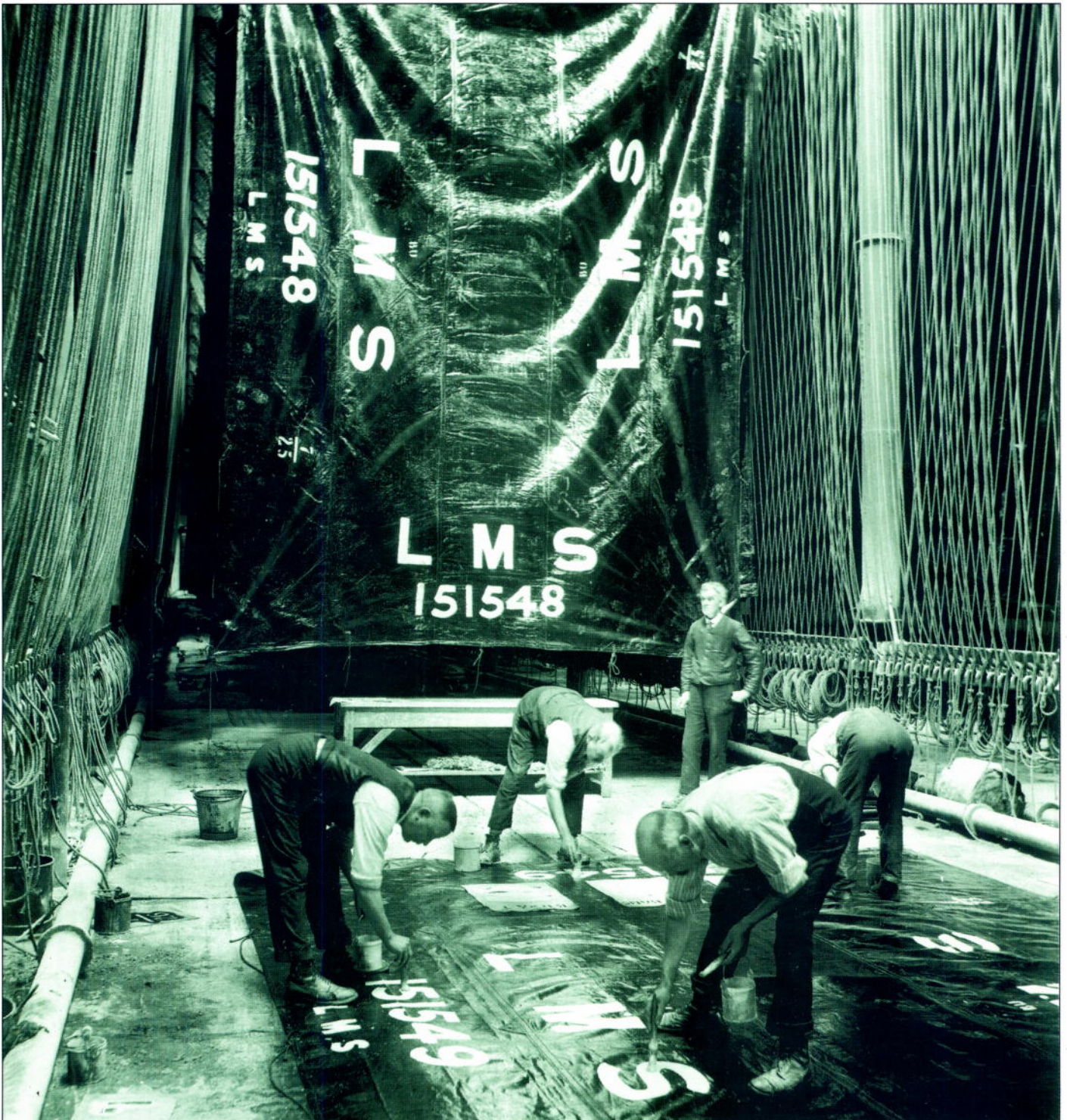


# INDUSTRIAL ARCHAEOLOGY NEWS

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**COVER PICTURE**

Midland Railway Sheet Stores, c1925, showing the size of a typical wagon sheet, and how sheets were hung up to dry. Each sheet was numbered and dated to ensure it was regularly returned for inspection and repair. See page 10

