VITTORIA STREET

ENCAPSULATING THE JEWELLERY QUARTER

Carl Chinn

Just a few yards away from the Chamberlain Clock at the heart of the Jewellery Quarter is a street that encapsulates the social and economic history of this distinctive and important district. It is Vittoria Street. Seemingly a quiet backwater in the midst of this busy area, yet does Vittoria Street have an intriguing history that tells us much about the stages of development of the Jewellery Quarter, its historical buildings, its manufacturers and the lives of its residents, poor as well as wealthy.

iStockphoto: Oleg Breslavtsev

BirminghamLives Archive

The cyclist is cycling from Legge Lane and is approaching Frederick Street. The car coming towards him is coming to the same junction but from Graham Street. In the background is St Paul's Church. This photo looks like it was taken in the 1950s, not long before the back-to-back houses on the right would be demolished.

Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter

Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter was one of England's most important and distinctive manufacturing centres in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Located a short distance to the north-west of the city centre, it arose rapidly from the 1840s as the town's jewellers gathered close to each other in a pleasant neighbourhood previously the preserve of a few wealthy families living in grand houses or else covered by extensive gardens. With the trade sub-divided into different aspects of various manufacturing processes, it was beneficial for the jewellers to work alongside each other so that each piece could be sent quickly to the person working on the next stage - whether it be gold rolling, pressing, stamping, engraving, case making, jewel mounting, jewel setting, or polishing.

A trade of mostly well-paid skilled male workers, they were employed by prosperous small gaffers whose business premises, called shopping, were put up in the plots behind their homes. By the 1860s, purpose-built works also began to be erected on the last open spaces and sites once occupied by large residences. Then, as the nineteenth century drew to an end, the employers began to move their families away from what was now a deeply industrial setting and to more salubrious suburbs. Their former dwellings were split into workshops, but behind many of them remained poorer families living in badly-built back-to-back houses who made precarious livings from dirty, hard and unskilled work in Birmingham's multifarious trades.

Vittoria Street and a General

A micro-study of Vittoria Street brings to the fore this history. It begins at Graham Street, opposite the Ramgarhia Sikh Temple. Opened in 1844, for the Highbury Independent Chapel it could seat 1,000 people and was put up when this locality, then known as Harper's Hill, was in the throes of urbanisation. Originally called Martin Street in a map from 1808, Graham Street was renamed in honour of Thomas Graham, a gallant soldier and hero of the French Wars that ended in 1815.

He was married to Mary, a remarkable beauty, who died of consumption off the coast of France. At Toulouse, her coffin was broken open by drunken officials in search of contraband and this disrespectful treatment made Graham a bitter opponent of the French Revolutionary Government. He went on to gain the reputation as a courageous soldier and as a general he fought in Spain with the army led by Arthur Wellesley, later the Duke of Wellington. Though in ill health and with his eye sight failing, Graham remained an able subordinate and in June 1813 he played a prominent role in the defeat of the French at the Battle of Vitoria – hence the naming of Vittoria Street.

English Heritage

The entrance to the Victoria Works of Joseph Gillott in Graham Street is on the right.

Birmingham's Central Celebrity: Gillott's Steel Pen Factory

Across Graham Street and to the left of Vittoria Street is the former entrance to the Victoria Works of Joseph Gillott. These premises stretched down the west side of Vittoria Street to number 20. The son of a workman in the Sheffield cutlery trade, Gillott became one of Birmingham's greatest manufacturers. He came here in the early 1820s and set up as one of Birmingham's little gaffers in the light steel toy trade - the making of buckles, chains, and other small wares.

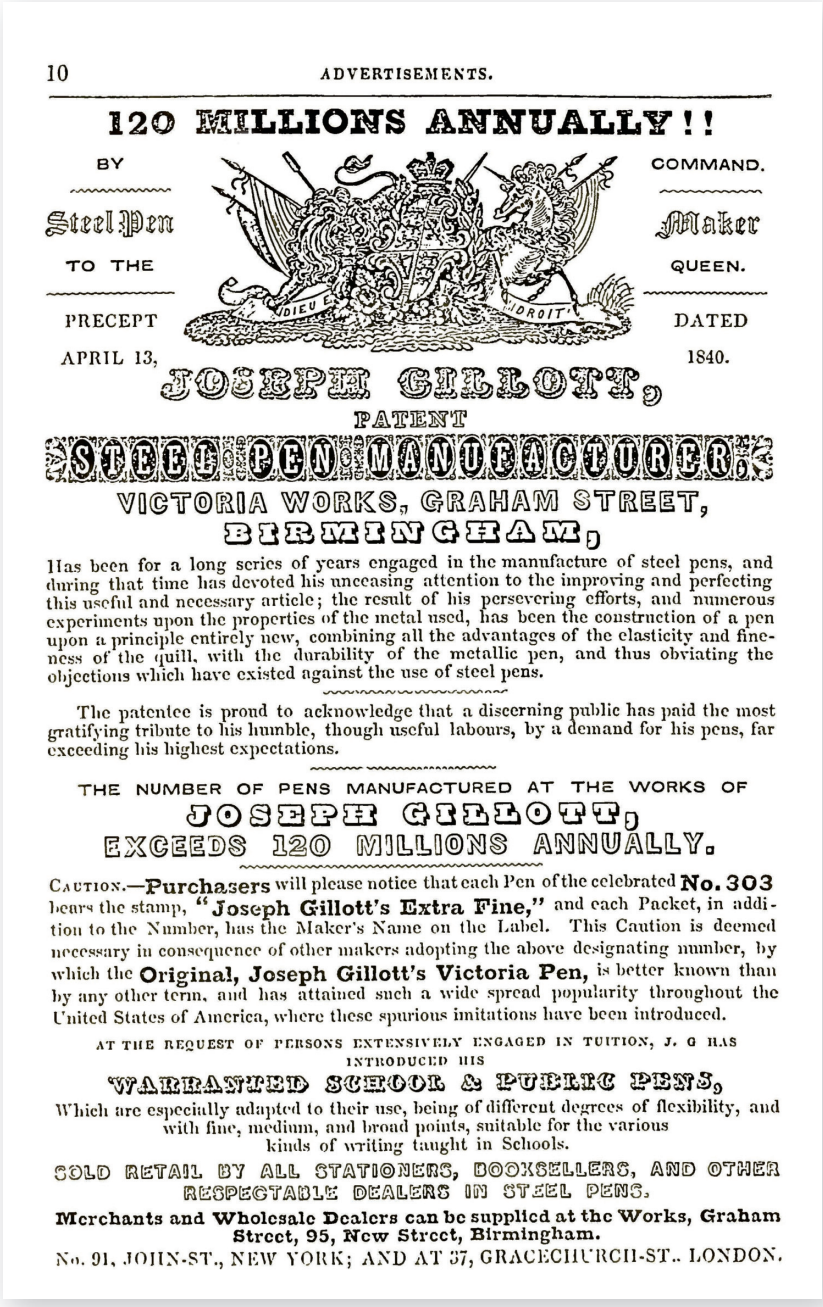
With a fine reputation for his goods, he prospered but he may have remained another successful small-scale manufacturer if he had not met Maria Mitchell. Her brothers, John and William, made steel pens but their process was laborious and quite expensive. With shears they cut out the shape of the nibs from sheets of metal and then trimmed and filed them. These steel pens could be bought only by the wealthy, and most other writers used goose quills – themselves quite costly and out of the reach of working men and women. In this way, the skill of writing remained the preserve of the better off.

