

The Development of the Jewellery Quarter, Birmingham

Although metalworking is first recorded in the area in the 14th century, goldsmiths and silversmiths have been working in what we now call the Jewellery Quarter for more than 200 years. Originally scattered across Birmingham, they began to congregate in the Hockley area from 1760 onwards. The main reason for this was the development of the Colmore family's Newhall estate which released more land for housing and manufacturing.

Precious metal-working grew out of the 'toy' trades – not children's playthings but buckles, buttons, pins, pens, silverware, candle sticks and other small metal trinkets. 'Brummagem toys' were produced in their hundreds and thousands, in cut-steel, brass and silver. The ranges of products produced there have all contributed to its nicknames 'The City of a Thousand Trades' and 'The Workshop of the World'.

As the trade expanded new streets were laid out across former rural estates, and substantial houses were built for wealthy manufacturers. Alongside these large houses, terraces of artisans' homes were also constructed. For many entrepreneurs this allowed them to live and work in the same building, saving them from the expense of having to rent a second property. Now a family could turn their front rooms or back gardens into a workshop and live in the rest of the house.

The different craftspeople and manufacturers were dependent on each other's distinctive specialist skills which explain their concentration in such a compact area.

During the 1820s two key events led to the further development of the Quarter. For the first time gas was being piped in which made it possible for longer working hours and a steadier heat source for smouldering. Coupled with the opening of the sand quarries which provided the factories with vital ingredients needed for the casting process, the Quarter again expanded.

Although the Jewellery Quarter suffered through times of hardships and unemployment things began to pick up after the 1880s. By then the machinery needed to mass produce items became common place which allowed for the construction of purpose built factories. Most of these purpose built factories were built on land that had been cleared by demolishing the disease infested back to backs which had been housing the poorest of Birmingham's residents.

The industry expanded rapidly and reached its height in 1913 when some 70,000 people were employed in the precious metal trades.

During both World War I and World War II the Quarter turned its attention away from fine jewellery and 'toys', focusing on the production of munitions. This led to the Quarter becoming a target for German bombs and resulted in heavy damage throughout the area.

After the World War II many factories struggled to compete with overseas trade and cheaper plastic-made products. While some firms were able to diversify and carry on many began to close their doors forever.

For most of its history the Jewellery Quarter was a closed community. There were no jewellery shops until the late 1970s when the economic recession prompted some of the manufacturers to start opening their doors to retail customers. Soon other retailers moved into the area and in the 1980s old buildings started to be restored rather than pulled down.

Recently the area has had a rebirth of sorts; the opening of new bars, restaurants, art galleries and attractions has made it a popular place to live, work and play. New housing developments can be found mixed in with Victorian factories and Georgian houses and with factories still producing 40% of Britain's jewellery output among many other items, the Jewellery Quarter continues to be "The Workshop of the World".