Coalbrookdale decorative ironwork in London: a gazetteer

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Introduction

Ranking among the most famous historic ironworks in the UK, indeed the world, the Coalbrookdale furnaces in Shropshire were where, in 1709, Abraham Darby I first smelted iron ore using coke. Here in 1722 cast-iron cylinders for Newcomen engines were first manufactured, in 1779 the bridge that gave nearby Ironbridge its name was cast and the boiler and other parts were made for Trevithick's 1802 locomotive. At this time their technical expertise was among the best in the world but after the Napoleonic wars the iron works started to experience difficulties and the blast furnaces were closed in 1822.

The Coalbrookdale Company now moved into the production of ornate cast-iron items such as fireplaces, gas lamps, gates, etc. By 1849, it had been awarded the Gold Medal of the Society of Arts for its fine castings. At the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park in 1851 the Company not only received an award for specimens of iron, tire iron for wheels and engine floor and foot-plate iron that it exhibited but it also made the ornate entrance gates to the exhibition (see Gazetteer entry below). At the follow-up 1862 Exhibition, held in buildings on a site now occupied by the South Kensington museums complex, Coalbrookdale provided a number of structures including even more fanciful gates shown in the *Illustrated London News* drawing of the time (Figure 1).

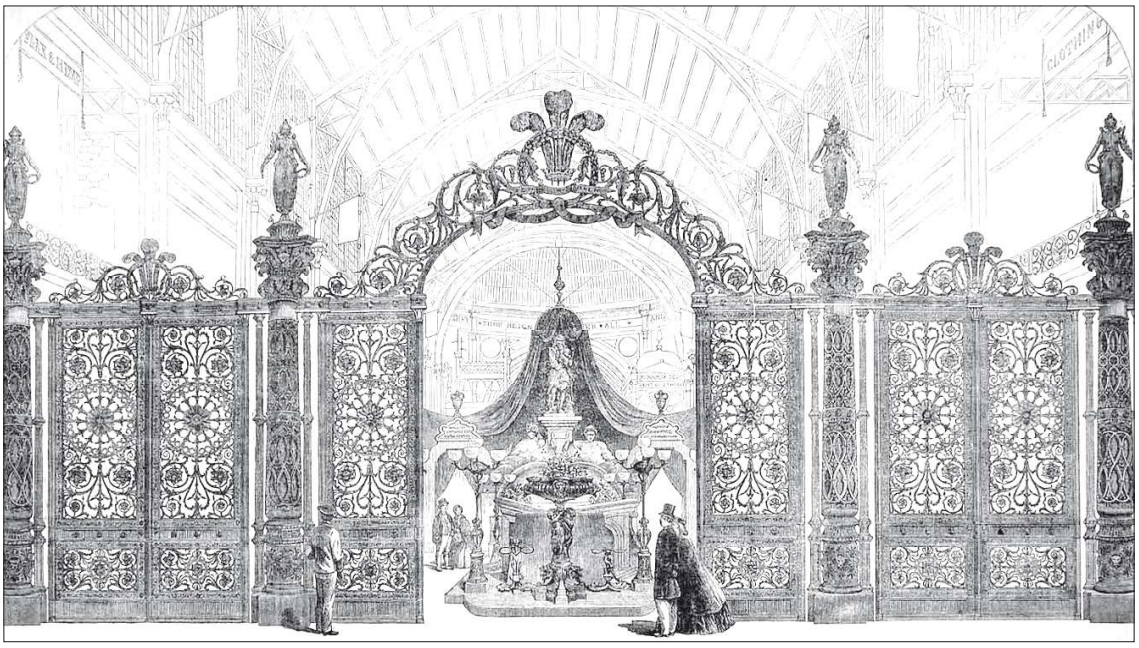

Figure 1. *ILN* illustration of Coalbrookdale Gates at 1862 International Exhibition

By the 1850s, it employed some 3500 men and boys at its foundries in Coalbrookdale and Horsehay. The weekly output was 2,000 tons of cast-iron and the ironworks were the biggest in the world. Many fine castings as well as more utilitarian products can be seen today in the Museum of Iron at Coalbrookdale, part of the Iron Bridge Gorge Museum.