Sharp, clever and persevering, Joseph Gillot devised a quick, efficient and cheap way of manufacturing steel pens by adapting an important process from the pearl button trade, whereby hand presses were used to force out the blanks from the raw material of the shells. By pushing out the blank of a steel pen from a sheet of metal with a hand press, Gillott speeded up production markedly. Working on his own in his garret (attic), he was able to make as many steel pens as twenty people labouring without a hand press – thus reducing the price of his pens. Moreover his wares were superior in quality to any others on the market. Gillott also solved the problem of the extreme hardness of steel pens by cutting side slits to the centre slit and cross grinding the points, thus giving them elasticity. The orders poured in, stimulated by a rising demand for pens from an expanding population which was becoming more literate.

As Gillott's business grew, he took on workers and moved to bigger premises. Finally in 1839, he paid for a purpose-built manufactory in Graham Street, between Frederick Street and Vittoria Street. He was one of the first to do so at a time when most of Birmingham's manufacturers operated in small workshops, attics or narrow and low 'shopping'.

Production at the Victoria Works grew spectacularly and in 1843 the number of pens manufactured there was an amazing 105 million. Women played a crucial role in this remarkable expansion as they operated the hand presses. Through their work, mechanisation, and the sub-division of labour, which separated the tasks involved in production, the price of steel pens was reduced from 5s (25p) per gross (144) in the late 1830s to as low as 1½d (just over a 1p) per gross in the mid-1860s. This sharp reduction was matched by a boost to sales because of increased letter writing following the introduction of Penny Post.

Despite the importance of other pen makers in Birmingham, Gillott was the most acclaimed internationally. Indeed it was said to be doubtful if any article of such wide



10 ADVERTISEMENTS.

120 MILLIONS ANNUALLY!!

BY COMMAND.

Steel Pen Maker

TO THE QUEEN.

PRECEPT DATED

APRIL 13, 1840.

JOSEPH GILLOTT,

PATENT

STEEL PEN MANUFACTURER,

VICTORIA WORKS, GRAHAM STREET,

BIRMINGHAM,

Has been for a long series of years engaged in the manufacture of steel pens, and during that time has devoted his unceasing attention to the improving and perfecting this useful and necessary article; the result of his persevering efforts, and numerous experiments upon the properties of the metal used, has been the construction of a pen upon a principle entirely new, combining all the advantages of the elasticity and fineness of the quill, with the durability of the metallic pen, and thus obviating the objections which have existed against the use of steel pens.

The patentee is proud to acknowledge that a discerning public has paid the most gratifying tribute to his humble, though useful labours, by a demand for his pens, far exceeding his highest expectations.

THE NUMBER OF PENS MANUFACTURED AT THE WORKS OF

JOSEPH GILLOTT,

EXCEEDS 120 MILLIONS ANNUALLY.

CAUTION.—**Purchasers** will please notice that each Pen of the celebrated **No. 303** bears the stamp, **"Joseph Gillott's Extra Fine,"** and each Packet, in addition to the Number, has the Maker's Name on the Label. This Caution is deemed necessary in consequence of other makers adopting the above designating number, by which the **Original, Joseph Gillott's Victoria Pen,** is better known than by any other term, and has attained such a wide spread popularity throughout the United States of America, where these spurious imitations have been introduced.

AT THE REQUEST OF PERSONS EXTENSIVELY ENGAGED IN TUITION, J. G HAS INTRODUCED HIS

WARRANTED SCHOOL & PUBLIC PENS,

Which are especially adapted to their use, being of different degrees of flexibility, and with fine, medium, and broad points, suitable for the various kinds of writing taught in Schools.

SOLD RETAIL BY ALL STATIONERS, BOOKSELLERS, AND OTHER RESPECTABLE DEALERS IN STEEL PENS.

Merchants and Wholesale Dealers can be supplied at the Works, Graham Street, 95, New Street, Birmingham.

No. 91, JOHN-ST., NEW YORK; AND AT 37, GRACECHURCH-ST., LONDON.

Author's personal collection

An advert for Gillott's pens from Francis White and Co., *History and General Directory of the Borough of Birmingham* (1849).

and universal use was ever so identified with the name of one man. In particular, almost every pen used in the classrooms of the United States was made at the Victoria Works. According to Elihu Burrit, the American Consul in our city, the factory had become "a king or central celebrity in Birmingham to visitors from America and other countries".

Believed to be an enlightened and paternalistic employer, Gillott established a benevolent society among his workpeople, who worked in a much better environment than others in Birmingham. Their red-brick factory covered almost 4,000 square yards and could accommodate around 600 workers. They laboured in spacious, lofty and airy workrooms that were clean and provided with plenty of light. This was achieved by having three-storey buildings that were long and which had a line of wide windows to the front and rear.

Purpose-Built Works

The introduction of the biro after the Second World War sounded the death knell of the Birmingham steel pen trade and a variety of businesses then operated from the Victoria Works. Now transformed into apartments and offices, the building is Grade II listed because of its importance in the industrial development of Birmingham and its international significance as the first place where steel pen nibs were mass produced. There are several other purpose-built factories on the west side of Vittoria Street that are also Grade II listed. Like the Victoria Works, they are built of red brick, have three storeys, and are lined with windows to allow light for the jewellers engaged in intricate work.

One example is at number 28 Vittoria Street. In June 1866, it was advertised as newly-erected and convenient premises for rent to factors and wholesale jewellers. As such, it is an early example of a purpose-built jewellery works. C. F. Harrison and Company, merchant factors and manufacturers, rented it for a short time from 1871, but two years later the business failed. By 1890, Arthur Harrop, was working from the premises. He was a gilt jeweller and 66 years later the same trade was carried on there by H. W. Timings Ltd.

