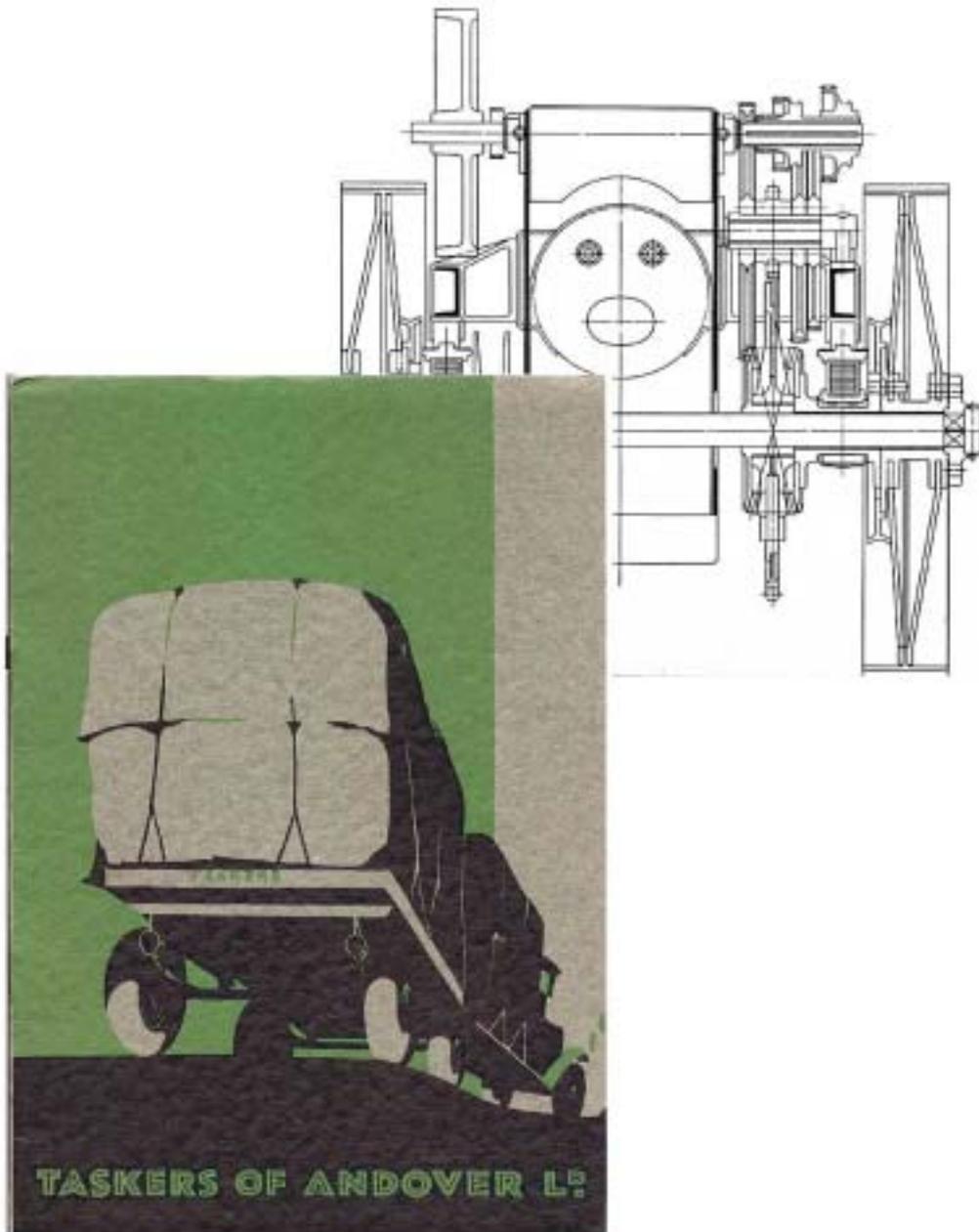


TASKERS OF ANDOVER



Hampshire
County Council

Robert Tasker, Blacksmith

Near Andover, in the early years of the 19th century, Robert Tasker and his brother, William, began what was to become the Waterloo Ironworks.

At the heart of those ironworks was a forge, which must often have reminded both of them of the blacksmith's shop run by their father in Stanton-St-Bernard in Wiltshire. As the eldest son, Robert Tasker would have been brought up to be a blacksmith himself. But he was ambitious from the start, and probably left Wiltshire as soon as he was twenty-one and free to look around him. That day came in February 1806.