1946 saw the development of the Rayburn cooker in the dale. The Rayburn-Aga cooker was made by the foundry but is actually of Swedish design. The foundry at Coalbrookdale continued to make AGA stoves into the 21st Century but its closure was announced by the American owners in May 2017.[1]

Coalbrookdale in London

From Post Office Directories it is possible to see that Coalbrookdale ironwork was sold in London via their agents Robinson & Eyre, who had premises at 118 Cannon St, E.C. from around 1867 to 1883. In 1884 Coalbrookdale opened their own showrooms at 43–44 Holborn Viaduct but by 1890 they were in the De Keyser's Royal Hotel Building, New Bridge St, Blackfriars at the north end of Blackfriars Bridge. The hotel had opened on the 5th September 1874 under the ownership of Sir Polydore de Keyser (1832–1898). De Keyser came to London from Belgium, initially working as a waiter, but rose to become Lord Mayor of London in 1887. The 400 room hotel was very exclusive with initially every guest having to be introduced personally or by letter. In this showroom customers could view the company's smaller decorative items as well as some of the decorative tiles and bricks from Ironbridge. A wider choice could be seen in the ornate catalogues produced by the company.[2]

The hotel was taken over by the RAF in 1916. In 1920 was acquired by Lord Lever as the site for the Lever Brothers' London offices. Lever Brothers became Unilever in 1930. Construction of the present Unilever House started in 1929 and it opened in 1933.

For larger items, such as steam engines, customers had to go to 16 Eastcheap, E.C. and see another agent John F. Wolff. By 1900, Coalbrookdale's showroom was at 142 Queen Victoria St, in 1908 they were in Rathbone Place and then finally in Berners St, W.

Although their cast-iron work could be of the highest decorative quality both in terms of the prevailing styles and quality of the castings, Coalbrookdale did have rivals in the great Scottish companies such as Walter MacFarlanes of the Saracen Foundry, Glasgow and George Smith's Sun Foundry, Glasgow and London Founders such as Dewer of Old St and Grissell of Regents Canal Ironworks.

This article is derived from a set of GLIAS display boards I help prepare for the Association of Industrial Archaeology conference held in Ironbridge in 1979 to commemorate the completion of the iron bridge itself. The display, called 'The Dale in London', also included some of the many other products of the Dale such as tiles from Maws tile works and Coalport. Here I have focussed on only the surviving ironwork and tried to update the 1979 listing with more recent information and findings. Guided by a list of some of their significant products in London published by the Company and now in the archives of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum I have looked for a number of other items supplied to sites in London such as a bandstand in Hither Green and a hotel canopy in Northumberland Avenue without much success; presumably much was lost to the rather futile and misguided scrap metal drive of World War 2. Others, such as Sunfields Memorial Church in Blackheath, were destroyed by bombing in WW2 and street lighting appears to have fallen to street improvements and road widening.

Gazetteer

Entries are in order of year of construction where known. All photos by David Perrett unless otherwise attributed.

