

BIAS : SUCCESSES AND FAILURES OVER TWENTY-FIVE YEARS

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BIAS has greatly honoured me by making me its President, so I am particularly glad to have this opportunity to express my best wishes to the Society on its 25th Anniversary. Of course, industrial archaeology in the Bristol Region is rather older than that: Neil Cossons and I struck up our partnership in 1964, when he was the Assistant Curator in Technology at Bristol City Museum and I was in the process of establishing my research unit, the Centre for the Study of the History of Technology, at what was then the Bristol College of Science and Technology. Our first organized function was a summer coach party out into the Somerset Coalfield, and I well remember being met by a somewhat bemused Robin Atthill as what seemed like a flood of children poured off the coach in the Nettlebridge valley. Still, it was an excellent and instructive occasion. At one point, in the derelict Binegar forge site, an old resident who stopped by to observe the unwonted activity became a marvellous source of information about the forge in its prime. From such serendipity much of the pleasure of IA is derived.

For several years, Neil and I ran an Extramural class on the subject, and as the class kept on growing and showed no sign of dispersing at the end of the normal three-year cycle, we took the momentous decision to convert it into a permanent Society. Thus in 1968 was born the Bristol Industrial Archaeological Society. We always intended it to cover more than the city of

Bristol, but Neil was adamant that only "Bristol" should appear in its title in order to give us the neat acronym of "BIAS". In fact, our main area of operation came to coincide almost exactly with that defined by Neil and myself for our book The Industrial Archaeology of the Bristol Region and subsequently by the planners who devised the new County of Avon. I sometimes wonder whether or not the latter were influenced by our argument for regarding "Greater Bristol" as a coherent area. Perhaps that is not a point to stress, however, because nobody has ever loved Avon County and it now seems unlikely to survive the next round of local government reform. But as a primary unit of regional government it would still make a lot of sense.

So BIAS came into being and has now enjoyed a quarter of a century of vigorous existence. It has always tended to be a general purpose and educational organization rather than a project-centred society like many other IA bodies, and I consider that this has helped it to survive and to undergo periodic revitalisations as personnel have changed and old interests have faded away. But it has, in the process, taken part in many substantial preservation exercises. Most of these have been at least partially successful, but there have also been a number of serious failures. The late 1960s, in particular, witnessed several sad losses. The Shot Tower on Redcliff Hill was sacrificed in the interests of road widening, and even though it was replaced by a modern tower which kept the process going in Bristol for another generation, it seemed a poor exchange for



Bath Green Park Station before restoration (R.A. Buchanan)

the distinctive brick turret which William Watts built on top of his house to make what was without any doubt the first tower in the world for making lead shot by allowing it to solidify in free fall. The Great Western Cotton Factory was another serious loss to the stock of industrial monuments in the region. It was typical of the advanced fireproof mill form of construction in the 1830s, familiar enough in some other parts of the country but virtually unique in Bristol. Our late Member George Watkins particularly deplored the disappearance from Barton Hill of this fine building and its two different engine houses (the steam engines themselves went long ago) and hoped to prepare a piece for BIAS Journal on the subject. I hope that it may yet be possible to put together such an account from his notes.

Other notable textile mills were destroyed about the same time in Twerton, Bath. Neil, who pioneered a class on IA in Bath, led his students on an early emergency recording mission when these large woollen cloth mills were about to be demolished, but so far as I am aware their work was never written up as a presentable report. Other industries such as pottery, paper board and tobacco have now gone from the central Bristol area, with almost nothing left to mark their existence and one-time prosperity. Much of the zinc and copper works established by William Champion at Warmley have succumbed to the erosion of suburbanisation, along with the route of the Avon and Gloucester Tramway, and a similar process is obliterating most signs of early industrial activity in Nailsea (although the discovery of the foundations of a glass cone was a bonus here). The viaduct carrying the former GWR over Pulteney Road in Bath was first vandalised by unsympathetic restoration with engineering brick, and then replaced by the modern non-descript steel slab which occupies the site today. The catalogue of failures could be continued, but perhaps I have made the point sufficiently to show that we have no cause for complacency.

