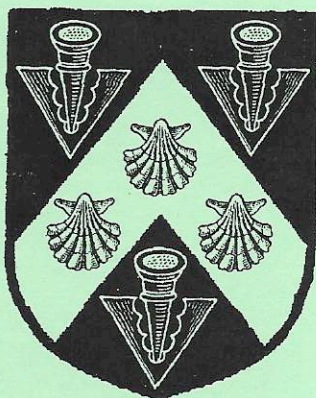


AMBLECOTE HISTORY SOCIETY



REPORT OF AN INAUGURAL MEETING
&
PRESENTATION BY MR.ROY PEACOCK
on
JAMES FOSTER
Ironmaster of Stourbridge

Wednesday 19th of February
2003
at
Holy Trinity Church
Amblecote

COVER

The Foster Arms.

Displayed on the memorial to

James Foster (1786—1853)

at Holy Trinity Church, Amblecote.

Amblecote Historical Society
Inaugural Meeting
Wednesday 19th February 2003
At Holy Trinity Church, Amblecote.



THE inaugural meeting of the Amblecote History Society, attended by over sixty people, took place at Holy Trinity Church on Wednesday 19th of February 2003. Mr. Roy Peacock, local historian and former teacher of history at King Edward's School Stourbridge, made a fascinating and highly relevant presentation on the Stourbridge Iron-master, James Foster .

During the meeting a number of historical issues concerning Amblecote were discussed. It was noted that the impetus for the formation of the Society arose from a successful campaign to restore the former Amblecote Urban District Council clock, located on the Ruby Cantonese Restaurant (previously the Fish Inn) in Wollaston Road. This, along with efforts to save Amblecote's name as a result of political boundary changes, the rescuing of Dennis Hall from total ruin and other issues where modern changes have imposed on historical matters, has resulted in a natural desire amongst interested parties to focus on preserving and protecting the thousand year old history of Amblecote. Councillor John Simpson noted that efforts are being made to ensure that a tram on the new Midlands Metro link will be named *Agenoria* to commemorate Foster and Rastrick's famous locomotive of that name.

Names and addresses of those present were taken in order to initiate a circle of interest from which it is hoped an active local history society will emerge. Judging from the enthusiasm shown on the 19th of February this will not present a problem!

Refreshments were kindly provided by members of the congregation at Holy Trinity.

Introduction.

Canon Paul Tongue illustrated the relevance of Holy Trinity Church as a venue for both the inaugural meeting and a talk on James Foster, by bringing along the Parish Record Book containing entries between 1839 and 1928.

The first entry in the book -- dated with fortuitous synchronicity as the 20th of February 1839 -- recorded a meeting at which the construction of a Parish Church for Amblecote was first formally proposed. Amongst those prominent in the proceedings was one James Foster who gave £450 towards building costs. Later on Foster donated the striking wrought iron railings, at the estimated cost of £500, that to this day form such a prominent and well-known feature of the church. Another large donation towards the organ is recorded, as are several smaller ones. Foster continued to support the church throughout his life along with St. Mary's at Oldswinford, where he was buried in 1853. He is commemorated at Amblecote by the stained glass East Window and an adjacent brass and enamel lettered plaque, the cost of these being met by his former employees and by friends. The plaque, a fine example of Victorian neo-gothic design, has recently been restored and placed in a more accessible viewing position.

Mr. Nick Baker who, with Canon Tongue, had helped organise the meeting, introduced Roy Peacock.

JAMES FOSTER 1786 – 1853
A Presentation by Mr. Roy Peacock
To Amblecote History Society.
Wednesday February 19th 2003
At Holy Trinity Church, Amblecote.

