

BIAS NEWS and NOTES

Edited by Joan Day

BIAS continues to expand. At 1st November 1972, the total was 178, including 29 family and 4 industrial members, and undoubtedly by the end of the year the numbers will be higher. A full programme of lectures, meetings, visits and excursions has been well supported, and with several members carrying out research on individual topics, the journal is well assured of its future supply of material.

The Society makes an effort to support other organisations in industrial archaeology. On 25th March, several members visited Cheltenham for the regional seminar, this year organised by the Gloucestershire Society for Industrial Archaeology. In the programme of lectures from participating societies, the BIAS contribution was made by M.J.H. Southway talking on the Kingswood Coal Industry. An excellent photographic display mounted by the host society provided additional interest and aroused much favourable comment. The Annual Weekend Conference of the Windmill and Watermill Section of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings was held at the College of St. Matthias in Bristol, from 14th-16th July. The local organisation of a busy programme of visits was in the hands of BIAS member, Martin Watts, and supported by other Society members. Later in the year BIAS representatives travelled to Glasgow for the second British Conference on Industrial Archaeology for a programme of lectures and local excursions which had been arranged 15th-17th September. It is planned to hold the third Conference on the Isle of Man. Coinciding with the Glasgow weekend, another group of Society members visited Cardiff for the Annual Conference of the Historical Metallurgy Group in one of the Halls of Residence of the University College of Wales. There, a BIAS contribution was made to the programme by Professor D.G. Tucker who gave a lecture on the Tintern Wireworks, and later acted as guide to the remains of numerous sites of the wire industry of the Angiddy Valley at Tintern. HMG has made plans to hold its next Annual General Meeting at Bristol in May 1973, to combine with a visit to SS Great Britain.

From Angus Buchanan comes news of Baird's Maltings at Bath:

'With the national pattern of consolidating the process of malting into larger and larger units, the survival of small maltings has become increasingly uneconomic, especially when they occupy city sites which could be

lucratively redeveloped for offices or housing. Baird's Maltings alongside the Kennet & Avon Canal at Widcombe in Bath is a good example of this rationalisation of the industry. A compact, graceful, building in Bath stone, this provided for malting on two floors, the lower being a stone vaulted basement at canal level, and a store-room above, with a traditional kiln alongside. A gas engine driven off town gas was installed on the ground floor and supplied power to the hoist. The firm sold the building in the summer of 1972 and malting ceased by the end of the year. Fortunately, a public outcry drew attention to the building, and it was included in the revised list of protected buildings for Bath. Fortunately, also, the building has been acquired by a local resident with a keen sense of preservation, who is anxious to find a new use for it which will maintain its external appearance as a canal-side feature. At the time of going to press, however, its future use had not been determined and the fate of fittings such as the gas engine is still uncertain.'

Owen Ward writes:

'The half dozen members who have been working at Stapleton most summer Sundays on the bank of the Frome have been digging their way further out of sight below the collapsed walls and flourishing vegetation of King's Mill. In some places the excavation has gone far enough down to be seriously hampered by flooding. On this riverside site the water level is little more than eight feet below the original surface, and at that depth we have had to call a halt until more efficient drainage can be provided, and this is going to be quite a problem. The most recent discovery has been a clear land drain crossing the site some three feet above the present water level. Fortunately it is now bone dry and looks as though it has been for a long time. The sides are lined with 'dry-stone' walling, and apparently the bottom is made of up broken cooking pot. There is no obvious method of drainage at a lower level. I suspect that the wheel-pit may have been filled in when the wheel and associated machinery were removed. We cannot reach the bottom of the pit yet because of water, but there is a notable absence of decayed vegetable matter in the fill which consists of cement, mortar and small rubble of all kinds. It is still not apparent why there should be both pantile and slate at floor level on many places around the site, as it is clear from a painting of the mill which we were recently shown that it had a pantile roof at the turn

of this century. It is becoming evident that this is a very old and much-altered site. The weir and the walls which have been built onto the face of it suggest at least three separate ground plans, in which water was laid on to the wheel in different ways. This wheel could have been outside the mill altogether until the latest alteration.'

