Henry Maudslay Biography

Henry Maudslay

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Biography

Before Henry Maudslay began his work, screw threads were made by very skilled craftsmen. Large threads could be forged and filed, but smaller threads had to be cut by hand. Maudslay changed all that by designing a lathe that could repeatedly cut the same threads on a screw, and that could make identical sets of taps and dies.

Maudslay was born in Woolwich, England, on August 22, 1771. By age twelve, he was at work filling cartridges at the arsenal there, and in only two years he was promoted to the joiner's shop and apprenticed to the metal-working shop. By age eighteen his skills were already renowned, and he went to work with hydraulics and lock pioneer Joseph Bramah.

Maudslay rose to manager of Bramah's workshop, but left in 1797 to open his own business, where he developed his lathe to cut screw threads. He also devised the slide rest for lathe work and designed the first micrometer for measuring the precision of his work. His lathe was so precise that screw threads became standardized, and nuts and bolts interchangeable, a necessary step in the success of the industrial revolution.

From 1801 to 1808, Maudslay worked with Marc Isambard Brunel to construct a series of machines for making wooden pulley blocks. These machines could be operated by ten unskilled workers, and could accomplish the amount of work formerly done by 110 skilled craftsmen.

In 1807, Maudslay patented a table engine that became a compact power source for many years. Maudslay's firm proceeded to manufacture marine steam engines, first as small as 17 horsepower and later as large as 56 horsepower. Seven years after Maudslay's death, his company built the 750-horsepower transatlantic steamship *Great Western* for Isambard Branel.

Although Maudslay's main interest was in engines, he also worked on methods of purifying water and eliminating boiler scale. Maudslay died on February 15, 1831 after a trip from France. He was buried in a cast iron tomb at Woolwich.