A similar structure is next door number at 30. It has an ornate doorway as well as distinctive pediments above the two windows on the first floor. In 1874 Thomas Colls took over the lease. He was a manufacturing jeweller specialising in making coloured gold and silver lockets and was there until 1882 when a watch maker and jeweller took over. By 1908, another jeweller was there and thereafter the building was leased by an electro-plate manufacturer, tool makers and, in 1967, by a sheet metal pressings firm.

Vittoria Street Works

Numbers 32 and 34 were also purpose-built and as a whole but with two separate sections – of which 34 was the larger. Later known as the Vittoria Works, in January 1868, it was announced in the press that W. Heath's electro-plating works was moving there from Hall Street. William employed fourteen people, but according to the 1871 Census, he and his wife, Mary, also lived there along with their baby son, a cook and a nurse. It was a common practice amongst middling manufacturers to live in front of their workshops, but as they prospered so did they move their home away from their businesses. The Heaths did this in the 1880s, relocating to the adjoining Frederick Street, which was more residential than the more industrial Vittoria Street. Soon after, William must have retired and by 1890 number 34 was rented by William Hancock and Sons, whip ornament makers.

As for 32, it was used by a jeweller in 1870, then became the merchant offices of W. Herbert Williams and Company and later was leased by George Hopkins & Company, scarf and belt fittings makers. By 1890, the occupiers were Flint and Sons, who were followed by Alfred Deakin and Sons, manufacturers of brooch tongs.

Gardens to Building Land

In the early nineteenth century, the Harper's Hill locality had been dotted with a few grand houses and by the gardens that then surrounded much of Birmingham. One such was sold as valuable building land in 1825. With frontages to both Frederick Street and Vittoria Street, it measured upwards of 2600 square yards and was in "a high State of cultivation, with fine young fruit trees, and having erected upon it a lofty summer-house, with elegant tea-room, two of Jordan's patent metallic hot-houses, of large dimensions, with expensive stoves and flues, and vines in full bearing, green-house, and many other pleasant and tasteful appendages". The neighbourhood was described as highly respectable whilst the

Author's personal collection

Part of a "Map of Birmingham engraved from a minute trigonometrical survey made in the years 1824 & 1825" by J. Pigott Smith, Surveyor & Engineer, Birmingham (1828). It shows the large houses and gardens still dominating the Vittoria Street area.

situation was elevated and healthful so that the site was particularly desirable for the erection of one or two good family houses or for many smaller residences.

Less than a generation later, the gardens had mostly disappeared and the district was attracting the families of middle-class professionals, small-scale manufacturers who wished to live in a pleasant area with shopping behind their homes, and highly skilled men. Interestingly, in 1841 one of the latter was William Gillott. A steel pen maker born in Sheffield, it would seem that he was a close relative of Joseph Gillott. William lived in Vittoria Street with his wife and two sons; but it does not seem that he became wealthy like his namesake as in 1851 he was lodging with a comfortably-off clerk's family in Hockley.

By then, the Vittoria Street neighbourhood was regarded as rapidly improving

and the social range of its residents was wide, as made clear in that year's Census. It included middle-class occupations such as commercial travellers, clerks, a bookkeeper and governess as well as shopkeepers like a woollen draper, tea dealer, butcher and publican. There was also a paper dealer, boarding house keeper and three employers: a merchant, who employed three men; a jeweller giving work to eight men, and a pearl button maker with three men, two women and a boy. Finally there were servants in the homes of the more prosperous residents as well as many working men and women who gave their occupations as jewellers, japanners, solderers, toolmakers, polishers, brass founders, dress makers, thimble makers and silversmiths - amongst others.

One of the last large open spaces locally was the land belonging to Harper's Hill House, which had extensive frontages to Frederick Street and Vittoria Street. It belonged to John Betts, a widower aged 89 and a wealthy refiner and smelter of gold andsilver whose premises were in Charlotte Street. His descendants continue to be involved in an important company in the Jewellery Quarter. However with his death, the land belonging to the house was sold as valuable freehold.

The Unity Works

It seems likely that the Grade II listed Unity Works at numbers 36-40 Vittoria Street was built on part of the Harper's Hill House estate. This is because in 1866 the firm of Henry Jenkins and Sons advertised in the *Birmingham Daily Post* that "in order to meet the demands of increasing connection" it had moved from nearby in Spencer Street to suitable premises in Vittoria Street. In so doing, its proprietors embraced "this opportunity to tender their thankful acknowledgements for past favours, and to express their determination, by unrelaxed efforts on their part, to sustain the very high estimation which for many years has been awarded to them in all branches of Die-Sinking, Toolmaking, Stamping, Piercing, &c. and in all of which branches it will still be their ambition to be excelled by none".

The new building in Vittoria Street was extended in 1898, by which time the company

Courtesy of Kate O'Connor

The interior of the Unity Works in March 2019.

was also involved in tool making, electro plating, stamping and piercing. During the First World War, it moved over to munitions and made more than one million rifle oilers for Lee Enfield rifles for the BSA, the Birmingham Small Arms company. Henry Jenkins and Sons continued to operate until the later twentieth century.

Georgian Houses

Alongside the Unity Works are two Georgian-looking structures at numbers 48-52 Vittoria Street. Although reaching three stories, they are not as high as the adjoining works. Set back from the pavement, they are also very different in style. Built as houses, they are approached by centrally-placed steps and were first noted in the 1851 Census. That year Mary Ashwell was living at 48. She was 76 and an annuitant – receiving an annual pension that was big enough for her to afford to live in a grand house. With were her two unmarried daughters, aged 56 and 45, and a fourteen-year old servant.

English Heritage

Elliott's Button Works on the corner of Regent Street and Vittoria Street.

Intriguingly, ten years later the building was given as the premises of a jeweller called M. Joseph Rothschild, who boarded there with another family. The two adjoining premises, including 52, were given in an 1861 business directory as occupied by Rothschild and Co., wholesale jewellers.

In the next decade, number 48 was turned into apartments by the unmarried sisters Sarah and Mary Chattaway, but the shopping at the back was occupied by Marks & Kestenberg, gold chain manufacturers. By 1881, the house was the home of Joseph Ward, his wife, Eliza, their two young children and a sixteen-year old servant called Emily Laws from Wiltshire. Young Birmingham women preferred the independence and higher wages of factory work to that of domestic service, which drew its employees like Emily from agricultural districts. Ward also had his business at 48.

