and toiletries from the front counter. Those who could not afford the doctor's fee would come here for advice. People also came here to see a visiting dentist and optician. The Chemist may even have extracted teeth himself.

The building is a reconstruction, the name taken from a local chemist. The fittings inside the store are taken from a Bournemouth shop and the jars and other items on display were collected from many sources.

Grocer's Shop

A wide variety of goods would be available in shops such as this, dried food, meat, tinned goods, luxury items, brushes, cookery items and even whole dinner services. Windows would be beautifully displayed each season to entice customers into the shop and to secure their custom.

Annie Earp – Confectioner

The tempting display of liquorice comforts, sherbets and rainbow-coloured sweets recall the days when sugar was thought to be good for you. On display are early wrappers from the Cadbury Company, a popular manufacturer of chocolate, who once had a production unit in Shropshire, which used the extensive canal network.

The New Inn Public House

This typical late nineteenth-century pub was removed from the centre of Walsall and reconstructed here in 1981-2. The bar area was reserved for men only. Women were allowed into the larger tap room where a wide range of beers, old ale and porter were served along with occasional bread and cheese.

The Foundry

Small foundries like this once were common in many towns in late Victorian Britain. Products ranged from statues to doorstops. Pig-iron is produced from iron ore smelted in a blast furnace. This iron, remelted and poured into moulds, is known as cast-iron. Cast-iron is a brittle metal that is strong in compression. The Iron Bridge was cast in open sand moulds in 1779, using 384 tonnes of iron.

The process used at Blists Hill is called greensand casting. The moulds are made on a moulding bench and then placed on the floor. When the floor is full, casting begins, usually once a week. In a fully staffed commercial foundry, casting would take place several times a day.

Iron is melted in the tall cylindrical cupola at the back of the foundry. From there the molten iron is collected in ladles inside the foundry and poured into the prepared moulds on the floor. When the iron is cooled, the moulds are broken open, the casting removed and the whole process begins again.



J Edmunds – Printer

Most Victorian towns had printers where posters, notices, tickets, advertisements and handbills were printed. Boxes containing single characters, letters and blocks were placed upside down and back to front and then paper was placed over the top to receive the print. The machinery is operated by hand and foot except for the Howard Bremner powered press, which is capable of 1,200 copies per hour.

Thomas Trevor – Candle Maker

Throughout the nineteenth century, candlelight was vital both for domestic and industrial use. This candle factory was built about 1850 in the local town of Madeley by Thomas Trevor. Candles are made here by dipping, and in two colours. During the nineteenth century candles were made of tallow which came from mutton fat. Any residue was fed to the pigs.

Stirchley Board School

This local school was opened in June 1881 and last used in 1973. It consisted of two mixed classes, an infant class in the small room and the older children in the larger classroom. The pupils were looked after by the headmistress and a pupil teacher. There were two main causes of absenteeism. During Harvest time the children were expected to work in the fields, and as all children walked to school, very heavy rain prevented the children from attending classes.

The building's exterior is a brick-by-brick reconstruction as is evident from marks on the front door.

