

EDITORIAL: WELCOME TO AVON

If all goes according to plan, the long-awaited reform of local government areas will come into operation in the next year. After reorganised elections in 1973 we will find ourselves in 1974, in the Bristol Region, united within the new County Authority of Avon. It does not seem likely that the protestations of Bristol, and of various other local government units which will lose their separate identity, will have any influence on the Government's determination to bring Avon to birth. Whether we like it or not, we must face the fact that the ancient City and County of Bristol, the County Borough of Bath, and a medley of RDC's and UDC's in parts of southern Gloucestershire and northern Somerset, are about to be combined in the new Authority which will take over extensive powers, particularly in planning policy.

For our part, we welcome the change. Although there is no special merit to be anticipated from the mere increase in size of local government, BIAS has always been concerned with a region which extends from the Mendips in the south to the limits of the Bristol Coalfield in the north, and from the Severn coast in the west to the Limpley Stoke Valley in the east, and as this is virtually the area of Avon we hope that the coincidence of regional interests will lead to a co-operative and constructive relationship with the people responsible for development and conservation in the united authority. The reorganisation presents politicians, planners, and amenity bodies with a splendid opportunity to reconsider their strategy for future developments within the context of an integrated region. Planning policy for road works, industrial development, new housing, and educational expansion, could all be improved by such co-ordination. So could the planning of public amenities, open space, and the preservation of distinguished features including outstanding industrial monuments. If the reorganisation is to succeed, it is important that the responsible bodies should join together to secure such a wide-ranging reconsideration of policy. It is most appropriate, therefore, that we in BIAS should once more rehearse our priorities in the preservation of industrial archaeological features so that there should be no misunderstanding about what is important when the new planning policy begins to take shape.

First, then we reassert the case for preserving **Bristol Floating Harbour**. Now rapidly approaching complete obsolescence and closure, and under the threat of the

hydraulic changes envisaged in the Bristol Docks Act of 1971, the remainder of the Floating Harbour area has been the subject of an enquiry by Sir Hugh Casson, the results of which have not yet been published. We hope that Sir Hugh will share our view that the old maritime "core" of Bristol, with its wharves and warehouses, locks and entrance basins, bridges and workshops, is worth conserving as a unit. The enormous success of Bristol "Water Festivals" has demonstrated the unique and vital quality which the possession of this waterway gives to Bristol and its region. Another happy portent has been the gradual acceptance of the Floating Harbour as the natural home of the ss **Great Britain**. No irreversible commitment has yet been made, but it now seems much more likely than it did a year ago that the great ship will remain where she now is - in the dry dock adapted for her construction in the 1830s.

Many other buildings and structures in central Bristol require sympathetic treatment as part of our industrial heritage. Foremost amongst these is **Old Temple Meads Station**, which now enjoys a high degree of statutory protection yet remains in a limbo of neglect until such time as it can be acquired from Bristol Rail and put to a congenial use. The Avon Authority should give urgent attention to the acquisition of this important monument. One building which has fared well since we last reported its condition as a matter of anxiety is the **Redcliff Glass Cone** now pleasantly incorporated in a new hotel building. Much of the credit for this scheme should go to John Totterdill, whose tragic death in February 1972 was such a grievous loss to the cause of conservation in the Bristol region.

The River Avon connects the urban areas of Bristol and Bath, like a pair of unequal dumb-bells, across the middle of the new Authority. Bath is only awakening slowly to the significance of its industrial monuments, but satisfactory progress is being made with the restoration of the Widcombe flight of locks on the **Kennet & Avon Canal**. **Baird's Maltings**, a functional building, alongside the canal, has been preserved for the time being, and so has **Green Park Station**. Although now owned by the Corporation, it is still far from certain that the station will be redeveloped as it deserves to be, to serve the long-standing need of Bath for a large concert hall and exhibi-

tion area. Meanwhile, Dredge's unique **Victoria Bridge** remains unprotected, even though it has recently received a much needed coat of paint. The new Authority could usefully institute a survey into the historical significance of all the bridges for which it will become responsible.

Between the urban centres, we urge on the Avon planners the extreme desirability of retaining adequate open spaces, and of improving public access to these spaces. This object could be admirably served by many of the schemes which we have previously canvassed: First, the suggestion of a linear park to follow those stretches of the **Avon & Gloucestershire Railway** which have not yet been built over; Second, the institution of a suitable memorial to the once great brass industry of the Avon Valley, possibly by making the **Kelston Brass Works** available as a public amenity; Third, support for a similar reminder of the now fast disappearing coal industry, ideally by the preservation of part of the workings of the **Writhlington Colliery** together with the mile of railway track between the pit and Radstock which could be used by the Somerset and Dorset Railway Society based there; Fourth, the preservation of remaining sections of the **Somerset Coal Canal** and the Limpley Stoke-Hallatrow Railway which replaced it as a public footpath; and Fifthly, attending to the remains of the Mendip lead industry which are fast being eroded at **Charterhouse, Priddy, and Smitham Hill**. It is not yet completely certain where the boundary of Avon with Somerset will run, but it is likely to place the Smitham site firmly in Avon so that the Authority should take over immediately the responsibility for

the chimney there which is currently the object of valiant exertions by local bodies striving to prevent its complete collapse. Part of the brickwork crumbled in June 1972, but a prompt rescue attempt has succeeded in retaining much of the stack as a landmark feature and an eloquent monument to the lead industry.

In addition to these major schemes, a number of isolated artefacts should be high on the short-list for conservation and amenity utilisation by the new Authority. We would place in this category the **Albert Mill, Keynsham; Priston Mill**; Bristol Waterworks steam engines at **Blagdon** and **Chelvey**; and **Clevedon Pier**, the reconstruction of which still awaits the collection of sufficient funds.

The items named in this survey are, of course, only a few of the many which could have been selected for mention, but they include the most important industrial monuments in Avon and they indicate the sort of programme of constructive conservation which could be integrated into an imaginative development plan to the benefit of the whole region and to posterity. Every item in such a programme would need much more detailed analysis than can be attempted here, and our Society will be willing and, indeed, anxious, in welcoming the advent of Avon, to assist in any way within its power to conduct such further investigations as may be necessary. We trust that the new men who undertake the planning responsibilities in Avon will look with sympathy on the industrial heritage of the region for which they are the trustees, and will accept our invitation to help in its conservation.