

THE EAST SHROPSHIRE COALFIELD: A MAGNET FOR MIGRANTS

Shropshire, ironically, was not only a magnet for migrants as the Industrial Revolution got underway, but was the chosen location for a visionary New Town some two hundred years later, created to alleviate the urban over-crowding created by industrialisation.

Kate Iles



Flames and smoke from iron furnaces belch into the Coalbrookdale valley. *Afternoon View of Coalbrookdale* (1777) by William Williams.

'Here's a Place for Overspill'

In February 1955, an article appeared in *The Birmingham Gazette* entitled, 'Here's a place for overspill', in which the journalist A. W. Bowdler wrote about the potential of the area underpinned by the East Shropshire coalfield to 'offer the solution to the overspill problems of the Midland cities'.

The area in question was the collection of small, industrial communities that had, together with their more well-known neighbours, Ironbridge and Coalbrookdale, been at the heart of the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The problem to which Bowdler was referring was that Birmingham's industrial base had pulled in so many workers that its population had long outgrown its infrastructure and high-density living in slum conditions was an ongoing problem. The combination of the 'new town' approach to town planning after the Second World War, embodied in the New Town Act of 1946, and the rejection of Birmingham's plans for growth, led to the consideration of other locations for an 'overspill' population, not only from Birmingham but also from the Black Country. Bowdler helpfully identified a place approximately 30 miles from Birmingham that offered 'a far better solution than going 'up and up' in an area almost choked for lack of breathing space'.

The Birthplace of Industry

The irony of presenting this particular area as a solution to the population problems of Birmingham and the Black Country was that those problems were, in part, a result of a first wave of migration to East Shropshire in the eighteenth century. Rich in natural resources such as coal, lime, clay and timber and with a convenient water source for power and transport in the form of the River Severn, the area had long been associated with industrial working. Ironsmiths appeared in the records by the fourteenth century and when a young man by the name of

Abraham Darby migrated to Coalbrookdale from Bristol in 1708, he took full advantage of both the natural resources and the low-level industrial activity that had taken place there for generations. Darby began the process that saw this part of Shropshire emerge as the birthplace of industry by revolutionising iron smelting with the use of coke.

Subsequent generations of the Darby family and other iron-masters, such as John 'Iron-Mad' Wilkinson, unleashed an unprecedented level of industrial activity, changing the local landscape forever. And where the work was, so came the people. In 1711 the population around the East Shropshire Coalfield was 11,500; by the dawn of the nineteenth century it had grown to around 34,000.

Old communities such as Dawley, Madeley, Hadley, Ketley and Lawley found their numbers swelling and new communities sprang up at convenient places in between. Squatters cottages appeared at the side of the rough roads and bargemen and shipwrights settled by the river that provided them with work.

Growth was irregular and random, following the pattern of necessity, but the key driver was the work – the industry supplied by the coal and lime mines, iron foundries, brick works and the supporting service and transport trades. In the period between 1776 and 1815 the area boomed, fuelled latterly by the Napoleonic Wars and the demand for iron.

Descent into Dereliction

With peace came an economic downturn and because of this, together with the growth of other industrial centres, such as Birmingham, the population of the area fell. The people who had migrated there during the boom years followed the work, some of them inevitably to Birmingham and the Black Country, contributing to the rapid population growth in those areas that led to the population and housing crisis of the mid-to-late twentieth century.



A settlement of miners cottages in Dark Lane, Malinslee, 1962. These were demolished to make way for Telford new town.



New town-style modern housing in 1950s Telford.

By 1955, the East Shropshire coalfield was seen as a landscape scarred by industrial working, derelict and run-down, despite the fact that industry had not completely left. The communities in existence before the arrival of the great ironmasters and enlarged by the industrial migration of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries continued to develop.

As a result of Bowdler's article, Dawley Urban District Council approached Birmingham Corporation and initially the Langley Farm Estate was built to accommodate families from Birmingham. Later, the chairman of Dawley UDC at the time, George Chetwynd, commented that this was as far as their plans extended; to develop derelict land with housing, in order to raise the local population to between 26,000 and 28,000. But in light of the reluctance to extend Birmingham, a report was requested by the Minister for Housing and Local Government on the possibility of developing Dawley further.

In 1963, Dawley was designated as a 'new town'. Architects John Madin & Partners of Birmingham were commissioned and work began on a 'master plan'. But it was not without controversy. As much as the local residents welcomed greatly-needed regeneration, they resented the way their local area was depicted in the media. An article in *Town and Country Planning* in November 1960 was positive about the area's potential, it had 'all the makings of a good town'. However, it was scathing about the existing communities, drawing attention to the 'remaining slag-heaps and empty cottages' and calling the streets and shops of Dawley and Lawley 'undistinguished'. With supreme highhandedness the article continued, 'There is nothing here that modern engineering methods cannot put right. Most of it will disappear before a bulldozer.' More controversially, *The Daily Express* in September 1963 called Dawley 'a beaten down little town ... A place destroyed and living on its own ruins'.

