

October 2008

Heritage

TODAY

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The winning story of a workshop in Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter

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Why lavatories deserve to be praised



ENGLISH HERITAGE

SILVER LINING

JW Evans & Sons in Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter was on the brink of extinction when English Heritage turned a misfortune into a cultural asset

WORDS **MARK PALMER**
PHOTOGRAPHY **BORIS BAGGS**

INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE



Tony Evans, the last proprietor of the silver factory

It can't have been easy for Tony Evans to put on his coat and walk out of his factory for the last time. Not at all easy, when you consider that his family had been in the silver manufacturing business since 1880, always in the same premises at the heart of Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter, always employing some 50 skilled men and women and always fiercely proud of the quality of work produced.

There was, however, to be a silver lining on that evening of 31 March 2008. At the eleventh hour – and long after it had become obvious that his business was not going to be viable for much longer – English Heritage stepped in and took the unusual step of acquiring JW Evans & Sons for the nation, complete with machinery, moulds, tools, archival documents and immaculately kept records.

In so doing, English Heritage has saved one of the most complete examples of a traditional craft business and taken a big stride towards preserving England's industrial heritage for future generations. There was simply no way that English Heritage could have let the factory and its contents be destroyed.

'Once English Heritage agreed to acquire the factory, and when the day came for me to leave, I explained that there wouldn't be much time to clear up,' says Tony. 'Oh,' I was told, 'don't clear up – by which I mean that if you see a paper clip lying on the desk then just leave it there.'

And that is exactly what he did. The result is extraordinarily inspiring. It means everything at 54-57 Albion Street is just as it was on 31 March 2008, which is pretty much just as it was in 1880.

These four terraced houses, which were built as residences in 1837, typify the thriving manufacturing community that made Birmingham internationally famous and contributed to it becoming the second-biggest city in the UK. Such examples of Britain's past deserve preservation.

Small is beautiful

What made the area unique was the almost total absence of large factories. Rather, there were dozens of small companies operating from workshops created in the attics of individual houses or in buildings erected in domestic back gardens.

After a visit here you will look differently at that silver candelabra on your dining room table or the silver-plated gravy boat squeezed into a cupboard in the kitchen or, more likely, packed in a box in the loft. With more and more of our household items mass-produced in the Far East, it's easy to forget about the skills that ensured Britain once ruled the industrial waves. But not here at JW Evans & Sons. In total there are 80 rooms that make up the former JW Evans business.

Some, particularly the workshops and cutting-out rooms to the rear of the properties that used to be the gardens, are large and filled with heavy drop stamps (weights on pulleys) that required manly muscles to operate.

Upstairs is where smaller items were hand-finished before being sent to the grand silver shops of London and elsewhere. JW Evans always supplied the retail world; it never sold direct to a customer and only got its own hallmark in 1980.

Buried treasure

Everywhere are dies, the hardened steel blocks into which are cut the patterns for silverware, from teapots to pendants. In fact, you will find every single die that the company ever produced. Other shelves are groaning with candlesticks, mirror backs, cigar boxes and sugar bowls. On the ground floor in the stock room near the directors' entrance (as opposed to the workers' entrance, with its clock-in machine, still fully functional) stands a wicker wheelbarrow that used to transport small parts around the quarter or carry raw materials bought or borrowed from neighbouring companies.

'The more time you spend here, the more you realise what an amazing treasure chest this is,' says Nick Molyneux, an Inspector of Historic Buildings in the Birmingham office of English Heritage. 'What comes across is the quality of the work, both in the workshop and in the meticulously kept archives upstairs.'

The accounting books are worthy of their own exhibition. Tony's grandfather, Jenkin William Evans, who founded the business, had studied at the Birmingham School of Art and his handwriting is immaculate. There are also some brilliant examples of his artwork, including pencil drawings of the heads of statues.

'The boom time was the Edwardian era,' says Tony. 'This was when the silverware sector in the Jewellery Quarter

was bigger than the jewellery sector. People didn't have cars or things like that to impress their neighbours, so displaying silver was a way of showing that you were getting on in life. Of course, it helped that you would have had others to clean it, which meant that all you had to do was sit back and enjoy it.'

Jenkin Evans died in 1928, by which time his son Austen was in charge of operations, with his brother Harold Jenkin Evans as partner. Austen Evans kept working until he died aged 85 in 1980, by which time Tony was the senior director. 'I was the only son,' Tony explains, 'so, a bit like Prince Charles, I always knew what I was going to do in life. I left school at 16 and worked in every department of the business.'

