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exclusif

Busy France Broke Britain

– but UK politicians are turning heritage-friendly

And: Belgium turns its Rubens village to rubble

Just in time: barns and the SPAB

A silver timecapsule

High-speed rail trouble ahead

Shine on

Craft, artistic endeavour and small-scale manufacturing are close to the heart of the ideas which gave rise both to the SPAB and the wider Arts & Crafts movement. Naturally, complete, unaltered examples of workshops that thrived during this period are almost unknown. Judith Leigh reports on a time-capsule in Birmingham, a silverware business-turned-dusty treasure-trove of conservation philosophy conundrums that is one of English Heritage's most enigmatic projects yet

On 31 March 2008, English Heritage, in its role as guardian of last resort, signed the purchase documents and on 1 April became the owner of JW Evans, Albion Street, Birmingham – and an insight into a vanishing world.

The business had been put up for sale by its owner, Tony Evans, the last in a family line which began with Jenkin William Evans, Tony's grandfather, in the 1880s. For more than a century-and-a-quarter the family had been part of the tight network of small companies inhabiting the modest streets of Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter, creating items of domestic silverware for the households of Britain and for export.

Metalware and jewellery have been produced in Birmingham since the Middle Ages, and by the mid-18th century the town was already well known for its manufacture of small metalwork objects. Nearby, Worcestershire and Staffordshire produced raw materials of iron-ore and coal and, from the late 18th century, the network of canals provided transport for the goods.

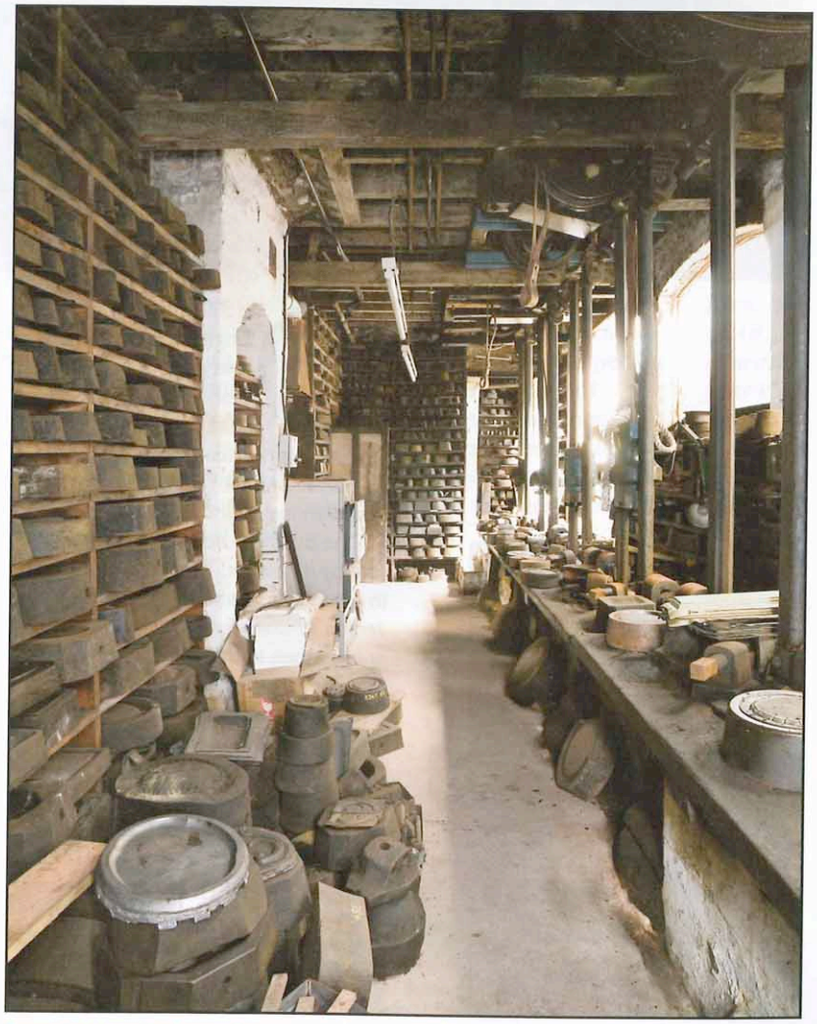
In 1791, Arthur Young, in "Travels in England and Wales", called Birmingham "the first manufacturing town in the world". The early 19th century saw masters and artisans moving into a semi-rural area just north-west of the city centre, which gradually developed as the combined residential and industrial zone we now know as the Jewellery Quarter. This is where JW Evans established his trade.

But with manufacturing now shifting to cheaper workshops on the other side of the globe, and changes in style and fashion making fewer demands on this traditional craft, orders dropped away until the business was no longer viable.

Had this been a slow decline, the workshop emptying, the contents gradually finding other homes, it would have vanished un-noticed. But the overwhelming importance and

SAVING JW EVANS

ALL IMAGES: ENGLISH HERITAGE



Preceding page, the second floor workshop at JW Evans – as if some Edwardian worker had just left. This page (top) stored dies at fly press shop 2. Above, the lower stamp room

interest of JWEvans is that it retains within its confined space all its machinery, moulds, tools, products, records, accounts and archives from its beginnings – a microcosm of the small-scale metal object manufacturing for which Birmingham was world renowned in its Victorian and Edwardian heyday.