He and his family was still there in 1901, although with no servant but with two boarders. His two sons were now in the jewellery trade – as a gold gem setter and an electro-plater. A decade later, the Wards had gone and the premises were rented by Herbert Twist a paper merchant. Finally by 1940, numbers 48, 50 and 52 were in use by T. A. Butler & Co., medallists.

Curving into Regent Street

Encompassing numbers 54, 56 and 58, is another purpose-built three-storey structure, but one which is a much more decorative. Again Grade II listed, it was built in 1905 to the design of the architects Essex Nicol and Goodman on the site of a large house in which a merchant had lived in 1851. Later the parcels office of the Midland and Great Western Railway, it was knocked down along with other older buildings and replaced with a structure made of machined and finely pointed red brick with terracotta dressings. This elegant building curves broadly into Regent Street and in 1908, the businesses working from here included two jewellers, a die sinker, gold ring maker and diamond cutter.

Elliott's Button Works

From the late 1820s, the far side of Regent Street was dominated by William Elliott's button works. Originally it was based in Great Hampton Street, but in the early 1820s Elliott had an imposing house built fronting Frederick Street. He then developed the land behind it as shopping for his workers to turn out gilded and plated buttons. In 1837, an extension was added to the back of these premises taking them by way of a curve around into 60, 62 and 64 Vittoria Street. This plain

The Municipal School for Jewellers and Silversmiths in Vittoria Street taken by Phyllis Nicklin in mid-1963.

building is another that is Grade II listed. It was built shortly before the Victoria Works and as such is probably the oldest surviving substantial factory building in the Jewellery Quarter. Like Gillott's pen factory it is made of red brick, whilst each of its three storeys is lined with windows, giving plenty of light to the women who were operating the hand presses that were vital to the button trade.

Next door at 66 and 68 is a manufactory built at the end of the nineteenth century. It is of the same general design as Elliott's in its height, large number of windows and red brick but it is more ornate with painted stone dressings and moulded brick decoration. In 1890, number 66 was occupied by the goldsmith, John Skinner, who had moved there from across Vittoria Street. By 1908 his company was limited and at number 68 was Perry and Wright diamond setters.

The School of Jewellery

A few yards along Vittoria Street is the eye-catching and impressive School of Jewellery at numbers 82-86. The importance of design and the application of art methods to the making of jewellery was recognised from an early date by Birmingham's jewellers, and some of the major companies insisted that their apprentices attended the Birmingham School of Art and Government School of Design founded in 1843.

Then in 1887, the Jewellers' and Silversmiths' Association was formed. It had a number of objectives such as watching over legislation affecting the trade, assisting in the development of exports, and seeking the removal of restrictions on the trade. It also sought to promote art and technical education. To this end, from 1888, the Association made arrangements for art instruction to be given to employees by the Municipal School of Art at a new branch school in Ellen Street, nearby in Brookfields. Half of a student's fees were paid by the Association and the other half usually by the employer.

Demand for instruction was high and the Council also recognised that there was a need to provide a more fully equipped Branch School in the part of the town mostly occupied by the workshops of goldsmiths, silversmiths, and jewellers. The building leased was the splendid two-storey Venetian Gothic factory of William and John Randel, goldsmiths, at 84 Vittoria Street, which had been erected in about 1865. This was converted according to the plans of the renowned Birmingham architects Martin and Chamberlain, whilst the work was carried out by the local builders, Sapcote and Son.

The new branch of the Municipal School of Art was opened on September 18th 1890, becoming the Municipal School for Jewellers and Silversmiths. Eventually, the facility could take up to

Jewellery Quarter Townscape Heritage

The modern entrance to the School of Jewellery. In 1992, numbers 70-74 Vittoria Street were taken over and demolished. Three years later, an extensive building and refurbishment programme was completed, creating the largest teaching institution for the specialisation of jewellery in Europe. Today the internationally renowned School of Jewellery is part of the Faculty of the Arts, Design and Media of Birmingham City University.

460 students, holding courses for boys from the age of twelve and a half, and for adult craftsmen and women. In 1911, the School was extended to the south by the construction of a new block on the site of an old electroplate and tinplate workshops. This red-brick building of three storeys was designed to resemble contemporary purpose-built manufactories. Forty years later, all jewellery and silversmithing teaching at the College of Art in Margaret Street was moved to Vittoria Street and a single school was created.

Sutton Tools

Near to the end of Vittoria Street at Warstone Lane is one more Grade II listed building on this west side of the street – numbers 91 and 92. A manufactory just two stories high, it was built in about 1890 of red brick. Designed for multi-occupancy, in 1908 a silversmith, engraver and jewellery case maker worked from here. Today it carries the name of Sutton Tools, although after Betts Metal Sales took over the business in October 2015 the showrooms of both companies were merged in Spencer Street.

The founder of Sutton Tools was Thomas Sutton, who began as a toolmaker in Warstone Lane in 1884. His family carried on business there until the 1970s, when they moved it to Frederick Street. They provided a vital service and in 1978 Thomas Sutton (Birmingham) Ltd proudly proclaimed it was "supplier of Quality Tools and Equipment to Birmingham's Jewellery, Silversmith and Allied Trades based in Birmingham's famous Jewellery Quarter".

Shops and Gold Plate

Across Vittoria Street on its east side are numbers 97 and 99. They are Grade II listed and belong to a terrace running round into Warstone Lane. Built in the early 1850s, they are a pair of 3 storey houses with an entry between them and with original shop fronts. In 1855, number 97 was a hosier's run by John Lewis, who lived there with his wife, children and housemaid. The shop later became the premises for a cigar deal and ironmonger and later a grocer. As for 99, it was run by Frederick Whiston, a chemist and druggist. He was still there in 1877 but by the end of the century the premises was a company making gold wedding rings. Number 97 is still occupied by a jewellery business.

A few doors along at number 93 was the Vittoria Inn, first noted in 1841 when it was run by John Robathan, who had been a coach plater. Fourteen years later, the publican was James Gale. A few doors up was James Reeves, a stamper, and then Sarah Orme, a widow and thimble maker. Her son, Henry, was a chaser and retail brewer. Their houses were

later knocked down and replaced in about 1870 by a new works at 85 and 87. Grade II listed and three storeys high, it was put up for Benjamin Lines, who gave himself as a wire drawer in 1873. However, a decade later the firm of Benjamin Lines and Son had moved into the more prestigious field of gold plate manufacturing.