The Old Makes Way for the New

The residents of Dawley reacted angrily and as time went on, and the plans for the development grew more ambitious, their worries grew concerning the old being swallowed up by the new, and the arrival of the 'immigrants', as the families from Birmingham and the Black Country were termed.

'What will happen in Dawley when the 'Brummies' pour in?' asked *The Dawley Observer* in October 1963. 'How well will they settle down? And how will they be accepted?'

What happened to Dawley was less dramatic than had at first been envisioned, because in 1968, with plans for the new town enlarged to include Wellington and Oakengates, the centre of development shifted and Dawley was no longer at its heart. This change was most obviously demonstrated by the change to an entirely new name for the town - Telford. Now the master plan encompassed the other small centres of habitation and the greenfield land that lay in between them, that became new estates such as Sutton Hill and Malinslee.

To these new estates the Brummies came. Their experiences, how they settled in and how well they were accepted depended on a range of circumstances. Some came and instantly disliked it. The

problems centred predominantly around the vast difference between living in an urban environment and the rural character of their new home. A storm broke out in 1964, with people complaining about the lack of amenities. There was nothing to do in the evening, no picture houses, no dance halls, no places to meet, only a few pubs. Shops were not adequate and transport was limited. The result was that the Brummies quickly yearned to move back and those who had bought their new homes did just that. "We left 'The Lot' to come to 'The Nothingness'" was how one ex-Solihull resident put it. Those residents in council properties felt even more miserable. They had no choice but to



The glossy buildings of Telford, now the largest town in Shropshire



Thomas Telford, sculpted by Andre Wallace in 1987, leans on the letters that spell out his name in Telford Square, Telford.



An example of urban transformation. Contrasting views of Market Street, Oakengates in 1899 and the mid-1960s.

stay, but felt they had been ‘duped into moving with promises of new town amenities’. Some found the cost of living high, with rent and food prices comparing unfavourably with those in Birmingham and some claimed they experienced hostility from the indigenous communities, being referred to as ‘troublemakers from the slums’.

The Houses Came First

The issue lay in the fact that, rather than the people following the jobs, as they had in the eighteenth century, this time the houses came first and the amenities, and for many, the jobs, came much later. ‘There’s nothing to do in Telford’ wrote two young men in 1976; ‘Well there’s houses, houses, houses galore/Plenty of houses but nothing more.’ Industry did come to the area, especially after the development of the industrial estates such as Halesfield and Tweedale, but for many early residents it came too late.

But not everyone found the experience of migration to Telford a negative one. Some praised the new houses, the clean air and the warm welcome they found from local people. The contrast was drawn between what they had left and what they now enjoyed. Coming from a West Bromwich slum, one resident of Malinslee remembered growing up in a house ‘infested with vermin’ and that ‘we had to pass two houses to go up a dark entry to use the toilet, which was old and dirty most of the time, as several families had the use of it’. She ended her reminiscences with the tart observation: ‘So look around at your gas centrally heated modern houses with lovely gardens and all the “mod cons” in the heart of the countryside, and thank your lucky stars.’

Others took those complaining to task and accepted they were a part of new and growing communities, to which they had to contribute. Communities did develop their own social groups in time. Nonetheless the lack of support services such as doctors’ surgeries, schools, shops and transport links remained a constant theme through the 1960s and 1970s. A pressure group was set up to campaign for a hospital in the area. As much as people did like their new homes and surroundings, in the words of another Malinslee resident: ‘Good health care is a basic necessity for healthy living. Not a luxury or an afterthought. This fundamental service should have been included along with the first planning programme of Telford as a new town, along with the shops and first house to be built.’

A Connection Between the Past and the Present

Today, the area around Ironbridge and Coalbrookdale is designated as a World Heritage Site and lies within the unitary authority of Telford & Wrekin. The historical significance of the small settlement on the banks of the River Severn, to which Abraham Darby came in 1708, is nationally and internationally accepted. But the story of the growth of Dawley New Town into Telford, and its links with Birmingham and the Black Country, can also tell us much about our more recent history, offering an insight into the new town project of the post-war government. It also gives an insight into the ways the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were viewed and dealt with by subsequent generations. The new town, with the threat it posed to the industrial heritage of the area, prompted the preservation of that heritage in the form of the Ironbridge Museum Trust, revealing a connection between past and present.

The Telford area is also an example of two forms of migration. The first was ‘pull’ migration – people were pulled into the area by the work that was available. The second was an example of ‘push’ migration, with people leaving an uncomfortable environment, either voluntarily or not. Ultimately, the story of Telford reaffirms that migration is a complex process, driven by many factors and people experienced it very differently depending on their own personal circumstances. However, it is worth considering, at a time when immigration is very much a part of the political agenda, that only fifty years ago, ‘immigrants’ were not only those coming from foreign countries, but people who came from the city 30 miles down the road, and the accent that began to be heard on the Dawley streets, that was deemed ‘odd’, was a Brummie one. ●

Dr Kate Iles worked on the Revolutionary Players Digitisation Project (www.revolutionaryplayers.org.uk) and recently completed at PhD at the University of Birmingham on Sabrina Sidney.

Further Reading

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Maurice de Soissons, *Telford: The Making of Shropshire’s New Town* (Swan Hill Press, 1995).