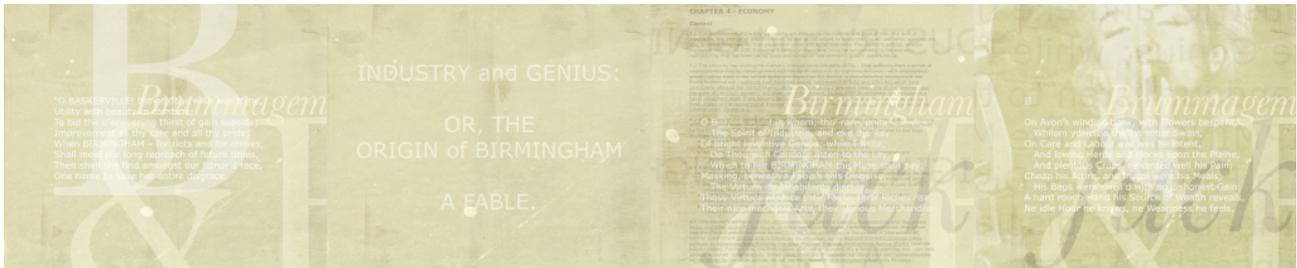


## Baskerville | The Poem (A Fable), 20 October 2013



### 1. The Poem (A Fable)

An anonymous 18th century poem (published in Aris's Birmingham Gazette on 21.01.1751) describes the citizens of today's second city as:

"... a Race

Of docile Sons, in whom the Mother's Mind, Her Ingenuity, and matchless Grace,  
Shone with the Father's Perseverance join'd."

The female aspect of the town ("a maiden...so fair") "Was theme of every Tongue, and every Heart" is which:

"Grace still distinguish'd her Productions rare From those of common Artists: Her nice Hand Obedient was to execute, with Care  
And elegance, her Fancy's least Command."

The male aspect of the town was "a thrifty, sober Swain" whose:

"... bags were swell'd with no dishonest Gain;  
A hard rough hand his source of Wealth reveals, Ne idel Hour he knows, ne Weariness he feels."

The poem, called 'Industry and Genius or the Origin of B\_\_\_\_\_, A Fable' begins:

"O B\_\_\_\_\_! in whom, tho' rare, unite  
The Spirit of Industie, and eke the Ray  
Of bright inventive Genius; while I write,  
Do Thous with Candour listen to the Lay, Which to fair B\_\_\_\_\_ the Muse shall pay;  
Masking, beneath a Fable's thin Disguise, The Virtues its Inhabitants display:

Those Virtues whence their Fame, their Riches rise, Their nice mechanic Arts, their various Merchandise."

## 2. Birmingham or Brummagem

In its opening declaration ("O B\_\_\_\_\_!"), the poem doesn't specify whether the subject is Birmingham or Brummagem. Certainly at the time of its publication, the two terms, Birmingham or Brummagem, were coming into conflict.

The coat of arms of today's modern city shows both the female and male aspects of the pre-1750 town. The female figure (sinister side) holds a golden artist's palette and two paint brushes, and represents Art. The male figure (dexter side) is a "man habited as a smith" holding a hammer resting on an anvil, and represents Industry.

Today, the "happy Union" of Art/Genius ("Ingenuity, and matchless Grace") with Industry ("Perseverance") that once underpinned Brummagem's greatness, has been squandered in Birmingham's drive for Enterprise focused primarily on Financial and Professional Services.

The "hard rough hand" of Industry and the "nice hand" of Art (or Genius) have been trumped by the smooth hand that has never done a day's work in its life. But this is not a recent development. It's all to do with money.

## 3. The 'Rude Boy'

During the latter half of the 18th century, the Royal Mint struck hardly any small denomination copper coins. This left Brummagem industries with no "decent money" with which to pay its workers and artisans.

Being a place of "ingenious artificers" ('England's Gazetteer', 1751), Brummagem began to produce its own coinage. Within a couple of decades, "it was estimated over one half the copper coin in [national] circulation was counterfeit, and that nine-tenths thereof was manufactured in Birmingham" (Showell's Dictionary of Birmingham, 1888).

The most famous of these counterfeit coins was the 'Rude Boy' halfpenny. On its obverse side, the coin showed a naked young boy holding a spanner and leaning on a coin producing screw press. On the reverse side is the motto 'INDUSTRY HAS ITS SURE REWARDS', and five hedgehogs on a shield. The hedgehog is a symbol of the provident provider, rejuvenation and spring. The hedgehog's ability to curl itself up in a prickly ball has given it the additional meaning of self preservation.

By providing for the working classes, Brummagem's counterfeit copper coinage saved the English Industrial Revolution from early collapse. It also became the common currency of the American War of Independence, or Revolutionary War, of 1775 - 1783. See the pamphlet 'The Adventures of a halfpenny: commonly called a Birmingham Halfpenny, or counterfeit: as related by itself', published by John Golby Rusher in about 1830.

