

THE WEST MIDLANDS IN WAR AND PEACE

Malcolm Dick

The French Wars (1793-1815) influenced life in the region, but the impact of the conflict was not total. Births, deaths and daily existence continued often unaffected by the struggle.

Moreover, industrialisation, agricultural improvement and urbanisation preceded and succeeded the conflict, but war and peace influenced the economy, shaped living standards and stimulated political activity.



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Shropshire, where natural resources combined with scientific discovery to create a revolution.
The River Severn winds into the distance whilst flames and smoke pour from the blast furnaces in the gorge.
Afternoon View of Coalbrookdale 1777 by William Williams.



Across the Midlands, natural resources were harnessed for manufacturing. At Cromford in Derbyshire, Sir Richard Arkwright built the world's first successful water-powered cotton spinning mill.

The West Midlands was the silicon valley of the late eighteenth century. Pioneering iron-making in the Ironbridge Gorge, including new uses for the metal in bridge and building construction, ceramics in the Potteries, glassmaking in Stourbridge and chemicals in Tipton, married manufacturing with what we would now call scientific discovery. Carpet-making in Kidderminster, cotton manufacturing in the Derwent Valley and nail-making and coal mining in the Black Country, were other important industries, but less dependent on scientific knowledge.

The centre of West Midlands industry was the Birmingham area. This city of a thousand trades was renowned for its products before the outbreak of the French Wars. Matthew Boulton's Soho manufactory in Handsworth, which produced metalwares and the Boulton and Watt Soho Foundry in Smethwick, which made the parts for steam engines, were large factories by the early nineteenth century. They applied the division of labour, mass-production methods, precision engineering and mechanical power to making goods.

Most Birmingham industry was workshop-based, however, where manufacturers employed small numbers of workers in skilled and unskilled manual labour. The gun industry was an example, but printing, button making, japanning, wire drawing and brass making provided other instances. Birmingham had a complex

business structure, which produced a variety of goods for domestic and overseas markets.

James Bisset's *Directory* was a visual showcase of Birmingham industry during the war years. Published in two editions in 1800 and 1808, it contained a 'brief description of the different curiosities and manufactures of the place, accompanied with a magnificent directory, with the names and professions, &c. superbly engraved in emblematic plates'. The adverts provide a detailed and visually important record of the nature, extent and self-image of Birmingham manufacturers, including those who supplied the government with weapons of war, but the second edition coincided with a recession in the town.

A ruinous war

The French Wars were not kind to Birmingham. Its population may even have fallen in the 1790s, but, in any case, it failed to maintain the rapid rate of growth which had sustained it before that decade. From 1801 to 1811, its population rose from 73,670 to 85,755, a lower rate than in, for example, Manchester and Leeds.

The evidence for an economic recession is plentiful. In the fourth edition of his *History of Birmingham* (1809), William Hutton referred to: 'the ruinous war with France which has been the destruction of our commerce, caused 500 of our tradesmen to fail, stagnated currency, and thinned the inhabitants'. Unemployment was high and there are examples of businesses from japanning to wire manufacturing releasing labour.

Why was this? Exports were particularly important to Birmingham's prosperity. Between 1806 and 1812, Napoleon's continental system placed a trade embargo on France's enemies and therefore closed many European markets to Birmingham's manufacturers. The North American trade was also disrupted. To add to the problem, trade with the continent was forbidden by the British Government's Orders in Council in 1807. The 1812-1813 war with the USA had damaging commercial consequences. Taxation on incomes and property raised money for the government, but also reduced demand for goods. Bad harvests increased the price of bread.

The ending of war was also unkind. Birmingham's industries had to adjust to peace and manufacturers who supplied weaponry to the military, including gun and

sword makers, were hit. Demobilised soldiers and sailors flooded the labour market. Wages fell and unemployment rose, thus putting pressure upon the local systems for poor relief. The Corn Law of 1815 introduced measures to prevent the import of foreign wheat and was widely condemned for keeping bread prices high at a time of pressures upon incomes.

A natural disaster compounded these man-made difficulties. In 1816, Tambora, the Indonesian volcano, erupted. Ash clouds were carried round the earth, blotting out the sun, and heavy frosts and rain ruined harvests and caused floods. Multiple economic problems provided the context for the radical activity in Birmingham which coincided with the ending of the war.

