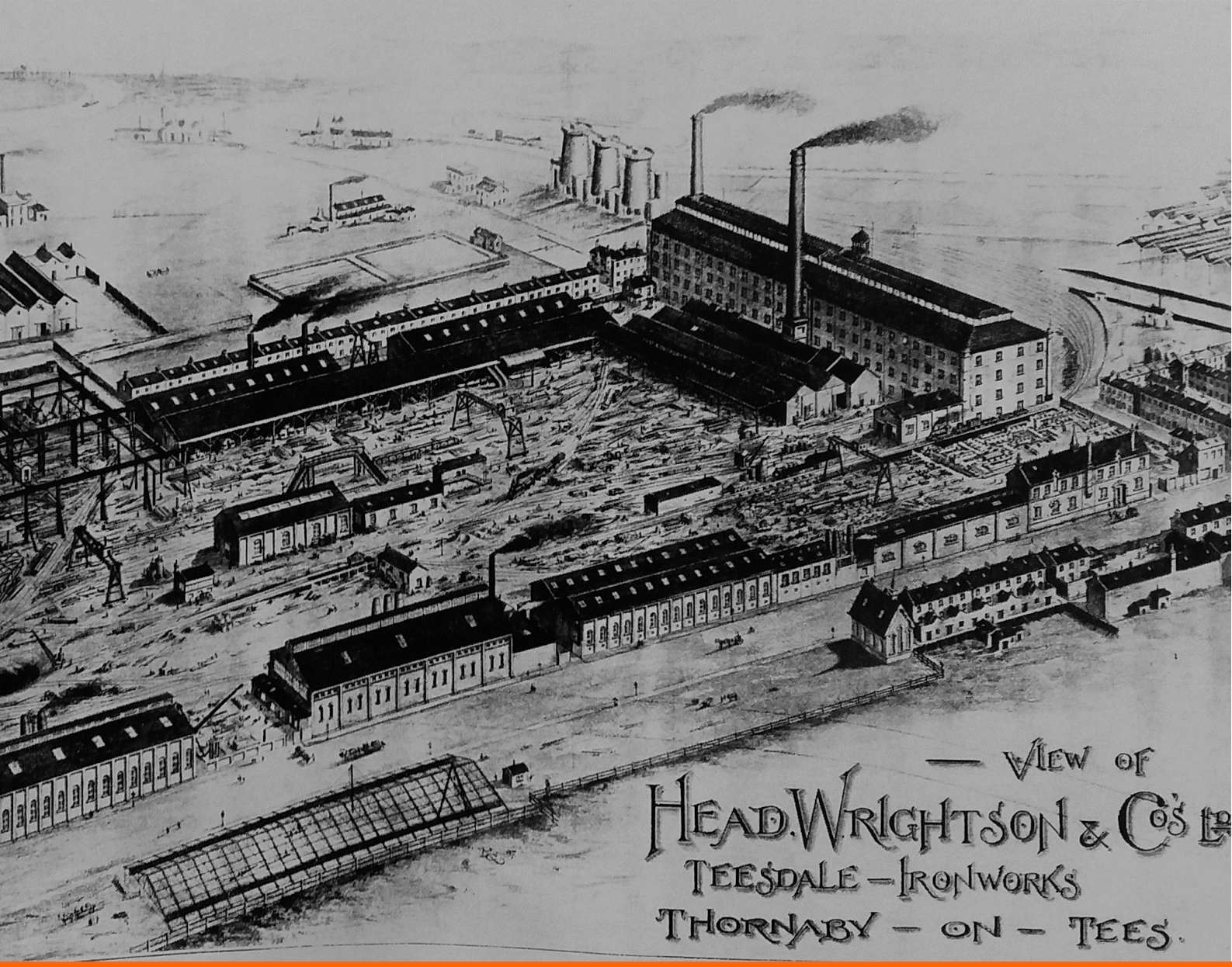

Talking Tees Valley Activity Pack

Head Wrightson

Tees Valley Museums

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Tees Valley Museums

Welcome to another edition of the Talking Tees Valley Activity Pack

Each month we use objects and photos from our museums in the Tees Valley to take a closer look at the lives and stories from people in our area.

