

CHAPTER 16

OTHER COMMERCIAL EXHIBITIONS

In 1865, the third time that Birmingham hosted one of the British Association's annual meetings, the exhibition that was inspired by the occasion was unique in the town. This time the exhibitors were local working men and women. The preliminary address of the organisers elaborated on the background to the project and their aspirations.

A number of Working Men of Birmingham, desirous of holding an Exhibition of their Industrial Production . . . have formed themselves into a Committee to carry out their object . . . It does not necessarily follow that working men or women should exhibit articles connected with their special trades or departments of industry. The Committee rather aimed at exemplifying the talent, ingenuity, and skill of the artisan classes, by showing the results of their hours of leisure. (1)

For once, somewhat unwillingly at first, industrialists took a back seat. The organisers' preface in the catalogue hints at this dispute with guarded restraint.

The time of opening was fixed for August, in consequence of the visit of the British Association; but here occurred, in

connection with this visit, a circumstance which threatened to mar the undertaking; some of the leading Manufacturers wished for an Exhibition . . . A public meeting was called by the Manufacturers and a deputation then waited upon the present Mayor, Henry Wiggin, Esq. urging upon him the priority of the working men. (2)

It is possible that at this point considerable private pressure may have been applied by the Mayor and others. Whatever the case the manufacturers, at their meeting, not only backed down completely but magnanimously agreed to support the working men's project and even provided generous financial support.

"The Working Men's Industrial Exhibition for Birmingham and the Midland Counties" – these exhibition titles are so often long and boring! – opened in Bingley Hall on Monday 28 August and ran until 21 October. The third and final edition of the catalogue lists no less than 830 entrants. Their exhibits displayed a range of creativity that absolutely defies an adequate summary whilst still retaining reasonable brevity. Regrettably the small selection that follows will have to suffice.

There were four categories, Classes A, B, C and D. An example picked at random from Class A exhibits is described as a *"Lilliputian Penknife and Scissors: weight of knife 2 ½ grains, and of scissors 2 grains"*. George Glover, a working jeweller, made this tiny artefact. In contrast an item plucked from those in Category B was very much larger, consisting of *"self-acting Reclining Library*

Chairs, with Portable Desk and Stool". This furniture was designed, made and carved by Solomon Barnett of Sutton Road, Aston Park. (Interestingly this Aston Park address reflects an attempt by the developers of the Holte estate, only marginally successful as it turned out, to create an exclusive residential area matching Edgbaston). In category C was a "*leather model of the Knight of St Crispin Inn and a Water Mill*", created by a Hockley boot maker, James Allen. Lastly, in category D, "*a small collection of Cultivated Plants, and Specimens of Dried Wild Plants*" was entered by Richard Price of Coventry Road.

Several exhibits cry out for special mention. First, a violin and bow, not exceptional in themselves, but remarkable in the method_of manufacture. John Davis, the exhibitor, was self-taught and "*uses only a bent razor*". Davis, a 64-year-old from Wednesbury, was formerly a puddler in an iron foundry, but was now "*too old to work at his trade*". Next is an item made by W R Lloyd, a silver-plate worker, living in a back house in Lower Essex Street. It was described by him as a "*newly invented Tea Kettle, the 'Ladies' Friend', will boil in a few minutes, will never boil over, will, when boiling, put itself on the hob, will also make three or so cups of tea, and keep hot while the lady goes to town*". It seems likely that Mr Lloyd's considerable inventiveness was not entirely restricted to his handiwork! And, finally, one fears that the worst Bible-inspired nightmares of *Aris's* reporter at the Exposition in 1849 would have been confirmed in full measure had he still been around to view cabinet-maker Peter Martin's "*Papier*

Maché Chair, Snake Form”! Heaven forfend!

The reporter from *Illustrated London News* had nothing but praise for the way the show had been presented. The journal’s large illustration captures an animated and crowded scene. Well in evidence are top-hatted gentry and their crinolined womenfolk. Even the very youngest of girls are shown wearing those same bulky garments.

The well-known hall in which the exhibition is held is admirably suited for the purpose, but, large as is its area, it fell short of the space required by the number of persons who were anxious to exhibit The hall itself has been appropriately and elegantly decorated, an abundance of flowers having been used. Here are festoons in great variety, banneretes ornamental in gold and silver employed with such good effect that the appearance of the hall was all that could be desired for such an exhibition. (3)

In those days the only form of public transport within the town was the hackney carriage and that affordable only by the affluent. The Borough Inspection Committee published a handbook giving the precise fares – which they controlled – from all the 82 cab stands in the town to a variety of destinations, of which Bingley Hall was one. Fares for four-wheeled carriages were half as much again as those for two-wheelers. From St George’s Church, Edgbaston, to Bingley Hall cost either 8d or 1/-, from the Workhouse, Dudley Road,

1/- or 1/6d – paupers half-price? - and from Warstone Lane, 8d or 1/-. (4)

The event was so successful financially that afterwards the organisers were able to distribute £1,000 between various hospitals and charities, a very large sum of money then. However, it appears that there was another side to the story. After the show one of the exhibitors, John Thorneloe, took the trouble at his own expense to produce a forty-page booklet, “*The Exhibitors Memorial Volume*,” in which he lambasted the organisers on a number of important aspects of the show, which he dubbed, scathingly, “*The Bingley Hall Bungle*.”

Although there was so large a surplus, only £110 was spent on prizes . . . although so economical in the one case, so profoundly generous were they in another that £210 . . . [was] divided amongst seventeen of their own body . . . they hardly dare publish a balance sheet . . . and twenty-nine other Members of the Committee had been awarded a silver medal each, with buckle and clasp. (5)

Amongst other criticisms, for which Thorneloe offers a considerable body of evidence, he gives chapter and verse of the committee’s handling of several exhibitors’ complaints concerning items which had been lost or stolen during the exhibition. Little compensation, sometimes none, was offered. For example, the misuse of Mr Earnshaw’s anvils caused his entry to miss out on the judging for prizes.

