

## VISIT TO THE WEST MIDLANDS

Wednesday 20th October 1999

Congratulations and thanks to Gerry for organising this visit to the historically fascinating area of the Black Country - black by day and red by night we were told; the black is obvious but the latter was due to the opening of the furnaces!

A party of 14 gathered at the Lock Museum, 54, New Street in Willenhall, which had previously been the home of the Hodson family from 1904, although the family's business had started about 1800. The front of the property was a haberdashery and children's clothing shop run by the ladies of the family. But the back, like so many houses in the area, was devoted to the manufacture and assembly of locks. The family had saved a vast amount of their domestic history - papers, paraphernalia and furniture and fittings. So an interesting example of the domestic setting was seen in the back rooms, along with a lovely welcoming fire.

In the workshop at the forge, a retired accountant demonstrated the initial manufacture of a bar padlock and

then explained the operation of the other machinery.

Assembly of the locks took place upstairs where the light was better; the components going up by a rope pull lift. The museum's vast selection of locks and keys were on display and provided great interest for us all. The explanation of the principle of the 4000 year-old Egyptian wooden lock, which was adapted to the modern Yale lock, would be a thesis in its own right and did you know that ETAS locks were made by E. Tonks & Son? The Albert Lock, made for the 1851 Exhibition and named after the Consort, was also on display. A commercial traveller's demonstration box packed with locks and keys was opened and seemed to be of an unmanageable weight. A wise tip – do not ever leave a key in a lock.

As so often happens our programme required us to move on at 11.30 a.m. I recommend a visit to this museum if you are in the area. There is a small workshop run by an able craftsman Andy Middlebrook under the name 'Experimental Prototype Engineering' and he will undertake research, repair and restoration of locks. (Tel: 01902 634113).

A rapid transfer to the Black Country Museum in Dudley, our second venue, gave us a deeper insight to the way of life, working conditions and social history of this important and immense area of industrial England. Our guide showed us some of the one-up one-down properties with their sparse furnishings.

Although limited furniture of interest was found, an appreciation of the industrial importance of the area certainly came home. The Tilted Cottage and Toll House were more interesting and the latter, with 2 bedrooms, a reflection of the importance and status of a toll keeper.

We were on the move again at 2.30 p.m. to Wightwick (pronounced Witic) Manor. Built 1887–1893 by the Manders family (paint and varnish manufacturers) and given to the National Trust in 1937. The property is of great interest as it has excellent examples of William Morris works, and although built in the Victorian period, reflects numerous historical styles and features. The Pre-Raphaelite influence is very strong with some marvellous pictures and drawing, stained glass, fabrics and carpets. The furnishings collected by the family, are of every period but displayed tastefully. Furniture in particular was beautifully maintained and included some interesting oak pieces which were inspected carefully and discussed as to authenticity and modification.

Our guide here was very knowledgeable and gave us an excellent tour of a property I would highly recommend.

*Peter Stone*