In 1811 Robert Tasker married Martha Fowle. This picture of them working together in the forge was published about 1860 in a rather sentimentalised religious tract, *The Poor Blacksmith Made Rich*.

In Abbots Ann, near Andover, there was a forge owned by a smith called Thomas Maslen. Robert became his assistant. After only a few years, in 1809, he took over Maslen's business. Aged just twenty-four, Robert Tasker was now a blacksmith in his own right. Yet what he had done so far was only the beginning.

The young Robert Tasker was a keen businessman, but more important to him was his strong Christian faith. As a nonconformist he attended Andover Congregational Church. But feeling he needed to do more, he opened his cottage for prayer meetings on Sunday evenings.

It seems his nonconformist faith made him some enemies. His neighbours may have found him tiresome. Landowners in the area, members of the established church, saw any kind of dissent as a threat to their authority. Little work came his way locally. For a while Robert had to rely on his inner courage and resourcefulness, finding customers in places like Newbury and Southampton in order to stay in business.



The cottage in Abbots Ann where Robert Tasker lived, and in which he hosted prayer meetings.

Second only to his religion were his ambitions for the forge. He knew that an ordinary blacksmith's shop could not supply what the industrial revolution, then nearing its height, could offer to customers of a major ironworks. If he was to succeed he had to take advantage of the situation.

To achieve that the forge expanded to become, for a time, the Abbots Ann Ironworks. Yet it must always have been clear that the village was too inaccessible for what Robert Tasker had in mind, and the site too small to satisfy his ambitions.



A view of Robert Tasker's blacksmith's shop in Abbots Ann taken from a billhead of about 1820. He has added a small foundry, with a horse to drive the bellows that supply air to the furnace

Traditionally, a blacksmith works only in wrought iron, heating it in the forge till it softens and can be shaped between the hammer and the anvil. Cast iron is different. It is heated, not just until it softens, but until it melts into a liquid and can be poured into a mould. To do that a kind of furnace can be used that in ironworks is called a cupola. The part of an ironworks where metal is melted and cast is called a foundry.

Wrought iron is better than cast in some ways. It will bend before it breaks and won't easily rust. But cast iron is harder, and, as it is worked in a liquid state, it can form more difficult shapes than wrought iron, or be used to make many identical parts.

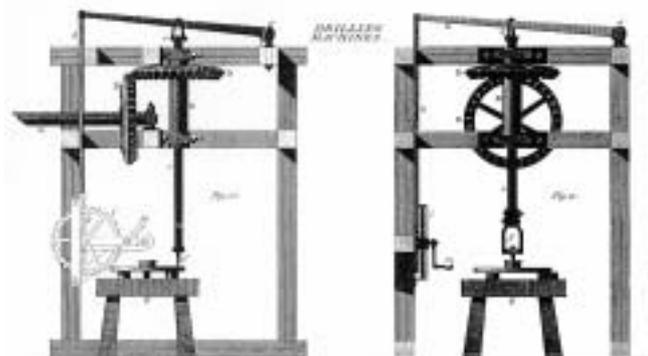


Illustration of machinery typical of the kind that Robert Tasker may have dreamed of installing in a new, larger ironworks of his own.

From Rees's Manufacturing Industry, 1810.

The technology of ironfounding was still being developed when Robert Tasker came to Abbots Ann. But he must have seen that, for example, ploughshares made in a foundry lasted longer than any made by an ordinary blacksmith. The addition of a small foundry to his own forge shows that such lessons struck home.

The industrial revolution punished businesses that did not understand or welcome its new technologies and rewarded those that did. Products like the cast-iron ploughshare made some blacksmiths poorer. But another product of the industrial revolution, the Andover Canal, was to offer Tasker a great opportunity.



Part of the 1841 tithe map for Upper Clatford showing, far left, the Waterloo Ironworks and, far right, the Andover-Redbridge Canal and Taskers Wharf. (*Hampshire Record Office, ref.21M65/F7/240/2*)

What did the Taskers make? Their early billheads mention ploughshares, complete ploughs, iron tyres, gates, railings, garden rollers, cooking stoves, and seed drills. To that list could be added such things as animal troughs, signposts and even window frames.

Some of the earliest Tasker products to survive are the door knockers from houses built by Robert and William Tasker for their expanding workforce.

