

CAA Visit to Birmingham: Friday September 21st to Sunday September 23rd 2012

Friday

Nineteen members assembled at the Thistle Hotel in the centre of the city in the late morning. This proved to be a convenient centre for visits since many sites, such as the two cathedrals, the City Museum and indeed the Jewellery Quarter were within walking distance, and it was close to the Metro Station at Snow Hill.

At 2.00 pm the party left by bus for **King's Norton**, one of the mediaeval villages absorbed by the spread of Birmingham in the 19th century and formally incorporated into the city in 1911. In the late 15th century King's Norton (a royal manor) was a prosperous village making its money from wool. In 1492 a farmer and stapler, Humphrey Rotsey, began to build a large new house (known now as the **Saracen's Head**) on the edge of the Green, close to the church. This house still survives, despite several changes of use. In the 1930s it was given to the church by the brewery which owned it and during the last 10 years it has been the subject of a major restoration, helped by success in the BBC2 *Restoration* programme. This restoration has concentrated on the essentially intact north wing, now available for display and use as meeting rooms. The slightly later east wing, originally built for commercial use, had been more heavily changed and is now parish offices and a cafe, while the south and west wings, rebuilt in the 19th century as service areas, have been rebuilt again in an elegant but functional modern style.

The Cambrians did not visit the 14th century church, heavily restored in the 19th century, but went across to the **Old Grammar School** on the other side of the churchyard. The school originated as a pre-Reformation Chantry School, became a Grammar School during Edward VI's reign and is associated with the notable Puritan scholar, Thomas Hall, who was vicar in the mid-17th century but ejected after the Restoration. The building is known to have housed his extensive library. The school, which remained here until the 19th century, was on two floors, boys below and girls above, each in a single room linked by a projecting porch with staircase. The ground floor was stone built, the upper floor timber-framed. There is a large 14th century traceried window in wood in the upper room which has been brought from elsewhere but its exact origin is unknown. The building was remodelled in 1911 when additional windows, an external stone stair and two fireplaces were added. It has also been subject to more recent restoration and can be hired for meetings.

This complex of late medieval buildings, the largest in the Birmingham area, still belongs to the parish of St Nicholas which is helped by a large body of volunteers. The Cambrians were guided around the buildings by Al **xxx**, one of these volunteers.

The party returned to the bus at 3.45 to go to **Bournville** to see the timber-framed **Selly Manor** and the cruck-framed hall-house, **Minworth Greaves**. Both houses were rescued and re-erected by George and Laurence Cadbury and are owned and run by the Bournville Village Trust, set up as an independent charity by the Cadbury family in 1900. The party was welcomed to Minworth Greaves by Gillian Ellis and Jim Blackham of the Trust and had a cup of tea in the mediaeval hall while watching a presentation by Mr Blackham on the process of demolition and re-erection of Selly Manor. This work, carried out under the supervision of the architect W.A. Harvey from 1900 -16, had been very fully recorded photographically. These photographs had been recently digitised by Mr Blackham and he provided a fascinating commentary upon them before leading the group through the building itself which stood in an attractive garden only a few yards from Minworth Greaves, also dismantled and re-built in 1932. Both houses had been in a bad condition when they were bought by the Cadburys to provide 'instant heritage' for their new community at Bournville for which building had started in 1895. Both were entirely typical of the Midlands timber-framed building tradition and came from only a few miles away. The simple cruck-framed hall of Minworth Greaves (perhaps 750 years old) lends itself to modern use and is available for meetings; Selly Manor is a more complex building, perhaps dating back to the early 14th century but is displayed as a 16th century house, filled with contemporary furniture from the collection of Laurence Cadbury. This includes a tester bed marked EP 1592 and thought to have belonged to Bishop Edmund Prys, the translator of the Psalms into Welsh.

After dinner there was a brilliantly illustrated lecture from **Dr David Symons** of Birmingham Museum on the **Staffordshire Hoard of Anglo-Saxon jewellery**. Dr Symons is in charge of the current conservation and research project relating to the hoard and was able to bring members up to date on new insights from the conservation work and from new research into the possible function of some of the rare elements of decoration in the hoard.

Saturday

Dr Symons had kindly arranged for the Cambrians to visit the **City Museum** at 9.30am, before the normal opening time and he was on hand to bring us through the security barrier and remained to answer questions and provide commentary on the pieces on display. Some of the larger and more unusual pieces are currently on view in Stoke on Trent Museum which is joint owner of the hoard with Birmingham City Museum.

