

Frontispiece to Bisset's Magnificent Directory

Image from: Bisset's Magnificent Guide or Grand Copper Plate Directory for the Town of Birmingham, 1808
[From Birmingham Central Library]

01. Frontispiece to Bisset's Magnificent Directory and Literary and Commercial Iconography Respectfully Dedicated to His Royal Highness George Prince of Wales.

The engraving by Francis Eginton shows a bust of Prince George, the eldest son of George III. Twelve years after 1808, the date of the publication, he inherited the throne as George IV and reigned from 1820 to 1830. The Prince is portrayed as a beneficent and handsome figure, very different from the selfish, greedy and overweight libertine of the anti-monarchical cartoons of the time.

Above the image, two cherubs support the Prince of Wales' crest with his motto "Ich Dien", translated as "I serve". Behind the bust is a picture of ships on the high seas, signifying Britain's global significance as a trading nation and unrivalled naval power following the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. The nautical imagery is emphasised to the left by the anchor, trident and globe. Other representations strike additional notes:

- The long tradition of English liberty is demonstrated by Magna Carta,
- The winged staff of Mercury points to the transmitting of information around the world,
- Cultural achievements are shown by a lyre, artist's palette, a book and two quill pens.

In front of the bust a child holds a crown and the other unfurls a map of Great Britain. Linked with the other icons they present a United Kingdom, watched over by an enlightened prince and benefiting, according to the engraving's symbols, from international trade, the arts and a libertarian tradition. The themes of the frontispiece are represented in many of the engravings for individual businesses illustrated in the pages of the Directory.

Engraving was a fine art and a highly skilled trade. The engraver gouged lines or flicks into a copper plate by a pointed steel burin or graver with a mushroom-shaped wooden handle. As the engraver pushed the burin forward, he removed shavings of copper from the plate. By altering the angle and pressure on the burin, the engraver could vary the depth and width of the line. A less laborious process involved coating the copper plate with wax and using a needle to incise images into the wax. The plate was then immersed in acid, which ate into the copper exposed by the needle, leaving the wax-coated area untouched. The plate was printed by inking and wiped to clean the surface. Forcing the ink onto paper by means of a special press created a print.