When Robert Tasker first saw Anna Valley it was almost unpopulated. But gradually the manufacturing buildings were joined by houses for the Tasker workers. The earliest, two cottages called Anna Valley Place, appeared in about 1830. Like the works and the foundations on which they stood, the cottages were built of chalk. Surprisingly, the three blocks known as Waterloo Square, built only a little later, remained until 1961 when they were demolished to make way for company offices, now also swept away.



Workers cottages: Anna Valley Place in about 1904

Eventually, in the mid-1830s, the brothers themselves moved into Anna Valley. A large house called Brookside was built for William at one end of the site, and another, known as Clatford Lodge, housed Robert at the other end.



'Brookside', the house built in Anna Valley for William Tasker

In 1836, when he was only just over fifty, Robert Tasker chose to end his active role in the business. It is not known why this was, but it has been suggested that he wanted to spend more time on religious and charitable work.

As yet there was no second generation to share the load with Robert's brother. Robert and his wife had no children and, at the time, William's eldest was only six. The partnership that William entered into with George Fowle (a relative of Robert's wife, Martha) continued until 1857, when his first two children, both boys, were ready to take responsibility for the firm themselves.

There are still a few small cast-iron bridges in use, constructed by Tasker & Fowle. One was made in 1843 to take the road over the River Anton in Upper Clatford. Another, which crosses the current Micheldever Road in Andover, is a footbridge dated 1851. It carries a footpath called the Ladies' Walk, and became necessary after a road was cut across the line of the path in the direction of Micheldever station.



The Ladies' Walk Bridge, photographed in 2000

The Waterloo Ironworks was begun at a time when poor people in farming areas were finding life harder than they had for generations, and the rich were afraid there might be a revolution here, just as there had been in France.

Rural life had begun to change in the 18th century. The country's total population was growing, but people were leaving the countryside to go and work in the new industries in towns. Age-old methods of farming could not survive the loss of manpower and demand for greater than ever productivity.

In response, owners of fields that had been small and widely scattered found means to consolidate them into larger, more efficient acreages which were then fenced off or hedged around. Animals too, that had grazed common land, were withdrawn to their owners' own fields where they could be selectively bred and fattened. This was 'enclosure' in action - just one aspect of a change in attitude towards farming. By the

early 19th century working the land was not about managing nature, but about scientific improvement and profit.

Riot and Tumultuous Assembly

Unfortunately, under the old system, with no economic pressure, there were those who kept one or two animals on the common, and grew a little food on land not their own. These people could be edged out by enclosure, and forced from subsistence into desperate poverty.

Enclosure led to hard times for a few, but far more were impoverished as a result of the war with Napoleon.

During the war it was difficult to import food, and Britain had to be self-sufficient in things like grain. Because there was no competition from abroad farmers could increase their prices. By 1812 grain cost nearly three times as much as it had in the 1790's. The farmers got rich, but didn't increase the wages of their labourers, who had to buy bread like everyone else.

When the war ended in 1815 grain prices at once began to fall. However, farmers had got used to their profits and tried to safeguard their incomes by cutting labourers' wages and mechanising. As well as this, the government passed laws to limit cereal imports so as to keep prices as high as possible.

Farm labourers had to continue to claim relief under the Poor Law, and even that could be taken away from them. In 1830, around Andover, the bread allowance per man was just a quarter of a loaf a day - half what they were entitled to in 1795.

In this situation rioting was bound to erupt. Its main target was to be the farm machinery that seemed to be robbing the labourers of work - most hated of all being the new threshing-machines. But innocent parties were attacked too, and the punishment that the law would mete out was to be worse than the rioters expected

Riot and Tumultuous Assembly

On 20th November 1830 at about 4 o'clock a mob of around three hundred men came into the Waterloo Ironworks. Using tools they found there they tore down walls and part of the roof, smashed the windows, destroyed some half-made ploughs and damaged the foundry crane and waterwheel.

The attack was a pointless and random episode in a wave of agricultural riots that had begun in Kent. They are known as the 'Swing' riots after 'Captain Swing' - an invented name put to letters demanding better pay and conditions for farmworkers.

In Hampshire the most notorious Swing riots had happened the day before along the Dever Valley between Chilbolton and Micheldever. But whereas those protests had centred on threshing-machines and Poor Law allowances, the men that attacked Taskers had earlier threatened to wreck a printing works in Andover, then destroyed cast-iron bridges on their way to Anna Valley.



The Angel Inn, Andover, where the Swing rioters gathered before descending on Anna Valley.

