

A Catalogue of Commerce and Art: Bisset's Magnificent Guide for Birmingham, 1808

Image: Title page of Bisset's Magnificent Guide or Grand Copper Plate Directory for the Town of Birmingham

The contents are described as follows:

Comprising the Addresses of the most eminent Public Companies, Bankers, Merchants, Tradesmen and Manufacturers in the "Toy-Shop of Europe" alphabetically arranged in elegant and emblematic Engravings containing upwards of fifty superb Plates with Views of the Principal Buildings etc., exclusive of a view of the Royal Mint and Soho Manufactory.

Dedicated by permission to His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales by J Bisset, Author of the Orphan Boy, the Converts and the Patriotic Clarion, etc., etc.

Price Five Shillings or with Proof Plates, Half a Guinea,

Birmingham, Printed (for the Author) by R Jabet, Herald Office, and sold by all Booksellers in the Imperial Kingdom, 1808.

Summary

Directories are a source of information about businesses. They list them in alphabetical order or under trades and provide a means of identifying individuals and their economic activities. Most directories for the late 18th or early 19th centuries have few, if any illustrations. One exception is Bisset's Magnificent Guide or Grand Copperplate Directory for the Town of Birmingham. The Directory was first published in 1800, but the edition of 1808 was expanded with more engravings. A copy of the Directory is held in Birmingham Central Library.

By the early 19th century, businesses were using trade cards to advertise their work to customers. Using copper-plate engravings, the Directory provides a catalogue of collection of images creating a catalogue of Birmingham's businessmen and women. Bisset's contains several individual cards with only the names and addresses of professionals, traders, shopkeepers and manufacturers. Others are more elaborate. They are illustrated, often using classical or patriotic motifs, which indicate how the owners wished to present the culture of their business. Rural images also proliferate, frequently used by urban manufacturers. Many engravings present the urban landscape, individual buildings, industrial processes and manufactured products. They provide an insight into how artists presented Birmingham's architectural and economic life at the start of the 19th century. Malcolm Dick has selected the engravings from Bisset's Directory of 1808. The accompanying text describes, assesses and places the images in their historical and artistic context.