

Georgina Grant: *Iron Furniture of the Coalbrookdale Company*

Every schoolboy used to know that Coalbrookdale in Shropshire was, in the eighteenth century, 'the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution', where iron was first produced commercially and, in 1779, was the site of the world's first iron bridge. In an entertaining and informative lecture, Georgina Grant, Senior Curator, Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust, explained how this happened and discussed the rise and fall of the great Coalbrookdale Company before describing some of its many products.

In 1709 a Bristol man, Abraham Darby, rebuilt an existing blast furnace in Coalbrookdale Gorge and began the experimental smelting of iron from available ironstone and limestone using coking coal from drift mines in the sides of the valley. The success of his methods resulted in the establishment of an iron foundry which produced ironware for industry, cooking pots and domestic goods. The River Severn flowing through the gorge was used for the supply and distribution of his products.

By the nineteenth century improvements in casting resulted in a huge expansion in the range of items available for sale to an emergent middle class of traders, merchants, bankers and industrialists. The new railways carried goods the length and breadth of the country. Goods were exported by sea to the Empire and beyond. Key to this expansion were extensive trade catalogues, illustrated initially with woodcuts and later with photographs.

Henry Cole's Great Exhibition of 1851 showed how technological progress and artistic merit could be combined in the production of furniture such as benches and fountains for public parks and street furniture like post-boxes, street lamps, gates, railings, drinking fountains, urinals and telephone boxes. For the home there were hallstands, hall tables and chairs, hatstands, fireplaces, umbrella stands and balcony railings. Coalbrookdale employed the best designers and sculptors including Christopher Dresser, Alfred Stevens and John Bell, whose 'Deerhound Table' of 1855 featured four life-size hounds, one at each corner.

The heyday of the Company was in the period 1840–1900. The preference of industry for steel (never made at Coalbrookdale) over iron and, from 1890, the fashionable popularity of the Arts and Crafts movement with its handmade products, made cast iron appear old fashioned. The Company struggled on into the twentieth century through a series of amalgamations before the gates finally closed in November 2017. Coalbrookdale is today the site of ten separate museums of the industries once conducted there.

James Barnes