Mr T W Earnshaw, however, in a letter to the Daily Gazette dated Nov 11th 1865, says “ I sent seven . . . anvils . . . I came to Birmingham . . . could not find them . . . [but] after a long search we found them being used by the Committee to hold down the gas bags used in connection with the fairy fountain”. (6)

To digress for a moment, this booklet’s two interesting references to a pre-1899 fountain in the hall are the only ones that have turned up in the ephemera of those earlier years. It appears the second time in Thorniloe’s list of the committee’s expenditure, as the “*Fiery [sic] fountain, exhibited 33 times – £35*”.

In 1886 a further visit of the British Association inspired yet another major event in Bingley Hall. A prospectus was issued specifying the type of exhibitors required.

The Exhibition will be confined strictly to articles manufactured in Birmingham, and in the district embraced by a radius of fifteen miles. It is also proposed to limit the exhibitors to the leading manufacturers in their respective branches, or any firm producing a speciality, with the view of showing the great variety of trades, and the excellence of the work produced. A special feature will be the introduction of Workshops, illustrative of old Birmingham architecture, where quaint and interesting trades will be carried on . . . The Hall will be lighted with electricity. (7)

No effort was spared to transform the interior of the hall from its “*decidedly utilitarian appearance*”. On opening day the local morning newspaper described the décor and layout in considerable detail. (8)

The work of painting and colouring, which has completely metamorphosed the aspect of the interior, and the floral and upholstery decorations which have been added, make up a really charming appearance . . . the hard appearance of the girders supporting the roof is relieved by graceful festoons of delicate-coloured drapery . . . and between the festoons are placed, on brackets, vases of foliage and hanging plants . . . the whole of the area of the hall has been covered with a stout level wood floor . . . of inch timber . . . [there is a] lake island in the centre of the main avenue . . . over eighty feet in circumference and it is enclosed with a border of tufa stone . . . the island in the centre, fourteen feet in height . . . [carries a] lighthouse lantern . . . from which, at intervals, a powerful electric light will flash over all points in the hall. (9)

The new wooden floor mentioned in that report must have replaced a previous one that had deteriorated, although, strangely, this is not mentioned or even hinted at. Events prior to 1886 would surely have required a reasonable surface underfoot. In fact, confirmation of this appears in a

report of an 1884 show featured in the *Birmingham Daily Post* at the time. It specifically mentions that “*the floor is boarded*”. (10)

At the far end of the central avenue a number of two-storey reconstructions of ancient Birmingham buildings were situated.

Perhaps no street in the kingdom . . . was richer in quaint specimens of old timbered houses than the continuous thoroughfare . . . formed by two old streets, Digbeth and Deritend. There still remains the deeply interesting example of fourteenth-century architecture, now known as the Old Crown House . . . which Leland saw in 1538 and which is reproduced in the exhibition . . . opposite . . . stands the Golden Lion and . . . the old chapel of Deritend . . . on the other side are two old low-roofed taverns side by side, the “Old Leather Bottel” (sic) and the “Three Crowns”. (11)

The actual Old Crown is, of course, still *in situ* in Digbeth and has recently been restored. The Golden Lion was dismantled and part of it re-erected in Cannon Hill Park in 18**. Sadly, the chapel, taverns and the other ancient buildings in the vicinity had been demolished even before the 1886 exhibition.

Even outside the hall this scenic artistry was not neglected. Spanning the full width of Broad Street and reflecting the interior décor, an ornate triumphal arch was erected. It was endorsed, in huge letters, with the single word – “EXHIBITION”. (12)

A booklet produced for the event was entitled, "*Souvenir of the British Association and Exhibition of Local Products and Industries, Bingley Hall, Birmingham, August to October 1886*". Despite the long-winded title it is a charming publication. One of the surviving copies in Birmingham Central Library bears the signature of that well respected local historian, Robert K Dent. Perhaps it was Dent's own copy. It is believed that he was the author but that is not actually stated in the booklet. The layout is impeccable and both paper and font are well chosen. Each corner of every page is tastefully decorated with a tiny vignette of a significant Birmingham building. (13)

In the opinion of the *Birmingham Weekly Post* "the most attractive feature of the Bingley Hall Exhibition is Mr Bernasconi's impersonation of the old magician". (14) This comment referred to some amusing goings-on at Southall's stall. Visitors to the stand were offered a small pamphlet, written in spoof Old English, entitled "*Ye Historie Offe ye Anciente alchemyst's Laboratorie whiche ye Maisters Southall didde Produce atte ye Bingleye Halle Exhibytionne*". Southall's exhibit was described in the pamphlet with somewhat ponderous humour.

*Courteous Reader, Whenne ye Exhibytionne
offe ye handicraftismenne offe
Birmynghame was announced to be helde
inne Bingleye Halle, Maisters Southall, ye
Apothecaries offe Bulle Street, didde have
an idea offe shewing, side by side, an*

aneiente Alchemyst's Laboratorie and a modern Apothecarie's Shop . . . They didde dispense charmes, love philtres, and curious decoctions, and medicines offe ye olden time. (15)

Leaving aside this bit of playfulness, the numerous displays by Midland manufacturers were central to the purpose of the exhibition. As at earlier shows a few leading companies like Elkington's, Winfield's and Avery's, tended to dominate, but there were many smaller firms presenting excellent displays. In addition to presenting their products a high proportion of the participants demonstrated their manufacturing processes too.

To mention but a few of these, Houghton's were there with letterpress printing, Perry & Sons featured steel pen making and Nicholls & Son were weaving the metal gauze they supplied for miners' safety lamps. From outside Birmingham came Stevens of Coventry weaving silk and Brunton's of Kidderminster demonstrating carpet weaving. There were many more of these processes to be seen in the hall and they were as diverse as the manufacture of watches, toffees, spurs, pins and nails. Blind workers showed their skill at making brushes and baskets. Tangye's gas hammer was most impressive. It was "*said to strike 2,500 blows for one pennyworth of gas*".

