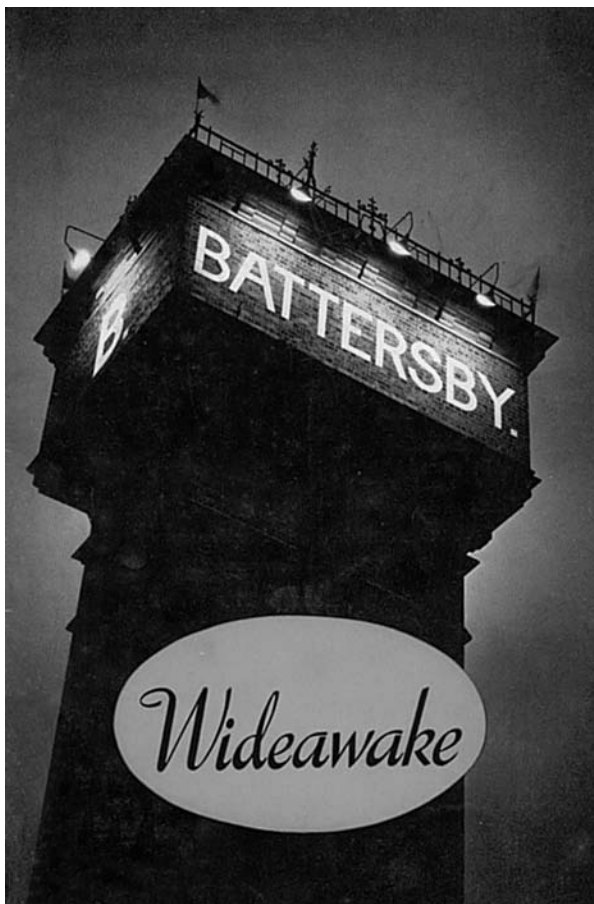


MUSEUMS

The Character of Hat Works

Hannah Williamson

The Tower on Battersby's hat factory, from the front cover of *Wideawake*, the company magazine



Hat Works has been open since Easter 2000. To create a museum devoted to hats, headwear and the hatting industry was, in financial terms, a brave venture: it is, after all, a specialist subject. But it was not a move undertaken hastily. The original Stockport Museum in Vernon Park had for many years extensive displays devoted to hatting. Then, from 1995–1999, thanks to the European Regional Development Fund under the Mersey Basin Initiative, Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council operated a highly successful hidden gem of a museum in the old Battersby's hat factory building. This first all-hatting museum was set up with Heritage Lottery Funding. Hat Works is now located in Wellington Mill (home to Ward Bros. Hats 1895–1930s), adjacent to the bus and railway stations in Stockport town centre.

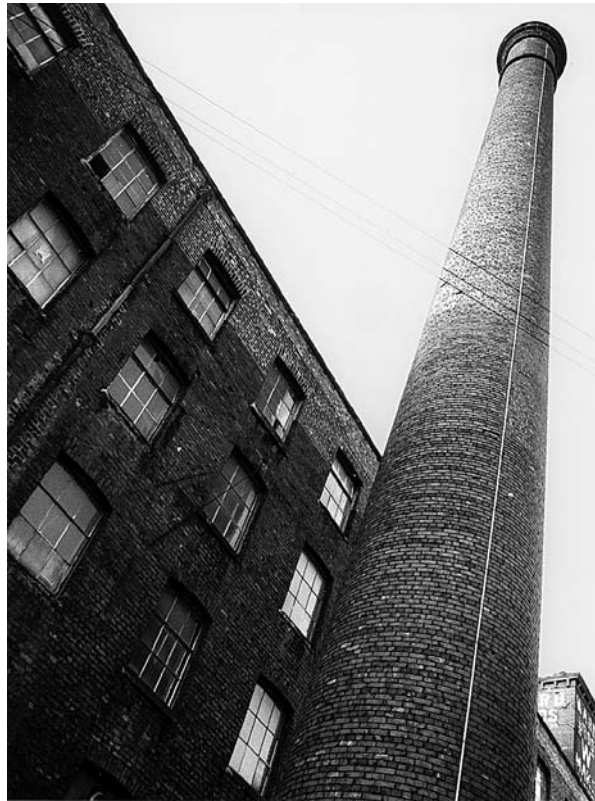
Hat Works is remarkable to its visitors for the high level of personal interaction available with the museum staff. Every visitor is offered a 45-minute guided tour, even if it is 3 o'clock on Christmas Eve and they are the only member of the public in the museum. I hope I can convey something of this personal touch: in this article, I would like to examine how the present museum came into being with reference to one or two characters instrumental to its conception and development. This is in no way a negative reflection on the commitment and contribution of the many museum staff not mentioned. I must however pay tribute to the support of

Terry Jones, Stockport's Head of Leisure Services, and John Baker, Head of Heritage Services, whose commitment to the development of the museum has been wholehearted.

