

Bilston BSF – Background Information

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1. HALL GREEN SCHOOL, PROSSER ST [OPP STONEFIELD RD], BILSTON. SMR Number 5328

The School in Prosser Street is now called Bilston High, in the past it was named Hall Green and before that, in the 1950s, was Stonefield Secondary Modern.

2 storey chateau like building in interwar tech/college style. Has a central roof mounted vent with weather vane. Site includes other school buildings which were once poss primary or junior schools. School shown on 3rd edn map 62.16 of 1919 but not on 2nd map of 1903. It is now Colton Hills Community School and Bilston Education Centre.

Primary School built in 1906. Built around a central hall, highly ornate with large imposing windows. Many original features, including turrets, tall iron railings and terracotta details. The associated building is inter-war date. The complex is a high visible landmark and an important feature of Bilston town centre. Locally Listed, approved November 2001.

The railings, which are not by one of the large Wolverhampton firms but by Jones of West Bromwich, are interesting. They appear to rest on terracotta copings; but these copings are, as the photo shows, painted cast iron and came as part of the railings, not as part of the wall. Note: possibly Bayliss, Jones & Bayliss Ltd?





2. THE SCHOOL & JOSEPH SANKEY & SONS LTD

Through George H. Sankey (1865 - 1934), the ninth child of twelve of Joseph Sankey, there is a connection between "the establishment and construction of Stonefield School in Bilston" (Archives note #9, below) and Joseph Sankey & Sons Ltd, the 'large makers of wrought-iron stamped and pressed hollow-ware'.

It could be argued that Bilston is Joseph Sankey & Sons Ltd, and vice versa. As the Local Archives says, "Sankey's were big. They started off by being big in Bilston, then they got to being big nationally and internationally."

Starting in 1861, and ending during the 1980s recession (as GKN Sankey Ltd), the company made 'Stamped and Pressed Holloware. Art Metal Work. Embossed and Engraved Sheets' in copper, brass, caspian silver, electro-plate, nickel-plate and oxidised silver, and included such items as "...cake baskets, breakfast trays, afternoon tea trays, crumb sets, scoops and brushes, bread trays, bread boards, tea pot stands, finger bowls, cheese butter and biscuit dishes, hot water jugs (mostly with or without lids), hot water cans, match holders, ash trays, fern pots, panels and finger plates, photograph frames, string boxes, desk pads, fire guards, umbrella stands, waste paper baskets, toilet trays, brushes, mantle strips, tea caddies, candle sticks, coal boxes and scuttles" and "iron stampings for the different Foreign and Colonial markets, such as rice bowls, dished sheets, &c., as well as paint kegs and oil drums".

George H. Sankey was one of the good guys. He became temporary chairman of Sankeys in 1913, and sold the company to John Lysaght & Co in 1919. Within a year, Lysaght had amalgamated with Guest, Keen and Nettlefold (aka GKN). Over many years, George H. Sankey promoted the idea of creating the nearby Birmingham New Road, and eventually got it built via the public works jobs creation programme during the great depression.

