

‘A FINE CROP OF PEACHES’

THE IMPACT OF METAL-FRAMED GLASSHOUSES

Elaine Mitchell

Cultivating tender plants has challenged gardeners in Britain since the sixteenth century when orange trees were sheltered beneath canvas and wood. By the early-nineteenth century these simple structures had evolved into sophisticated glazed and metal-framed buildings when the Birmingham firm of Jones & Clark became a leading manufacturer.

In 1818 Thomas Clark Junior and John Jones established one of the earliest manufactories of metal-framed glasshouses, at Lionel Street in Birmingham. In a venture that harnessed the benefits of location, new technology, business and marketing skills, they built an enterprise that left its mark on the landscape and culture of the Midlands – and beyond – throughout the nineteenth century.

Those marks were evident not only in the structures themselves, but also on the dining tables and in the gardens of the growing middle classes. But the ‘fine crop of peaches, and several hundred geraniums’ that Thomas Clark’s father produced from his metal-framed greenhouse in Ladywood furnished not only his table and his garden, but also his mind, with his son observing that it provided ‘an occupation in which he takes great delight’. The metal-framed glasshouse not only demonstrated productivity but also affinity with the natural world.

The Nature of Custom

Whilst the success of Jones & Clark saw them commissioned to produce glasshouses and conservatories for Queen Victoria and a panoply of Dukes and Duchesses, Lords and Ladies, these stellar commissions are eclipsed by the many orders fulfilled for people like Thomas Clark’s father. With the middle classes now gardening with a vengeance in the suburbs, no villa could be considered complete without its conservatory and no garden without its glasshouse. Championed by the influential horticulturalist and publisher, John Claudius Loudon, the market for glasshouses took off.

From the late eighteenth century Birmingham glasshouse manufacturers like John Jorden were experimenting with metal framing in an effort to improve on the limited lifespan of glasshouses made of wood. Patents granted to Jorden indicate that he was one of the driving forces in this arena. But innovation often comes at a price and Jorden was eventually declared bankrupt in 1819. By this time John Jones, who had worked for Jorden, had entered into partnership with Thomas Clark at a manufactory newly-built by Clark’s father.



The Camellia House at Wollaton Hall, ordered by Lord Middleton in 1822. One of Jones & Clark’s major commissions.

Courtesy of Matthew Hollingsworth Sprint Architecture

A Natural Location

Opportunity, combined with the technical expertise, connections and salesmanship of Jones, and the business skill and financial capital of Clark Junior, created a business that took advantage of the growing market for glasshouses and conservatories. But location was also an asset. As well as metal-working, Birmingham was also a significant site of glass production and this combination of skills with the raw materials and a location at the centre of a growing transport network made the town well-placed to develop the new business. A small cluster of glasshouse manufactories, some longer-lived than others, located themselves in the streets close to the Fazeley canal, giving access to an emergent national system of inland waterways.

When Thomas Clark began his new enterprise with John Jones he was confident that his prospects were ‘flattering’. A Royal Warrant and Loudon’s view that Jones was ‘decidedly the best hothouse builder in Britain’ may have confirmed this view. ●

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Further Reading

Fiona Grant, *Glasshouses* (Shire Publications, 2013)

John Hix, *The Glasshouse* (Phaidon Press, 2005)

May Woods & Arete Swartz Warren, *Glass Houses. A History of Greenhouses, Orangeries and Conservatories* (Aurum Press Limited, 1990)