The Battersby's hat museum began life as a couple of rooms hired by Stockport Museum for storage. Since the 1960s museum staff had been aware that the dying fur felt hatting industry was a colourful feature of Stockport's history. A glance at Kelly's Trade Directory for Cheshire in 1892, in the heyday of Stockport hatting, confirms that there were over 50 'hat manufacturers' and 'hatters' in Stockport and districts, with hat finishers, box, block, wire and trimming manufacturers also clustered locally. By the 1960s, however, fashions were changing: headwear became an optional

accessory, not an essential item without which you were not dressed. Large hat manufacturers gradually subsumed the smaller businesses as trade became leaner. Eventually the large hat manufacturers Christy's, Wilson's, Moore's, Lees' and Battersby's amalgamated in 1966-67 to try to stay in production, and foresightful curators began to accumulate their surplus hatting machinery. Stockport Museum at Vernon Park was simply not large enough for industrial collecting, so the greater part of the new acquisitions were kept in redundant Council buildings. At one point, Stockport Museum had filled two chapels of rest and one redundant mortuary with hatting machinery. But, although the local industry was dying, this was not the machinery's final resting place. After the great 1960s hatting amalgamation, which formed one new company of 'Associated British Hat Manufacturers' (ABHM), the Battersby's building was also redundant. Museum staff could have hoped for nowhere better than a disused hat factory to store the hatting machinery.

Behind-the-scenes tours of the stores were the making of the hat museum. At first, from 1993 to 1995, the glimpse of hatting collections in store at Battersby's was only available to visitors on a Sunday. Those who made the journey to Hempshaw Lane on the outskirts of



Wellington Mill Chimney before restoration



Hat Works'
main entrance

Stockport's town centre to visit the Battersby's hat museum were likely to have been guided round the museum by Vic Barry.

Vic

Vic is a natural talker. He is constantly coming to his point, and diverting into semi-role play situations, which begin, 'I am a block-maker / burglar / fireman, and you see this helmet / spokeshave / kettle, what do you say to me? ... Of course you do.' But Vic can also listen, which he points to as the key to his interpretational style. Vic was originally employed in 1980 as the resident caretaker of Woodbank Hall, Stockport Heritage Services' storage and office building. Gradually, he drifted into the role of museum attendant, and talking to visitors became his speciality. 'I learnt my stuff from our first visitors,' Vic explains. '90% of them were hatters.'

So, what do you need to know to show visitors – who may already be experts in the felt hatting process – around a hat museum? First of all, a little geography. Many people's first question is why fur felt hatting centred on Stockport. Any reasonable answer would have to include random chance as a factor, but the standard textile industry explanation of an abundance of water, raw materials, and good transport links serves well. Hatmaking drifted to the Stockport area in the seventeenth century in part due to restrictive guild control in the cities. 400 years ago, in 1604, the Worshipful Company of Feltmakers was granted its charter by James I, and the industry's first regulations came into force.¹ Furriers, hatters and feltmakers in London were covered by strict rules governing, for example, how many years a journeyman must work for a master before setting up his own business (seven), setting quality standards and particular methods of workmanship. Strict rules were enforceable in Chester also, where a felting trade guild had been in operation since at least 1550.² Stockport not being a corporate town covered by guild restrictions made it a fair prospect for any seventeenth-century craftsman wishing to undercut the legitimate hat trade. What is now the A6 through Stockport was the area's first turnpike road, built under an act of 1725, making access to the town easier.³ By the late eighteenth century, Stockport had become known amongst London hatters as the town from which one bulk-bought cheap ready-made 'hoods' or 'bodies' to finish into hats.

Although at first Stockport's cottage industry hatters worked with readily available wool, they began to make hoods from beaver fur to target the luxury end of the hatting market. But over-trapping led to a sharp decline first in European, then in North American beavers, and a sharp increase in their price. By the mid-nineteenth century, Stockport hatters had learned to use rabbit and hare fur, amongst other fibres, and to mix them with the more expensive beaver for a wide range of qualities and finishes.

Before a hat body can be made, the fibres which form it must be cleaned and separated. For wool felt hats, which locally became a speciality of the Denton area, extensive degreasing and crushing of the wool is required. For a Stockport fur felt, the process is slightly different. A typical small-scale hatmaker's shop would perhaps be an eighteenth-century farmer's part-time concern. Pie for supper ensured a quantity of rabbit skin, from which a sharp knife would be used to remove the long, waterproof outer hairs. Then the soft, fluffy hairs were cut from the pelt, and sifted using the bowing process.