This month we look at the story of one of Teesside's well-known steel makers – Head Wrightson. From the early years of the business to the World War years, to its acquisition by Davy Corporation, Head Wrightson have had a varied history that left their mark on Teesside and the world.

Head Wrightson first started out as a small iron works founded by William Smith and the brothers William and George Skinner at Thornaby Carrs in 1830. The company was then bought by Thomas Howard Head and Joseph Wright in 1859.

From the 1860s the firm specialised in making iron parts and structures for different types of industry including railways, locomotives and shipping. They were also big employers, with 450 people working for them at this time.

Then there was another change in management - Thomas Wrightson joined the firm in 1866. A year later Thomas Howard Head sold his part of the business to Wrightson and his younger brother Charles Arthur Head.

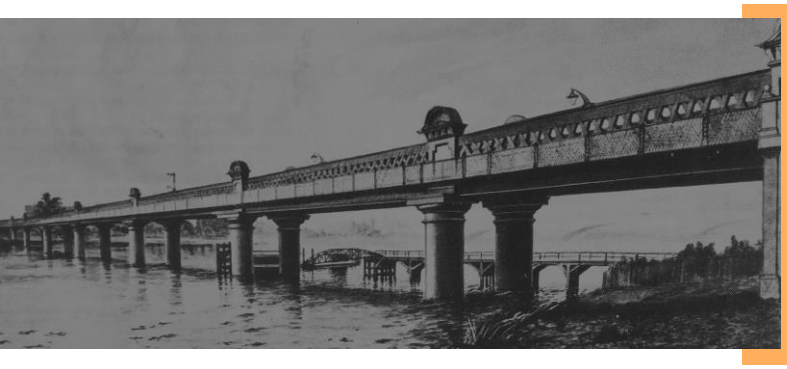
From here on the firm became the name that the company is so remembered for - Head, Wrightson and Co.

Here is one of the railway locomotives Head Wrightson built in 1870. It was one of two that were built to work at Seaham Harbour in County Durham. They carried maintenance equipment and materials that were used to make regular repairs to the harbour.

In the 1930s the locos were sold back to Head Wrightson and later restored.

This loco, known as No. 21 was displayed in Stockton before being moved to Preston Park Museum and Grounds.

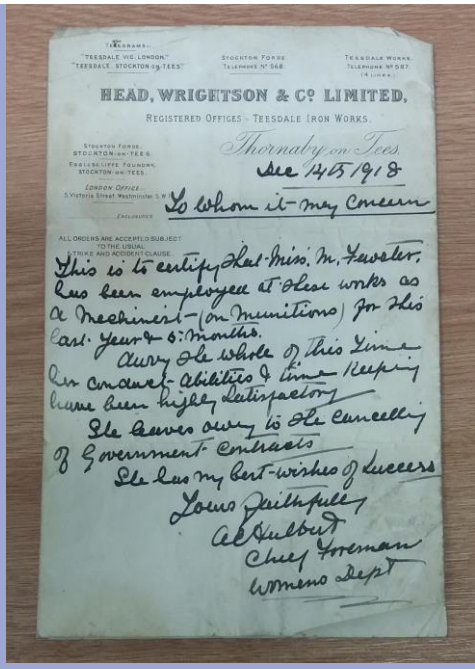
Head Wrightson quickly became a strong industrial force into the 1890s – they built most of the blast furnaces in Teesside, became well-known for making dock gates for ports across the world, and they constructed some of their most well-known bridges.



The Fulham Railway Bridge was built by Head Wrightson in 1889, connecting the London and South Western Railway with the Metropolitan District Railway at Fulham. It is still in use today.

