



## BLACK COUNTRY HISTORY DAY 2017 Report

The audience for Black Country History Day 2017 were treated to four excellent presentations, the speakers now having two giant screens, newly installed in the refurbished Large Lecture Theatre on which to display their efforts. The morning session was linked to the important geology of the Black Country with Dudley's Keeper of Geology, Graham Worton, detailing the efforts being made to gain international recognition for the area, through the UNESCO Global Geopark network. The Black Country would then join areas of the United Kingdom such as the English Riviera on the south coast of Devon and others across the globe, including in Iceland, Uruguay and China, which are recognised as having geological inheritance of international value. Sites across the area were included in the bid, including Wren's Nest, Dudley (source of the 'Dudley Bug'), the Galton Valley and Barr Beacon. Graham explained that mining in the Black Country was first mentioned in a document from 1271, although it existed before then and he regards Dud Dudley's map from 1665 as the world's first geological map. Following a visit by UNESCO delegates in the summer of last year and a presentation to international delegates at a Global Geoparks conference, UNESCO has recognised that the Black Country has globally important, world class geological and related cultural heritage and all the attributes to become a Global Geopark. However, the bid was deferred to give organisers time to increase awareness and visibility of the sites that form part of it.

The Black Country Society's President, Keith Hodgkins, continued the geological theme, looking at how the area's stones have been used in its buildings. Dudley Castle was built from the limestone mined in its immediate vicinity and the 12th century Dudley Priory also used limestone quarried from Wren's Nest. The Black Country Living Museum is the site of the Earl of Dudley's limekilns where the stone was converted to lime by burning and used in industrial processes such as iron making. Walsall also quarried limestone but little now remains, apart from Rushall Parish Church, St Michael's, and Rushall Hall gatehouse. Gornal Stone, mentioned by Dr Plot in 1686, was used for grinding stones but also for buildings such as churches and chapels in the area. St James School, now moved to the Black Country Living Museum, is built of Gornal Stone, as are many walls in the area. The volcanic rock, Rowley Rag, which turns blue when worked, was quarried in Rowley Regis and used for cobbles and kerbs, being very hard. Examples remain at Lye railway station and in the walls at St Giles Church, Rowley. The last material Keith considered was slag, a waste product of the iron industry throughout the Black Country, used for walls, a fine example of which are the walls surrounding St Mark's Church, Pensnett.

In the afternoon session, David Mills, Assistant Curator at the Walsall Leather Museum, explained that Walsall had been the centre of a much older trade, loinery, the making of buckles for saddles and shoes, as high-grade ore was found in the ground at Rushall. Four craftsmen were involved in the making of one spur. As fashions changed there was a concentration on leather working, although a Burgess Roll as early as 1377 mentioned two people linked to the leather trade. The British Empire had provided overseas markets for all kinds of harness for dogs and goats, as well as horses. The high-water mark of the trade came around 1900, before the advent of the car. Warfare produced government orders for gun holsters early in the 19th century and there was a high demand for saddlery during WW1. Women particularly worked as 'sweated labour' and the Leather Museum, Littleton Street West, Walsall, tells the stories of those involved in the trade which still continues as a 'high end' product. Both the Queen and Margaret Thatcher favoured handbags made in Walsall, although not necessarily ones made of crocodile leather, a particularly hideous example of which was illustrated.

The final speaker of the day, Judith Davies, a PhD student at the Centre for West Midlands History, detailed the life and times of Samuel Cook, the 19th century Dudley radical. Many of those in the auditorium remembered Cook's Department store in central Dudley which he founded in 1819 and used to display posters relating to political events. Samuel was born in Trowbridge, Wiltshire, in 1787 and baptised in a Presbyterian Chapel. Cook's father was a clothier and Samuel followed him into this trade but was not always successful and was declared bankrupt on more than one occasion. Although his background was middle class he had great sympathy for the working class of the Black Country, campaigning for better working conditions for miners and nailers. His activities got him into trouble with the authorities and, ultimately, six months in prison. Judith suggested his religious beliefs were 'Cromwellian' – he queried celebrating Christmas, Good Friday and Easter – and he was very opposed to the established Church of England, denouncing the collection of Easter offerings and church rates, thus attracting the enmity of the Dudley cleric, Rev. Luke Booker, JP, an opponent of the universal suffrage advocated by Cook. He was radical to the end of his life, campaigning for open, fair, accountable government. Two of his grandsons later became Mayors of Dudley.

