

Princess Ekaterina Dashkova's Visit to Soho, Handsworth

Image: Soho Manufactory. William West, *Picturesque Views... of Staffordshire* (Birmingham, 1830). Engraving by T Radclyffe was based on a drawing by F Calvert. This is an untypical view of the building from the rear and presents the complex of forges, mills and engine houses behind the neo-classical façade of the factory. The Soho Works became a tourist attraction as people came to view Boulton's manufacturing processes. The image shows visitors in the foreground.

Image from: Local Studies and History, Birmingham Central Library

The Princess Ekaterina Dashkova (1744-1810), first came to England in 1770. Her interest in the country was enhanced by the fact that two of her brothers, first Alexander and then Semion Vorontsov, were both Russian ambassadors in London. She travelled from London through South England to Bath and Bristol and then back through Oxford, which was described in her article *The Travels of a Russian Noblewoman Around Some English Provinces*. This was published in 1775. In the Introduction she wrote:

*I prefer England to other states. Their government, education, manners, public and private life, mechanics, buildings and gardens – everything depends on the organisation of the first [i.e. the government] and surpasses the efforts of other nations in similar enterprises.*¹

She chose Edinburgh University for the education of her son and spent the years 1776-1780 in Britain. Her Edinburgh salon and meetings with William Robertson, David Hume, Hugh Blair, Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith were described in her Memoirs.²

After her son had graduated, she travelled around Ireland. In May 1780, she sailed from Ireland and landed in Holyhead. On her journey to London she passed through the West Midlands and visited the Soho factory in Handsworth. Unfortunately, she did not find Matthew Boulton at home, as he was staying in London. But her visit is described in detail in the letter from the Soho employee John Hodges to Boulton in London:

Soho 15 May [1780]

Monday

Sir,

This is purposely to acquaint you that the Princess Dashkaw with her son and daughter from Russia visited Soho this afternoon. – I waited upon her Highness etc. over the manufactory. The shops in general were but thinly peopled. I had a good apology by saying it was Whitsuntide holiday. – She asked if you had not an Exhibition room in London for your manufactures, I inform'd her that you had a small apartment of paintings and vases etc. I have given her your address and she seems very desirous of seeing you and purposes being in town on Thursday or Friday next.-

She beg'd I would write to inform you of her coming and that if you were about leaving Town before that time, that you would if convenient stay a day or two longer, as she much wish'd to have a conference with you. /.../ She desires to be a subscriber for a Copying machine – she saw the operation and was much delighted and astonished at the invention.

The Fire Engine was not in Order and she could not stay while it was set going. –

Her Highness purchased a set of buttons and several small pictures, in all about seven Guineas worth. /.../

The Princess and her family reside at No17 Cork Street, Burlington Gardens.³

This visit is not mentioned in her Memoirs, that is why it has not been noticed by modern scholars. But without any

doubt, Princess Dashkova was one of the most eminent visitors to Soho, who came there, not by fashion or idle curiosity, but by a deep interest, desire for knowledge and respect for modern technology and science. Her visit was an important event in local history.

¹ Dashkova E.R. Zapiski. Pis'ma sester M.i K.Wilmot iz Rossii. M., 1987. p.114.

² Puteshestvie odnoi znatnoi gospozhi po nekotorym Anglinskim provintsiiam. - 'Ya bereg pokidal tumannyj Albiona...'Russkie pisateli ob Anglii. 1646-1945. M., 2001. p.31-44.

³ Birmingham Central Library. MBP 313. Hodges, No16.