Frank

Frank, now the Projects, Curatorial and Technical Services Manager at Stockport, is responsible for Hat Work's interpretation of the bow garret, the name given to the backyard workshop where pre-industrial hatters sifted fur. Frank joined the service in 1979 as a Museum Assistant. He is a man with an eye for a project, as his new title suggests.

One evening in 1990, Frank was driving through Haughton Green, on the outskirts of Denton. His mind was on hatting, as Stockport Museum was in the process of refurbishing its display about the industry. Frank glanced out of the side window of his car. Not a great view: just a house with a run-down brick shed. But wait. Is that shed not rather like the kind of outbuilding he had always imagined small-scale hatters to work in, two hundred years ago?

'You can understand why at first the lady who owned the house thought I was a little eccentric,' recalls Frank. 'But I had my staff pass with me. She softened up as I explained I was from the museum, and that I was interested in her shed.'

By strange coincidence, the lady had recently obtained a copy of the house's deeds. She fetched them, and she and Frank peered close. In tiny sideways writing, all squashed into the shed shape, were the words 'Hat Shop'. Frank had by chance discovered what could have been the last bow garret in the area.

His visit could not have been more timely. The lady's builder husband had set the coming weekend aside for the demolition of the building. On realising the significance of their shed, the couple decided instead to modernise it. The old, dirty, small-paned window which they replaced became the background to the recreated bow garret in the original Stockport Museum at Vernon Park. Fred the farmer, a costumed mannequin, bowed fur before it in a recreation of that lady's outbuilding in Haughton Green. This meant that he had a five-foot long wooden implement, like a violin bow, suspended above a slatted table. When Fred plucked the catgut with his stick, the



vibrations sent the fur fibres into the air. When this is done enough times the fur is softly sifted. Bowed fur is arranged into triangles, ready for the next stage of the process. A recreation of this recreation of the bow garret – with another Fred, eternally wielding his hatter’s bow – provides the interpretation of this stage of the pre-industrial hatmaking process at Hat Works.

The next key stage of the hatting process is planking, which is performed in a kettle. The kettle is essentially a vat of acidic solution, kept bubbling with a furnace beneath it, that is surrounded by a wide wooden sloping shelf. Triangles of bowed, fluffy fur were repeatedly dipped into the hot acid water and rolled with a wooden rolling pin, called a planking pin. The acid, the heat, and the pressure ensure that the fur fibres felt together. Constant turning (like turning the pastry when rolling out a pie crust) of two triangles of fur together around a slip of oilcloth results in a seamless triangular hood of fur felt, which is then ready to be shaped into a hat.

Vic throws in an interesting point here: many of his first hatter-visitors to the Battersby’s museum seemed to be under the impression that it was the evil-looking cauldron bubbling in the planking shop that caused mad hatter’s disease. This degenerative nervous condition, that began with trembling and ended in dementia, was a

‘Fred’ bowing
fur at Stockport
Museum,
Vernon Park

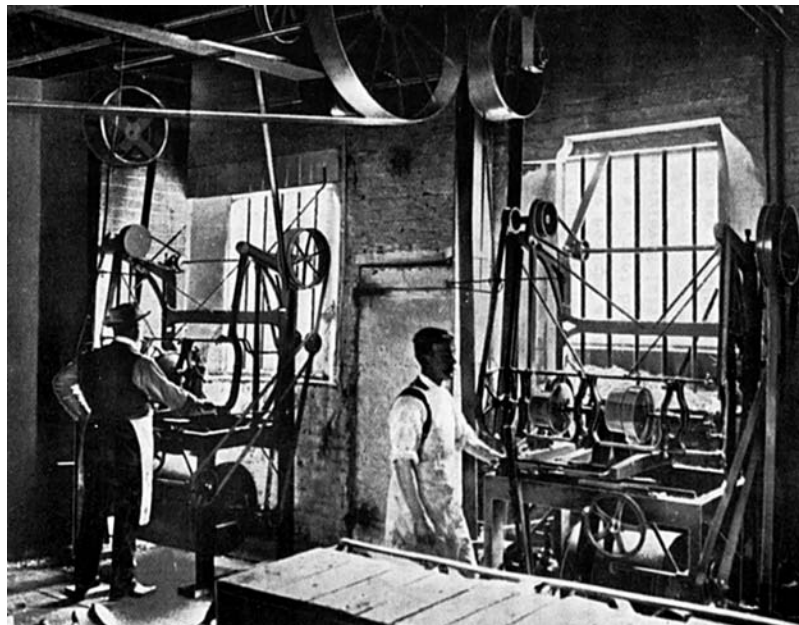
result of mercury poisoning. Vic had happily believed his early audiences when they told him that the mercuric nitrate used to improve the felting of fur steamed out of the kettle and into the plankers' nostrils, and thence into their nervous system. But as the hat museum's fame spread, and audiences broadened, Vic's guided tours became more accurate. He learnt from a retired doctor, 'Man at the back with a bow tie – knew he wasn't a tram driver – took me aside, ever so polite like, and said excuse me, but the mercury poisoning must've happened before the planking. Put mercuric nitrate in sulphuric acid, and you won't be breathing it in. It's the bowing that's going to get the stuff into your lungs.'

