

The Watchmakers Workshop

The origins of clock, watch and tool making in Prescot are obscure. However, there was a tradition of metal working and industrial activity in the area, and by 1700 the trade was well established.



Watchmaker's workshop,
Highfield Place

The trade was based on the domestic system, with craftsmen working in workshops attached to houses which were easily recognised by the large windows on two or three sides of the building. There were many different craftsmen involved in making the various parts of a watch, this allowed them to become specialised and skilled in their trade.

The well developed network of piece-workers, along with cheaper labour in comparison to London, allowed Prescot to pride itself on being the national centre of watch-movement making in the 18th century. The town's craftsmen were also producing Britain's best chronometers, precision time pieces, an industry that went on to outlast the watchmaking industry in Prescot.

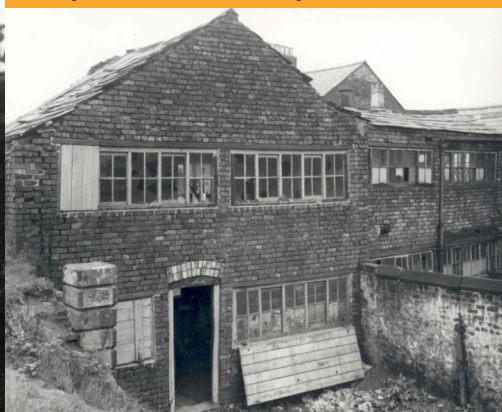
Most watchmaking workshops were on the first floor with large, preferably north facing windows to allow as much daylight in as possible. Work benches were at windowsill height and made from a stout board securely embedded in the wall and standing on heavy wooden legs. Small tools such as files were stored on a shallow shelf above the window. Larger cabinets and drawers were stored above if roof space allowed.

The last watchmaker to use a typical Lancashire workshop for the purpose for which it was built, was Harry Pybus of Joseph Preston & Sons, Chronometer & Watch Movement makers, at Highfield Place behind Eccleston Street. It continued until the death of Harry Pybus in 1952.

<http://www.knowsley.gov.uk/things-to-see-and-do/galleries-and-museum.aspx>

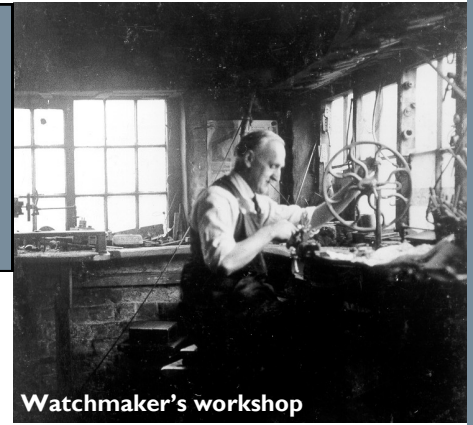


Joseph Preston workshop



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Watchmakers needed to be warm to work and heating was by an open coal fire, or in later years a cast iron pot stove mounted on a stone slab. Gas lighting replaced oil lamps during the mid 1800s, before then rush candles were used.



Watchmaker's workshop

Access to the workshop was usually by a door in the yard leading to a set of steps or a ladder. At the top was a trapdoor that could be lowered over the hole in the floor for safety. Some freestanding workshops had outside steps leading up to a door. A worker who could not afford to have his own workshop, could usually rent space in someone else's. If the workshop was attached to a house, the area below was frequently a wash room with a fire and a large copper pot for boiling washing in. When noisy activities such as casting and forging were done, the smithy was usually detached from the house across the yard.

Workshop hours of work were long and holidays few, the day started at 6am and ended at 8pm. Apart from Sundays the only holidays given were 3 days in August. The wages were considered good, in 1870 the average weekly wage was 24 shillings.

Prior to 1850 Prescot supplied London, Coventry and Liverpool with their rough movements or 'ebauches', to be finished and cased with Prescot movements, which were then exported in large numbers to the Continent, Ireland and America. By the 1860s competition from Switzerland and the USA hit Prescot's trade badly and by 1885 most of the workshops had closed down.

Apprentices were taken on at the age of eleven, twelve or thirteen, usually for a period of seven years. The employer received a sum of money and in return taught the boy the trade and either clothed, fed and provided him with lodgings, or paid him a very small weekly wage.



Freestanding watchmaker's workshop

Watchmaker's workshop, Eccleston Street

