

Historians' meeting 27 October 2023

Mary Bodfish: 'Early Years at Soho'

Mary Bodfish could make any subject entertaining and interesting and her talk on Matthew Boulton, James Watt and the Soho Works was especially so.

Handsworth was heathland with the Hockley Brook forming a pool for a metal-rolling factory, when Matthew Boulton (born in Steelhouse Lane in 1728) bought the site for £20,000 in 1762. There he began manufacturing 'toys', that is, small metal goods, vases etc. At that time Birmingham did not have an assay office so all his goods had to travel to Chester to be assayed. Lichfield MP Thomas Gilbert lobbied on his behalf and Birmingham finally acquired its own assay office in 1773 with the anchor as its hallmark. The partnership with James Watt began in 1769, when Watt moved to Birmingham to build his steam engines, which were a great improvement on the Newcomen engine.

Boulton oversaw the manufactory and Watt the foundry. The complete site included workers' cottages and meeting rooms and attracted visitors from near and far, including the 11-year-old Princess Victoria. Boulton and Watt were also founder members of the Lunar Society.