**Men of Iron** – The Fussells of Mells – Robin Thornes – Frome Society for Local Study

xiii + 212 pages - published 2010 - price £11.50 (£15.50 inc p&p) - ISBN 9780956 5869 19

Frome Society for Local History (<http://www.fsls.org.uk/>) has published some excellent books on the history of Frome and its industries, and this book on the history of the Fussell family of Mells, ironmasters, edge tool makers and mine owners lives up to the reputation of its predecessors.

The south west of England has long had a tradition of edge tool making, as outlined in Professor Ted Collin’s paper ‘Change and Continuity in the Manufacture of Agricultural Edge Tools’, and the Fussell family established several businesses that grew to rival those found in the industrial centres of Sheffield and Birmingham. Robin Thomas has undertaken a scholarly research into the history of the family, its members and employees and the frequent disputes with local squires, the Horners. The book is well laid out and easy to read: my only criticisms would be the lack of information on the craft of edge tool making, which is only covered in rudimentary detail, and a lack of illustrations showing the diversity of tools made, and the marks on them. Given that the nearby Frome Museum and the Radstock Museum have good collections of tools, and that there are several extensive private collections close by, it would not have been difficult – but it may well have increased the cost of the book if additional illustrations were added. Line drawings, maps and copies of old photographs are in plenty, although reference to documents in the text would have been enhanced with a photograph of the actual document, e.g. the letter and letterhead in the Frome Museum (p172).

Of particular interest is the historical research into local edge tool makers – before, during and after the 150 year reign of the Fussell dynasty, especially that of the short lived Fussell and Wise partnership, and the equally short lived John Skurray and Company of Chippenham. The book also mentions Robert Coombs of Doulting, (who also made edge tools as well as shovels) and Arthur Steed of Gurney Slade (who had an ancestor named John Fussell Steed).

For anyone interested in the history of tools and tool making, coal mining, canals, industrial archaeology, economic history or the Mendips area of Somerset this book is a must, and as I am returning the review copy to the TATHS library, I will be ordering a copy for my own use.

Bob Burgess