

Bilston Community Association.

A report of the Commemoration of the 30 Anniversary of the Closure of Bilston Steel Works by the secretary, Mr. B. D. Patel.

Bilston Steel Works which was also known as Stewarts and Lloyds, was one of the major producers of steel for nearly two hundred years not only in Great Britain but in the world till its closure on 12th April 1979.

It employed 3500 people from the Black Country and beyond. There are some ex-employees who still remember Bilston Steel Works with passion. They talk about it as if it was part of their family which has never departed from their lives. One of them, Mr. John Barnsley, is an active member of our Management Committee.

At every AGM we plan a year ahead as to what we would like to celebrate during the forthcoming year. John Barnsley proposed in 2008 AGM that 'Next year, 2009 is the 30th Anniversary of the Closure of Bilston Steel Works and that it should be celebrated'. The Management Committee accepted the proposal and agreed to discuss the topic in the next Committee meeting in June 2009. It was decided to commemorate the event on 12th April 2009.

The result was extraordinary! One thing led to another. The Sub-Committee, consisted of Des Smith, B. D. Patel, Martin Peake, John Barnsley and co-opted members John Vincent and Mr & Mrs Hickey was formed. In the beginning they met once a month then nearer the time, 12-4-2009 started meeting twice a month. They reported their 'extensive Exploration, Investigation and Research' to the Management Committee for its approval. The Commemoration plans were established but instead of 12th April which was Easter Sunday it was approved to move the event a week forward to 3rd April 09.

Each and every proposals put forward by the Sub-Committee were discussed thoroughly by the Management Committee and were approved unanimously.

We proposed :

The event to take place over three days:

- **Friday 3rd April** with Thanks Giving Service at St. Leonard's Church followed by Social Evening at Spring Vale Social Club;
- **Saturday, 4th April**, Opening Ceremony of the Photographic Exhibition.
- **Sunday, 5th April 2009** Installation of the Memorial Plaque at the Junction of Wolverhampton Street and High Street.
- To have a photographic exhibition and display of memorabilia in our Centre for at least a month.
- To install a Memorial Plaque showing important events of Bilston Steel Works by 'Steel Monument' this is at Millfields Road roundabout.
- To contact ex-employees by advertising our project in local newspapers, by words of mouth, personal visit and writing to agencies and organisation.
- To persuade ex-employee to give their collection of photographs, memorabilia and other artefacts for exhibition purposes.
- To visit Wolverhampton Archives and Local Studies to research on Bilston Steel Works (Stewarts and Lloyds)
- Produce a DVD of interviews with ex-employees.
- To organise a Thanks Giving Service in St. Leonard's Church, Bilston.
- To organise a Social Evening at Springvale Social Club this is a meeting and focal point for ex-employees.

- To provide refreshment on all three days.

Funding the Project:

We applied for Grants to the funding Agencies. Our applications were not approved. So, the Management Committee decided to Finance the Project from our own resources and request donations from our members and also continue to look elsewhere for funds.

Then suddenly, 'out of blue' on 28-3-2009 we were given a Grant of £2423-49 by Grassroots Grant from Wolverhampton Network Consortium! Everyone was delighted. This put a new zest in our approach to this unique Project.

Thanks Giving Service:

We worked in conjunction with the St. Leonard's Church Management Committee who agreed to be one of our partners in this project. We met Revd. Chris Davies to discuss the programme of the Service and it was resolved to have the Service with introduction of Bilston Steel Works, interviews with three ex-employees namely, John Vincent, John Barnsley and Cllr. Bert Turner, reading from The Bible and Prayer Books. Des Smith, who was supposed to do a reading was taken ill and was replaced by Sylvia Hodister the other reading was done by Colin Foster.

Transport was provided to disabled persons. The Service was conducted by Revd. Chris Davies in presence of the Mayor of Wolverhampton, Cllr. Christine Mills, other dignitaries of Bilston and members of BCA. Lord Dennis Turner was the main speaker who addressed the congregation on Bilston Steel Works. The Service was well attended.

Social Evening on Friday, 3rd April 2009

This was an added incentive. Invitations were sent to as many as 120 people and we sold additional tickets to others. The guests also included our MP Pat McFadden, local Councillors, ex-employees as far as from Lincoln, Bristol, and Manchester.

In total there were **180 people** who were entertained by Jerry Lloyd who sang well known songs from 50s. 60s and 70s. Mrs. Andre Hickey addressed the guest about the Social, Sports and Welfare sections of Bilston Steel Works.

The buffet prepared by Springvale Social Club was sumptuous and delicious. We also had raffle, first prize being a Hamper donated by Midland Co-op. The Evening turned out to be memorable event.

Opening ceremony of the Photographic exhibition along with display of Memorabilia on Saturday, 4th April, 2009 from 11-00am to 4-00pm in our Centre.

The photographs and artefacts were given to us chiefly by Mrs. Andre Hickey, Len Kensey and other ex-employees. With the help from volunteers the photographs were framed and screwed on the walls around the Main Hall. Some of the valuables were displayed in two glass cases which we brought from Wolverhampton Archives.

The Opening ceremony took place at 11 -00am in our Centre and was performed by our President, Lord Dennis Turner of Bilston who also addressed the packed Hall about the 'Glory of Bilston'-Bilston Steel Works-Its golden years were recalled with pride and closing of the Works were described with lot of emotion.

