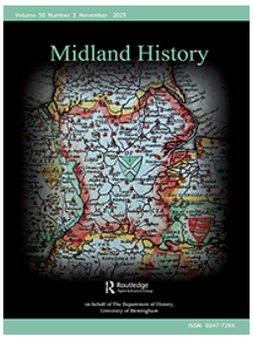

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Political Sophistication in Industrial Birmingham: Reappraising Brass Manufacturers' Campaign Against Thomas Williams, 1799–1801

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ABSTRACT

Birmingham brass manufacturers mounted a sustained campaign against Thomas Williams' copper monopoly between 1799 and 1801, demonstrating considerable political skill in the process. This challenges previous scholarship that has characterised late-eighteenth century Birmingham's' industrial community as politically unsophisticated. The manufacturers employed multiple strategies to challenge Williams' control over copper supply. They presented detailed evidence to the 1799 Parliamentary Enquiry, engaged in a vigorous pamphlet war between 1799 and 1801, and mobilised political networks to support their cause. These efforts culminated in legislative reform in 1801. The campaign reveals how Birmingham's manufacturing community understood parliamentary procedure, utilised print culture effectively, and built coalitions to achieve their objectives. This study examines the manufacturers' tactics and their success in securing legislative change, offering a revised understanding of how provincial industrial interests engaged with the political system during the Industrial Revolution.

KEYWORDS

Birmingham; brass manufacturing; Parliamentary Enquiry; eighteenth century; print culture

Introduction

In April 1799, the House of Commons convened a Select Committee to investigate allegations that had been circulating with increasing urgency throughout Britain's manufacturing districts.[1] The claims were that Thomas Williams of Anglesey, the so-called 'Copper King', had established an effective monopoly over the nation's copper trade, to the detriment of brass manufacturers in Birmingham who depended upon this essential raw material for their lucrative products.[2] The Enquiry represented a noteworthy moment in late eighteenth-century economic politics in Britain, bringing provincial manufacturers into direct confrontation with one of the period's most

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[1]Wolfson Centre Archival Research, Library of Birmingham (WCAR), MS3782 /13/97, Matthew Boulton and Family Papers, Correspondence and Papers of Matthew Robinson Boulton 1770–1842, Copper Trade Vol. 2: Cornish Miners contest 1770–1801, items 6–10, *Copy of the Minutes of a Meeting of the Committee on Copper Mines (MCCM)*, 9–13 Apil 1799.

[2]J. R. Harris, *The Copper King: A Biography of Thomas Williams of Llanidan* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1964).

formidable industrial capitalists before the bar of Parliament. For the Birmingham brass founders, who had been seeking reform to the industry throughout the 1790s, the stakes could scarcely have been higher.[3] Their industry, which employed thousands of workers and contributed substantially to Britain's export trade, depended upon access to copper at competitive prices.[4] Yet the significance of the 1799 Enquiry extended beyond the immediate commercial interests at stake. The episode offers a revealing window into the political capabilities of provincial manufacturers at a crucial juncture in British industrialisation, when the relationship between manufacturing capital, mercantile power, and parliamentary authority remained contested and fluid. How effectively could manufacturers from the provinces navigate the complex terrain of parliamentary politics? Could they marshal evidence, deploy rhetoric, and mobilise influence to challenge entrenched commercial interests?

In his authoritative 1964 biography *The Copper King: A Study of Thomas Williams of Llanidan*, John R. Harris provided what remains the authoritative account of Williams' extraordinary career and his domination of the British copper trade during the final decades of the eighteenth century, as well as one of the few explorations of this copper conflict.[5] Harris's work, based on meticulous archival research and displaying a commanding grasp of the technical and commercial dimensions of the copper industry, has shaped subsequent scholarship on this subject. Yet in his treatment of the Birmingham brass manufacturers' campaign against Williams' alleged monopoly, Harris reached a striking conclusion: the Birmingham brass founders, he argued, demonstrated no obvious political sophistication, and 'neither the government nor the Birmingham merchants and manufacturers seem to have been possessed of much solid evidence for their beliefs, nor was the case against Williams marshalled with any skill'.[6] In their efforts to challenge Williams' market dominance, according to Harris, the Birmingham industrialists were outmanoeuvred at every turn by Williams and his allies: their case was poorly presented to Parliament, and their subsequent pamphlet campaign revealed more about their commercial desperation than any genuine political acumen. This assessment has been accepted, largely without question, in the limited subsequent scholarship that has touched upon this episode. John Money, a decade after Harris' account, similarly claims that Birmingham was politically unimportant until 1838, when Birmingham was incorporated as a municipal borough and had its first elected town council, and until then the town was unable 'to advance any claim to significance in the affairs of the nation'.[7] Drawing on work from the author's doctoral thesis,[8] this article fundamentally challenges these conclusions by Harris and Money. Harris's assessment of the Birmingham manufacturers appears, on closer examination, to be something of an anomaly within his otherwise exemplary scholarship. His biography of Williams adopted its subject's perspective on events, and Williams himself consistently portrayed his Birmingham opponents as commercially incompetent and

[3]WCAR, MS3782/13/97, item 1, Resolutions of a meeting of manufacturers and others concerned in the consumption of copper and brass, held at the [Birmingham] Hotel, 1 April 1790.
[4]Ibid.
[5]Harris, *Copper King*.
[6]Ibid, p. 115.
[7]J. Money, *Experience and Identity: Birmingham and the West Midlands, 1760–1800* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), p. 275.
[8]D. Frankis, 'The Eighteenth-Century Birmingham Brass Trade: Origins, Growth, and Politics', (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2021).

politically naïve, characterisations that served his own rhetorical purposes in defending his business practices. Moreover, Harris's primary focus on Williams' career meant that he did not examine in detail the full range of sources that illuminate the manufacturers' campaign. A more comprehensive examination of the evidence reveals a different picture.

Far from displaying a lack of political sophistication, the Birmingham brass founders demonstrated remarkable political capability across multiple dimensions of their campaign against the alleged copper monopoly. Their performance reveals manufacturers who understood precisely how to operate within the political culture of late eighteenth-century Britain, who could adapt their strategies to different forums and audiences, and who ultimately achieved a measure of national success in their industrial and political objectives. This sophistication manifested itself in three key areas. First, the Birmingham manufacturers' preparation for, and performance at, the 1799 Parliamentary Enquiry, which demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of how to present evidence effectively to a parliamentary committee, how to frame their case in terms that would resonate with MPs' concerns about monopoly and national interest, and how to coordinate testimony among multiple witnesses to construct a compelling narrative. Second, in the pamphlet war that erupted following the Enquiry, the Birmingham manufacturers deployed print culture with considerable skill, producing arguments that engaged with contemporary political economy, appealed to public opinion, and positioned their cause within broader debates about commercial freedom and economic justice. Third, and perhaps most significantly, the manufacturers demonstrated their ability to mobilise political contacts and navigate the informal networks of influence that were essential to achieving legislative outcomes in this period, ultimately securing notable parliamentary reform in 1799.[9] Whilst the outcome fell short of their maximal demands, it did nonetheless partially curtail Williams' market power and established important precedents for political change within Birmingham. In this sense, the campaign prefigured the forms of coordinated political mobilisation associated with Birmingham reform politics, most famously in the activities of Thomas Atwood and the Birmingham Political Union.[10]

This article draws upon three principal categories of primary sources to reconstruct the Birmingham manufacturers' campaign and assess their political capabilities. First, the minutes and published reports of the 1799 Parliamentary Enquiry provide detailed records of the testimony presented by both sides, revealing the manufacturers' evidentiary strategies and rhetorical approaches. Second, the substantial pamphlet literature generated by this controversy, including a variety of works published by Birmingham brass manufacturers, which offers insight into how the debate was framed for different audiences and how arguments evolved over time. Third, surviving correspondence between the manufacturers, their parliamentary allies, and other political contacts illuminates the behind-the-scenes coordination and lobbying that accompanied the public campaign. Together, these sources permit a thorough reappraisal of the manufacturers' political sophistication.

