

JEWELLERY QUARTER (AREA 5)

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The Jewellery Quarter, or The Quarter as it is locally known, is said to be 'The Jewel in Birmingham's Crown' yet the people whose crafting skills to make the jewellery were hidden working away in their workshops, usually in converted rooms in their terraced houses or for a Master Jeweller in his jewellery factory. The jewellers were either producing the complete piece of jewellery or components for other jewellers to carry out the final assembly.

The rich and fashionable bought their jewellery from jewellers in London or the better class of jewellery shops in the provinces. In those days, rarely would customer and jeweller have ever knowingly met each other. So, the customer would only have met the salesman in the jewellers and not the one whose skills created the masterpieces for them.

The first reference of a jeweller was in 16th century, when a goldsmith Roger Pemberton was mentioned working in the town around 1553. 120 years later there would be just 28 jewellers recorded in the town, rising to 400 just 20 years later. The Jewellery Quarter rapidly expanded during the 19th century when a taste for fashionable jewellery really took off.

Toy making is regarded as precursor to jewellery making. The term 'toys' refers to accessories worn by both sexes, buckles, medals, and very ornate buttons, like miniature works of art. Over time what we would now call jewellery began to come to the fore, as bracelets, bangles, rings, and other personal ornaments.

From the earliest times, when precious metals, gold, silver, and platinum were used, they had to be in alloy form, i.e., had to be mixed with a base metal like copper to make them workable. The more copper the harder and more long lasting they were. Much of the silver is called Sterling Silver, which is 92.5% silver and 7.5% copper. To the trade it is called a millesimal fineness 925.

Jewellers worked in many different precious metals that came in different forms, wire, blanks and in sheet form. Jewellery made from sheet metal used die-struck-stamps to cut shapes from a sheet of metal, with the appropriate die to cut through a metal sheet leaving a patterned piece that would be finished off by hand. This was mechanised after 1769 by John Pickering's patented stamping machine.

However, jewellery in precious metals was not for all, it was too expensive. Electroplating changed all that.

Electroplating Jewellery came about in a collaboration between a chemist called Brugnatelli who supplied the Electrolyte and his friend Volta who supplied the electricity from his voltaic pile. In this process objects were connected to voltaic pile and then immersed in a glass tank filled with the electrolyte and the piece gradually became coated in a very thin layer of silver on to the surface of the base metal.

The inventors being unable to develop the process in France, John Wright discovered potassium cyanide electrolyte and awarded the first patents to George and Henry Elkington in 1840.

Very quickly a whole range of cheaper alternatives to solid silver pieces of jewellery could be made more cheaply and mass-produced, low-cost jewellery shipped across the British Empire.

Two industries benefited from the Jewellery business, Steel nibbed pens and whistles. Steel nibbed pens replaced goose quills, which were trimmed to suit with a 'pen knife'. With the invention of steel nibs for dipping pens people found them easier to use. It wasn't until 1820s when John Mitchell's and Josiah Mason's factories started to mass produce steel nibs, cutting the costs by 99.9%. compared with handmade ones. By 1850s, half the steel-nib pens manufactured in the world were Birmingham made.

Joseph Hudson pioneered whistles in the Quarter, including the first football referee whistle in 1878 and the police whistle in 1883. Hudson also manufactured whistles for the RMS Titanic, some of which were recovered from the wreck. Around 1,000 million whistles have been made by various companies in the Jewellery Quarter since 1870.

The Museum of the Jewellery Quarter in Vyse Street opened in 1992 as a perfect example of a 'time capsule'. The proprietors perfectly preserved the Smith & Pepper jewellery factory as it was in 1981 when they retired, locked the doors and left. They could not have known what a treasure trove they left behind, for the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (now the Birmingham Museum Trust), when the museum staff first opened its doors to start cataloguing everything. They were able to put together the Jewellery Quarter's only museum representing a typical medium scale jewellery firm that traded for 80 years.

Visitors can see all aspects of their business, from the office to each part of the factory and their pattern books. Virtually every process of manufacturing from the forming of components, assembling and applying various finishes that were carried out in-house using this equipment. You can see how the jewellers hand made their wares, each jeweller with his stool, scalloped-out 'peg' bench and their 'Birmingham Sidelight for soldering and the soldering pouch of leather to catch all the waste for recycling and to protect the jeweller from burns.

Jewellers needed as much natural light as possible working on their jewellery, by having their benches under the windows, aided by reflective light from walls white ceramic bricks built into neighbouring buildings.

