

A Description of Birmingham and its Industry from the Diary of Lady Shelburne, 1766

(Lord Fitzmaurice, *Life of William, Earl of Shelburne, I* (1912), pp. 274-278; in D. B. Horn and Mary Ransome, eds., *English Historical Documents, Vol. X, 1714-1783*, N.Y: Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 470-72.)

May 14th [1766, London.]

We got into the coach for Birmingham, and arrived through rough roads at nine o'clock there. We were kindly and politely received by Mr. Garbett...

May 15th

We breakfasted, and went soon after with Mr. Garbett to see the manufactory of buttons and hardwares, which are very curious, and entertained us much till dinner-time. Mr. Taylor, the principal manufacturer there, dined with us, and we went afterwards to Mr. Bolden's, who trades much in the same way. His house is a very pretty one about a mile out of the town, and his workshops newly built at the end of his garden, where they take up a large piece of ground which he has named Soho Square. There, as in the morning, we purchased some watch chains and trinkets at an amazing cheap price, and drank tea afterwards in his house, which is a very pleasant one. We returned home to supper between nine and ten, for we kept early hours. Mr. Baskerville supped with us.

May 16th

This morning we went to Gimlett's, where we bought a great many toys and saw his warehouse of watches &c., one of which I bought for Master Parker. We also went to a Quaker's to see the making of guns, but neither Lady Louisa or I being much interested about that, we left Lord Shelburne and Mr. Garbett and went with his son to the toyshops, where we made some purchases. At Mr. Taylor's we met again, and he made and ennamel'd a landscape on the top of a box before us, which he afterwards gave me as a curiosity from my having seen it done. The method of doing it is this: a stamping instrument managed only by one woman first impresses the picture on paper, which paper is then laid even upon a piece of white enamel and rubbed hard with a knife or instrument like it, till it is marked upon the box. Then there is spread over it with a brush some metallic colour reduced to a fine powder which adheres to the moist part, and, by putting it afterwards into an oven for a few minutes, the whole is completed by fixing the colour. We came home, dined, went again to Gimlett's, and from thence to drink tea at Mr. Taylor's villa. This is a very handsome house with a dairy and garden about it. His wife and daughter, a girl of about fourteen, received us, and she played on the harpsichord and sung to us. Mr. Taylor and his son walked about with Lord Shelburne and Mr. Garbett. After this Mr. Frank Garbett went with Lady Louisa and me in the coach to Mr. Baskerville's, which is also a pretty place out of the town; he showed us his garden and hot-house, Mrs Baskerville the Japan, which business she has chiefly the management of. By this time Mr Garbett and Lord Shelburne, who walked, arrived; he bought some new books printed by Mr Baskerville, and I some Japan, and it being now dark we returned home.

May 17th.

As soon as breakfast was over we went to see the making of buckles, *papier mache'* boxes, and the melting, painting, and stamping of glass. By twelve o'clock we returned to Mr Garbett's, took some chocolate, and, thanking him for our entertainment at Birmingham, got into our coach to return home....

May 19th.

We dined alone and in the evening Lord Shelburne was so good to write for me the following account of the place we had been so much amused at:

"Birmingham originally had no manufacture except a small one of linen thread, which continues there to this day, though now to the amount of ten or twelve thousand pounds. It is not fifty years since the hardware began to make a figure, from thence begun by people not worth above three or four hundred pounds a-piece, some of which are now worth three or four hundred thousand, particularly a Mr. Taylor, the most established manufacturer and trader; some, however, are beginning to rival him in the extent of Ws trade. Its great rise was owing to two things, first the discovery of mixed metal so mollient or ductile as easily to suffer stamping, the consequence of which is they do buttons, buckles, toys, and everything in the hardware way by stamping machines which were before obliged to be performed by human labour. Another thing quickly followed, instead of employing the same hand to finish a button or any other thing, they subdivide it into as many different hands as possible, finding beyond doubt that the human faculties by being confined to a repetition of the same thing become more expeditious and more to be depended on than when obliged or suffered to pass from one to another. Thus a button passes through fifty hands, and each hand perhaps passes a thousand in a day; likewise, by this means, the work becomes so simple that, five times in six, children of six or eight years old do it as well as men, and earn from ten pence to eight shillings a week. There are besides an infinity of smaller improvements which each workman has and sedulously keeps secret from the rest. Upon the whole they have reduced the price so low that the small matter of gold on a button makes the chief expense of it, being as three to one including all other materials and manufacture. However, they have lately discovered a method of washing them with aquafortis, which gives them the colour of gold, and are come to stamp them so well that 'tis scarce possible at any distance to distinguish them from a thread button. There are many other manufactures here; most of the spirit of hartshorn consumed in England, and oil of a great quantity, but the greatest manufacture of that is now removed to Preston Pans in Scotland. The reason Mr. Garbett gave for it was, first, secrecy as to the method of making it (which is almost impossible to preserve in Birmingham, there is so much enterprise and sharpness); next, the cheapness of provisions; and, lastly, the obedient turn of the Scotch. Refining of gold and silver, and gun-making to a prodigious amount for exportation, are likewise another branch of their trade, of which they send annually above a hundred and fifty thousand to the coast of Africa, some of which are sold for five and sixpence a-piece, but what is shocking to humanity, above half of them, from the manner they are finished in, are sure to burst in the first hand that fires them. If an Act of Parliament was passed ordering a proof-master to be settled at the expence of the manufacturers themselves, for one shilling

more the barrels might be properly bored and finished, so as to secure the buyer at least from certain danger, the trade by this means assured and confirmed in its present channel, and the moral infamy in the individuals who are thus induced to multiply gain, suppressed. This trade, great as it is, is not above twenty or twenty-five years' standing. Another thing they are in great want of is an assay-master, which is allowed both at Chester and York; but it is very hard on a manufacturer to be obliged to send every piece of plate to Chester to be marked, without which no one will purchase it, where the great object of the whole trade is to make a quantity and thus to reduce the profits as low as 'tis possible. It would be of infinite public advantage if silver plate came to be manufactured here as watches lately are, and that it should be taken out of the imposing monopoly of it in London”.