[9]WCAR, MS3782/13/97, item 43, Printed copy of *An Act for Altering the Laws now in Force, Relating to the Importation and Exportation of Copper; For Repealing Certain Duties and Drawbacks on Such Importation and Exportation; and for Substituting New Duties and Drawbacks in lieu thereof*, 24 June 1801.
[10]D. Moss, *Thomas Atwood: The Biography of a Radical* (Toronto: McGill-Queen Press, 1990).

The 1799 Parliamentary Enquiry: Strategic Preparation and Performance

One of the chief concerns emphasised by the Birmingham brass founders during the Enquiry was the struggle to maintain their businesses due to the fluctuating price of copper, for which they blamed Williams: the entire argument was underpinned by the belief that copper prices were fluctuating due to his disagreeable nature and greed. George Simcox, a prominent brass founder from Birmingham, was an important witness for the town and had attended an early meeting of the brass manufacturers who were concerned about the fluctuating prices of copper.[11] Simcox owned a brass house on Livery Street and ran several large coin and button manufactories, including the lucrative guinea-production company of Henry Kettle.[12] He introduced himself as a representative of the town, saying that he had been:

> Deputed, by the merchants and manufacturers of Birmingham, to represent to his Majesty's Ministers the great distress the trade of the town and neighbourhood has laboured under for many years past, owing to the great fluctuation in the price of copper; the extreme embarrassments they at present feel from the alarming and unexampled advance which has lately taken place in the price of that article.[13]

Desperation is an idea that is regularly emphasised by the various Birmingham representatives. Upon being asked 'What is the present state of the Birmingham manufacturers in copper?', manufacturer and exporter of brass products William Smith of *Smith, Son and Smith* responded, 'I believe never worse'.[14]

The manufacturers of Birmingham were not simply portraying a lull in trade, but a disaster that threatened their existence. Speaking about brass founders, Matthew Boulton stated that 'I am afraid that many of them must either abandon their trades or abandon more than their profits', as well as claiming that 'I have for forty years past carried on a very considerable button manufactory, but I have lately abandoned it, because the profits on the orders were much reduced'.[15] Similarly, an ex-Birmingham-based manufacturer, William Collins, gave an account of his brass button and buckles exporting business which was characterised by a 'rise, increase, extent, decline and fall of my trade in these articles'.[16] He claimed that he was forced to abandon the practice after fifteen years in Birmingham due to a lack of prospects. The primary problem for the brass founders was highlighted by Simcox:

> The difficulties arising from such great fluctuations are, that the manufacturer has no data to form his calculations upon. It is frequently twelve months before orders are received from his patterns, which being sent out at fixed prices, the merchant expects he should execute on the same terms at which his patterns went out. If copper advances as it has done the last year, and if he does this in the most leading articles of our manufactures, he must not only sink the whole of his profit, but a part of his capital. If he refuses, his business is at a stand; the merchant is offended, and he risks the loss of his future orders. If, on the other hand, the merchant ventures to send them to his correspondent at an advanced price, it is seldom admitted; and if he omits the order, his customer is not only

[11]WCAR, Resolutions of a Meetings of Manufacturers, 1 April 1790.
[12]R. Hawkins, 'Minor Products of British Nineteenth-Century Diesinking', *The British Numismatic Journal*, 30.1 (1962), 184.
[13]WCAR, *MCCM*, p. 4.
[14]Ibid., p. 26.
[15]Ibid., p. 21.
[16]Ibid., p. 33.

> disappointed of the sale of these goods but is often thereby prevented from disposing of others for want of a general assortment, so that the whole course of the trade is thrown in confusion, and the workmen deprived of employment.[17]

Unpredictable copper prices were a reasonable complaint with a clear basis in truth, as can be seen in Cornish copper prices sold to the East India Company throughout the 1790s (Table 1).

The Cornish mining community and its way of conducting commercial operations was undeniably affecting Birmingham brass businesses, as well as other purchasers of copper. The price of copper had become difficult to predict. Like Simcox, other midlands-based industrialists claimed that the problem went beyond their own personal and business prosperity, suggesting that most workers living in Birmingham and District were adversely affected by the uncertain prices of raw copper. When speaking about the nearby region of Wolverhampton, which was extensively involved in brass lock manufacturing, Joseph Lane, a manufacturer from the area, claimed that:

> The town of Wolverhampton is said to contain about 20,000 inhabitants; I should think that nine parts out of ten of these inhabitants are manufacturers, and more than one half of the manufacturers are employed in the manufactories where brass is necessary.[18]

The loss of profits for businesses which used brass and copper forced manufacturers to reduce their reliance upon it, which meant thousands of workmen potentially faced the prospect of reduced, or loss of, employment, and there was a concerted attempt by the Birmingham brass representatives at the Enquiry to portray the success of the brass industry as a key factor in maintaining social order within Birmingham and District. Magistrate William Villiers was used by the Birmingham brass manufacturers to elaborate upon the wider social problems experienced in the midlands region, claiming that they were a result of the copper price issues. Villiers was the Commissioner of the

Table 1. Average price of copper (1787–1799).

Year	Average Price of Copper in Cake, per Ton
1787	70 d
1788	74 d
1789	79 d
1790	78 d
1791	84 d
1792	105 d
1793	103 d
1794	96 d
1795	96 d
1796	106 d
1797	106 d
1798	108 d
1799	138 d

WCAR, MS3782/13/97, item 37, Printed paper, entitled, *A statement of the several prices of copper in the home market and of copper sold to the India Company, from the Year* 1787, distinguishing each Year, 2 April 1800.

[17]Ibid., p. 4.
[18]WCAR, *MCCM*, p. 76.

Table 2. Poor rates in Birmingham (1792–1799).

Dates	Amounts
From 1792–93	£14,067 7s. 2d.
From 1793–94	£20,640 17s. 3d.
From 1794–95	£19,658 16s. 4d.
From 1795–96	£23,133 4s. 9d.
From 1796–99	£74,862 12s. 0d.

MCCM (7 May 1799): edited table of money spent on poor rates in Birmingham (1792–1799), p. 79.