In view of all these industrial goings on, which were virtually continuous throughout the show, it is small wonder that musical entertainment in the hall was severely marred, if not altogether ruined, as the *Birmingham Gazette* reported.

A series of vocal and instrumental concerts have been organised in the exhibition building . . . the ordinary disabilities of a promenade concert sink into insignificance beside those imposed upon the unfortunate vocalists by the overwhelming noises produced by machinery in motion, manufactures in full process, the ringing of bells, sounding of gongs, and clatter of every kind which prevails in the hall during the progress of these so-called concerts.
(16)

Separate sections of the exhibition were devoted to the natural history and archaeology of the Midlands. In yet another section were displayed a collection of historical items. Many of these relics, which were listed in the *Gazette* in full detail, were exceptionally interesting, as the following few examples testify.

A collection of Baskerville's books and personal relics of the great painter, together with other interesting remnants of old Birmingham, mainly of a literary character . . . including a Bill issued [early in the century] for the purpose of inducing young men to join the Royal Birmingham Fencible Infantry . . . it sets forth that the war cannot last much longer," owing to the immense decrease of those French frog-eating rascals". (17)

Of special interest were three examples of the early copying machines developed by James

Watt and produced at the Soho Works of Boulton & Watt. In their day these caused quite a stir.

The proposal to copy writing in facsimile was looked upon with alarm. Boulton had to hang about the lobby of the House of Commons and try to persuade anxious financiers that Bank of England notes were safe and could not be copied by the process.
(18)

Refreshments, indeed full meals, were on offer within the *reconstructed* Old Crown, with a range of alcoholic beverages, strangely foreshadowing the eventual use of the building as a public house.

The railway companies provided special excursion trains during the run of the exhibition, bringing visitors from all over the Midlands. Thousands of children in organised school parties were admitted free of charge, a worthy gesture by the organisers. Attendance was phenomenal. Even on the final day, 30 October, when the exhibition was formally closed by the Mayor, Alderman Martineau, no less than 10,000 visitors passed through the doors. In the following January an Illuminated Address was presented to the Honorary Secretary of the Exhibition Committee, Major Charles Hart, in the text of which the enormous success of the event was emphasised.

The unprecedented success of the exhibition in upholding the high position of our Town and District as a manufacturing centre, the incalculable pleasure and profit

afforded to upwards of 400,000 visitors, and the fact that the Exhibition resulted in a surplus of £5,000, must in itself have been most gratifying to you and your colleagues.
(19)

Turning our attention to displays of leisure goods in Bingley Hall, an early show whose catalogue has survived, as mentioned in an earlier chapter, is that of the English Sports and Pastimes Exhibition. It was staged in the late summer of 1882, the same year that the Speedwell Cycle Exhibitions began. An admission price of five shillings, almost half a week's wages for many people at that time, clearly indicated the class of visitor the organisers wished to interest. In addition the show had been arranged to coincide with that year's Birmingham Music Festival, an event that always attracted large numbers of affluent visitors to the town. (20)

At the top of the price range were the products of coachbuilders. Morgan's of London were offering a Landau – a type of four-wheeled carriage – “*with patent C spring*”, for 265 guineas. The somewhat less magnificent “*Royal Hansom*”, a two-wheeled cabriolet – hence “*Hansom cabs*”. Thomas Hansom, the designer, went bankrupt building Birmingham Town Hall. This model, made in Wolverhampton by Forder & Co, cost a mere 140 guineas.

The show was of special interest to cyclists. A spacious track was constructed inside the hall to enable them to test-ride the machines on offer should they so desire. More affordable than they

had been, although still far from cheap, were the bicycles on display, all of the “*Penny-Farthing*” design. Humber, Marriott & Co of Nottingham were asking £20 18s 0d for a racing model with a 55-inch front wheel. Rudge & Co of Coventry were displaying both bicycles and tricycles, whilst National Arms & Ammunition Co, based in Sparkbrook, offered a tricycle with 50-inch wheels at £27 15s 0d. Henry Matthews from Snow Hill was selling only one product – bells – but the brand name he had dreamt up was very odd – “*Comic Comicut Bicycle and Tricycle Bells, silent until the clapper is pushed out of the slot*”. An illustration in the catalogue shows the device to be a dangling bell, shaped like those in belfries, the type mentioned on an earlier page.

Although there were no animals at the show, saddles and horse clothing from Walsall – from where else but in “leather town” indeed? – catered for equestrian interests. Spratts were there selling dog medicines and “*patent dog cakes with beetroot*” – beetroot, really?

For anglers there was everything from fly rods, reels, artificial bait to fishing punts. Rowing dinghies, skiffs and canoes catered for those who enjoyed being afloat. There was even a steam launch on display but not priced. Presumably, as it has been said about Rolls Royce limousines, if you had to ask the price you couldn’t afford one!

Greeners of St Mary’s Square offered a range of guns for the sportsman including a “*new hammerless gun*” and their “*Magnum . . . guaranteed to kill 10 yards further than any other choke gun*”. From Witton, well away from

Birmingham's long-established gun quarter, Kynoch's were displaying sporting guns together with cartridges of many types. To capture the interest of the sporting fraternity there were daily demonstrations of skill by a pair of crack shots, father and son.

Thomas Brown will shoot daily at clay pigeons . . . his son, Charles . . . who claims to be the champion shot of the world at glass balls, will display his skill. (21)

Considering that young Charles was a mere eight years old, this claim seems to have been exaggerated quite beyond belief.

Alfred Stanley displayed "*Archery Jackets and Lawn Tennis Implements*". Lillywhite Frowd & Co of London had a wide range of sporting equipment on offer: bats, stumps and balls for the cricketer, footballs and "*Lawn Tennis Bats*" – yes, "*Bats!* Timmins of Pershore Street stocked "*Quoits, Quoit Pins and Quoit Compasses*", whilst John Keane of Snow Hill, at a somewhat less elevated level of trade, offered footballs and boxing gloves.

