

NAILSEA GLASS WORKS

by B.J.Greenhill

In the year 1788, John Robert Lucas, son of a deceased well-to-do cooper of Bristol, set up a glasshouse on Nailsea Heath, a wild area of land between the old village on Kings Hill and the extensive parish of Wraxall. He was in his early thirties, owned a thriving beer and cider warehouse in (St.) Nicholas Street, Bristol, was one of three partners in a bottle making glasshouse opposite to where the Great Britain steamship now lies in dry dock, and was a partner in a bottle and crown glass works at Stanton Wick near Chelwood, Somerset. There is no doubt that what brought him to set up in Nailsea was coal, - the Heath pit had been sunk and opened two years before, - a wealth of local stone for the buildings, lime from the half dozen adjacent kilns, sand within and without the parish, and clay for the crucibles. Had he added to the glasshouses in or just outside the walls of the City all these primaries would have had to be carried in, whereas it would be much cheaper to transport the finished goods to warehouse or quay from Nailsea.

The first glasshouse was for making bottles, for which there was a great demand. But John Robert Lucas, once assured of his trade in bottles, added a house for the making of crown glass which was blown and cut into those small pieces seen occasionally today, greenish in colour and one or more with a bulls eye or bullion in the middle. These bullions made excellent cabin lights, until modern development made them obsolete. So from the port of Bristol, carried there on light four-wheeled drays or dillies, the bottles and glass of Nailsea went up the Severn, its tributaries and canals, the Wye and the Avon, to be filled with the Bath waters, or give light to homes or the new factories. They went also to Newfoundland and along the St. Lawrence, to the coasts of Maine and Pennsylvania, to the many islands of the West Indies from whence came sugar and spices and rum, to Spain and Portugal, the Mediterranean and the Baltic.

How did Mr. Lucas build up his labour force to make his enterprise so soon successful? What was unusual in those days, he thought of his men, their wives and families and built a row of nineteen cottages alongside the glasshouses, each with one room down and one up, as was the practice of the time. Somewhat extended and improved, they are still in use today, forming a quiet retreat off the busy High Street. Presumably his skilled workers were men recruited from the other glasshouses in which he was interested and the labourers would be local agricultural and coal-pit workers attracted by higher wages, to be slowly trained in the unusual skills of the glasshouses. There

was some trouble with Mr. Elton over apprentices seduced from his glasshouse in St. Philip's Without-the-Wells, which cost a lot of money, but pay in Nailsea was good and employment continuous, housing was better and the risk of being carried off by the Press Gang was infinitely lower.

On this side of the City there was only one so-called highway subject to Acts of Parliament and that was the Yatton Turnpike. (Weston-super-Mare was a hamlet when the first Census was taken in 1801). This ran from Bristol Bridge along Redcliff Street, past the beautiful church into East Street and North Street, Bedminster, through the Ashton gate where tolls were paid and on by Long Ashton and Backwell. When you consider the risks attached to making glass, its crating and carriage into Bristol, removal to a wharf, stowage in a ship, the perils of the sea in vessels with no load line and often no classification or insurance, the delivery to a small village on the coast with no unloading facilities, the collection by the intended retailer, one wonders how any profit could be made by the man who built these great cones which cost so much, dominating the landscape and polluting the air for miles around. Yet J.R. Lucas, who paid high wages and looked after his men, died a wealthy man in 1828, leaving to each of his grandsons the sum of £10,000. The beautiful home which he had built, Backwell Hill house, was thereafter cared for by his widow and daughter. By this time bottle making had ceased and crown glass only was made.

In considering the material results of Industrial Archaeology, we sometimes tend to overlook the physical, mental, moral and spiritual effects upon the workers in these lost or discarded buildings. There is recorded evidence to prove that the glasshouse men fed better than the other workers hereabouts, which was to be expected as their wages and emoluments were so much higher (50 per cent or more according to skill). There was the parish church to cater for the spiritual needs of the village, but no Sunday school or Day school. So when Miss Hannah More heard of these "profligate glassmen and colliers", she determined to establish a Sunday school here, the ninth in a radius around Wrington where she lived. This was in the year 1792, the same year in which the Wesleyan glassmen and colliers built a Meeting-house on Kings hill, and when she later expanded the school into a limited Day school to teach writing as well as reading, and literacy slowly grew in the parish, one could say that civilisation had at last come to Nailsea. In due course the school was taken over by the Diocese and education offered

to all whose parents would make a small weekly payment. It is interesting to see that the County Education Authority has remembered Miss Hannah More by naming her school after her.

In the 1850s the firm advertised "Inventors and manufacturers of glass water pipes, plain, jointed and angular. Glass curtain poles." It seems unlikely that the first mentioned would be a profitable line, but curtain poles were useful and attractive and occupied a place in the best households until recent years. The next development was into sheet, plate and ornamental window glass, which called for new ways and new skills. A reminder of this period is to be seen in the Masonic Hall in Nailsea, where there is a sheet of beautifully ornamented obscured window glass en-

dorsed with the initials of the proprietor of the works. A pattern sheet is with it to prove its authenticity. For the polishing of sheet and plate glass the big shed at a right angle to the Royal Oak public house, was built.

Working conditions in the early nineteenth century were vastly different from what they are today and some glass blowers were not discouraged from using their talents for purposes other than those of the employers, - after all, it was a kind of advertisement, - so we find walking sticks, rolling pins, flasks, ear trumpets, cider jars, door-stops, cream bowls, condiment sets, dolls house furniture and a variety of ornaments attributed to Nailsea. There is an interesting collection at Clevedon Court.



The works closed in 1873. The new ring road will shortly plough through part of the site of the Glass» works and thereafter nothing will be left other than the cottages, 1850 Manager's house and office

(Masonic Hall), polishing shed and a substantially built square stone building by the roadside, the usage of which is unknown.