

Arthur Young on the industrial development of Birmingham, 1791

(Arthur Young, *Tours in England and Wales*: London School of Economics Reprints, XIV, pp. 255-258; in A. Aspinall and E. Anthony Smith, eds., *English Historical Documents, XI, 1783-1832*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1959, pp. 523-24.)

The capital improvement wrought since I was here before is the canal to Oxford, Coventry, Wolverhampton, &c.; the port, as it may be called, or double canal head in the town crowded with coal barges is a noble spectacle, with that prodigious animation, which the immense trade of this place could alone give. I looked around me with amazement at the change effected in twelve years; so great that this place may now probably be reckoned, with justice, the first manufacturing town in the world. From this port and these quays you may now go by water to Hull, Liverpool, Bristol, Oxford (130 miles) and London. The cut was opened through the coal mines to Wolverhampton in 1769. In 1783, into the new mines of Wednesbury, and to the junction with the Coventry canal, at Faseley, near Tamworth. From Birmingham to the Staffordshire canal is 22 miles, and to Faseley 15. In the 22 miles from hence to Wolverhampton only three locks; but down to Faseley there are 44 locks; not one rivulet to supply water, and only 30 acres of reservoirs, the water coming out of the earth. At Ocher hills they have a powerful steam engine for throwing back the waste water: and in the whole extent one that cost £4,000; another of £3,000; another of £2,500, another of £1,200; and yet another building that will cost £3,500. The first-mentioned works at the charge of £200 for six months. The old and new cuts were executed at the expense of about £250,000; one mile where it is open to the depth of 44 feet £30,000 for sinking only 18 feet lower than the original level. There are 13 locks between the port and Deritan, 8 feet 2 inches wide, and the boats 7 feet; to pass the 13 takes only two hours. Coals, before these canals were made, were 6d per cwt. at Birmingham, now 4 and 1/2d. The consumption is about 200,000 tons a year, which exhausts about 20 or 22 acres; it employs 40 boats, each 20 tons a day for the six summer months, besides 15 to 20 boats to Oxford, a new supply since the new cut. In the Wednesbury mines the coal is 10 yards thick, and in some even to 12 and 14, a thing elsewhere almost unheard of: a cubical yard they reckon a ton. Shares in the navigation, which were at first done at 140 per cent are now at 1040. I was assured that shares in the Aire and Calder navigation are yet higher, even 100 per cent per ann.

These immense works, which wear so animated a face of business, correspond well with the prodigious increase of the town, which I viewed to good advantage from the top of the new church of St. Paul: it is now a very great city indeed; and it was abundantly curious to have it pointed out to me the parts added since I was here. They form the greatest part of the town, and carry in their countenance undoubted marks of their modern date. In 1768 the population was under 30,000; now the common calculation is 70,000, but more accurate calculation extend it to 80,000, which I am told is the number assigned by Dr. Priestley. In the last 10 years above 4,000 new houses have been built: and the increase is at present going on much more rapidly, for I was told that the number this year is not less than 700.

The earnings of the workmen in the manufacture are various, but in general very high: a boy of 10 or 12 years, 2s. 6d. to 3s. a week; a woman from 4s. to 10s. a week, average about 6s.; men from 10s. to 25s. a week, and some much higher; colliers earn yet more. These are immense wages, when it is considered that the whole family is sure of constant steady employment; indeed they are so great that I am inclined to think labour higher at Birmingham than in any other place in Europe: a most curious circumstance for the politician to reflect on, and which shews of how little effect to manufactures is cheap labour, for here is the most flourishing fabric that was perhaps ever known, paying the highest rates of labour. Such an instance ought to correct those common notions that have been retailed from hand to hand a thousand times, that cheap provisions are necessary for the good of manufactures, because cheap provisions suppose cheap labour, which is a combination founded in ignorance and error. Provisions at Birmingham are at the same rate as everywhere else in England, for it is remarkable that the level of price at present is very general, except the division of the east and west of the kingdom for corn; but while Birmingham and Norwich eat their provisions at nearly the same price (with allowance that the former is much the more quick, ready and active market) the price of labour is at least 150 per cent higher in one of those places than the other.