Political protest and unrest

Politically, the counties of the West Midlands were within the unreformed political system where the landed gentry and aristocracy dominated the political system. There were elections, but the franchise was based on a property qualification so that only a small number of men could vote. Constituencies were either county or urban ones. In the latter case, representation was confined to old-established towns and cities such as Warwick, Worcester, Shrewsbury and Lichfield.

Two of the largest and most rapidly growing towns in the country, Birmingham and Wolverhampton, were not able to elect their own Members of Parliament until after the passage of the Great Reform Act in 1832. Instead, voters in these towns elected their MPs as part of the county constituencies of Warwickshire and Staffordshire respectively.



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'A brief description of the different curiosities and manufactures of the place'. James Bisset's *Directory* provides a visual showcase of Birmingham's manufactures in the early nineteenth century. Bisset's *Magnificent Guide or Grand Copperplate Directory for the Town of Birmingham*, 1808.

The West Midlands, nevertheless, was home to a tradition of reform. The best-known regional radical figure before the French Wars was Joseph Priestley (1733-1804) or 'Gunpowder Joe' as he was called by his conservative critics. Priestley advocated removing aristocratic privilege, breaking the link between the Anglican Church and the state and basing government upon the principle of the greatest happiness of the greatest number. The Priestley Riots of 1791 forced him to flee Birmingham and frightened fellow radicals. Following the outbreak of the French Wars in 1793, political reformers were accused of French Revolutionary sentiments and lack of patriotism. It was dangerous to want change.

Reform revived after 1812. In Birmingham, the banker Thomas Attwood (1783-1856) led a successful local and national campaign to repeal the Orders in Council. His success made him a national figure and in the immediate post-war years he

campaigns to extend the vote and reform the House of Commons, culminating in the 1832 Reform Act. Attwood was middle-class, but his supporter George Edmonds (1788-1868) was from a humbler background. In the immediate post-war years, Edmonds helped to form Birmingham's Hampden Club to campaign for political reform. Major Cartwright (1740-1824), the veteran political reformer, saw the Midlands as fertile soil for seeding radical ideas. In 1816 he visited thirty-five Midland towns to speak at reform meetings.

In 1817, Edmonds' Hampden Club organised the first of Birmingham's mass political meetings. They were to prove highly effective in galvanising sentiment to pressure for political reform. The end of the French Wars coincided with the re-emergence of Birmingham's radical tradition.

Farming and landscape improvement

Most of the people in the West Midlands lived in rural areas where farming was the dominant economic activity and culture was more conservative than in towns like Birmingham. The high demand for bread during the French Wars increased the price of grain and stimulated wheat growing. This process was often accompanied by enclosure.

There were extensive regional and local variations. Oats were the main crop in the Staffordshire Moorlands and barley was produced in east Staffordshire, partly to serve the needs of the beer industry in Burton. Brewing was also served by hop growing in the Teme Valley and apples in Herefordshire were turned into cider. Market gardening was located around growing towns to provide vegetables and fruit to urban consumers. The Trent Valley specialised in cabbages, peas, carrots and potatoes and the Avon Valley in Worcestershire grew fruit.

The demand for horses multiplied during the French Wars. They were supplied to the military, but more importantly they were used for farm work, carting, hunting, mailcoaches, pit work and pulling canal boats. Horses were bred in Warwickshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire and sold at horse fairs, the most important being in Rugeley in Staffordshire. One specialised centre for poultry was Meriden where Lord Aylsford raised turkeys for the London and Birmingham markets.

In 1812 the agricultural improver James Loch (1780-1855) became estate commissioner for the Marquis of Stafford, who owned vast estates in the West Midlands. In Shropshire, a county that had not been particularly renowned for its advanced agriculture, Loch encouraged investment in fertilisers, grains and livestock, drainage schemes, road building, tree planting and new brick-built farm buildings for milking, threshing and storage. Loch was an innovator who transformed much of the regional rural landscape.

Moving goods around the region

Transport was also improved, stimulated by agricultural, industrial and commercial activities. Road building and canal construction started before the French Wars, but following the outbreak of hostilities between Britain and France, another pioneering improver helped to transform the regional infrastructure.



