

INDIA IN THE ARCHIVES

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This article concentrates on Britons in India rather than Indians in Britain as illustrated by surviving papers in Birmingham City Archives. Not surprisingly, many of the relevant papers seem to involve transport, or Birmingham's role as a centre of export and manufacturing. In addition, of course, there are the personal contributions from people whose papers we are fortunate enough to have acquired.

The earliest document we have which mentions India is a 'Bill of Lading' of 1683 for 'one bale of callicoes & thirty one duffers of Gun powder, containing seven Candy seven maund and twenty seer...[weight] to be delivered to a Mr George Ramsden at Vizagapatam for the price of twenty pagodes'¹ [Indian coinage].

We do not know what happened to William Shepherd, merchant, of the House of Forbes, Shepherd & Co., on the island of Bombay, but his will, dated 18 February 1791, left various sums of money, depending what his estate might be worth at his death, to his wife Carolina Susanna and his brothers and sister in Ayrshire. Shepherd was obviously a much travelled man as the codicil says 'Having been engaged in business twice before my arrival in India, in partnership with Charles Fergusson and in a voyage to America whither I went to settle, in both of which engagements I was unfortunate...'²

In 1837 the Report of the Baptist Mission Society noted that there was to be no addition to the number of missionaries in Bengal. One W.H. Pearce returned (to England?) for the benefit of his health 'after nearly twenty years of distinguished usefulness' and was busy 'making a stirring appeal... on behalf of that dark land... in wh[ich] are at least one hundred and thirty four millions of British subjects.'

'The native chapels are thronged with attentive hearers. In the city of Calcutta alone more than two thousand Hindoos are receiving a Christian education. The native mind is at length arousing from its torpor, and its energies are called forth by the interesting facts of modern science and the impressive verities of the Christian faith. The results must be glorious. The first edition of Mr Yates' Bengalee New Testament is entirely exhausted...'

The British & Foreign Bible Society declined to provide any finance, but Baptists in America voted the sum of \$5,000!³

In an article on the steam engine in India, Tann and Aitken state that steam technology in India was developed with British interests in mind.⁴ Between 1775 and 1825 there were 27 enquiries about steam engines to the firm of Boulton and Watt, and 15 orders. A British Parliamentary Report of 1831 on the use of steam power in India noted its use in coal mining, dockyards, papermaking, cannon founding, minting, and the manufacture of flour, silk, and cotton.

In 1814 the Nabob Vizier of Oude ordered a 14 hp steam engine from Boulton and Watt, together with pumps for raising water for a fountain, to be erected at Lucknow. A new iron bridge for the site was designed by John Rennie, but not erected until the 1840s. The drawings in *Boulton & Watt*, Portfolio 616, illustrate an impressive engine house designed in the Indian style.

Calcutta had four Boulton and Watt engines by 1832. In 1819 an engine was ordered for a cannon foundry; in 1827 one was ordered for a saw mill and in 1832 one for an oil mill. The East India Company's major ventures of the Calcutta and Bombay Mints were also provided with engines from Boulton and Watt. Skilled mechanics were needed to install the machinery once it arrived in India, but it was not an easy life. In 1825 Lieutenant Forbes of the Bengal Engineers reported to the Calcutta Mint Committee that two of his mechanics had died. He had availed himself of the services of Mr Thomas Pigg, 'foreman, millwright and mechanist,' and he wrote to ask approval for his action, listing Mr Pigg's qualifications for the post. Thomas Pigg had entered the employment of Mr Rennie in 1808, had worked on the London Mint up till 1813 and had undertaken repair of the Royal Mint after the fire of 1815. In 1818 he had travelled to the United States to erect a saw mill, constructed by Rennie, and had returned to England to work on the machinery for the Calcutta Mint. Forbes asked also for two other workers, an engine erector and a turner. Both would have gained experience at the Soho or London Mints.⁵

In 1866 Robert Knight gave a paper to the London Indian Society entitled 'The Indian Empire and our financial relations therewith'. He begins by enumerating the benefits he believes are conferred upon India by English rule - education, law and order, religious freedom, free trade - and continues:

'But these benefits give us no right whatever to exact a money compensation for them.

He goes on to speak of the career opportunities offered to the English in government, the professions, the army and in business.

