

HIDDEN UNDERGROUND BIRMINGHAM'S GLASS INDUSTRY

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Birmingham's glass industry has left very few visible remains and is under-appreciated in comparison with that of nearby Stourbridge and Dudley. Yet nineteenth-century illustrations of the Aston Flint Glassworks in Bagot Street hint at the size and importance of this often forgotten part of Birmingham's industrial past. Recently, archaeological excavations have helped to improve the understanding of this once-thriving industry.



Exterior view of Aston Flint Glassworks in Bagot Street, c. 1800. Artist unknown.

Although 'forest' glass was being made in wood-fired furnaces in the West Midlands as early as the fourteenth century, Birmingham's glass industry was part of the predominantly urban coal-fired glass industry of the seventeenth century onwards.

In common with many of the city's industries the growth of glassmaking followed the development of canals from 1769, when the first canal into Birmingham opened. Canals were ideally suited to carrying the industry's fuel, raw materials of sand and lime, and its bulky and fragile products. The first canal-based glassworks, Park Glasshouse, opened on the Birmingham Canal in Spring Hill, in 1788.

Structures and Features

The distinctive feature of coal-fired glassworks was the tall glass cone with its central furnace, underground flues and access passages or caves, and surrounding buildings including a cutting shop. From the late eighteenth century glassworks were contained in a large circular or rectangular shed-like building, providing greater working space, which had a large central chimney serving two or more furnaces.

None of Birmingham's glass cones survive, but cones are shown on illustrations of Islington Glassworks in Broad Street, the Soho and Vesta Glassworks and Eglinton's glassworks in addition to that at the Aston Flint Glassworks. Cones are marked on historic maps at Belmont, Windsor Street and Union Glassworks, and on building plans at Soho. Park, Chester Street, Aston, Ostler's, and Aetna glassworks were the 'shed' type.

The most prominent surviving remains are those of Islington Glassworks, established in 1815, where the front house can still be seen. The building was later used as a hospital and is now a pub (Old Orleans, Broad Street). A short stretch of the original canal-side wall is visible at Aston Flint Glassworks, established by 1800, and below-ground remains probably survive behind it. Part of the boundary wall of the Belmont Glassworks survives, and remains of the Park Glasshouse and Union Glassworks also probably still exist under car parks.

Archaeological Excavations

Archaeological investigation has taken place at five of Birmingham's glassworks in advance of redevelopment. Excavations in Edgbaston Street in 1999 included Glasshouse Court, which is marked on John Sheriff's map of 1808. There were no structural remains of the glassworks but glass working debris was found. A watching brief during construction of the Hyatt Hotel on Broad Street in 2000 identified remains of the Aetna Glassworks, established in 1836-7, including an annealing furnace.

Most of the site of Birmingham's first glassworks, that of the Jewish manufacturer, Mayer Oppenheim (established in 1757 and out of use by 1780/81), lies under Snow Hill Station. Archaeological excavation in 2006 showed that the area had been substantially truncated by the construction of the original station in the nineteenth century, but part of an earlier wall was found that was possibly part of the glassworks.

A china, glass and earthenware manufactory at the Belmont works, north of Belmont Row on the Digbeth Branch Canal, was first mentioned in 1806. John Pigott Smith's map of 1824-25 shows a large



Base of a small early nineteenth-century glass cone at Belmont Glassworks.

glass cone to the north-east of the canal, and his larger-scale map of c. 1850-55 also shows two smaller cones on the south-west of the canal.

Excavations in 2007 and 2009 revealed a small glass cone that was not marked on the historic maps and was therefore built between 1806 and 1824.

The Soho and Vesta Glassworks was established in 1805 in Lodge Road Hockley on an arm of the Birmingham Canal, and became John Walsh's works in 1850. The glasshouse is marked on Kempson's map of 1810 and an illustration in a trade directory shows a glass cone behind frontage buildings. Building plans show that the cone and a later, smaller, cone added in the 1860s survived until the 1950s. Archaeological excavation in 2008 revealed that there was a brick-built tunnel underneath the large cone and possible annealing rooms adjacent to it. Analysis of the glass showed a difference between the composition of the waste and the finished vessels, as well as the use of a range of colourants.

Shedding New Light

Archaeology reveals more about Birmingham's glass industry than documentary evidence alone is able to provide. Who knows what else lies beneath the pavements and edifices of modern-day Birmingham waiting to be discovered? ●

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Further Reading

Birmingham City Council, *Historic Environment Record*, www.birmingham.gov.uk/sites-monuments.

David Crossley, 'The Archaeology of the Coal-Fuelled Glass Industry in England', *Archaeological Journal* 160, 2003, 160-199.

Toni Demidowicz and Mike Hodder, 'Birmingham: Glass Industry', *West Midlands Archaeology* 40, 1997, 101-102.

Michael Hodder, *Birmingham: The Hidden History* (The History Press, 2011).

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www.birmingham.gov.uk/archaeology

Glass produced by Belmont Glassworks.



The first mention of a china, glass and earthenware manufactory at the Belmont works appears in 1806.