The building trade has shown its wares in Bingley Hall on a number of occasions. Regrettably, records of the first of these exhibitions in April 1882 are not to be found, but, fortunately, a catalogue describing the next one is available. Opening on 30 April 1883 the second "*Building and Materials Exhibition*" attracted over 150 exhibitors and had a successful four weeks run. (22)

Over 400 products were on display, although, as is usual upon such occasions, some of the exhibitors were simply people seizing an excellent opportunity to market wares unconnected with the industry. For example, A C Sneezum – surely not a genuine surname! – at “*The Civet Cat*”, New Street specialised in equipment for croquet, cricket and other sports. On second thoughts though, builders do often have offices and Sneezum listed desks and writing sets too, so maybe there was a slight link after all. Pool Brothers from Stratford Road had no link whatsoever, unless we concede that their gas-fired “*domestic steam washer capable of doing a family’s washing in an hour with very little labour*”, would have eased the workload of the builders’ wives considerably.

In addition to everyday materials used in the trade, some of the other items listed in the catalogue catch the eye, flights of stairs and circular iron staircases, for example. “*Semi-Prism Reflecting Lens Pavement Lights for diverting daylight into basements*” are unusual today, although still to be seen here and there in the city, set into the pavement. Makers of sheds and greenhouses were also offering “*Bicycle Houses and Tricycle Houses*”. Adjacent to a stand displaying “*closet pans and traps, with glazed inside*” – how about the outside? – another firm, Jennings’ Patent Earth Closet Company, were offering “*Pull-up commodes, plain deal or varnished*”. Yale Locks described their products as “*absolutely unpickable*” – famous last words maybe?

Humdrum interior decorating materials were supplemented with “*heads and horns for hall decoration and preserved birds*”. Interiors of churches were catered for too, with such things as “*Brass Eagle Lecterns, Fonts in Caen stone and Brass Rails*”. The purveyor, James Willis, traded, appropriately it may be thought, from Temple Row.

The building trade, making a return visit to Bingley Hall in October 1908, had even more to offer, so much indeed that it is difficult to make a moderate selection. Journals and magazines available at the exhibition provide something of an indicator to the extent of the show: *The Builder, Building World, Building News, Illustrated Carpenter & Builder, The Sanitary Record, The Plumber & Decorator, Decorators’ & Painters’ Magazine, Stone Trades Journal, Brick & Pottery Trades Journal* – the list in the catalogue goes on! (23)

Several local firms were offering strong-room doors and safes; even more of them advertised paints and varnish. Panicali Bros. of Moor Street were selling plaster cornices and centre flowers for ceilings, plus paving mosaics and parquetry flooring. Butler’s of Tipton had “*lock furniture*” – door knobs, etc – in china, wood and glass, while their namesakes, Butler’s of Phillip Street were catalogued as “*masonry contractors, monumental sculptors, stone, slate, marble and grindstone merchants*”. Their slate suppliers, Oakley’s and Macnofferen’s, were there too, all the way from the quarries of Blaenau Festiniog and Portmadoc.

It was a sign of the times that Handsworth's Best & Lloyd's were now offering electric light fittings in addition to those for gas that they had been selling for years. Ward, Skelding & Co from Smethwick displayed a "*Patent ferret drain cleaner*" and a "*sewer plough*", but the really heavy goods came from Darlaston. Keay Ltd could supply "*steel girders and beams, steel railway bridges and roofs.*" Very much lighter but exceptionally useful was the "*patent automatic penny-in-the-slot WC lock for public WCs*", produced by Brown's of Smallbrook Street.

Probably the most popular public entertainment in Birmingham during 1889, the year in which, on 14 January, Queen Victoria elevated the town to city status, was a trade show in Bingley Hall, "*The Electrical & Industrial Exhibition*". It was advertised in *The Dart*, a local weekly magazine, as "*the greatest combination of electrical appliances ever brought together*". (28) There were no less than 260 stands, according to the catalogue, which carried the following comment:

The special feature of this Exhibition . . . is Electricity, as applied to the various industries . . . The lighting of the Exhibition is divided into sections and has been contracted to the following firms, who each illustrate their various systems. (29)

There were seven such firms listed, mainly from the north-east and London, but only one is heard of today, Thomson-Houston. Mains

electricity had not yet reached the Bingley Hall area of Birmingham, although it was already not too far away, just around the corner in Easy Row.

Opened by Lady Randolph Churchill on 1 August, the show was a roaring success from the word go. *The Birmingham Daily Gazette* reported that:

By the evening the exhibition had attracted nearly 5,000 visitors as they flocked to see the engine houses, the great central hall with numerous stalls, the illuminated winter gardens and also the model of a working coal mine.(30)

The Dart, noted for acerbic comments on the Birmingham scene, was uncharacteristically benign and congratulatory about the show from the very start. In an article in their edition of 9 August it was given an unequivocal welcome.

The speciality of the exhibition is, or should be, an important factor in its success. Electricity, as applied to the thousand and one requirements of modern life, has come so rapidly to the front that to devote so much space to its illustration in an exhibition is to offer a series of profoundly interesting object lessons as to the extent to which the new power is thrusting aside the older forces which have been subjected to the will of man . . . It is worth a visit simply to see the wonderful transformation which has been effected in the appearance of the

ugliest building in Birmingham. The whole area of the hall has been made comfortable by the construction of boarded floors, the unsightly roof is covered with graceful draperies and decorated with flags; while the rows of stands in every direction have been judiciously intermixed . . . to produce quite a brilliant effect. (31)

The magazine covered the show throughout the three months run with a special feature, “*Exhibition Jottings*”. It is evident that a great effort had been made to present the show in the best possible way, as one of the earliest of these reports acknowledged.

