

## **Civic Pride and Civic Products? Objects and their Makers in 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century Birmingham and Sheffield**

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This paper examines consumers, objects and sociability in eighteenth-century England. It does so through a comparative case study of the towns of Sheffield and Birmingham. After textiles, metalwares were arguably the most important product of industrializing England. Sheffield and Birmingham were leaders in technological innovation, the production of new goods for the growing consumer market, a fast-developing public culture of social and educational institutions, and consolidating civic identities. Whilst these towns shared had many features in common, they nevertheless developed quite distinctive cultures of consumption and sociability. This paper undertakes a comparison of Birmingham and Sheffield in order to explore the links between the economy and civic society by focusing on the material culture of the two towns.

The paper engages critically with some of the principal themes of the history of eighteenth-century consumer culture. First, in contrast to the emphasis in much of this work on middling-sort or elite consumers, and building on important scholarship on clothing and plebeian consumption (J. Styles; B. Lemire), this paper will consider the consumption of workers. Second, the history of eighteenth-century consumer culture has tended to focus on the domestic interior and the household as the engine of the consumption, though this paper will explore consumption in civic and sociable spaces. Third, this paper suggests a reorientation in focus away from the enduring themes of politeness, luxury and the exotic towards the rough, home-grown and quotidian. Finally, this paper will build on the growing body of work that considers men's consumption, rather than the too-oft supposed femininity of consumer culture.

Using visual, material and archival sources, the paper examines the ways in which material culture was used to forge and articulate corporate political identities in public culture and civic representations. In answering this question, the paper also addresses how economic change altered the ideals and experiences of masculinity, both labouring, artisanal and middling-sort. The research engages with social and economic histories of the working class through a gender history of labour and occupation. It does so in part by challenging arguments for the increasing hegemony of 'bourgeois masculinity' (J. Tosh) and exploring instead the way in which embodied male labour or occupation came to represent civic and political power. It does so through a focus on the 'material politics' (M. Daunton & M. Hilton) of industrial production and consumption, foregrounding the relationship between men and the objects they made and used. The project hypothesizes that the physical body became increasingly central to representations of masculinity and that one of the components of this embodied form of masculinity was a changing association between the worker and the products he made for the market.