

A visit to Blists Hill, Ironbridge

Stephen Mills May 2024

After many years, I recently re-visited Blists Hill Victorian town near Ironbridge, an open-air museum made up of various buildings moved and rebuilt on site, original industrial structures, and a stretch of the Shropshire Canal. It is one of ten museums operated by the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Blists Hill area was heavily industrialised, comprising brick and tile works, blast furnaces, and coal, iron, and fire clay mines. The canal ran across the site to the Hay Inclined Plane, which transported boats up and down a 207 ft high incline from Blists Hill to Coalport. It really is a fascinating, varied site, especially for someone with an interest in the region's industrial heritage.

Of course, as usual, I had to play my usual game of finding items made in Gloucestershire, and I wasn't disappointed. The re-created bicycle shop included an example of the much-loved Pederson bicycle, or **Dursley Pedersen bicycle**, developed by Danish inventor Mikael Pedersen and produced in Dursley. First patented in the early 1890s, the first models were made largely of wood, although the Blist Hill one was later and made of steel.



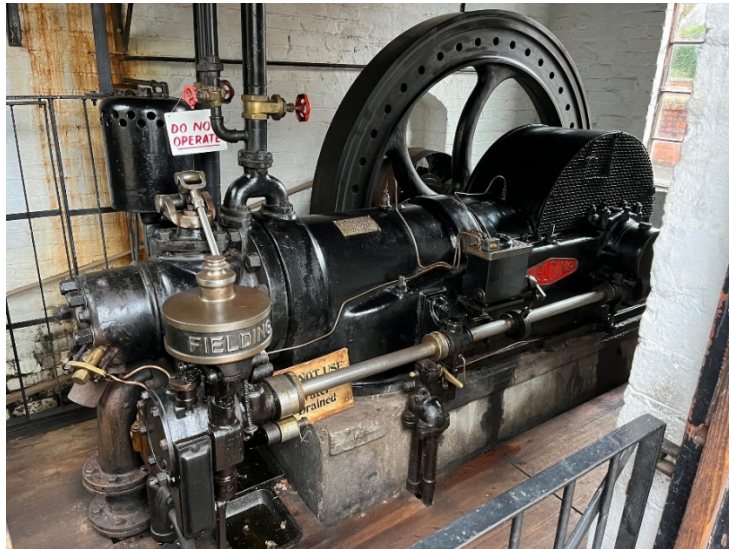
In a nearby engineering workshop was a small inverted vertical single cylinder (enclosed) engine manufactured by **Sisson & Co** of Gloucester. Established by William Sisson in 1889, the company built their reputation partly on designing and developing high speed launch and marine engines and boilers. But they also made a range of other products - for example, in the early 1920s they manufactured chocolate-rolling machinery for Cadbury Brothers. But one boat well-known to many of us is 'Sabrina' built in 1870 for the Gloucester-Sharpness Canal Company's engineer and directors. After a long life, in the early 1970s, she was restored and fitted with a Sissons steam engine and a boiler built by Historic Steam at the Kew Bridge Steam Museum. In May 2019, she returned to the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal and is now based at Saul Junction. By 1958, the firm of Bellis & Morcom Ltd had acquired all the shares of Sissons, as the culmination of twelve years of co-operation between the two companies.

In another nearby building was a 60 BHP oil engine produced by the well-known engineering company of Fielding & Platt, whose huge Atlas Works is now largely covered by the Gloucester Quays shopping complex. The engine was built in 1927 and came from a sawmill in Smethwick. Power is transmitted via line shafting beneath wooden floorboards across the adjacent yard.

GSIA Journal for 1992 looked at the company's first 100 years (Fielding & Platt, An innovative Gloucester engineering company), and a huge amount of information is now available at <https://www.fieldingandplathistory.org.uk/>, a growing archive of



historical material, photos, old documents, and memories, much of which has been gathered by former employees.



And in yet another much larger building was the 'Spry', the last surviving Severn trow. She was built in Chepstow and registered in Gloucester in 1894, destined to spend much of her life operating in and around the Bristol Channel. Over her long life she carried limestone, sand, and numerous other cargoes, eventually ending up at Diglis Basin, Worcester, where she gradually deteriorated into a complete wreck. However, she was eventually acquired by several organisations including the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust, and in 1983, transported to Blists Hill where a decade-long meticulous rebuild took place. It took 3 years to acquire enough wood to for the rebuild and consumed no less than 83 trees, donated by generous benefactors. In 1992, the finished boat was carried on a lorry to Bristol for the International Festival of the Sea, where she sailed again for the first time in 60 years, later spending some time at the National Waterways Museum in Gloucester. She is now a permanent and impressive display at Blists Hill.



It's always gratifying to come across products that reflect Gloucestershire's lengthy and innovative engineering past, something we should be justifiably proud of!

A celebration of the Dursley Pederson bicycle

Coincidentally, while I was looking at a distinctive Pederson bike at Blists Hill, more than 30 Pederson riders descended on Dursley to take part in the Pedersen Gathering. Organised by the Veteran-Cycle Club, they were greeted by the Mayor and Deputy Mayor. The first 'Pedersen Pilgrimage' to Dursley took place in 1993 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Mikael Pedersen's first patent application for his unique design. As part of the recent event, riders visited Pederson's grave in Dursley. This was followed by several talks at Kingshill House.