This page: the old stamp shop at JW Evans & Sons, looking through to the main stamp shop. Floor-to-ceiling 'gravity' drop stamps are visible – the weights used with them sit on the shelves. Opposite: drawers in the first-floor stock warehouse, where surplus samples were stored. Candlestick bases sit on the shelves and decorative details are nailed onto the drawers

LONG GONE SILVER

During the days of the British Empire, JW Evans & Sons was a thriving factory in Birmingham making traditional silverware for the home. In time, sales flagged and it found itself marooned, but English Heritage stepped in to rescue the still-intact workshops and their evocative contents. Jeremy Musson discovers a treasure chest of the nation's industrial past ▷

WHEN EDMUND BURKE called Birmingham the 'toyshop of Europe', he was not only referring to little soldiers and the like, but also to the whole industry of fancy metal goods, from snuffboxes and buckles to cuff links and cruet sets. The heart of this trade was focused on the Jewellery Quarter, an area of intense activity, competition and invention. Walk through the area now and there are many buildings that hint at the success and profitability of this world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

But today there is really only one place where one can still step through a door and breathe in the authentic atmosphere of those small, complex workshops that were often added on to the back of earlier terraced housing, and which were crammed with heavy steel machinery, originally entirely hand-operated. That place is JW Evans & Sons, 54-57 Albion Street, a traditional stamper's and die-sinker's business founded in 1881. Still in situ are the original drop stamps and fly presses, which were used to punch out shapes that provided the familiar silver and silver-plate tableware of most affluent English houses during the late Victorian period. This machinery helped to create the enduring image of the English dining room from this era – Corinthian candlesticks, silver salvers, rose bowls – as well as dressing-table sets and cigar cases.

The founder's grandson, Tony Evans, had preserved the business premises intact, keeping the thousands of dies – blocks of steel into which were engraved impressions of the component parts for a host of household objects. The latter could be turned out in their hundreds and thousands by what was, in around 1900, a workforce of roughly 60 men, women and boys. As Tony recalls: 'They never threw away a die, they only built more shelves.' Indeed, the wooden shelving crammed with steel dies wraps round the interior walls of all the workshops. When he was looking to sell the business, he made it a point of principle that the collection of thousands of dies be preserved as a whole.

Thankfully English Heritage, which has long been involved in making records of the Jewellery Quarter and encouraging its preservation, decided to step in. When Tony Evans retired in 2008, they purchased the houses, the die collection and all the existing machinery, much of which dates back to the early 20th century. They have conserved the roofs to protect the contents, but otherwise left the workshops entirely as found. ▷

Top: the narrow wooden shelves are crowded with old dies and tools used for cutting out the scrap from stamped objects on the fly presses. Above: a larger fly press is silhouetted against a workshop window in the 'Bill Corbett' stamp shop, named after one of the longest-serving stampers to have worked here

Black with grease and grime, these rooms still poignantly evoke their heyday in the late 19th century, although 1970s carpet tiles in the office and pictures of Aston Villa footballers speak of the company's continuity into more recent times. Inevitably, however, they also tell of its slow decline: the rocketing cost of silver, and competition from the Far East, made it difficult for such small, specialist industries to remain profitable in the later 20th century. The workforce numbers declined markedly here, especially after each world war. Today the visitor stands in spaces that once buzzed with work and noise, but – ironically – have survived so completely precisely because over the last century fewer and fewer people were employed to work the machines and large areas were left undisturbed. A slow retreat.

The silence is as telling as the layers of dust. The stories recounted by Tony and others who worked at the company – and recorded by English Heritage – are an important way of helping future generations to understand what life here was like. These workshops are already regarded as one of the real treasures of the Jewellery Quarter.

The founder of the firm, Jenkin William Evans, was the talented son of a draper and sometime court clerk who had moved to Birmingham from Wales. JW Evans attended Birmingham Municipal School of Jewellery and worked for local silversmiths Levi & Salaman, who provided him with much of his work at Albion Street in the early days (and loaned him the money to buy the premises).