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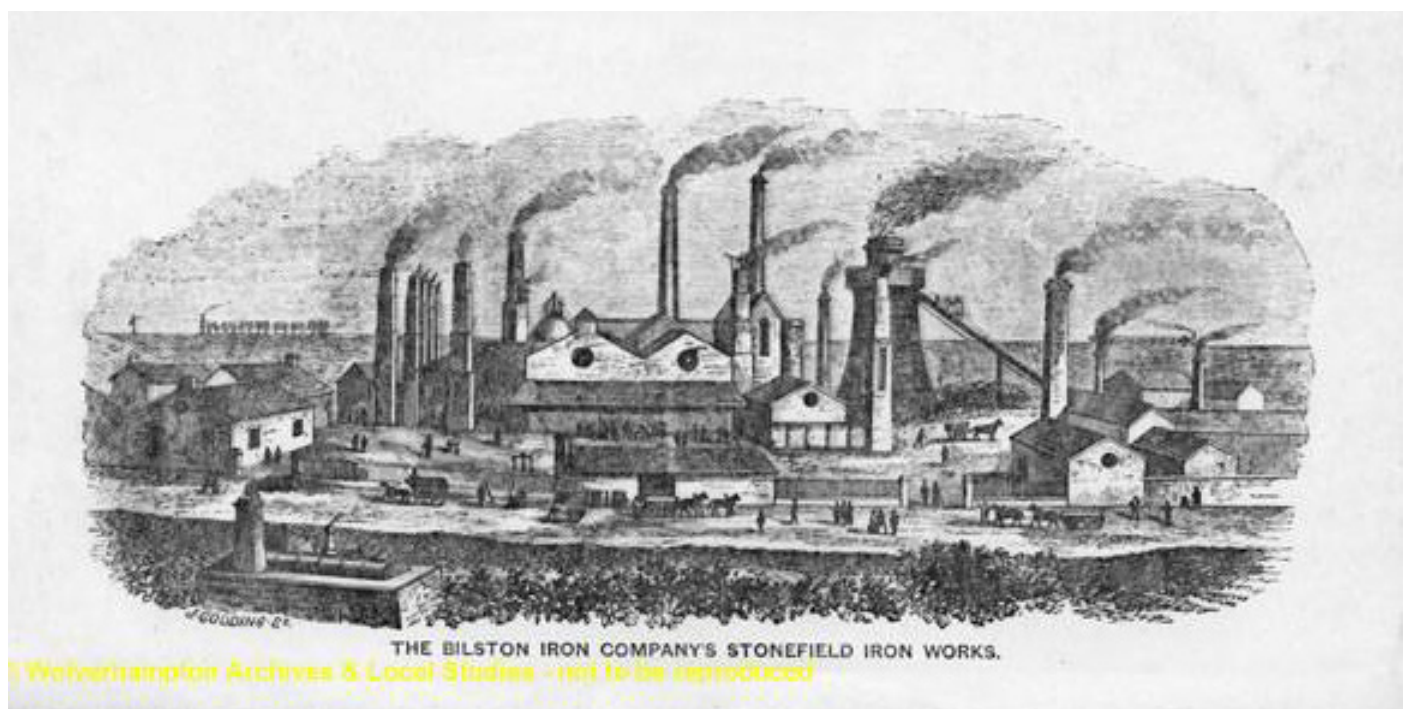
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3. STONEFIELD AREA

In 1862/63, Joseph Sankey went into partnership with Richard Chambers and John Page to buy a rolling mill and ironworks at Stonefield in order to gain closer control over supplies of tinplate and sheet iron. The business was renamed the Bilston Iron Company.

George Cockayne [born Bilston 1842 lived on Castle Street for the 1891 Census] - Stonefield Mine, employing 9 underground workers + 6 surface workers. [Peak District Mines Historical Society Ltd: South Staffordshire's Mining Industry in 1896 - A List of Coal Mines].

David Rose, Ironmaster of Darlaston: Mill forge and furnace with land adjoining called Stone Field Works, Bilston. [Stafford Archives ref: D1317/1/11/1/3/1-17 1768-1892]



4. PROSSER STREET

Named after Rev. William Prosser (1832 - 1917), curate and then vicar of St Luke's Bilston between 1877 and 1911. His mother, Sophia nee Dibdin, was a British author known for her sentimental morality tales and fables (the sort that the author Lewis Carroll lampooned).

"The reader, very likely, has never been in the Black Country, as the region of coal and iron in the Midland Counties is called; if so, he should not suffer a dark name or prejudice to keep him away from it. There is a strange weirdness in its beauty; but beauty to an artistic eye, it certainly has." [Sophia Amelia Prosser: 'How Jarvis Got His House, An Incident of Life in the Black Country'].