In 1897 Head Wrightson purchased the Stockton Forge and Egglescliffe Foundry, and a period of rapid growth followed for the next three decades. During World War One they built 'X' lighter landing craft for the Navy and the main Thornaby site had electric arc furnaces installed, expanding their production range to steel castings used in marine, mining and energy equipment.

Like many industries across England, Head Wrightson employed women during World War One as munitions workers to help keep the war effort going.


HEAD, WRIGHTSON & Co LIMITED,

REGISTERED OFFICES - TEESDALE IRON WORKS.

Thornaby on Tees

Dec 14th 1918

To Whom it may Concern

This is to certify that Miss. M. Fewster has been employed at these works as a Mechanist - (on Munitions) for the last Year & 6 Months.

During the whole of this time her conduct, abilities & time keeping have been highly satisfactory.

She leaves owing to the cancelling of Government Contracts

She has my best wishes of success

Yours faithfully

A.E. Hulbert

Chief Foreman

Womens Dept

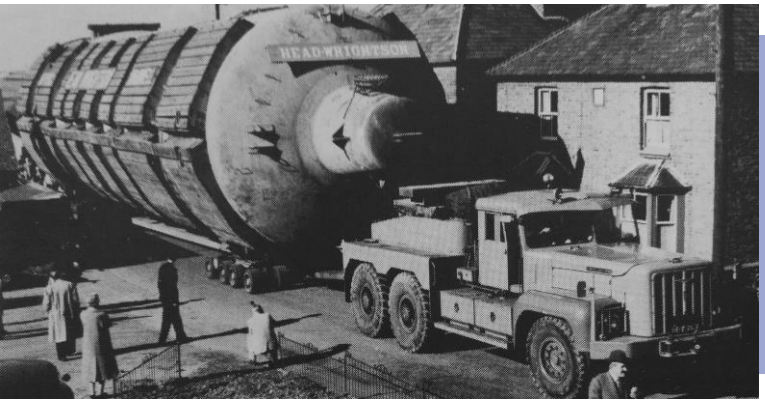
Preston Park Museum have in their collections a reference letter for a Miss M. Fewster who had worked for them in munitions for 18 months. Her work and time-keeping was described as "highly satisfactory".

In 1931 Head Wrightson faced an economic slump. Sir Guy Wrightson, son of Thomas Wrightson and current Director at the company, put out a mortgage on the Wrightson family seat at Neasham Hall to help the company survive.

Opportunities for growth came with the outbreak of World War Two in 1939. By 1945 they had manufactured 238 landing craft, designed bellman hangars, transportable aeroplane sheds for the Air Ministry, and supplied prefabricated harbours to the Allied Forces.

Head Wrightson also made machinery that supplied oil and petrol to D Day troops, including this drum being carried by HMS Persephone to offshore allied troops at Normandy in 1944.

Following the end of World War Two, the company continued to grow. It established a new Research Department for new and improved methods and invested in apprentice training. New opportunities in manufacturing nuclear reactors also led to the company becoming a shareholder in British Nuclear Associates Ltd.

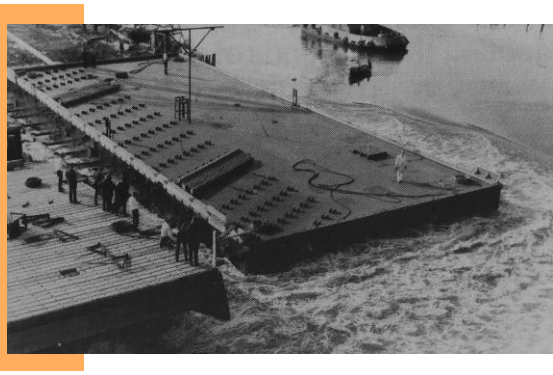


Bradwell Nuclear Power Station commissioned Head Wrightson in the early 1960s to build 12 heat exchangers, each measuring 100 feet long by 20 feet diameter and capable of carrying 200 tonnes.