At 10.30 members left the museum to make their way to the Jewellery Quarter where visits to the **Museum of the Jewellery Quarter** and to **Evans Silverworks** had been arranged for 11.30. Those going to Evans in the morning walked there under the guidance of Heather James and Rory O'Farrell; others went by taxi or train to the more distant Museum of the Jewellery Quarter. Both these museums are built around workshops founded in the later 19th century and closed in the 1980s (MJQ) or 2004 (ES). Like most businesses in the Jewellery Quarter they had both started in domestic houses with small workshops in the back and had expanded into small but cramped factories. Consequently in both, only small groups could visit at a time and the Cambrians visited one in the morning and the other in the afternoon, switching around at lunchtime. Many of the processes for cutting, pressing and polishing metal were similar in the two establishments but differed in scale. Both firms sold only to the trade so their names would be unknown to the public and assay marks would reflect the point of sale rather than manufacture. The Smith and Pepper Jewellery Works has been a museum since the 1990s and is run by the Birmingham Museums Trust. The Evans Silverworks closed more recently and was bought by English Heritage. It is only open by prior arrangement and the tours are run by very knowledgeable volunteers who have worked in the trade. In both, the juxtaposition of original 19th century fittings and machines and the occasional 20th century pieces of equipment was particularly fascinating and poignant in the context of these highly traditional craft industries whose products were once on every dressing-table and sideboard – and no longer are.

The Jewellery Quarter has a very good pamphlet on its historical sites and after the arranged visits members chose their own routes and targets. The large 19th century cemeteries were very atmospheric and the 18th century houses around St Paul's church were much admired. Some of the numerous jewellery shops were also visited.

After dinner Nicholas Molyneux of English Heritage lectured on '**Matthew Boulton and the Lunar Men**', in preparation for our visit to Soho House on the following afternoon. He spoke about the Soho Manufactory and Foundry as well as the house, showing the numerous plans for enlargement and aggrandisement which did not take place because Boulton preferred to put money into schemes for production of goods. The range of his entrepreneurial activity was emphasised, as well as his good sense and attractive personality.

Sunday

The party left the hotel at 10.00 for an **architectural tour of the Civic Centre** with Nicholas Molyneux. This started at the Roman Catholic Cathedral just across the road from the hotel. St Chad's Cathedral is by Pugin in the Baltic German style. The exterior is austere but the interior a riot of colour with a high, soaring vault. St Philip's Anglican Cathedral is English Baroque, built in 1715 and presented a contrast in white and gold, with scarlet Burne-Jones windows. Cambrians were just able to look into both churches briefly between services. The surrounding streets presented a contrast of new and old business palaces. Many fine Victorian and Edwardian facades still survive but the number of offices to let was very noticeable and the future of some older buildings may be in danger. The future of more recent office blocks, some by notable architects, are certainly under threat as a great deal of demolition and rebuilding (driven by financial calculation) is clearly underway in this central sector of the city. Mr Molyneux calculated that the average life of a modern office block was 25 years. Stops were made on several street

corners to admire and discuss particular buildings before the party arrived in Victoria Square beneath the Town Hall, modelled on the temple of Castor and Pollux in Rome and built in Anglesey marble by Hansom and Welch (who also built Beaumaris Gaol, seen during the Summer Meeting this year). The Italianate Council House of 1874-9 and the French Renaissance former Post Office were also discussed, as well as the modern sculptures in the square. The party then moved through the shopping mall beneath the current Brutalist City Library to look across at the colourful wire cladding of the new library building, soon to be opened. **XXXXX**

After having found their own lunch Cambrians returned to the hotel to take the coach to **Soho House**, the home of Matthew Boulton in Handsworth. The museum in a separate building has recently been provided with a new exhibition including some exceptionally fine examples of ormolu vases and Sheffield Plate candlesticks made at Soho and an explanation of the manufacturing technique, as well as examples of medals and coins made in the foundry and mint which was Boulton's last great enterprise. There was also a good scale model of the house and parkland in relation to the manufactory and foundry, all then set in an open agricultural landscape.

Though hemmed about by more recent housing, the elegant Georgian house still looks very fine. It has lost service and library wings but the core is intact, with its painted slate wall-covering still in place despite recorded problems with the fixings. The idea of using slate came from North Wales through the Wyatt architectural family some of whose members worked for Boulton and for Richard Pennant at Penrhyn. The house has been restored to its condition in Boulton's day (1766 – 1809), with painted oilskin floor coverings and much original furniture, including the dining table around which the men of the Lunar Society sat and debated science and watched demonstrations of early chemical experiments. The original heating system using one of Boulton and Watt's steam engines can still be seen in the basement, along with the extensive wine cellars with their Welsh slate shelving.

This was a leisurely visit, with time for a cup of tea in the museum cafe before taking the coach across Handsworth to the **parish church of St Mary** to see the memorials to Matthew Boulton, James Watt and William Murdock. Murdock had been the chief engineer, supervising the re-assembly of steam engines sent out to clients all over the world. We were welcomed by the vicar, Canon Brian Hall, who outlined the long history of the building, from Norman, through 14th century to Georgian and on to the very impressively roofed Victorian building of today. James Watt reportedly did not like the church, but he is commemorated in it with a specially built chapel containing a very fine life-size seated statue by Sir Francis Chantry. Boulton has a wall plaque with a very laudatory epitaph touching on both his achievements and his character. He had been not only a great businessman but had also overseen the development of Birmingham's Dispensary and General Hospital and had also taken an interest in the theatre.

The meeting was organised by Frances Llewellyn on behalf of the Association and she would like to acknowledge the help and advice given by Henry Owen-John, Nick Molyneux and David Symons, and to thank the latter two for their very active and generous participation in the event. She would also like to thank the President, David Longley, for lending his digital projector for the lectures.