The Importance of Local History

Roy took the opportunity of addressing this first meeting of an Amblecote History Society by welcoming the formation of another local history group, complimenting those already in existence in Stourbridge, Wollaston, Wordsley and other surrounding areas. Local history, he explained, is the essential back-bone of historical knowledge, providing a “consciousness of the past” at a vital and human level. The burgeoning interest in local history, combined with the new tools of technology whereby records are now freely available on disk and on-line, enable even the most obscure of individuals to be researched, recorded and placed in historical context. Combining these genealogical records with other local sources such as newspapers and official records results in an ability to answer important questions about how people lived, where they were from and why they did the things they did. He noted that Amblecote offers a plethora of historical ‘starting points’. The church’s lych-gate has plaques commemorating around 60 Great War and WW2 fallen, each representing an important human story that should be recorded. Amblecote’s industry, based around glass, iron, coal and clay was of world importance. Whilst the big houses of Amblecote such as The Hill (later Corbett Hospital), and Dennis Hall, had housed a succession of industrialists and land owners who, whilst they may well have made themselves comfortably rich, were nevertheless unequivocally ‘local’ in their activities and outlook. Meanwhile, Amblecote’s Urban District Council, “the smallest in the country and therefore an important claim to fame”, promises an important source of historical records along with the less grand, but non the less vital, recollections, records and family photographs of present day Amblecote folk. Local history, which Roy noted could be engaged upon at a variety of levels ranging from complex archive research to the simple recording of personal memories, represented one of the most important tools “in enlightening the past”.

James Foster 1786—1853

Roy introduced James Foster by emphasising his importance to the Stourbridge and Amblecote area as both an industrialist and a public benefactor, thus following in a tradition begun by the Foley’s over a

century before, and continued into more recent times by Ernest Stevens. That said, Foster could afford to be generous - growing rich as a result of an almost manic obsession with his business, and a fortunate combination of astute commercial acumen, timeliness and not a little luck. Never married, James Foster poured all his considerable energies into the development of the iron industry in and around Stourbridge and the Severn Valley.

James Foster was the half brother of John Bradley, both sons of Mary Haden who first married Gabriel Bradley and later James' father, Henry Foster. John Bradley inherited his father's ironworks in Stourbridge in 1771, and in 1800 in partnership with James and others, formed John Bradley & Co. on land adjacent to the canal wharf. John Bradley died in 1816, leaving James Foster in sole charge of the company. With so many James, Johns, Henrys and half brothers, Roy admitted that a full appreciation of everyone's exact relationship wasn't easy! Though he did note that the family home in Lower High Street still stands.

Roy made the point that Foster's business life began during the relatively hard times of the post-Waterloo period. In the early 19th century not only did business regularly go bankrupt, but banks also, taking their depositors with them. Foster solved this possibility by forming his own bank, an approach to 'integrated business' that would not be out of place in the modern world. Foster also concentrated on manufacturing wrought (as opposed to cast) iron, and thus created a layer of value added production whereby he transformed the crude pig into a product suitable for conversion into the multiplicity of products required by a rapidly industrializing world. Furthermore Foster firmly believed, as Bradley had done before him, that quality was everything, and his products were highly respected by both trade and customers, as indeed was James Foster himself.

As time went by he expanded his interests to include coal mining, limestone extraction and transport, so that he controlled every aspect of production, finance and supply. By 1840 he owned no fewer than ten different mines, four blast furnaces and nine forges, ranged throughout the Severn Valley from Ironbridge to Stourbridge. Foster became a major employer, and labour flooded into the area to work in his factories and mines. By 1851 he employed around 5,000 people, a huge number in those days. Roy emphasised that one of James Foster's chief assets was his ability to manage such a diverse and widely distributed workforce, reminding the audience that contemporary communications consisted of an unreliable mixture of horse and water borne transport, and hand written notes.

In contrast to many industrialists of the period, James Foster did not fall

prey to the pretensions that his wealth potentially allowed, always re-investing profits rather than spending them, and showing no inclination to sell up and turn to art or poetry as others sometimes did. Even Stourton Castle where he lived, though very grand and altered by him, was rented rather than purchased. As a fascinating aside Roy mentioned that during recent renovation work at the Castle the present owner has discovered an immense wrought iron water tank at the top of a tower. Obviously the work of Foster, it illustrates that whatever else he may have eschewed in spite of his great wealth, a plentiful personal supply of fresh water was not one them!

