



THE LOCKSMITH'S HOUSE

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Locks from Willenhall

Willenhall is the home of the lock making industry as Walsall is to leather and Stourbridge is to glass. The town has been famous for lock making since the sixteenth century and continues to be the centre of lock making in Britain. Lock making flourished during the Industrial Revolution and Willenhall became established as the centre of Britain's lock making industry.

Locally available materials first allowed the industry to develop, but it was the skill of the locksmiths, passed down from generation to generation, that has kept the industry in Willenhall right up to the present day.

By 1855, there were as many as 340 lock making businesses in Willenhall, most of them set up in backyard workshops. Richard Hodson & Son, at the site of 'The Locksmith's House' was one such business.

Gradually the small family businesses disappeared as the industry became centred on large companies often employing hundreds of men and women.

Early days of lock making in Willenhall

In the early days firms were small and manufacturing took place in backyard workshops and 'brew houses' where whole families were employed down to small children filing keys. At its peak in the mid-eighteenth century most households in the area were involved in the industry.

***'More locks are made here than in any other town in England or Europe'.
(Dr Richard Wilkes, c.1750)***

In 1820 Willenhall houses were described as "*plain and flanked by one storey workshops*". Here the locksmiths worked long hours often from 6 am to 7 pm, making their own tools to reduce costs. Finished products had to be sold before they could buy next week's raw materials.

Locksmiths were paid less in Willenhall than elsewhere in the Midlands. Willenhall locks were simple in design and therefore sold more cheaply than Wolverhampton's, which tended to be of higher quality.

'It was said that if a Willenhall locksmith dropped a lock, he never bothered to pick it up because he could make another in less time!'

Willenhall turned out vast quantities of cheap locks of different types. Orders for 10, 000 locks would be shipped to plantations in South America and India, and sold for as little as a penny each. For them quantity was better than quality!

As with all craft trades at the time locksmiths apprenticed boys for training. They were often badly treated and worked a 14 or 16-hour day suffering humped backs from bending over benches from a young age. These deformities earned Willenhall the nickname 'Humpshire'.

'In Willenhall the children are shamefully and most cruelly beaten with a horsewhip, strap, stick, hammer-handle or whatever tool is nearest to hand, or are struck with the clenched fist or hand'. (1843 Children's Employment Commission)

Expansion

Early in the nineteenth century, new firms were established and many of the original smaller manufacturers expanded, gaining international recognition as household names. Chubb were famous for producing high quality locks and making the Detector Lock from 1818, a lock which both prevented picking and was capable of showing the owner whether it had been picked.

Trading under the name Union and based at the Union Works, Josiah Parkes advertised in the Wolverhampton Guide of 1864 as 'a manufacturer of all kinds of locks'.

By 1860 the industry was virtually confined to Willenhall and Wolverhampton with around 90% of the locks produced in England being made here. However by then 85% of locks were produced by the large factories rather than backyard workshops.

In 1911 Parkes began the manufacture of cylinder locks and latches, which we now refer to as 'Yale locks'. At the time comparatively few were being made in this country. The American company, Yale, actually only began manufacturing locks in England in 1929 when it took over Willenhall's H & T Vaughan Ltd. Yale inherited a ready-made work force and production facilities for manufacturing cylinder locks.

Richard Hodson & Son

Richard Hodson & Son lock makers was established in 1792. The family relocated several times within Willenhall, moving from Union Street to Hall Street, to Lower Lichfield Street, finally bought the premises in New Road in 1905. The Hodsons both lived and worked together as a family. Father John and son Edgar worked in the backyard workshop making locks while mother Sarah and daughters Ida, Edith and Flora helped with the book keeping and packing the finished goods.

The Hodsons carved out a niche at the cheaper end of the market. They produced locks in large quantities for export as far afield as South America, Chile, Peru and Russia. Edgar followed family tradition making bar padlocks and lighter locks. He continued making locks on this site until his death in 1970.

Also known as Spanish locks and alcove locks, bar padlocks have a long bar attached which, like a bolt, is shot through 'eyes' to secure, for example two gates. These are not the most secure locks, but adequately serve for a temporary use, such as cattle pen doors, that need to be secured quickly. They are of an unusual shape to be made in Britain, and perhaps the Hodsons were meeting the needs of the Latin American market they served. The bar padlocks were japanned – a process in which the lock was coated with 'green' or raw paint and then cooked in the japanning oven, to create a shiny and durable black finish.

'Lighters' are a type of barge, used to transport loads from larger vessels to shore. Lighter locks, a type of chain padlock, were galvanised in a vat of zinc to prevent corrosion. They were used to lock deck hatches giving access to the cargo. The chain was bolted to the deck by the captain thereby preventing the crew stealing provisions or goods from the ship. Ordinary padlocks could have been thrown overboard by dishonest crewmen with a hope of returning later to steal goods from the open hatch! The Hodsons made locks for other companies, and branded them with that name, such as the Union Lighterage Company.

The Hodson's also had a small stampings business and many of the items were actually drop forgings and included parts for aircraftsmen's harness during World War 1, barrack bed bolts, parts for oven door catches for New World gas cookers and an enormous quantity of spanners.