

Black country Museum Shines a Light on History

By Darby Patterson

The wind was biting cold and a gray pallor coated the industrial city of Dudley where nail making, iron and steel, and coal mining once drove everyday life. This is the land of the



Long canal boats docked at the Black Country Museum

working man, woman and child of England's past, a history of great contrast between rich, and poor and the north and south of this powerful island nation. Dudley is tucked into the midlands and is generally off the beaten path for tourists. It is, however, a unique culture and landscape worthy of visiting. Certainly, the Black Country Museum is an attraction that in itself, puts the region on the map for tourism.

It was perhaps the perfect weather for our trip to the Museum because it was easy to imagine the hardship and meager existence of people who built the industry that fueled England's growth at a dear personal price. At least 40 buildings - humble abodes, cottages and shops where people plied their trades - have been moved to this 10 hectare (about 26 acres) site in an effort to preserve the distinct local history that endowed the museum with its name. It is said that in the mid-19th century smoke from the factories and mills filled the air with particles so dense the sun barely shone through, and every surface was coated with a dusting of dull, sooty black. However, coal, iron and industry were indigenous to the Black Country from as early as the 16th century – and the deepest and thickest seam of coal and iron in Great Britain lies beneath its surface.

Life for the workers in these mines was brutal, short and dangerous. It was anything but profitable, except for the elite who owned and ran the mines. Child labor was a given. The abundance of coal in the Black Country made way for the construction of canals – narrow waterways that led to major ports in Manchester and Birmingham. I am told my great-great grandfather worked on one of the narrow canal boats such as those that today sit serenely in the carefully reproduced environment of the Black Country Museum. Colorful long canal boats continue to be a feature of the many waterways that wind through the Black Country and beyond. In some measure, their beauty belies the human pain that made them useful.

But the Black Country Museum does not shy away from this dark era of the region's history. It reveals the truth in re-enactments and demonstrations that take place in historic buildings – some moved brick by brick from their original location and lovingly reassembled on the museum's expansive open air environment. One such building is the Darby End Church. It was taken down one brick at a time, and pew by pew to once again welcome people as a centerpiece at the museum. According to local legend, the church was first dubbed Darby Hand Church – dedicated to the men and women who worked for the powerful Darby coal and iron empire.

Throughout the recreated Black Country village are tiny shops with proprietors in authentic costume and character, eager to talk with visitors and impart local history. There's a mercantile shop, a chemist's, a black smith workshop, candy store and bakery and, of course, a tavern. There are many tiny living spaces that show how laborers shared warm spaces and families survived with little hope of a better life. On this cold December day, coal fires burned on grates and the few, brave visitors to the museum huddled close, like long lost friends to share the warmth.

But the work of the Museum's dedicated volunteers continued despite the bite of winter. At the nail maker's shop, Kevin Lowe put the bellows to a coal fire where rods of iron heated to a glowing red. My cousin Stephen and I were the only audience willing to endure the nip of the cold and follow through the process of nail making. We had a personal interest as our common ancestor was a nail maker – Joseph Darby, a proud looking gent who smoked a crooked pipe and wore a jaunty cap. We knew, of course, that our good Darby name was not related to the famous Abraham Darby who developed the technology to cast iron and helped spawn the Industrial revolution. No, our family, like thousands of others, was at the very bottom of workingman's ladder, stoking the fires and wielding the tools of the trade.

As Kevin deftly worked he explained that nail making was generally a family affair, with children as young as 4-years old working the bellows. A family, he said, could produce 6000 nails a week for which, if they were lucky and not cheated by a middleman, they were paid one pound. The region was so



Kevin Lowe, a nail maker at the Black Country museum, shows a handful of freshly forged nails

intensely worked around the clock it became known as “Black by day and red by night.” Despite the heat from the coal glowing in Kevin's shop, we could still see the vapor from the cold as he talked us through the process.

The nail making trade was highly valued and the call for nails extended well beyond the shores of England. Nonetheless, the families worked in virtual servitude and endured financial and physical abuse throughout the era that lasted from the 1700s to the mid-19th century.

By then, there was great unrest and some workers united. “It was a circle of poverty you couldn’t get out of,” said Kevin in his Black Country brogue. “And, they kept a blacklist of rebellious nail makers.” Inevitably, there was a rebellion. Thousands of nail makers joined the Dudley Riots of 1842. The target of the nail makers was the nail masters – many known for cheating workers of the little they earned. Although the workers were successful in uniting and bringing attention to the plight of nail makers in the Black Country, their rebellion did not succeed. Their leaders negotiated in good faith with the bosses only to be betrayed. While talks took place, dragoons arrived from Birmingham. On horseback with their swords drawn, they drove the crowds back and quelled the riots.

Throughout this narrative, Kevin heated iron rods, pounded them with hammers, twisted and snapped off the ends and flattened the heads. Finally feeling he’d made a proper nail, he presented us with one. Kevin’s hands were the hands of time – calloused and blackened from his labors, no different than the hands that worked the same thankless trade centuries ago. The nail was, indeed, perfect, and amazingly, I was able to take it onto the plane to California with me without raising an eyebrow or an alarm!

The entire 26 acres of the Black Country Museum is veritably alive with this rich history. Its authenticity and the dedication of its volunteers make the site a hidden treasure among England’s many historic attractions. There’s an underground ride through a coal mine – a delight for kids - convincing shop keepers playing their roles and imparting interesting tidbits of history. Modern amenities such as trolley cars and trams ferry visitors around most of the year. Of course, in December such niceties were not available, and Stephen and I braved the cobbled streets on foot, warmed by glowing coal fires and the great hospitality of the good folk of the Black Country.