

EDITORIAL - ON INDUSTRIAL ARCHAEOLOGY IN BRITAIN

by Angus Buchanan

After a decade of vigorous growth, the study of industrial archaeology in Britain is in a curiously disorganised condition. The strength of the study is in the local societies and specialist societies such as those in the field of transport history. There are several dozen of these bodies, pursuing varied programmes of active research, excursions, and physical effort to preserve or restore industrial monuments. But these activities are almost exclusively preoccupied with immediate, parochial, objectives, and while they are in themselves thoroughly commendable they have not done much towards cultivating a general national, or even international, body of informed opinion about the subject.

The result has been that the study of industrial archaeology, viewed as a national activity, has come to consist of a large number of active but unrelated groups, proceeding on their respective courses without much regard for each other or for the overall co-ordination of their work. Attempts by the Council for British Archaeology and by the establishment of the journal **Industrial Archaeology** to provide a measure of co-ordination have not so far succeeded, although both these ventures have achieved more limited objectives. The CBA, for instance, has promoted the National Survey of Industrial Monuments out of which the National Record of Industrial Monuments (NRIM) has grown, while the journal has attained a satisfactory circulation by giving the local and specialist societies pieces to please as many groups as possible.

Examining the "headless" state of the industrial archaeological movement, the Bath Conference of 1968 decided to set up a Steering Committee with a mandate to explore the possibilities of strengthening the national organisation of the subject. There appeared to be three areas in which such strengthening was necessary. First, in providing a regular information service for industrial archaeologists, with facilities for liaison and co-ordination between societies. Second, in encouraging systematic excavation and other research projects such as making industrial archaeological films on a national basis. And third, in promoting a comprehensive national policy for the preservation of industrial monuments. This would imply the existence of an authoritative body which could represent industrial archaeologists nationally, make official approaches to government bodies, and generally act as a mouthpiece for the subject. The Steering Committee has been meeting for almost a

year now and it will be making its report to the Bath Conference in the autumn of 1969. It should not be expected that the Committee will produce a precise blue-print for a national organisation. There are too many outstanding problems and unresolved differences of opinion to allow anything so definite at this stage. It is time, however, that the alternative possibilities for the future study of industrial archaeology were squarely faced.

In the first place, there is the simplest possibility - that things go on very much longer as they are now. This will mean that the local and specialist societies will continue to go on their own way, duplicating effort and failing to achieve a rational preservation policy, as a result of which effort will be wasted on preserving the wrong things while other more deserving industrial monuments are lost. Sheer inertia and the strength of vested interests make this non-solution of the problems we have posed seem all-too-likely. If the resolution to break out of this situation is sufficiently strong, however, two broad alternatives present themselves. One is the development of existing organisations to fulfil the requirements of national co-ordination, and the other is the creation of a national industrial archaeological society. The first of these alternatives has the advantage of economy of resources, but depends upon the pre-existence of organisations capable of development in a manner suggested. The second alternative has the advantage of making a fresh start, but presents formidable administrative problems.

Of bodies capable of development into national organisations for industrial archaeology, the only plausible candidate at the moment is the CBA. Other possibilities might have been the Newcomen Society, the publishers of **Industrial Archaeology**, and the Bath Conference, but for different reasons none of these seem at present appropriate. The Newcomen Society has renounced any intention of taking the lead in the national industrial archaeological movement, preferring its traditional role as a learned society in the field of technological history. The publishers of the journal did take an initiative towards establishing a national organisation two years ago, but the consensus of opinion at the time was that the introduction of commercial interests would handicap any national organisation in formal approaches to government and other official bodies. The Bath Conference has so far been too spasmodic to provide continuing direction of a national

organisation, but the development of something like the Steering Committee to provide such guidance would be possible.

This leaves the CBA as the only organisation already equipped to perform the necessary functions, and indeed it should be observed that the CBA has, since the establishment of the Research Committee in industrial Archaeology in 1959, exercised a definite interest in the subject. Through the creation of an Advisory Panel to the Research Committee, moreover, the CBA has been responsible since 1967 for preparing lists of buildings recommended for protection or preservation and for making representations to the appropriate national or local authorities. Again, the CBA has received a grant of £2,000 for several years from the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works towards the cost of the National Survey of industrial Monuments. In these substantial respects, therefore, the CBA is already equipped with the nucleus of a national organisation for industrial archaeology. All that is necessary to convert it into reality is to reorganise the Research Committee on a representational basis (at present members are recruited by an informal process of selection); to refurbish the Advisory Panel so that it can hold frequent meetings in order to develop its preservation policy; and to persuade local societies to affiliate to the CBA so that they can use its publications as a means of co-ordinating and planning systematic work. As the recognised recipient of government money, the CBA could hope for financial assistance in this extension of its industrial archaeological work, and could reasonably expect to increase its secretarial staff to cope with it. The prospect, indeed, of achieving the desired measure of national organisation with the maximum efficiency and greatest

economy, is so attractive that it deserves detailed consideration. It may well be that the CBA will find this prospect of increased activity more alarming than the industrial archaeological societies, for it could understandably see this development as something of a cuckoo in the unruffled nest of classical archaeology.

However attractive in some respects, it is thus by no means certain that the CBA machinery can be coaxed into fulfilling the required objectives. This means that the other alternative should also be considered - the creation of an independent national society. An initial problem here is to decide whether to make it a society open to individual or to organisational membership. Against individual membership is the powerful argument of the difficulty of recruiting members in such a diverse and locally-orientated subject, and persuading them to pay yet another membership subscription. Organisational membership is administratively more feasible, but would lead to a society parallel to the CBA, a sort of Council for British Industrial Archaeology. Either form of national society would have to decide on its publication policy and would thus have to determine its relationship with the existing journal. The preparation of a journal is usually an important incentive to the formation of a society, so that the position is complicated in this case by the pre-existence of a now well-established journal which is steadily improving in quality.

Whatever the difficulties confronting the national organisation of industrial archaeology, the attainment of this objective is one by which BIAS, along with other local societies, has nothing to lose and much to gain. The course of the discussion in coming months will thus be followed with close attention.