

BIAS NEWS AND NOTES

edited by Joan Day

During 1974 BIAS members have shown an increasing interest in the more practical pursuit of industrial archaeology, a healthy activity which will augment the considerable amount of documentary research being undertaken by individuals who prefer 'to do their own thing'. In the past such lone enthusiasts have provided the bulk of Journal articles, a trend we hope will continue, but the society is now large enough to encourage those facets of our interest which have long been neglected. With still-increasing membership, now standing at a new peak of 240 inclusive of company and family members, BIAS should be encompassing all aspects of industrial archaeology. The results of teamwork and enthusiasm which, earlier this year, overtook the group who surveyed the logwood mill at Keynsham are detailed elsewhere in this issue, but more important, the work resulted in the formation of the BIAS Survey Unit. Members of this unit have since measured the beam-engine house at Kilmersdon Colliery which may possibly be demolished once the NCB have vacated the site. A list of buildings, particularly those with an uncertain future, in addition to likely volunteer helpers, is being made by Colin Frayling in preparation for future activities.

Fussell's site at Mells

In the Spring of this year two BIAS members were visiting Fussell's edge-tool site at Mells and, by chance, discovered that plans were being made to route a sewerage pipe through the works. John Cornwell decided to embark on an emergency site excavation with the object of discovering and recording any features which might persuade the authorities to change their pipe routing. Permission was readily obtained from the landowner, and backing was given by BIAS committee. From that time a small group of members and interested friends has worked at Mells regularly. Robin-Stiles reports:

Considerable changes have now taken place on site since serious clearance and excavation works commenced in the spring of 1974. On most weekends, since then, this quiet valley has reawakened to the bustle of activity as tumbled walls are cleared of spoil and heavy vegetation.

A task force of boys and staff members from Downside School has been carrying out valiant work in felling quite sizeable trees, and removing quantities of rubble to reveal the substantial remains of two hand-forges, complete with air pipes and anvil blocks. At the same time other groups led by John Cornwell have been making the site more secure, reopening sealed archways, and carrying out the more massive excavation works

necessary to uncover a buried water-wheel and two curious furnace-like structures that are not, as yet, fully evident as to their former function.

Apart from a site plan of about the 1840's, direct documentary records of the Fussell's business are sadly lacking, but we are fortunate in having photographs of the exterior of the buildings taken in the final stages of their use as an ironworks about 1880. These photographs, in conjunction with maps of various dates, and other secondary sources of information, are beginning to build up a picture of a large, complex and prosperous undertaking, and also providing some intriguing clues as to what we may find as the excavations progress.

So far the surface of the subject has been only scratched and further assistance will always be welcome, both on the physical and the research side. For instance many original Fussells tools have survived and we would like to know the location of others and the marks inscribed on them - one note of warning however, the trade name of Fussells was used long after the works closed and it is still possible to buy a modern Sheffield made reaping hook marked "Fussell Guaranteed" !

One novel aspect, as far as BIAS is concerned, has been the extent of local interest and publicity that has been generated by our efforts with an item on "Points West" T.V. programme broadcast on Tuesday evening, 17th September, and another for "Radio Bristol" on the morning of 14th October 1974.

The prime objective, that of saving the site from destruction through the installation of a proposed sewer, appears to have already been achieved, with an enlightened decision by the Local Authority to route the sewer down the opposite side of the valley. Excavation and research will therefore be continuing at a steady pace for quite some time to come, and detail reports will be published in this Journal in due course.

The steam crane

For those members who wish to employ their skills and energy in preserving equipment and machinery, an opportunity will shortly occur to assist restoring the heavy-lift crane situated on Wapping Wharf. This 'Fairbairn-type' steam crane, built in 1874 by Stothert and Pitt of Bath, is still more or less in working order but badly in need of maintenance. It has been relinquished by the City Docks and is now in the care of the City Museum. It is planned to clean and restore it in situ under the guidance of men who once worked

on it. Volunteers should contact Paul Elkin, Curator of Technology at the Museum.

