

# Industrial Museums and the Educational World

Some major provincial museums have well-established education departments which are justly proud of their links with schools and colleges but it is greatly to be regretted that links between museums and educational institutions are not as close as they might be. There are losses to both sides. A small number of schools take full advantage of the range of opportunities available for study visits, assistance with hand-outs and questionnaires and the provision of informed and lively guides at some museums. But these activities depend for their existence on a minority of committed teachers who are prepared to battle for resources in an adverse economic climate and a minority of museum staff who care about communication at all levels besides their other important curatorial and research activities. Such an attitude should not merely be cultivated by the museum education officer but by all staff from Director downwards.

To prepare a class for a museum visit and to follow up the visit with discussion and project work without overkill requires great skill. A museum visit can be over exploited, the children producing high standard project work for display with an increased sense of frustration. Conversely, there is the teacher who hands the class over to the museum staff without preparation or prior warning, regarding the visit as a welcome day off. Both groups of children are likely in the future at best to be disinterested and at worst positively to dislike museums.

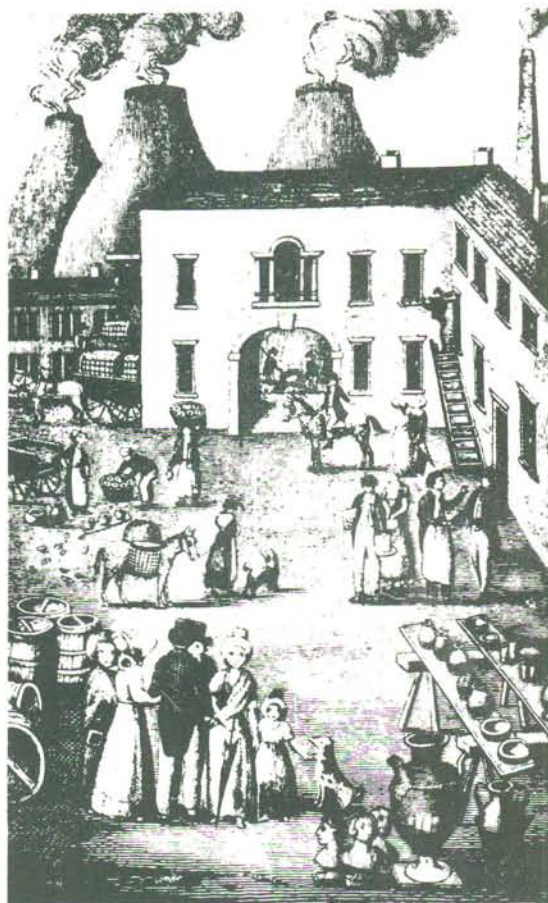
Too little use is made of the museums by the universities. Whilst Colleges of Art have had close links with Art Galleries for many years, universities have, on the whole, had little teaching or research involvement with museums. The obvious exceptions are the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Manchester with their museums of high reputation. But links between universities and the national museums, as well as many major provincial museums and industrial museums, are tenuous. Such links as do exist are at the personal level rather than the institutional. And yet there is much to gain on both sides from closer collaboration.

Some university history, economic history and geography departments offer student field courses and have based at least some of them at Ironbridge, Beamish and the Gladstone Pottery Museum. Field work is an integral part of geographical studies but site visits provide a whole new dimension to the study of history. One day visits pose timetabling difficulties but these are not insuperable. And museums can come to the students. Lectures by museum staff with illustrations and artefacts on the students' territory can be a valuable introduction to museums. An encouraging student response was produced by a visit of a member of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust to the Metallurgy Department at the University of Aston a few months ago.

