

Robert Southey

1774 - 1843

Robert Southey was Poet Laureate for thirty years until his death in 1843. Southey spoke against the factory system and the conditions of life such as the employment of children faced by people in places like the Midlands where he travelled in the summer of 1807. He advocated that the state promote public works to maintain high employment and called for universal education. In his travels around the Black Country, Southey looks back at Birmingham with a pall of smoke over it ...

... everywhere around us, instead of the village church whose steeple usually adorns so beautifully the English landscape; the tower of some manufactory was to be seen in the distance, vomiting up flames and smoke and blasting everything with its metallic vapours. The vicinity was as thickly peopled as that of London. Instead of cottages we saw streets of back hovels, blackened with smoke of coal fires which burn day and night in these dismal regions. Such swarms of children I never beheld in any other place, nor such wretched ones – in rags, and their skin encrusted with soot and filth.

The face of the country was more hideous than can be described, uncultivated, black and smoking.... I asked the coachman from whence the smoke proceeded and he told me the whole earth beneath us was on fire; some coal mines had taken fire many years ago and still continued to burn. 'If you were to travel this road by night, Sir,' said he, 'you would see the whole country a-fire, and might fancy you were going to hell!' – a part of the road which is thus undermined gave way lately under one of the stages; it did not sink deep enough to kill the passengers by the fall, but one of them had his thigh broken.

This deplorable country continued for some leagues, till we had passed Wolverhampton, the latest manufacturing town in this district.



Fig. 28 Robert Southey
by John Opie

Southey viewed Dudley from the direction of the Birmingham Road and thought it “hideous” (in its congested appearance, with its ‘streets of brick hovels, blackened with the smoke of coal fires which burn day and night in these dismal regions.

This was perhaps not far from the view painted by the Birmingham artist who often visited Dudley for inspiration, David Cox (1783-1859.) Cox’s views is more like the “old England” – the church tower, green fields, quaint village with new panorama – which Southall compares with what he saw in Dudley.



Fig. 29 Dudley Castle from Burnt Tree Road
1810 from Clarke’s Curiosities