If a blip in time allowed a worker of 100 years ago to revisit the workshop, he or she (the photos show plenty of women at work) would be able to make straight for the shelves where the dies are kept and find the ones used still in their place. They would be able to sit at the same benches, the light from the same windows falling on the same tools. They would be able to make their way through the warren of small rooms (80 in all), pausing as they adjusted to small alterations, additions, extensions, probably marvelling at some of the later machines, maybe somewhat distressed by signs of decline and disrepair (early photographs show workshops full of people at polished benches).
But their surroundings would be wholly familiar; they would be able to lift their tools and recommence their work.

As modern visitors, we search for words to express the unforgettable sensation of walking into another life; stepping back in time, a time capsule, the well-worn phrases are here exceptionally apt. There are no workers at the benches but – except for the dust and rust – it is as though they have just walked away, leaving their tools at the ready, their equipment on the shelves, the boss's papers on the desk, books and boxes of bills and invoices in the office, design drawings in files. On the ground floor are workshops with rows of heavy drop-stamps to press out patterns for the silverware, with ranges of fly-presses upstairs to cut out the finished pieces and add decoration. Everywhere, shelves from floor to ceiling house every single metal die that the company ever created.
In the stock rooms, thousands of finished and part finished objects are stored on racks and startle the visitor by their familiarity – our mother's or grandmother's sugar-shakers, cruets, candlesticks, whose provenance we never suspected.

Objects and parts of objects were produced here. The business was part of an integrated system developed in the Jewellery Quarter where different workshops specialised in different processes and unfinished objects were trundled round in barrows to undergo their next stages of manufacture.

What of the building itself? Like its neighbours in the Jewellery Quarter it started in the early 19th century as a domestic house, four terraced houses, opening directly on to the street.
As businesses grew, workshops were crammed into the back yards and gardens at right angles to the houses, with the living rooms gradually being turned into offices for the business, which nevertheless still retained their domestic layout and original street frontages.

The unique challenge facing EH is how to conserve this building and its contents and secure it for the future whilst retaining this all-enveloping atmosphere of an historic workplace. "Minimum intervention", "Conserve as found" are familiar maxims, and of course historically favoured by SPAB, but in this instance they will be followed to an unprecedented degree. In short, the building and its contents will be left largely as they are. There will be no tidying up. Items will be left

Top, a bench on the first floor silversmith's shop. Far left, women workers in the JW Evans press shop, circa 1905. Left, the terrace of four 1830s houses that make up the street frontage of JW Evans. Behind is a sprawl of workshops

in situ, scattered on the benches; dust will not be removed. Walls will not be redecorated. The patina and defects of age and wear and tear will not be removed. Priority is to be given to retaining the spirit of active manufacturing. This approach is embodied in a guidance document, "A Conservation Philosophy for JW Evans and Sons", distilled by Nicholas Molyneux from a seminar of EH staff in summer 2008.

At present however there are buckets on the floor to catch drips coming through the roof and the conservation philosophy does not extend to retaining these. Indeed, it would not be true to the spirit of the place, and an offence to the proud workers shown in those photographs, to reveal it solely in its death throes. Therefore, the building envelope is to be repaired, sensitively and without changing materials. Where a corrugated roof has enclosed a courtyard, this, renewed if necessary, will remain the cover. Where panes of glass are letting in the rain, they will be replaced. But where they are simply cracked, and still doing their job, they will be retained. This summer saw the commencement of this work to roof and glass. The buckets will go.

THE CHALLENGE FACING ENGLISH HERITAGE IS HOW TO CONSERVE THIS BUILDING AND ITS CONTENTS WHILST RETAINING THE ATMOSPHERE OF A HISTORIC WORKPLACE

The team for this stage comprises Rodney Melville and Partners, Architects; Bare, Leaning and Bare, Quantity Surveyors; E Bowman & Sons Ltd of Stamford, contractors. The project manager is English Heritage's Nick Hill, with whom readers of the "Cornerstone" article on a previous EH project at Apethorpe will be familiar.

