

Matthew Boulton Biography

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Biography

Matthew Boulton had a reputation as a restless man who constantly strove for new innovations. He was born in Birmingham, England, on September 3, 1728, and became a partner in his father's buckle manufacturing business in 1750, which he eventually inherited in 1759. In 1761, he launched a new factory in Soho; after meeting Benjamin Franklin, however, he became more interested in the scientific and technological advancements of the day, particularly the development of steam engines.

In 1764, Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802; grandfather of naturalist Charles Darwin, 1809-1882) proposed to Boulton the idea of building a steam-powered carriage. Three years later the two met Scottish engineer James Watt, and Boulton decided to join forces with him to further the development of steam power, a field still ripe with promise after the introduction in 1712 of Thomas Newcomen's problematic steam engine.

His chance came years later when, in 1772, inventor and close friend John Roebuck (1718-1794) went bankrupt and lost patents on his own, mostly unsuccessful, steam engine developments. Boulton acquired Roebuck's patents in 1775 and then entered into a partnership with Watt. During the next decade, their engines were to become prime motivators of Europe's Industrial Revolution. The task Boulton and Watt set themselves was monstrous and fraught with financial difficulties, legal battles, and mechanical delays. Yet they succeeded perhaps beyond anyone's expectations, for the new Boulton & Watt engines boasted an energy efficiency three times that of the most contemporary Newcomen engines.

During the 1780s Boulton's fame spread as he became the leading English manufacturer, the man who brought Watt's genius to fruition by means of his optimism and manufacturing expertise. He was quoted by James Boswell as saying, "I sell here what all the world desires--power." In his later years, Boulton patented a steam-driven coin press that restored public confidence in the English monetary system and forced counterfeiters out of the business. A founding member of the prestigious Lunar Society of Birmingham, Boulton ranked at the time of his death, on August 17, 1809, as one of the most prominent figures among scientific circles of his time.