John Howell, the Taskers' foreman, was there when the rioters arrived, and tried to stop them. Robert Tasker himself was somewhere nearby. According to one account he was hiding in the timber yard. When the rioters came to be tried, though, he was able to say '*I did not speak to them, nor was I near enough to identify the parties*'.

There was a strong belief amongst the Swing rioters in Hampshire that their suffering justified their actions, so there would be no price to pay afterwards. Some of those who attacked Taskers, feeling the job was unfinished, even announced that they would let Sunday pass and come back on Monday. In the event, Monday saw thirty arrests by Special Constables. Fourteen of the men arrested were later charged.

The feeling of entitlement amongst the protesters was encouraged by such as William Cobbett, farmer and "radical" politician, in his *Weekly Political Register*. This political aspect of the unrest alarmed the government. It seemed like the beginnings of a revolution. Also, they thought that in Kent, where the protests started, local magistrates had punished the protesters too lightly.

Therefore, after a month in Winchester prison, the accused appeared before a government-appointed Special Commission with powers to sentence them to hang or be transported.

Four of those charged with 'riot and tumultuous assembly' at Taskers were acquitted. The other ten were sentenced to death. For nine of them this was immediately commuted to transportation for life to Australia. The authorities wanted one, John Gillmore to die, but he too was eventually transported. Two Hampshire men were hanged, however, in connection with other Swing riots, and to add to the misery of all the other convicted men they were made to watch their executions.

Taskers and Steam

Living far from the northern factory towns, Robert Tasker may never have gained any practical knowledge of steam power, even though as a businessman he probably realised his potential.

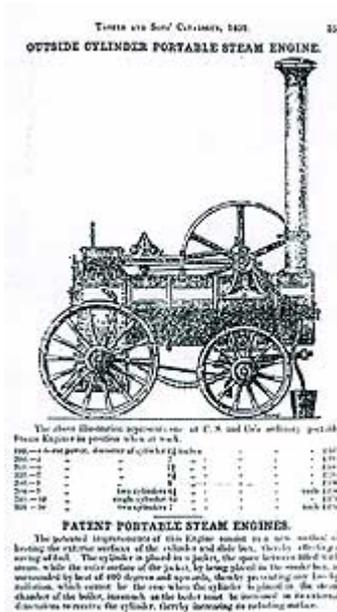
For nearly thirty years after Robert's retirement, the only machines made at the Waterloo Ironworks were ones powered by men, horses or the engines of other manufacturers. Nevertheless, by the 1850's railways were being built everywhere. A line from London to Andover opened in 1854, and in 1859 the Andover-Redbridge Canal, without which the Ironworks would never have existed, was closed.

As if to confirm the sovereignty of steam, after a few years a railway line was built along the route of the old canal. Taskers wharf at Upper Clatford was transformed, magically it would seem, into the company's private railway siding.



Andover Town Station opened amidst the railway boom in 1865 and closed again with Lord Beeching's cuts in 1964.

Although they made none of their own in the 1850s, by the end of the decade Taskers were supplying portable and stationary steam engines made by Clayton, Shuttleworth & Co of Lincoln. This change may well have had to do with the retirement of George Fowle, who had run the company for twenty years in partnership with Robert's brother William. Now it was time for William's sons to take over.



Pages from Tasker & Sons 1859 catalogue showing engines made by Clayton, Shuttleworth & Co of Lincoln.

The first steam engines made at the Waterloo Ironworks were three portables in 1865. A portable was an engine meant to drive other machinery. Its own wheels did no more than allow it to be drawn around by horses.

Many parts for these first engines were supplied by other manufacturers. To design and assemble them, Tasker & Sons even needed to "headhunt" a man from Clayton, Shuttleworth & Co - the company whose engines they had been selling for several years. Another man came from Blackstones, also in Lincoln.

These men from the industrialised east midlands may have been surprised to find the ironworks amongst the green fields and trout streams of Anna Valley. It may also have seemed strange to them that most of the workforce belonged to families that had lived nearby for generations. It was rare then for the sons of farm workers to be able to work in industry without having to leave the countryside. In a way, although it was not something that they ever planned, it is Taskers' most original achievement.



The boiler shop in the Waterloo Ironworks in about 1910.

