

BIAS NEWS AND NOTES

edited by Joan Day

1977, our tenth anniversary, has been a busy year for BIAS members, particularly for those who form the committee. In addition to our usual intensive programme we have been involved in various activities in celebration of our formation ten years ago. Although it was disappointing to have to cancel the conference proposed for September which was to highlight our interest in Bristol Docks, most of the speakers were incorporated into our Extra-Mural Winter Lecture Programme. Other celebration plans proved more rewarding, starting with the exhibition in the entrance hall of the Central Library, which introduced the overall subject of industrial archaeology and the particular involvement of BIAS to a wide section of the public. The broad scope of members' activities, as portrayed by extracts from *BIAS Journal* from its inception, was presented in an attractive display to which the public responded with interest. The series of three public Walkabouts organised later in the year brought even greater enthusiasm, to a point which was almost overwhelming at times. Following radio publicity, the demand for BIAS leaflets describing the three city-centre walks was far greater than had been anticipated. In consequence, the series is to be repeated and extended during the coming year and new routes are being planned to ensure the continuity. Our celebrations as planned were not intended as a boost to BIAS membership, nevertheless, they achieved that end. We close the year just short of 350 members.

Reflecting on developments of the ten years since our formation it is encouraging to register the increasing interest in the conservation and preservation of industrial features in our environment. Perhaps the contributions to the study of industrial archaeology made by our society and its individual members have helped to sway public opinion towards the gradual change which has taken place. Whatever the cause, there now exists a greater awareness that industrial remains can have an intrinsic value of their own which makes the best worth keeping. Only by sustained effort in recording and research can the industrial archaeologist attempt to provide worthwhile guidance of the importance of local industrial monuments in the context of local and national technology. Even when this is available, controversy still continues over particular features in some areas. Notably, at present, at Bath over the Green Park Station. News of local conservation issues follows below.

Bristol Docks

Following the years of inevitable malaise as the commercial port has been slowly dying, prospects are brightening at last for the future of Bristol's dockland as a leisure centre for the city. The industrial Museum, sited in M Shed across the water from the Arnolfini Gallery, is scheduled to open in mid-March and in consequence, is reported by Paul Elkin in more detail elsewhere. M Shed is linked by railway line to the *ss Great Britain* and it is proposed, when finances are available, to make use of this stretch to steam some of

the city's collection of railway locomotives. It follows that the Stothert and Pitt Fairbairn steam crane will then be strategically placed to capture public interest. At present, the crane awaits insurance tests before it can be operated again but, apparently, these are not likely to present such an obstacle as first thought. In the mean time, BIAS member Tom Fisher has made temporary weatherproofing to gaps in the roof in order to protect the restored donkey engine.

Elsewhere in the docks the City Council, aided by a Job Creation Scheme, has cleared Baltic Wharf formerly used as a timber wharf, to provide a site for forty touring caravans. A dutch barn has been converted into a dinghy store, a dockside cottage will provide a club-house and to complete facilities for holiday-makers who have boating interests, a new slip-way has been built for pleasure craft. In St Augustine's Reach work is being carried out to convert the *Lochiel*, a Clyde pleasure boat, into a floating pub and restaurant to be run by Courage Western Limited. Plans are well advanced for opening early this year. These are just some of the schemes now nearing completion, but those who regularly visit the docks area will have noticed the other summer attractions. These include the horsebus which regularly encircles the docks, the Bristol Packet, the traditional narrowboat which provides tours round the docks, and the ferry boat offering a commuter service across the docks to the Great Britain. Proposals for a marina in the upper part of St Augustine's Reach are seen as an essential part of the docks redevelopment programme, and the council has asked developers to come forward with schemes to take up to 200 craft in this area, but, ironically, the Avon County planners still insist on retaining their long-term road scheme which would bridge this stretch of the harbour, thus preventing its access to boats.

Charles Hill and Sons Limited

With the city purchase of the Albion Dockyard of Charles Hill and Sons Limited, there are official hopes that it will be possible to establish a small craft-repairing service in the dry dock on part of the site, but what was to happen to the items of historic and technical interest which are no longer required? Members of BIAS committee were concerned about this aspect, and in consequence, John Powell wrote to the company and received the following reply from *Mr J C G Hill*:-

'... I have been the member of the family who has been most interested in its history, and I am glad to be able to tell you that the original house built for my Great Great Grandfather, Mr Charles Hill is being preserved, and within that house, which is still used for board meetings and conferences, I have managed to save a lot of the early half-models and models of the ships built here going back even to our original Dockyard which, in point of fact, was at Hotwells on the other side of the river which was started in 1760. I have also managed to collect and buy in many

original paintings of early sailing ships and steamers owned by the Firm, also some interesting documents and the original bell of the last sailing ship built in the Dockyard. I started to do this soon after the end of the Second World War, and I believe it to be the finest collection of any shipping firm still in existence in the World.

