

Subject: Blists Hill Victorian Town, Ironbridge Gorge Museum [exhibition review]
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Source: *Museums Journal*, vol. 109, no. 10, 2009, pp. 58-59
Note: This is the pre-print version prior to being edited by the journal

Picture yourself in a dark, claustrophobic space. It's hot, but you can't quite decide if this is real or an illusion brought about by the images of molten metal and the footage of tired looking workmen, their faces glistening with sweat. Suddenly the floor vibrates to the rhythmic thud of a gigantic machine. Then the images fade to black and white and a shiver is sent up your spine as a male choir sings:

Danger waits our ev'ry motion,
Death seems ready to devour;
Yet we seek our daily station
Where the sun-beams never come,
Follow hard our occupation,
Glad when safety leads us home

These powerful words come from 'The Miners' Tragedy', a ballad about a fatal accident that occurred at a pit in Madeley, Shropshire on 2 January 1810. The pit is long gone, but it lives on thanks to Blists Hills' emotive new visitor centre.

This latest development is part of the 'Celebration of the Imagination', a strategy to promote the industrial heritage of the West Midlands (*Museums Journal*, July 2009, pp. 32-35). As part of this Blists Hill will grow over the coming months and years to include a new incline plane plus a narrow gauge railway, the latter taking visitors to the 'Clay Mine Experience', something that will draw attention to the fact that mining did not just involve coal, but iron ore and clay too.

The village green is also set to expand. And there are plans to build a new events space just outside the site's perimeter in order to facilitate more out-of-hours events. This will serve as a reminder that Blists Hill is but one of many attractions spread across the Ironbridge gorge. In an obvious attempt to strengthen these links the last thing a visitor to Blists Hill now sees is a video telling a brief history of the Ironbridge World Heritage Site. This is intended as a 'gateway', encouraging people to explore some more, and thus make the most of their annual 'passport' ticket.

Blists Hill is the focus of a £12m investment. This is apparent as soon as you enter the freshly expanded car park and look across to the new entrance. It is a postmodern affair: above it looms a fanciful chimney while flywheels, boilers and other industrial artefacts are mounted onto the façade.

Visitors pass under them to queue for tickets before entering into the heat and noise of the nine minute multimedia show described above. This conveys a few facts, but its real task is more visceral as it seeks to capture the harsh reality of industrial life in Blists Hill and beyond. The visitor is thus given a jolt before the nostalgia takes over. This is a laudable and very important task because, as Marion Blockley has noted, all too often 'living museums' like Blists Hill tend to present the 'attractive quaint aspects of craft production... at the expense of the reality of the 12-hour working day'.

The tone struck by the opening sound and video montage is in marked contrast to the former entrance to Blists Hill. The latter building still stands, albeit roped off by orange fencing. Meanwhile, at the other end of the site, are the beam engines David and Sampson. They were moved to Blists Hill in 1971 with the abortive intention of using them as the centrepiece for a new entrance. These three alternative beginnings to the same attraction highlight that heritage is an ever changing phenomenon: it is constantly being repackaged and reinterpreted – with each alteration saying just as much about the present as it does the past.

A clever link between the two is made in Blists Hills' new multimedia show. This begins on the ground floor of the new visitor centre and continues on the level above where a looped sequence shows people walking past a wall, their ghostly bodies fading as they go. This effectively evokes the countless, unnamed people that have once worked here whilst simultaneously introducing the people we are about to meet, namely the costumed interpreters. Some of the latter, dressed in their fine Victorian attire, are shown in a series of large, framed photographs on the wall leading out to the recreated town.

Whilst at Blists Hill it is possible to have your own 'Victorian' portrait taken at the newly enlarged photographers shop. This and other establishments feature in a now expanded row of stores on Canal Street. As I approached it I thought for a moment that a new audioguide had been provided on account of the white cones that everyone seemed to be holding. But I quickly realised that these contained chips not commentaries.

Indeed, the new 'Fried Fish Dealers' appears to be doing a roaring trade. Presumably the food was a bit better quality than in ye olden times: the site's blog – blishtshill.org – reveals that frying was a tactic originally deployed to mask the fact that the fish on offer was either too rotten or ugly to be sold in a conventional fishmonger's window. The stench that came from a nineteenth-century chippy was such that it was branded a 'noxious trade'.

A seemingly innocent portion of fish and chips therefore gets right to the heart of a dilemma raised by Blists Hill: how to make the past palatable yet 'authentic'. The unrealistically hygienic chip shop made me recall what happened some years ago when the Natural History Museum unveiled its wildly popular animatronic Tyrannosaurus rex. It was reported that the curators had opted to give it a tame, 'swampy' smell when it was pointed out that the more realistic aroma of rotten meat wedged between the dinosaur's teeth would have caused all the excited children to puke up.

Continuing on the theme of authenticity, the Blists Hill blog goes on to explain that its new post office has been developed in consultation with the British Postal Museum & Archive (BPMA). But it is not true to say, as I heard one visitor claim, that the establishment 'had been moved here brick by brick'. Such misconceptions will surely grow as the buildings age and begin to look even more authentic. Do such misconceptions actually matter? If they do, how should they be addressed? Dispelling them is no easy matter given that, as Neil Cossons noted thirty years ago, 'on-site labelling... destroys any illusion of time and place in the minds of the visitors.'

This sense of make-believe is paramount to a place like Blists Hill. It is a fantasy that has been brilliantly enhanced by the Canal Street development. Its new visitor centre proves, however, that it *is* possible to introduce a critical edge. Now that this has been established the challenge is to take this further. What better chance to test this out than by drawing further attention to 'The Miners' Tragedy' to mark the bicentenary of the local Madeley pit disaster in January 2010?

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Project data

- Cost: £12m
- Main funders: Advantage West Midlands, The European Regional Development Fund
- Additional funding: Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Wolfson Foundation (£126,000 towards the post office) (reported in *MJ*, April 2009, p.7)
- Visitor centre: Nash Partnership of Bath with Osbornes Architects; Mansell Construction Services Ltd.