As for the objects, the more usual procedure of removing objects for

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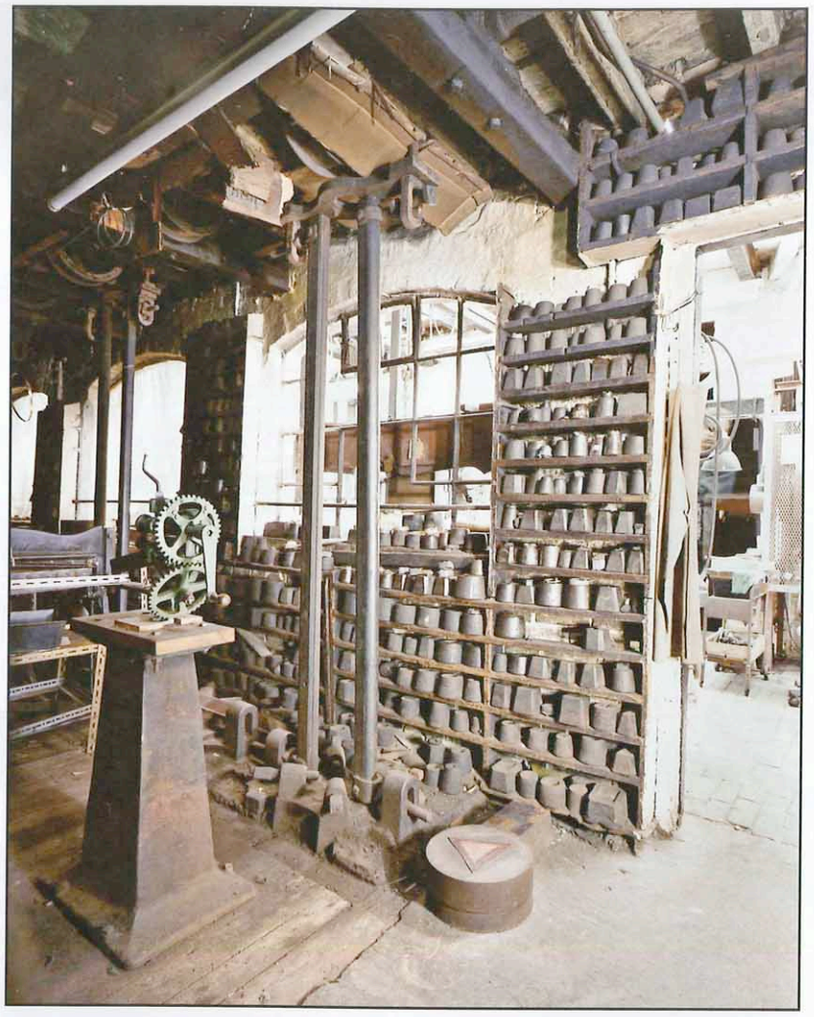

Top, the drop stamps at JW Evans, and stamp weights stored as they have been since the 19th century. Above, a group of workers in the stamping shop, probably late 19th century

cleaning and treatment and then returning them to their original position is not to be followed. Things will remain where they were left, with minimal treatment as and when necessary. In spite of this "retain in situ" philosophy, the well-being of the items will not be compromised.

A careful, comprehensive "Strategy for the Contents" has been devised, setting out the parameters for this uncommon approach, and the contents are currently in the care of a full-time conservator, Beth Stanley. Provision is made for "carrying out remedial and preventative conservation", but the aim in general is to maintain the objects "in an environment suitable to their long term preservation". That is not to say that complete rubbish cannot be disposed of and that loading and environmental issues may mean some measured intervention, but every change has to be judged against criteria and conditions agreed by the Contents Team.

As well as the wish to perpetuate "the intense character of the all-enveloping atmosphere of a historic place of work", another reason for limiting changes to the absolute minimum is to enable this vast range of material to be studied in greater detail in its context, and in particular to understand the dynamics of the business, how it changed and adapted to new conditions and new demands over its life.

There are technical and social processes to be understood as well as objects to be classified. Hugely important is the role of Tony Evans, who has been retained as an adviser, and whose memories of life and work in the workshops, spanning some 50 years, illuminates the inert material.

Unrestricted access for visitors to the workshops is never going to be an option. For the present, each visit has to be accompanied by two guides and accommodates only ten people. Added to these are the difficulties of access and health and safety considerations, and disabled access is problematic. Yet EH is providing opportunities for the public to visit through members' days, Heritage Open Days and for specialist groups.

What of the future? EH is funding basic repairs at a cost of £750,000 as a rescue project, and this will put the building in sound condition. Phase II will depend on the results of current discussions. Ideally, JW Evans would be taken over by a Building Preservation Trust. Continuing manufacturing on a small scale is an enticing possibility – "Made by English Heritage in Birmingham"...

EH may have taken a leap of faith in acquiring this site, since its future is necessarily undecided, but it was based on a thorough understanding of the unique nature of the Jewellery Quarter. There is no doubt that had the organisation not stepped in, others having fallen by the wayside, then this extraordinarily complete example of this traditional craft, and an exemplar for the history of small-scale metal manufacture in Birmingham, would have been dispersed and lost. And the idea of putting an embargo on change – not only to preserve the intensity of the experience, but to give time for emerging significance and understanding to point the way to the future – is surely the best approach in this case.

Emerging from the Evans workshop and returning to the familiar city centre of shops and offices, you pass signs outside the front doors of the one-time houses: stampers, piercers, spinners, pressers, makers-up to the trade, polishers and electro-platers, badge and metal works, assayers and refiners, press toolmakers, steel pen manufacturers. After your visit you will see them in a different light, part of the network of a historic tradition.

■ For more information, see English Heritage's publication "The Birmingham Jewellery Quarter – an Introduction and Guide" (2000); and EH's more detailed architectural survey.