

New Museum School Podcast Transcript– 2019/2020

PODCAST TITLE: *JW Evans Silver Factory: the silver that helped make Birmingham the second city.*

NMS TRAINEE: *Gala Albas*

HOST INSTITUTION: *English Heritage*

SCRIPT

NMS INTRO STING

INTERVIEW CLIP 1 (Margaret & Audrey Interview - Clip 1)

Audrey Foulkes, Volunteer, JW Evans Silver Factory, English Heritage

It is like a time warp, you walk through the door and you go back a century, at least. Rickety stairs, freezing cold in the winter, stifling hot in the summer. Everything about it is old: the furniture, the machinery, the things that they work with. But they all do an unbelievable, fantastic job. When you walk into the showroom and you see what is created, it's as if a light goes on, and the one thing you cannot miss is the craftsmanship of the workmen. It shines out at you like a beacon.

LINK 1

That's **Audrey Foulkes**, describing the atmospheric JW Evans Silver Factory in Birmingham. She worked there from 1974 to 2001, but the factory was established long before that, in 1881, by Jenkin William Evans. It became a flourishing family business, specialising in designing and producing a wide range of silverware products,

such as teapots, trays and candlesticks. They produced both parts for individual items and complete silverware products.

The factory continuously operated as a family business for over a century, under the ownership of three generations of the Evans family, until it closed in 2008. The processes, tools and equipment which were used to make its products changed very little over time. Today, the factory is looked after by English Heritage and is open for guided tours. It gives visitors an insight into the trade, which once employed over 70,000 people in Birmingham, helping to make it the 'city of a thousand trades'.

I'm Gala Albas, Interpretation and Learning Trainee at English Heritage, and you're listening to my New Museum School podcast. I'll be sharing the story of this fascinating urban heritage site and giving you a glimpse into what its future may hold.

ATMOS 1&2 | Street and sound of traffic

Sounds of the road, cars, hints of people talking on the road

LINK 2

I'm on my way from the railway station to JW Evans Silver Factory, walking through the Jewellery Quarter, just northwest of Birmingham city centre. It's an area which was once Europe's largest jewellery manufacturing area. These days, it's the sound of the busy road, office workers and people, mostly young couples, browsing the windows of the many jewellery shops that fill the streets.

LINK 3

JW Evans is on Albion Street, just off the main road, and it doesn't look much like a factory at all. It takes up four Victorian terraced houses, on a street made up of two-up two-down houses, modern flats and disused factory buildings. In fact, even getting into Evans is a little confusing. On my first visit, I knocked and stood at the door for

2

ages, only to realise that a building made up of four houses also had four front doors, and I was at the wrong one!

JW Evans doesn't look like a purpose-built factory, because it isn't. As **Audrey**, who worked at the factory, dealing with exports, pricing and providing administrative support, explains:

ARCHIVE AUDIO CLIP 1 | Oral histories Audrey Foulkes, Volunteer, JW Evans Silver Factory

... because all the houses in the Jewellery Quarter, the buildings mostly were private houses with land at the back. And then the family, which was Mr Evans of now, his grandfather started the firm at the back of where they lived. And I think Mr Evans now, Tony, his father was actually born in the front room which became Mr Evans's office, that was the family bedroom and Mr Evans's father was actually born in that room. So the family was at the front, the works were at the back and that's why you'd got like a kitchen area downstairs and you'd still got the fireplaces in from where they were bedrooms and sitting rooms.

ATMOS 3 | Walking through factory

Sound of lights being turned on – creaking door – footsteps – fade out under.

LINK 4

Walking through the factory really does feel like stepping back in time. It's a bit of a maze of small rooms, all filled with machinery and tools. Pretty much everywhere you look there are shelves, filled with silverware pieces and thousands of dies. There are around 15,000 of these dies at the factory. They all acted as moulds, which turned

silver into JW Evans' many designs. The dies were kept so that a product could always be recreated or replaced, even 100 years after it was first sold.

You can't shake the feeling that those who worked at the factory might come back at any minute and pick up where they left off - the holiday brochures, paperwork, and football memorabilia from the local club, Aston Villa, still sit where they were put down by those who last worked at the factory.

LINK 5

Tony Evans, the factory's final owner, tells us about the people who worked here:

[ARCHIVE AUDIO CLIP 2 | English Heritage Podcast](#)

[Tony Evans, Owner, JW Evans Silver Factory](#)

In their heyday, I believe there was about 60. One of the treasures which are in the archive here is a wages book going back to the 1890s, which shows that they were working a six day week, 66 hours a week - that means 11 hour days - really hard graft. But all of the people learned individual skills so they weren't just pushing buttons. Each one was having a very personal input of their own particular trained skill for which they'd been trained. Bit by bit, you get a high-class product at the end. But one thing which has been quite a feature is the loyalty which people that have worked here have had over the years, and in my time, quite a number have done more than 50 years without a break'.

LINK 6

I met up with **Audrey Foulkes and Margaret Wolfson**. Margaret started working at JW Evans in 1975, as the Invoice Clerk and Bookkeeper, a few months after Audrey.

They shared with me what it was like to be employed at JW Evans and its working culture:

INTERVIEW CLIP 2 | Part 3

Margaret Wolfson and Audrey Foulkes, Volunteers, JW Evans Silver Factory, English Heritage

MW: Not once, not once - and Audrey will say the same - if you worked there, he'd never say, 'Do that'.