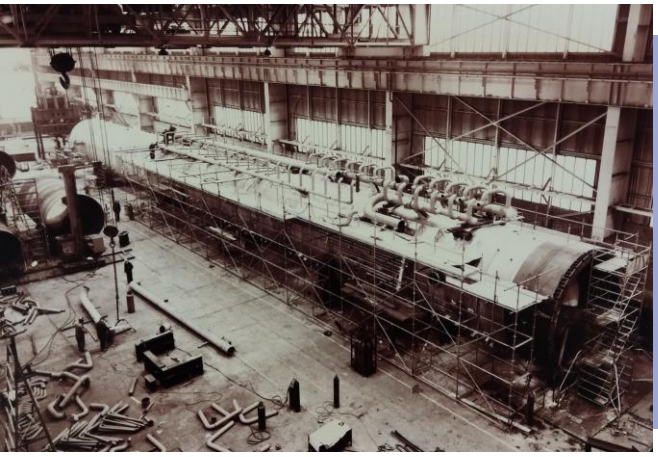
By 1962 Head Wrightson were at the peak of their success, having expanded to six sites in the Cleveland area and employing around 6,000 people. However, it was shortly after this that the company's fortunes began to decline.

A combination of new cheaper materials from international competitors, the 1972 Miners Strike and the Three-Day Week Order of 1974 caused Head Wrightson to steadily lose money and they began to close their sites one by one.

Despite its financial downturn, the company still produced crucial pieces of industry in what would be its final years.
This is one of the dock gates they built for the Mersey Docks in Liverpool in 1971. It measured 41m long by 16.5m deep and weighed 741 tonnes.



In 1976 Head Wrightson was bought by the Sheffield based corporation Davy McKee and the company's fortunes began to rise again. Davy worked with British Steel Corporation to design and build the Redcar Blast Furnaces. The works were completed in 1979 and were Europe's largest blast furnace.



In 1984 Davy McKee announced that on the 25th March a stainless steel column measuring 328 feet (100 metres) would be delivered from Head Wrightson's Thornaby works to ICI's Nitric Acid plant in Billingham, making it the longest load ever to be moved on a British Road.

For a short time it appeared that Head Wrightson could continue. But no amount of small progresses could halt the company's decline. Davy McKee closed the remaining Head Wrightson company sites in 1984 and the name slowly began to be phased out.