5. IN GENERAL

"In some directions one may travel for miles and never be out of sight of two storied houses interspersed with blazing furnaces, heaps of burning coal in process of coking, piles of ironstone calcining forges, pit banks and engine chimneys besides intersecting canals crossing each other at various levels, and the small remaining patches of surface soil are occupied by irregular fields of grass and corn intermingled with heaps of refuse of mines, or from the slag of blast furnaces. ... Sometimes the road passes between mounds of refuse from the pits, like a causeway on either side which have subsided by the excavation of the minerals beneath. These circumstances in the state of the surface and the substrata united to clouds of smoke from the furnaces, coke heaths and heaps of calcined ironstone, which drift across the country according to the direction of the wind, have effectually excluded from it all classes except those where daily bread depends upon their residence within the district." [Midland Mining Commission of 1843]

Bilston's situation in a rich coal, iron, limestone and fireclay area, with good road links to neighbouring towns, ensured its prosperity during the MALLEABLE IRON PERIOD (good phrase!). But these favourable factors tended to perpetuate a way of life associated with heavy industry to the exclusion of the variety and diversity of industry which have contributed to the continuing expansion and prosperity of towns like Birmingham and Wolverhampton.



The dominant feature of the South Staffordshire Coalfield was the 'Thick Coal' or 'Ten Yard Seam' in which 14 coal seams lie so close together that it gives the impression of one continuous seam. This coal bed was rarely more than 400 feet below the surface and as such there were a large number of small shallow coal mines that were cheaper to run than deeper mines.

Mining began in the area in the 14th century. Coal is known to have been dug at Bradley by 1315, at 'le Hayeschute' near Wednesfield in 1325 and at Bilston by 1401. By the 17th and 18th centuries coal mining had expanded rapidly.



During the 18th and 19th centuries, pig and wrought iron were both produced at Bilston in ever increasing quantities. By the mid-19th century, Bilston was producing more iron than the whole of Sweden. Bilston became an important centre for other trades such as japanning, sheet metal, galvanising, tin plate and the manufacture of domestic hardware.

"Of Bilston...eight tenths of the land is covered with heaps of mineral rubbish and five sixths of the houses are of the poorest description."

[George Robinson, solicitor, to T.W. Gifford, lord of the Manor of Stowheath, January 1848]



6. ENAMELLING [<http://www.birminghampost.net>]

The man who brought enamelling to Bilston appears to be Dovey Hawksford, who began in business in about 1720 as a toymaker and then later added enamelled boxes to his portfolio. He died in 1749, but many of the lads he taught as apprentices took their skills with them to create their own workshops. The collapse of the Battersea enamel factory in 1756 probably also brought talented artists to the West Midlands, including Robert Hancock.

Much of the enamelling industry was carried on within families, and hardly grew much bigger than that. A workshop at the rear of the house provided the space for the essential tools of the trade: a workbench, a few tools and a muffler furnace for firing. The box making and painting was generally done elsewhere.

One or two families, however, developed their business further. Benjamin Bickley left his son with a thriving enamelling firm when he died in 1776, a business built up over two generations. The Beckett family too were enamelled box makers in Bilston for the best part of a century, combining that trade with japanning.

By the 1820s the Bilston enamelling trade was virtually extinct. It had risen and fallen in just half a century or so. The shrewder enamellers were quick to see the writing on the wall. Benjamin Bickley for one had converted much of his wealth into land with coal beneath it, and had begun to take an interest in the burgeoning iron industry too. By the 1820s Bilston was so dominated by iron, steel and coal that it was hard for other trades to recruit employees. By this time Bilston alone was said to be producing more iron than the whole of Sweden.

7. JAPANNING

Samuel Timmins' book 'Birmingham and the Midland Hardware District', published in 1866, states that there were 2000 people employed in the japanning and tin-plate industries in Wolverhampton and Bilston at the time. Japanning firms ranged in size from small family workshops, which often adjoined the proprietor's home, to a few large factories employing over 250 people. In the larger workshops, the production of tin plate and papier mâché articles and the japanning process all took place under one roof, while small workshops tended to carry out only one or two of the trades, usually tin-plate working and japanning.

Japanning is a method and a style of protection and decoration. Its name derives from the fact that the method and style came originally from goods produced in the east, mainly China, India and Japan. The lacquers that were used in this country were not the natural lacquers of the east but substances, mostly based on asphaltum, which were developed here for the purpose. Over time they improved greatly and were as fit for their purpose as the originals. Originally the style was practically an imitation of the Japanese and it always consisted mostly of a black ground with gold decoration. To this would be added painting in natural colours and, later, thin slivers of pearl.

