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Revisiting Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution



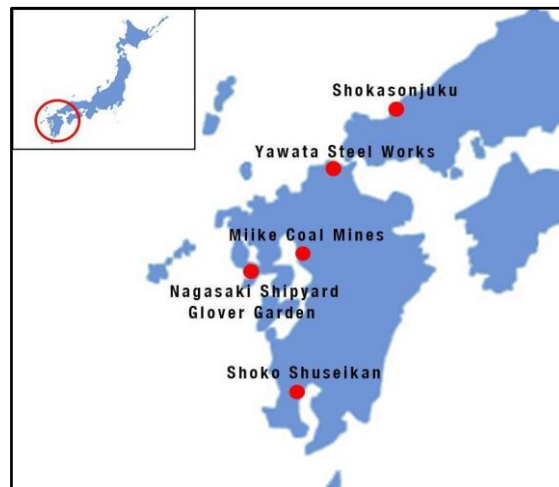
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A decade after UNESCO's World Cultural Heritage listing, Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution sites still remind people of the endeavors of Japan's leaders to turn the nation into a modern industrial power — which they achieved in just over 50 years. Many remain active as industrial facilities, a testimony to their connection to today's Japan as a global manufacturing powerhouse.

This issue of Japan Tourism Spotlight will take readers on a journey through the World Heritage-listed sites in southwestern Japan — starting in Yamaguchi Prefecture on the western tip of Honshu, then moving on to Kyushu to stop over in Fukuoka and Nagasaki, before traveling further south to Kagoshima. The 23 heritage sites, most of which are in this part of the country, highlight the heritage of rapid industrialization and modernization through iron and steel making, shipbuilding, and coal mining.

These are testaments to the first successful Western-style industrialization in a non-Western country in the mid-19th century. The Meiji government initially relied on Western technology and expertise, as it faced an urgent need to build up national defense after opening the country following more than two centuries of isolation. However, Japan later achieved a full-blown industrialization by adapting Western technologies to local needs and resources through homegrown innovation and expertise.

[Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution](#)



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1. Journey begins in Hagi — a crucible for modern Japan

Included among the industrial revolution heritage sites is the former castle town of Hagi, Yamaguchi Prefecture, where travelers can walk around its old streets that retain some of the Edo-period townscape. Other heritage-listed sites include the relics of the Hagi Reverberatory Furnace and Ebisugahana Shipyard — symbols of the Choshu Domain's trial-and-error in introducing Western technologies. In the suburbs, the remains of the former site of the Ohitayama Tataro Ironworks show how the clan, in order to supply iron to beef up its shipbuilding, used the traditional ironworking called "tataro," which processed iron sand into steel.

Perhaps the most significant of the heritage sites in Hagi is the Shokasonjuku Academy. Many of the students at this 50-square-meter school played important roles in Japan's subsequent industrialization and modernization. It was led by Yoshida Shoin, an educator who championed Western knowledge, and taught military tactics and history. He was among the first to emphasize the importance of engineering education. The school's prominent students included Ito Hirobumi, who would go on to become Japan's first prime minister; Takasugi Shinsaku, a leading figure in the Choshu Domain's campaign to fight the shogunate; and Yamagata Aritomo, also later prime minister who wielded a strong influence in Meiji-era politics. Today, the original building still stands, with a shrine built nearby for Yoshida Shoin.

Hagi was the capital of the Choshu Domain, a leading anti-Shogunate force in the 1860s. Along with the Satsuma Domain, they formed the Satcho Alliance, which toppled the shogunate and brought about the Meiji Restoration. During this period, Choshu leaders also sent their best people abroad to acquire Western knowledge. The goal was to nurture leaders to helm Japan's modernization and industrialization in the coming era.



Courtesy: Hagi Museum

In 1863, Hagi's brightest minds, known as the "Choshu Five," secretly set sail on a sponsored voyage to Britain to study Western ideas and become "living instruments" to expel foreign threats. When they returned, they instead used this knowledge to transform the country into a modern, industrialized nation. These individuals were Ito Hirobumi; Inoue Kaoru, later the nation's first foreign minister; Yamao Yozo, "father of Japanese engineering"; Endo Kinsuke, chief of the National Mint; and Inoue Masaru, "father of Japan's railways."

From the efforts to overthrow the shogunate to the coming industrial revolution, Hagi was at the epicenter of this seismic shift in Japan's history. The city became a testing ground of the nation's ambitions, proactively trying Western technologies like iron smelting, cannon making, and shipbuilding.

[The Choshu Five](#)

[World Heritage: Hagi Sightseeing Guide](#)

[Hagi Meirin Gakusha Visitor Center](#)

2. Across the strait to Kyushu — dawn of modern steelmaking



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Opposite Yamaguchi Prefecture, across the Kanmon Strait separating Honshu and Kyushu, is Kitakyushu in Fukuoka Prefecture, one of Japan's major industrial centers today. This is where the Meiji government, in response to growing demands for iron and steel to supply the burgeoning shipbuilding, railway, construction, and other sectors, built the first state-run steel mill. The Imperial Steel Works, or Yawata Steel Works as it was later called, and currently operating as the Kyushu Steel Works, was the nation's first fully integrated iron and steel plant, which began operating in 1901.

