

Bristol and the iron trade in western Britain in the eighteenth century

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During the eighteenth century Britain was the hub of the international market in iron. Although the British Isles could boast a well-established domestic iron industry, native ironmasters were unable to meet the rapidly growing demand for iron in the major metalworking districts of the Midlands and the north. As a result, large quantities of bar iron had to be imported from the Baltic to meet the shortfall. By the 1740s foreign imports - principally from Sweden but in growing volume from Russia as well - exceeded home production.¹ Much of this iron, destined for the West Midlands, was shipped through Bristol.

One Bristol merchant who played an important role in this commerce in the first half of the eighteenth century was Graffin Prankard (d.1756). The survival of many of Prankard's business papers in the Somerset Record Office has ensured that his career is known to historians.² His interests, it is clear, were widely spread. Prankard traded with the American colonies, the West Indies and southern Europe. But it is as a Baltic merchant that he deserves special attention. He was a major importer of iron between the 1710s and the 1740s - the period in which Swedish penetration of the British market was at its height - and his activities are extensively documented. This is not just true of the British end of his business.

In Sweden the Stockholm merchant house of Jennings & Finlay acted on his behalf, assembling cargoes. Happily, the Jennings family, one of Sweden's major commercial dynasties in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, maintained its own business archive,

now at the Riksarkiv in Stockholm. So, the commercial circuits through which Prankard moved can be reconstituted in massive detail using complementary archival material on either side of the North Sea.

This is to be the basis of a research project conducted jointly by Chris Evans (School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Glamorgan) and Göran Rydén (Department of Economic History, University of Uppsala). The volume of iron which Graffin Prankard shipped into Bristol can be traced through his accounts, as can its distribution to customers in the West Country and the West Midlands. Prankard's letterbooks contain a mass of additional information, with the merchant offering a commentary on the changing nature of the market and its institutional features. This combination of quantitative and qualitative data will enable a pioneering study to be made of one of the key industrial markets of early industrial Britain, exploring the ways in which imports may have affected industrial structures and social organisation in (say) the West Midlands.

In turn, the Jennings archive will allow an investigation of how demand from Britain met a response in merchant houses of Stockholm and among ironmakers in the *bergslagen* (mining district) of central Sweden. Together, archival material from Bristol and Stockholm will allow an investigation of the role of international trade as a medium for technological transfer and social change in early industrial Europe.³

Further information can be obtained from Chris Evans at the University of Glamorgan (cevens3@glamorgan.ac.uk)

¹ See the survey in Chris Evans and Göran Rydén, 'Iron in Sweden and Britain 1600-1850: interdependence and difference', in Gert Magnusson (ed.), *The importance of ironmaking: technical innovation and social change* (Stockholm, 1995, 2 vols), I, pp. 407-14.

² J.H. Betty, 'Graffin Prankard: an eighteenth-century Bristol merchant', *Southern History*, XII (1990), 34-47.

³ For a preliminary attempt, see Chris Evans and Göran Rydén, 'Kinship and the transmission of skill: bar iron making in Britain and Sweden 1500-1800', in Maxine Berg and Kristine Bruland (eds), *Technological revolutions in Europe: historical perspectives* (Cheltenham, 1998), pp. 188-206.