Initially, he lived in one house with a workshop at the back, but by 1901 he had become prosperous enough to move to the comfortable suburb of Kings Norton, having bought the neighbouring houses, extended the workshops and paid off his original loan. In 1908, he took his eldest son Harold into partnership; in 1918, his younger son Austen joined them. Later, Tony Evans (Austen's son) became the last proprietor; both his sons worked for the company too.

JW Evans's trade was that of die-sinker. This is a highly skilled manual process that involves engraving the three-dimensional impression of a design into a hardened steel block. A block was cast at the required size and the die-sinker then sketched the design and cut it into the steel, in reverse, with a tool called a graver. After engraving, the steel was heated and cooled (which hardened it to withstand the force of the stamping machines), then polished. The die, which was held in ▷

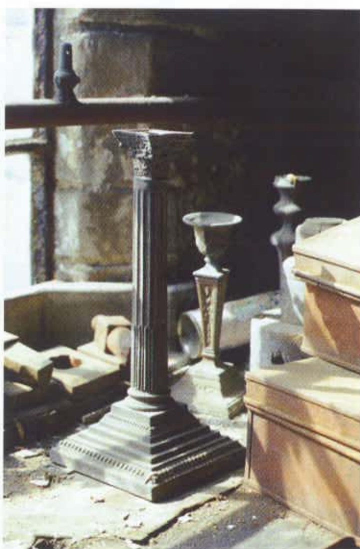
Top left: a view through to the well-worn staircase in No. 54, leading towards the offices. Top right: the 'Bill Corbett' stamp shop. Its narrow wooden shelves are stacked with steel dies. Above: Nos 54-57 Albion Street, Birmingham. The workshops fill the gardens behind these 1830s terraced houses

place by bolts known as 'poppets', could then be used to stamp the design into a sheet of metal referred to as a 'blank'.

A soft molten metal was poured into the die to form a positive imprint, generally known as a 'force'. This was then fixed to the underside of the hammer of the drop stamp to force the blank into all the engraved details. The number of stampings required varied according to the detail on the engraving. The first drop stamps, known as 'deadweights', were entirely manual; later, most were powered by machine, but they still needed to be operated by hand.

The smaller items were produced by a similar, though simpler, manually controlled device known as a 'fly press' – in the early 20th century this work was mostly done by women, whereas the main stamping workshops were staffed by men, with boys as assistants. The more toxic processes, such as silver-plating, were done elsewhere. One Edwardian basket trolley still remains here; it was used to trundle silver items round to other craft workshops for various specialist finishes and other refinements.

JW Evans & Sons produced all of their wares for retailers, and did not sell directly to individuals (until recent times); nor did they produce catalogues, as such, until the 1940s, although they did advertise and produce individual trade cards for special objects. The shops they sold to included Mappin & Webb, alongside other well-known names such as Garrard and a great number of smaller retailers up and down the country. Each pattern was used exclusively for a particular client.



There are numerous pocket-sized 'die books' here, forming a catalogue of every die created on site (more than 6,000 in total) from the company's earliest days. Each is listed by year, numbered in sequence and accompanied by a small Indian-ink sketch of the die itself. There is also a huge scrapbook full of ideas for designs, featuring cuttings, drawings and ideas jotted down for inspiration.

Classic Georgian-style tea and coffee sets were made here throughout the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. It is an intriguing corrective to visit the cramped, grimy rooms in which these classic English symbols of style and security were produced, and to reflect on the sense of time passing and human endeavour so easily forgotten ■

For more information, including details about guided tours of JW Evans & Sons, ring 0870 333 1181, or visit english-heritage.org.uk

ALL IMAGES: ENGLISH HERITAGE

Top: taken in the early 20th century, this photograph shows women at work on the fly presses in the first-floor workshop, which produced smaller and more delicate items. Above: Corinthian-column candlesticks were a typical feature of JW Evans & Sons' output during the late 19th century