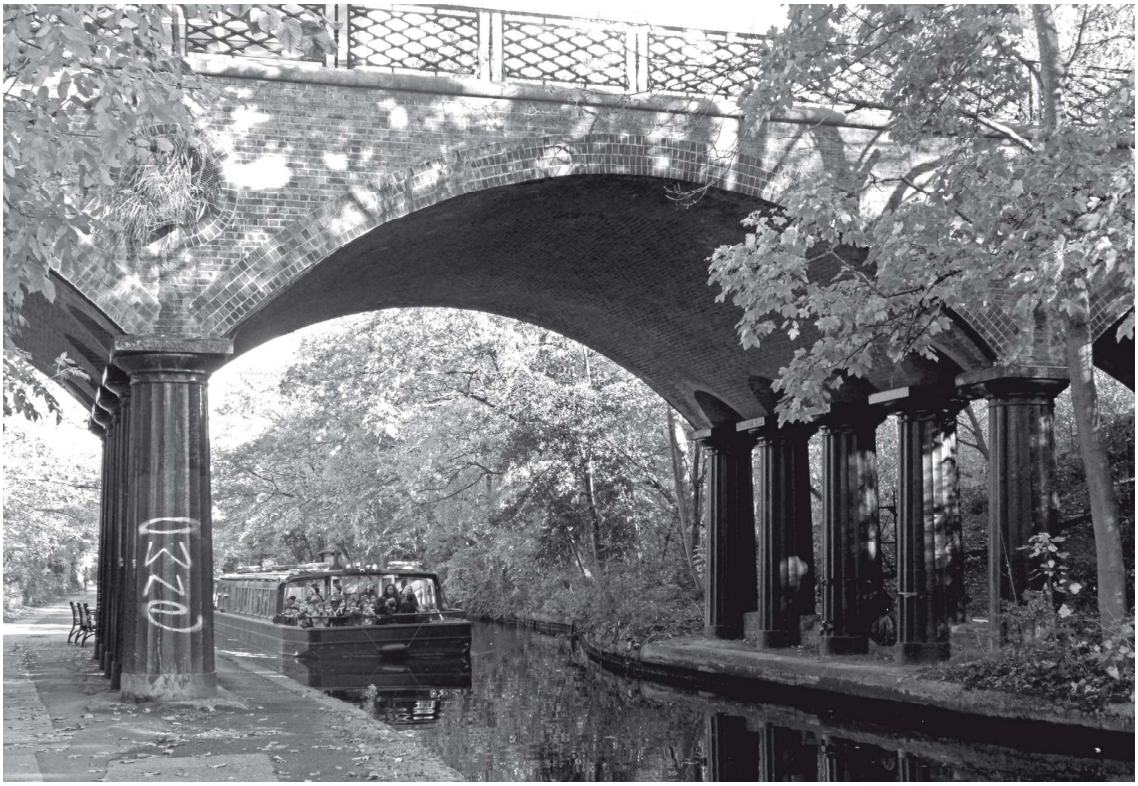

Figure 2. Macclesfield (Blow-up) Bridge. November 2017

Figure 3. Reversed capital on Blow-up Bridge

Macclesfield (Blow-up) Bridge (1816), Regents Canal

The most unusual event in the history of the Regent's Canal occurred on Friday 2nd October 1874, when the barge *Tilbury* being towed by a steam tug passed under the bridge. It was one of five barges carrying mixed cargos including petroleum and *Tilbury* was laden with blasting gunpowder from Waltham Abbey going to Nottingham. The bridge, originally constructed in 1816 with fluted cast-iron columns by Coalbrookdale, is named after the Regent's Canal Company Chairman, the Earl of Macclesfield.[3] At 3am an explosion occurred that completely demolished the bridge and killed three people. The Coalbrookdale columns were salvaged and the bridge was rebuilt to the same design but many of the columns were turned around during the rebuild as testified by the rope marks on them. To this day it is known as 'Blow up Bridge' (Figures 2 and 3).[4]

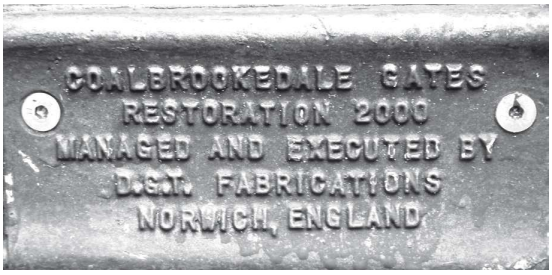

Figure 4. Great Exhibition Gates in Hyde Park. April 2010
Figure 5. Makers' plate on column base in Hyde Park.

