

Whither (or Wither?) Somerset's Industrial Heritage?

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Viewed thematically, industrial archaeology has always been a component of archaeology of all periods, for example, the excavation of evidence for probable pre-Roman lead mining at Charterhouse-on-Mendip (Todd 1994). The survey of the Victorian remains nearby (Stanton and Clarke 1984) can be seen as being chronologically at the opposite end of the same spectrum. However, conventionally industrial archaeology is focused on sites and structures of the post-medieval and modern periods which are no less vulnerable to destruction or drastic alteration than monuments of earlier times (Darvill and Fulton 1998).

Origins

Industrial archaeology is the “new kid on the block” achieving a wider recognition in the County only during the past 30 years, one fifth of the life of the SANHS. Indeed, founding members of the Society would be bemused to find themselves the subjects of study by students of industrial archaeology. Lists in Proceedings for the early 1850s include a cluster of manufacturers and traders from Bridgwater, a noted railway contractor, George Hennet (Greenfield and Murless 1999) and Andrew Crosse, infamously remembered for his electrical experimentation (Gledhill and Lamb 1986). Even the landed gentry listed fostered industrial enterprises such as mining and quarrying on their estates. But in more

recent times Leslie Grinsell, a past president, was one of the first members to appreciate the potential importance of industrial archaeology (Grinsell 1965).

The rural character of Somerset may not appear at first sight to be fertile ground for the promotion of a discipline perhaps more popularly associated with “heavy” industries elsewhere. But protagonists were to emerge during the formative decade of the 1960s, a number of whom became distinguished champions of industrial archaeology well beyond the County's boundaries. Professor Angus Buchanan and Sir Neil Cossons were early collaborators producing a slim volume of great interest (Buchanan and Cossons 1969). Professor Walter Minchinton was a colourful contributor, supporting the annual conferences for the industrial archaeology societies of South Wales and the South West (which still continue) and day seminars on selected aspects at Dartington Hall, Devon.

Accessibility came in various other ways including a West Country publishing house whose principals, David St John Thomas and Charles Hadfield, were themselves serious researchers on railways and canals (St John Thomas 1966; Hadfield 1967). Among the authors from this “stable” was a Somerset school-master, Robin Atthill, whose enthusiasm for Mendip's industrial past encouraged the reader to make the transition from the printed page to the monuments in the landscape (Atthill 1971). The media too played its part, the journal-