The visitor . . . will not fail to observe the admirable manner in which the gigantic work of fitting up the exhibition and flooring the vast space had been accomplished. (32)

The manner in which the magazine writes about the flooring, seemingly as though a wooden floor was something new in the hall, is baffling. (33) Had the floor laid down in 1886 deteriorated terminally in such a short time, requiring replacement? If so it seems strange that blue brick paving was not adopted instead. Popular in Birmingham’s streets in those days, it was virtually indestructible. The hall was certainly timber-floored in the twentieth century, presumably with the planks laid down in 1889.

As was to be expected stallholders dealing with electrical goods and services were in the majority. Dent and Sons, Dudley, displayed electrical exploders and signals for use in the mines, whilst Edison & Swan, in addition to “*incandescent lamps*”, were selling electric miner’s lamps. Information about the batteries for those lamps would have been interesting. Electric Power Storage Co were offering large accumulators for general lighting so perhaps the pit lamps had a scaled-down version of those. Weight would have been the greatest problem.

On show also were arc lamps, electric welding machines, bells and cranes, railway and tramcar batteries, dynamos and much else. Shippey Bros of London, in addition to their stock-in-trade, electric battery motors, exhibited an interesting collection of “*ancient incandescent lamps manufactured in 1877, 1878 and 1879, and one from 1874*”. A particular attraction was one of Edison’s new-fangled phonographs, discussed earlier, the forerunner of the gramophone, “*a delicate little instrument the size of a sewing machine*” which could be seen and heard in operation. (33) Also active in the field of transmitted sound in those experimental years, the National Telephone Co had what *The Dart* described as “*an interesting and tastily arranged show*”. (34)

Undoubtedly the most popular facilities at the exhibition were the Winter Gardens. “*These are set apart for refreshments and smoking*”, the catalogue explains. A two-page spread in *The Dart* of cartoon-like sketches depicting various aspects

of the show, carries a small drawing of this charming feature. The magazine waxed euphoric.

The Winter Gardens at the Exhibition has been one of the most popular institutions in the city, and with its bright parterres, trim lawns, rockeries and rustic arbours, and the plashing [sic] music of its miniature fountains, it deserves its popularity. In the evening when the garden is brilliant with electric lamps and the fountain and rockeries reveal little romantic nooks . . . the scene is one of fairy-like beauty, and reflects the highest credit upon Messrs Vertegans, whose magic wand wrought the transformation. (35)

Anticipating, in a very minor way, the disaster at Bingley Hall a century later, there was a fire in the Winter Gardens during the show, as *The Dart* reported. The cause is not stated but it was an area where men sat and smoked, so, as is so often the case, perhaps a carelessly discarded cigarette end was to blame.

Visitors . . . have an opportunity of tasting the quality of the Birmingham spring water used by our forefathers . . . Messrs Goffe, the well-known and old-established mineral water manufacturers, use the water from the Ancient Dygbeth Spring for all their beverages . . . [and [have contrived a novel application for the extinction of fires, which has already proved of great service in

preventing the spread of a fire which broke out in the Winter Gardens a few weeks ago.
(36)

The next exhibition to be primarily concerned with electricity, held in the spring of 1898, was not such a grand affair. (Perhaps the elaborate 1889 show had acquired a strong element of “city status” celebration in its conception). Even so the catalogue was able to list 184 stands. (37)

Walsall Electrical Co, in addition to installing temporary lighting for exhibition and public entertainments, hitherto their principal trade, were now offering to carry out permanent electrical installations. These would be provided with electric current from the new street mains mentioned earlier. However, these had still not been laid near enough to Bingley Hall for this service to be available there.

At this show there were many more firms selling machinery. Among local firms were Canning’s of Great Hampton Street – still there today, but a very much larger company now – with electro-plating and polishing plant, Taylor & Challen’s with power presses and Richardson’s of Broad Street with “*Otto Gas Engines from ¼hp to 12hp*”. A special exhibit in this category was highlighted in the catalogue: “*Don’t forget the working gold mine – Klondyke in Birmingham !*” The gold rush in Alaska, immortalised in 1925 by Charlie Chaplin in his epic film of that name, was in full swing in 1898.

There was a display section given over once again, free of charge, to “*Artisans’ and Women’s*

Industries” but there were only 96 entries. As the catalogue put it “*the entries in these sections are necessarily limited on account of space*”.

Generosity has its limits in the commercial world.

In 1922 the Institute of British Foundrymen held their Annual Conference in Birmingham, formal proceedings and lectures taking place in more exalted surroundings than the old exhibition hall could offer, such as the Chamber of Commerce buildings. Nevertheless, Bingley Hall was the scene of a Foundry Trades Exhibition held in conjunction with the conference. The souvenir booklet gives little information about the displays, mentioning only “*modern foundry and historical exhibits*”.

(38) Perhaps there was a separate publication giving the details which has not survived.

However, a contemporary engineering journal published a lengthy report on the exhibition. In the main the text is highly technical, of interest only to the specialist. The following extract is adequate for this present purpose.

In addition to the main attraction of the stands of over a hundred exhibitors, there are lectures on foundry practice, daily exhibitions of industrial cinematograph films and competitions in core-making, moulding and pattern-making for foundry employees and students . . . It is impossible to summarise the contents of the exhibition otherwise than by saying that they cover the whole range of foundry work . . . the machinery on view aggregated 1,000 tons in weight. (39)

Those attending the conference, many of whom were accompanied by their wives, were not actually working foundrymen but rather their managers and employers. Not a little of their time seems to have been devoted to socialising. For instance, they attended a garden party at the Botanical Gardens one afternoon. Inasmuch as the party began at 3-30pm and they had some distance to travel to get there, an organised visit to the Bingley Hall exhibition, prearranged to follow lunch on that very same day, must have been extremely brief and, more likely than not, poorly attended. During the afternoon of 20 June the Duke of York paid a visit to the hall, touring the exhibits and witnessing “*competitions by foundry employees in core and mould making*”. (40) No doubt there would have been a better turnout on that occasion.