AF: Never been told to do anything

MW: 'Would you mind, would you mind, Margaret, could you get that invoice for me please?' It was always 'would you mind', never telling you to do anything

AF: And we were always paid on a Friday in cash. We didn't have cheques or anything, or monthly salaries. We were always paid in little brown envelopes in cash because Norma, our friend, she was the cashier and she used to do it all. Usually it was Mr Lawden brought the wages around. He would bring it around and he'd say, 'There you are, Audrey, thank you very much for your week's work'. He would always thank us for the week's work

INTERVIEW CLIP 3 | Part 1

Audrey Foulkes and Margaret Wolfson, Volunteers, JW Evans Silver Factory, English Heritage

AF: I can remember there was one morning. It was bitterly cold, it was horrible and we were really fed up. And I said, 'Oh, I'd love something nice at lunchtime. I'd love something warm.' Margaret says, 'Do you fancy some chips?' And I said, 'Now where can you get chips from?' (Margaret) 'Downstairs, John the Van. Would you do us a favour, John? Would you go down the fish shop and get us some bags of chips? We'll buy you one as well!' And he was down there wasn't he?

MW: We had them every Friday after that!

AF: And then Mr Lawden came in...(he sniffs)

MW: 'What's going on?'

AF: I said, there's ever such a strange smell going around. I said, we've had to shut the windows! (Laughter)

LINK 7

JW Evans contributed to some significant moments in British history during its a hundred and twenty-seven years. Business was at its peak during Birmingham's early 20th century industrial boom. Evans also operated during the two World Wars, making metal components for the war effort. The final big push for production was the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977, which created a demand for commemorative silver. However, due to changing fashions and increasing overseas competition, business at Evans gradually declined.

When English Heritage took JW Evans into guardianship in 2008, the decision was made to leave the factory and its many contents as they were when it closed for business that same year. This means it's now one of the most complete surviving factories of its kind in England and gives visitors a fascinating insight into traditional silver manufacturing processes.

LINK 8

Former workers **Margaret and Audrey** have helped to share the legacy of JW Evans with visitors as volunteers at the factory. I asked them why they think it's so important that Evans is preserved for future generations.

INTERVIEW CLIP 4 | Part 2

Margaret Wolfson, Volunteer, JW Evans Silver Factory, English Heritage

I believe that everyone should be aware of the great skill of the workforce and the story of JW Evans should always be there for people to see and appreciate. When going to JW Evans there is a real sense of British history and a feeling of immense skills and pride in what was produced by the workforce and the JW Evans family. The skills that are being lost forever.

INTERVIEW CLIP 5 | Part 2

Margaret Wolfson, Volunteer, JW Evans Silver Factory, English Heritage

There's so much at JW Evans. I'd just like them to know how much English Heritage hopefully will keep that going, because everything seems to be getting lost, doesn't it, of our history?

LINK 9

Once again, JW Evans Silver Factory is in a transition period. The National Lottery Heritage Fund is currently supporting English Heritage to shape the future of the factory as a heritage site. Here's **Michelle Lisa-Gayle**, from English Heritage, talking about her work on the project:

INTERVIEW CLIP 6 |

Michelle Lisa-Gayle, Engagement Officer, JW Evans Silver Factory, English Heritage

I've been in post as the Development and Engagement Officer at JW Evans for a year now, since February 2019. Thanks to funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund we've been able to find ways to open the factory to the public more than ever. With Evans being such a unique site, not only due to the collection and the location, English Heritage has recognised the value of engaging with the local community as well as with residents and businesses.

I've been leading a feasibility study, which has trialled new and existing activities that can be delivered at Evans which tie into the wider area of the Jewellery Quarter, which is part of Birmingham's significant and important industrial heritage. Although the area has changed, and the people who live there no longer work in the industry of the past, it's important to understand how the lives of those who did impacted on the area today.

Exploring the social history of the Evans family, we've been looking at the artistic and creative abilities of the family. To tie this rich history with the present community, we've

looked closely at the factory's first owner Jenkin William's artwork, and his son Harold's photographic skills.

To showcase what the area has to offer today, we're holding an art exhibition, featuring the work of art students from the Jewellery Quarter Academy. This is a really great way of working alongside the local community and gives young people access to a really unique inner city site. By showing this artwork to our established members and visitors, they're able to see the skills and talents of those who live and study in the area now

LINK 10

I went along to some of the community engagement sessions, hosted by Michelle in different areas across the city. I wanted to get a real sense of how Birmingham sees places of heritage, like JW Evans, and how people feel that sites like this should be used.

While very few people had heard of the factory, most were interested in the site and wanted to find out more. What stuck with me most from these sessions is the number of people we spoke to who had stories to tell. Either they'd worked in manufacturing - one man had worked with Tony Evans in the past - or they knew that their ancestors were part of the Jewellery Quarter's earlier industrial boom. Some had a particular attachment and interest in jewellery and silverware, and one man was even called JW Evans himself! People told us their stories with enthusiasm, and what was clear was that they wanted JW Evans to be a place for them, and to share in its story.

LINK 11

That brings me to the end of my podcast. My special thanks to Tony Evans and all those who have helped make this podcast possible, especially Margaret, Audrey and Michelle for taking the time to speak to me. Thank you for listening.

NMS OUTRO STING

SCRIPT ENDS