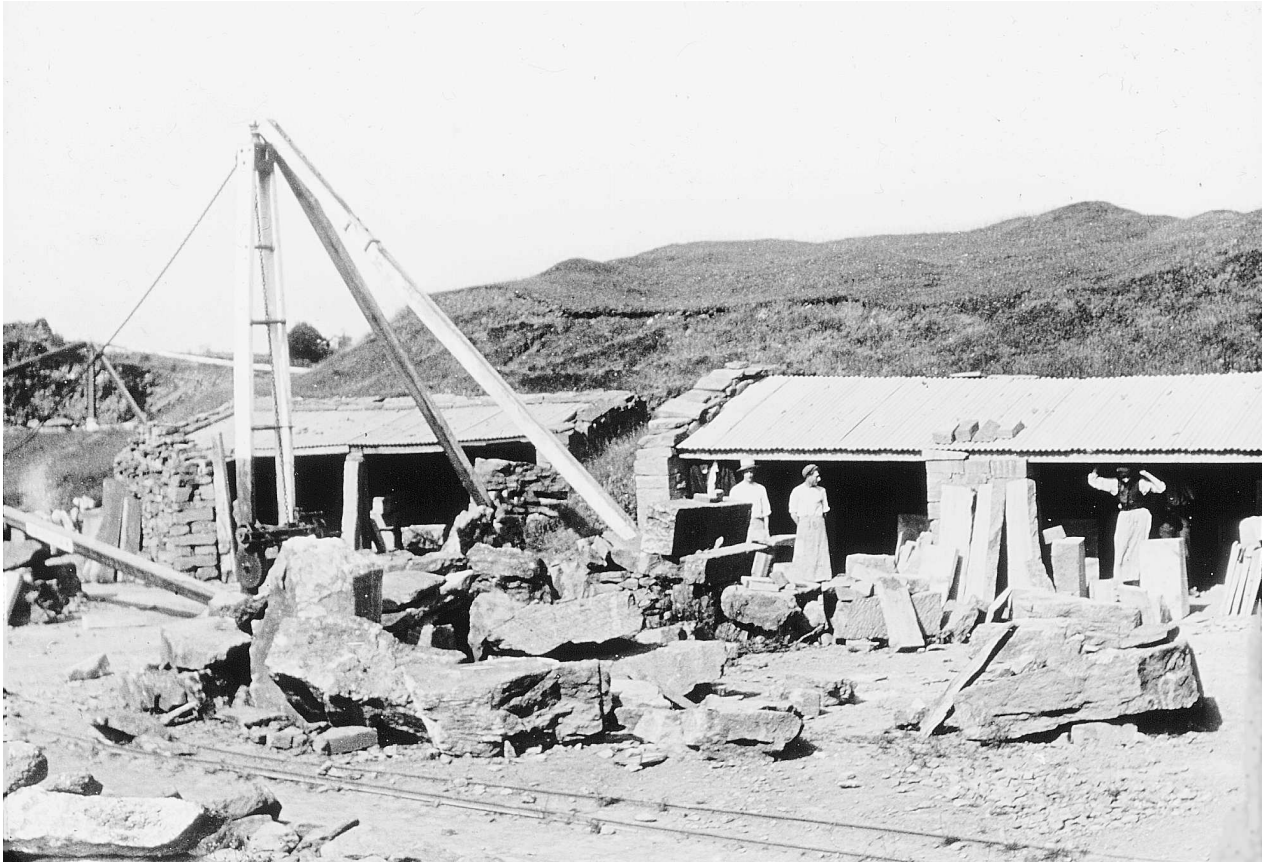


Figure 18.1: *Stone quarrying at Ham Hill – from a lantern slide in the collections of the SANHS. Although undated the photograph provides invaluable evidence of manual working on a site quarried for the past 2000 years.*

istic skills of Kenneth Hudson putting industrial archaeology on regional television as well as in popular literature (Hudson 1965). Adult education brought further pioneers like C A (Sandy) Buchanan who readily applied his social and economic history background to the interpretation of industrial structures (Buchanan 1992). Frank Hawtin, a past secretary, undertook work on sites in a manner that would today be termed “community archaeology” (Hawtin and Hawtin 1977).

Ultimately, two societies were established in the pre-1974 County of Somerset: the Bristol Society (BIAS) founded in 1967 and the Somerset Society (SIAS) in 1972. Because of the disparate nature of industrial archaeology with a myriad aspects for possible study, they are “rainbow” organisations with members tending towards specialist interests but having common aims with regard to publication, site surveys and occasional excavations as well as social activities like lectures and visits. The promoters and practitioners have been mainly

amateurs, in the true sense of the word, with a handful of forays into Somerset by the Royal Commission as at Fox Brothers’ woollen mills, Wellington (Stoyel and Williams 1993). The mechanism is now in place for professional involvement at local level in both archaeological evaluation and recording as happened recently at Chard where an unfortunate delisting of the former basin warehouses of the Chard Canal resulted in their demolition (Graham 1999).

Some situations and responses

Liquidation, merger, takeover, nationalisation and privatisation are a few factors impacting on Somerset industries added to which is the advent of new technologies bringing the urge to sweep away that which is redundant for the purpose of redevelopment or leave sites to the ravages of man and nature. This has also had an adverse effect upon the survival of

