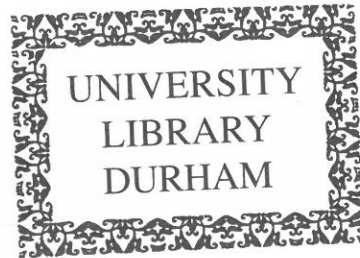


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H.G. Wells and the Staffordshire Potteries

by R. HAMPSON

H. G. Wells was born in a potshop which undoubtedly stocked Staffordshire pottery, and his first impressions of the area could have come from his father, who spent a short time as a gardener at Trentham Hall, Potteries seat of the Duke of Sutherland. (1) He is more likely to have heard of the Potteries from Horace Byatt, headmaster of Midhurst Grammar School, who taught Wells in 1881, (2) and again in 1883-84. (3) Horace Byatt had been the successful head of Burslem Endowed School, from 1875 to 1880 – and numbered amongst his pupils there both Arnold Bennett and Harold Hales, Bennett's original Card. Burslem Endowed School was a recently re-founded fee-paying day school for boys, held in the Wedgwood Institute. When Byatt left, it was said that he had vastly improved the school, but tried to do too much. (4) "Too much" included running the science side of Burslem Science and Art School, held in the evenings in the same building. There too, he greatly improved the attendance, range of subjects and examination successes. (5) Surely, Byatt would talk to his young assistant about his recent experience of the industrial North?

Wells' contact with Byatt certainly led to his major contact with North Staffordshire. In 1884, he left Midhurst to attend the Normal School of Science, South Kensington, (6) along with fellow scholarship holders from all over England – amongst them William Burton from Manchester. (7) Although their friendship led to Wells spending three impressionable months in Stoke on Trent, Burton had no previous contact with the area. William Burton was born in 1863, eldest son of a Quaker shopkeeper at Newton Heath, Manchester. (8) He became a pupil-teacher, and, like Wells, seized the opportunity to further his education at South Kensington. Together they went to hear William Morris, (9) and, when Wells was forced to give up editorship of the *Science Schools Journal*, it was Burton who nominally assumed the post. (10)

In the summer of 1887, Burton and Wells left South Kensington – Burton to marry Miss Eliza Nicholls, and take up his new job at Wedgwoods' Etruria Works, Stoke on Trent, (11) "to re-discover how the original Wedgwoods used to mix their more famous wares." (12) Wells came to rest at a miserable private school, Holt Academy, near Wrexham, (13) less than forty miles from Burton's "new little house" (14) at Basford, near Stoke. So near that Mr. and Mrs. Burton visited Wells at Holt at the end of their honeymoon – and found him "thin, white and frail". (15) Wells' illness, result of a malicious attack on the football field, led to him leaving Holt to convalesce with his mother, housekeeper at Uppark, Sussex. (16) Burton sent books to Wells, and "presently the Burtons, installed in a newly furnished new little house conveniently close to the Wedgwood potbank at Etruria, wrote to say they had a visitor's room quite at my disposal I accepted very eagerly" (17)



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Wells arrived at the end of March, and stayed until the end of June, 1888. He arrived a confirmed writer, for, in a letter from "Stuck on Trent" to A. M. Davies, itemising his literary earnings totalling one pound, he includes one 35,000 word novel and another unfinished 25,000 word one, both burnt. (18) He also wrote to his father a vivid word-picture of the Potteries, of Wedgwoods' works, and of Burton's experimental work. (19) He went about the industrial area, gaining impressions which are described in young Remington's walks in *The New Machievelli* and which are used to set the scene for *In the Days of the Comet*. The nearby Shelton Bar Ironworks provides the background for Wells' dramatic short story, *The Cone*.

Ten years later, Wells wrote *How I Died*, a description of his convalescence at Basford, and how he came to life again, by a chance encounter with a girl in Etruria woods; (20) and he wrote another version of the same incident to Arnold Bennett, who had inquired where Wells had gained his knowledge of the Potteries. (21) Although Bennett was still a clerk in his father's law office in Hanley, two miles away, during Wells' visit, they did not knowingly meet then. The woods, the stream and the bluebells were still there in living memory, but have now been finally swept away by an urban motorway.