The Imperial Steel Works, which relied on German technology and engineers for construction and operation launch, marked a new phase in Japan's iron and steelmaking, and contributed significantly to its heavy industry development. Following a series of expansions, the plant at one point supplied most of the nation's steel demand.

After being passed on to private-sector ownership in 1934, the steelworks still operates today as the Kyushu Works of Nippon Steel Corp, Japan's largest and, according to the company, the world's fourth-largest steelmaker following its takeover of US Steel in 2025.

Since the entire steelworks is still in operation, visitors cannot enter its historic buildings from the Meiji Era. However, a platform called the Observation Space was erected some 80 meters away for visitors to view the former head office structure.

[The Imperial Steel Works, Japan Observation Space](#)

3. Discover Nagasaki's shipbuilding roots and Thomas Glover



kazukiatuko / PIXTA



iland / PIXTA

Nagasaki was officially Japan's sole port for international trade during its Edo Period isolation. This is where the Shogunate chose to build a navy in the mid-19th century, as it explored the response to growing pressures from Western powers for opening up the country. The launch of Nagasaki Yotetsusho Foundry, Japan's first warship repair factory, in 1857 marked the beginning of what would become a key pillar of its shipbuilding industry, after being sold off to the Mitsubishi group in 1887.

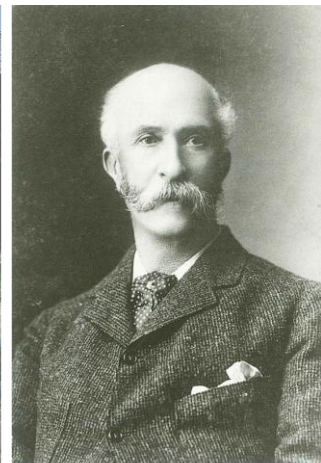
The birthplace of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, the Nagasaki Shipyard & Machinery Works produced many of Japan's greatest commercial vessels and warships, including Battleship Musashi (commissioned in 1942 as the sister ship of Yamato). After World War II, the Mitsubishi

Nagasaki shipyard went on to build large tankers, luxury cruise ships, as well as Maritime Self-Defense Force destroyers. More than 150 years since its inception, it remains one of Mitsubishi's premier shipbuilding operations.

Several facilities of the Nagasaki shipyard have been listed on the industrial revolution heritage, including No.3 Dry Dock and Giant Cantilever Crane, which has been operational for more than 100 years. While the facilities in active operation are closed to visitors, one can see the relics of the Kosuge Slip Dock (Kosuge Shipyard), which used Japan's first steam-powered towing equipment. Beginning November 6, a guided tour of the hauling shed will become available on weekends and holidays.

[Mitsubishi Nagasaki Shipyard](#)

[Kosuge Shipyard Ruins](#)



© Glover Garden

Glover Garden, and the Scotsman who played key roles in industrializing Japan

On a hill overlooking the shipyard and the port is the Glover Garden, one of Nagasaki's most popular tourist spots. On its premises is another World Heritage site, the Glover House and Office, the oldest existing Western-style wooden architecture in Japan, built in 1863. It features a fan-shaped roof covered with Japanese tiles, a brick chimney, and large windows of colonial design.

Its former occupant, Thomas Blake Glover (1838-1911), was a Scottish-born merchant who played important roles in Mitsubishi's Nagasaki operations — and in Japan's modernization and industrial development. Glover forged long-lasting friendships with Mitsubishi founder Iwasaki Yataro and his brother Yanosuke, serving as an advisor to Mitsubishi for 40 years.

In a joint venture with the Satsuma Domain, Glover imported the equipment from Britain to build the Kosuge Slip Dock in Nagasaki in 1869 for repairing foreign ships. He later sold his share in the venture to the government, which in turn sold the dock to Mitsubishi as part of the Nagasaki shipyard.

In a partnership with the Hizen Domain (in today's Saga Prefecture), Glover also invested in developing the Takashima Coal Mine on an island near Nagasaki in 1868 — the first in Japan to

use Western mining technologies — in response to surging demands for coal with the expanding fleet of steamships. The undersea mine was then acquired by Mitsubishi in 1881 in the group's first major diversification beyond shipping.

After his death, Glover's son and his wife lived in the Nagasaki mansion for 30 years, before it was purchased by Mitsubishi in 1939, at a time when the ongoing construction of Battleship Musashi at the dock across the bay had to be hidden from public view. Following its postwar seizure by the Occupation authorities, the residence returned to Mitsubishi's ownership, and was donated to Nagasaki city in 1957. It has since been turned into the Glover Garden, where a guided tour and virtual reality experience are available. Glover Sky Road, an inclined elevator, gives easy access to the hilltop site.