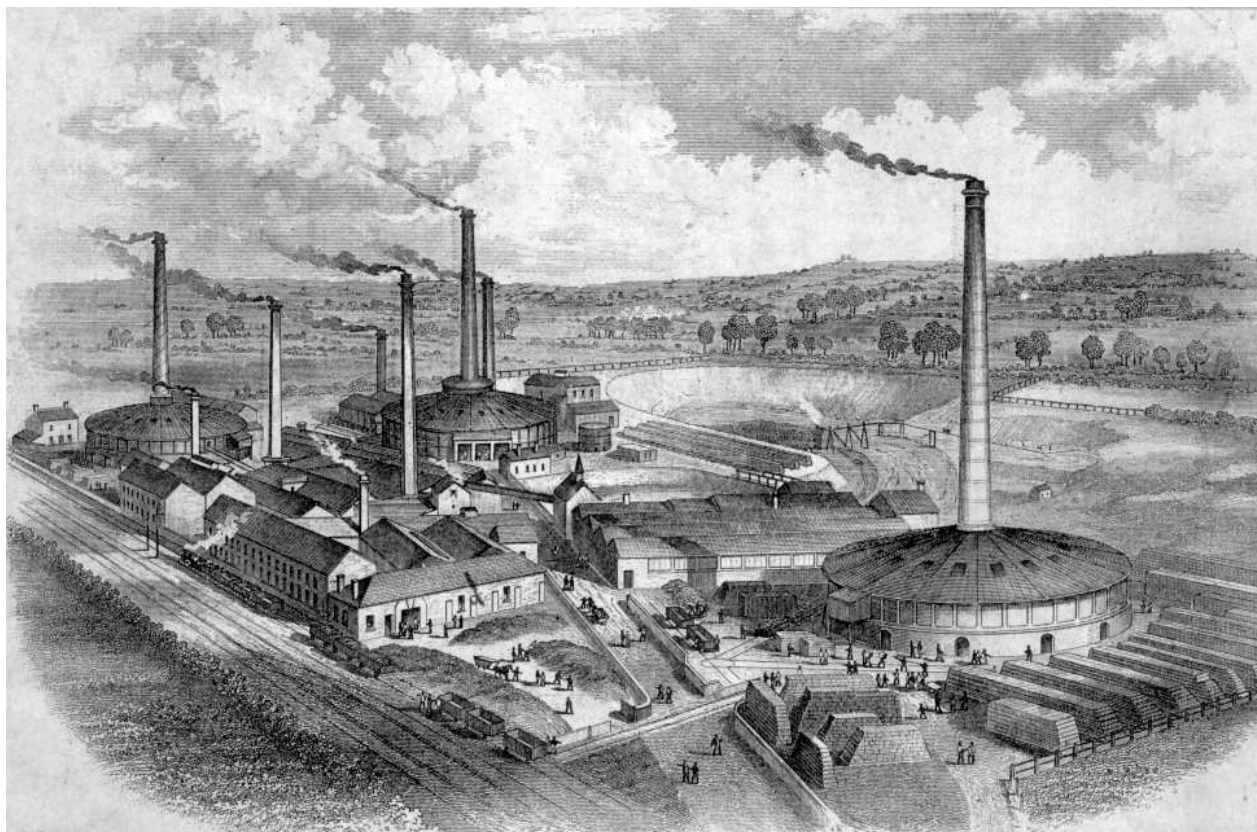


Figure 18.2: A vanished Victorian industrial scene – William Thomas & Company's steam-powered brick, tile, pottery and terra cotta works at Poole, West Buckland faithfully illustrated in the cover of an 1891 catalogue (Isaac and Parrott 1995).

documentation and the industrial archaeologist often has to resort to techniques such as regressive map analysis and trawling through trade directories and unindexed newspapers for evidence. Nevertheless, the steep learning curve that has been the quest for the discovery of industrial sites is in part reflected in the refinement of gazetteers and guides previously published only in a national or regional format (Buchanan and Buchanan 1980; Minchinton 1984) to a county and district layout (Warren 1996).

Data transference has not kept pace, the County's Sites and Monuments Record indicating only a fraction of the information assembled. Some details found their way on to the National Record for Industrial Monuments, a system superseded by the Index Record for Industrial Sites (AIA 1993). No programme exists for copying industrial archaeology work into the National Monuments Record or locally at the Somerset Record Office though a comprehensive secondary source deposit of SIAS publications is lodged with the Somerset Studies Library.

Radical changes over the years have brought about the termination of volume production in brewing and malting. Mary Miles, who has investigated these industries (Miles 1989) has charted this decline, the once formidable brewing "empire" of Hancock's, for example, has only a few structural remnants including the much-altered Wiveliscombe Brewery and Ashlands Malting, Crewkerne (Miles 1985). The gas industry has undergone similar fundamental upheavals but it is still possible to locate evidence of earlier phases such as the 1855 private gas plant at West Quantoxhead (Stafford 1992) and the Wedmore Gas Works established in 1870 (Daniel and Gledhill 1994).

The recognition of industrial remains, especially those of a post-1840 date (DoE 1994) as being worthy of statutory protection or at least of needing recording prior to alteration or destruction has been a slow process. Sites of County Importance are included on local structure plans and their place in an urban context, first "flagged up" in the 1970s



Figure 18.3: *An industrial archaeological problem – Dark Lane Water Tower, Wellington. This unlisted, redundant structure was altered to extend domestic accommodation but recording was assisted by the discovery of the original construction drawings of 1896 (Murless 1995).*

(Aston and Leech 1977), have now found expression in selected Extensive Urban Surveys (eg Gathercole 1998). But survival is never assured, the former silk mill and later collar factory at South Street, Taunton, falling victim to “brownfield site” planning policy in 1998. Assessment of the degree of importance of sites of certain industries has begun with English Heritage’s Monuments Protection Programme (English Heritage 1999). Coal mining in Somerset, which has its own gazetteer (Gould 1999) has been shown to have monuments of national significance including the unique coking ovens at Vobster (Instone and Cranstone 1994).