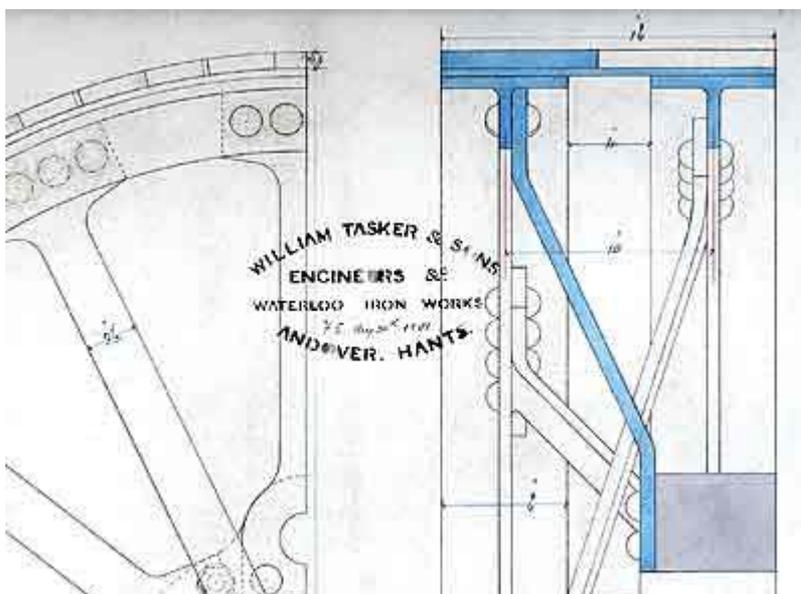
None of the first few hundred engines made at the Waterloo Ironworks was “built to drawings”. That is to say, new plans were drawn up for each one and standard parts modified, with the result that every finished engine was unique.

However intuitive and craftsmanlike these methods were, they were clearly inefficient. In 1891 a class of closely-related engines was at last established with the 8 horsepower traction *Economic*.

Progress was marked by *Economic* in one other way - whereas all previous Tasker & Sons engines had boilers made of wrought-iron, the boiler of this one was entirely made of steel.

As a practical alternative to cast or wrought iron, steel only became available in the 1860's. An inventor named Henry Bessemer, trying to improve the way in which carbon was removed from cast iron so as to make wrought iron, found he could make a material with the best properties of both. The Bessemer process blew air through molten iron to let the carbon escape, and left a kind of metal that was strong and pliable, yet could be cast in large ingots.

Far more steel than wrought iron could be made in one go. Large components, like boiler plates, were therefore easier and cheaper to make in steel. As a result, from about 1870 production of wrought iron began slowly to decline. The very last piece came from a furnace in Bolton in 1976.

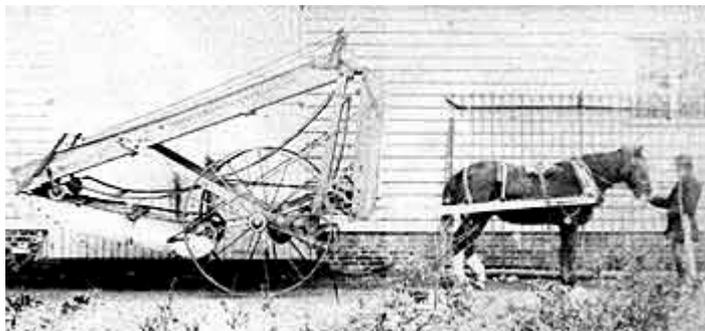


Detail of Tasker & Sons engineering drawing showing construction of a wheel for a 7 hp traction engine, dated 20th August 1891.

In typically Victorian style, William Tasker named his first two sons after himself and his brother. So, in 1858 after Tasker & Fowle became Tasker & Sons, it was again a Robert and a William Tasker who had charge of the business.

As it turned out, Robert jnr. would never have more than a financial interest in the firm. He turned to farming instead. But William jnr. proved to be the most inventive member of the whole family. Between 1858 and 1873 he lodged at least nine patents; four for improvements to threshing-machines, three for hay elevators and two for ploughs.

However, none of William jnr's patents was for a steam engine. Fortunately there was one more brother left at home. Henry Tasker, seventeen years younger than William jnr. was apprenticed to steam engineers Clayton, Shuttleworth & Co in 1864 and afterwards bought his knowledge of steam back to the family firm.



William Tasker jnr's second patent folding hay elevator (used for building ricks and to feed threshing-machines) photographed in about 1871

With Henry's help there were technical advances, but no dramatic rise in the number of engines made - perhaps due to a lack of capital. Then in 1883 William jnr. died, leaving Henry to run the business alone, and now with only a one-third say in its finances. When he had to pay £6,620 to buy-out his brothers' heirs a few years later, the company was deprived of still more capital and began a decline that would not end until the 1930s.



