



# WELCOME TO HISTORY WEST MIDLANDS

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**T**he origins of History West Midlands go back to the summer of 2011 when the publisher Mike Gibbs and I supported the need to publish a high-quality magazine and website which reflected the rich and fascinating past of the region from its earliest times. We did not see the label West Midlands as implying a single collective identity which all the people in the area shared, but there were common experiences within the historic counties of Derbyshire, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire. Perhaps these went back to the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia which covered the centre of England. The medieval and post-medieval periods saw the development of county towns, religious centres and markets, but the inhabitants of the counties pursued their own history whilst experiencing the rule of feudal lords, the Reformation, civil war and the impact of disease and death. By the eighteenth century, the growth of a regional economy, which was stimulated by transport developments, increasingly connected the counties. The canal engineer, James Brindley's 'Silver Cross' linked the mines, businesses, towns and farms of the West Midlands with the rivers Trent, Mersey, Severn and Thames and enabled raw materials, food and manufactured products to be moved effectively within and outside the region. Later, railways and roads accelerated this communications revolution and consequent integration of the region. These changes shaped the area's cultural and demographic landscape as ideas were exchanged and people migrated within and into the area.

A broad approach to regional history allows us to focus on life both in and beyond the central 'West Midlands' conurbation composed of the metropolitan boroughs of Birmingham, Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall and Wolverhampton. We are keen to explore rural as well as urban experiences and the history of cultural, economic, political and social life in all parts of the region. Hence our geographical attention includes cathedral cities, county towns, Coventry and Stoke-on-Trent, the industrial developments along the Derwent and Severn valleys and the farms, villages, churches, castles and landscapes of Derbyshire, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire. We also recognised that county boundaries are porous when it comes to historical events and processes, so sometimes future editions of *History West Midlands* will explore the East Midlands, Cheshire, Gloucestershire and the Welsh borders as well as the six historic counties.

During 2011 and 2012 History West Midlands became a project as well as an idea. We agreed that it should not be academic but present the latest research to intelligent general readers in an interesting and accessible form. A website ([www.historywm.com](http://www.historywm.com)) was created, films were made and a team was built to take the magazine and the website forward. A sample edition of the magazine was published to explore the look and feel of the publication and invite comments from potential readers. We established an editorial board of people from throughout the region – historians, heritage professionals and independent scholars – to offer advice and publicise the magazine locally. Our strapline – 'people of ideas, innovation and enterprise' – provided a mission statement to direct our approach towards the region's history.

### **In this Issue**

For our first issue of the magazine, we have chosen the theme 'The West Midlands Enlightenment' as it provides a clear focus on 'people of ideas, innovation and enterprise'. We have covered the historic counties of Derbyshire, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a period when the region was developing a shared experience. Enlightenment can simply be defined by using the philosopher Immanuel Kant's pregnant phrase 'daring to know', which involved a new way of thinking about nature and the world by rejecting an unquestioning acceptance of tradition. In the West Midlands, the Enlightenment also meant 'daring to do'. The articles in this issue reveal the radical, experimental and original approaches of regional individuals to science, technology, art, industry, social reform and education. The Lunar Society of Birmingham and Staffordshire is a celebrated example of a network of luminaries who were in pursuit of the new, but the West Midlands Enlightenment was more than the activity of men such as Matthew Boulton, Joseph Priestley and James Watt. The contributors to this issue of the magazine expand our knowledge of unfamiliar women and men as well as the famous.

The first article, by Peter Jones, explores the meaning of the traditional European Enlightenment and focuses on the regional distinctiveness of the West Midlands, where useful knowledge was transmitted to the 'real world' of industry. Next, Philip Carter and Mark Curthoys' biographical approach considers how local people contributed to the texture of the regional Enlightenment: all counties had their thinkers and doers. Paul Elliott looks at the richness of the Derbyshire Enlightenment, from Joseph Wright the painter to the Derby Philosophical Society, which was founded by

## EDITOR'S LETTER

Erasmus Darwin. Barrie Trinder sees evidence of a Shropshire Enlightenment amongst the intellectuals and industrialists of the county.

Five articles focus on men who connected the world of thought to the world of industry. Rita McLean investigates Matthew Boulton, the manufacturer of metalware, steam engines and coins; Sue Tungate provides a cameo piece on John Wilkinson, a Shropshire ironmaster whose tokens represented West Midlands achievements in solid metal. Caroline Archer contemplates the typographer and printer, John Baskerville, who created the impressive Baskerville typeface; Gaye Blake-Roberts explores Josiah Wedgwood who united art, science and industry in his north Staffordshire potteries; and Alison Wallis considers the polymath Erasmus Darwin: doctor, inventor, poet and writer on evolution, decades before his grandson, Charles Darwin, turned the notion into a theory. Finally Kate Iles looks at Thomas Day's unsuccessful educational experiment to turn an orphan girl into his perfect wife. In so doing she raises new ways of seeing the West Midlands Enlightenment by bringing the experiences of girls and women into the foreground of thinking about the period.