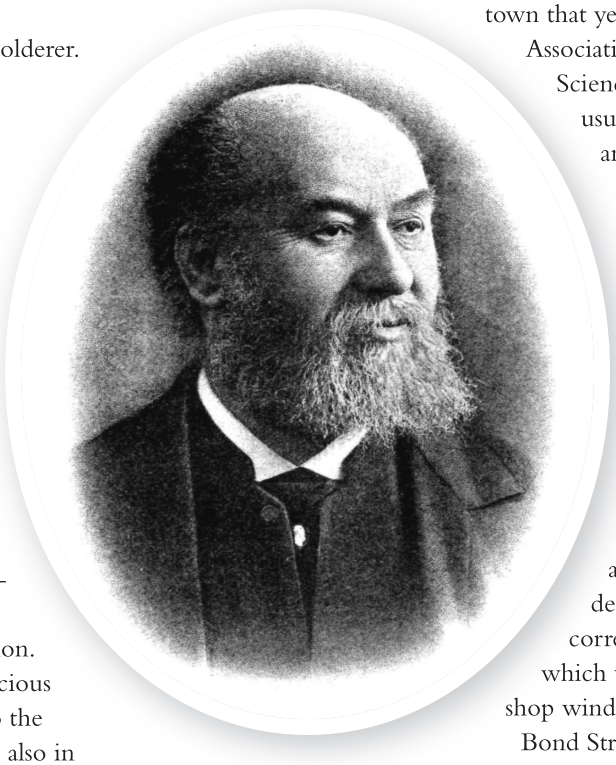
Like other smaller factories, it has a two-bay wagon entrance, including a small door. To the left is the entrance to the offices and to the right a larger door into the workshops. Later known as the Lines Buildings, in the 1940s the premises were used by a saw piercer, silver smith and diamond polisher as well as by Mrs Alice Lawley, a solderer.

Courtesy of Kate O'Connor

The Lines Building, now the Jewellery Industry Innovation Centre (JIIC).

Jewellery for London

Just past the Lines Building are the modern structures of Cooksongold, a major employer locally and the United Kingdom's largest one-stop shop for jewellery makers. It offers over 18,000 products, including a huge stock of silver, gold, palladium and platinum bullion cut to the buyer's requirements, as well as massive ranges of findings, loose and finished chain, gemstones, ring blanks, jewellery making tools, silver clay, beading materials and much more. The company occupies numbers 87-59, although the latter is part of an older structure used by its Precious Metals division. This is a leading supplier of fabricated precious metals, mostly gold, silver and platinum, to the jewellery industry not only in the UK but also in the USA, France and Spain.



Author's personal collection

John Bragg from *Birmingham Faces and Place*, Vol. 1, number 12 (April 1889).

Next door, numbers 55 and 57, was the site of Thomas and John Bragg, a large manufacturing jewellers' establishment. Their company had been founded in the early 1820s in Northwood Street by Thomas Perry Bragg, a goldsmith and jeweller. Thirty years later, he was working from Vittoria Street, where his sons took over the business. By 1861, they were employing 48 workmen and three assistants and the Braggs had become well known for valuing quality and design.

In September 1865, a knowledgeable commentator in the *Daily News* appraised the Birmingham jewellery trade from a London point of view. He had personal experience as he had visited the town that year with the British Association for the Advancement of Science. It was noted that Braggs usually employed between 30 and 40 apprentices. All of them had to show some amount of skill in drawing and each was bound through their indentures to attend the Birmingham School of Art and Government School of Design.

The value of design at Bragg's was underscored by the constant employment of a special artist to make new designs, and the London correspondent recognised many which were familiar to him in the shop windows of Regent Street and Bond Street. One in particular was the design for the brooch presented to the Princess of Wales by the ladies and gentlemen of Wales, which was exhibited at one of the great jewellers in London. The result of such an investment in design was an improvement in the quality of Birmingham's jewellery both artistically and intrinsically.

Jewellery Quarter Townscape Heritage

The Grade II listed Number 51 Vittoria Street is on the left-hand corner with Regent Place. The higher building to the left is the site of the works of the Bragg brothers. Aston's premises is now occupied by the tall Squirrel Works in Regent Place – just beyond the no entry sign and on the left.

Three years later, in 1868, Thomas Bragg was praised as the "head of one or the most important firms in the manufacturing jewellery trade, one that has done a great deal to elevate the character of Birmingham jewellery, which now fairly rivals even the productions of London or Paris". The company continued into the early twentieth century.

