

The Landmark Trust

IRON BRIDGE HOUSE, IRONBRIDGE, SHROPSHIRE

The landscape of Ironbridge has a particularly complex history and Iron Bridge House was erected during the proudest and most self-confident stage of that history, when the area could aptly be described as 'the most extraordinary district in the world'. The wealth of the Severn Gorge was founded on its geology. The river cuts through the rich mineral seams of the carboniferous measures and at the same time provided a means of carrying away the produce of those seams. The urge to exploit these made it accruable for technical advance.

As early as the 16th century the Severn was a great commercial highway linking mid-Wales to the Bristol Channel. Large-scale exploitation of the minerals of the Gorge began in Elizabeth I's reign in the late 16th century. Coal from Broseley and Madeley was carried up and downstream by barge to become the staple fuel of the Severn Valley from Welshpool to Gloucester. Numerous industries making use of the local coal grew up in the Gorge: potteries, saltworks, tar distilleries and tobacco pipe manufacturers. Just across the river from Iron Bridge House is a timber-framed building which in the early 18th century was part of a lead-smelting complex, one of several in the district using ore brought downstream from mid-Wales, that was smelted using the cheap local coal and forwarded as pig lead to Bristol. The iron industry was established in the area in the Middle Ages, but it did not achieve any national significance until 1709, when Abraham Darby I first successfully smelted iron ore with coke at Coalbrookdale.

For about half a century, from 1755 onwards, the east Shropshire coalfield was the foremost ironworking area in Great Britain. Many of the most important innovations both in ironmaking technology and in the application of iron were pioneered here. It soon attracted visitors, both those with an interest in technology and those who merely wished to be thrilled by the sight of blazing furnaces in a spectacular setting, from all over the world.

In the mid-1770s the Severn Gorge was a rough, open area, dotted with cottages and pock-marked with coal and iron ore mines. Horses drew waggons along primitive railways, carrying ore to the furnaces at Coalbrookdale and Madeley Wood, and coal to the riverside for sale along the Severn. Where the Iron Bridge now stands there formerly plied a ferry boat but few travellers other than local people used it, for the riverside was almost unapproachable by road. The first steps towards the erection of a bridge were taken in 1774 but it was not until New Year's Day 1781 that the bridge was opened to traffic. The provider of the greater part of the money for the scheme and the manager of the whole construction process was Abraham Darby III of the Coalbrookdale ironworks. This was the first iron bridge in the world and it was recognised and promoted by the proprietors as a unique achievement.

The ancient market of Madeley, which dated from the reign of Henry III, had lapsed by the beginning of the 18th century but was revived in 1763. The north end of the Iron Bridge lay in the parish of Madeley and the market was transferred to it in the 1780s. This seems to have been largely the decision of Richard Reynolds, the Quaker ironmaster, partner of Abraham Darby III at Coalbrookdale and Lord of the Manor of Madeley. He was responsible in about 1800 for starting a short-lived cattle and pig market in the area and the market place still belonged to his descendants in the mid-19th century.

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Iron Bridge House reflects the prosperity of the market centre that Reynolds and his collaborators established. It is a substantial six-bedroomed house over a double-fronted shop, with store rooms linked by trap doors, a pulley (which still survives) in the roof and various offices, stables, coach houses, cellars and a 'bacon drying house' adjoining. It was probably built by one Henry Smith whose imposing bill headings reflect not just pride in his own premises, but an awareness of their situation, next to the first iron bridge in the world.

By the 1840s Smith was working in partnership with Charles Price and also with a Charles Smith, probably his son, who combined the trades of ironmonger and grocer. Charles Price's household in 1851 was typical of a prosperous Victorian shopkeeper. As well as his wife and three children, it included an assistant and two apprentices, two nurses and a house servant.

Ironbridge was then a thriving commercial centre with several inns, a post office, a printing shop, a subscription library, a dispensary, a bank, various doctors' surgeries, lawyers' offices and a range of splendid shops, of which Iron Bridge House was perhaps the most imposing.

The prosperity of Ironbridge was sustained by the opening of the Severn Valley Railway in 1862. Ironbridge and Broseley station was at the south end of the bridge and the numerous travellers from the Madeley area to Shrewsbury, Bridgnorth or beyond all had to cross the bridge, thus bringing more trade to the shopkeepers at its northern end.

The coming of the railway brought about a decline in river traffic. By the 1860s none of the provisions sold at the shop in Iron Bridge House would have been brought up the river by barge, and by 1900 there were no longer any cargo-carrying barges at all on the Shropshire portion of the Severn. The decline of local industry from the late 19th century onwards diminished the trade of Ironbridge and while the designation of Telford New Town in the 1960s began to restore prosperity to the district as a whole, competition from other shopping centres and heavy road traffic have brought about the closure of many of the shops in Ironbridge. At the same time the growing recognition that the monuments of the Industrial Revolution are as much part of our history as stately homes or ruined abbeys brought increasing numbers of visitors to see the bridge. The Iron Bridge is a monument of international importance. The market place at its northern end was laid out as a direct consequence of the building of the bridge, testament to the creation of something unique, which at the same time provided opportunities for profitable speculation and demanded an appropriate setting. Iron Bridge House is an elegant and essential part of that setting.

In 1835 the land on which the building now stands was sold to Henry Smith, grocer, for the sum of £1,400. The seller was William Smith, who had bought the land in 1827 from the family of Richard Reynolds, partner of Abraham Darby III.

In 1861 Henry Smith died, leaving the property to his son Egerton William Smith to carry on the business. By 1916 it was bought by R. A. Jones for £550. His widow Mrs Jones sold it to J. C. Lloyd and Sons, a grocery and off-licence business, in 1949. They in turn sold it to Federated Properties Ltd., who in 1972 sold it to the Landmark Trust. The Trust leased the ground floor shop to the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust until 1975, when restoration work began.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Iron Bridge House sleeps up to 4 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.