Spike Island proposal

Recent proposals from the Director of the City Museum to the Arts and Leisure Committee of Bristol City Council suggested that an area in the vicinity of the Underfall Workshops should be considered for development as a Maritime and Technological Museum. Dr Nicholas Thomas said in his report, 'The Underfall Yard with its historic buildings, machinery and equipment would provide atmosphere, displays and facilities unrivalled in the world.' Whilst too many similar proposals have been shelved in the past to cause real excitement at present, this idea must receive full support from this society and its individual members. If adopted, it would solve many problems for Paul Elkin and his department. Work is progressing on the restoration and conservations of many items in their care but the display of any new acquisitions to members of the public becomes increasingly difficult, just as the pressure on storage space is causing many problems in accepting donations of equipment. Members can help individually by writing to their local Councillors in support of the new Museum proposals.

The project brought publicity to a name for the area containing the Underfall Yard which is new to most Bristolians, historians and BIAS members alike. Apparently, Spike Island is very familiar to those who have worked with the Port of Bristol Authority and was adopted officially for the Museum proposals at the suggestion of David Neale, Chief Engineer to the City Docks.

Regional Conference

The regional organisation for industrial archaeological societies which was established on an informal basis at Exeter last year will be holding its 1975 conference on the weekend of Saturday, 5 April at the Worcester College of Education. Residential facilities will be available and a film evening will be organised for those who wish to travel there on the previous Friday evening but the main programme of society lectures will be held throughout the Saturday. An additional series of visits is also being planned for those who wish to remain until Sunday and it is hoped to tour the Museum of the Royal Worcester porcelain works at some time during the weekend.

Kelston Mills houses

Industrial housing is a subject which has been very largely ignored by members of the society until quite recently. Some interesting comparisons have now been

made between rows of houses which once stood, or still stand, on three former sites of the eighteenth-century brass and copper works established by William Champion. Champion listed houses and tenements in a Warmley Works inventory made in 1761. Could the row of houses measured and photographed by BIAS members prior to demolition in 1968 possibly have been these same dwellings? The photographs have been compared with a row of houses photographed at Bitton before they were demolished two years ago, and also the row of houses which still stand at Kelston Mills. All are very similar. The Bristol brass company took over these sites later in the century, but this company appears to have no history of building this type of housing elsewhere, therefore it seems reasonable to suggest that the houses may have been built prior to Champion's bankruptcy in 1769. If this is so, the surviving Kelston Row is earlier than the housing at Cromford and Belper, thought to be the earliest examples of industrial housing to be seen in the country. Jeremy Lowe and Christopher Powell, two lecturers from the Department of Architecture at UWIST in Cardiff with special interest in industrial housing, have visited Kelston at the request of BIAS members. They concluded that the group of houses constitute an excellent example of a very early pioneering industrial colony and could possibly date from the 1760s. Unquestionably these houses justify proper recording and further research to find further evidence to date construction more closely.

William Smith's cottage

An article published in the **J Soc Bibliography of Natural History**, 1974 by Joan M Eyles, the biographer of William Smith the geologist, challenges the authenticity of the cottage at present identified as Smith's home in the parish of South Stoke, near Bath. William Smith, well known as the 'Father of English Geology', was employed as a surveyor in the building of the Somersetshire Coal Canal in the 1790s. In 1798 he purchased a property near the canal called Tucking Mill, or Tucking Mill House in the parish of Monkton Combe. In her account of careful research on early maps and documents, Mrs Eyles argues convincingly that the Tucking Mill Cottage in South Stoke which bears the tablet 'Here lived William Smith...', is wrongly identified. (This cottage lies to the west of the parish boundary formed by the stream flowing from Horsecombe Vale into Midford Brook, the correct Tucking Mill House is 46m east of the stream and 15m above the road.) A strong plea is made for the real Tucking Mill House to be scheduled as a building of historic interest and for the tablet to be removed to it.