David

It was David, Stockport Heritage Services' recently retired Design Technician, who constructed both the bowing bench and the replica planking kettle at Hat Works. He made the kettle's sides from mahogany, following written instructions in *The Penny Magazine* of 1841.⁴ A fishtank pump and some food colouring provide an illusion of boiling acid in the central vat. To hear David talk you wonder that he isn't worn down to the ground with shifting hatting equipment from building to building.

David also installed the hat blockmakers' workshop and office that is such an atmospheric feature of the visitor's experience of Hat Works. For, of course, after the felt hood has shrunk and dried, it is

Plant's workshop at Great Ancoats Street, c1900



steamed again and shaped around a hat block, most frequently made of sycamore or alder. This is true of both the pre-industrial and industrial hatting process. Hence Hat Works' focus on the blockmaker's craft as an essential ancillary industry. A large corner of the ground floor is given over to the lathes and saws and shelves of blocks that were salvaged from Walter Plant's hat blockmaking business of Great Ancoats Street in Manchester, when it finally closed in 1976. The business had its roots in Stockport where William Plant, Walter's grandfather, first set up as a blockmaker.⁵ David was among the team that did the salvaging. They worked at the Great Ancoats Street shop, sketching and notetaking, in preparation for the scaled-down recreation of the blockmaker's shop that was planned for the lower ground floor of Stockport Museum in Vernon Park. David

has happy memories of the weeks spent at Plant's. It was down to two members of staff, Walter Plant, by then aged 90, and his assistant 'Young' Bert, only seventy-something. Walter's daughter Aileen, who was influential in the decision to offer the workshop to Stockport Museum, used to pop in occasionally to ensure that the donation was going to plan. David did not find the environment relaxing:

You have never heard anything like the noise. The machinery ran on a line shaft, with leather driving belts – the whole building used to shake. It had a huge crack in the wall as it gradually vibrated apart. It had never been decorated: no decorator would dare! Then, at 12 o'clock, Mr. Plant would press a switch. And it would be total silence. Lunchtime. Walter would go into his office, have a cigarette, switch his electric fire on, roll up his trousers [to warm his legs], and go to sleep. Bert would make a fry up on the stove, with a packet of sausages and some bacon.

Plant's were working on their final order of blocks, winding up the



Bert Gurden in the reconstructed Plant's workshop at Stockport Museum, Vernon Park, c1979

business, even as the museum staff worked around them, selecting what to acquire. David was instrumental in the installation of the one-quarter-sized recreation of Plant's into the ground floor of Stockport Museum at Vernon Park, where papier maché bricks of astonishing reality were aged with tea and dirt to provide an appropriate setting. Plant's blockmaking shop was moved from Stockport Museum to the hat museum at Battersby's in 1989. The current resting place at Hat Works, David says, is final. He has sprinkled the correct kind of woodshaving beneath the correct lathe for the last time.

It was around the time that Plant's workshop was coming to Stockport Museum (1976) that the service had another offer of a donation that they could not refuse. Although by the end of his time in business Walter Plant operated his machinery with a switch, it had originally been a steam-powered workshop. J. B. Naylor and Co, makers of abrasives on the Hyde Road in Woodley, offered a medium-sized Tangye steam engine. The Tangye illustrated steam power in the blockmakers' shop in Stockport Museum, in the hat museum at Battersby's and now at Hat Works – albeit at one third of its intended speed, for health and safety reasons.

Nick

Nick is the man who effectively manages the interpretation of the next stage of the hatmaking process at Hat Works. He has worked as a Demonstrator at Hat Works since 2000, and specialises in maintenance of the hatting machinery. Having worked as Engineer in his family's hat factory, Nick is expert. His attitude is that if it doesn't work, then it's not a machine. Health and safety considerations again are the principal frustrations of the museum's aim to show the hatting machinery in action. Operating the fur blowing machine, which performed the sifting and cleaning function in hatting's industrial age is out of the question: fibres in the air were a problem for hat factory employees, but cannot be imposed upon Hat Works' visitors.