Courtesy of the Institution of Civil Engineers

Telford brought improvement to transport in the region, transforming the movement of goods. Here, he is pictured with an image of the Pontcysyllte cast-iron aqueduct.

Thomas Telford, FRS by Samuel Lane, c. 1822.

Thomas Telford (1757–1834) contributed significantly to the development of the region during this period. An architect and professional civil engineer, he built churches, including the remarkable St Mary Magdalen, Bridgnorth (1792–1795).

His canals and associated bridge building were his major claim to importance. The Longdon-on-Tern aqueduct on the Shrewsbury Canal (1795–6), and the Pontcysyllte aqueduct on the Ellesmere Canal (1805), used cast iron in construction. Sir Walter Scott described Pontcysyllte as ‘the most impressive work of art he had ever seen’.

The Harecastle Tunnel, at Kidsgrove, Staffordshire on the Trent and Mersey Canal, was an engineering achievement, as was his Birmingham Canal improvement. This bypassed James Brindley’s earlier meandering canal and created a huge cutting at Smethwick, which reduced the previous route by eight miles.



By the time of Waterloo, the sons and daughters of the Lunar men and women were taking their work forward. Maria Edgeworth, for example, was an active educationalist and author. *Portrait of Maria Edgeworth.*

In road building, Telford's main achievement was the London to Holyhead Road (now the A5), which was substantially improved in Shropshire and Staffordshire, but he also built iron bridges. An early example was Buildwas Bridge, Shropshire (1796), probably the second major iron bridge to be completed in Britain.

Religion in the region

The churches were the dominant cultural institutions. Most people's lives were regulated by the Church of England. In most localities, the parish church was the dominant building and the vicar or curate was the most important regulator of life. The sermon transmitted morality and laws to parishioners and managed the rites of passage of baptism, marriage and burial.

Roman Catholics were small in number as were Protestant dissenters. The latter, including Quakers, were minorities in Coventry and Birmingham. Unitarians and Baptists were important sects, also significant in Birmingham.

Methodism became strong during the war years in the Black Country and North Staffordshire.

Denominations were divided, but they united in their support for the abolition of the British slave trade which was secured in 1807. In Shropshire, the siblings Katherine Plymley (1758–1829) and Archdeacon Joseph Plymley (1759–1838) were at the centre of local campaigning. Anti-slave trade agitation mobilised local communities, involved women as well as men and provided a template for future pressure-group activities.

The Lunar Society and beyond

Not all cultural activity was religious. When the French Wars broke out, the Lunar Society, an influential regional network of intellectuals, was in decline. The Priestley Riots of 1791 were a major blow. The wars themselves dampened the effervescent cultural atmosphere which had flourished at Soho House and elsewhere. It became dangerous to question received ideas. Matthew Boulton, for one, emphasised his patriotism, by producing a medal, at his own cost, for each sailor who fought at Trafalgar in 1805.

When Waterloo was fought, several Lunar men (Matthew Boulton, Erasmus Darwin, Joseph Priestley and Josiah Wedgwood) were dead. Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Samuel Galton Jnr, James Keir and James Watt were alive, but they were old men. Initiatives passed to a younger generation of their sons, daughters and grandchildren. Maria Edgeworth was an active educationalist, James Watt Jnr and Matthew Robinson Boulton managed their fathers' businesses, the Darwins, Wedgwoods and Galtons contributed significantly to nineteenth-century manufacturing and intellectual life.

By 1815 it would have been misleading to describe the West Midlands as the silicon valley of Great Britain, but innovative science, economic and industrial expansion, radical protest and a culture of improvement were sustained.

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Further reading:

Eric Hopkins, *The Rise of the Manufacturing Town: Birmingham and the Industrial Revolution* (Sutton Publishing, 1998).

Peter M. Jones, *Industrial Enlightenment: Science, Technology and Culture in Birmingham and the West Midlands 1760-1820* (Manchester University Press, 2008).

Marie Rowlands, *The West Midlands from AD 1000* (Part Four), (Longman, 1987).

Jenny Uglow, *In These Times: Living in Britain through Napoleon's Wars, 1793-1815* (Faber and Faber, 2014).

The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* contains biographies for many of the key figures mentioned in this article, and is freely accessible online with your public library card at www.odnb.com.

Many of the themes of this article are explored further on Revolutionary Players at www.revolutionaryplayers.org.uk.