Steel and toy trade between England and France: The Huntsmans’ correspondence with the Blakeys (1765–1769)

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ABSTRACT: Benjamin Huntsman is generally associated with the development of crucible steel. However, French archives show him in the role of merchant, exporting not only steel, both blister and crucible, but a wide range of tools and ‘toywares’ to the Blakeys, merchants and forge-masters of Paris. Tools were sourced not only in Sheffield but in Birmingham and in the south-west Lancashire clockmaking district. Toywares comprised a wide range of high-quality decorative and utilitarian objects, many incorporating new high standards of decoration. The Blakey papers show contacts with other English sources, notably orders placed with the Oppenheims of Birmingham. Mrs Blakey, of French descent, and her English husband, William, show, in their surviving orders and correspondence with Benjamin Huntsman and others, a recognition of the trends in fashion of the 18th-century Enlightenment, which crucible steel in particular could serve.

Introduction

Although Benjamin Huntsman is an archetypal figure of the Industrial Revolution, he left few business records. Apart from overseas visitors’ reports from the 1760s, and descriptions of the crucible steel process based on later developments, historians have relied mainly on the correspondence and orders between William Huntsman and Matthew Boulton, mostly for the years 1786–1802. As Barraclough (1984, 18) stated, ‘These exchanges between the foremost steelmaker of this time and his famous engineering customer serve to show how they both contributed to the development of the technology which put Britain ahead in the Industrial Revolution’. We wish to emphasise less prominent figures, Huntsman’s French customers from the 1760s. Amongst them were the Blakeys, whose business, based on Paris, reveals how much Huntsman’s steel production relied on the growth of European commercial networks, on the burst of ‘consumer industry’ (Berg 1998), and on changes in luxury trades. His steel was a ‘European achievement’ (MacLeod 2004), and an outcome of the Enlightenment in Europe.

This research is based on the numerous letters exchanged between the Huntsmans and the Blakeys. Whereas the first letters are written by Benjamin Huntsman, from 1767 they are signed ‘Huntsman & Asline’, referring to the partnership between William Huntsman—Benjamin Huntsman’s son—and Robert Asline, a button maker in Sheffield (Barraclough 1984, 5, 10, 16, 20). William Blakey, of English origin, and his wife Elisabeth Aumerle were manufacturers, toy-dealers and shopkeepers in Paris from the 1730s, and were involved in a European and colonial trade for steel wares, from watch-spring wire to trusses, razors, jewels and tableware. Their trade with the Huntsmans began in 1765 and lasted for 10 years, but most of the records cover the period 1766 to 1769 when Mrs Blakey set up her toyshop, ‘Le Magazin Anglais’, close to the fashionable rue Saint-Honoré, profiting from the revival of anglophilia after the Seven Years War (Sargents on 1996, 114). In 1772 she became bankrupt and had to find new partners. Her ledgers, bills and orders were seized. Among Mrs Blakey’s papers were numerous invoices and letters from the Huntsmans, revealing their marketing strategies, their routes and networks, and their products and prices.

The Huntsmans were part of a global economy of steel, as much as Crowley, Hallett or Graffin Prankard in the iron trade at the same time (Evans and Rydén 2007, 12,