'I say that India pays a heavy penalty for the advantages of foreign rule...'

He gives as an example the exclusion of Indians from government office. His speech continues to attack the English taxation of India as unfair and discusses the way wealth is exacted from India.⁶

Helen Caddick (1843-1927), one of the first governors of Birmingham University and the first woman member of the Education Committee in West Bromwich, was an intrepid world traveller. In 1892 she was in Jaipur, and gives some colourful descriptions of her visit.

'Two enormous tanks (like lakes) for alligators, about 30 of them. I bought 8½d worth of meat which the men tied onto pieces of rope and fed them - they fought dreadfully for it.'

'Met a Hindoo wedding procession - Bride veiled and seated on an elephant, gorgeously got up. Elephants' faces are painted all sorts of curious colours and they have bells fastened on each side which swing and ring.'

On 10 February she went to the Amber Palace. At the foot of the hill 'elephants met us and took us up to the palace - about

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an hour - much nicer to ride than a camel.'

She goes on to describe a call made on a Mrs Wagentreiber, who had escaped with her husband and baby during the Mutiny. 'Miss Wagentreiber has been so nervous since that she always carries a revolver.'

'Dined with the Slaters and had a very merry evening. The poor Queen is much laughed at in India for her Hindostani. The Natives are so astonished that her advisers are not more careful in their selection of Indians.'

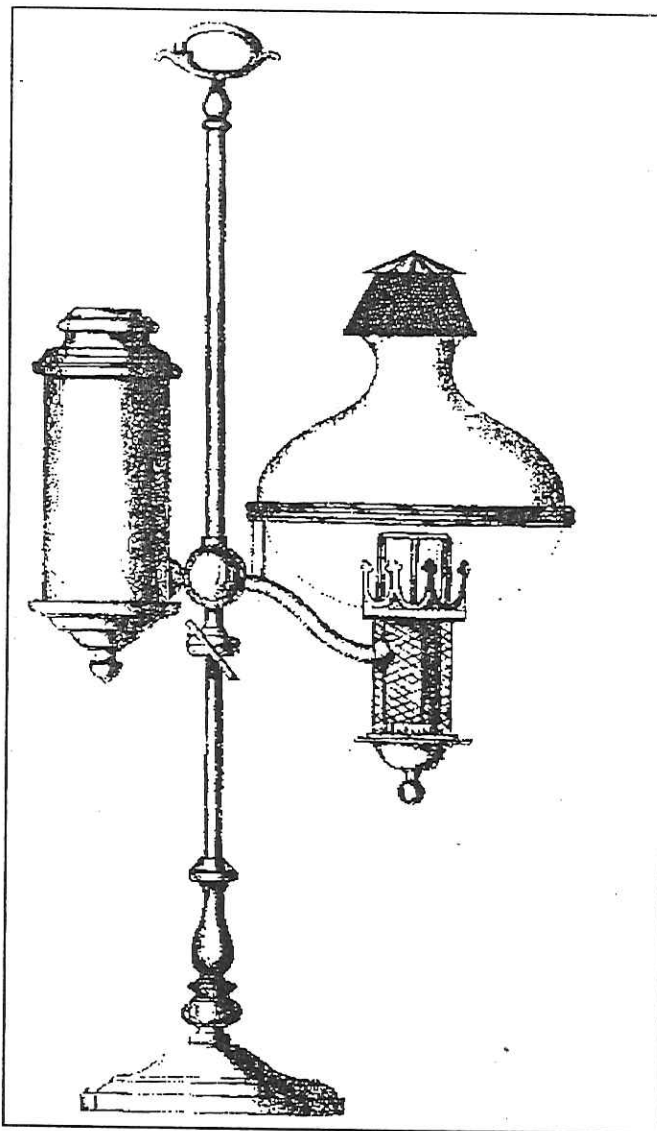
'Indian Motorcyclist crosses Sahara.' So ran the headline in *Cycling and Motorcycling* (May 1955). In that year an Indian engineer, Raj Kumar, called at the BSA works in Birmingham to have a larger engine fitted to his 1947 BSA motorcycle, bought second-hand for £110 and nicknamed 'Good Old Boy'. He was half way round on his world tour, having set out from his home in Glasgow in 1951, against his parents' wishes, and with only £1.4s.6d. in his pocket. He had covered Asia, China and Japan, as well as Europe and North and East Africa, and claimed to be the first person to cross the Sahara on a motorcycle. His motorcycle was fitted with special tyres and a large petrol tank, and the rider existed on compressed food and vitamin tablets.