Two years later, in June 1924, foundry practice and equipment were again on display in the hall. Organised by the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, the International Foundry Trades Exhibition attracted exhibitors from Glasgow, Edinburgh, Belfast, Tyneside, Sheffield, and from all over the Midlands. Despite the impressive title of the show only Brussels was represented from abroad. Once again there were competitions for foundry employees to enter: core making, moulding and pattern-making. (41)

Over the years there have been a number of exhibitions in the hall concerning efficiency in commercial and industrial life. The earliest of these for which evidence is on file in Central Library took place just before the Great War, in October

1913. Entitled the “*Business Exhibition*”, it was fairly small, only fifty stands being listed in the catalogue. (42)

Dedicated, as it was, to equipment and labour-saving devices for office work, the emphasis was on calculators, typewriters, and sundries like carbon paper. Halsby’s offered “*The Protectograph – stamps and embosses, limiting cheques to – not over twelve pounds*”. Birmingham Private Telephone Co of Livery Street claimed that their equipment gave “*instant connection with every department, and every department with each other*”. There were “*already 480,000 in use*” they boasted, rather a high figure, it might be thought. Were there really so many firms in the area already using such equipment and even more potential customers as well? It might be that an extra nought had slipped in after the proof reading of the catalogue or perhaps two! Even 48,000 would have been a lot of users.

Todd’s featured the “*Swan fountain pen*” – famous and popular for several generations - in their range of goods, whilst Talykron Ltd pointed out that their clocking-in devices had the advantage of being “*not limited to a certain number of men*”. Dictaphone’s recording machines competed with Edison’s but both still used wax cylinders for their recordings.

Not long after the Great War the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce promoted another efficiency display in Bingley Hall, the “*Birmingham & Midlands Business Efficiency Exhibition*”. Taking place in September 1920, it was a much larger affair than the pre-war attempt,

with 130 exhibitors listed in the catalogue. It was a sign of the times that the promoters' foreword found it necessary to sound the following warning:

Now that Peace has been signed and ratified it is incumbent on British manufacturers to make every endeavour to secure the greatest possible production from their available resources . . . so that for the future a greatly increased output may be obtained with the reduced staff and equipment which post-war conditions have imposed on this country. Foreign competition will inevitably – perhaps sooner than many imagine – be very severe in the home and overseas markets. (43)

Advances in the world of the telephone were exemplified in the “*Automatic telephone Exchange System*” displayed and demonstrated on the Siemens stand. Ellam's proudly boasted that their duplicating machines could print “*at a rate of 100 copies per minute*”. They were also selling stencil paper and ink, typewriter ribbons and carbon paper. “*All our goods are of British manufacture*” their advertisements patriotically declared.

Birmingham's Gas Department constructed, as their showpiece, a staff canteen “*suitable for installing on business premises*” and a display mounted by the Municipal Technical School, Suffolk Street, demonstrated the “*correlation between the drawing office and workshops*”. In one of the annexes there were regular lectures on a

variety of subjects, such as “*The principles and practice of correct costing*”, “*Training executives*” and “*Calculation and accounting by machinery*”. The other annex was designated as a cinema hall. Amongst films shown there were “*Transport and Handling Methods*” “*How Welfare Work Aids Efficiency*”, “*Wonders of Wireless*” and “*The Birth and Adventures of a Fountain Pen*”.

Efficiency was to the fore again in 1922 when the “*Industrial & Commercial Efficiency Exhibition*” came to town, again promoted by the Chamber of Commerce. Stands taken up numbered 144, little change from 1920. The purpose of the promoters was announced in the catalogue.

To promote and protect the Home, Colonial and Foreign Trade and the manufactures of the UK, in particular those of Birmingham and the Midlands. (44)

Whilst there were many familiar firms exhibiting, there were some interesting new faces, amongst them the Birmingham Jewellery & Goldsmiths’ Association and the Birmingham Safety Council. “*Intimate co-operation of art with industry is essential . . . to secure maximum efficiency*” was the slogan of the British Institute of Industrial Art, whose section was wholly devoted to the importance of advertising. The Institute’s display included posters, show cards and labels, book designs, fabrics, jewellery, inn signs and much else. A number of local firms displayed examples of their own advertising material, Cadbury, Midland Railway, Huntley & Palmer and

Birmingham Small Arms (BSA) amongst them.

Films showing in the cinema hall included “*Modern Production Methods*”, “*Recreation at Bournville*”, “*The Value of Film as a Publicity Medium*” and “*A Modern Biscuit Factory*”. In the main hall the three newspapers controlled by Lord Iliffe were well represented. One of them, the *Birmingham Weekly Post*, in the catalogue, proclaimed its own virtues.

First issued in 1825 as the “Birmingham Journal”, a really great family weekly newspaper – no sensationalism, no record of all the crime of the week and doubtful coupon competitions.

The *Birmingham Mail*, which was already “*printed on British-made paper*”, would be joined in that respect “*early in the New Year*” by the *Birmingham Post*, when all three of Iliffe’s newspapers would be “*printed on British-made paper only*”.

Moving on to 1930, that year’s catalogue of a Business Efficiency Exhibition had only 65 stands to report, a huge decline, which rather belied their claim that “*This Exhibition is the largest and most comprehensive of its kind ever held in any provincial city*”. (45) This decline was not unusual because 1930 was a time of serious economic slump.

In 1936 the organisers of yet another efficiency exhibition came up with a really smart idea, producing a catalogue with a difference, as the preface explained.

