



## Soho House: A Short History

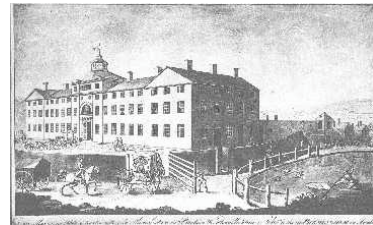
Matthew Boulton

Matthew Boulton was born in Birmingham on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1728. When he was 17 he started working in his father's buckles and buttons business. He eventually took over the business and expanded it. During the 1760's he moved the business to a brand new site on Handsworth Heath: an area of open heathland just outside Birmingham. He moved there because there was land to build on and a stream for his water powered machinery.



### The Manufactory

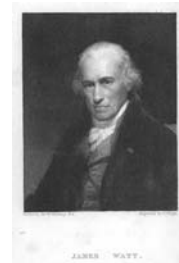
The Manufactory produced an amazing variety of goods amongst which were buttons, buckles, boxes, trinkets, swords, hilts, lamps, coffee pots and much more. Originally the machinery was water powered but James Watt successfully re-developed the steam engine to speed up production and save money. Additionally some 800,000 coins were accurately struck each week in the Soho Mint. Prior to this there was much counterfeit coinage in circulation which was largely abolished due to the accuracy of Matthew Boulton's methods.



This 'factory' way of working was revolutionary at the time. 200 years ago most businesses were fairly small. The idea of having hundreds of people on one site working together plus the implementation of steam powered machinery really kick-started the Industrial Revolution in Britain.

### James Watt

**James Watt** was a good friend and business partner of Matthew Boulton. They first met in 1768, but didn't start working together until 1775. With Boulton's money to finance him, James Watt was able to successfully redesign the Newcomen steam engine to make it much more efficient. As a result steam power was introduced to the Manufactory and a successful venture was started building steam engines at the Soho Foundry. Many of these were sold for use in the Cornish tin mining industry.



### William Murdoch

**William Murdoch** was another famous Soho workman. He began his life at Soho as a mechanic. He is best remembered for his application of coal gas for lighting. In fact some of his lighting was installed at the Manufactory.

### Soho House

Matthew Boulton moved to Soho House in 1766 so he could be near his business.

Originally this was a small farmhouse. Over the next 50 years he had many alterations and improvements done to make it an elegant and fashionable country home. The grounds were extensively landscaped to make them attractive.



Matthew Boulton was very keen on new inventions. Soho House is probably the first house in England to have a central heating system installed since Roman times. In addition he had a vast steam heated bath installed and indoor flushing toilets. He was way



ahead of his time - such luxuries were not common in people's homes until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### Servants

The Boulton family employed servants. These would have included a butler, a housekeeper, a cook, maids and a gardener.



### The Lunar Society

A group of Matthew Boulton's friends who met here monthly. They were some of the most important scientists, engineers, manufacturers and 'thinkers' of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They met at the time of the full moon, this enabled the members to proceed home by its light. The meetings held here were lively affairs, where all the latest ideas and inventions were discussed and scientific experiments carried out.

### Matthew Boulton's Family

Matthew Boulton's parents were called Matthew and Christiana and they lived in Snow Hill, Birmingham. His father ran a business making 'toys', these were small metal objects such as buttons and buckles. Matthew started working in the business when he was 17 years old.

When he was 28 years old Matthew married Mary Robinson who came from a wealthy Lichfield family. With Mary's dowry, Matthew expanded his business. In 1759, Matthew inherited his father's business. His wife Mary also died in this year. Matthew later married Mary's sister Ann. This was a very shocking occurrence in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Ann's dowry was also used to expand the business.

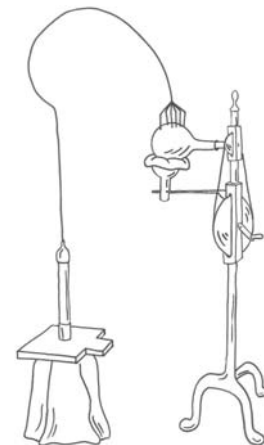
Ann and Matthew had two children, also called Matthew and Anne. Matthew also outlived his second wife. She died in 1773 when she drowned in the grounds of the house. Matthew's son, Matthew Robinson Boulton, carried on the family business in partnership with James Watt's son, after his father's death in 1809.

### Soho after Matthew Boulton

Matthew Boulton died on the 17<sup>th</sup> August 1809 aged 80 years. He is buried at St Mary's Parish Church off the Hamstead Road in Handsworth.

The open land that once surrounded the house was sold off by Matthew Boulton's grandson during Victorian times; when many of the houses that you now see nearby were built. The Manufactory was demolished in 1862. Part of the house was also demolished at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: this contained the kitchen, billiard room, library and rooms in which some of the servants lived.

The Boulton family moved out of Soho House in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century to a country estate in Great Tew, Oxfordshire. The house was then leased. Since Boulton's time, the house has been a vicarage for St Michael's church, a girl's school, in 1912 a boarding house, in 1921 a hotel, in 1955 a hall of residence for apprentices and in 1964 a hostel for policemen. Finally the property was bought in 1990 by Birmingham City Council and it opened as a museum in 1995.



*Replica of Joseph Priestley's static electricity machine*