The impression is gained that Wells overstayed his welcome — he must have been a trying visitor, careless of his appearance, arguing with his host, and perhaps distressing Mrs. Burton, unused to student attitudes. Later, Wells half-apologised for his behaviour, (22) and, in 1900, when Burton was picking up again the thread of their acquaintance, he also half-apologises — "because I was a fool ever so many years ago is no reason, to my matter-of-fact mind, why I should be a fool now". (23) By then, Burton was a master potter, manager of the famed Pilkington company at Clifton Junction, north of Manchester, pioneering special glaze and lustre effects. Their friendship continued until Burton's death in 1941. Wells' own comments illustrate the evening scene at 18, Victoria Street, during his stay — "Burton used to get young men to his house, and humbug them that Carlyle was a sort of Quaker ... Into which meetings I introduced controversy leading to scepticism. It made Burton dry up his monopoly and pass the cake round ... likewise I was very shabby which hurt Mrs. B.'s feelings when a visitor came" (22) and "I was very untidy. I had a teasing habit of luring Burton after his day's work into exasperating discussions". (24) The house stands, little changed apart from its discreet plaque recording Wells' visit. Burton family tradition tells that, as students, "Wells and Burton were a pair of tear-aways" and that Burton's daughter was later shielded from Wells' Bohemian influence. (25)

So much for the actual visit — what was its effect on Wells? He says himself " ... and at Etruria my real writing began ... " (24) It was his only prolonged contact with industrial life, and he made good use of his Potteries experiences in his fictional writings. His short story *The Cone*, (26) a dramatic tale of an ironmaster's terrible revenge on his wife's lover, is vividly accurate in its description of the night scene

from Basford Bank, and within the now-closed Shelton Bar Ironworks. The ironmaster first attempts to kill his wife's lover whilst they are crossing the railway, and finally thrusts him onto the cone of the furnace. Wells uses the real names of Newcastle, Etruria, Hanley and Burslem in the story; he may well have heard of the tragedy of a youth's death crossing the railway to the ironworks during his stay; (27) and may have also heard the local tradition of an ironworker falling into a furnace. (28) A reader who knows the locale can have no doubt that Wells visited the ironworks at night.

Wells' 1906 novel *In the Days of the Comet* (Odhams Press edition, page numbers quoted) is shot through with his memories of the "Four Towns" (page 359) — Bennett's "Five Towns" — of the Staffordshire Potteries. We plunge straight into the "dismal outskirts of Swathinglea" (Hanley) (page 325), to "Rawdon's Potbank" in "Clayton" (Burslem), and evening classes at Overcastle (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (page 328). "Leet over the moors" (page 328) is scarcely disguised Leek in the Moorlands. In "Bladden's Ironworks" (page 332) we have the "Jeedah Ironworks" of *The Cone* short story, and Granville's Shelton Bar Ironworks of reality. Even "the checkered pavement" (page 335) is the diaper-pattern blue brick footpaths still common in the Potteries, and the "clumsy steam tram" (page 336) plied between Burslem, Hanley and Stoke in 1888.

Pages 336 and 337 hold a splendid evocation of the late-Victorian Potteries scene by night, though Checkshill and Lowchester are surely imported from Uppark and Chichester? "Half the valley may be playing" (page 341) — a good North Country dialect word for being out of work, as Wells explains — a word he must surely have learnt in North Staffs? The real life equivalent of "Lord Redcar, greatest of our coalowners" (page 364) was Earl Granville, a much older man, who owned a line of collieries round Hanley. "Peacock coal seam, and "Bantock Burden Pit" (page 368) is Wells' pseudonym for Hanley Deep Pit, owned by Earl Granville, the names linked through the contemporary English composer, Granville Bantock! The "steep, cobbled, excavated road between banked up footpaths" (page 369) is Hanley High Street within recent memory, leading to Hanley Deep Pit, now transformed into Hanley Forest Park. There was no miners' strike during Wells' stay, but there would be clear recollections of the bitter struggle for three months in 1883. (29) When Leadford decides to follow Nettie to Shaphambury, he walks over Clayton Crest (Basford Bank) to Two-Mile Stone Station, and Wells uses this opportunity to give another detailed description of the Potteries scene, this time in daylight (page 404).