Peace for the counties of Worcestershire and Warwickshire and was known to the War Office for his work supressing unrest and riots in the Black Country, as well as his response to the Priestley riots.[19] Villiers drew attention to how the poor rates of the town of Birmingham had increased considerably since 1792, as the amount of money spent on the poor increased five-fold in less than a decade (Table 2).

The increase in the poor rates, especially between 1796 and 1799, is significant. The reasons for this trend are less obvious. Population increases could have been a contributing factor and Catherine Hutton notes how the 1790s was a turbulent time in Birmingham characterised by religious tensions, riot, and civil unrest.[20] Villiers was asked why he believed rising poor rates occurred and stated that he thought it was because of the great decrease in the trade of the town, of which he estimated over more than half the articles made were of copper and brass.[21] To what extent poor rates in Birmingham could be attributed to the stagnation of the copper industry is debatable. The correlation between poor rates and copper prices was tenuous at best, but the argument depicting a socially unsettled Birmingham continued to be constructed throughout the Enquiry.

Playing upon the fear of widespread discontent and unemployment within the industrial working classes, in a time of radical movements and social upheaval, was a shrewd tactic by the Birmingham pressure group that demonstrated an awareness of wider political movements and how to exploit them for their own advantage. Painting such a negative image of the state of Birmingham, the town's metal industries, and the social impact, would have been particularly powerful during 1799 when there were concerns about international political upheavals and radicalism. Mark Philip and Joanna Innes have explored different European governments' responses to the challenging of social order throughout the Atlantic World in the second half of the eighteenth century. Innes draws attention to the fact that many of the revolutions were driven by practical imperatives, such as a loss of employment and resentment towards government economic policy, rather than simply ideological motives.[22] The Government had fears of social unrest in Birmingham, which had experienced the Priestley riots in 1791. James Watt wrote that the riots 'divided Birmingham into two parties who hate one another mortally'.[23] Revolutionary activity throughout the Atlantic World provided an

[19]J. Bohstedt, *The Politics of Provisions: Food Riots, Moral Economy, and Market Transition in England, c. 1550–1850* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 196.
[20]C. Hutton, *A Narrative of the Riots in Birmingham, July 1791* (Birmingham: White Publishing, 1875), pp. 158–62.
[21]WCAR, *MCCM*, p. 79.
[22]J. Innes, 'Reimagining the Social Order', in *Reimagining Democracy in the Mediterranean, 1780–1860*, ed. by J. Innes and M. Philp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 80, 141, 155.
[23]R. Rose, 'The Priestly Riots of 1791', *Past and Present*, 18.1 (1960), 68.

important context to the proceedings: fear of an uprising of the lower orders was alluded to throughout. As Innes and Philp have highlighted, the success of democracy in Europe was seen as a delicate balance during the 1790s and the British Government would have been keen to avoid social unrest in its key industrial centres.[24] This pessimistic picture painted of the Birmingham brass trade, and its workers, was almost certainly an exaggeration. In contrast, William Aitken's history of the Birmingham brass trade portrays this time as a thriving era for brass merchants of the town.[25] Local trade directories show that brass founders grew in numbers throughout the 1790s,[26] but it is possible that the profits and opportunities that had been exponentially growing throughout the eighteenth century had begun to decelerate because of increased competition and war.

As Villiers briefly alluded to in his questioning, wars and rival foreign brass founders were also a contributory factor. Many involved in the industry recognised that copper mining and manufacturing centres were being established throughout the world to rival those in Birmingham. Boulton claimed that:

> Until very lately, Birmingham has had the bulk of the trade of Europe in those articles (brass wares), but lately I am told that they make many of these articles, particularly buttons, brass foundry, and others, cheaper than we do in this country.[27]

The fear of cheaper products made abroad played upon the notion that foreign markets would overtake Birmingham and further exacerbate unemployment and social unrest in the town. When asked how much of his trade he had lost to mainland Europe, merchant Sam Smith estimated that he had lost 'almost one half to the continent'.[28] An expert in the foreign copper markets, Pascoe Grenfell, corroborated these claims by highlighting that copper was being obtained from:

> Sweden, Norway, from the mines in the Hartz (sic) mountains, in the north of Germany, from the Neighbourhood of Mansfeldt in Prussia, Hungary, Barbary, at Cadiz, from the Southern American mines, and at Smyrna, from the Asiatic mines in Diabekir (sic).[29]

Sam Smith drew attention to the relatively low cost of labour in Germany as a considerable advantage to that market.[30] Thomas Hadley claimed that foreign markets were specifically aiming to replace Birmingham as a source of many articles, by reproducing the goods made in the midlands and prohibiting importation of said goods:

> I am well convinced much pains have been taken in France to make competition in the articles manufactured in Birmingham; my knowledge arises from having been in France

[24]Innes, 'Reimagining the Social Order', p. 196.
[25]W. Aitken, 'Brass and Brass Manufacturers', in *The Resources, Products and Industrial History of Birmingham and the Midland Hardware District*, ed. by S. Timmins (London: Robert Hardwicke Publishing, 1866), pp. 226–331.
[26]J. Sketchley, *Sketchley's Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Walsall Directory* (Birmingham: J. Sketchley, 1767); S. Sketchley and O. Adams, *Universal Directory for the Towns of Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Walsall, Dudley and the Manufacturing Villages* (Birmingham: Sketchley and Adams, 1770); M. Swinney, *Swinney's Birmingham Directory* (Birmingham: Swinneys, 1774, 1775 and 1777); J. Bisset, *Bisset's A Poetic Survey and Magnificent Directory* (Birmingham: James Bisset, 1800).
[27]WCAR, *MCCM*, p. 24.
[28]Ibid., p. 27.
[29]Ibid., p. 41.
[30]Ibid., p. 20.

> and Italy, and seen the manufactories in 1789, and from my correspondence with Germany and Russia to this time.[31]

He also revealed that 'in the Emperor's dominions we had formerly a great demand for our goods, they now are either prohibited, or such duties have been laid upon them as have prevented their exportation'.[32] In Vienna the prohibition of all Birmingham-crafted goods took place, leading to the wholesale loss of that market.[33] Workmen from Birmingham were also moving abroad because prospects were better. Simcox believed that this phenomenon had led to home trade slowly deteriorating to the point of becoming stationary.[34] Birmingham manufacturers were making a cohesive and persuasive argument that copper prices needed to be kept lower, and more predictable, because of foreign competition.