# Black Country Annual History Day

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The 2018 event took place on Saturday 10 November in the Large Lecture Theatre, Arts Building, University of Birmingham.

Organised in partnership with the Centre for West Midlands History, University of Birmingham.

Those attending this year's Black Country History Day were treated to a particularly varied programme of talks, beginning with well-known Black Country historian, Ned Williams, posing the question, 'Can the Metro Save the Black Country?' Ned has a fascination with the history of transport and took his audience on a whistle-stop journey from canals, through steam engines such as the Agenoria, built in Stourbridge in 1829, the early tramways, including the Kinver Light Railway, trolley buses, Midland Red and then the coming of the motorway network. A comparison of railway maps between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries showed how many lines had been abandoned to dereliction by the 1980s, when first the Black Country Development Corporation, 1987-1998 and then Advantage West Midlands, began cleaning up the toxic legacy of mining, the production of steel and other industries in the Black Country.

Although the Isle of Dogs, where Ned grew up, has been very successfully regenerated by the building of the Docklands Light Railway, opened in 1984, it was not until 1995 that the Jewellery Line Midland Metro was opened, with light rail using the old Great Western railway route, closed in the 1960s. With money from the Government now promised for the Metro extension to Dudley and Merry Hill, and a new Light Rail Innovation Centre and bus station planned for central Dudley, will this be enough to ease congestion and bring prosperity, as in London? Ned felt the jury is still out!

On a very different track, the second speaker, Dr Len Smith, Honorary Senior Research Fellow, Social Studies in Medicine, Institute of Applied Health Research, University of Birmingham, considered 'Bilston and the Trade in Lunacy, 1740-1830.' With three 'madhouses' in one small town Bilston was a leading centre for the private care and treatment of mentally disordered people in the eighteenth century, a situation not replicated anywhere else in the country, outside of London. The Proud family – father, Samuel and sons Joseph and Samuel Junior – ran very successful enterprises, claiming many 'Cures' in their advertising. As Len explained, treatment at this time included tonics, bleeding, cold baths, exercise, diet, seclusion and mechanical restraint to prevent self-harm or the harming of others, but he warned us not to judge by modern day standards. Indeed, following the passing of the Regulation of Madhouses Act in 1774, an inspection in 1776 found Samuel Proud to be particularly skilled in his profession. A collection of letters in Shropshire Archives illustrated, through the case of Ann Penbury, sister of a Shrewsbury attorney, that 'madhouses' were not for permanent incarceration, but that patients could go home if recovered.

In the afternoon session, Dr Jenny Gilbert, Lecturer in Design Cultures at de Montfort University, explained the value of the Hodson Collection, now housed at Walsall Leather Museum, to cultural historians, as it illustrates ordinary fashion, rather than the more upper-class collections of other museums. The Hodsons were a lock making family, living in Willenhall, where Edith Hodson opened a draper's shop in the front parlour of their home, later being joined by her sister, Flora. After Flora's death in 1985, over 5,000 items of stock were discovered, including Jewellery as well as clothing, and catalogued by Sheila Shreeve from Walsall Museum. Neither sister married and Edith, particularly, enjoyed visiting the nationally renowned wholesale clothing retailers in Birmingham, although bills were often addressed to Mr E Hodson! Some items in the collection were intended for middle class account customers, whilst a clothing club for the community was also run.

The Locksmith's House, where Edith Hodson ran her business, is now part of the Black Country Living Museum, which is planning a major new £25 million development at its main site on Tipton Road, Dudley. This will include a 1940s-1960s town centre and an industrial area to showcase Black Country industries, such as brickmaking. Simon Briercliffe, the Historical Research Assistant, set the political scene during this period, when the Black Country consisted of 22 separate local authorities with huge differences in size. Simon's presentation detailed many of the buildings planned for relocation or replication, particularly the Lea Road Infant Welfare Centre from Coseley, which will help tell the story of the beginnings of the NHS. His colleague, Glenis Williams, as the Museum's Community Engagement Manager, then explained her role, to encourage a more diverse audience to visit and to improve access for disabled visitors. She also organised events to capture real stories from local people to underpin the research for the new development, such as the very successful 'Songs for Stantons' 1950s event held in Dudley town centre, a video of which was shown.



back row John Woodall, Simon Briercliffe, Ned Williams, Dr Malcolm Dick  
front row Judith Watkin, Dr Len Smith, Dr Jenny Gilbert, Glenis Williams