In the new life, after the Comet has passed, Wells stresses the destruction of the pre-Comet trashy footwear, the same footwear that the Potteries industrial health pioneer, Dr. Arlidge, was campaigning against in the 1880's as "abominated rubbish" — Leadford himself steering truck after truck of cheap boots and shoes to the run-off by the top of the *Glanville* furnaces — "plup! into the cone" (page 490). The

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freshness of the Potteries scene in these descriptions tempts speculation that much of it was written in 1888 and salvaged from the burnt, unfinished novel. (18)

The Potteries played a smaller role in *The New Machievelli*, serialised in 1910 – page references to the first book edition of 1911. The guardian of the central figure, Remington, is “Uncle Minter”, a Staffordshire man (page 49). Remington’s visits to his uncle (pages 122, 161) bring in descriptions of the Potteries, chiefly in the first chapter of the second book, titled *Margaret in Staffordshire*. The “villa in Newcastle” (page 162) bears a remarkable resemblance to “West View”, Sandy Lane, home of the Howsons, real-life sanitary-ware manufacturers, even to the ground-floor billiard room and over-size billiard table (pages 163, 175). “Bursley (Burslem) Wakes”, held annually, and occurring right at the end of Wells’ visit, make yet another Wellsian appearance (page 122), (see *The Triumphs of a Taxidermist* and *The Time Machine*, pages 254 and 14 in the collected *Short Stories*, Benn, 1927). Again Wells draws on his Potteries memories and describes the industrial scene (page 165), but this time as an aid to Remington’s political education. “Lord Redcar” of *The Comet* (page 340) (and in *Tono-Bungay*, 1933 edition, page 66) lives again in the person of “Fladden, the borax king” (page 168) and refers to the Coghill family, leading borax merchants, who lived near the Howsons in The Brampton, Newcastle – borax being a principal ingredient in pottery glazes. Uncle Minter’s “potbank” (page 169) relates closely to Wells’ description of Wedgwoods’ works to his father, (19) and the acute reporting of attitudes to lead-poisoning (page 170) reflects the then current concern about the evils of leaded glazes in the pottery industry.

There is no family recollection of Wells visiting the Howsons, and their house, now local offices of English China Clays, was not built in 1888. It is far more likely that William Burton would visit the Howsons, fellow progressive potters, in the early 1900’s, and describe their comfortable ménage to Wells. Burton was a leader of the pottery manufacturers nationally, in obtaining workable Lead Regulations and interpreting them to the trade.

I hope I have written enough to show the deep impression made by the Potteries on Wells, and his use of those impressions to exemplify nineteenth century industrial England. My thanks to many helpers, particularly Miss Howson, Mrs. Burton and John Hammond in England, and Mary Ceibert in Illinois, U. S. A., and to the Estate of H. G. Wells and the University of Illinois Library at Urbana-Champaign for permission to use excerpts from published works and letters housed in the Wells Archive.

NOTES

1. *Experiment in Autobiography*, H. G. Wells, 1934, page 57, and see *The Story of the Late Mr. Elvesham*, H. G. Wells, second paragraph.
2. *Experiment*, page 140.
3. *Experiment*, page 171.
4. *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 21st August, 1880.
5. *Report, Burslem Schools of Art & Science*, 1879-80.
6. *Experiment*, page 175.
7. *Royal Lancastrian Pottery*, A. Lomax, 1957, page 88.
8. *Royal Lancastrian Pottery*, Page 86.
9. *Experiment*, page 238.
10. *Experiment*, page 240.
11. *Royal Lancastrian Pottery*, page 90.
12. *Experiment*, page 302.
13. *Experiment*, page 292.
14. *Experiment*, page 306.
15. H. G. Wells, Geoffrey West, 1930, page 68.
16. *Experiment*, page 302.
17. *Experiment*, page 306.
18. Letter, “Dear Davies”, undated, Wells Archive.
19. Letter, “Dear Father”, April 29, Wells Archive.
20. *Certain Personal Matters*, H. G. Wells, 1898, page 274.
21. *Arnold Bennett & H. G. Wells*, Harris Wilson, 1960, page 274.
22. Letter to A. T. Simmons, September, 1885, Wells Archive.
23. Letter from William Burton, 22nd June 1900, Wells Archive.
24. *Experiment*, page 308.
25. Private communication, 30th July 1978.
26. *The Cone*, first published 1895, available in *Penguin Selected Short Stories of H. G. Wells*
27. *Staffordshire Sentinel*, 28th April, 1888.
28. *History of Etruria* E. J. D. Warrilow, 1953, page 185.
29. *Staffordshire Advertiser*, May to September, 1883.