We do note that, for reasons of space, these pages do not cover several significant individuals and subjects. These histories may come later.

We are particularly grateful to Lucy Bamford and Derby Museum for allowing us to use an image of Joseph Wright's 'A Philosopher Giving that Lecture on an Orrery', which expresses so well the scientific, social and educational dimensions of the Enlightenment.

We hope that you find much of interest in these pages and welcome your feedback on our first issue as we plan our second and third issues. You can email us at [info@historywm.com](mailto:info@historywm.com) or write to us at 3 Arrow Court, Adams Way, Springfield Business Park, Alcester B49 6PU.

Issue 2 of *History West Midlands* will be available in the Summer and its theme will be 'Moving into the West Midlands'. ●

**Malcolm Dick, Editor-in-Chief, on behalf of The History West Midlands Team**

## TIME LINE

- 1702 **Queen Anne** reigns until 1714
- 1707 Act of Union passed, merging the Scottish and English Parliaments, which establishes the Kingdom of Great Britain
- 1709 **Abraham Darby I** begins smelting coke with iron at Coalbrookdale, Shropshire
- 1712 **Thomas Newcomen** erects an atmospheric engine near Dudley Castle to pump water out of a mine
- 1714 **George I** reigns until 1727
- 1727 **George II** reigns until 1760
- 1733 Of the 110 Newcomen engines now operating across England and Wales, 20 are located in the West Midlands
- 1738 **Charles** and **John Wesley** undergo spiritual experiences that lead to the founding of the Methodist Church
- 1741 *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* is founded
- 1742 **Benjamin Huntsman** experiments with crucible steel
- 1745 Jacobite Rebellion takes place and **Charles Edward Stuart** (Bonnie Prince Charlie) reaches Derby
- 1760 **George III** reigns until 1820
- 1760s Establishment of the Lunar Society; members include **Matthew Boulton, William Small, John Whitehurst, Josiah Wedgwood, James Keir, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Thomas Day, Erasmus Darwin** and **Joseph Priestley**
- 1762 **Matthew Boulton** plans Soho Manufactory; completed 1765
- 1765 **James Watt** develops the separate condenser for steam engines, significantly increasing their potential, and **John Taylor**, buttonmaker, and **Sampson Lloyd II**, ironmaster, establish Birmingham's first bank
- 1766 Work starts on the construction of the Staffordshire to Worcestershire, Trent and Mersey and Birmingham to Wednesbury canals, improving links between the West Midlands and other parts of Britain
- 1770s **Richard Arkwright** begins building cotton factories at Cromford in Derbyshire and **Josiah Wedgwood** creates a new factory at Etruria in Staffordshire to manufacture his pottery
- 1773 Birmingham Assay Office is established and **James Keir** opens a chemical works at Tipton, making alkali, potash, soda soap and red lead for the glass industry
- 1774 **John Wilkinson** registers a patent for a boring machine, to be used for manufacturing steam engine cylinders and cannon
- 1775 American War of Independence starts – and continues until 1783
- 1776 **Adam Smith's** *Wealth of Nations* is published
- 1779 Birmingham General Hospital is opened and Birmingham Library established. **Abraham Derby III** constructs an iron bridge across the River Severn at Coalbrookdale
- 1780 **James Watt** patents his copying press and **Joseph Priestley** settles in Birmingham
- 1781 Birmingham's population reaches 50,000, making it the second largest English town
- 1783 **James Watt** patents a rotary steam engine and **Henry Cort** invents the puddling process to make wrought iron
- 1788 **Matthew Boulton** sets up the first steam-powered mint at his Soho Works
- 1789 **George Washington** is elected first President of the United States
- 1789 The French Revolution begins
- 1791 The Birmingham or 'Priestley' Riots take place, aimed mainly at religious dissenters across the city such as **Joseph Priestley**
- 1793 The French Revolutionary Wars start between Britain and the French Revolutionary Government
- 1796 **Edward Jenner** administers the first smallpox vaccination
- 1797 The Cartwheel penny and two pence are produced at Soho Mint
- 1801 **Thomas Jefferson** is elected President of the United States and a Union is formed between Ireland and Great Britain
- 1802 Gas lighting is introduced at **Matthew Boulton's** Soho Works
- 1803 The Napoleonic Wars start between Britain and France
- 1804 The first self-propelling steam engine, or steam locomotive, makes its outing at the Pen-y-Darren ironworks in South Wales
- 1805 **Admiral Viscount Lord Nelson's** defeat of the French and Spanish navies at the Battle of Trafalgar establishes Britain as the dominant world naval power for the next century
- 1807 Britain's slave trade is abolished
- 1813 **Jane Austen** publishes *Pride and Prejudice*
- 1815 The Battle of Waterloo ends the war with France
- 1818 **Mary Shelley** publishes *Frankenstein*
- 1820 **George IV** reigns till 1830