Protecting the essential character and integrity through scheduling but more commonly by listing, has been successful as at the Parrett Iron Works in 1979, a former engineering and flax and hemp spinning complex at Martock now converted into light industrial units. Detailed research into special features can result in an upgrading as at Castle

House, Bridgwater where the home of a local cement manufacturer was shown to have innovative use of the material and a primitive structural reinforcement system (Murless 1999). Receiving official status is not, in itself, a passport to survival however, and several industrial examples appear annually on the “Buildings at Risk” register.

Traditional processes carried out on a vintage industrial site are rare and the horsehair works within Higher Flax Mills, Castle Cary, which is unique in Great Britain, received international endorsement for its continuation when threatened by redevelopment in 1998. At Dawe’s Ropewalk, West Coker, Somerset’s last intact example, the Industrial Buildings Preservation Trust has realistic hopes of restoration to a business (Wood 1999). Artefacts, whether machines, tools or products are usually discarded upon closure but notable exceptions were the contents of John Chidgey’s Foundry, Watchet, J. Howe & Sons, Kingsbrompton Wagon Works and Nimmer Mills Brush Factory, Wadeford which were removed to the Somerset Rural Life Museum in 1976, 1988 and 1990 respectively (Warren 1981). Stationary steam engines, the workhorses of older industries, seldom remain in situ but on the Somerset Moors, an initiative begun by Louis Kelting (1968) has secured the preservation of a range of drainage machines, the 25 ton example at Westonzoyland Pumping Station being regularly steamed under the auspices of a charitable trust (Miles 1981). Smaller engines, such as those designed by the Pools of Chipstable (Warren 1988), have also fared badly but once played a vital rôle in workshops supplementing or replacing waterwheels as at Simonsbath Sawmill where a turbine and an oil engine survive (Jones 1998). The Industrial Revolution in Somerset still kept a “green” tinge and sites with sufficient water-power often changed functions as at Hawkcombe Mill, Porlock where a grist mill was used for the generation of electricity (Gledhill 1995).

Local authority involvement in a site can make a difference: at Bridgwater Docks both the basins and warehouse could have been erased but the County Council’s purchase in 1974 led to their refurbishment amidst sympathetic new-build housing (Murless 1989). In South Somerset the District Council has successfully participated in ambitious conversions at the former Gifford Fox lace mill in Chard and Kelway’s Nurseries, Huish Episcopi (SSDC 1999).

Some industries render themselves obvious targets for obliteration seemingly having nothing in terms of sites and structures to offer for preservation after cessation. The construction of the M5 Motorway at Dunball “remodelled” the western Polden Hills eradicating lias quarries and cement works but fortunately left a group of lime kilns, one of Somerset’s most undervalued industrial heritage assets (Daniel and Murless 1994). The last vestiges of brick and tile manufacturing all but disappeared in the 1960s but the industry has a dedicated museum (Murless 1991). The industrial archaeology of metal mining, stimulated by the work of Roger Sellick (1962) has continued under Mike Jones who, with the assistance of SIAS and the Exmoor Mines Research Group, has focused on engine houses such as Langham Hill and Smoky Bottom on the Brendon Hills (Jones 1988). Iron foundries have generally not outlived the castings which they produced for a variety of uses. The survival of the important edge tool works of Fussells at Mells, which combined traditional craft skills within a factory environment, poses a particular difficulty as a sizeable, derelict site (Griffiths and Gallop 1996).

Linear transport systems in the landscape become truncated on closure through the sale of segments to adjoining landowners. Although only one Somerset canal, the Bridgwater and Taunton, has been restored to full navigation (Haskell 1994), others have yielded technologically significant monuments such as the tub boat lift on the Grand Western Canal at Nynhead where industrial archaeology is attempting to evaluate the work of the famous engineer James Green (George 1997, 138–142). An opportunity was lost to properly document the branch and cross-country railways which closed under the “rationalisation” report of Dr Beeching (1962) but a project to record Somerset’s turnpike roads received a national fieldwork award (Bentley and Murless 1985; 1987). Sadly many of the smaller roadside features such as milestones have since become vulnerable to traffic damage, theft and vandalism, the casualties including a turnpike terminus stone at Tolland (Figure 18.5 on the next page) and a cast-iron milepost at Greinton. Tollhouses, placed at former strategic points along Somerset roads, have been enlarged in order to afford improved standards of accommodation, but the Snowdon Hill house, Chard, is a rare and picturesque example in its original guise.