[Glover Garden](#)

[Glover Sky Road](#)

4. Exploring the coal mines that powered modern Japan



© Omuta City

The Miike Coal Mines, in the area straddling southern Fukuoka and northern Kumamoto prefectures along the Ariake Sea, once boasted the largest output in the country. Two of the mines — the Manda Mine and the Miyanohara Mine — and the Miike Port, as well as the special railway that linked the mines to the port, are on the World Heritage list.

Each of the mines, which are some 1.5 km apart, contains preserved structures. If short on time to visit both, it is recommended to go to the site of the Manda pit, the better-preserved of the two. The site (entrance fee required) retains the elevator shaft and multiple brick buildings, and a guided tour is available. At Manda Coal Mine Museum and the Omuta Coal Industry and Science Museum, visitors can learn its history as it contributed to Japan's modernization.

Coal was the key energy source that fueled Japan's drive from the Meiji-era modernization and

industrialization through its post-World War II reconstruction and rapid economic growth. Japan's industrial progress accelerated as coal fueled everything from blast furnaces to steam locomotives, steam-powered battleships, transport vessels, and electricity turbines.

Development of the Miike Mines started in full swing after the government sold them in 1889 to the Mitsui conglomerate, which employed cutting-edge British technologies to modernize and expand the facilities. In 1997, with the decline in coal demand, the mines were eventually shut down after more than a century in operation.

[Miike: Story & Sites](#)

[Miike Coal Mines](#)

[Manda Coal Mine Museum](#)

5. Concluding the journey at Shuseikan Sites in Kagoshima



©Sengan-en

In Kagoshima, historical relics related to the Shuseikan industrial project are listed on the heritage sites, which include a machinery factory building, the foundations of a reverberatory furnace, a former residence of British engineers hired for a spinning mill, the remains of the Terayama Charcoal Kiln, and the Sekiyoshi Sluice Gate of Yoshino Leat.

One can learn about the Shuseikan relics within the premises of the sprawling 50,000-sq-meter Sengan-en garden. Originally built in 1658 as a retreat for the Shimadzu clan of the Satsuma Domain, the garden is famous for its use of "borrowed scenery," which integrates the active volcano Sakurajima and Kinko Bay into its design. Its historic house, which was also used as a diplomatic guesthouse, is a unique architectural blend of traditional Japanese and Chinese styles, reflecting the clan's outward-looking mindset.



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Using the former building of the Shuseikan Machinery Factory, the Shoko Shuseikan Museum showcases the history of the Shimadzu family through a collection of over 10,000 artifacts. It documents centuries of dynastic history alongside the industrial projects. A workshop to make beautiful Satsuma Kiriko cut-glass, a craft that flourished during the clan's industrialization efforts, is located next to the museum. The opening of Sengan-en station on the JR line last March made access to these historic sites easier.

The relics of the Shuseikan project — launched by the Satsuma Domain leaders even before the Tokugawa Shogunate opened up Japan — provide a window into the nation's modernization process. The project was the brainchild of Shimadzu Nariakira, the 28th head of the Shimadzu clan. For nearly 700 years, the Shimadzu family reigned over southern Kyushu, and its control of the maritime trade route — even under the nation's isolation policy — enabled the clan to acquire information and culture from overseas. That led Satsuma to sense the pressures from Western powers approaching Japan in the mid-19th century more quickly and acutely than the rest of the country.

Driven by a sense of crisis, Nariakira launched the project in 1851, clearing land next to his villa to establish Japan's first modern factory complex. It was here that the adaptation of Western technologies for iron production, cannon casting, and shipbuilding began, laying the foundation for Japan's subsequent industrialization. The Shuseikan historical sites offer concrete evidence of Japan's swift embrace and adaptation of Western industrial technology.

[Shoko Shuseikan](#)
[Sengan-en Garden](#)



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Meiji industrial revolution significant from world history perspective



According to Kohirata Shiho, a curator of Shoko Shuseikan, up to 1,200 people were working at the Shuseikan project — the largest-scale industrial operation in that era. It was a project that heralded Japan's Meiji-era modernization, with technology and expertise gained here contributing significantly to the early-phase industrialization efforts that took place mainly in Kyushu and Yamaguchi.

The Meiji Industrial Revolution sites highlight the profound legacy of industrialization during Japan's transition to modernity. Their inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage Site has led to a surge in international visitors to the museum and sparked greater interest among Japanese children in the nation's history, she said.

"People in Japan took the initiative to adapt Western knowledge to develop the country into a modern state over an extremely short period," Kohirata said. "The rapid development of heavy industries in iron and steel, shipbuilding, and coal laid the foundation for today's Japan as the monozukuri (manufacturing) powerhouse. That process is of significant value from the perspective of world history."

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