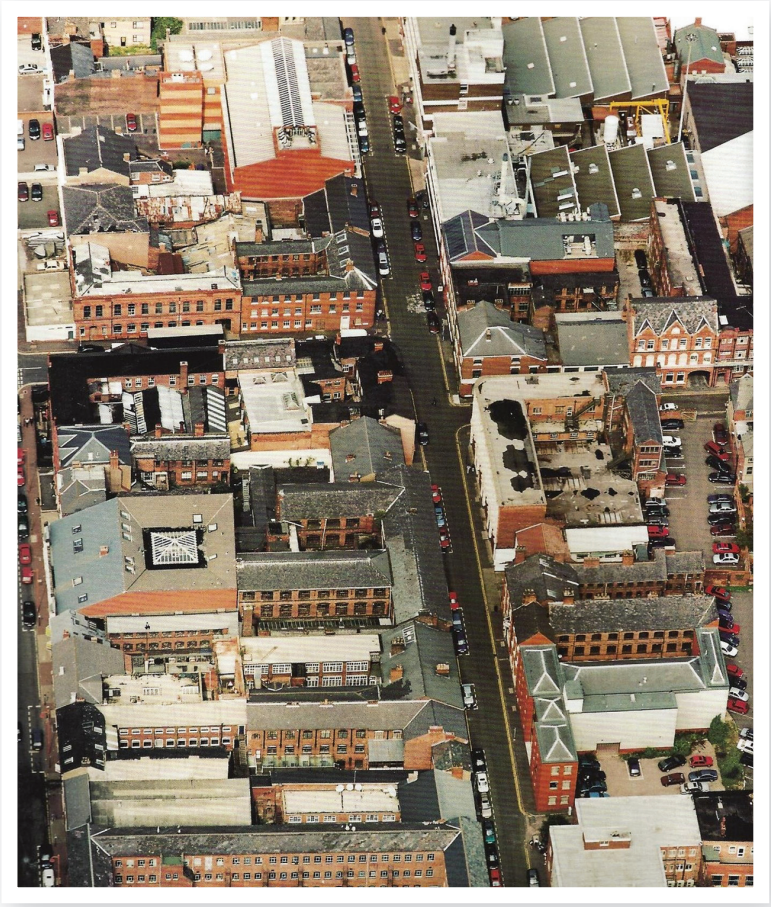
A Birmingham Ring for Dickens

The next Grade II listed building is number 51 on the corner with Regent Place and built as a smaller house that was part of a terrace, of which 53 also remains but which is not listed. In 1851, the latter was the home of Charles Viles, a travelling salesman from Kent, who lived there with his wife and two young children. Forty years later, Simon Barnett Simmons, a wholesale jeweller was working from the shopping at 53 whilst the house was rented by George Hood, a postman from Birmingham. He was living with his wife, Ann, from Buckinghamshire, two sons, mother-in-law, who was a lace maker, and sister-in-law, a nurse. There is no entry for 51 in either the 1890 trades' directory or the 1891 Census but in 1940, Mrs Mary Jones was occupying it as a shopkeeper, although in 1966 it was the premises of an anodiser.

Part of this building faces into Regent Place, which has a fascinating connection with Charles Dickens. In the autumn of 1852, a group of men met at the 'Trees Inn' at Hockley Hill to form a committee to start a fund to pay for a presentation to the writer. It was aimed at working men, each of whom would give one shilling (5p), and the presentation would be accompanied by a testimony of the admiration and esteem in which he was held by this class of people.

The secretary of the committee was George Linnaeus Banks. A son of a seedsman in the Bull Ring, he was a remarkable self-made, self-taught and self-improving man – the kind praised by Dickens and the kind for whom Dickens was praiseworthy. After a short time as an engraver, then a modeller and finally cabinet-maker, and still a young man, Banks began to write for newspapers and magazines. A radical in politics, he was also a public speaker, popular lecturer and song writer, and editor of a number of publications, including the *Birmingham Mercury*.

Banks wrote to Dickens informing him of the desire of the working men to present him with a ring and some other specimen of local art manufacture. The author wrote back from his London home of Tavistock House on 26 December, 1852. In "a very charming and characteristic reply" as Banks put it, Dickens announced that:



English Heritage

An aerial view of Vittoria Street from the south. Elliott's Button Works is the large red-brick structure on the top left. It is on the corner with Regent Street, which runs into Frederick Street on the left-hand edge of the photo. Regent Place is on the right and the three-storey building opposite the car park is the Squirrel Works, built on the site of Aston's workplace. The building to the left of the car park is the Standard Works. Across the road and little further down is the Unity Works.

> nothing could be more welcome to me than such a mark of confidence and approval from such a source; nothing more precious, or that I could set a higher value upon. I hasten to return the gauges, of which I have marked one as the size of the finger from which this token will never more be absent as long as I live. With feelings of the liveliest gratitude and cordiality towards the many friends who so honour me, and with many thanks to you for the genial earnestness with which you represent them,
> I am, my dear sir,
> Very faithfully yours
> Charles Dickens

He came to Birmingham on 6 January 1853 and at the Society of Artists' Rooms, in Temple Row, Banks addressed Dickens on behalf of the Committee. He extolled the writer as having striven "to instruct the social mind of the country – establish kindly sympathy between all classes, to reconcile men to the discipline of calamity and harsh fortune, and to maintain in its integrity that great law of God which teaches that all mankind are brothers". Banks then presented Dickens with a very valuable diamond ring made at the Regent Place premises of the goldsmith and jeweller Thomas Aston and Son. Its novel and appropriate design included the feather of a pen.

Dickens also received a copy of the Iliad salver in silver guilt from the famed electro-plating works of the Elkington Brothers of Newhall Street. The original had been one of the important pieces of Birmingham art manufacture which had been sent to the Great Exhibition in 1851. The copy was inscribed with the words that the presentation was a sincere testimony of the appreciation of Dickens for "his varied literary acquirements, and of the genial philosophy and high moral teaching which characterise his writings".

In his response to the gifts, which were worth close to £100, Dickens recognised the kindness of the working class and assured the audience that through his work he had tried to hold up to admiration their "fortitude, patience, gentleness, the reasonableness of their nature, their accessibility to persuasion, and their extraordinary goodness one towards another". He had done so "because I have first genuinely felt that admiration myself, and have been thoroughly imbued with the sentiment which I have sought to communicate to others".

With regard to the ring and salver, he accepted them as "so far above all price to me, and so very valuable in themselves, as beautiful specimens of the workmanship of this great town, with much emotion, I assure you, and with the liveliest gratitude". He intended to remove his own old diamond ring to his left hand and "in future wear my Birmingham jewel on my right, where its pressure will keep me in mind of my good friends here, and preserve a very vivid remembrance of this very happy hour".

The site of Thomas Aston's premises at 32 Regent Place is now occupied by the Squirrel Works. It was built in 1905 for S. J. Levi & Company, manufacturers of antique silver and electro plated nickel silver for homes and hotels. 'The Squirrel' was the company's trade mark.

The Standard Works

Across Regent Place is the large Standard Works at numbers 41-49. Designed by Thomas F Williams, it was built in 1879-80 for multiple occupancy. It

replaced "a substantially built house comprising dining-room, drawing-room, sitting-room, good kitchens, and china pantry, five bedrooms, and dressing-room, with Garden, Coach-house, and Stabling", which was advertised for let in 1854. Within a year, whoever had taken it on had added an excellent range of shopping and it appears that this was leased by Edwin Cotterill, a lock and fire-safe safe maker. According to the 1861 Census he was in a good way of business given that he employed 30 mechanics. Aged 46 and unmarried, he lived in the grand house attached to the shopping with a female housekeeper and servant.

By 1871, another lockmaker, Henry Fear, had taken over the buildings. However, within two years, a jewellers' factor, Bernard Rubinstein, was advertised as based at the premises but his business failed in 1876. The redevelopment of the site then followed. The section nearest to Regent Place was used by Blanckensee & Levetus, silversmiths, and the Levetus Brothers, gold chain makers. This was known as the Canada Works as in 1873 Edward Levetus gave his address as Montreal and he was associated with the manufacture of Canada gold, a superior class of imitation gold.

His older brother, Hymen, was his partner and they were the sons of Lewis Levetus, who was from Romania – although his wife, Celia, was from Hampshire. According to the 1871 Census, Lewis was a retired shochet for the Hebrew Congregation, a person officially certified as competent to kill cattle and poultry in the manner prescribed by Jewish law. All of their children were born in Birmingham from 1849 onwards and Hymen and Edward first set up business in Northampton Street and Icknield Street West in about 1870. Eight years later they exhibited at the Paris Exhibition, where they received honourable mention for excellence in plated jewellery.