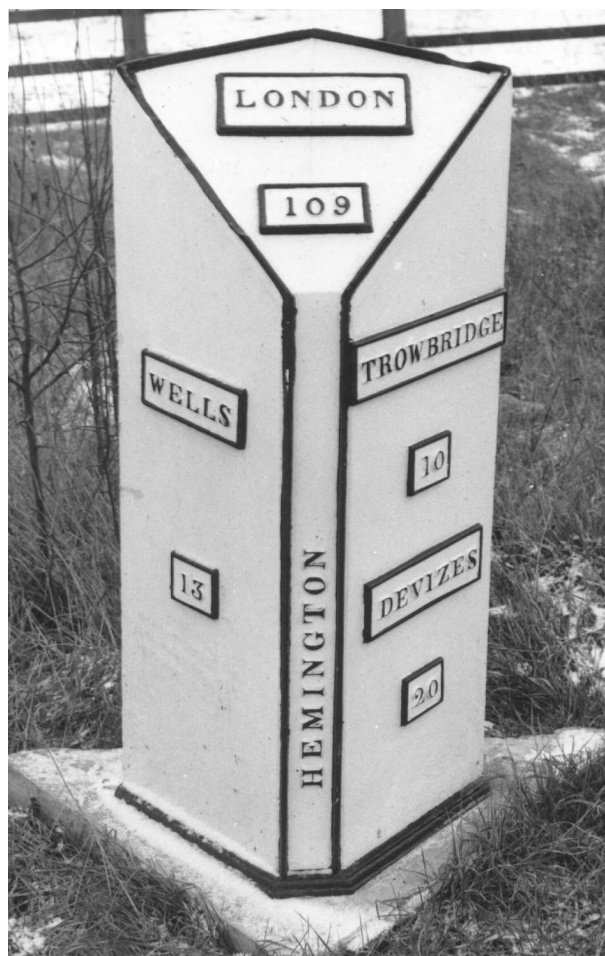


Figure 18.4: An informative cast-iron milepost of the Radstock Turnpike Trust at Hemington, now a Listed structure.

As we move into a new millennium it is clear that industrial archaeology is broadening its remit to include not only the workplaces but the housing and architecture associated with the health and welfare of people, illustrated by such buildings as Sir George Gilbert-Scott’s Williton Workhouse. There is also a need to engage in a serious study of 20th-century industries which could result in the listing of modern structures like the electricity pylons which connected Somerset to the National Grid in the early 1930s.

A way forward

The maturation of industrial archaeology has coincided with the development of the planning control process as exercised through local government and national guidelines (DoE 1990). The further input of “quality” information by industrial archaeologists



Figure 18.5: *The terminus stone of the Taunton Turnpike Trust at Tolland was destroyed but the plate retrieved and is now the subject of a Millennium reinstatement project.*

is essential if decisions on planning applications are to be influenced and positive outcomes managed such as adaptive re-use of disused industrial buildings, the designation, where appropriate, of statutory protection, site access for archaeological work and high standards of recording where demolition occurs (Daniel 1999). Good relationships between fieldworkers and authority officers remains of vital importance, a favourable “sea change” which began with the appointment of Mick Aston as County Archaeologist in 1974. This has permeated to district council levels and will hopefully be on-going to the parishes as the aims of Local Agenda 21, which include the safeguarding of the historic heritage, are pursued (Stokes 1999). Only when industrial archaeology is firmly established at the grass roots will any lingering misconceptions about our industrial past be finally laid to rest and the relics of a revolution take their rightful place in a multi-period Somerset landscape.

Note

The transference of part of Somerset to the County of Avon, now two unitary authorities, needs separate industrial analysis. For a summary of significant sites see J Day, *A Guide to the Industrial Heritage of Avon* (Association for Industrial Archaeology, 1987). A chapter giving an overview of the present County’s industrial past will appear in C J Webster (ed), *The Archaeology of Somerset*, forthcoming.

Photographic Acknowledgements

Mr D Bromwich, the Society’s Hon. Librarian, for supplying Figure 18.1 and Mr D W Warren for Figure 18.3.