Henry Tasker (standing at right with hat in hand) photographed in 1871 with his parents, sisters, other relations and 'Furry' the dog.

In 1896 Henry Tasker handed over ownership of the firm to shareholders. Tasker & Sons became Tasker & Sons Ltd. Henry was still a director of the company, but it was the end of an era.

Things should have got better now - especially as the government was beginning to encourage road transport by easing speed and weight regulations. In 1902 Taskers stepped in with the first of a standard class of 'light' (just under 3 tons) engine called the Little Giant. Eventually over 300 of these were built, and when enthusiasts today hear the name Tasker, it's the Little Giant they think of.

Unfortunately the success of the Little Giant did not come quickly enough. There was a company liquidation in 1903 and a reformation in 1907, between which two events Henry Tasker retired, ending the Tasker family's involvement with the company that bore their name.



Unlike most steam engines, the 'Little Giant' was light enough to be used at times like a modern tractor, able to pull implements on unprepared ground without getting bogged down

Then came the First World War, followed by a slump in which the only steam engines called for were road rollers. The very last steam engine built by Taskers was a road roller completed under the shadow of a second company liquidation in 1926.

The new company, Taskers of Andover Ltd, made no effort to revive steam. At some time in the 1930's a last relic of it, a note book with drawings used for making spares, came somehow to be burned in a heating stove, and with that the age of steam at Taskers ended.



Staff of Tasker & Sons Ltd gathered in front of the company's last steam vehicle, a C Class road roller, in 1927. The man third from the right in the front row is the company receiver

The Tasker community

If ever he was not too busy, Henry Tasker may have sat at his desk and thought about the benefits his family had brought to their whole community of workers.

Robert Tasker, the founder of the company, built a chapel and school in Abbotts Ann in 1831. Then, in the mid-1830's, he installed a schoolmistress and her husband in one

half of the gatehouse of his home, Clatford Lodge. Lessons for his workers' children took place in the other half from Monday to Friday, and religious services were held there on Sundays.

Just over thirty years later Henry and his brothers built the Waterloo Workmen's Hall, which is one of very few works buildings still standing. Opposite the factory gates, it opened in 1867 as a library, reading room and Sunday School.



The gatehouse of Clatford Lodge, Robert Tasker's home in Anna Valley. From the mid-1830's the gatehouse was used as a school for the children of Tasker employees

By this time the old school was too small. A new school for 60 children was built behind the Workmen's Hall and opened in 1871. Parents paid 2d (slightly less than 1p) a week for infants, and 3d (slightly more than 1p) for older children.

Every boy hoped that at 13 he would start his apprenticeship with the company. Work opportunities for the girls must have been more of a problem. The Ironworks would employ no women workers until the outbreak of the First World War.



Pupils of the Waterloo Day School photographed in about 1896. Their teacher, Mary Southwell, at the far left, may have been no more than 13 years old herself

Henry Tasker inherited from the previous generation of his family an intense religious faith. His first ambition was actually to be a missionary, and he was always ready to proclaim a vigorous Christianity amongst workers at the Waterloo Ironworks.

The Taskers can never have been happy that a public house, The Plough, stood to one side of the Ironworks' main entrance. Perhaps because of the encouragement Henry was giving to the Temperance Movement in the area, its customers dwindled, and in about 1890 it closed down. The building became the Anna Valley Post Office, and carters who came to the works were now given tickets for a glass of lemonade and a ham sandwich at The Speedwell coffee bar in the Workmen's Hall.

However, the interest of most workers did not lie in the public house. For them the highpoint of the year was the annual "feast" or works treat. From at least the 1860's, most often on a Friday in July, work would finish at 11.00am. Then, in the afternoon, the workers gathered with their wives and children in the field by Clatford Manor. There were country sports and games, a tea for as many as seven hundred people, and, inevitably perhaps, speeches by the management.



A Taskers workers' annual treat in about 1906. The Little Giant tractor and its wagon-load of excited children came to be known as "Tasker's Roundabouts". Henry Tasker himself appears at right in a straw hat and breeches.

Taskers of Andover (1932) Ltd

The year after Taskers' last steam engine left the factory in 1927, a new product appeared that would revive the company's fortunes - though not before yet another liquidation a few years later in which the company name was changed to Taskers of Andover (1932) Ltd.