On the other hand, BIAS can take considerable pride in and credit for some notable achievements of industrial conservation. First and foremost I would place the preservation of the traditional City Docks of the Floating Harbour. I get real pleasure now from walking on the waterfront round The Grove, Welsh Back and St. Augustine's Reach, because I feel that through BIAS and other conservation organisations we have managed to influence the Bristol landscape here in a very positive and satisfactory manner. Not everything about it is perfect, and some of the details of new buildings around the Harbour could have been much better, but the overall impression is very pleasing. In particular, the water surface has been preserved, so that it is difficult to recall now that the City Planners seriously canvassed the idea of covering much of it to create better traffic circulation and car parks. The traffic plans were changed, however, by our successful defence at Public Enquiry of the "Seed Warehouse", which obliged the planners to drop the major relief road projected to slice across St. Augustine's Reach after demolishing this building which stood in its course. Meanwhile, the renovation of Bush's Warehouse (preserving the shell around the new Arnolfini Gallery) was a masterpiece, and the conversion of the St. Augustine's Transit Sheds into a shopping precinct was inspired. It is a pity that one

or two of the cranes could not be preserved on these sheds, but at least some were restored on the Industrial Museum waterfront. The preservation in this area of the maritime atmosphere, so essential to the ancient heart of Bristol, has thus been little short of miraculous.

Another minor miracle has been the restoration of the S.S. Great Britain to the dry dock in which she was built in the Port of Bristol. In the book to which I have already referred, Neil and I observed in 1969 that "one of the most remarkable industrial monuments of the Bristol region" was then in the Falkland Islands (p.49). A year later it was back in Bristol, having been rescued by an extraordinary act of philanthropy and the expertise of a Dutch salvage team. Reactions in Bristol were at first mixed, with the City Planners being especially uneasy about the idea of reinstalling the ship in the dry dock which had been extended specially for her construction in the 1840s, but which in the 1960s lay athwart one of the projected inner ring road spurs. Once there, however, the Great Britain quickly became a major tourist attraction, and opinion rapidly firmed up in favour of restoring her and keeping her permanently in the dry dock. And so it has been. The work of restoration has gone on quietly for the last 22 years, and will go on for a long time yet. This has been, by any standards, a major triumph of industrial heritage preservation.

Closely associated with the success in connection with the S.S. Great Britain has been the vigorous and sustained revival of interest in all things connected with I.K. Brunel. Some people have regarded this enthusiasm as rather "over the top" for an engineer who was never a Bristolian, but there are in fact several good reasons for regarding Brunel as an outstanding person in the industrial history of Bristol. For one thing, so many of his engineering achievements have left monuments in the city. Not only the ship, but also the Clifton Bridge (completed as a memorial to him in 1864), the Harbour works in the City Docks (the Underfall scheme is still in regular use, and his notable South Entrance Lock with its pioneering swing bridge remain largely intact), and the Great Western Railway with its fine terminus of 1840 at Temple Meads, together with many minor features, all testify to the activity and engineering genius of I.K. Brunel. In addition, the city possesses an outstanding documentary testament to Brunel in the archives of his engineering career housed in Bristol University Library. It is not surprising, in these circumstances, that the engineer should have become such a powerful focus of attraction for industrial archaeologists in the region, nor that his monuments should have become objects of local pride and careful preservation. The fulfilment of Bristol as the foremost Brunel Heritage centre has thus been a substantial achievement of industrial archaeological endeavour in the region.