This was followed by Key Note speakers David Bishop of Wolverhampton Archives and Local Historian, Ron Davies. Lunch was followed by PowerPoint display of photographs by Mrs. Andre Hickey and of course the visitors had a chance to look around the exhibition put on by our volunteers.

Installation of Memorial Plaque on Sunday, 5th April 2009 at 11-00am.

The design and what needs to go on the Memorial Plaque was thoroughly discussed in the Management Committee over the weeks; we opted for the following writings on the Plaque:

A brief History of Bilston Steel Works

1. 1770- Birmingham to Wolverhampton Canal was opened with increased industrial activities.
2. 1866- Hickman family acquired the Work.
3. 1866-1883- Six new furnaces were built which produced 24,944 tons of iron a year.
4. 1897- Merger of Springvale Furnaces and Staffordshire Steel 7 Ingot Iron Company to become Alfred Hickman Ltd.
5. 1907- The first mill powered by electricity was installed.
6. An open hearth furnace was built followed by additional furnaces during the First World War.
7. During the Second World War- The plant was Shell - making centre.
8. 1947- Springvale Social Club was opened.
9. 1950s- £16 million development scheme was put in place.
10. 1954- 'Elisabeth' blast furnace known as 'Big Lizzy' was installed; she produced 275,000 tons of iron a year.
11. 1966- Bilston Steel Work was nationalised.
12. April 12th 1979 The last Steel billet was cast at Bilston so ending more than 200 years of Iron and Steel production.
13. 5th October 1980- Elisabeth which produced more than 5.5 million tons of pig iron was demolished. It was an end of an era, a massive blow to the economics of the area

We approached Wolverhampton City Council (WCC) and obtained their permission to install the Plaque at an appropriate place. It was decided to install the Plaque at the junction of Wolverhampton Street and High Street Bilston by the Millfields Roundabout where the Steel Monument is erected.

The Plaque was manufactured by Photocast of Liverpool. It was installed by L.J. Leisure of Stourport-on-Severn on Thursday, 2nd April at 9-00am. We thanked them for their services. Opening ceremony was performed by our Chairman, Mr. Jack Bickley at 11-00am by unveiling the Plaque in presence of about twenty five people. It was an historic moment for Bilstonians. All those people who were present at the ceremony were full of praise of the Plaque.

Following the unveiling we all returned to the Centre.

The key note speaker on this day was Mr. Daren Kensey whose father, Len worked for Bilston Steel Works. Daren as a child was keenly interested in the life of the Bilston Steel Works and over the years has built up a photographic collection of the Works.

This was followed by collection of memories from those who wanted to recall their experiences. They were John Barnsley, Mick Birch, Len Kensey, John Martin, Lorenzo Williams, Ken Wright, Mrs. Andre Hickey, Allan Bowden, Colin Foster, Franklin O. Amadedon OBE, Sheila Turner and Eileen Ward-Birch who read a poem about the Works.

Most of the afternoon was devoted to the showing of the DVD. This was produced by second year students of Commercial Video Production from the University of Wolverhampton under the

supervision of Mr. Alfred Raoul Lemogo and Oliver Jones. People present in the Hall watched the DVD with great interest with their eyes transfixed on the screen. The film not only included the interviews but as it was shot around the site of the old Steel works which showed how the complex has changed over thirty years with new housing estate and retail parks built on it.

The narrator, John Masefield was extremely informative and looked professional along with the film maker. Film also included excerpt from Steel Works laboratory and other departments which made the film very lively and one to treasure for years to come. Though the background music was slightly louder than expected the graphics and editing was praiseworthy. Our congratulation to Alfred, Oliver and his team for producing the DVD within the time limit. Well done!

It must be noted that we sought permission from 55 ex-employees to give interviews of their experiences of working for Bilston Steel Works. Some of the persons were unable to attend owing to their health and others declined the invitation.

DVD includes the interviews with 15 ex-employees. They were:

- John Vincent,
- Lorenzo Williams,
- Mrs. Andre Hickey,
- Colin Foster,
- Ken Wright,
- John Barnsley,
- John Martin,
- John Masefield,
- Mr & Mrs. Bert Durkin, John Smith,
- Anthony Lewis,
- Michael Hampton,
- Ken Elwell,
- Franklin O. Amadedon OBE.

Interviews took place over four days in our Centre. Room 3 was temporary turned into a 'Studio'. The interviews were taken by Alfred and Oliver with Thursday, 12th April devoted to students of Moseley Park School who interviewed the ex-employees.

DVD were given free of charge to those who gave the interviews and others were sold at £2-00 each.

There were many notable people who helped us to host the events successfully. The list is long but we must extend our thanks to

- Mr. and Mrs. Hickey,
- Mr. and Mrs. Barnsley,
- Mr. John Vincent (Who was co-opted on the Management Committee), St. Leonard's Church Committee,
- Martin Peake,
- Dinesh Patel,
- And all the ex-employees who contributed towards the project in one way or another,
- Wolverhampton Network Consortium,
- Bilston North Neighbourhood Action Partnership,
- Midland Co-op,
- Wolverhampton City Council,
- all the donors who donated in kind and cash,

- Committee and Sub-Committee members,
- Back to Back, volunteers
- And above all the kitchen staff from Hindu Association, Bilston who worked very very hard under the guidance of Mrs. Indira Patel to produce the refreshment during the event.
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If I have forgotten to mention anything or anybody it is not deliberate which please kindly note so kindly excuse me.

Thank you all. It really was a hard work but above all it was worth every penny!

Together we are stronger.

Yours truly,

B. D. Patel MBE (Secretary)