Recently I have had everything documented and the Bristol Art Gallery are going to do some restoration work on some early drawings. As a matter of fact I did write a book about our history some twenty seven years ago which, I am glad to say, was very well received and reviewed by the public. As you may have gathered, although we have sold the Albion Dockyard we have not sold any of the original offices attached to this Dockyard and we are, at the moment, intending to stay on here, but you can rest assured that while I am still alive all these matters will be attended to now that it has at last been realised how important the history of the Yard is to the general public. I am quite certain that one way or another future generations will preserve as much as we possibly can accommodate. . .'

The book to which Mr Hill refers is:
Shipshape and Bristol Fashion Liverpool, 1951

The Kennet and Avon Canal

John Powell writes:-

1977 has again shown how beneficial the Government's Job Creation Schemes have been for canal restoration projects. Some months ago it was announced that the breach near Llanfoist, on the Brecon and Abergavenny Canal, was to be repaired under such a scheme. More recently, a sum of £125,000 has been allocated to the Kennet and Avon Canal in order that brickwork on the 29 locks at Devizes (ie not just the Caen Hill flight) can be made good and the side-ponds cleared. This sum must be matched by a sum of about £110,000 from the Kennet and Avon Canal Trust, and the project will provide jobs for 43 people for one year.

Meanwhile, the Job Creation Scheme at Limpley Stoke (see Notes and News, *BIAS Journal 9*) has been extended until April, 1978, and the contribution from the Kennet and Avon Canal Trust is likely to be approximately £105,000. Progress has been satisfactory on this stretch of the canal, most of the concrete having been laid by the end of December, 1977.

Though outside the scope of Job Creation Schemes, much dredging has taken place between Bath and Dundas during the year, and preliminary work on the aqueduct at Avoncliffe has also been undertaken. This indicates that the prediction made at the Canal Trust's AGM this year - that the canal could be open to navigation between Bath and the bottom of Devizes locks by 1980 - is more of a reality than one could have hoped for a year or two ago.

Sydney Gardens' bridge restoration

Research undertaken by BIAS member, Dr Hugh Torrens of Keele University has revealed that the two cast-iron bridges over the Kennet and Avon Canal in the Sydney Gardens, Bath were supplied by the Coalbrookdale company, through the agency of George Stothert, ironmonger, of Bath. The

bridges are of differing designs but both have plaques dating them 1800 and are listed by the DoE. They are believed to be the earliest surviving cast-iron bridges in the area and, of course, contemporary with John Rennie's construction of the canal. A recent report by Bath City architects' department estimated that some £8,800 would be required for work needed on the bridges although they had been found to be sound structurally. Because of the historic connections with the forebears of their company, Messrs Stothert and Pitt Limited have now offered to carry out a substantial part of the work required, the long-needed replacement of the balustrade of the decorated footbridge, which they describe as part of the company's Jubilee-year effort. In support of their offer, it has been agreed that the council will take responsibility for the waterproofing of the bridge deck beneath the footpath. When this work has been completed consideration will then be given to work required on the other bridge, a wider, skew structure, plainer in appearance but of more complicated and interesting design.

In addition to proposals for work on the Sydney Gardens bridge Stothert and Pitt have also agreed to repaint the two small footbridges over the Washhouse and Top Locks of the flight at Widcombe. These bridges bear the name of Stothert, Bath (see photograph and article, *BIAS Journal 9*) and are believed by Dr Torrens to be of later construction, at least after 1811. (George Stothert junior announced that he had established an ironfoundry in 1815 separate from his father's previous ironmongery business).

Green Park Station

Angus Buchanan writes

The position regarding Green Park Station remains very unsatisfactory. There has been no lack of imaginative plans for retaining the office building and train shed in the re-development of the site, including concert halls and skating rinks. So far, however the only proposals for the retention of this fine industrial building which have received any financial support have been those to incorporate it as a covered car park in schemes for new super-stores, and Bath City planners are opposed to such ideas because it is claimed that they would be detrimental to the trade of existing retail stores and so cause problems of 'blight' in other parts of the city centre. The Council has thus applied for planning permission to demolish the train shed in the hope that a clear site will attract firm offers to build a hotel, which is what the planners would like. But the official enquiry into this proposal has been delayed pending the report of yet another shopping survey which the planners expect will vindicate their judgment on shopping needs within the city. Meanwhile, the industrial monument rots away, and it is clear that the point of no return beyond which it will be impossible to rehabilitate the building must be imminent. Urgent action to save it from decay is necessary, but there is no indication that such action will be forthcoming.