Edward Levetus died in 1895 and soon after the family association with the Canada Works ended. By then, D. & L. Spiers Ltd, silversmiths, were in place in another part of the building that was known as the Standard Works, as indicated on the Ordnance Survey Map of 1887. David and Lionel Spiers were also Jewish and the sons of Nathan Cohen Spiers from Lublin in Poland and his wife, Sophia, from Birmingham. The parents were pawnbrokers in Ann Street, later part of Colmore Row, but by 1873 David and Lionel were gilt jewellery manufacturers in Hylton Street and were making enough money to live in a fine house in Duchess Road, Edgbaston. Lionel Spiers was a significant figure in the Jewellery Quarter and in 1906 was chairman of the Jewellers and Silversmiths Association. An active citizen, prominent member of the Jewish community and supporter of the Queen's Hospital, he died in 1925 and left the huge sum of £173,000.

By the door on the corner of the Standard Works with Regent Street is a name plate – that of Joseph Smith & Sons (Birmingham) Ltd, manufacturing jewellers, and the last occupiers of the building in the 1980s. The business began as Smith Brothers in the 1870s in Frederick Street. It had moved to 63 Vittoria Street by 1890 and eight years later was in Vyse Street. By then Joseph Smith also had his own entry in the local trades' directory as a gold chain manufacturer. His company was back in Vittoria Street by 1940 and amongst its products were "Super Bangles" that were "made in all colours to tone with the latest frocks". Smith and Sons moved the short distance to the Standard Works in 1950.

From the end of the twentieth century, this building was empty for twenty years. Fortunately it has now been revived by the Ruskin Mill Land Trust. On the first floor is Argent College, a specialist further education college for young people with learning difficulties and complex needs which is run by the Ruskin Mill Trust. The Hive Heritage Hub and Hive Café & Bakery is on the ground floor and there is an urban roof top micro-farm. Students from the college are learning to bake in the café and grow organic produce on the roof as part of their curriculum. The café also enables the students to gain valuable work experience.

Three-Quarter Houses

Three doors down from the Standard Works is a curious type of home, a pair of "three-quarter" houses at numbers 35 and 37. There is an elegant doorway between them, approached by two steps flanked by a Tuscan pillar on each side. Behind the doorway was a shared passage, with doors on either side leading into each house. Three storeys high, each dwelling had two rooms on the ground and first floors and either one large room or two smaller rooms on the upper floor. The passageway between the houses also led to the back yard with a shared brewhouse, privy and ashpits.

Built in the mid-nineteenth century for prosperous families, two wings of shopping were soon added at the rear of the houses. Number 35 became the premises of Alfred S. Paterson, a manufacturer of spoons and forks who was also an electro and general plater on steel and German silver. Five years later he was calling his workplace the Colonial Works, but by 1865 it was run by Naylor, Clark and Co., electro-plate manufacturers.

Naylor was a farmer living in Lincolnshire whilst Clark had his home in Edgbaston. According to a newspaper report in 1869, they were employing about 100 people at what they now referred to as the Caledonian Works. By the mid-1870s, they shared them with Alfred Woodward, a pencil case maker. Then in 1883, the electro-plating business

Courtesy of Kate O'Connor

The 'three-quarter' houses at 35-37 Vittoria Street.

failed and by 1890 Woodward was operating from both numbers 35 and 37.

Alongside number 35 is another Grade II listed building at 33. It is part of a three-storey manufactory erected in the late nineteenth century which originally extended further along Vittoria Street to include numbers 29 and 31. In 1890 these premises were occupied by Henry Ashworth and Co., black ornament makers, and Thomas Winkles, a gilt chain maker. It is apparent that the buildings were new as eight years before the site had been occupied by a beer retailer, silversmith and hardware merchants who were working from buildings that had been houses.

W. J. Sutton

In the later 1960s, a number of businesses were based at 29-33 Vittoria Street, including a precision castings manufacturer, badge maker, manufacturing jeweller and press tool maker. During that decade and after, a number of historical buildings of importance were cleared in Vyse Street, Spencer Street and also Vittoria Street and replaced with new structures. One such is St Helen's House at 23-31 Vittoria Street, but despite its modernity here is one of the Jewellery Quarter's oldest firms – W. J. Sutton. It is a family-run manufacturing jewellers and wholesalers which is 132 years old and which proudly boasts over 6,000 lines whilst specialising in quality silver and gold handmade chain.

Founded in Spencer Street by William Josiah Sutton, a silver chain maker, the company grew strongly and in 1929 exhibited at the British Industries Fair as manufacturers of silver and 9 carat, 10 carat, 15 carat and 18 carat chain, curb and fancy Alberts, expanding bracelets, flexible bracelets, band bracelets, necklets, snaps, ear wires, swivels, eyeglass chains and safety pins. With many of the buildings in Vittoria Street turned into offices and plans to transform others into apartments, it is encouraging that W. J. Sutton continues to make high quality jewellery in a street once famed for its jewellers and allied trades.

St Helen's Passage

Just above W. J. Sutton is St Helen's Passage, a little cul-de-sac behind which is Northwood Street. It is now forlorn of the folk who lived here until the 1960s when their back houses were swept away in the post-war redevelopment of Birmingham. Sadly, their lives and those of others like them have been mostly forgotten in modern Birmingham – as has their ability to forge strong neighbourhoods in the midst of industry and despite bad housing. St Helen's Passage provides an opportunity to recognise that achievement because it was a close-knit neighbourhood of twelve families.

Amongst them was the family of Ann and Bernard George and their four daughters, Iris, Kathleen, Christine and Pat. Now Pat Brothwood, she recalled that they lived at "number 10, where I was born in 1944. We lived there until 1962 under 'slum clearance' but it was a lovely house, attic high with a cellar".

BirminghamLives

Part of St Helen's Passage in the 1950s.

"The residents in the other eleven houses were Mrs McCourt and children, Jean and John; Mrs Morton and daughter, Rene, and grandson, Paul; Mrs Weston and daughter, Josephine; Daisy and George Frost and their daughter Janet, a lifelong friend of my sister and me; Mr and Mrs Bolton and daughter Rose; Mrs Skitt and son, Maurice; Mr and Mrs Moutney and children, Edith and Jimmy; Mrs Gregson and son, Harry; Kath and Jim O'Gorman and son, Michael; Mrs Bishop and son, Jacky; and Raymond and Edna Dilworth and children, Celia and Stuart. Finally at the factory backing on to St Helen's Passage the caretakers were Mr and Mrs Price and their daughters, Diane and Gillian."