A semi-trailer is a trailer with no front axle. The weight of the front simply rests on the point where the trailer is attached to the lorry. On the Tasker semi-trailer this point of attachment, or coupling, allowed movement in all directions. Because of that it was possible to jack up one side of the lorry or one wheel of the semi-trailer without having to uncouple them first..

This was the product that brought Taskers back from the brink. With all their structural parts being steel, growing production of the various models of semi-trailer led to less and less use for the foundry. Finally, in 1937, iron founding at the Waterloo Ironworks came to an end. Robert Tasker may have turned in his grave, but business continued to improve.



A lorry belonging to a Southampton haulage company, George Baker and Sons Ltd, is here coupled to an early Taskers semi-trailer. The photograph was taken in Tasker's yard.

In 1938, with war looming, the Air Ministry asked for tenders for a trailer able to carry an entire fighter aircraft. Within ten days Taskers submitted not just a design and tender, but a full-size prototype. The contract was won, and in the World War that followed nearly four thousand of these trailers were built. They soon gained the nickname "Queen Mary", being, like the passenger liner, the largest of their kind.



In World War II, as in World War I, women joined the Taskers workforce. However, it was felt necessary to segregate the sexes at mealtimes.

Reclaiming the past

A L Fuller was one of those who took over the company in 1927. His son, Arthur Fuller, became managing director in 1932, and continued in that post until 1967 when he handed over to his own son, Leonard Fuller.

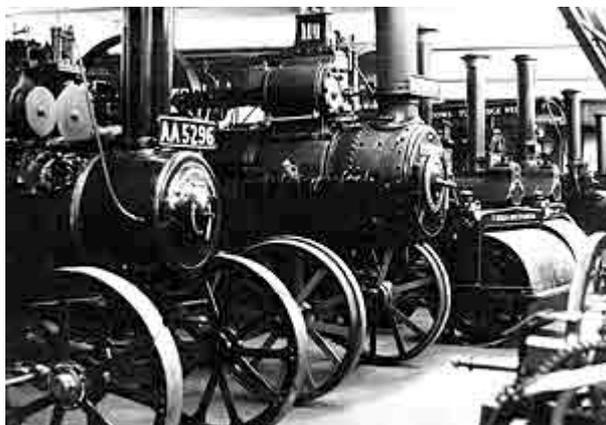
Arthur Fuller was the first to realise that Taskers had a unique history which should be preserved. In 1948 he and the company began to retrieve from all over the country engines and other things they had made in the past. In its final form, in a hall beneath 1960's company offices, the factory museum held 108 exhibits, including 23 engines and an RAF Spitfire on a Queen Mary Trailer.



A Tasker steam lorry photographed before rescue and restoration in the 1950's. The lorry now forms part of Hampshire County Council Museum Services Collection and can be seen at 'Milestones' Museum in Basingstoke.

Then, in 1968, Taskers was taken over by another company, and the collection had to be sold. A charitable trust was hurriedly formed to raise money to buy as much of it as possible. Hampshire County Council Museums Service was also alerted, so that when the sale took place in February 1969 nearly three-quarters of the collection was bought up and entered public ownership.

The Tasker Museum Trust was wound up shortly afterwards, but the items they had saved then joined those bought by Hampshire County Council Museums Service.



A View of Taskers' factory museum in the 1960's. (Photograph by Jane Bown, courtesy The Observer)

The End

In the later 20th century Taskers shared the fate of many medium-sized companies, becoming first a production arm of a mighty conglomerate, then a casualty of changes taking place higher up.

By 1968 the company had adopted the name Tasker Trailers Ltd and had branches in Scotland and near Wigan in Lancashire. But that year the old problem of insufficient capital led to them becoming a subsidiary of Craven Industries Ltd, which was itself owned by the huge John Brown & Co Ltd.

The Craven-Tasker group, with a head office at Anna Valley and sites in at least six locations throughout the country, continued making trailers and a variety of agricultural implements until the early 1980's. Then, in 1983, John Brown & Co Ltd sold assets, including Craven-Tasker, to Montracon, a company based in Belfast.

Already having enough manufacturing capacity, Montracon immediately brought 170 years of business at the Waterloo Ironworks to an end. The next year, 1984, the factory buildings were levelled.



Gathering of former Tasker workers (photograph by kind permission of the Andover Advertiser)