Mells Excavation

Progress at the BIAS excavation being directed by John Cornwell at Fussells' Edge-tool works, Mells, has become rather less spectacular during the past year, and with good reason. Once the decision was made to divert the main

effort towards the protection and stabilisation of structures

already exposed, it is estimated that some 200 man-hours were spent on this essential programme of conservation work. Now, at the beginning of the new year, preparation is under way for a new phase in excavation and fifty yards of rail track and other items of heavy plant have been installed to facilitate its resumption. Initially, it is proposed to investigate the tower structure of the gasholder and adjacent buildings. At the same time, there are hopes that progress will be made in research on the history of the site by reference to deeds held by the landowner. For instance, it is now clear, from very brief glimpses of such documents, that when the Fussell works was established in 1744 the site was, by no means, virgin but had previously been inhabited with buildings which had become derelict. Possibly this fact will influence future plans for excavation. Those members who would like to join the group of enthusiasts who work at the site on most Sundays should contact John Cornwell, telephone Bristol 658256.

The Bowler Collection

Miss Georgina Russell, the curator of the Bath industrial History Trust achieved one of her main objectives in December 1977 by getting the Bowler Collection installed at its ultimate resting place at the new Camden Works Museum in Morford Street, Bath. The collection consists of items of machinery and equipment from Bowler's jobbing engineering-works-cum-brass foundry situated in Corn Street, Bath, from 1876 to its closure some eight years ago. The entire contents of the works was then purchased by designer and Newcomen Society member Russell Frears, who, subsequently, was responsible for establishing the Trust to house the collection of nineteenth-century equipment. The building being used for this purpose has an intrinsic interest, being constructed as a court for Real Tennis, later converted to a brewery and, more recently, subject to controversy when its demolition was proposed. Those plans were circumvented and now all that remains to be done before public opening later in the year is a vast amount of cleaning, sorting and putting equipment into working order. It is hoped that the Museum will be ready for a preliminary opening for the Bath Festival in May, but it should be fully open to the public by September 1978.



Mill Notes

In September, members visited Kilcott Mill, near Hillesley in the Wotton-under-Edge area, to see the mill working and grinding corn after its restoration by BIAS member Mr W A Medlam. Having owned the mill for some twenty years, he set about his ambition to restore it to working condition on his retirement just over two years ago. Help came from several quarters, including the BIAS member who gave assistance with the shaping of a large number of oak cogs needed as replacements and the owner of a derelict mill in Upton-on-Severn near Worcester who donated a set of French burr stones for which Mr Medlam had long been searching. Since September, Kilcott Mill has been working at about fortnightly intervals, on an experimental basis, to gain experience in the grinding of flour for the kitchen and the production of cattle feed. It is hoped eventually to carry out these operations on a semi-commercial basis in order to finance the continued working of the mill. The main obstacle to the future of this enterprise is likely to be a shortage of water, brought about by the diminishing flow available in the Kilcott brook. This is thought locally to be caused by the lowering of the water table from nearby extraction of drinking water.

The two conservation proposals involving industrial water-mills in the Keynsham and Saltford area are still awaiting action, with both properties in the process of changing hands at the time of writing. The Saltford Brass Mills site is up for sale at £55,000 thus delaying hope for proposals which were investigated tentatively by Jenny Birkett, the Conservation Officer for Avon County Planning Department. It has been suggested that the mill buildings, with water-wheels and annealing furnace restored, might be linked with the Bristol City Museum, but at present, no source of finance is available locally. Such a plan, therefore, is reliant on the success of the proposed Avon Historic Buildings Trust, through which access can be gained to various charitable and government funds. It will also be necessary to obtain the full co-operation of the new owner of the brass-mill site, whoever that may be.

The Albert Mill at Keynsham is awaiting a new occupier having been vacated by Messrs Ellis and Everard (Chemicals) Limited. Financial support from the Department of the Environment was forthcoming for a BIAS plan, in conjunction with South Bristol Technical College, to restore the exterior waterwheel and logwood chipper to working order providing co-operation could be secured from both owner and occupier. There was every hope, from preliminary enquiries, that this might be arranged satisfactorily when Ellis and Everard decided that a change of premises was desirable. Understandably, the owner Mr R Thomas wishes to arrange a new lease for the mill before committing himself to conservation, although, in principle, he is sympathetic to such plans. We await future developments.