As John Harris himself outlined, in another of his works, industrial espionage was also of concern to the British Government throughout the second half of the eighteenth century.[35] Two anecdotal stories provided by Thomas Hadley were obvious attempts to play upon those fears. Hadley spoke of merchants from Birmingham moving abroad and diffusing their previously exclusive knowledge of copper and brass manufacturing into foreign markets. In the first case Hadley revealed that:

> two of the four manufactories at Paris were conducted by English artisans who had resided in Birmingham and carried on their trades there; I myself had an offer on the part of Mons. De Calonne [...] to induce me to settle there.[36]

In the second example, in the city of Vienna, which had banned Birmingham products, he spoke of two manufactories that were being run by ex-Birmingham residents:

> One conducted by a Mr Hickman, who went from Birmingham; another by a Mr Winwood and his Sons, who also went from Birmingham. I cannot speak to the number of hands employed, or the capital, but I know Mr Winwood had £2000 advanced him before he went, on his going from hence. They are both natives of Birmingham; they have the same tools employed there as at Birmingham.[37]

Some of the knowledge and technological advances in copper and brass working that had been made in Birmingham were innovative and significant in their scope and influence and had the potential to give advantages in the marketplace, as well as in military matters. This was particularly persuasive and relevant given the backdrop of war and revolution during the 1790s. The naval advantages that copper and brass had conferred on Britain were vital. In the same year as the Enquiry, the Secretary of State for War, Henry Dundas, highlighted: 'By our commerce and our fleet, we have been enabled to perform those prodigies of exertion which have placed us in the proud state

[31]Ibid., p. 43.
[32]Ibid., p. 44.
[33]Ibid.
[34]WCAR, *MCCM*, p. 46.
[35]J. Harris, *Industrial Espionage and Technology Transfer; Britain and France in the Eighteenth Century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998), pp. 1–7.
[36]WCAR, *MCCM*, p. 44.
[37]Ibid.

of pre-eminence we now hold.[38] Niklas Frykman highlights, however, that there was a fear that Britain's dominance was under threat. Despite important victories against the Dutch and French at sea, the Spithead and Nore mutinies by sailors of the Royal Navy in 1797 were extremely concerning for the Government, who feared that radicals had infiltrated the Navy and paranoia rose about industrial espionage.[39] Birmingham brass manufacturers had played an important role in stimulating the economy and even Williams, who had been so critical of those manufacturers in Birmingham, was forced to admit that the significant advances in copper technology came about because of the Birmingham workforce. He spoke of the financial problems his clients had suffered because of their ships using iron bolts under the water level, which led to rust and corrosion at pivotal joints in the sheathing of the vessel. This in turn led to costly and regular maintenance work being carried out on all maritime ships:

> But after the great pains and labour with two ingenious artists of Birmingham, we found out the method of making copper bolts, far superior to the very best iron ones ever made. The navy board, after giving them the fullest trials, approved, and adopted them, and they have ever since been universally used, to the incalculable advantage of the British navy.[40]

Whilst prices and quality of foreign brass and copper products could not consistently compete with many Birmingham created brass goods, the extent of the new businesses and the transfer of knowledge involved in copper and brass manufacturing would have been a concern to the Government. The issues that the Birmingham brass founders highlighted, in combination with the looming threat of increased foreign competition, created a bleak image of the brass and copper trades within the midlands.

The midlands-based political lobbying group outlined reasons to explain the difficulties within the copper trade, by drawing attention to the behaviour of Thomas Williams and the Cornish mine owners, increased competition internationally, and trade restrictions. George Simcox accused Williams and his associates of conspiring to raise prices and being deliberately difficult when dealing with Birmingham brass founders. He spoke of how in 1785 'new proposals on the part of Mr Williams, and the Gentleman connected with him, were then submitted, to induce the Cornish miners to enter into a fresh contract for the sale of their ores'.[41] Simcox suggests that this was the reason that a Birmingham Mining and Copper Company had been established in 1785: 'in order to secure their independence in case any attempts were made to prevent the sale of ores'.[42] He then drew attention to several examples of Williams and his business partner, John Vivian, preventing sales, making broken promises, and breaking lawful contracts. Simcox claimed that he had met Vivian in Truro, and the agent had unsuccessfully attempted to persuade him to agree to unreasonable and excessive terms. As a result of this meeting:

[38]Quote in J. Davey, 'Atlantic Empire, European War and the Naval Expeditions to South America, 1806–1807', in *The Royal Navy and the British Atlantic World, c. 1750–1820*, ed. by J. McAleer and C. Petley (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 148.
[39]N. Frykman, 'Connections Between Mutinies in European Navies', *International Review of Social History*, 58.21 (2013), 87–107.
[40]WCAR, *MCCM*, p. 52.
[41]Ibid., p. 6.
[42]Ibid., p. 7.

> The Birmingham Brass Company, who then supplied a very considerable part of the brass used in the manufactories of the town, were dependant (sic) on Mr. Williams for a supply of copper, being under contract with him for 250 tons at £84 per ton, to be delivered and paid for. He immediately stopped their supply, and even detained a large quantity of it on the road, where I believe, it remained for near twelve months. The town was thereby reduced to great distress.[43]

Williams had been suspected by Prime Minister William Pitt for many years of trying to monopolise the industry.[44] The Birmingham lobbying group played upon this idea, regularly portraying him as greedy, uncooperative, and unreasonable. Simcox referred to numerous meetings in Cornwall with Williams where he became abusive and threatened physical violence, although these accusations were denied.[45] Simcox claimed that the Birmingham brass founders were also looking after the Cornish miners' interests, concluding that Birmingham copper purchasers had tried to prevent new and unfair contracts from being forced upon the workers and that:

> Many of the miners they understood were very averse to it; as the annexed extract of resolutions of a meeting of gentleman concerned in the copper mines, held at Redruth, January 24th 1792, at which Sir Michael Nowell presided, will show.[46]

Simcox claimed that 'the merchants and manufacturers can have no interest in wishing copper to be sold lower than is necessary to enable them to maintain their trade; an excessively low price being no advantage to them in general'.[47] Whilst this was not necessarily true, as cheaper copper would reduce manufacturing costs and increase profit margins, the constructed dynamic between the two parties created the narrative of a reasonable and practically-minded Birmingham manufacturing force struggling to deal with a larger, more powerful, and unreasonable corporate Cornwall mining industry against the backdrop of a difficult international context.

The performance of the Birmingham manufacturers before the Select Committee in 1799 thus reveals political capabilities that Harris's account entirely fails to recognise. These were not unsophisticated provincials stumbling through an unfamiliar political process. They were organised, prepared, and strategically astute. They had coordinated their efforts across multiple towns and trades. They had gathered statistical evidence to support their claims. They had selected appropriate representatives and deputed them with formal authority to speak on behalf of the manufacturing community. They had framed their arguments to appeal to national, rather than merely sectional interests. They had presented their case with consistency and coherence across multiple witnesses. And they had demonstrated a nuanced understanding of the political and ideological context within which they were operating. This was political sophistication of a high order, and it would prove even more evident in the campaign that followed the Enquiry's conclusion.

[43]Ibid., p. 9.
[44]D. Fisher, 'Williams, Thomas (1717–1802), of Llanidan, Anglesey and Temple House, Berks', *History of Parliament* <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/williams-thomas-1737-1802> [accessed 15 February 2026].
[45]WCAR, *MCCM*, pp. 10 and 42.
[46]Ibid., p. 8.
[47]Ibid., p. 6.