There are many other achievements which deserve to be recalled. Bristol has a large number of "lost" industries, so that it has been important to secure monuments of these. Some had virtually disappeared without trace before anything could be done to preserve them - pottery, clay pipes, and sugar refining amongst them. Glass making appeared to have gone the same way, so that Neil and I were very excited to discover

he stump of an important glass cone serving as a chemical factory (actually, it was artificial fertiliser) in Prewett Street, close to St. Mary Redcliff. The preservation and partial restoration of this cone was achieved by incorporating it as the restaurant in the new hotel erected on the site, but the device of cladding the upper part of the brickwork with Welsh slate has not been altogether happy. Nevertheless, the cone remains, saved largely by the intervention of the late John Totterdill, who was then working in the Planning Department. John's other success in industrial conservation, before his untimely death, was in the gateway to the "Devil's Castle" in Amos Vale. This, incidentally, is now uncomfortably close to the inner relief road under construction for the Bristol Development Corporation.

Brass, like glass, came close to becoming a forgotten industry in the Bristol region, but it has been rescued partially from oblivion by the activity of BIAS members, and especially Joan Day, in recording its activities and preserving some of its dwindling remains. The Saltford Brassworks - one of the smaller but more manageable sites - has been (and remains) the object of particular concern, but the other major centres of the industry at Keynsham, Warmley, Kelston and Twerton have all received careful attention.

In Bath, always firmly within the BIAS terms of reference, there have been some outstanding achievements. The preservation of Green Park Station, after two Public Enquiries and incorporation in the projected Sainsbury Superstore, seemed an almost hopeless case when the railway closed in 1966. The restoration of the Kennet & Avon Canal has been achieved by the K & A Trust working assiduously towards this end over many years, but many BIAS members have been associated with this effort. The preservation of the remarkable Victoria Bridge of 1837, a subtle suspension design developed by a local brewer, James Dredge, has meant that Bath has come to possess the most technically interesting bridge in the region. And the preservation of so much of the astonishing Bowler Collection of light engineering and mineral water bottling, in what is now the Bath Industrial Heritage Museum in the Camden "Real Tennis Court", has established an important feature in the industrial landscape of Bath. The initiative for this came largely from one person, Russell Frears, but BIAS members have taken an active interest in the project from the outset.

To the south, the Society has always been interested in the mining activity on the Mendips, and has had several excellent excursions around the lead workings at Charterhouse, Priddy, and Smitham Hill. The chimney on the latter - the last industrial chimney on Mendip - has been given a new lease of life, and the condensing tunnels at Charterhouse have been partially consolidated, although they remain extremely vulnerable to misuse. The most distinguished BIAS activity in this part of the region, however, has undoubtedly been the work done by a team of members under the direction of John Cornwell in excavating and recording Fussell's engineering workshops and forge in the steeply wooded valley below Mells. This enterprise continued over many seasons, and the team has gone on to tackle other difficult but rewarding sites like those of coal

mines in the Golden Valley at Bitton and at Nailsea. So far as sustained practical application is concerned, this must rank as one of the most substantial BIAS contributions to the industrial heritage of the region.

Another achievement of BIAS which deserves to be singled out for special mention is that of the BIAS Journal, which has appeared regularly every year since the foundation of the Society and which has maintained a persistently high standard of contents and presentation. It has thereby performed a very valuable service both in keeping the wider membership of BIAS, including many people who are not able to participate more actively in its proceedings, and an informed general public beyond the membership, aware of topical issues and significant research in the industrial history of the region. Together with the Bulletin and other occasional publications of the Society, the Journal has established an authoritative voice for BIAS in the region and amongst industrial archaeologists elsewhere.

I feel confident in concluding, therefore, that while regretting the various opportunities for industrial conservation which have been missed over the last 25 years, BIAS has demonstrated its value in a number of very material ways, and that after a quarter of a century of activity we are entitled to a modest expression of satisfaction in the work and achievements of the Society. It is true that the work has been done by a handful of active members, but that is always the way in even the most healthy societies, and those who are unable to participate actively have done much by their support and encouragement, as well as by their expertise and their influence - in terms of numbers - on planning proposals. So it is good to be able to pronounce so emphatically that the Society is in good heart after its first 25 years. May it do as well in the next quarter century.



Interior of Green Park Station (R.A. Buchanan)