Kensington Gardens Gates (1851), S. end of West Carriage Drive

The Coalbrookdale Gates are large bronze-painted cast-iron gates made at Coalbrookdale for the Great Exhibition of 1851 (Figure 4). Small ground level plaques commemorate this event and are marked 'Coalbrookdale' (Figure 5). The gates, designed by John Bell and Charles Crookes, were cast in one piece. Their finials, supporting a crown, represent peace and the stags' head vases evoke the origins of the park. When the Exhibition was dismantled in 1852 the gates were put up for sale with other unwanted items but since no buyer came forward the gates were erected on the Inner Park Road. With the construction of the Albert Memorial in 1871 they were moved to their present position. The quality of the castings is of the highest standard. The gates were repaired after bomb damage in World War II. In 2000 they were restored by DGT Fabrications of Norwich.

Surprisingly the gates are only listed Grade II whilst the 1858 Queen Gates to the west of the Albert Memorial are II*.

Figure 6. *The Eagle Slayer* inside Museum of Childhood. Courtesy Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum

Figure 7. *The Water Carrier* Blackfriars. November 2017

Figure 8. Coalbrookdale casting mark

The Eagle Slayer (1851), Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood, Cambridge Heath Road

The Eagle Slayer was exhibited at 1851 Great Exhibition. At the exhibition it was displayed under an elaborate tall cast iron dome with an eagle perched on top, also by Coalbrookdale. The shepherd is shooting the eagle that had killed the sheep at his feet. It was one of four statues by John Bell (1811–1895) made at Coalbrookdale, the others being Andromeda, Temperancia and Ceres. *The Eagle Slayer* (or a copy) was displayed in the Crystal Palace in Sydenham. After the exhibition it was at Kensington Palace and then displayed outside the original V&A building (the 'Brompton Boilers') in South Kensington. In 1927 it was moved to re-erected 'Brompton Boilers' now in Bethnal Green. After many years standing outside the Museum, and more inside at the rear of the café, in 2017 it was transferred to the Museum of Iron at Coalbrookdale (Figure 6).[5]

The Water Carrier (1861), N.E. end of Blackfriars Bridge, outside Blackfriars Station

The plaque below the statute on the granite pedestal of the fountain states that it was erected by the Metropolitan Free Drinking Fountains Association in July 1861 by the Chairman Samuel Gurney MP. Sculptured by Wilts Bros of London, 'Coalbrookdale' is inscribed on the statue itself (Figures 7 & 8).

Figure 9. Victoria Gates, Kew Gardens March 2014
Figure 10. Marked lock plate

Victoria Gates to Kew Gardens (1867), Kew Road opposite Lichfield Rd

The gates, originally called the Temperate House Gates, were purchased from the Coalbrookdale London agents Robinson & Eyre, in 1867. They are no 77 in the Coalbrookdale catalogue and cost a total of £100.[6] They were moved to their present site and renamed with the Queen's permission in 1889 (Figure 9). 'Coalbrookdale' is cast into the Lock plate (Figure 10).

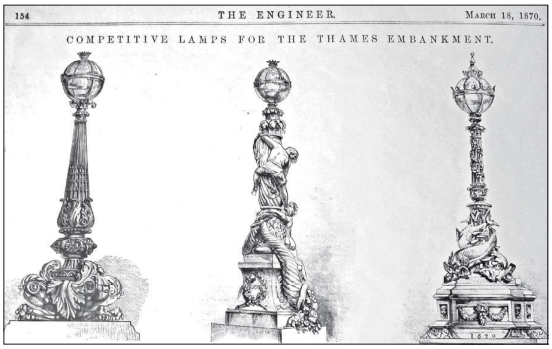

Figure 11 The competing designs for the Embankment lamps

Figure 12 One of the two Coalbrookdale competition on the Chelsea Embankment. April 2016

Figure 13 *above*. Bench by Coalbrookdale in the V&A. Courtesy Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum

