

## Ironbridge Gorge Museum

A year after Ironbridge Gorge, the open air museum near Telford in Shropshire created at the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, won the Museum of the Year Award it was declared the European Museum of the Year, and ten years later it was designated a World Heritage Site.

So the impact of this comparatively small spot has been international, both as an historic site and as an interpreter of the history that ensured that Abraham Darby's first commercial smelting of iron was preserved.

There's no doubting the importance of this site, and not only to British history. In this furnace Darby in 1709 first smelted iron with coke instead of charcoal, a much speedier process, and iron became the material of the Industrial Revolution. It was used for steam engines, machinery, bridges and buildings, and for the ships and railways which transported raw materials, finished goods and people throughout Britain and across the world.

In 1770s his grandson, Abraham Darby III, built what for 20 years was little more than an intriguing curiosity, the world's first iron bridge. The apocalyptic floods of 1795, though, swept away or damaged every major bridge on the River Severn except for this one, and cast iron became an indispensable bridge building material.



# The post-70s museum business

And the development of the museum – actually ten museums sprawling over several acres of some of the most beautiful countryside in the heart of England - does not seem to have flagged in almost 20 years since it was the Museum of the Year.

The Ironbridge Gorge Trust was established ten years before that, just as industrial archaeology was emerging as a legitimate historical study, but it was the vision of the young director who took over in 1971, Neil Cossons, that created the multi-awarding attraction it has become.

His belief was that it was not enough simply to preserve the objects of our industrial infancy but that they must be made appealing in a presentation

coherent and undemanding enough to attract a lot of people to a fairly remote part of England.

Since those heady days, not a year has passed without some addition to the growing estate. Take Blists Hill, the Victorian township that first opened in 1973 and really drew the judges' attention in 1977.

In 1978 a cobbler's shop and mission church were added; in 1979 a squatter's cottage; in 1980 butcher's and plasterer's shops; in 1981 a candle factory; and so on through the years, a sweet shop arriving, the New Inn opening for thirsty museum-goers, a bank with actual coins, a bakery, a school, a Victorian fair, and now even the Sundial Theatre street performers.

More broadly, the huge estate of derelict factories and monuments has been largely repaired, restored, conserved and brought back to life, and the three huge factory sites – the Coalbrookdale Ironworks, Jackfield Tile Factory and Coalport China Factory – which would each stand as a substantial factory museum in anywhere else, have become exhibitions demonstrating manufacture, but also teaching studios and busy tenants.

But what has more fundamentally changed at Ironbridge since being Museum of the Year, says its chief executive Glen Lawes, is betrayed by the title of his appointment: "The museum has become a far more professional and diversified business over the last 15 years" he says.

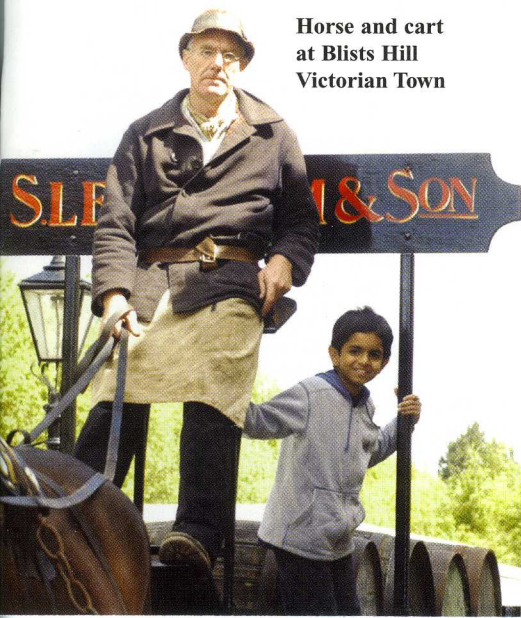
"Ironbridge is also a model of a diversified business with many partners. Its joint venture with the University of Birmingham at the Ironbridge Institute continues to flourish and add to its cours-

es. The museum and its tenants manufacture in metal, ceramics, glass and wood and sell many unique products. We are developing a thriving corporate entertainment and conference business. Our archaeology team operates nationally as specialists in post-medieval archaeology. Ironbridge's library and archive, assisted by a substantial website, responds to many thousands of enquiries every year and assists researchers from across the world with their publications. A new business is emerging in the manufacture of precisely researched historic costume. With over 54,000 school children visiting us each year, we run one of the biggest schools programmes in any museum.

"It's as a broadly based business that Ironbridge will continue to evolve and adapt for a long-term, independent future."

The biggest challenge, he says, is to find a way of taking Blists Hill forward. "As Ironbridge's reputation as a World Heritage Site grows, so does Blists Hill begin to look anomalous. There is a mismatch between our narrative about a small industrial town at the end of the 19th Century – when Ironbridge was a worked-out backwater – and the celebration of the glory days of the Gorge as a generator of the Industrial Revolution a century or more earlier.

"A large funding package is currently being put together from various agencies which would make it possible to develop Blists Hill and use it in a more effective way to introduce the World Heritage Site, to draw out more effectively the geological, mining and manufacturing stories as well as the social history of the people who lived and worked there."



Horse and cart at Blists Hill Victorian Town