

EDITORIAL TenYears of BIAS

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The tenth anniversary of a society such as ours is an opportunity both for celebration, as we can justifiably congratulate ourselves on the continuing vitality of our organisation, and for contemplation of our achievements and of the tasks still requiring our attention. The celebrations have taken a number of forms, some serious and some convivial, beginning with a series of public 'Walkabouts' round the inner-city parts of Bristol last summer. For the contemplative part of the anniversary events, it is appropriate that we should express a few reflections here.

BIAS was established in 1967, after three seasons of a very successful adult class at the Bristol Folk House had demonstrated the measure of support which could be expressed in the Bristol Region for an attempt to promote the systematic study of industrial archaeology. Since then the Society has held, with the co-operation of the Extra-Mural Department of Bristol University, a series of winter lectures each year, to which leading industrial archaeologists from all over the country have come to talk about their work. Side-by-side with this academic programme, the Society has maintained a high standard of meetings addressed by its own members and by local experts in aspects of industrial history, and has kept up a cycle of field-work expeditions which have never dwindled in enterprise or enthusiasm. We have also secured recognition, if modesty permits us to say so, for a high standard of publications in our Journal and Bulletin.

These may be regarded as the routine elements constituting the success of BIAS over the last decade, but however impressive they may be it does not necessarily follow that the Society has made substantial progress towards achieving its stated objective of advancing the study of industrial archaeology in the Bristol Region. It is obviously important to provide satisfaction and enjoyment for our steadily growing membership, but it is also essential that we should be making a more general impression on public opinion and on the formulation of planning policy in the region. Overcoming our natural modesty once again, it is possible to show that the Society has in fact made some very positive contributions in this direction. They may be reviewed under the headings of recording, preservation, and conservation.

Recording is a vital part of industrial archaeology, because we have to face the fact that as much of the material in which we are interested - whether it be buildings, machines, or other artefacts - cannot be preserved, it is necessary to secure an accurate archival record for posterity. First class recording demands skills in surveying, draughtsmanship, and machine drawing, which are not easily come by, but we are fortunate as a Society in having a handful of members who have possessed these skills and who have put them at our service. Thus, in co-operation with Bristol Museum, it was possible to secure a record of the Redcliff Shot Tower before its demolition, and a full survey of Old Temple Meads Station. More recently, a number of experts have combined their skills in the BIAS Survey Unit to produce excellent records of the Albert Mill, Keynsham; the Saltford Brass Mill; and the Fairbairn Steam Crane in Bristol Docks. All this work has been published in the pages of this Journal, together with many less ambitious but nonetheless valuable survey records of smaller mills and sites in the region. We have also undertaken very useful surveys of the Turnpike Roads of the region (our first collective recording exercise); of the paper mill sites; and of industrial remains in the City Docks and the local coalfields. The work is still far from complete, particularly as new categories of building and artefact are continually being drawn within our field of investigation (artisan housing is one of the latest; although here BIAS made an early start with its Survey of brass-workers cottages at Warmley). But some very substantial work has been done.

The compilation of an adequate record of industrial monuments is a basic task for any local industrial archaeological society, but like other societies of this sort we have also become heavily involved in the more physical task of securing the preservation of buildings and artefacts. This activity takes several forms. At one level, we have exerted ourselves to obtain statutory protection for local monuments through listing and scheduling procedures, and our efforts have contributed in part to the fairly satisfactory situation in this respect throughout Avon County, with all the finest industrial monuments and many of the lesser monuments enjoying a measure of legal protection. BIAS has been represented at one critical planning enquiry, to resist the demolition of the listed seed warehouse on The Grove. The decision of the Secretary of State to uphold our objection was doubly welcome, because it both safeguarded the integrity of one of the few remaining corners of Bristol's genuine waterfront architecture between The Grove and Bush's Warehouse, and blocked the intrusive relief-road scheme which was projected across St Augustine's Reach at this point.

Legal protection is only the first step towards permanent preservation, because it does not prevent an owner from neglecting the industrial monument in his possession, or even from demolishing it if he desires to do so sufficiently strongly. Like other societies, we have been drawn into seeking preservation by bringing monuments into the care of the local museum or other forms of sympathetic ownership. The Fairbairn steam crane, for example, has been acquired by Bristol City Museum and restored to working order with the help of our members. Members have also been involved in local canal and railway preservation projects, in the restoration of the Claverton pumping engine, and in the preservation of several stationary steam engines.