Lamp posts (1870), W. end of Chelsea Embankment Gardens SW1

In March 1870, the Metropolitan Board of Works (MBW) took the unusual step of displaying the proposed designs for the lamp standards on the Victoria Embankment, in order to gauge public opinion before a final choice was made. Central to the technical responses was how the lamps would be affected by mass reproduction in cast iron since hundreds would be required to fill the riverfront. The competition entries were featured in a number of journals but the figure here is taken from The Engineer (Figure 9).[7] The middle lamp was designed by the artist Timothy Butler for the Coalbrookdale Company. Artistically it was the critics' favourite saying that it showed the spirit of the Empire but others said it showed two Black Country urchins getting up to mischief! The right-hand lamp with 'dolphins' was designed by the MBW architect George Vulliamy. The more restrained design, shown on the left, is by the MBW engineer Joseph Bazalgette, cast by Turner and Allen and features a base of bent lions' legs and paws. Lamps of Bazalgette's design can be found at the west end of the Embankment. Vulliamy's dolphin lamp design won and are what today we see along the Embankment. The dolphins are, in fact, sturgeon!

Two of the ornate Butler design lamps cast for the competition at Coalbrookdale can be seen, one on either side of the road near to the Albert Bridge marking the end of this section of the Thames Embankment (Figure 12).

Figure 13. Elaborate Coalbrookdale survivor of the number supplied to Trafalgar Square. November 2017

Figure 14. Ventilator lamp post, Charing Cross Road

Figure 15. Coalbrookdale mark on ventilator lamp post

Benches (c. 1870), Victoria & Albert Museum

Two benches by Coalbrookdale are in the third floor iron gallery. One, painted white, is dated ca.1870 and the other, painted green, was designed by Christopher Dresser for Coalbrookdale ca. 1890. There is no indication where they came from.

Lamp standards (1878), Trafalgar Square

It has been stated that the two ornate triple headed lamp standards, dated 1878, sited at the Trafalgar Square ends of Northumberland Avenue and the Mall are by Coalbrookdale but this is clearly wrong. In fact, the Northumberland Avenue lamp bears the founder's mark of Young & Co, Pimlico. Interestingly though it is one of the few artefacts that are marked 'Metropolitan Board of Works' in full. The confusion is easy to understand since Coalbrookdale did supply a number of elaborate ventilating lamp pillars for various sites in central London including Trafalgar Square. These can clearly be seen in Victorian photographs of the Square. Others were in Shaftesbury Avenue and Embankment Place. Judging from their position shown in the various photographs they would today be located in the middle of the current road system – so they were clearly removed in earlier road widening schemes.

Nearby, at the south end of Charing Cross Rd on a traffic island, is an elaborate lamp-post with three lamps (Figure 13). There is no lettering indicating Coalbrookdale however it is very similar to one pictured in the Ironbridge archives: the archive photograph shows an identical column with four suspended glass globes while the current lamp has had the top globe replaced with a casting of what appears to be a crown. It is situated above a former toilet, now a ticket booth. A few feet away is a much simpler lamp also with a ventilated base and Coalbrookdale is cast into it. (Figures 14 & 15).

Figure 16. 1882 Dolphin design lamps outside City of London Girls' school. 2006
Figure 17. Lamp posts and railings outside Principal Hotel, Russell Square. 2004

Lamps (1882), Victoria Embankment, outside the former City of London Girls' School

Two Dolphin lamps dated 1882 are mounted at either side of the entrance steps. They appear to be of the same casting that Vulliamy had submitted for the Thames Embankment lamp standards and are marked 'Coalbrookdale'. The school was adjacent to where Coalbrookdale had their London sales room on the ground floor of de Keyser's Hotel so they no doubt served as useful advertising (Figure 16).

Railings and lamp posts (1898), the Principal London, formerly the Hotel Russell, Russell Square

The hotel was built in 1898 to the designs of the architect Charles Fitzroy Doll. Partly in response to the hotel's success, Doll received his most famous commission: the RMS Titanic. On board the Titanic he copied many of the hotel's room designs. Cast-iron railings and lamp posts outside are from Coalbrookdale (Figure 17).