You might notice that this handbook differs from the usual style of catalogue because it is something more than a bare list of exhibitors. The exhibitor's comments have been written with the idea of providing information about their products and services . . . useful for reference long after the exhibition. (47)

Most exhibition catalogues get scrapped after the show ends. With this fresh style the participants' advertising material had a very good chance of surviving on the reference shelves of their potential customers. However, the smart idea had no beneficial effect on take-up of stands, which stayed at the same low level, one fewer in fact. The displays, mainly of office interest, were largely similar to those of earlier years, although, naturally, the goods were updated versions.

The most notable fresh items were photocopying machines and piecework tickets. The introduction of piecework into manufacturing had gathered pace during the 1920s, creating considerable industrial unrest. For example, in Birmingham, at Lucas's factory, this culminated in a strike in January 1932. (48) However, modernisation was not to be denied, only delayed, and piecework soon became the norm in industry.

Much later, in 1956, yet another Business Efficiency Exhibition was promoted. (49) The catalogue reflects a much greater interest in participating, 118 stands being occupied, but by 1960 interest had declined once again, only 101 stands being taken up. (50) In 1965 matters got

even worse, only 90 exhibitors taking part. (51)
This fall in interest seems distinctly at odds with the constant enthusiasm for greater efficiency that has characterised commercial and industrial life since the Second World War.

In May 1962 quite a different angle on efficiency was promoted in the hall when the Industrial Research & Productivity Exhibition was held there. Sir Bertram Waring, Managing Director of Joseph Lucas Ltd and President of the Birmingham Productivity Association, in a welcome message published in the catalogue, wrote:

The Council of the Birmingham Productivity Association has long recognised the need for holding an event to highlight the work of those engaged in Research and Development and the vital contribution they make to industrial productivity. (52)

Exhibitors, who were listed alphabetically, ranged from Benton & Stone Ltd, an old-established firm in Aston Brook Street, to Wolseley Holdings Ltd from Leicester. The former were displaying "*Pneumatic Control Equipment*", while the latter provided "*protective coatings against corrosion*". Research associations were thick on the ground – British Iron & Steel Research Association and British Welding Research Association to mention but two. Local firms included BSA Tool Group from Kitts Green, the Mint in Icknield Street, Dunlop Rubber Co from Fort Dunlop in Erdington and Rover of Solihull, the latter showing

an "*auxiliary power plant*" using their new "*Gas Turbine Engine*", the first in the world. Government support came in the shape of a display by the Department of Scientific & Industrial Research. Birmingham's College of Advanced Technology, Gosta Green, soon to be upgraded to university status, came too.

Like all business efficiency exhibitions this was a very serious-minded affair, with no distractions like music and fountains. Conferences were held on a host of weighty topics, amongst which were: "*The Application of Low Cost Automation*", "*Labour and the Approach to Automation*", "*Making Work Study Pay*" and "*Ergonomics in the Iron and Steel Industry*"

Much earlier in the century, in 1908, another event with an exorbitantly lengthy title – and we have found a few! – was held in Bingley Hall. The organisers of the National Association of Master House Painters & Decorators of England chose Birmingham as a venue for the second time, the catalogue informs us, for their 15th Annual Convention and Exhibition. (53)

In addition to the usual descriptions of displays in the hall – fifty stands were occupied on this occasion – the glossy catalogue carries an unusually large variety of advertisements of considerable historical interest in themselves. It also contains a section devoted to excellent contemporary photographs of interesting features and buildings of Birmingham, together with descriptive text. One of the buildings illustrated, the Technical School, Suffolk Street, was, we are told, the venue for their earlier visit to Birmingham,

in 1896, the year after it opened. An excursion that had been arranged for them, taking in Warwick, Leamington Spa and Stratford-on-Avon, is described in detail with attractive photographs of those places attached.

Naturally, many of the displays consisted of wallpaper, paints and varnishes. Shand Kydd and Sanderson, both still well known wallpaper manufacturers, were there while Postan and Berger were just two of the many vendors of paints and varnishes.

The Fifth Provincial Shoe, Leather & Machinery Exhibition and Market took place in Bingley Hall in January 1910. This was the first and only exhibition of the trade ever held in Birmingham and was purely a trade show – “*bona fide Retail Traders only will be admitted*” directed the organisers in their catalogue. (54)

The heavyweight firm of the show was Henry Knowles Ltd of Liverpool with no less than fifteen tons of leather on their stand, including “*English Bends and Butts*”. Bristol’s Jay Brothers claimed to be “*the largest makers of heavy nailed, sprigged and slugged work in the kingdom*”. “*Dandy*” and “*International*” were just two of the seventeen types of heel on offer at the stand of Manchester’s “*Lancashire Revolving Heel Company*”. All kinds of tools for boot-makers, including “*heel-dummies*”, “*lasting jacks*” and “*edge-irons (jigger or plain)*”, could be had from Richter & Son of Northampton.

With all this obscure trade terminology to cope with, perhaps it is just as well that the general public were excluded. At least “*Dreadnought*

Polish”, for boots and shoes of course, offered no semantic problems. The brand name would surely have been inspired by the most recent and revolutionary addition to the British fleet. (Just a few years’ later Dreadnought battleships would play a significant part in the sea battles of the Great War). Despite its formidable name this polish seems to have been scuppered by its rival at Bingley Hall, “*Cherry Blossom*”, purveyed by Chiswick Polish Company, which is popular even today.

Twice daily the Paganini Anglo-Viennese Band entertained the leather trade with popular light music, much of it from the Savoy operettas, such as “The Gondoliers”. Another of the band’s numbers, Lincke’s “*The Nigger’s Birthday*” would not have been thought of then as racist, but would certainly cause an outcry today, justifiably so.

Another Bingley Hall event exclusive to the trade – coal mining in this instance – was the Coal-Face Machinery Exhibition in September 1935. Not for the first time, nor the last, Birmingham’s central position in England had been perceived as an advantage when a venue was being sought. Covered at great length by journalists from a major technical publication, some of the terminology – once again! – is jargon to most of us, but the sense of the following extract is not too difficult to follow.

