Henry Cort Encyclopedia Article

Henry Cort

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Henry Cort

1740-1800

English Inventor

Henry Cort developed two iron-making processes that, when combined, led to a fourfold increase in iron production throughout Britain within two decades. His patented grooved rollers and a puddling process for separating iron from carbon should have made him rich, but due to a disastrous business partnership, Cort was denied the fruits of his labors.

Cort was born in Lancaster, England, in 1740, and by the age of 25 was serving in the Royal Navy. In that capacity, he was responsible for improving ordnance made from wrought iron—primarily cannon balls. He soon became fascinated with the subject of ironworking, and using funds he had managed to accumulate, started his own iron business.

Cort's first major breakthrough was a process for creating iron bars with the use of grooved rollers, which replaced an older method of manually hammering the bars into shape. He patented the process in 1783. A year later he patented a second process, this one for separating out carbon by stirring molten pig iron in a reverberating furnace. As the iron decarburized, this had a purifying effect.

The two processes proved most useful when applied in tandem, and ironworking flourished throughout Britain as a result of Cort's two breakthroughs. Unfortunately, he was not able to enjoy his success. He had entered into a partnership with Samuel Jellicoe, whose father was a corrupt naval official involved in embezzlement of public funds. Because some of those funds wound up in the Cort-Jellicoe partnership, the British government punished Cort—though he had taken no part in the crime—by seizing the rights to his patents.

As a result of this misfortune, Cort's competitors were able to benefit from his efforts. Cort himself lived out his days on a small pension, and died at the age of 60 in Hampstead, London.