

## The Elton Collection

### Margaret Ann Elton

*Sir Arthur Elton was a founder member of BIAS and a contributing member of the early Bath Conferences of Industrial Archaeology where his wide knowledge and appreciation of technical film material was particularly welcomed. His Collection was, by then, acknowledged to be the finest of its kind in the country: books and pamphlets, prints and drawings, commemorative items of glass and china all tracing the development of industry and technology.*

*The Collection was accepted by the Treasury in lieu of estate duties following Sir Arthur's death in 1973. After long deliberation it was eventually allocated to Ironbridge from a list of eager applicants including those from Bristol. Sir Arthur's daughter Julia, undertook the mammoth task of compiling a catalogue of items before removal from Clevedon Court, and now her mother Lady Elton, herself a keen local historian with a comprehensive local library, writes of her late husband's Collection. JMD*

When Sir Arthur gave his Presidential Address to the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society in 1963 on 'The Pre-History of Railways', it was a radical departure from the monumental brasses, the lake villages, the tessellated pavements, the Norman clerestories, and the ornithology and geology currently popular in a well-documented county. Withal, it was resiliently accepted, astonishing though his plea for 'the study and protection' of all the industries of Somerset appeared to be. Gracefully acknowledged in 1963 to be the county's expert in these matters, perhaps members of BIAS will be the first to appreciate that he has long been surpassed. But it is unlikely that he will ever be equalled as a collector.

The Elton Collection is well worth an award for the *most mis-understood* Collection of the Century, for which a select few industrial archaeologists have been largely responsible. In an unlikely combination with the picture research industry, they think of it as a rich quarry to be mined for 'illustrations'. Historians of Technology are swift to ignore Sir Arthur's scholarship, but find his Collection a vast, useful, random, whimsical affair and 'an unrivalled source of visual material' (sic).

These misconceptions have not been shared by the Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum, nor the University of Bristol Library. They jointly made a strong case for the retention of the Collection. Unfortunately, not a single museum in Great Britain has the space, the staff, or the money to house it coherently under one roof. Even at Ironbridge, the pictures are parted from the books, albeit by only a few hundred yards.

The greatest possible distance lies between those who are able not only to look at the pictures as a hitherto neglected aspect of the History of Art, but also to see the Collection as a unity, with its subtleties and intricacies; and those who see it in bulky fragments, according to their specialised

interests. This ponderous notion ought not to dismay the youngest and most enthusiastic members of BIAS who are looking freshly at 'the grubbier aspects of our genius', and are most likely to have their vision illumined and extended by looking at the Elton Collection with a comprehension unknown to their elders.

In a recent article on 'The Future of Science Museums', Angela Croome observed that the transplanted of artefacts, and even buildings, can create an atmosphere of 'Toytown' in an open air industrial and technological museum. This led her, somewhat uneasily, but with considerable perception, to the question of whether to preserve the true condition of the past, or an improved version of it.

It is a giddy notion that the Elton Collection is an improved version, authorised by a single mind and imagination, in a private exploration to reveal the interdependence between diverse aspects of endeavour. If it is admirable in its gravity, its elegance, its scholarship and its taste, it makes its demands and, it is easy to deny them. A private collection without precedence can be very fragile, and the translation of a private into a public collection carries with it enormous responsibilities, not least to maintain the perception of the collector.

The Collection began simply enough in early childhood, and consisted of the numbers and names of steam locomotives. 'For I had the good fortune to be brought up in Bradford-on-Avon, and Bradford-on-Avon had the good fortune to be served by the Avon Valley branch of the Great Western, and the Great Western not only gave its engines names but set them out in splendid letters in gleaming brass, on a curved name-plate'.

By 1920, he was at Marlborough. At a jumble sale in the Town Hall, he chanced upon Acworth's *The Railways of England* for tuppence. Nearly forty years later, prowling round near-by Ramsbury, he found *The Reports of the Juries of the Great Exhibition*, a presentation copy from Fox Talbot to the Marquis of Lansdowne, with Fox Talbot's original photographs, for fifteen shillings. Acworth had transformed the loco spotter into a book collector, and confirmed the cautious prudence with which he acquired one of the great private libraries of his time.

It is impossible to describe the scope of it here, but it embraces Railways, Canals, Metals, Coal Mining, Civil and Mechanical Engineering, Chemistry, Electricity, the Thames and Channel Tunnels, the Great Exhibition, Petroleum, and Aviation. There are rare pamphlets, Acts, Bills, Maps, Handbills, Reports, Company Histories, a vast section on Biographies, and a fastidious collection of Travels, Tours, and Guides.

Elaborately cross-indexed in ten bulky drawers, the logic of his cataloguing has its wayward moments. **Topography: U K Cornwall** leads to **See West Cornwall**. The next card

(badly spelled and typed) carries the injunction: **See West Cornwall Mineral Railways**. West Cornwall Mineral Railways lead to **See Metals Ferrous and non-Ferrous**, and back again in an S bend to **See Topography: U K Cornwall**. More unfortunate was the binding of six pamphlets together, cataloguing four under **Pamphlets**, one under **Books**, and leaving the sixth uncatalogued. This took some feverish explanation to the retired naval officer whom the Treasury in its wisdom sent down to 'supervise' the packing.

But no such errors accrued to the great illustrated books which are the glory of the Collection. Protectively sheltered behind glass doors, they elicited all the skills of a dedicated bibliographer and the sharp eye of an art historian. It was fifty years since the illustrations in Acworth had sent him in pursuit first of the illustrators, and then of the artists. On coming down from Cambridge to London, he began to haunt the old Caledonian Market, looking for such railway scraps as he could afford. As his interests broadened, the scraps were enhanced by a growing collection of sketches, drawings, prints, engravings, aquatints, lithographs, and oils on nearly every aspect of technology. He never regarded them as distinct from his library, even though they demanded another kind of discipline to arrive at judgments of quality. He virtually created what Tom Rolt described as 'the Aesthetics of Technology'.