Unlike other forms of archaeological investigation, industrial archaeology does not rely heavily on the technique of excavation because most of the monuments with which it is concerned are above ground. But in some cases careful excavation is the only means of recording and preserving an industrial site, and our Society has been involved in two such operations. At King's Mill on the River Frome in Stapleton, a small group of members have spent several seasons studying

the remains of what appeared at ground level to be an unpromising site, and have succeeded in recovering the plan of the mill. On a larger scale, another group of members has tackled the formidable task of excavating and interpreting the extensive site of Fussells' iron works near Mells: this work has now completed its third season and has revealed a fascinating succession of different phases of occupation of the site, but the work is still far from complete. Efforts on this scale are very arduous and time-consuming, and those members of BIAS who have devoted their time so unstintingly to these excavations deserve the thanks and gratitude of the whole Society.

Beyond recording and preservation, there is another level at which a local industrial archaeological society can hope to exert some influence. This is on regional conservation policy, and in this respect also BIAS has some creditable achievements. Interest in industrial archaeology has been both a cause and a consequence of a radical change of emphasis in national planning policy, whereby the dedication to 'modernization' and 'comprehensive re-development' has changed to a more subtle and sensitive appreciation of the need to conserve the best from the past in planning the cities of the future. In Bristol, a great deal of irremedial damage has already been done to the industrial heritage. But the milk having been spilt, we should be thankful for what is left and concentrate on securing its retention. The change of attitude was already appearing some years ago, when Bristol Planning Committee refused British Rail permission to redevelop the Old Temple Meads site, and put up the imaginative proposal whereby the new Dragonara Hotel incorporated the historic base of the surviving Bristol glass cone into its new building as a restaurant. More recently, the new conservationist strategy has become apparent in the abandonment of the redundant outer ring-road scheme and a much more constructive approach to the maintenance of the water-surface of the now obsolete Floating Harbour than seemed possible only five years ago. In all these matters, BIAS has made its collective views known, and on some it has been consulted by council officers and by official committees.

BIAS welcomed the formation of Avon County four years ago, because it represented an apparent rationalization of administration and planning policy in the Greater Bristol Region, and because it happened to coincide almost exactly with the extent defined as the area of activity of its members. The multiplication of authorities and the corresponding weakening of neighbouring counties, particularly Somerset now shorn of its industrially significant northern section, has subsequently given rise to doubts about the manner of the county reorganisation, but so far as conservation policy is concerned Avon County has demonstrated its determination to get its priorities right by appointing a Conservation Officer and by supporting efforts to establish a Conservation Trust which would be responsible for the restoration of significant buildings, with several industrial structures being included for consideration. In these consultations, the views of BIAS are heard and taken into account, and for a small voluntary society this is a significant achievement.

Although there has been a distinctly favourable change in public policy towards all sorts of conservation, and in particular the conservation of our industrial heritage, there is no guarantee that policy will not change again in the future, should a revival in material prosperity promote another building boom and a consequent pressure for sweeping redevelopment proposals. The work of a society such as ours can thus never be regarded as complete, for in addition to the routine activities which our members have always found so enjoyable there will remain a permanent need for recording, for preserving selected industrial monuments, and for maintaining our influence, as a democratic pressure group, in favour of an enlightened conservation policy. Such a continuing function is obviously beyond the competence of any one individual or any particular group of officers, so that BIAS will require replenishment by a steady flow of new members in the years ahead. It has been one of the most encouraging signs of the vitality of our Society that it has not relied on particular individuals, but has continued to grow and prosper as individual members have come and gone. The Society has generated a powerful sense of comradeship amongst its members, but over the last ten years many of the original members have departed. Some have left the region, while others have changed their interests and some have died. We mourn the passing of the latter, but we are grateful for the creative fellowship of the past and glad to see it being constantly recreated by new generations of members. The Society is grateful for all the support it has received from other institutions, and especially from Bristol City Museum and from the Universities of Bristol and Bath. But in the last resort a Society like BIAS is made, for better or for worse, by its members. These members have had an active and creative decade, performing a valuable function in representing the interests of industrial archaeology in their chosen region. May the members over the next ten years have an equally satisfactory and enjoyable experience.