James Foster was also, by the standards of the day, a fair and paternalistic employer. He paid wages in regular cash rather than 'truck', and refused to employ 'butties', the hated middlemen of so many mines. However he did believe in rules, and issued workers with a list 19 of these along with strictly enforced fines for transgression. Throwing water on heated metal, a most dangerous practice in iron works, cost a worker half a crown, whilst fighting incurred a penalty of five shillings. Drinking, though not banned, was severely restricted with workers limited to a quart of ale a day during working hours. Roy observed that this was "probably a bit harsh", considering the nature of many of the jobs.

Foster's concern for his workforce extended well beyond the factory gate. He was instrumental in the formation of the Stourbridge Mechanics Institute, and also what was to become the Guest Hospital. However, as Roy pointed out, we should not lose sight of the fact that Foster's philanthropy can only be judged by the standards of the day. His factories still worked six-day, twelve hour shifts, and in advance of the Acts of Parliament of 1842, Foster (along with most other Ironmasters and Coal Owners) was an employer of children. Records survive of ten-year old boys being interviewed by inspectors at Bradley's and found to be almost wholly uneducated. Nevertheless, Foster was highly regarded amongst his employees, and during boom years he was never short of skilled workers.

Foster was also well respected by his peers and was called upon to represent the Ironmasters and the locality on a number of political levels on several occasions. In 1830 he briefly served as a Member of Parliament, though as an uncomfortable public speaker and, one suspects, not attracted to a London lifestyle, he did not continue in this role. During the 'Hungry Forties' when economic depression swept Britain, he traveled to London to petition the Prime Minister, Robert Peel, on behalf of the local iron trades. He also served as a Justice of the Peace and as High Sheriff of Worcestershire.

Foster is justly famous for his part in the early development and use of steam locomotion, a wide-ranging subject in its own right. In 1819, in partnership with John Urpeth Rastrick, he built a number of early locomotives at Bradley's, including the *Stourbridge Lion* the first locomotive to run on rails in America. Roy spoke in some detail about the other famous locomotive produced by Foster, Rastric & Co., the *Agenoria*, which transported coal from Foster's Shutt End Colliery at Pensnett to the canal wharf at Ashwood. In fact the *Agenoria* was not a great success, though Roy considers that its pioneering use as part of an integrated transport system represents "a vital reference point" in railway and transport history. Both *Stourbridge Lion* and *Agenora* survive, in the USA and York respectively.

Foster was a regular churchgoer, and enthusiastically supported local church construction and upkeep. Besides his financial and structural donations to the new Holy Trinity Church at Amblecote, he also donated cash and construction materials to St. Mary's at Old Swinford, the 'mother church' of Stourbridge, including a gift of sandstone from his own quarries.

James Foster died on April 12th 1853 at Stourton Castle. On the afternoon of his funeral work at Bradley's stopped and the work force is reported to have marched six abreast accompanying his coffin to St. Mary's, Old Swinford, where he was interred in a family grave. Furthermore, every man was paid for the afternoon, a final act of philanthropy from a forward-looking employer who, whilst undoubtedly out to make himself wealthy, was always prepared to be fair to his employees - certainly by the standards of the day.

William Orme Foster, James Foster's nephew and agent, inherited Bradley's. Roy spoke briefly about William Foster, emphasizing that he too continued in the tradition of supporting the community that he employed. Like James, he donated funds to the Mechanics Institute, as well as building the Church and School at Wollaston.

Thanks

Nick Baker thanked Roy on behalf of the meeting, noting that anyone traveling to Washington DC to view the Stourbridge Lion (as he had recently done) should be aware (as he had not done) that it has been removed to Baltimore!