

The genius of industrial archaeology

(The following essay is adapted from the Introduction to the author's paper to the Conference at Bath University of Technology in November 1967. A report of this Conference has recently been published by the Bath University Press, see page 28.)

Industrial archaeology is primarily an activity and is certainly not a contemplative study, so that its main emphasis is on practical field work rather than on self-examination. Nevertheless, self examination has its uses in practice, and one of its most immediate applications is that it helps to clarify what it is one is doing and talking about. It is appropriate, therefore, from a strictly practical point of view, to pose fundamental questions from time to time in order to check one's bearings and to see if it has become necessary to make any adjustments in one's course. I want to consider here some such basic issues about the study of industrial archaeology which have emerged in the last few years.

First, there is the question of the definition of the subject. Various attempts have been made to define industrial archaeology, and some time ago I tried to distil from the experience then available a working definition which seemed to fit my own particular circumstances, and which could have a general application as well. It went like this: "Industrial archaeology is a field of study concerned with the investigation, surveying, recording and, in some cases the preservation of industrial monuments". Provided that one is clear that an "industrial monument" is any surviving relic or artefact of a phase of industrialisation which is obsolete or on the point of becoming obsolete, this still seems to me to be a reasonably sound definition of the subject, covering as it does the four main practical activities in which the industrial archaeologist is likely to find himself engaged. But I have come to feel recently that the definition needs strengthening by the addition of a further sentence which would read: "Industrial archaeology aims, moreover, at assessing the significance of these monuments in the context of social and technological history". Although this could be regarded as implicit in the process of "investigation, surveying, recording and. . . preservation", it can also be overlooked with the result that the activity comes to be regarded as a purely mechanical exercise of measurement and card-filling. To avoid this very real danger I consider that it is important to make explicit the more conceptual and analytical aspects of the subject. Hence my proposed addition to the working definition. I realise that, in putting it forward, I am suggesting a subtle change in the emphasis of the subject, with the effect of offsetting against the "I-spy" or "train-spotting" aspects of industrial archaeology

a specific relationship with social history and the history of technology. I regard this as important because it is necessary for the continued vitality of industrial archaeology that it should acquire a measure of academic respectability by demonstrating its value as a field study in the interpretation of social and technological history. If it is to do this, it is essential that it should rise above the merely mechanical level at collecting "bits and bobs" without attempting to evaluate them. Not so long ago, a plate appeared in the journal *Industrial Archaeology* with the caption: "A mysterious object". This is a symptom of an attitude to the subject which threatens to lose it in a sort of industrial antiquarianism.

Another basic aspect of industrial archaeology which has grown increasingly apparent during recent years is its intensely local focus. The apparently spontaneous emergence of local societies all over the country has been one of the most encouraging and perhaps surprising features of the development of the subject. Admittedly, the spontaneity has been abetted by the missionary work of such able propagandists as Messrs. Kenneth Hudson and Rex Wailes. But they alone are not responsible for the enthusiasm and sheer hard work of many of these societies, which are doing an excellent job of local investigation, surveying and recording, in the terms of my definition of industrial archaeology. They are also putting increasingly effective pressure on local and national authorities regarding the preservation of significant industrial monuments. British Rail For example, despite their extraordinary hari-kari complex for ripping out their own guts with impunity, cannot disregard public objections to the destruction of the Sudbrook beam-engines or Old Temple Meads Station quite as completely as they would have done ten years ago. Thanks to the initiative of local societies, moreover, many pieces of industrial equipment which would have gone to the scrap merchant ten years ago are now finding their way into museum collections of technological exhibits. All this represents solid progress for industrial archaeology, but the point which I want to stress here is that it is progress achieved by predominantly local initiatives, which has its disadvantages as well as its very substantial advantages. The main disadvantage is that the study of the subject tends to be fragmentary and lacking in homogeneity. This can be seen in the unevenness with which the Council For British Archaeology record cards of industrial monuments have been completed. It accounts in part for the editorial difficulties of the journal *Industrial Archaeology*, relying as it does upon intensely localised contributions which are likely to be of little interest to readers frequenting other parish pumps. It is also an important reason for the failure to materialise so far of a national society for the study of industrial archaeology, even though there is a growing awareness of the value of such an organization, particularly in working out and in applying a national policy for the preservation of industrial monuments.