Paper News comes from Brian Attwood:

'Production of handmade paper at Wookey Hole Papermill has now ceased after over 350 years. This statement does not mean in fact that handmade paper is no longer being produced in the Wells district as the Wookey Hole production has been transferred to St. Cuthbert's Papermill which is approximately a mile away at Haybridge. The Wookey Hole Papermill was covered in our survey of papermills in the Bristol region and paper has actually been made at Wookey Hole from 1610. The original mill was sold to the Hodgkinson family in 1845 and was rebuilt three years later, it being sold to the Inveresk Paper Group in 1952. The future use of the building is not at the moment decided. Contact has been made with the owners and some of the surplus equipment will be available to the Bristol City Museum. It is possible that this equipment will be installed in the mill building at Blaise Castle where it will become the basis of a typical handmade papermill. I recently had the good fortune to visit the Dard Hunter Paper Museum at the Institute of Paper Chemistry in Appleton, USA, and the small paper museum in the Swiss Folk Art Museum at Basle, Switzerland. The Dard Hunter Museum is undoubtedly the finest paper museum in the world and does have complete papermaking equipment from the original Wookey Hole Papermill. The paper museum at Basle is somewhat more modest but nevertheless contains an interesting collection and it could be that eventually we will have a similar collection on the Blaise Castle site. I have recently been in contact with the Papyrus Institute in Cairo, Egypt, where a study is being made of the ancient art of papyrus sheet manufacture. The curator has kindly presented to me samples of this work with a photographic description and it is hoped to put this on display in the Bristol City Museum.'

It was a happy coincidence when BIAS member A.H. Parsons of Bishop Sutton discovered a hitherto unknown will of one of the Bilbie bellfounders who once worked in Chew Stoke. Mr. Parsons is particularly interested in the local history of the Chew Valley including its industrial past, and his find is relevant to the BIAS lecture season of 1972 which has twice featured the subject of bellfounding. He writes:- 'It was about 1666 that the Bilbie family came to Chew Stoke to begin the business of bellfounding and clock-making. It was Thomas who first became famous, not only as a bell founder but as a maker of

Lantern Clocks, and although these are now very rare, one can be seen in the Victoria and Albert Museum. When Thomas died in 1730, his business was carried on by his two sons, Edward and Abraham and their bells are still to be found throughout Somerset, Devon and Dorset. One was installed in Chew Stoke in 1690 weighing 47lbs. at a cost of £2. 7s. 0d. When it was not convenient to cast a bell in the churchyard, this was carried out at Chew Stoke, somewhere near the house which is still called Bilbie House, but there are no apparent signs left of this important foundry. Between 1676 and 1688, a brother-in-law Edward Webb made lantern clocks and signed them 'Ed Webb in Chew Stoke'. In 1742 a Thomas Bilbie repaired the Great Clock in Wells Cathedral and the work was done so well that he won a contract to continue the maintenance throughout his life, for a fee of £3 per year.

By 1770 William Bilbie was well known for his long-case clocks, which he made with thirty-hour movements for the cottager and eight-day movements for the more wealthy. By 1785 Edward Bilbie was known for his clocks and a number of these still exist, although when brought up for auction they usually fetch two to three hundred pounds. The whole family were noted for the remarks they inscribed on their bells. In Dunkerton Church can be found on one of the bells, 'Before I was broke I was as good as new, but when that Cockey recast me I near was worth a penny'. The Cockey's were bellfounders working in Warminster. At Mark Church can be seen 'Come here Brother founders and here you may see what sort of workman the Bilbies be'.

In his will of 1789 William Bilbie left to his wife Martha real and personal estate for her natural life, on her death he bequeathed his Workshops, Bell House, Garden and nearby Orchard, also a field called Dippingstiles, to his eldest son Thomas Webb Bilbie, he to pay his sister Betty £20. To James Fear Bilbie, his second son, all that messuage commonly called Black Horse, with garden and orchard, the garden shall extend from the turnpike road to Mr. Olverton's Orchard in a right line with the old wall, also a ground called Mash, he must pay to his sister Betty £10, and £20 to Martha. To the eldest daughter, Betty, his house and garden also the orchard called Tilehay, "which I bought off Samuel Cox, to Martha, the orchard at Chilly Hill. If any of my said children, Thomas Webb, James Fear, Betty and Martha dies when single, the above to be equally divided between the survivors. My working tools and Stock in hand to my 2 Eldest Children, Thomas Webb and James Fear Bilbie, and it is my desire that Thomas and James will continue the business of Clock and Watch Makers, also Bell founders." James Bilbie died in 1812, leaving Thomas to continue with his sister Betty, but by 1829 the business had come to an end. Betty lived to the age of 84, a spinster in the year 1845. In 1970

I met a great great grand-daughter of Thomas, who lived at Knowle, Bristol, and has since moved to Northampton.'

Work has started on the restoration of the Smitham chimney above East Harptree, the wellknown landmark and relic of the Mendip lead-mining industry. Old photographs have been consulted by J Dawson and Sons, the Clutton steeplejacks, to ensure that they

rebuild the stack to the old Mendip style. After slowly deteriorating in recent years, the chimney was more seriously damaged by gales early this year. The Mendip Society undertook responsibility of raising £1500 to enable repair work to be carried out, and are on the point of reaching their target.

Robert Hunt in **British Mining of 1887**, described smitham in his glossary of terms on page 913 as: 'the smallest of the ore that goes through the wire bottom of the sieve'.