It is a fortunate coincidence from an interpretational point of view that fur blowing (the equivalent of bowing) is an early stage of hat-making, as it was the first machine to be introduced into the industry, from as early as the late eighteenth century.⁶ So the fur-blower sits at the beginning of the machinery layout at Hat Works, both chronologically and in terms of process. After Plant's workshop and office, the ground floor of Hat Works focusses on the industrialisation of hatting. Hatting did not industrialise so wholeheartedly as the cotton industry. Battersby's, for example, were still hand-planking in 1911. The well known hatting firm of Christy's are credited with the introduction of mechanisation to the industry. In 1859 Thomas Christy and

his technical manager William Barber visited American hat factories to study mechanisation, bringing back with them several machines.

The machines now on display were restored to working order whilst behind the scenes in Battersby's, prior to the opening of Hat Works. But it is the unseen collection in store which is invaluable for maintaining links with local industry. Nick has developed a close working relationship with Peter, the works manager of the only remaining hat manufacturers in the area, Failsworth Hats. Although Failsworth have had to discontinue hood production, and now import ready-made hat bodies for finishing, they still use machines similar to the ones the museum has collected. In 2004, during the completion of an important order for Lock and Co. of St James, Failsworth Hats' brim-breaker broke down, and Peter came to the museum to borrow a spare roller head. It is a measure of how *recherché* the industry has become when manufacturers contact the museum for spare parts. A similar situation arose when Christy's, the final incarnation of the amalgamated ABHM, were still in production, pre-1997. Stockport Heritage Services' reserve collection of machinery had been restored so competently that Christy's took the museum's recommendation for a contractor, rather than vice-versa.

With a fair representation of a factory floor on display, Nick anticipates using the reserve collection for spare parts in future. After all, if you have a lively museum, and keep machinery running, eventually problems will arise. Since the closure and demolition of the Christy's factory in Stockport, maintaining authentic moving machinery has become more of a challenge. Nick has conducted internet research to find manufacturers in Portugal, Africa and South America, but the chances that the machines they use are the same as Hat Works' are slim. The reserve collection is at the heart of Hat Works' long-term viability.

Hannah

At present, the Hat Works team is focussing on developing a lively gallery floor for the museum, as Vic and Nick and their colleagues have already raised the machinery floor to a high level of interactivity. The museum's first floor is a gallery of hats, displayed thematically, and a temporary exhibitions area. Notable early exhibitions have included *David Shilling* (2001) and *Royal Millinery* (2002).

I am not the Curator of Hat Works, I am the Collections Access Officer, a similar job, but with the emphasis on getting things out of store, rather than squirreling them away. It is becoming increasingly possible to curate exhibitions based on Stockport's own holdings of hatting and costume, as concerted collecting in recent years has

broadened the original men's fur felt historic collection to include headwear produced all over the world for many different purposes. Hat Works is the UK's only museum devoted to hats, headwear and the hatting industry, and this affects our collecting policy. Whilst many local museums are only on the lookout for local items, Hat Works continues its drive to broaden the scope of its holdings of hats to reflect a modern multicultural outlook. You could say that the museum has ambitions that are as international as the Stockport hat trade once was.

Hat Works, Wellington Mill, Wellington Road South (the A6), Stockport SK3 0EU.

Parking: a range of inexpensive parking facilities are available in and around Stockport Town Centre. The nearest car parks are: Heaton Lane, Merseyway and Grand Central.

Open all year round, Monday-Friday 10am–5pm, Saturdays, Sundays and Bank Holidays 1–5pm. Christmas and New Year: please call for details. Admission is free, guided tours £2.

For information, call 0845 833095

Researchers are welcome by appointment: call 0161 355 8008. We have a good selection of general hat books, and archival material on the local fur felt hatting industry.

Notes

1. R. Weinstein, *The History of the Worshipful Company of Feltmakers, 1604–2004* (Chichester, 2004), *passim*.
2. P. McKnight, *Stockport Hatting* (Stockport, 2000), p. 3.
3. O. Ashmore, *The Industrial Archaeology of Stockport* (Manchester, 1975), p. 58.
4. G. Dodd, *Days at the Factories* (1843), p. 148, originally published in *The Penny Magazine for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*, vol. 10.
5. C. Cross, William Plant, Woodblock and Woodcraft Manufacturers, 67A Great Ancoats Street, Manchester (Stockport, 1977), introduction to unpaginated booklet.
6. McKnight, *Stockport Hatting*, p. 27.