The Pamphlet War: Sophisticated Deployment of Print Culture

With the completion of the 1799 Enquiry, Parliament adjourned to assess the evidence; official reform however was not produced until June 1801.[48] In the interim two years the Birmingham-based lobbying group continued to meet, formed committees, and produced pamphlets to try and sway political opinion. On 14 March 1800, the self-proclaimed Birmingham Copper Committee met in the Stork Tavern, Birmingham, to discuss their ongoing strategy for the conflict with Williams. From this meeting the following resolutions were produced:

(1) Request the High Bailiff to permit the deputation to affix his name thereto in behalf of the town.
(2) That the committee and the deputation are particularly requested to continue their exertions for obtaining such parliamentary regulations in the copper trade.
(3) That thanks of the merchants and manufacturers of this town and neighbourhood are due to the deputation and particularly to Matthew Boulton and George Simcox esquires for their great and unweaned (sic) exertions in this business.[49]

The document confirms that there was a continued and exerted effort within Birmingham to organise political resistance against groups which threatened the Birmingham brass and copper manufacturing community. It also shows that there was interaction between brass founders and the bailiffs of Birmingham, one of the most influential positions in the town.[50] The bailiffs oversaw judicial procedures and local law enforcement, and their links to the lobbying group continued to blur the lines between political, industrial and social roles of the brass founders within the town. Boulton's own assessment of the meeting refers to his and George Simcox's efforts to use their 'friends in parliament for the purpose of obtaining some restraints and regulations in the copper trade'.[51] Amongst his friends he listed Robert Jenkinson, known as Lord Hawkesbury (member of the board of trade and future prime minister as Lord Liverpool), who had overseen the Enquiry, as well as William Pitt. He claimed that the three of them had been meeting in secret for months, discussing how to convince all MPs of their mutual interests and goals to promote Birmingham and to defeat Williams.[52] Boulton revealed that Hawkesbury was actively encouraging their political lobbying group. He had 'desired us to lose no time in coming to Town for the like purpose, we obeyed [...] we therefore apply ourselves to the preparing and arranging our ongoing case'.[53] Following a meeting of the Commercial Committee in March 1800, Boulton wrote a summary and sent it to another industrialist, Samuel Garbett, who was unable to attend in person:

[48] *An Act for Altering the Laws*, 30 June 1801.
[49] WCAR, MS3782/13/97, Copper Trade Vol. 2 Cornish Miners Contest, 1770–1801, item 30, T. Cooper, Resolutions of a General Town Meeting held at the Stork Tavern to discuss the Copper Trade, 14 March 1800.
[50] W. Hutton, *An History of Birmingham* (Birmingham: Pearson and Rollason Publishing, 1783), p. 148.
[51] WCAR, MS3782/13/97, item 29, M. Boulton, Draft address by Matthew Boulton to a General Town's Meeting, held at the Stork Tavern, Birmingham, 14 March 1800.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.

> We received an appointment from Mr. Pitt and in conformity thereto we waited upon him accompanied by Lord Hawkesbury … He said he was confirmed in the opinion he had formed last year and was convinced that the state of our own manufacturers and our navy rendered it indispensably necessary to check the growing evil.[54]

The links between the Birmingham group, the Prime Minister, and the lead investigator of the Enquiry, demonstrates how influential the political connections of Birmingham brass founders were by the turn of the century, and how they tried to use political connections for industrial and economic gain. It also demonstrates the level of political manoeuvring and strategising that was happening behind the scenes of the investigation. Lord Hawkesbury helped to orchestrate propaganda and Birmingham brass founders, 'would print the case in order to deliver it to the MPs'.[55]

In March 1800 the Birmingham pamphlets, written by a variety of brass founders from the Commercial Committee, and backed by Lord Hawksbury, began to be published. Birmingham brass founders utilised Andrew Strahan, MP for Newport (Isle of Wight), who was also one the King's Printers, to help produce their pamphlets.[56] Strahan campaigned on behalf of the brass founders and printed several texts that were distributed at the doors of the House of Commons.[57] The Strahan-produced pamphlets included a list of demands indicating the changes which should be made to combat 'the evils arising' in the copper trade.[58] These included direct attacks on Cornish ticketing practices, arguing that there should be restrictions and limitations to the cost 'when the standard price of copper at the ticketings in Cornwall shall exceed one hundred pounds per ton for a time to be limited'.[59] The Birmingham pamphlets were distributed to MPs as they left or entered chambers. They were also nailed to the doors of Parliament as posters. The pamphlet contained direct quotations taken from the Enquiry, Parliamentary debates, and Cornish pamphlets.[60]

The first Strahan-produced pamphlet, for the Birmingham brass manufacturers, was simply entitled *Copper Trade* and within it there was a claim that intentionally complex and ambiguous phrases were being used by the Cornish mining community to confuse and mislead readers and politicians to justify the rising costs of copper:

> The term "CAPITAL in the mine", used in the report, means *the value of the Stock*. "LOSS UNRECOVERED", means *money advanced, not yet recovered by the Adventurers*. To make the account more intelligible the latter terms are here used.[61]

[54]Ibid.
[55]Ibid.
[56]C. Timperley, *A Dictionary of Printers and Printing: With the Progress of Literature, Ancient and Modern, Bibliographical Illustrations* (London: H. Johnson, 1839), p. 918.
[57]WCAR, MS3782/13/97, item 33, A. Strahan, Printed paper, entitled, *Account of Cornish Copper Mines, Producing Two-Thirds, and others producing Seventeen-Twentieths, of the Whole Copper raised in Cornwall, in the Six Months ending January or February 1799. With a Refutation of the Statement delivered to the Members of the House of Commons last Session, respecting the Profit and Loss of the Copper Mine of Cornwall*, 21 March 1800; WCAR, MS3782/13/97, item 38, A. Strahan, Printed paper, entitled, *Answers to Certain Resolutions of the Lieutenancy and Magistracy of the County of Cornwall, concerning the Copper Trade. With Remarks on Mr. Vivian's Reply to the Birmingham Manufacturers Case*, 3 April 1800.
[58]WCAR, MS3782/13/97, item 35, A. Strahan, Printed Paper entitled, *Copper*, 21 March 1800.
[59]Ibid., pp. 1–2.
[60]Ibid., pp.1–14.
[61]Ibid. p. 3.

