

Wellington Celebrate Thomas Parker, inventor of the electric car.



The Thomas Parker electric car. Thomas Parker is in the middle of this photograph.

Wellington, although a proud market town since 1244, is now situated in Telford. The area that comprises Telford was home to myriad inventors, many of whom are celebrated in Telford's [Ironbridge Gorge Museums](#). The museum's tag line is now "valley of invention". So, when Wellington was planning their [2022 walking festival](#), which always coincides with [Heritage Open Days](#), they thought it would be sensible to include an event showcasing one of Telford's inventors.

As electric cars are now in most people's consciousness it seemed appropriate to celebrate one of Telford's lesser-known inventors - Thomas Parker. Little did they know the museum trust had the same idea- and are also showcasing Thomas Parker, making entry to their Coalbrookdale sites free on September 17th and 18th. Rather than clashing, the two events complement each other nicely.

Thomas Parker was born in Coalbrookdale in 1843, the son of a moulder. Thomas also worked in the Coalbrookdale Ironworks, starting as a young child while attending school. While still at school he built a violon and taught himself to play it. In 1862 he too became a moulder. His horizons were broadened by a visit to the 1862 International Exhibition in London where he saw, among other technology, the wet battery.

Spells in Birmingham, the Potteries, where he married Jane Gibbons, and Manchester followed. In Manchester he attended chemistry lectures of Henry Enfield Roscoe and others. He returned to Coalbrookdale in 1867, first as a foreman then as a chemist in the electro plating department. While working in Coalbrookdale he made his name, not for electricity, but first for co-creating in 1876 a new and improved steam pump The "Parker and Weston's Patent Pump" which would later be awarded a medal at the International Inventions Exhibition of 1885.

To show the breadth of his inventiveness, in 1880 the Kyrle Society increased awareness about the negative effects of coal smoke in cities. In response Parker invented the "Kyrle Grate," which was designed to allow anthracite coal to be burned inside of it. His grate won a silver medal at the Smoke Abatement Exhibition in 1881. He would later, in 1904, invent Coalite. In 1936 Thomas was posthumously awarded a gold medal by the Smoke Abatement Society for this invention.

Still at Coalbrookdale, Parker also improved the electroplating process by adding a dynamo that he built himself. He then became in effect an electrical engineer, working on projects that were at the cutting edge of technology.

In 1881 he was responsible for the first electric tramway in the world at Portrush, Northern Ireland, powered by the first hydro electric generator.

In 1882 he moved to Wolverhampton to co-found, with Paul-Bedford Elwell, the first company in the Midlands to manufacture electrical equipment. It was whilst there that, as early as 1884, he made, and used, electric cars.

Thomas continued his links with the Coalbrookdale Company. Elwell-Parker Limited didn't have a foundry and so most of their castings were made at Coalbrookdale. One of the first large orders secured by the new company was for the design and construction of the electrical plant for driving the Blackpool Tramway, the first English electric tramway of any size. The trams used a conduit system, where the power was picked-up from a slot between the rails. The Birmingham trams soon followed but these were battery powered.

In 1883, the company designed, built, and installed dynamos and electric lighting for the Trafalgar Collieries in the Forest of Dean. This was the first underground electrical installation in the country, if not in the world. The electrical equipment included a 1.5hp. motor that was attached to a pump to lift water 300 feet from below the surface.

In 1892 he designed the high voltage DC system for distributing electricity in the cities of Oxford and Birmingham and in the London area at Charing Cross, Chelsea, Sydenham and Shoreditch. In 1897, he formed the Midland Electric Corporation, the first company in the world to distribute electricity over a wide area.

In 1899 Thomas Parker moved to London to become the Consulting Electrical Engineer to the Metropolitan Railway Company. Here he was responsible for the electrification of much of the underground.

In the early 1900s Thomas Parker became interested in a metric system of weights and measures and also advocated the introduction of decimal coinage. He campaigned vigorously for a British decimal system based on existing British units, rather than the European ones.

He returned to Coalbrookdale in 1907 to retire. He bought and lived in Severn House in Ironbridge, now the Best Western Valley Hotel. He was still very active as he purchased and, with his son Charles, ran the Court Iron Works in Madeley as well as giving lectures at the Quaker Meeting House in Coalbrookdale. He retained his keen interest in science, and equipped a laboratory and workshop in his house, so that he could keep abreast of modern developments.

He stood as the Liberal candidate in Kingswinford in the general election of 1892 but was defeated. Because of his radical political views, he refused the possibility of a knighthood. He was a Justice of the Peace in Wolverhampton.

He died (aged 72) in 1915 from a brain tumour and was buried in St. Michael's church Madeley, in the Fletcher (his mother's) family vault .

He had twelve children, of whom nine survived to maturity. His son Charles Henry Parker ran the company that produced Coalite; his son Thomas Hugh Parker was an inventor, building prototype motor cars.

Wellington's event is an 8-mile walk on 15th September. The walk will start in Madeley and go first to Thomas Parker Drive (named in his honour on the centenary of his death), near the Court Iron Works (still remembered by many in Telford), before going to various sites in Coalbrookdale, where he lived and worked, then returning to Madeley, via Madeley Parish church. See details [here](#) on the HODS site

This is an expanded version of an article in the [Walkers are Welcome , Walk this Way newsletter](#).

The actual newsletter is [here](#).

Sources

None of this is original, being derived from

<http://www.historywebsite.co.uk/genealogy/Parker/ThomasParker.htm#menu>

(various pages)

and

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Parker_\(inventor\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Parker_(inventor))

Most of the facts have been checked in both sources.