In his library, one could read everything ever written about Robert Stephenson, and everything about bridges. At the bottom of one staircase hung an engraving of Stephenson and behind his confident stance, the Britannia Tubular Bridge. Along another staircase there was one of the great series of tinted lithographs of the Tubular Bridge by George Hawkins, the other carefully kept in a press with the General Plan of Works (attributed to Hawkins) bearing the signature of Robert Stephenson and the other engineers

The General Plan, and all the Hawkins' plates (but not the framed lithograph showing the Tower, which was published separately) are then to be found in Edwin Clark: *The Britannia and Conway tubular bridges*, with general inquiries on beams and properties of materials used on construction, (London, 1850). Near the escritoire in which this was kept, was a coin chest, containing a bronze commemorative

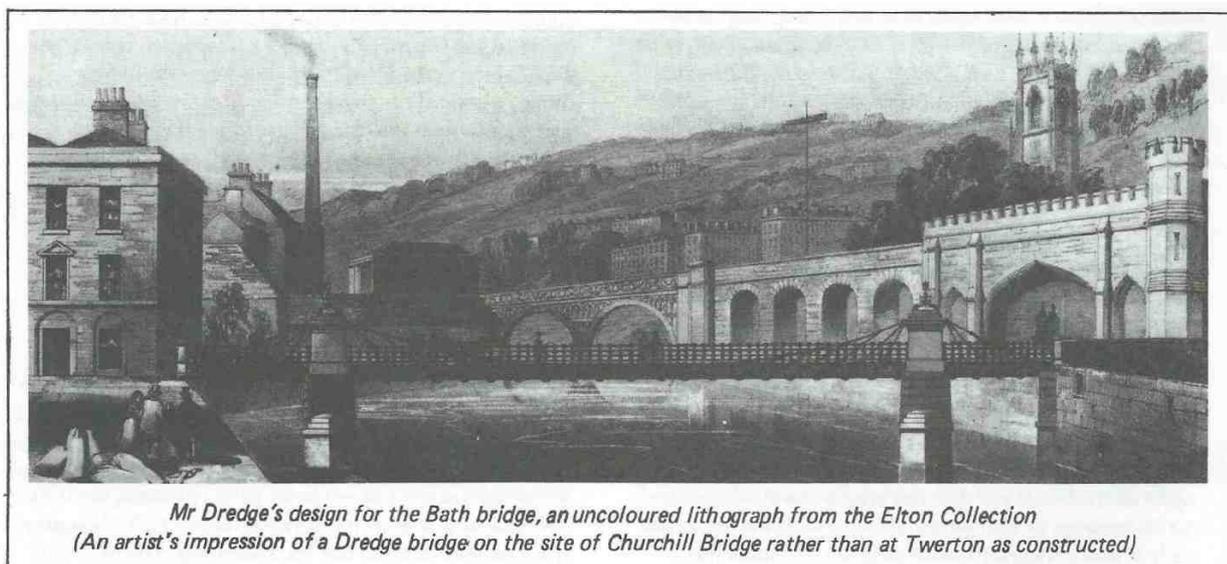
medallion with a View of the Britannia Tubular Bridge on the obverse side, and Wyon's profile portrait of Stephenson on the reverse. A small statue of Robert Stephenson, full length, holding a plan, stands on the press which once held the Hawkins' lithographs and General Plan.

And if the imagination can bear to pursue this further, a modest earthenware jug is transfer printed with the Tubular Bridge. It could be found on a shelf in a china cabinet. A modest book (title forgotten) bound in green buckram was gold stamped with the Tubular Bridge. Finally in the nursery, and so hung as to catch the sun, is a naive picture (sic) in water colour, on which is super-imposed, in gleaming split straw, a fantastic version of the Tubular Bridge inevitably framed in bird 's eye maple, with gilt inset. All one can say is that no two scholars in our time ever served Robert Stephenson better than Tom Rolt and Arthur Elton,

He was privileged in his friends, the first of whom he met when he was nine, but Michael Hyatt-Baker had barely more than a decade to live, and never did take over the Timetable Division of the GWR. At his next school he met John Betjeman. They cycled from Marlborough to Swindon on Saturdays. In his twenties, he met Charles Clinker, Henry Dickinson in his thirties, and Charles and Dorothy Singer before he was forty.

The last great friend of his life was Jean Gimpel, and he had the pleasure of seeing a Frenchman into the long, honourable tradition of the gifted English amateur. He thought, with an odd kind of perception, that an authority on the French cathedral builders ought to see Ironbridge, but he could hardly have foreseen that *The Medieval Machine* (1976) was to be followed by the study of ancient technology. It is a pleasant thought that yet another amateur made a master catalogue of her father's Collection, and compiled the catalogue of the Gimpel Collection of Models.

It is a very long time since the *Isaac Elton* sailed out of Bristol, and since Sir Abraham Elton 1 and Abraham Darby were joined in some inventive enterprise. Ten generations later, the Elton Collection followed Abraham Darby to Ironbridge. It too was an inventive enterprise, and worthy of inclusion in the *Annals of Bristol*, had John Latimer extended them into the twentieth century.



Mr Dredge's design for the Bath bridge, an uncoloured lithograph from the Elton Collection  
(An artist's impression of a Dredge bridge on the site of Churchill Bridge rather than at Twerton as constructed)