By the middle 19th century, the Quarter was very important to the London Trade. Some said by 1850, half of the gold and silverware products on sale in London jewellery shops had been produced in Birmingham. There is no actual data on that, many shop owners would not admit where the jewellery was manufactured.

The Quarter made a large proportion of the British Empire's fine jewellery. There are royal connections too! The Queen's Birthday Honours medals were made right here in the Jewellery Quarter.

It was the professional classes and the more affluent master jewellers moving away from the overcrowded housing that started the trend of building fine new houses dating from 1840s onwards, each frontage in the style of the period, Regency, Gothic, Italianate, Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau.

Over a longer period, skilled craftsmen were moving into the less salubrious parts of the Quarter, into the new narrow streets into what were courtyards seen across the Town. It was in these back-to-back houses, that the jewellers set themselves up in tiny workshops in whatever rooms were available.

The jewellery business flourished, despite some recessions in 1850s and 1870s to 90s. In 1913 it reached its heyday over 30,000 people employed in the Birmingham's jewellery trade. Though The Quarter continued to thrive through World War I, as demand for military buttons, badges and medals increased, the demand plummeted after the war, with two recessions 1919 – 21 and 30 – 31.

WWII was a turning point when most of the factories were put on to making munitions and the Luftwaffe bombers inflicted severe damage to the area. In 1953 the City Council surveyed the area concluding 9 km² of land was beyond repair. Although council produced plans for redevelopment in 1956, some felt it failed to consider the importance to the small trader's needs vital to the area.

In the 70s for the first time, the Jewellers opened their front rooms as direct-to-customer shops in the Quarter. Today along Vyse Street you can see the shop fronts inviting you to buy their best rings, or watches or for you sell them your gold.

The jewellery trade is still a big part of Birmingham's present and future with approximately 700 jewellers working in the area, manufacturing around 40% of the UK's jewellery output. In 2015 it got a new Assay Office which is as busy as ever, with approximately 12 million items hallmarked every year.

The geology and topography are important to the area, as formerly it would have been heathland which sat atop two sorts of sand that the metal working trades found good for making moulds for different types of castings.

From St Phillips church (now cathedral), the land drops down from Great Charles Street to Fleet Street and then rises to St Paul's Square and finally up to Warstone Lane where it levels off before dropping down Key Hill Drive.

Into this undulating corner of the town of Birmingham, some of the long-established families like the Colmores, were wanting to sell up because of the encroaching and industrialising town, but were unable to sell their land for development, for legal reasons. In 1746 Ann Colmore sponsored a private act of Parliament to solve the problem and the land was sold as plots. Development of the Newhall or Colmore estate was rapid and most of Colmore Row was built up within five years, and the rest of the estate during the next 25 years. New Hall itself was demolished in 1787.

The plots nearest the Newhall Branch Canal in 1772 (later to become the BCN). The factories developed along either side of the canal had easy access to the canal for transporting their raw materials and finished goods by the narrow boats heading towards London, Worcester or Wolverhampton, plying up and down the cut.

A plan of Birmingham by Thomas Hanson in 1778 shows that most of the Newhall estate had been laid out in a grid-like pattern from St Paul's Church. The pattern of streets, lanes and roads, lead northwards from the centre of Birmingham, Great Charles Street had become the right place to live.

Georgian houses aimed at the prosperous middle class were constructed around the square, some of which survive today, the new church of St Paul's, built around 1779, sits proudly in the centre of the square.

After the war, with all the bomb damage and the economy in a bad shape, the City Council and individual landlords began talking of redeveloping the area. One of the landlords, Sir Richard Vyse' drew up his own plans for his Hockley estate to redevelop it, however his ideas died with him.

In 1963, the council agreed to buy the freehold of 14.5 acres 6 km² of the Vyse land and the council project got approved in 1965. Part of that was to clear the area and build low-rise units and an eight-storey flatted factory known as the Dockley Centre (now the Big Peg), which were completed in 1971.

For the 150 or so, working in one of these new workshops came at a high cost owing to increased rents and was less convenient for the jewellers.

In the 70s, they were doing things differently and instead of conserving aging and yet attractive buildings, they were being demolished to build, what some feel, today, is that these blocks are unattractive, and the Big Peg is a case in point.

Would the planners have done something very different today? Would they also have consulted the jewellers more adequately? Perhaps.