An intriguing feature in the development of industrial archaeology which is related to this local focus and the amateur enthusiasm which provides the broad base of interest in the subject is the polarization which occurs amongst its devotees. On the one hand, there are people with one absorbing passion, be it steam engines, canals, or railway branch lines, who can (and will) rattle off engine dimensions, the number and size of locks on this or that canal, and the exact date of closure of a particular branch line station, at the drop

of a hat. On the other hand, there are those people to whom the human interest (or possibly the animal interest) of the subject is all important. These will look up the ghoulish details of a mining accident in contemporary newspapers, study the conditions of the Irish navvies who built the railways, and make reports on the distribution of types of horse troughs. Industrial archaeology accommodates both these extremes of interest, representing roughly the twin poles of the history of technology and social history, and the whole range in between them. Somewhere in the middle there is the happy mean at which the study of the social impact of technological change provides a fruitful conjunction of interests. The desirability of encouraging this median position at which diverse interests merge as the main "growth-point" of industrial archaeology stems from the need which I have already considered for industrial archaeologists to look more to the interpretation of the significance of their material.

A fundamental issue of industrial archaeology is that of motivation, summed up in the question: "Why bother?" Apart from the pleasure which it undoubtedly gives to its practitioners and the increased awareness of their environment which they derive from it, there are two major incentives which make it worth-while - the historical and the cultural. The historical incentive is the satisfaction, in so far as this is possible, of the historian's thirst for knowledge about past phases of industrialisation. The integration of archaeological and documentary evidence about industrial processes and the social effects of industry, while the evidence is still available, is a vital contribution to scholarship. To the historian, all such knowledge is good knowledge. Future historians will have cause to be grateful to the industrial archaeologists who have taken the trouble to record industrial relics which would otherwise have disappeared without trace. An essential part of this process is the creation of a full and readily accessible archive, and it is to be hoped that the National Record of Industrial Monuments will continue to receive the support from local organisations which is essential if it is ever to become such an archive.

The cultural incentive involves the preservation of carefully selected industrial monuments as significant elements in our cultural tradition and heritage. The emphasis on selection is necessary in order to avoid a reputation as cranks aiming at indiscriminating preservation. The fact is that we cannot expect to live in a museum even if we should want to do so, and that only a small selection of industrial monuments can be preserved. This demands a close scrutiny of the criteria by which industrial monuments must be evaluated in order to make out a detailed justification for preservation in every particular case. It also demands thought about the means of financing and maintaining monuments, and about the means of obtaining various sorts of scheduling and other protection. But only vandalism or philistinism of a high order could tolerate the complete disregard of the cultural incentive for preserving a selection of our finest industrial monuments. Unfortunately, the fate of the Doric Arch at Euston and the uncertainty hanging over the future of the Coalbrookdale Iron Bridge and Old Temple Meads Station demonstrate that such attitudes prevail amongst many of our public and private institutions. Industrial archaeologists thus have a duty to educate public opinion on this important aspect of our national heritage.

Although the spirit or "genius" of industrial archaeology remains predominantly practical and local in emphasis, with most of its support coming from enthusiastic amateurs interested in some particular aspect of local industry or history, there have thus been some signs of change in recent years. The move to secure a measure of academic recognition for industrial archaeology, the growing interest in a national society, the need to hammer out a national policy for the preservation of industrial monuments, and the desirability of finding a general rather than a particular or parochial focus for the subject, are now stimulating thought and discussion amongst industrial archaeologists. In my opinion, the continued vitality of the subject will depend upon the satisfactory solution of these problems, and the fusion of the practical element of industrial archaeology with the analytical element by which industrial monuments are assessed in their social and technological context. In this way the study of industrial archaeology will acquire fresh significance and interest.

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THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF INDUSTRIAL ARCHAEOLOGY

The papers delivered at the Bath Conference on Industrial Archaeology in 1967 have been published under this title by the Bath University Press. Copies of the book cost 7/6d each and are available from Mr. J.H. Lambie, Deputy University Librarian Northgate House Bath or through a bookseller. The four papers in the collection are:

- 1 "The Status of Industrial Archaeology" by Angus Buchanan.

- 2 "Industrial Archaeological Field Work" by Michael Rix.

- 3 "The Function of Museums in Industrial Archaeology" by Frank Atkinson.

- 4 "Industrial Archaeology in Europe" by Kenneth Hudson.

There is also a note on the discussion and other activities at the Conference, which was the fourth in a series of autumn conferences on industrial archaeology organized by the Centre for the Study of the History of Technology at Bath University of Technology. The collection is edited by R.A. Buchanan.