

Ironbridge: Birthplace of the Industrial Revolution

U3A 2-Day Study Break in April 2014



This was advertised in the November issue of Third Age Matters. It was open to members nationally.

I lost no time in applying. It was just as well as within days of the advertisement appearing it was oversubscribed. I joined my fellow 39 attendees on a sunny morning in April.

The glass room where we met was a high ceilinged adapted space, very pleasantly modernised and fitted out for a study centre. The first talk was given by the resident curator; a fascinating slideshow of works of art relating to the earliest development of the industry around Ironbridge. He was particularly informative with his answers to the many subsequent questions, but to vary our learning we next had the opportunity to walk around the extensive sites of the iron museum, the Darby family house and the Quaker burial ground, where many of the Darby family are interred. The resident archeologist was our guide. He showed us the remains of industrial processes dating from 1709, as well as domestic buildings indicating the living conditions for the workers and the ironwork owners. One particularly interesting point to emerge was the preponderance of Quakers in these successful industrial ventures. By dint of their religion these energetic and well connected young men were banned from university and public and civic offices. They could however apply their talents to engineering and industry eg. Cadbury and Fry Chocolate Companies, Clarks shoes, Hanburys Tinsplate etc. The Darby family had an enlightened approach to their workers. Tee-total themselves, they nevertheless built public houses for their hot and thirsty workers and later created parks and woodland walks to encourage the male workers to walk with their families on a Sunday, rather than spend the day drinking in the pub. Although many Quaker employers did ban alcohol they often provided medical, dental and educational opportunities. We saw evidence of this at Coalbrookdale.

Our second day was even sunnier. We started at the Coalport China Museum Site. We saw a potter creating flowers from clay and another making saggers before we entered an enormous bottle kiln. Again we heard riveting accounts of the industrial processes of old from enthusiastic and informative specialist guides. Our visit ended with an afternoon at Blists Hill Victorian Town. We left at 5pm but not until all the displays were closing.

We had all enjoyed our 2 full days but it was not enough time to do justice to the many museums which make up the Coalbrookdale and Ironbridge Complex. We did however leave armed with an annual ticket so that we can return to see more of these wonderful sites and explore more of this very beautiful part of the country.



Pauline Hales