Extra Special Best Best: Black Country iron puddling and wrought iron manufacture in the nineteenth century

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines a unique document, the pocket book of a worker at Noah Hingley and Sons’ ironworks at Netherton, near Dudley. This book (in a private collection) records the ingredients for the different types of puddled iron produced by the firm during the years 1891–1893. Hingleys were famous for their chains and anchors, and prided themselves on the superior tensile strength and anti-corrosion properties of their wrought-iron chains and cables. The notebook makes it clear that differentiation between ‘best’, ‘best best’ and other grades took place at the puddling stage rather than during subsequent forging; many of the mixtures described can be associated with different grades advertised by Hingleys at the time.

Introduction

Benjamin Westwood (Fig 1) was born in 1860, the son of Francis and Mary Westwood of 97 New Street, Netherton. Francis Westwood worked as a shingler in one of the local forges. The Westwood family were originally from Brierley Hill, and Francis’ grandfather Thomas had also been a blacksmith. The tradition passed to young Benjamin, who was apprenticed to the Netherton wrought ironmakers Noah Hingley and Sons. He was an active member of the Netherton Ironworks Social Club from 1882 to 1884; after that he joined the Foresters Society, and became involved with the emerging trade union movement. He taught himself to read and write by copying newspaper articles and other items of ephemera. In 1885 he married Harriet Loach, and shortly afterwards they set up house in St. Andrews Street, Netherton. By 1891 Benjamin Westwood had been given responsibility for supervising the puddling process.

With his self-taught writing skills he recorded the different mixtures he used, in a new notebook he probably bought for that purpose. For whatever reason, he discontinued recording this work in 1893 – perhaps he moved on to a more senior position; perhaps he had...