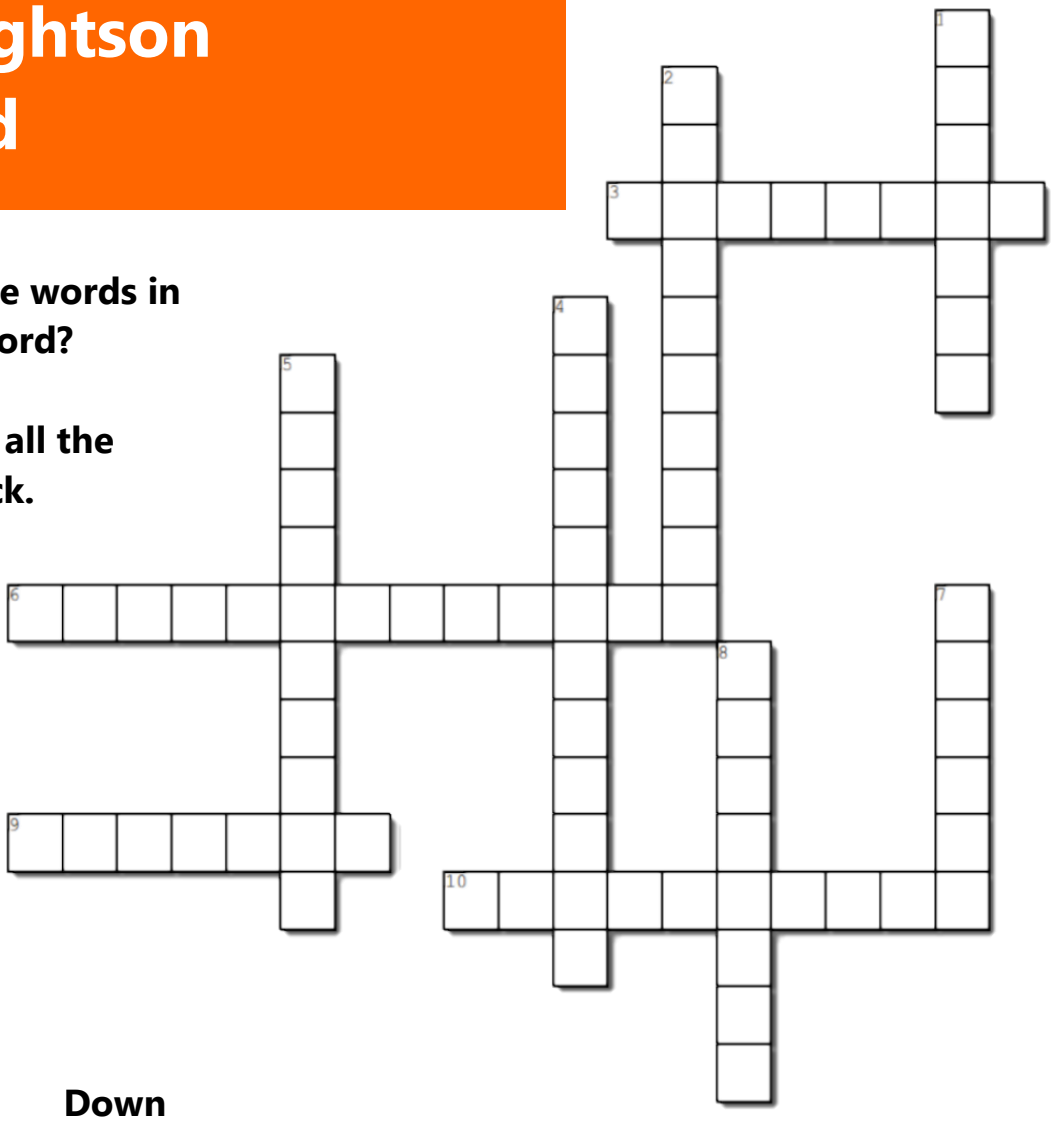
The very first site on Thornaby was slowly demolished until, on Saturday 5th August 1989 at 2pm the last workshop on the site was pulled down.

Did you work at Head Wrightson or Davy McKee? Or did you know someone who did? Can you describe what it was like? Use the space here to jot down your thoughts.

Head Wrightson Crossword

Can you find all the words in our cryptic crossword?

Hint: You can find all the answers in our pack.



Across

3. Head Wrightson supplied 12 heat exchangers to this nuclear power station.

6. Head Wrightson built the most of these in Teesside in the 1890s.

9. The surname of the woman who had a reference letter in 1918.

10. A stainless steel column was taken from Thornaby to this town in 1984.

Down

1. Name of the hangars Head Wrightson built in World War Two.

2. Name of the ship which carried a drum to D Day troops in 1944.

4. The Wrightson family seat that was mortgaged in 1931.

5. Name of the corporation that bought Head Wrightson.

7. Where Head Wrightson built this railway bridge in 1889.

8. Where Head Wrightson first started out in 1830.

All images used in this pack are courtesy of Preston Park Museum and Grounds.

You can find all our Talking Tees Valley packs through the Tees Valley Museums website under 'Latest News' or here: https://teesvalleymuseums.org/news/

If you would like to share your stories or contact us about the packs please e-mail teesvalleymuseums@stockton.gov.uk

Answers for the crossword:

1. Bellman, 2. Persephone, 3. Bradwell, 4. Neasham Hall, 5. Davy McKee, 6. Blast Furnace, 7. Fulham, 8. Thornaby, 9. Fewster, 10. Billingham