

# GATES, A FOUNTAIN AND STATUES

## COALBROOKDALE AT THE CRYSTAL PALACE

David de Haan

The Ironbridge Gorge Museum displays several Coalbrookdale manufactures which were shown in 1851. The Coalbrookdale Company was well represented at the Exhibition and won several prizes.

**W**ithin the category of 'General Hardware' the Coalbrookdale Company exhibited iron gates, ornamental chimney pieces and fire grates, kitchen ranges, cooking stoves, boilers, tables, garden chairs and hall chairs,

umbrella stands, hall tables and a hat stand, a door knocker, flower pot stands, ornamental vases and animalier art castings. More mundanely, in the department of 'Raw Materials' there was a display of 'square, round, flat, half-round and oval bar iron; angle T and girder iron; sash bar and moulding iron; tire iron; engine-floor and foot plate iron'. However, what people remembered and what was illustrated in the catalogues, were two show pieces – the Coalbrookdale Gates with a Cupid and the Swan fountain in front of them, and the Coalbrookdale Dome with the Eagle Slayer statue inside it. A 'Council Medal' (the highest class) went to the Company for 'statues, a new method of bronzing steel grates, and diamond flooring for steam engines'.

### The Coalbrookdale Gates

Opposite the main entrance at the far end of the Transept stood the magnificent bronzed cast-iron Coalbrookdale Gates, 60ft wide and designed by the Works Manager, Charles Crookes. The main gate posts were surmounted by four putti symbolising Peace and topped

by a gilded crown; the end posts were topped with stag's-head vases, suggestive of a park.

At the conclusion of the Exhibition they were offered for sale but did not find a buyer so were returned to Coalbrookdale. However, in 1871 the gates were re-erected in Hyde Park close to what was the west end of the exhibition building on the approach to where the Albert Memorial now stands. In August 1886 one of the gates was damaged by a mail cart and a replacement was cast, half the cost being borne by Her Majesty's Mails and half by the Coalbrookdale Company. They are still there today. The original drawing is in the Ironbridge Gorge



Courtesy of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust

The magnificent bronzed cast-iron Coalbrookdale Gates.

Museum archives and the damaged gate is on display in the Museum of Iron in Coalbrookdale.

### Cupid and the Swan

Directly in front of the gates there was a cast-iron fountain of Cupid and the Swan, designed by John Bell (1811-95), 'ornamented with a decoration of the white and yellow water-lily' and with water spouting out of the swan's beak. It was painted in 'naturalistic colours', including all the leaves and flowers lining the underside of the fountain bowl, which was recorded in a fine chromolithograph by Digby Wyatt.

After the Exhibition the fountain was purchased by Wolverhampton Council and erected in West Park, though later dismantled and stored. In 1959 it was returned to Coalbrookdale and now stands on the green outside the Museum of Iron, recently painted a bronze colour – the alternative and slightly cheaper finish offered in the Coalbrookdale Company's art castings catalogue.

### The Coalbrookdale Dome and the Eagle Slayer Statue

Half-way down the British Nave was the enormous cast iron ornamental rustic Coalbrookdale Dome or gazebo designed by Charles Crookes, 20ft diameter and 30ft high, with a pinnacle on top that took it a further 10ft higher, surrounded by guarding falcons.

Inside was an 11ft 6in high statue of Æolus, the Eagle Slayer, designed by John Bell, which had first been exhibited at the Royal Academy of Art in 1837. It depicted a bowman who had released his arrow which had pinned an eagle to the roof of the dome, described in the press at the time as 'the height of poor taste'. It can be seen in the photograph that forms the frontispiece of volume 3 of the presentation Jury Reports. Bell was awarded a 'Prize Medal' (the second highest class) for the Eagle Slayer statue.

The statue still survives and is on display in the Museum of Childhood at Bethnal Green, London. A smaller bronze version about 3ft high had been cast in 1848 by the Coalbrookdale Company and two of these can be seen in the collections at Ironbridge – one in iron on the top floor of the Museum of Iron and the other on the upper landing of the nearby Rosehill House.

### The Andromeda Statue

There was a marble version of a statue of Andromeda designed by John Bell in the Sculpture Court behind the south front, which was bought by Queen Victoria for £300 and erected as a fountain at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight. A photograph of the statue from Fox Talbot's studio was included in the 4-volume presentation copies of the Jury Reports, which were bound in red morocco and given to each of the jury judges. Fifteen copies were given to Fox Talbot, one of which he presented to the Marquis of Lansdown, and this is now in the Ironbridge Gorge Museum



Courtesy of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust

A cast-iron fountain of Cupid and the Swan, designed by John Bell.

Library. There was also a cast-iron version of the statue by the Coalbrookdale Company, an example of which is on display in the Museum of Iron.

By 1851 the Coalbrookdale Works had 500 employees, and with their branches including nearby Horsehay and Brymbo in North Wales the total workforce was around 3,500. However, Coalbrookdale was not linked to the mainline railway until 1862. Had that occurred 15 years earlier it is highly likely that the Company would have won the contract to produce the 3,300 cast-iron columns for the Crystal Palace, which were actually supplied by Cochrane & Co of Holly-Hull, Dudley. They were brought by train to Euston and from there by road by Pickford's wagons. ●

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#### Further Reading

Hermione Hobhouse, *The Crystal Place and the Great Exhibition: Art, Science and Productive Industry. A History of the Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851* (Bloomsbury, 2002).

Michael Leapman, *The World for a Shilling – How the Great Exhibition of 1851 Shaped a Nation* (Headline Book Publishing, 2001).