

Visit to Ironbridge – Birthplace of the Industrial Revolution

On Wednesday 16th May thirty-three members of the Deganwy History Group and friends visited Ironbridge in Shropshire, a World Heritage site and the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution.

Our first stop was at the Museum of the Gorge, originally the Coalbrookdale Company's Severn Warehouse, one of ten museums of the Ironbridge Museum Trust. A Gothic Revival architectural design with two narrow towers decorated with cross-shaped arrow loops, but actually hiding chimneys. This waterfront building houses a 12 metre long diorama displaying how the River Severn gorge looked at its industrial height (circa 1796). Flood levels throughout recent history are marked on the windows and walls of the building, the worst of the floods reached the top of the windows! The doors of the warehouse lead to the river basin where the grooves of a narrow gauge tramway used to transport goods are still visible.



The centrepiece of the visit, the Iron bridge, is a short walk from the museum following the river upstream. The weather was kind to us and enabled us to see the town and bridge in all its glory. Unfortunately, the bridge is currently undergoing a £3.6 million refurbishment which is due to finish later this year (estimated November 2018).



However, although the bridge itself was enclosed with scaffolding and sheeting, a walkway had been created alongside the bridge to enable visitors to view the work taking place which would not usually be visible. English Heritage guides were readily available to explain the repairs and point out the intricate ironwork and missing or damaged sections of the arch.



It was still possible to walk over the bridge and visit the Toll House where a number of articles depicting the structure of the bridge were on display. One such item is the list of Tolls paid to cross the bridge. Everyone paid to use the bridge, even Royalty.

TABLE of TOLLS.		
For every time they pass over this BRIDGE.		
For every Coach, Landau, Hearse, Chaise, Chair, or such like		3 d
Carriages drawn by Six Horses, Mares, Geldings, or Mules		2.0
Ditto by Four Ditto		1.6
Ditto by Two Ditto		1.0
Ditto by One Ditto		0.6
For every Horse, Mule, Ass, Pair of Oxen, Drawing or Harnessd		0.3
to draw any Waggon, Cart, or such like carriage, for each Horse &c		0.1½
For a Horse, Mule, or Ass, laden or unladen and not drawing,		0.2
For a Horse, Mule, or Ass carrying double,		0.1
For an Ox, Cow, or neat cattle		00½
For a Calf, Pig, Sheep, or lamb		
For every Horse, Mule, Ass, or carriage going on the roads		
and not over the Bridge, half the said tolls.		
For every Foot passenger going over the Bridge		00½
<i>B. This Bridge being private property, every Officer or Soldier, whether on duty or not, is liable to pay toll for passing over, as well as any baggage waggon, Mail-coach or Royal Family.</i>		

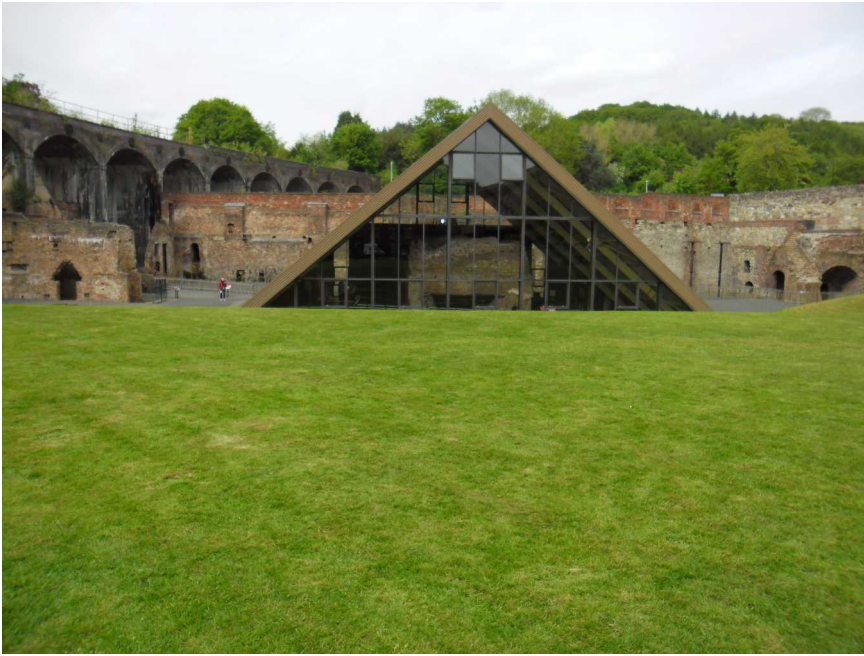
The next location we visited was the Coalbrookdale Museum of Iron, housed in what was the Great Warehouse, where the revolutionary techniques that made Coalbrookdale the most famous ironwork in the world. Here we learnt how the iron process developed and how Coalbrookdale iron changed the course of the world.



Several exhibits of ornate iron produced locally are on display, including the Boy and Swan Fountain from the Great Exhibition of 1851, and the Deerhound Table from the Paris International Exhibition of 1855. Other items on display are Coalbrookdale cast iron cooking pots, kettles, fire surrounds and street furniture.



Outside the museum are the remains of the revolutionary water powered blast furnace known as the Old Furnace. Abraham Darby in 1709 perfected the smelting of iron with coke instead of charcoal to produce superior iron than other manufacturers at the time.



The iron for world's first iron bridge was smelted here by Abraham Darby's grandson (Abraham Darby 3rd). The lintels of the furnace bear the inscriptions; "Abraham Darby 1777" and "1638" showing the furnace had been increased in size over the years as the demand for Coalbrookdale iron increased.



On the green in front of the Old Furnace was a poignant reminder to the passing of the Representation of the People Act 1918. This allowed women to vote in parliamentary elections for the first time. These silhouettes represent the 37 women who gained the right to vote out of approximately 160 who were working in the ceramic and iron industries across the

Ironbridge Gorge in 1918, including; Issabella Edwards (63) – Pipe Maker, Emma Austin (62) – Paintress, and Mary Oakes (48) – Warehouse Woman.

The third location was the Brookhouse Mill Restaurant, Denbigh, where we were served with a splendid three course meal by very patient staff. After a long day wandering around Ironbridge and its museums it was a most welcome end to a very enjoyable day.

The group thanked Ifor, with assistance from Angela, for arranging the museum visit, organising the coach, the meal and the excellent weather during our trip.

Trefor Price