Figure 18. Lamp posts at Marylebone. October 2016

Figure 19. Casting mark on lamp post

Figure 20. Street bollard in front of Christ Church Spitalfields. April 2015

Figure 21. Foundry mark on Spitalfields bollard

Lamps (1899), Landmark Hotel, 222 Marylebone Rd

Ornate lamps at the entrance to what is now the Landmark Hotel (Figure 18). The original hotel was built immediately in front of the Great Central Railway's new London terminus.[10] Marylebone Station and the Great Central Hotel both opened in 1899. The hotel, designed by Robert Edis in a Jacobean style, had 700 bedrooms – easily too many for the railway traffic. In 1916 it was requisitioned as a convalescence home for wounded soldiers. After the war it returned to its original role and remained a hotel until WWII when it was again requisitioned. After the war, it was purchased by the LNER just in time to be nationalised when it became the headquarters of the British Transport Commission. In 1987 it was sold and has once again become a hotel. It is clear from the detail of the lamps that the quality of the castings being made at Coalbrookdale by this date was beginning to slip (Figure 19).

Bollards, Christ Church, Spitalfields

Cast-iron bollards marked 'Coalbrookdale' are at the east side of Commercial St immediately in front of the church (Figures 20 and 21).

Figure 22. Greenwich Park bandstand. May 2016

Bandstand (1901), Greenwich Park

For the 1862 Exhibition in South Kensington Francis Fowke R.E. (1823–1865) designed the first cast iron bandstand.[8] He later designed the structure of the Royal Albert Hall. In 1889, two bandstands were purchased by the L.C.C., who put one in Southwark Park and the other in Peckham Rye Park; neither survive. Some sources say they were cast in the Dale but according to Hazel Conway's note they were by J. Potter & Co. West Hampstead. A bandstand by Coalbrookdale is in Montpellier Gardens in Cheltenham.

The Greenwich bandstand is a relatively plain structure just to the east of the Royal Observatory at the top end of the park (Figure 22). Today the heavily overpainted makers' plates are nearly indecipherable. You can just make out 'Coalbrookdale' and 'Deane & Co London' on some. Deane & Co had premises at 48 King William St but closed down in 1890 before this bandstand was installed. The relationship of Coalbrookdale to Deane & Co is unclear since they were not one of its London agents.[9]

Others…

Other GLIAS members have told me of the following items in London but I have not been able to check them out.

Sir John Soane Museum Iron chair in basement is said to be by Coalbrookdale

63 St James St. The Survey of London (vol 29–30 p 472) says that two fireplaces in the club rooms inside are by Coalbrookdale.

Broomfield Park bench marked 'Coalbrookdale' was there in the 1980s

Royal Ballet School, White Lodge, Richmond Park. Spiral staircase

If you know of other items not included here please let me have details via d.perrett647@btinternet.com

The author

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Notes and References

1 *AIA News* 182 (2017) p 10
2 A catalogue of their products dated 1875 can be viewed at www.darwincountry.org/explore/001845.html?ObjectsLimit=107&sid=ee3f0b63918846ccbe206f54bb912c62
3 *Illustrated London News* 10 October 1874
4 Spencer, H. 1961 *London's Canal, An illustrated history of the Regents Canal*, Pitman Press, London
5 *The Illustrated Exhibitor* 1851 p11 & p161
6 National Archives PRO file WORK 32/123
7 *The Engineer* 18 March (1870) p154
8 Conway, H. (2001) 'The Royal Horticultural Society Bandstand Mystery: Or, What Happened to the First Cast-Iron Bandstands?' *Garden History* 29, 214–216
9 B. Holland http://greenwichindustrialhistory.blogspot.co.uk/2015/09/greenwich-park-bandstand-deane-and-co.html
10 Jackson, A.A. (1969) *London's Termini*, David & Charles