

John Taylor and Matthew Boulton

Image: Advertisement for J Taylor, Gold and Silversmith, Jeweller, Tortoiseshell and Ivory Box and Toy Manufacturer, Birmingham. J Bisset, Bisset's Magnificent Guide or Grand Copper Plate Directory for the Town of Birmingham...(Birmingham, Printed for the Author by R Jabet, 1808).

The engraving represents a tomb, with a cherub and an angel to the right and left advertising the business founded by John Taylor, who died in 1775, one of Birmingham's major entrepreneurs who manufactured buttons and snuffboxes. Little is known about the business, but Taylor was a pioneer of mass-production methods for manufacturing "toys" before Matthew Boulton. In the background, the ship symbolises the firm's trading links overseas and the elephant the source of ivory. In the foreground are jewellery boxes, gold and silver items and a tortoise, another creature providing a raw material for the business, in this case tortoiseshell.

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From the mid 18th century there were many toymakers in Birmingham. Most of them were small businesses which we know only by their names, listed in directories. The two largest were John Taylor, and Matthew Boulton (1728-1809). The only information on Taylor's business is from visitors' accounts.

Matthew Boulton was born in Birmingham in 1728. His father, Matthew Boulton senior, was a buckle and button maker whose small factory was near the house in Snow Hill. Large quantities of buckles and buttons were being produced in Birmingham by this time. Matthew Boulton junior joined the family business after leaving school c.1745. In 1749 he married Mary Robinson, daughter of a wealthy Lichfield mercer. She died in 1759. A few months later Boulton's father also died and he took over the business. The following year he married his late wife's sister, Ann. The money he acquired through his marriages enabled him to expand the business at Soho in Handsworth.

Boulton's Soho Manufactory was founded on steel toys, and his surviving papers (the Archives of Soho at Birmingham City Archives, Birmingham Reference Library) give us an insight into both his business and the background to the wider trade which created Birmingham's reputation as 'the Toyshop of Europe'.