Refused a visa to South Africa because he was Indian, he continued to travel to America and Russia. In Malaysia he was joined by his cousin, Miss Gurupdes, whom he described as a good pillion driver.

'Apart from being an engineer, Mr Raj Kumar is a professional Indian footballer, playing for the Scottish League, a London stage violinist, a diploma holder from Munich in civil aviation, a man of good humour, charming disposition and very resourceful nature.'

The Digby papers contain letters from Kenelm Digby, writing from Madras and other places in India to his brother Wriothsley in England, covering a stay of ten years there, which is impressive, as the European survival rate was hardly more than one in two over a five year period. Most of the correspondence concerns business matters, the family, and political and military events. In 1775 he wrote to his mother that he felt 'I could not have bettered myself in Europe and at present I may boast every comfort of life this country affords ...' However, 'I am convinced that the most extravagant Fortune on conditions not to leave India for life would never tempt me as an equivalent to a moderate competency among my friends and Connexions in Old England...' In 1780 he wrote to his brother that he was kept indoors by the rain but otherwise was unafflicted, 'And at a time when scarce any one escapes a violent fever that has raged with uncommon fury. These last five months have recruited me wonderfully whether I may ascribe it to the Beer I drink in large quantities... and exercise or that disease is tired of tormenting me I know not... We are this instant alarmed with a most unheard of massacre at Vizagapatam...'

One of the aspects of English life, which the community there had no desire to abandon, was hunting. In 1776 Kenelm wrote by order of the Hunting Society of Madras, 'Instructions to any person who will undertake to supply the Hunting Society of Madras to the Number of Twenty Couple of Hounds Annually.' The request was for 'Harriers of about 18 Inches



Osler's Punkah Lamp

high... not the large Fox hound[s] which are too swift for the Game we pursue.. we wish to have amongst them one Couple of Tarriers that run with the Fox hounds and one Couple of exceeding large deep tongued southern hounds to add to the Musick - Dog and bitch of each kind..."

Unfortunately there is no record of whether any enterprising person attempted to sail out with such a cargo to enable us to complete the tale.⁹

J.S.Bowerman was unlucky enough to be an agent in Calcutta at the very time of the Indian Mutiny. He was agent for F.& C.Osler, chandelier and glass manufacturers of Birmingham. In June he wrote that all trade had stopped in the city because of the Delhi revolt and the rising of native troops 'plundering and murdering every one they can...' By July he was hoping things would be quiet and advised against any reduction in goods sent out as 'Calcutta will be almost swept for presents to give to those Rajahs... who have shown their loyalty to the British Government by saving the lives of great numbers of British Officers during recent occurrences.'

In August, however, the situation was grim. 'India has lately been the theatre of the most wanton and cruel bloodshed that

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the history of the world can shew.... No papers can convey to you the horrors that have been enacted here... We are threatened in Calcutta... with a rise among the Moslems here... Blood is hot on both sides, it will take little to make the Christian strike and the religious excitement of the fanatic Mussulman, heightened by intoxicating tobacco made of hemp & opium which they smoke, may induce him to insult the Christian... He goes on to say that the assistance of the King of Oude and volunteer Europeans in Calcutta had been refused by the army. '... As to the shades, they are quite forgotten, the chandeliers have never been opened.'