Certainly, from 2000s there has been much appreciation of the Quarter's wealth of buildings that are either of 'special architectural or of historic interest', which means, much debate is ongoing to ensure that any new buildings will be of a sufficiently high architectural merit to enhance the character of the Quarter. So far 300 buildings have been saved, restored and re-purposed by private initiatives.

William Murdoch, Scottish chemist, inventor, and mechanical engineer worked with Boulton and Watt, in Birmingham with chemicals and steam engines and was credited with starting the Birmingham Assay Office.

Founded in 1773 by an Act of Parliament, by the The Hallmark Act, the Assay Office assayed and hallmarked Birmingham's manufactured precious metal items and giftware with the symbol of the Anchor to indicate those items were the purity that the makers stated they were and were made in Birmingham.

Assaying was necessary to protect the public when buying items, purporting to be gold, silver, platinum of a particular purity to determine how much of a base metal was added to the alloy with a base metal.

In 1877 the Assay Office moved into the Victorian building, on New Hall Street, where it was to remain until 2015, where it transferred its Assaying and Hallmarking facilities with its priceless collections to the new purpose-built facilities at Moreton Street.

It is hoped the new Assay Office would do more than its Hallmarking, it would be better placed to display its extensive collections, such as their collection made for Liberty of London, a

fantastic company that still champions craftsmanship.

The Quarter today produces 40% of British jewellery output and is said to contain the highest concentration of dedicated jewellers in Europe.

Many former industrial buildings have been refurbished including the Argent Centre. As a result of regeneration, the Jewellery Quarter has also become home to PR firms, media firms, software companies and developers. It also hosts half of the city's architectural practices.

With that in mind, there is a much greater emphasis on high quality design, which is taught locally at the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, set in Vittoria Street, the school was founded in 1888 and moved to its present location in 1890. It is now run by Birmingham City University which hosts the Jewellery teaching centre for the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design.

There is also The University of Law opened in 2001, located within industrial premises of William Canning & Co off Great Hampton Street.

People made The Quarter what it is today, most of whom we will never know their names. But the traditions and practices and skills they passed on, is a testament to their dedication to maintain the high standards. Looking through a website for a man's jewellery company Lambournes, some of their vintage range are now collector's pieces.

If we don't know where they lived, we know where some of them died and were buried in either Warstone Lane Cemetery or Key Hill Cemetery.

Some more prominent people who left their mark in the Quarter: Joseph Chamberlain, founding father of Birmingham University, Rev Robert William Dale minister Carrs Lane Church, Joseph Gillott pen maker, members of the Martineau family, Alfred Bird custard and baking powder, Joseph Allday radical politician, John Baskerville manufacturer, Dr Pye Chavasse medical author, James Cooper, VC soldier, John Postgate food safety campaigner, Clement Mansfield Ingleby solicitor, Harry Gem lawn tennis pioneer.

Recently we know where James Watt lived, as the foundations of his Georgian semi-detached villa were discovered, when excavating the site and in his honour, they intend to call the development, Harper's Hill, after the name of Watts' house.

Tourism is sweeping through parts of Birmingham and the Quarter is no different. Folk are very keen to understand the area where a relative worked and seeing some of the buildings that would have been around, whilst they were alive.

For anyone wanting to explore on foot, there are several walking tours they can do that point out some of the significant, standing buildings.

Some want to buy something made in the workshop at the rear of the shop. Just remember, though they are very friendly they will be very security minded, so you must ring a bell and wait for them to let you in.

Have fun.

10 Pictures of the Jewellery Quarter

- (1) Ashton & Sons, 16-18 Great Hampton Street
- (2) Rose Villa Tavern, Vyse Street
- (3) St Paul's Church, Paul's Square from archway Brook Street
- (4) Gem Buildings, 20-21 Hockley Hill
- (5) School of Jewellery, Vittoria Street
- (6) Classic Diamonds, 16 Vyse Street
- (7) Warstone Cemetery, Vyse Street
- (8) Thomas Fattorini, Regent Street
- (9) Mural on wall, Vyse Street
- (10) Catacombs, Warstone Cemetery, Vyse Street

I am indebted to English Heritage for their very useful booklet, 'The Birmingham Jewellery Quarter – an Introduction and guide'. Also, I have been looking at a few websites, on electroplating, the Jewellery Museum, (sadly not open for present owing to some structural issues), and other snippets about the area and the jewellers themselves.

Any views expressed in this article are mine and are my interpretations of any of the documents that I have encountered, I apologise for any inaccuracies.