It may appear surprising at first sight, that Birmingham should have been selected as a venue . . . Birmingham was decided upon

owing to its geographical position, making it accessible from all parts of the country . . . The exhibition was limited to equipment supplied by members of the Coal-Face Machinery Exhibitors' Association, and was not open to the public . . . The Eickhoff shearing machine . . . has proved very successful when clean coal is particularly required . . . The total working time for a complete kerf is from 6 minutes to 14 minutes. The shift capacity of the machine is from 30 to 40 kerfs. (55)

For many years the gas industry had been obliged to parade its wares and services before the Birmingham public at general trade exhibitions, despite severe competition due to the ever-increasing popularity of electricity. The National Gas Exhibition was usually held in London, as was so much else – in the light of recent sporting history far too much else, many provincials believe! – but for once, in 1923, it paid a visit to Bingley Hall. The foreword in the catalogue, written by Alderman John Henry Lloyd, chairman of the city's Gas Committee, tells us why.

This is the first National Gas Exhibition that had been held outside London and it is only fitting that it should take in the area in which Murdoch made many of his early experiments in Gas Lighting at the Soho Works of Messrs Boulton and Watt . . . the Executive Committee trust that the Exhibition will serve the useful purpose of

presenting to the public convincing evidence of the marked advance which has been made in recent years in the design, efficiency and utility of all descriptions of gas appliances, and that it will lead to the extended use of gas in home and industry.
(56)

Birmingham has never stinted in its preparations for prestigious events and this was certainly borne out by the manner in which Bingley hall was treated for this important exhibition, as the *Evening Despatch* reported.

For several days an army of workpeople have been engaged on the preliminaries for turning its usually interior into a temple of light. Approximately 11,000 feet of gas supply pipes have been laid. The overhead lighting will be by high and low pressure lamps of a total illuminating capacity of 94,700 candle-power . . . the blaze of light will not be confined exclusively to the interior of Bingley Hall, for the old street lamps in the approaches to the exhibition, four of which gave a light of 60-candle power, have been superseded by 16 others, which are capable of shedding a light of 600-candle power. (57)

Rather pretentiously, there were twelve pages listing patrons of the show, some 450 of them “*Right Honourables*”, like Austen and Neville Chamberlain, to a host of “*Sirs*” – Herbert Austin,

not yet ennobled, was one of those – fifty Lord Mayors and Aldermen, plus Councillors and Professors by the truck load. Neville Chamberlain, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, but at one time ***** , speaking at the opening ceremony on 17 September, drew attention to “*the solid mass of carbon which yearly descended upon industrial centres through the use of coal direct instead of coal turned into gas*”. (58)

Birmingham Gas Department chose to promote “*small coke as the ideal household fuel . . . in kitchen and dining room grate*”. Coke is the residue after gas has been extracted from coal. The department almost always had large quantities to dispose of, hence this promotion. The industry combined forces to present a large show of up-to-date gas fittings and apparatus suitable for the home. Full scale models of lounge, kitchen, bedroom, nursery and bathroom were fitted out and there were daily cookery demonstrations.

For industrial and commercial visitors there were gas engines, mains drilling equipment, control systems for automatic street lighting, pneumatic gas switches and refractors for coke ovens. In the hall’s upper annexe the Annual Conference of the British Commercial Gas Association was entertained with lectures such as “*Gas in Industry*”, “*Gas in Catering*” and “*Gas Service and Domestic Economy*”.

There was even a small section devoted to historical exhibits; a gas fire from 1884, a meter from even earlier, 1844, and, most interesting of all, “*part of the original gas main laid down by William Murdoch to his house near Queen’s Head*

Lane in Handsworth". Murdoch's pioneering role in the development of coal gas lighting was honoured by placing his statue on a pedestal near the main entrance to the hall.

There were two conferences in the hall during the exhibition. The first one, which was for members of the Junior Gas Association, was attended by about a thousand young gas engineers and salesmen. Perhaps there had been mutterings in the ranks for they were put firmly in their place by Mr Goodenough, chairman of the Executive Committee of the British Council Gas Association, the industry's senior body.

Promotion always has to be earned before it could be won there were, it is true, instances of flagrant favouritism and nepotism, but they were exceedingly rare . . . blame oneself for failure or a limited degree of success in life. (59)

Hundreds of their seniors, mainly representatives of the largest gas undertakings in the country, met for their annual general meeting the day before the show ended. They were able to congratulate themselves on a job well done. In the final report the exhibition was rated a great success, 90,000 visitors being recorded, a daily average of 6,000. (60)

In industry, as in every sphere of life, the fundamental requirement of success is, of course, training, especially if young recruits. From time immemorial apprenticeship has been the tried and tested method for the soundest results. Although

sadly neglected in Britain today, forty years ago it was still in vogue, as was to be seen in Bingley Hall at the Careers Exhibition in 1961, an event honoured by a royal visitor, as the *Birmingham Post* reported.

The Duke of Edinburgh made a 75-minute tour of the Careers Exhibition at Bingley Hall . . . spent much of the time talking to apprentices . . . about their progress in training schemes . . . at the National Coal Board stand the Duke was particularly interested in the secret experiments on the production of smokeless fuel. (61)

One of the smaller trade shows in the previous year was the Newsagents' Fair, Booksellers and Stationers' Exhibition. Sponsored by the trade's magazine, *Retail Newsagent*, it ran for four days in January 1960. Many of the stands were exhibiting display fixtures and other useful shop equipment. (62)

The tobacco industry was well represented, Player's of Nottingham, Wills from Bristol and Benson & Hedges of *****. Roll-Tip (England) Ltd promoted ball pens – innovative at the time - as well as the traditional fountain pens. Forget-me-not Cards Ltd, still in the trade today, were offering Christmas cards “*in a retail range of 2d to 10 guineas*”. The latter price was the equivalent of a really good weekly wage at that time so it is difficult to envisage a vast public anxious to purchase those cards!