The early 1950s represented another boom time. There was a big push on exports and the Jewellery Quarter still employed more than 50,000 people. 'We had a number of people who did 50 years with the company. We were a happy band. There were long-term jobs to hang on to and there was a strong sense of community,' says Tony. 'But by 1955 ►

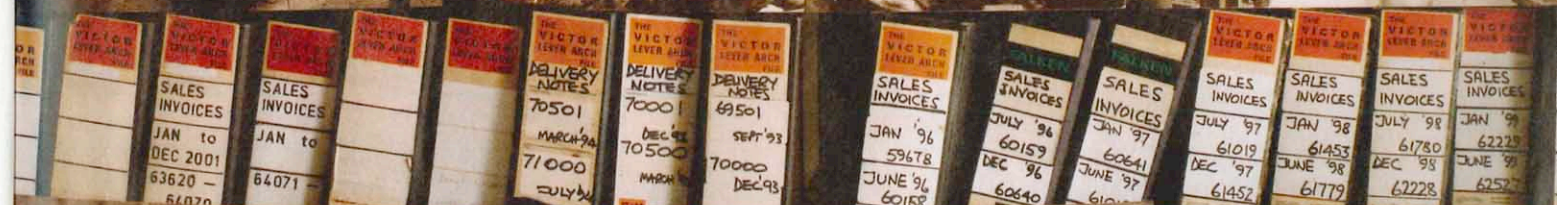
English Heritage exists to ensure future generations can enjoy, appreciate and experience our history. We have stepped in to save JW Evans because it is one of the most important Victorian and Edwardian manufactories in existence. Its loss would not just be for Birmingham but for the world' Dr Simon Thurley, Chief Executive of English Heritage

INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE



Above and right From floor to ceiling the factory is crammed full of equipment, much of it dating back to Victorian times

Below Propped up against the files in the directors' office are staff portraits dating back a hundred years



INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE

workers' heads were being turned by the prospect of better pay and less austere working conditions at the Austin Motor Company in nearby Longbridge.'

Winning order books

JW Evans remained a major employer and its silver still graced the dining tables of some of the finest homes in Britain. The staff listened to *Music While You Work* as they went about their duties, while upstairs in the directors' office the orders were processed, the wage books filled in and the safes tightly locked.

Today, those order forms, wage books and safes are all here, gathering dust but winning admirers in the process. While English Heritage is keen to preserve the unique atmosphere of the building, there are structural problems



Above centre An example of the silverware produced by JW Evans

that need immediate attention and are likely to take time to fix. 'The first thing we need to do is stabilise the buildings for public safety,' says Nick Molyneux. 'They were listed Grade II* about five years ago and we need to stop the rain coming in. While this critical work is being carried out, regrettably, there will be no public access to the property.'

It's an unusual acquisition but it is in keeping with English Heritage's *Conservation Principles*. In the document, it states: 'People may value a place for many reasons beyond utility or personal association: for its distinctive architecture or landscape, the story it can tell about its past, its connection with notable people or events, its landform, flora and fauna, because they find it beautiful or inspiring, or for its role as a focus of a community.'

With the exception of the flora and fauna – of which, it must be said, there is nothing at all – JW Evans meets all those criteria. And much more. **HT**

A Jewellery Quarter walk

Follow this walk and get an insight into the development of the Birmingham Jewellery Quarter and its rich and varied townscape. The walk should take 45 to 60 minutes

1 St Paul's Square

The Jewellery Quarter began in and around St Paul's Square. Local landowners the Colmore family laid out the square in the mid-1770s as a residential area centred on St Paul's Church (1776-79). Unlike other landlords, the Colmores allowed industrial activities in residential premises. Small manufacturers settled in the area, and jewellery and metalwork trades, already established in the city, began to concentrate in this area.

2 The Birmingham Assay Office

The Birmingham office is the busiest in Britain. Millions of gold and silver items are tested and hallmarked here every year. The present building, Birmingham's fourth assay office, grew in a number of phases from 1878.

3 Victoria Works and Argent Centre

Victoria Works was built for Joseph Gillott in about 1840. On the other side of Frederick Street, the polychrome brick Argent Centre, formerly Albert Works (1862-63), is a stylistic contrast with the neo-Classical severity of Gillott's factory. Both were built for the manufacture of pen nibs, which were sold around the world.

4 JW Evans, 54-57 Albion Street

On your left a few metres along the street are the premises of JW Evans.

7 Pickering and Mayell

A pair of houses built in the 1820s with workshop wings (known as 'shopping') to the rear. The original front doorcase and some windows survive in a rare example of a 'hybrid' residential property with workshops. The jewellery box makers have occupied the property since around 1900.

8 Jewellery Quarter Museum

Built in 1909 and 1914, the premises of Smith and Pepper, makers of gold jewellery, were converted to a museum by the city council in the 1980s.

Visitors can see demonstrations of jewellery trades.

5 Aquinas House

Built in 1882 as the premises of Manton and Mole jewellery manufacturers, Aquinas House represented state-of-the-art industrial architecture, with an elaborate tiled entrance, concrete floors and central heating. In the 1990s it was converted to units for small manufacturing and professional businesses.