Pat remembered that her family was taken to Towyn in North Wales by Raymond Dilworth and his son, Stuart, who lived at number 12; that all the families celebrated national festivities like the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953; that their children played with each other and went to school with each other; and that the neighbours supported each other.

Back-to-Back

There are several modern structures between St Helen's Passage and the beginning of Vittoria Street. Behind the buildings they replaced was once a big yard of back-to-back houses. Light can be shed on the poor who lived in such housing by researching numbers 22 and 24 across the street. Today this is a self-contained office building, but originally it was four back-to-back houses built before 1861, when they were first entered into the Census. Named as Hill's Buildings in the Ordnance Survey Map of 1887, they were three storeys high. Each had an attic above a bedroom and one ground floor room. This was multifunctional, serving as a living room, kitchen, dining room, wash room and workroom for older married women with several children who would carry out tasks for local manufacturers.

The doors to the two front houses have been bricked up, although the outline of the one to number 24 remains, whilst the one door in the middle once would have been the entry leading into the court behind. This was known by Brummies as a yard, into which faced the houses at the back of the two on the street. There were two more houses at the far end of the yard. Each had a house backing on to them in a yard that was entered from Frederick Street. Both yards would have had a brewhouse, washhouse, ash pits, and a privy – later replaced by dustbins and a dry pan lavatory shared between two families.

In 1867, Anne Hill, the owner of 24, was fined for allowing a foul ashpit and privy on her property, but despite this, the next year that house was rented at 5 shillings 6

Jewellery Quarter Townscape Heritage

A view of Vittoria Street looking down from its beginning at Graham Street. (Jewellery Quarter Townscape Heritage). On the left is part of the Victoria Works of Joseph Gillott, stretching to number 20. The building behind is numbers22 and 24, once back-to-back housing.

pence (27.5 pence)a week. Because it fronted the street it was a higher sum than that for the house behind it which was rented weekly at 3s 9d (almost 20 pence). To put these sums in context, as late as 1900, the poverty line was given at round about a 20 shillings (£1) a week for a moderate family of a husband, wife and three children. This meant that poorer families were paying a much higher proportion of their meagre earnings in rent than were middle-class families.

By 1891, William and Emily Ellson were living at 24. He was a butcher and she was a dressmaker working from home. With them were their two young children and Emily's 69-year old widowed mother. Next door at 22, the 73-year old widow Elizabeth James lived on her own. It must have been hard for her and to survive independently she was still working as a jewellery case maker, probably doing so at home.

Behind 24, at 1 back of 24, lived Charles Mitchell, an engine fitter, his wife and three daughters aged nine and under. Next door, 2 back of 24 was the home of the unmarried Emily Phillips, a 35-year old tailoress. To make ends meet she had a lodger, Ellen Fowler, who was 22 and worked in a warehouse in a brassfounders.

At the end of the yard, at 3 back of 24, living conditions must have been cramped for the family of John and Margaret Steward. No occupation was recorded for him in the Census but his wife was a paper bag maker. Things must have been tough for them and their oldest child, Isabella aged seventeen, worked in a warehouse, whilst her fifteen-year old brother, Robert, was a brass dresser. Three years younger, John was originally recorded as a scholar in the Census but that was crossed out and instead he was given as a boy porter. The two youngest children, Bertram and Ellen, were at school and the household was made up by Margaret's 22-year old sister, Priscilla, who was also a paper bag maker.

Their neighbours at 4 back of 24 were Charles and Emma Stallard, aged 21 and 20. He was an electro-plate polisher and although no occupation was given for his wife, the part-time employment of many poorer women was not recorded by the enumerators. Lodging with them was William Williams, 20, who worked in the coffin furniture trade. His wife, Emma, was the same age and had a two month-old baby, Alice. Though no job was given for her, it was likely that poverty would soon force her to find work.

Remembering

We can admire a man like him Joseph Gillott, who started from very little and who through hard work, initiative, business ability and a fortuitous marriage to his wife, Maria, became highly successful. Other manufacturers like the Braggs, William Elliott, Edward Levetus and Lionel Spiers should also be recognised, whilst the architecture of the buildings that they had built or worked in remain as a tribute to Birmingham's jewellery makers. But we should also respect the Stewards, Elizabeth James and all those other working-class Brummies who lived so insecurely in overcrowded conditions in the street's back to backs. Mostly they did so with fortitude and dignity and they too played a role in the making of one of Birmingham's most remarkable streets – Vittoria Street.

But walking along Vittoria Street is not just about remembering it is also about recognising the ongoing vitality of the Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter. A unique and absorbing district, its manufacturing jewellers play an influential and important role in the British jewellery industry. Working in a historic setting boasting an impressive number of Grade II listed buildings, they expertly bring together cutting-edge technology and contemporary design with traditional skills and craftsmanship. Producing 40% of the United Kingdom's output, the Quarter is home both to long-established family firms focused on quality by making high-value jewellery and exciting new businesses set up by young jewellers trained to the highest standards at the School of Jewellery. ●

Professor Carl Chinn is a well-known author and broadcaster on the social history of Birmingham, the Black Country and the urban working class.

TOWNSCAPE HERITAGE

Jewellery Quarter Townscape Heritage

Vittoria Street, along with Frederick Street, Legge Lane, Albion Street, Regent Street and part of Warstone Lane and Graham Street, are embraced within the Jewellery Quarter Townscape Heritage (JQTH) project. A three year scheme funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, it aims to regenerate this area within the Jewellery Quarter's 'industrial middle' through the repair and restoration of historic buildings and the delivery of events and activities for all.

Further Reading

John Cattell and Bob Hawkins, *The Birmingham Jewellery Quarter: an introduction and guide* (London, 2000).
Alison Gledhill, *Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter* (Studley, 1988).
Marie Elizabeth Haddleton, *The Jewellery Quarter – History and Guide (Birmingham, 1992).*
Shena Mason, *Jewellery Making in Birmingham 1750-1995* (Chichester, 1998).

Also available on our website are Carl's articles on Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter and Chamberlain's Memorial Clock.

Listen to his audio podcasts at www.historywm.com/podcasts

REVOLUTIONARY PLAYERS

WEST MIDLANDS HISTORY
PEOPLE OF IDEAS, INNOVATION AND ENTERPRISE