The ground colour could be almost anything and reds, greens and blues can all be found as variations on the black theme. Japanning could take place on almost anything. The most usual bases were tin plate and papier mache, though wood was also used. The products produced ranged from large pieces of furniture to small boxes - and everything in between: Japanned goods could play the role of plastics.

The trade in the West Midlands was divided between Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Bilston. Of these Birmingham started first and Bilston followed. The first mention of japanning in Bilston is in 1718/19 and the trade was very well established by the end of the 18th century. Japanning seems not to have started in Wolverhampton until the middle of the 18th century and not to have been fully established until the start of the 19th.. The two towns differed in that Bilston japanning was almost never carried out on papier mache; and was nearly all directed at the cheaper end of the market and the export trade, especially to Spain and South America, to whose taste much of Bilston's design was directed.

Of developments in Bilston, Lawley says: wood was soon found to be unsuitable, and a softer material, known as papier-mache, was invented in 1773. This was a few years after almost discarded for iron, a process of rolling having been invented by Wilkinson, which enabled the ironworkers to roll iron into thin sheets, from which an infinite variety of articles could be manufactured both for purposes of ornament and utility.

The trade went into decline from about the middle of the 19th century. In part this seems to have been due to changes in taste and fashion but largely it was caused by the introduction of electroplating. The trade was not helped by the introduction of new materials, especially aluminium and then plastics. But some japanning continued in both towns well into the 20th century, the products by then consisting mostly of very utilitarian objects, very thinly japanned and that mainly for the purpose of protecting the metal; decoration would be minimal. A typical example of such work would be the ubiquitous cash box, made out of tin plate and lacquered in black with a few gold and or red lines.

The best local collection of Bilston japanning is at:

Bantock House Museum & Park
Finchfield Road
Wolverhampton
WV3 9LQ
Tel: 01902 552195



8. CONTEMPORARY CRAFTS

Bilston Craft Gallery is the largest dedicated craft venue in the West Midlands with exhibitions featuring the best in contemporary ceramics, glass, jewellery, textiles, metalwork and woodwork.

Bilston Craft Gallery
Mount Pleasant
Bilston
WV14 7LU

9. WOLVERHAMPTON ARCHIVES SEARCH

- File re Stonefield Schools 1905 -1948 ref: CMB-BIL/11/2
- Stonefield Colliery (Bilston) - draft plan c. 1875 ref: DX-264/25
- Press Cuttings: Education folder 23 - Stonefield ref: L07CUT
- Illustration of The Bilston Iron Company's Stonefield Iron Works 19th century ref: DX-808/10/7
- Stonefield Secondary School Governors minutes and papers 1949 - 1965 ref: D-EDS-150
- Steam Engine, Bilston Iron Company, Bilston 1916 ref: P/4085...A Thomas Perry steam powered pumping engine installed in 1852 at the 'Stonefield Works' site. To the left on the spindle can be seen old drum chains. The engine was later demolished in 1918.
- Stonefield Iron Works, Bilston Iron Company, Bilston illustration 1873 ref: P/4086
- Pupils, Stonefield Girls' School, Bilston c. 1930s ref: P/6001, P/6004
- Press cuttings on the public and business life of G. H. Sankey 1900s ref: DB-25/7/3/10...articles about his involvement in the establishment and construction of Stonefield School in Bilston.
- Stonefield Infant & Junior School, Bilston photo early 20th century ref: P/6319
- Handwritten notes possibly made by George H. Sankey on the numbers of children to be accommodated at Stonefield School ref: DB-25/7/3/4
- Tithe Award Bilston 1845 ref: B/A/15/42, 400

10. LINKS

Bilston Town Trail at: <http://www.wolverhamptoncity.co.uk/files/download/325155751211128.pdf>

Black Country Route Public Art at:

<http://www.bilstonregeneration.co.uk/downloads/sculpturetrail.pdf>

History of Joseph Sankey & Sons Ltd at:

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a/records.aspx?cat=149-db25&cid=0#0>

[DP 30.04.2010]