What Brummagem was doing was revolutionary, as the "happy Union" of Art and Industry often is. If the state Royal Mint was only going to produce the gold and silver coin used by the gentry and ruling classes, Brummagem would look after the rest. And bring on the revolution.

4. How Brummagem, "pregnant with promises and anticipation [of revolution, was] murdered by the hand of the inevitable" (Birmingham).

Matthew Boulton was Birmingham's first business man. In its day, Boulton's Soho Manufactory was the largest and most famous factory in the world. To make a success of his factory, Boulton went to war against Brummagem and in building his Soho Mint in 1788 he "...single-handedly set about solving a crisis in the nation's coinage which had defeated the government for thirty years."

Boulton began the common association of the word 'Brummagem' with inferior, cheap, shoddy and often counterfeit goods. It's why even today we refer to a hammer as a 'Brummagem screwdriver', a jibe that suggests Birmingham workers are unskilled and unsophisticated (and would rather bash something with a hammer than turn it with a screwdriver). Instead, Boulton promoted the name of the town as 'Birmingham' to describe the most advanced, diverse and productive business centre in the industrialised world.

Although the 1751 'England's Gazetteer' had dithered over whether the town was called Birmingham or 'Bromicham' (Brummagem), by 1807 the poet Robert Southey was writing, "Probably in no other age or country was there ever such an astonishing display of human ingenuity as may be found in Birmingham."

Boulton's Birmingham had won the day, and Brummagem's virtues are now shadowed by the "Fable's thin Disguise."

5. What happened to the female figure of Art (Genius) and the male figure of Industry?

'Industrie' and 'Geniae' were kidnapped by Boulton's factory at Soho. In 1808, James Bisset's 'Magnificent Guide to Birmingham' was telling Brummies and the rest of the world that it was "Soho! ? where GENIUS and the ARTS preside" in the "Palm of Taste." As indeed they were, as wage-earning spectacle to celebrate the coming of age of Capital's son in 1791.

"At one o'clock all the persons employed in the manufactory assembled within its walls, and were marshalled into regular corps, according to their respective trades, from whence they marched, two by two, preceded by an excellent band of civil and military music. First corps ? one hundred young women mostly dressed in white, with blue ribbons. A corps of fifty engineers headed by Perrins in the character of Vulcan, bearing a working fire-engine on his head."

- Aris's Birmingham Gazette 15.08.1791

A year later, in 1792, Boulton was leading Britain's trade mission to China, hoping that trade and tribute, "useful knowledge" and "industrial enlightenment" would help pay off the nation's tea debt with the Chinese. From then on, Brummagem's "hard rough hand" and "nice hand" have been driven by business interests to feed the mouths of curiosity, greed, novelty and convenience.

Even so, and despite the "Fable's thin Disguise", Brummagem is still all that's good about Birmingham. For the moment, though, we are just as lost as poor old James Dobbs was a couple of hundred years ago:

I Can't Fine Brummagem

(James Dodds 1781 - 1837)

Full twenty years and more are passed Since I left Brummagem.  
But I set out for home at last  
To good old Brummagem.

But ev'ry place is altered so  
Now there's hardly a place I know Which fills my heart with grief and woe For I can't find  
Brummagem.

As I was walking down the street  
As used to be in Brummagem,  
I knowed nobody I did meet  
For they've changed their face in Brummagem Poor old Spiceal Stret's half gone,

And Old Church stands alone  
And poor old I stands here to groan For I can't find Brummagem.

But amongst the changes we have got In good old Brummagem  
They've made a market on the moat To sell the pigs in Brummagem.

But that has brought us more ill luck For they've filled up Pudding Brook, Where in the brook  
jack-bannils took Near Good old Brummagem.

But what's more melancholy still, For poor old Brummagem,  
They've taken away all Newhall-Hill From poor old Brummagem,

At Easter time girls fair and brown, Came roly-polly down,  
And showed their legs to half the town, Oh! the good old sights in Brummagem.

Down Peck Lane I walked along,  
To find out Brummagem,

There was the dungil down and gone What? no rogues in Brummagem, They've ta'en it to a street called Moor, A sign that rogues ain't fewer,

But rogues won't like it there I'm sure, While Peck Lane's in Brummagem.

I remember one John Growse,  
Who buckles made in Brummagem,  
He built himself a country house,  
To be out of the smoke of Brummagem  
But though John's country house stands still,

The town has walked up hill,  
Now he lives beside a smoky mill, In the middle of Brummagem. Among the changes that  
abound In good old Brummagem,  
May trade and happiness be found In good old Brummagem.  
And tho' no Newhall hil we've got Nor Pudding Brook nor Moat,  
May we always have enough  
To boil the pot in Brummagem.

#### 6. Postscript

Twenty-three years ago I made a sculpture for Birmingham's then new Centenary Square (where the New Library of Birmingham now sits). On the end stone of the sculpture is cut the text, 'INDUSTRY AND GENIUS / A FABLE'.

[David Patten: 'Industry And Genius / Monument to John Baskerville', Centenary Square, Birmingham, 1990, photographed during the afternoon rush hour on 24.09.2013]