In 1840 one of the Osler agents was berating them for sending the wrong shades. 'So repeatedly have I told you when in England that we burn oil not candles in this country...' Another complained of the poor packing: 'and the casks you pack in are so slight that half the goods are broken before they reach Calcutta.' By 1854 Osler's had invented the 'Punkah' lamp, and civil and military travelling lamps specially for India to give brilliant light anywhere. The advertisements for their premises in Calcutta show that they exported not only all manner of lamps and chandeliers, but also ornamental glass, frosted glass statuettes of Shakespeare and Walter Scott, Parian ware, and copies of Greek sculptures. Add to that papier maché ware, from tea trays to ink stands, water purifiers, patent freezing machines, chess boards, telescopes, snuff boxes, paper weights, bronze mirrors and hookahs and you have quite a list!¹⁰

In 1936, Dame Elizabeth Cadbury, Muriel Lester and Daisy Solomon visited India for the conference of the International Council of Women, to which India's National Council of Women had belonged for ten years. The newspaper reports show how broad an area was covered, from film censorship to women miners, education, contraception, health, child marriage and the vote. One Indian woman spoke out against early marriage:

'Husbands want to keep us in their golden cages... be petted like dolls, their homes the only sphere of our knowledge. We suffer in those golden cages. I do love my lord and his parents but I defy them when unjust. This sort of suffering for twenty years has awakened the divine voice within me to defy all. I, the lowest being of Lord Krishna, want to break the shackles of false convention and free our sisters from false morality.'

Appropriately, being a Quaker, Dame Elizabeth chaired the session on support for the League of Nations and organization of peace propaganda. One suggestion was to persuade shops to give up stocking war toys and unsuitable childrens' books, 'that encouraged the so-called soldier spirit and raised a false pride and patriotism that led to international ignorance, jealousies and war.'

Later in the year, Dame Elizabeth received letters from William Tandy at the Friends' Hospital in Itarsi, thanking her for the travelling dispensary and ambulance which she had enabled the hospital to buy.

'There is room for over a dozen people in it. It is fitted up with shelves for bottles, and has cupboards and shelves for dressings and instruments. We can transport seriously ill patients... It is labelled in English on one side and Hindi on the other... None of the large villages around here have any medical aid of any sort, and the regular visit of a doctor complete with dispensary

will make a tremendous difference to their lives...'¹¹

In 1972, Charles Parker, BBC Radio Producer in Birmingham, made two programmes with Dilip Hiro, journalist and writer, exploring the relationship between people from the Indian sub-continent and Britain. *Snowballs in Calcutta* looked at the young people in the schools and universities of Calcutta, Bombay, Delhi and Madras, who had grown up since Independence in 1947, and their reactions to the legacy of the British and the political situation on the eve of crisis in Bangladesh:

'All the schoolbooks came from England.. we just couldn't respond... we were told that it's great fun for children to play with the snowballs, but we could never imagine snowballs in Calcutta.'

This programme received criticism from people who could not accept the political radicalism among young people that the interviews revealed. The other programme, *A Place Way Out*, interviewed men and women of European and American origin in India and explored their reasons for settling there.

'After the war I chose to be demobilised in India and I started making carpets, and then the killings started up and the weavers got killed.. and the fellow who'd been with me weaving carpets said "Why not make furniture?" and I thought the fellow was mad. The whole of Calcutta was in smoke, flames and one thing and another. Then I was in Lipton's and George Faulkner came rushing up and said "Can you make packing cases?" And I had a quick thought... well it's easier to make packing cases than furniture... We took a terrible broken down workshop.. with no roof on it and we started... and from that I spread to plywood, and now we're mainly supplying... I also make ammunition explosive cases for the army and all the wooden cases for Indian explosives.¹²

Plenty of explosive words to find in the City Archives!

Notes

All references are to collections in Birmingham City Archives.

1. MS 128/6
2. Duke 337
3. MS 1675/3/1/3 Papers of Rev. Thomas Swan, Baptist minister, Professor of Theology at the College of Serampore in the 1820s, later minister at Cannon Street Baptist Church in Birmingham
4. Jennifer Tann & John Aitken, 'The Diffusion of the Stationary Steam Engine from Britain to India, 1790-1830', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 29, (1992) pp. 199-214
5. Matthew Boulton Papers, 407 and 408; Boulton & Watt Portfolios 707 and 708, cover the Calcutta Mint
6. Boulton & Watt: Box 24/33
7. MS 908/3, pp 173-4, 179, 186
8. MS 321/F/: BSA publicity file
9. Digby B 74, 89b, 156b
10. MS 6 (Letter Books of F & C Osler, 1840-1887)
11. MS 466/169 (Papers of Dame Elizabeth Cadbury)
12. Charles Parker Archive: CPA/2/140 and 142