Links at postgraduate level need to be encouraged. Research studentships are likely to fall in number or remain static rather than be increased in the future, but a formal link between the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust and the University of Aston in the form of an 'Ironbridge Studentship' has led to the

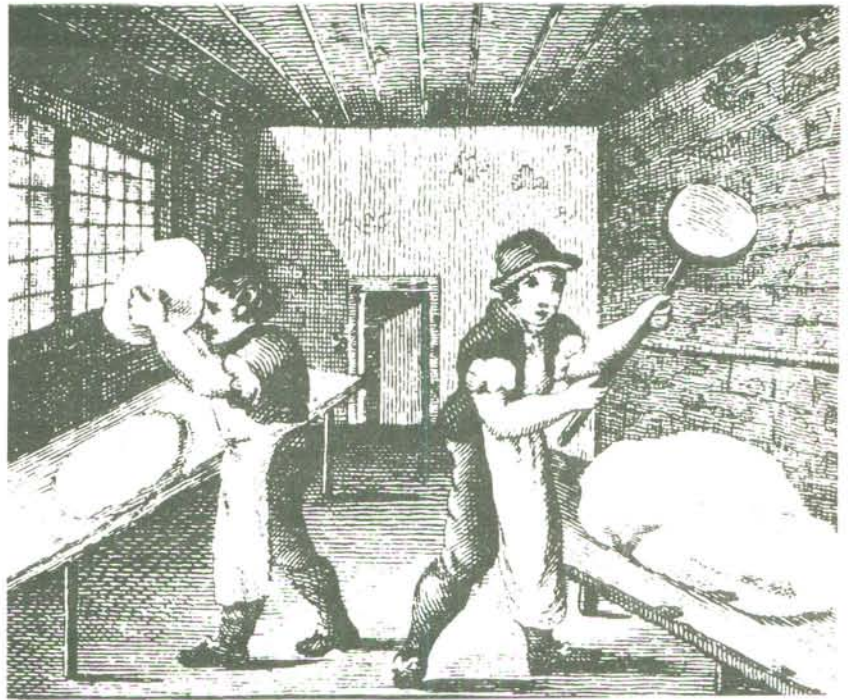
undertaking of a research project that will be of value to the Museum besides creating a nucleus of research students at the Museum. A further Aston postgraduate research student elected to do a museum-orientated project and two members of the museum staff have registered for higher degrees at Aston University on a part-time basis. The research students can see some practical and immediate value in their research besides its intrinsic value in adding to knowledge. They are encouraged to participate in volunteer working parties and can gain some practical experience in presenting their findings by writing pamphlets, acting as guides and tutoring adult groups. The Museum gains research source material, builds up its library facilities and obtains considerable bibliographical assistance which can be a great help to busy curatorial staff. Without doubt, links

*The Staffordshire  
Pottery.*





*Beating the clay so that it is pliable for the potter, 1827.*



*Examining and dressing ware, 1827.*



between other industrial museums and universities would prove to be as fruitful.

Research links between members of staff at industrial museums and universities can probably only be developed between individuals as both interests and staff change, but the possibilities are great. Scholarly work in the history of ceramics, metals and power systems, for example, has advanced rapidly through discussion between people from a number of different disciplines with different approaches asking different questions. And this is one of the strengths of industrial museums for each museum is likely to cover a narrower span of subject matter than the more conventional museum. Some industrial museums already hold occasional seminars, calling upon experts from both the museum and university worlds to give papers. A possible pitfall is for the seminar to be orientated towards the collector rather than towards the joint advancement of knowledge both for its own sake and for interpretation and communication to a wider cross-section of the community.

Collaboration between universities and museums in the development of audio visual resources could be increased. The Gladstone Pottery Museum and the University of Aston jointly produced a 20 minute 16mm colour film of the techniques of pottery manufacture, recording, in particular, the last bottle oven firing in the Staffordshire Potteries in August 1978. The end result is a film that is both a useful university teaching aid and a permanent record for the museum in question.

A film is shortly to be made of the jewellery and silversmithing trades of Birmingham and it is hoped that there will be close collaboration between museums and university in this case too.

The opportunities for the development of teaching and research links between museums and educational establishments are exciting and are there now. We have only just made a beginning.