

John Wyatt

When the cotton king, Richard Arkwright, died in 1792 The Gentleman's Magazine wrote that "he had factories, the income of which is greater than that of most German principalities". John Wyatt, on the other hand, did not.

History has not been kind to John Wyatt. He might have been up there with Watt and Arkwright, one of the stars of the Industrial Revolution. As it is, he fell among thieves, and the man who might have had a chapter of history to himself has to be satisfied with a footnote. Even his grave in St Philip's churchyard has disappeared.

Wyatt was born in Weeford, near Lichfield, in 1700 and was educated at Lichfield School. He died in Birmingham 66 years later. It was a life that had more downs than ups.

Had John Wyatt been content to live the life of a Staffordshire carpenter, it would certainly have been less troublesome, but he wasn't. He kept having bright ideas. Wyatt himself called his ideas "gimcracks" and numbered them.

"Gimcrack No.1" was a machine for cutting files. Since Wyatt had no money to patent or market it, he sold the invention to a Birmingham gunsmith called Heeley, who promptly ran out of cash and gave Wyatt his machine back. Wyatt turned instead to a shifty character called Lewis Paul, the beginning of a long and unhappy association between the two inventors. Unfortunately, Paul too hit a cash-flow problem. The file-cutting machine began to look like an industrial version of "pass the parcel", and when the music finally stopped Wyatt was still holding it.

Now Lewis Paul was something of an ideas man himself, particularly in relation to textile production. In 1729 he patented a machine for pinking shrouds, which made him around £70. For a while Paul was rolling in it - money not shrouds. When he discovered that John Wyatt was at work on a machine that could revolutionize the textile process, Lewis Paul's ears pricked up. By now the inventive Mr Wyatt had moved on to "Gimcrack No.25".

No.25 was a big one, a machine to spin cotton. Since textile production was still the mainstay of England's economy, anyone who could mechanize this process could name his price. Remember that by the 1780s England was importing about 18 million pounds of cotton a year, and all of it needed spinning.

Wyatt, short of money as usual, had been experimenting on a spinning machine in a small building near Sutton Coldfield. By 1733 he seemed to have gimcracked it. Two years later, and extremely unwisely, Wyatt entered into partnership with the very two individuals who had made such a disaster of No.1. Together they opened the first factory for spinning cotton, forerunner of those great Satanic mills of Northern England. This one was off Old Square in Birmingham.

There is, in Birmingham Museum, a shabby little exhibit that marks this epoch-making event, a small hank of cotton yarn with a scrap of paper in John Wyatt's handwriting:

“The enclosed yarn spun by the Spinning Engine (without hands) about the year 1741. The movement was at that date turned by two (or more) asses, working round an axis in a large warehouse, near the well in Upper Priory. It owed the condition it was then in to the superintendence of John Wyatt.”

Unfortunately, there was nothing super about Wyatt’s superintendence, and nothing business-like about his business partners. In April 1743 Wyatt received a progress report on his cotton mill:

“I think there is not one ass left alive, so what’s done is only by hand. There’s not a man left in the works, but only Mr Rodgers, an old man that came down from London. As to Paul, I think the town thinks a deal worse of him than ever. But, as to your own part, I think all the world is sorry for you, and think you have met with a deal of ill-usage from Paul.”

By this time John Wyatt was languishing in the Debtors’ Prison in London, watching glumly as yet another bright idea went up in smoke. So much for “Gimcrack No.25”.

But wait ! There was a shaft a light through the dark cloud that seemed to be forever hanging over John Wyatt’s head. Whilst incarcerated in the Fleet Prison, the inventor had been working on an engine to weigh coal without removing the load from its vehicle. Another gimcrack was on its way.

Wyatt’s weighing machine might even then have made his fortune. But he failed to take out a patent, perhaps deciding that another partnership with Paul and Heeley was not in his best interests. There were soon plenty of rival models to his, but at least Wyatt sold enough of his own design to keep out of the debtors’ prison for the foreseeable future.

Then the black cloud descended once more. A scheme to supply the householders of Birmingham with running water through pipes failed through lack of financial backing. Ahead of its time by a century, that one.

So the torrent of ideas continued to pour forth, always unsuccessful, never patented.

At least at his funeral John Wyatt had the distinction of being attended by two of the recognised geniuses of the age - Matthew Boulton and John Baskerville - recognition that life had forbidden him. And no doubt, to add insult to injury, he was laid to rest in one of those pinked shrouds his erstwhile partner had designed !