The two opposing groups produced different definitions of 'Capital' and therefore were able to produce different results in terms of profit margins of the mines. Cornish pamphlets, by their own definitions outline capital as: 'that sum of money which has been advanced on a concern, dividing it under two heads: first, the engines, materials on a mine, which they call 'capitals on a mine'.[62] Secondly, the difference between the sum expended, and the value of those materials, which they call 'loss unrecovered'.[63] Using this definition of capital, the Cornish mining community claimed in their own pamphlets that between 1 August 1798 and 31 January 1799, £350,358 was needed to run their operations.[64] After all expenses and profits were taken into account, that is copper sold, six months cost of working the mines, smelting charges upon 26,800 tons of ore, and Lord dues, only £9,915 remained.[65] It was then concluded that as a result of these limited profits, adventurers would probably never be paid in full and costs of copper needed to remain high.[66] The Birmingham manufacturers claimed that the Cornish definitions were erroneous, deceitful and created skewed financial statistics that ensured they appeared to be less prosperous than they truly were. The statistics were examined in detail by the Birmingham manufacturers in their own pamphlets and suggested that the Cornish figure of £350,358 produced to define their capital was inaccurately calculated. Birmingham manufacturers claimed that £169,302 of that figure was listed as 'being capital at hazard', but that it is the actual value of ore already raised, 'and machinery upon the mines; the greater part of which sum is the residue of profits in hand not yet divided'.[67] The pamphlets also outline that Cornwall had not included its more profitable mines within its own financial summaries, producing a narrower and less profitable image.[68]

Once more using tactics exhibited during the Enquiry, these financial statistics were handed to MPs as they entered Parliament. They included a wider range of mines and a simplification of the definition of capital to 'the difference between the sum expended, and the value of effects now to be shewn', which created a different image of the Cornish mining situation:

> The whole money the adventurers appear to be in advance is £32,699.5.6; and they have the effects on the Mines of the value of £148,502, which, after paying off the whole money unrefunded would leave a balance of undivided profits to the amount of £115,803 in favour of the adventurers.[69]

The difference in money raised for miners, as detailed in the two opposing sets of pamphlets, was £105,888. According to the Bank of England's Inflation calculator that was the equivalent of £7,766,061.57 in 2025.[70] The vast difference between the two figures, and complex use of financial statistics, created a confusing picture. The

[62]WCAR, MS3782/13/97, item 34, G. Woodfall, Printed paper, entitled, *A Short Reply to the Paper printed by A. Strahan, dated 21st inst. and distributed at the Door of the House of Commons on the 24th. Relating to the profits of the Cornish mines*, 24 March 1800.
[63]Ibid.
[64]Ibid.
[65]Ibid.
[66]Ibid.
[67]WCAR, Strahan, *Copper*, p. 2.
[68]Ibid.
[69]Ibid.
[70]Inflation calculator, *Bank of England* (2026) <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator> [accessed 2 February 2026].

statistical evidence provided in the pamphlets of Birmingham brass founders was accompanied using emotive language designed to provoke outrage at the supposed lies of Williams and the Cornish copper mining community:

> These sophistries in the pretended *impartial* statement being thus destroyed, there can be no doubt but the artificers of them will speedily manufacture new ones: but, after the attempt to substitute shadows for substantial matter, which has already been thus glaringly detected, can it be necessary to caution the wisdom of Parliament against being imposed upon by future fallacies and misrepresentations coming from the same quarter.[71]

Leitmotifs from the Enquiry itself continued, including foreign trade and Cornish greed:

> whether therefore the expenses of Government, in its naval and other departments, ought to be so extravagantly increased, the manufacturers and commerce of the country so cruelly oppressed, and exposed to such imminent peril, to support such profits as these, PARLIAMENT WILL JUDGE.[72]

The language employed suggested that manufacturing communities and the safety of the country were being put at risk by the greed and lies of the Cornish community, lies based on doctored statistics.

Birmingham's booklets were produced quickly to respond to any new claims made by the Cornish community, and they grew in length over time. On 3 April 1800 fourteen-page paper-back booklets, with marbled paper covers, were distributed in Parliament.[73] These longer booklets were an indication that the Birmingham lobbying group was spending money to make the pamphlets more visually striking, suggesting a conscious effort to present their case to parliamentarians in a professional and authoritative manner while ensuring their arguments stood out within the escalating pamphlet war surrounding the Enquiry. The standard of the booklet was high, with footnotes, tables, and intricate decoration. The marbled booklets were distributed in Parliament to answer many of the resolutions that were being published by the Cornish Open Committees, as well as by the Lieutenancy and Magistracy of Cornwall which had paid to have its opinions printed in national newspapers, and additionally had sent disparaging letters to the 'mayor, or other chief magistrate, of every commercial town in Great Britain'.[74]

In the introduction to the 3 April booklet the Birmingham political pressure group claimed that:

> Till (sic) this moment, when Parliament is about to decide upon the contest, (we) abstained from making any comment on the resolutions, lest it should be justly imputed to them, that they were making a party, and raising a popular clamour, to influence the decision of parliament.[75]

It asserted that the level of lies exhibited by Williams, within Cornish propaganda, meant the group felt compelled to dispel the falsehoods within the Cornish resolutions, such as resolution one, which:

[71]WCAR, Strahan, *Copper*, p. 6.
[72]Ibid., p. 7.
[73]WCAR, Strahan, *Answers to Certain Resolutions*.
[74]Ibid.
[75]Ibid.

> is founded on a mis-quotation [...] the ample supply is admitted; but the complaint is that with an ample supply the price has been immoderately and extravagantly advanced, and is still rapidly increasing, without the least prospect of a reasonable profit to the manufacturers of copper goods.[76]

The book continues dismantling thirteen different falsehoods, before the second half of the booklet produced anecdotal stories that attacked Thomas Williams for withholding shipments of copper that had been legally purchased, building on much of the attempted character assassination, and accusations of monopolistic practice, evident during the 1799 Enquiry.[77] The accusations of monopolies continued:

> In the year 1787, the whole stock of Cornish copper was consigned to him for sale; about that time Anglesea (sic) produced near 3000 tons per annum: so that the sales, of nearly the whole produce of copper raised in Great Britain, were at that time in his hands, and remained so, except a very small proportion, till the year 1790.[78]

Inconsistencies within the testimonies of Williams, and his associates, were also analysed and deconstructed. Birmingham brass founders identified a claim by Vivian that:

> less than one third of the trade has been in Mr. Williams' hands [...] yet 'Williams himself in his evidence to the Committee, declares that he has conducted for some years past, FULL ONE HALF of the copper trade of this country.[79]

Using Williams' own testimony against him demonstrates the flaws that exist within the Cornish argument, as well as providing evidence that the Birmingham brass founders were researching the transcripts of the Enquiry to strengthen their own political arguments within their pamphlets, suggesting they were a well-organised, well-informed, contingent.

The Birmingham group also analysed and undermined the expenditure of the Cornish mine owners, suggesting their financial accounts were not accurate. Such as an account from 'Mr Vivian then states, that some purchases of corn for the labourers, to keep them from starving'.[80] However, in a private letter to the Government, anonymous 'friends' from Birmingham draw attention to financial irregularities around this claim and evidenced excessive and frivolous spending, which are at direct odds with Vivian's claims. One such letter from a man only referred to as RM draws attention to the expenditure by the copper miners in the parish of Gwennap, Cornwall: 'At a moderate computation, there is now more than 200 pounds worth of Brandy, and other spirituous liquor, drank every week in these several ale houses'.[81] The publications of organised arguments within pamphlets, as well as the sending of private letters to politicians, was an attempt to create an image of lavish and disingenuous Cornish mine owners who were at fault for the rising price of copper.

In the conclusion of the 3 April 1800 booklet, the Birmingham brass founders triumphantly asserted:

[76]Ibid., p. 1.
[77]Ibid., p. 11.
[78]Ibid.
[79]WCAR, Strahan, *Answers to Certain Resolutions*, p. 12.
[80]Ibid.
[81]WCAR, MS3782/13/97, item 40, R.M., Letter to Matthew Boulton regarding Lord dues & various other facts relative to the Mines in Gwennap, October 1800.

