

## Blacksmiths and whitesmiths

Researching my Almond and Abbott ancestors in the Farnworth, Widnes and Prescot areas I have come across quite a few blacksmiths, and occasionally a whitesmith, often in the Almond branch of the family. I had not given their occupation much thought, being more interested in the Abbotts who worked in clock and watch manufacturing. My interest in the smiths was strangely enough awakened by an article in a Swedish daily newspaper entitled “Our contribution to slavery”. The article was written by Göran Rydén, a Swedish economic historian, in connection with the world conference on slavery in South Africa in 2001.

My eyes suddenly reacted to two familiar names in the article – Prescot and Liverpool. It was a quotation from the diary of the Swedish traveller Reinhold Angerstein, who in 1753 wrote “under vägen till Prescot och Liverpool woro Smederne sysselsatte med Kädjor för Slafwar, som säljas ifrån 3 ½ till 3 ¾ pence per skålpond. The bruka thertill Swenskt jern som betalas 18 ½ à 19£ per Tonn”. In English – along the road from Prescot to Liverpool the Smiths were busy making chains for slaves, which were sold for between 3 ½ and 3 ¾ pence per pound. For this they used Swedish iron, which was sold for £18 ½ to £19 per ton.

The conclusion in the article was that Sweden, not noted as a colonial power in Africa apart from the Gold Coast, did in fact make quite a large contribution to the slave trade. Not only by supplying the iron used to make the chains that the slaves were shackled with, but also by trading gunmetal to the slave traders and colonial powers and selling iron for trading on one leg of the slave triangle via Liverpool. The gunsmiths of Birmingham – then the centre of the metal trade in England – bought their raw material from Sweden.

I became curious. Who was Reinhold Angerstein? What was he doing on the road between Prescot and Liverpool in 1753? And, not least, were my Almond and Abbott ancestors involved in this business too?

Angerstein was what today would be called an industrial spy. Between 1749 and 1758 he made extensive journeys throughout Europe, covering Germany, Freiberg, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Austria, Italy, England, the Low Countries, Cadiz and Lisbon. His journeys were financed by the Swedish Board of Mines and the Swedish Ironmasters Association.

Angerstein’s main interest on his travels was the market for iron and the development of the metal trades. But his notebooks were filled with a wide range of other observations. He visited coalmines, textile mills, glassworks etc and made detailed descriptions of production methods. These observations, together with notes on towns, cathedrals, monasteries and the like, were carefully noted in his travel diaries. These amounted to eight volumes, 4 000 large pages and 700 drawings in all. Fortunately his travel diary from 1753 – 1755, when he travelled extensively in England and Wales, is now available in an English translation<sup>1</sup>.

Readers may be interested in what he saw in the North West. One of his trips took him, on foot or by horseback, north via Nottingham to Newcastle and then via Workington, Lancaster, Preston to Liverpool and on via Chester to Birmingham and back to London. He describes Liverpool’s share of the slave trade and ships sent to Sweden for iron, in particular Voyage Iron used for the African trade. Voyage iron was a kind of standardised currency used for

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<sup>1</sup> R R Angerstein’s Illustrated Travel Diary, 1753-1755. Industry in England and Wales from a Swedish perspective, translated by Torsten and Peter Berg, Science Museum, London, 2001

payment in Africa and probably also useful as ballast. The iron was in bars 5½ feet long, 1½ inches wide and 3/8 inches thick, costing between £20 and £21 10s each. Angerstein notes that the iron was imported from Stockholm and Gothenburg by Messrs Cunliffe and Sons in Liverpool. In one year, 1753-1754, about 60 000 bars weighing 955 tons were imported from Sweden to Liverpool and 329 tons re-exported to Africa. Some of this may have been Russian iron, another major supplier to England's metal trades.

Angenstein's diary showed that he had a very wide range of interest in all kinds of manufacturing processes. In Liverpool he describes the Delft or earthenware factories, tobacco factories, glass-houses, pipe factories, salt-boiling, the forging of anchors, tar distillation and a factory for watchmaker's tools run by Mr Dan Mather. He even had time to visit the Tarbock coal pit, giving details of the coal seams and other strata, production and prices. Warrington is mainly described for its metal working, iron by Messrs Barthom, Worst and Tittly and the copperworks owned by a Mr Patten. Other local industries described are coal mining in Wigan, screw making in Upholland, nail manufacture in Chowbent and the potteries in Prescot.

In all, Angerstein's diaries are a fascinating read for anyone interested in mid-18<sup>th</sup> century industry and local history seen through the eyes of a foreign spy!

But, back to the slaves. The slave ships leaving Liverpool for Africa were loaded with Voyage Iron, wrought iron, pewter, brass, lead, copper, cotton, guns, gunpowder, brass dishes, kettles for Africa and also with similar goods intended for America. They were also fitted out with chains ready to shackle the slaves for their journey across the Atlantic to the plantations of the New World. Swedish iron was also used to make the tools used by the slaves when they arrived at the plantations. So the blacksmiths of the Prescot and Liverpool area were in fact employed in the slave trade too and with 20-30 000 slaves transported across the Atlantic the demand for chains was enormous.

But were my Almonds and Abbotts involved too? A question that is not too easy to answer. The parish records of St Luke's Church, Farnworth in Widnes go back to 1538, and men's occupations are noted for marriages from 1754. I found several blacksmiths: Thomas Bullen, blacksmith, married Margaret Almond in 1757. James Abbott, blacksmith from Cronton married Anne Plumpton in 1771 at Rainford Chapel. A John Abbott, smith, lived in Hardshaw St Helens in 1775. The Almond family were farmers in the Cronton and Bold area, to the north of Farnworth. I found three blacksmiths too, including Ann Almond and her son James, but none as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century. So now I have an extra reason to research my Almond and Abbott ancestors, their possible involvement in the Liverpool slave trade!

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