John Wilkinson Biography

John Wilkinson

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Biography

John Wilkinson is perhaps best known as the man who perfected a boring machine that, among other things, made possible the successful manufacture and operation of James Watt's steam engine.

Born in 1728 at Clifton, Cumberland, England, Wilkinson was exposed to iron-furnace work at an early age through his father, an ironmaster, farmer, and part-time inventor. By 1763 he had become operator of his own furnace, and soon became a leading supplier of castings and armaments. His first boring machine, patented in 1774, was constructed for cannon-making. Because of its rigid design that enabled precise cutting, the machine, with a few adaptations, proved instrumental in boring engine cylinders to Watt's exacting standards. The essential components of Wilkinson's landmark machine were a fixed hollow cylinder and a rotating, double-supported boring bar that passed through the inside of it to advance the cutting head.

Wilkinson incorporated the Watt engine into his factory work, and, from it, produced the first steam hammer. His other important invention is a machine which could produce quality lead pipe through an extrusion process that reduced the pipes wall dimensions. Wilkinson's continuing and pioneering work with iron, which included the construction of an iron-hulled barge, several innovations in iron smelting, and the supply of castings for an iron bridge across the Severn River, earned him a lasting reputation as one of the great industrialists of the eighteenth century. Wilkinson died in 1808 in Bradley, Staffordshire, England.