> That EVERY ONE of the RESOLUTIONS which the open committee passed is founded in misrepresentation and fallacy: but they do not chuse (sic) to borrow the expressions which the framer of the resolutions thought it right to apply his Majesty's order in council, and they forbear to assert that the resolutions in question are founded in GROSS AND NOTORIOUS fallacy, which indeed they are not; for the FICTIONS are certainly ingenious, specious, and subtle, but not solid.[82]

Despite this, Williams and his Cornish contingent claimed that the midlands' representatives had failed to produce adequate proof for many different points they had made, especially the idea that Birmingham brass manufacturers had lost demand for products as a result of copper prices, or 'that the Birmingham manufacturers had suffered', or that they were in 'danger of being undersold in foreign markets on account of the high price paid by them for that raw material'.[83] It had also been claimed by Cornish representatives that:

> There has been no attempt to prove that there is any want of copper for the supply of the royal navy, the merchant ships, or the manufacturers; but on the contrary it has been acknowledged by every person interested, that the home market has been amply supplied, and that there is every reason to suppose it will continue to do so, at such a price as will afford a reasonable profit to the miners and copper markers.[84]

In response to the assertion that no evidence had been produced to support the claims of the Birmingham brass founders, the booklet drew attention to the Enquiry: 'proof was given that the Birmingham manufacturers did suffer by the loss of a great part of their products, and by the increasing and continually accumulating embarrassment of their trade [...] Boulton's Evidence, page 21'.[85]

Whilst there is evidence that Birmingham brass manufacturers lost some custom, it is also clear that since the improvements in copper sheathing and copper bolt technology, developed by Birmingham technologists, the need for copper products had increased exponentially throughout the global market, as admitted by Lord Hawkesbury himself in his private letters to Henry Dundas.[86] This meant that Birmingham brass founders had an enormous scope for profit, especially those who were supplying the Government, such as Boulton. The Government had also increased its demand for those products and required copper to remain cheap to lower its expenses. The crux of the entire issue seems to be that the Government was in need of large amounts of copper products to equip their navy and mercantile ships, especially to keep control of areas within Asia and particularly the Indian subcontinent.[87] If copper prices were kept low, Birmingham could create cheaper brass and copper products for the Government, navy, and East India Company, creating a mutually beneficial, self-sustaining, and economically productive partnership throughout times of war. This context, alongside the increasingly sophisticated political engagement by the Birmingham industrialists, was important for the outcome of the Enquiry.

[82]WCAR, Strahan, *Answers to Certain Resolutions*, p. 6.
[83]Ibid., pp. 1–2.
[84]Ibid.
[85]Ibid.
[86]Collins, Patent 1388 Copper Bolts; J. Westwood, Patent 1398 Hardening and Stiffening Copper; Jenkinson, Lord Liverpool to Henry Dundas.
[87]Ibid.

This coordinated deployment of print culture, combining statistical analysis, systematic argumentation, strategic framing, careful timing, and professional production, represents political sophistication of a high order. It demonstrates that Birmingham manufacturers understood print not merely as a medium for expressing grievances but as a political weapon that could be deployed strategically to shape opinion, mobilise support, and influence policy outcomes. They grasped that effective political communication required not only substantive arguments but also attention to rhetoric, framing, timing, and material presentation. They evidently understood that pamphlets needed to serve multiple audiences simultaneously, convincing MPs and government officials through rigorous analysis while also appealing to broader manufacturing and commercial interests through strategic framing that emphasised shared concerns about monopoly and free trade. Harris's characterisation of Birmingham manufacturers as politically unsophisticated cannot be reconciled with this evidence. The pamphlet campaign reveals a group that understood the mechanics of political communication in late eighteenth-century Britain with considerable subtlety. This was not the work of provincial manufacturers stumbling naively into political controversy, but of skilled political actors who understood how to use the tools available to them: print culture, political networks, public meetings, and appeals to government, to advance their interests effectively. The pamphlet war, no less than the Parliamentary Enquiry, demonstrates that Birmingham's campaign against the copper monopoly was characterised by strategic sophistication that demands a fundamental reassessment of how historians understand political culture in the industrial midlands at the end of the eighteenth century.

Outcomes and Impact: Political Sophistication Translated into Legislative Success

After the evidence given during the 1799 Enquiry, and the arguments that raged in the pamphlets during the subsequent two years, MPs had to assess whether to support Birmingham through reform of the British copper trade or allow Williams and the Cornish miners to continue their business unchecked. The eventual decision was that extensive reform was needed. On 24 June 1801 George III signed the Parliamentary Act 'altering the laws now in force, relating to the importation and exportation of Copper; for repealing certain duties and drawbacks on such importation and exportation; and for substituting new duties and drawbacks in lieu thereof'.[88]

John Harris in his chapter on the Enquiry, the primary analysis of the affair, concluded that 'the results of the enquiry and agitation were not great … it was of little significance for the industry'.[89] This article argues that this was not the case. Within the Act, seven substantial amendments were introduced to change the laws for copper exportation, importation and manufacturing that significantly altered the industrial power dynamics within Great Britain, leading to a noticeable decline in the power of Thomas Williams and the continued rise of Birmingham as a centre of brass and copper manufacturing throughout the early- nineteenth century. The Act declared that

[88]*An Act for Altering the Laws*, 30 June 1801.
[89]Harris, *Copper King*, p. 130.

'the provisions contained in several acts now in force, relating to exportation and importation of copper, from and into the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, have been found inconvenient'.[90] This statement in itself highlights the effectiveness of the Birmingham industrial lobbyists, who had successfully convinced many within the Government that the copper trade had a number of flaws that needed addressing. Of those areas that had been found inconvenient, Parliament directly addressed several concerns which the Birmingham merchants had been campaigning against. Of the seven main reforms to the system, the changes that were most agreeable to the Birmingham manufacturers were contained within the opening three clauses:

> [1] That, from and after the signing of peace, it shall and may be lawful for any person or persons to export copper from any port or place within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland to any port or place beyond seas, without hindrance or obstruction from any person or persons under any authority whatsoever.
> [2] That it shall be lawful to prohibit the exportation of all copper capable of being converted into a naval store.
> [3] That the duties now payable on the importation of copper unwrought, videlicet (sic), copper bricks, rose copper, copper coin, and all cast copper … shall from now and after the first day of December one thousand eight hundred and one, cease and be no longer payable.[91]