Photo: National Railway Museum DY13671

## What is industrial archaeology?

*When compiling an industrial archaeology gazetteer just what constitutes an entry? What sort of things do you put in? How do you draw the boundaries? In practice this can be quite a problem. What do you put in a gazetteer and what do you leave out? It is hoped that these personal views will generate discussion.*

Robert Carr

First we must distinguish between archaeology and history; both are concerned with the past. Archaeology is the study of surviving remains – considering artefacts and ecofacts. It does not necessarily involve 'digging things up'. History is the study of written documents; minute books, diaries, letters and so on. Archaeology is the study of the past through other surviving remains such as buildings, machinery, manufactured products, etc.

Archaeology is the business of studying artefacts (man made) as distinct from ecofacts (naturally occurring). For early archaeological periods it is not always easy to distinguish between the two but for the industrial period the distinction is usually obvious.

However archaeology also makes use of written or printed sources to illuminate material finds if relevant. This will often be the published work of historians but may include a study of primary sources, e.g. rate books or insurance plans. For the most recent period industrial archaeology can also make use of oral history – for instance when studying a factory it is possible to talk to people who used to work there.

History is a long established and highly respected academic pursuit. Archaeology is by comparison a relative newcomer and to some extent challenges the view of historians. It might be considered a corrective to the lack of a balanced documentary record. Primary sources are usually written by the powerful and successful and seldom reflect the plight of downtrodden losers. Sometimes written accounts can even be deliberately falsified, perhaps for fraudulent financial purposes.

Again those in authority very often create a powerful mythology to justify their position. Material facts can often prick the bubble of pretence.

Archaeology can present objective facts that destroy views formerly held by historians who before only had incomplete or biased written accounts. DNA techniques and dendrochronology are powerful new tools which in the hands of archaeologists are replacing opinions by hard facts. Thus our view of the past is changing significantly.

Archaeology was once seen as an upstart activity, scarcely respectable and not of academic merit. In the nineteen seventies some mainstream archaeologists regarded industrial archaeology with disdain – only fit for amateur amusement.

It should be made clear that industrial archaeology is not just a part of archaeology, e.g. a specialism. In fact a qualification in mainstream archaeology is not very useful in industrial archaeology. Industrial archaeology is almost a separate subject. Having a background in

engineering, science or technology is highly relevant. It is difficult to understand many industrial processes or for instance how a prime mover works without a knowledge of the relevant chemistry and physics etc.

Nonetheless industrial archaeology is highly interdisciplinary and people from a variety of backgrounds can and do make a viable contribution to the subject. Local historians, architects, schoolteachers, librarians, engineers and artists, are often to be found among the active members of industrial archaeology societies. In studying the built environment many skills and viewpoints are required.

The term industrial archaeology was officially invented in Birmingham around the mid-1950s. However under the name historical geography a good deal of what is essentially industrial archaeology had been going on in university geography departments for many years before that. One of the best books on the Port of London was written by a geographer – James Bird (see *The Geography of the Port of London*, Hutchinson, 1957).

Although not industrial archaeology, associated activities such as collecting and displaying industrial remains in museums, perhaps even retaining most of the original industrial complex as a museum, have been going on for about thirty years. Regional industrial museums such as those at Ironbridge and Beamish were systematically set up from about the mid-1970s and nearly all the ambitious schemes of that decade came to fruition. Looking back now we perhaps see this as something astonishing.

Another activity associated with industrial archaeology is the study of industrial biography; the lives of great engineers and industrialists. The most notable contribution in this field is that of Samuel Smiles in the nineteenth century but later the writing of L T C Rolt, published from the 1940s, had a tremendous effect in changing public opinion towards taking an interest in the work of the engineer and preparing the ground for the great upsurge of interest in industrial archaeology which took place in the early 1970s.

This upsurge was of course essentially brought about by the physical facts themselves – the very visible dead and dying remains of traditional British industry which could be seen everywhere. These years were in some sense a golden age of industrial archaeology when it was still possible to visit the last working examples of many industries just before the final closures took place. At that time industrial visits were welcomed in a way inconceivable today.

The study of and participation in industrial archaeology is very much a hands-on activity dealing with 'real reality'. Although books and periodicals are important, personal experience and the joys of discovery in the field are great incentives to its practitioners. In taking an interest in industrial archaeology one gains a different and distinctive view of the world and begins to take considerably more notice of the surrounding environment. How and why was that thing made can become a preoccupation.

