

Responses to Peter Calver's introduction to William George Armstrong.

Geoff Kennedy

It is clear from Peter's introduction to next week's topic, that Lord Armstrong was a remarkable individual of many talents whose contribution to Britain's industrial power in the 19th and 20th centuries was huge. It is disappointing that he features so little in the national consciousness and appears to be rarely mentioned among the great Victorian engineers; as Peter says, this may be due to his close association with the arms trade and his development of ever more destructive weaponry. For example, in features about the remarkable engineering of Tower Bridge, his name does not appear or, perhaps, just in passing. His prescience about the future was also remarkable and his philanthropy, towards his workers and to the community- the educational facilities he provided for workers and his donations to the community, Jesmond Dene Park being a fine example.

Our growth as a major trading nation and an industrial powerhouse was significantly facilitated by his development of hydraulics, for use in cranes and other machinery, enabling docks to cope with demands. We lauded the Royal Navy and his ships and weapons played a major role in Britannia ruling the waves and his successor companies also played a major part in two world wars and are still big UK enterprises.

More generally, it is instructive just to be reminded how big Britain was in the 19th century; it is difficult to conceive now our dominance of shipping and trade; how our coal production dwarfed that of other countries and how much was exported, along with steel and ships and vast quantities of other manufactures, big and small. And, for me, the significance of the North East of England during his lifetime. That also involves appreciating the scale of the subsequent decline. All in all, a study of his life helps us to understand major aspects of our history over the last two hundred years; a really rewarding read.

Peter's reply to the above:

As I got deeper into Armstrong's life story, I began to see more and more how it intertwined with Britain's status in the world during the 19th century.

Armstrong's work in ordnance helped give the navy its edge over other countries.

The colonial period of our history is now being questioned, along with the slave trade. I hope Armstrong and others, indeed this part of our history will not be swept under the carpet, unfortunately I expect the players will be quietly forgotten.

Armstrong is mainly remembered for his guns, not for his other engineering achievements, that benefitted mankind especially hydraulics and electricity generation. Or for as a benefactor for the working classes of Newcastle.

Alan Buckland

I knew next to nothing about William Armstrong, so this was a very interesting and full introduction to his life and achievements.

Lord Armstrong was clearly super-versatile - lawyer, engineer, scientist, inventor, landscape gardener, environmentalist, philanthropist - and it is difficult to think of anyone with a similar range of talents. (Though I'm sure someone can come up with some ideas.)

His achievements were recognised during his lifetime through knighthood, peerage and other awards and he left a massive legacy, but his name appears to have been lost amongst those of the more famous 19th century industrialists and engineers like Brunel, Stephenson and Trevethick. Similarly, his name does not feature amongst those of the great philanthropists of the time like Chadwick, William Booth, Rowntree and Barnardo.

I have seen it suggested that his relative anonymity is related to most of his work being associated just with the North-East and and, as Peter indicates, his role as a weapons manufacturer and dealer. Also, his inventions maybe do not carry the same glamour and immediate public appeal as the ocean liners and steam locomotives of his celebrated contemporaries. There is possibly a more recent concern about his involvement in slavery in that his armaments were supplied to the Confederates in the American Civil War. The National Trust has recently highlighted Craggside as having links with slavery.

A bit of trivia. The Grimsby Hydraulic Tower is very similar in design to the Chamberlain Clock Tower at Birmingham University. Both are apparently modelled on the Torre de Mangia in Siena.

Peter's reply to Alan

William Armstrong was little known outside of Tyneside.

Although he was heavily involved in the ordnance business that supported Britain's Imperialistic ambitions, I did not find he had any direct involvement, or benefitted from Slavery. The National Trust do link him quite rightly with Colonialism but not with Slavery (except the supply of arms to the Confederate army during the American Civil War).

Phil Hammond

Many thanks to Peter for his thorough and fascinating paper on Lord Armstrong which led me to consider his connection with Coventry and surrounding areas as I'm prone to do. As I was expecting with names like Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft (AWA) and Armstrong Siddeley Motors (AS) prominent locally since early in the last century I was not to be disappointed.

I also visited the web site of The Warwickshire Industrial Society www.warwickshireiras.co.uk which has a wealth of relevant information on the work and influence of Lord Armstrong. Some of what I think are relevant 'highlights' are presented below.

Armstrong Whitworth was the main airframe manufacturer in the Coventry area with factories situated at Whitley Baginton and Bitteswell. Over a period of some sixty years they produced many types of aircraft including the Lancaster, Lincoln. Gloster Meteor, Gloster Javelin, Hawker Hunter, and the Argosy transport aircraft.

Armstrong Siddeley Motors was situated at Parkside and Ansty. They manufactured piston aero engines, gas turbines, torpedoes and complete marine gas turbine units. Both sites are now closed.

Armstrong Siddeley also made very high quality cars with a radiator cap adorned with the Sphinx emblem, the company slogan being 'As Silent As The Sphinx' . Armstrong Siddeley car production ceased in the early sixties.

Peter's Reply to Phil

Thank you Phil for adding the Coventry connection.

When you tackle a project as large as William Armstrong's life it is difficult to know when to stop. Tentacles from what he created in his lifetime spread right across the country and some are still there today.

I decided to limit my research to his achievements during his lifetime. He created such a large business it carried on under its own momentum for many years after his demise.