Point one was more of a reassurance than immediately helpful, but it would have been encouraging for the Birmingham-based merchants to know that, once Great Britain's European wars were over, their trade could continue as normal. While point two on the surface could be misconstrued as a negative, it was in fact a vital clarification for the brass founders of Birmingham. Prohibition laws such as the sheet copper ban in 1779, that had so negatively affected Birmingham brass manufacturers commerce, were too vague and meant that many articles that had no military usage were still banned from being exported.[92] With the clarification that only copper capable of being converted into naval articles was prohibited from exportation, many foreign marketplaces once more opened up, especially with regard to button and buckle manufacturing, a practice upon which the Birmingham marketplace had historically been built. Point three is the most significant for the brass founders of Birmingham: allowing the importation of copper from foreign sources without import duties would allow them to purchase from cheaper and more reliable sources than Williams. John Harris, despite his insistence that there were no significant changes as a result of the Enquiry, also highlights that 'free import from Ireland was to be allowed' – something brass founders had specifically demanded.[93] These three reforms allowed the brass founders of Birmingham wide-ranging new freedoms and unprecedented autonomy over their trade. They could once more export products that had previously been banned, open up new markets, and free themselves from an over-reliance on Welsh and Cornish copper, switching to South American, Swedish, Irish and German markets.[94] The Birmingham brass community continued to thrive and expand as a result of these changes, as can be seen from the

[90] *An Act for Altering the Laws*, 30 June 1801.
[91] Ibid.
[92] WCAR, MS 3782/12/87, item 22, S. Garbett, Paper entitled, 'Observations on the Copper Trade of England and the Dangers of Exporting the Tools and Machines used therein', April 1786.
[93] Harris, *Copper King*, p. 131.
[94] R. Hawkins, 'Minor Products of British Nineteenth-Century Diesinking', *The British Numismatic Journal*, 30.1 (1962), 177.

hundreds of listed brass founders listed in the 1835 *Directory of Birmingham*.[95] The new links forged between Irish mining communities, and Birmingham brass manufacturers, were significant throughout the nineteenth century:

> The nineteenth century marked the maximum intensity in production of (brass) medals: of current historical topics including as usual coronations and other royal occasions, of societies and clubs, schools, railways, exhibitions, &c. The principal diesinking centre was Birmingham and the only other one of consequence in the UK was London. Dublin played a large part, assisted by Birmingham and perhaps other centres, in the striking of Irish tradesmen's tokens.[96]

Whilst a variety of important changes were made to the industry, it is important to note that the Birmingham brass founders did not achieve everything they planned: no changes were made to the system of public ticketing or private sales of copper organised by Thomas Williams and the Cornish mine owners. The substantial amendments to the import and export laws, however, allowed Birmingham brass founders to free themselves from the need for Cornish copper or ores that were controlled by Williams.

Conclusion

John Harris was wrong in his assertion that 'neither the government nor the Birmingham merchants and manufacturers seem to have been possessed of much solid evidence for their beliefs, nor was the case against Williams marshalled with any skill'.[97] John Money was also incorrect when he claimed that Birmingham was politically unimportant until 1838 and unable 'to advance any claim to significance in the affairs of the nation'.[98] The idea that the Birmingham brass manufacturers demonstrated no skill in their campaign against Thomas Williams' copper monopoly cannot be sustained in the face of the evidence presented in this article. The Parliamentary Enquiry of 1799, the pamphlet war of 1799–1800, and the legislative outcomes secured in 1801, collectively demonstrate that Birmingham's brass founders and metal manufacturers possessed political capabilities of a high order. They understood how to prepare evidence, coordinate testimony, deploy print culture strategically, mobilise political contacts, frame arguments for maximum effect, and translate advocacy into concrete legislative change. These are precisely the hallmarks of political sophistication.

The evidence for Birmingham's political sophistication operates at three distinct but interconnected levels. First, the Parliamentary Enquiry of 1799 revealed manufacturers who approached political advocacy with strategic preparation and careful coordination. The Birmingham witnesses who appeared before the Select Committee did not simply complain about high copper prices or articulate their immediate commercial grievances. Instead, they presented a comprehensive case that connected their specific concerns to broader questions of national economic policy, employment, poor relief, and Britain's competitive position in international markets. They compiled detailed statistical evidence on poor rates, wage levels, and production costs. They coordinated their

[95] *The Directory of Birmingham; Including an Alphabetical List of the Inhabitants of the Town* (Birmingham: Wrightson and Webb Printers, 1835).
[96] Hawkins, 'Minor Products', 177.
[97] Harris, *Copper King*, p. 115.
[98] Money, *Experience and Identity*, p. 275.

testimony to present complementary rather than redundant information. They framed their arguments in terms calculated to resonate with parliamentary concerns about wartime economic stability and the preservation of Britain's manufacturing base. This was not the performance of political novices stumbling through an unfamiliar process, but rather the calculated deployment of evidence and argument by manufacturers who understood precisely what they needed to accomplish and how parliamentary procedures worked.

Second, the pamphlet war that followed the Enquiry demonstrated Birmingham brass manufacturers' sophisticated understanding of print culture as a political weapon. The pamphlets they produced and circulated were not crude polemics but carefully constructed arguments that deployed economic data, legal precedent, and appeals to established political principles. They systematically dismantled the statistical claims within the booklets produced by the Cornish mining community, exposing the methodological flaws and selective presentation that had made Williams' monopoly appear less profitable than it was. The pamphlets demonstrated facility with complex economic calculation, understanding of accounting practices, and ability to present technical information in accessible prose. But the rhetoric varied and took different approaches from pamphlet to pamphlet, combining emotional appeals about manufacturing distress with principled arguments about free trade and the dangers of monopoly. The manufacturers understood that different rhetorical strategies served different purposes. They coordinated the timing of pamphlet publication to maximise political impact, distributed their publications strategically to reach key parliamentary and commercial audiences, and maintained consistent messaging across multiple publications while varying their rhetorical approach to suit different contexts. This demonstrates not merely literacy or access to printing facilities, but genuine sophistication in the political deployment of print culture.

Third, and perhaps most compellingly, Birmingham manufacturers translated their advocacy into tangible legislative success. The Act of Parliament passed in June 1800 directly addressed their core concerns, opening alternative copper supply channels through reformed import duties and undermining Williams' monopolistic control over domestic markets. The manufacturers achieved this outcome against entrenched interests with powerful parliamentary connections and substantial financial resources. They mobilised political contacts effectively, maintained pressure on Parliament through the extended campaign, and secured legislative change that fundamentally altered the regulatory framework governing Britain's copper trade. Political sophistication that produces no results might be dismissed as merely theoretical: Birmingham's manufacturers demonstrated that their capabilities were practical and effective.

This has important implications for understanding the political development of the industrial midlands more broadly. Birmingham's political sophistication in 1799–1801 did not emerge suddenly or spontaneously. Rather, it reflected capabilities developed over preceding decades through participation in earlier campaigns, cultivation of political contacts, and accumulated experience with parliamentary processes. The manufacturers who testified in 1799 and produced pamphlets in 1800 were drawing on established networks, proven strategies, and institutional knowledge that Birmingham's manufacturing community had built up over time. Their success in the copper campaign both reflected and reinforced

Birmingham's position as a politically significant manufacturing centre whose concerns commanded parliamentary attention. The episode thus represents not an isolated incident but rather a revealing moment in the longer process by which provincial manufacturing interests developed flexible and robust political capabilities necessary to defend and advance their economic interests at a national level, in an era of complex and rapid industrial change.

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