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Glass-Making in the 1750s and 1760s

During this period, glass was made in cone-shaped buildings (see fig.1). These were made of brick and could be up to 80 feet tall. Inside these cones, the raw materials used to make glass (e.g. sand and limestone) were mixed together and melted in very hot coal-burning furnaces (see fig.2. below). This produced molten glass which could be blown into different shapes (e.g. bottles) by glassblowers using blow-pipes (see fig.3). The heat inside a glass cone would have been intense.

Fig.1. A surviving glass cone at Catcliffe, built c.1740

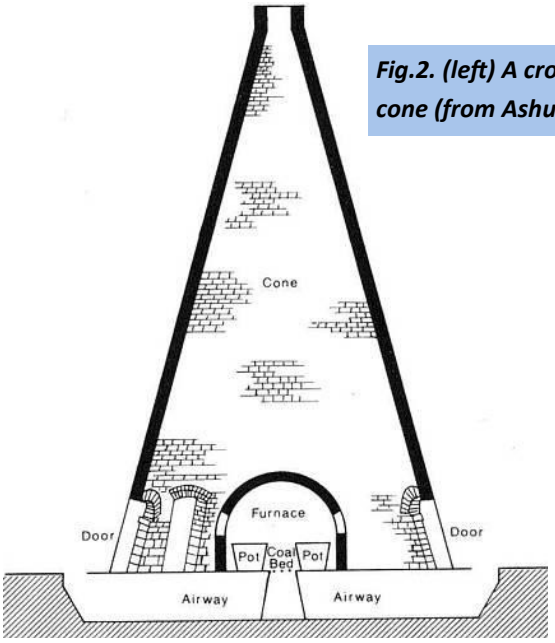

Fig.2. (left) A cross-section of a glass cone (from Ashurst, 1975)

Fig.3. (right) A glassblower using a blowpipe (from an engraving from the 1840s, Blackfriars, London)

Wages for glassblowers varied according to skill. Master glass-blowers could earn as much as 25 shillings per week, while the least skilled workmen earned much less – sometimes as little as 4 shillings per week. Glass works varied in size, but often employed 10-20 men. Settlements often grew up around glass works. These were populated by the men who worked at the glass works and their families. These communities were often quite tight-knit as glass furnaces were often built in rural areas.

Children whose fathers worked as glass-makers are likely to have helped out. There are numerous tasks connected with this sort of glass-making, which could have been performed by children, for example, fetching coal for the furnace and packing glass objects in straw for transportation. The sons of glass-makers may well have become apprentices in their teens, as glass-making was a trade which tended to be passed on through generations.

There were several hazards and dangers associated with glass-making. The intense heat from the furnace could damage eye-sight and the process of glass-making also released harmful fumes. Doing physical work in such hot conditions would have been extremely tiring.

Because glass works were often located in quite rural areas, it was usually possible and economical for glass-making families to grow some of their own food. In eighteenth century Gawber, the hamlet around Gawber Hall contained both a glass cone and a farm (see fig.4 and fig.5). This farm would have created further jobs and added to the size of the settlement.

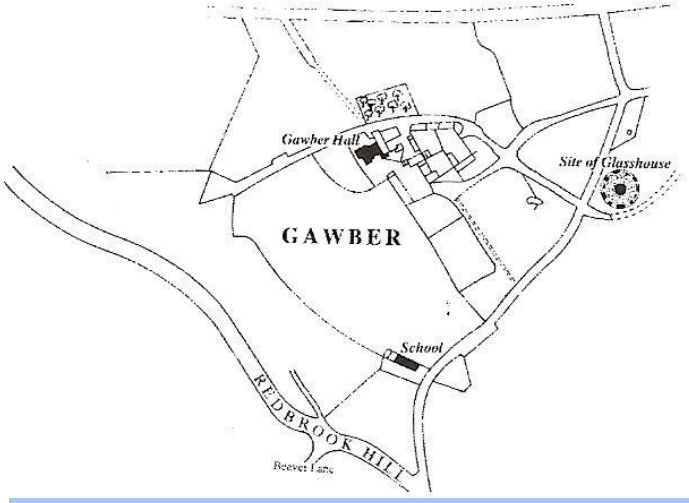

Fig. 4. The site of Gawber Hall and the associated glass cone (from Eliott, 1988)

Fig. 5. Gawber Hall, around the time of its demolition in 1935 (Batty and Bradbury 1988)

Glass works needed to be close to a source of coal; a constant supply of coal was needed to power the furnaces, which could burn for up to 24 hours per day. At Gawber, coal was brought from a 'day hole' on a nearby hillside. Because coal could be found close to the surface at Gawber, there was no need for deep mining.

Most glass-making families would not have been able to afford a servant, so it is likely that children would have had to help out with household chores as well as tasks connected with glass-making. There was no compulsory education at this time. There were some charity schools, but not all furnaces would have had a school within easy reach. For many children, any education they did receive is likely to have been very basic and home-based.

In the 1750s, loaves of bread of varying sizes could be bought for 1-3d (1 to 3 pennies). It is said that, in parts of Yorkshire, many working people ate a lot of oatmeal which was cheaper than bread. How well off a glass-making family was would have depended on how many of members of the family were working and how well-paid their work was. A family with a weekly income of 25 shillings could have lived quite comfortably, whereas a family with an income of 4 shillings per week would have been poor.

Glass-makers often moved several times during their lifetime. This may have been because glass-making was a career in which one could progress as one's skills improved. (I.e. A man might have had enough skill to become a master glassblower but he may have needed to move to a different furnace to do this, if there wasn't a vacancy at the furnace he worked at.)

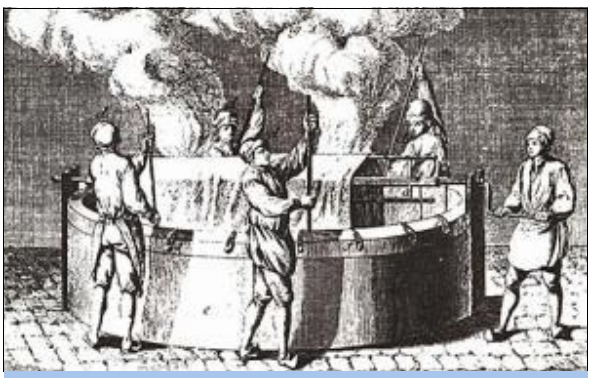

Fig.6 Glass-makers around a furnace (University of London)

Glass-makers usually rented their accommodation, which was often owned by the owner of the glass works where they worked. The glass works and accommodation at Gawber Hall was leased by a man named William Thorp in the 1750s and 1760s. It was owned by a family based in Derbyshire.