We might try at this stage to define just what industrial archaeology is. We can give several definitions. Industrial archaeology is:-

1. the archaeological study of how people earn or earned a living – that is work archaeology,
2. the archaeology of industrial processes including engineering and technology back to pre-history,
3. the archaeology of the industrial period, say after c.1700 to date, the archaeological period study that follows post-medieval archaeology,
4. Archaeology is what Industrial Archaeologists do – i.e. a circular definition.

Broadly speaking, definition 1 was the kind of notion favoured by Kenneth Hudson towards the end of his life. In fact he even suggested 'work archaeology' as a suitable term to replace industrial archaeology, (Rolt Memorial Lecture 2000 part 1, *Industrial Archaeology Review* vol. 23, no.1, p9).

Definition 2 is favoured by some mainstream archaeologists. They describe 2 as 'real industrial archaeology'. (It is interesting to note that Arthur Raistrick in his book *Industrial Archaeology: an Historical Introduction*, published in 1972, was insistent that definition 2 was the correct one.)

Definition 3 is favoured by some academic industrial archaeologists who are seeking to establish the subject and wish their work to become the period study of the last two hundred years or so.

Definition 4 is at present perhaps the most satisfactory one, even though it is circular. This is an 'operational' – suck it and see – definition of the kind favoured by vanguard artists over the last say thirty years – 'I am an Artist and what I do is Art' – etc.

Even leaving definition 1 aside we might (for now) have to accept that there is at least a (preposterous!) 'duality' involving 2 and 3. If we are to take this step it might then perhaps be more sensible to accept a 'plurality', adding either 1, 4 or both.

However in practice industrial archaeology does not, at least yet, entirely live up to its definitions. There are inconsistencies and blind spots or areas of omission. For instance if we take definition 3, industrial archaeologists should be interested in all material objects post c.1700. But it seems industrial archaeology often restricts itself to 'working class' items, especially when studying buildings. While an interest in non-conformist chapels, pubs, football stadia, music halls and cinemas is generally regarded as a totally acceptable fringe industrial archaeological activity you can't look at anything 'posh'. Opera houses are definitely out.

This exclusion of non 'working class' archaeology does not seem to apply in transport circles. Here an interest in the great ocean liners or Pullman carriages seems to be entirely acceptable. What is surprising is the almost total lack of interest in ocean-going cargo ships, until recently so dominant a feature of British economic activity.

For the archaeological study of earlier periods the exclusion of 'posh' items never seems to have manifested itself. Ancient Egyptian archaeology has been entirely happy to investigate the great pyramids, and they were for pharaohs only. Indeed until the quite recent past traditional archaeology has largely consisted of examining the physical remains of the rich. Is it that post c.1700, as there is such abundance of information, archaeology has been directed only toward areas where the record is relatively incomplete? The poor don't write much.

Industrial archaeologists tend to be relatively well educated and come from the better-off social classes. The desire to investigate what the 'lower orders' used to do is in part curiosity – exploring forbidden fields that parents say forty plus years ago would have tried to keep from their children. Doubtless for some the practice of industrial archaeology has given opportunities to make up for things 'missed' as children.

But will industrial archaeology 'roll forward'? Will it embrace Modernism; reinforced concrete, high-rise flats, motorways, big sheds. Will industrial archaeology include an interest in the all conquering diesel engine and the second half of the twentieth century; mass motoring, packaging, supermarkets and the information revolution? If it does not, younger people will form their own organisations to do just this and there are strong signs this is happening already.

For most people in Britain the Victorian period, at least in terms of ideas and taste, really lasted until the 1930s or later. The Twentieth Century Society started life as the Thirties Society, with an interest in the design style of that intellectually lively time when the ideas which gave birth to industrial archaeology first came into being.

It is beginning to seem something of a generation issue with each succeeding generation harking back to a period just before its time and taking a delight in 'what it missed'. Does this mean we will have Modern Archaeology, and (for goodness sake!) Post Modern Archaeology, et al. Whether Arthur Raistrick would like it or not industrial archaeology seems to have become irrevocably stuck within the period of the industrial revolution and its extended aftermath?

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