

INDUSTRIAL ARCHAEOLOGY NEWS

134
AUTUMN
2005

THE BULLETIN OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR INDUSTRIAL ARCHAEOLOGY

FREE TO MEMBERS OF AIA



AIA's Belgium tour • Ticknall potteries • the President calls • Big Pit prize
North Sea oil recording • regional news • publications



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The AIA visit to Belgium

The AIA tour took place on 18-22 April 2005, when a party of 31 members of the AIA and its affiliated societies visited a number of varied industrial archaeological sites in Belgium. As always our sincere thanks go to Paul Saulter for his impeccable arrangements, but also to Sue Hayton for providing the tour notes and acting as guide and Paul the driver for good temperedly overcoming the inevitable problems of visiting IA sites.

David Alderton

On a somewhat soggy Monday morning our party gathered on a pavement near Victoria awaiting the coach, and then an untroubled run to Dover saw us catching an earlier than booked ferry, albeit one delayed by berthing problems at Calais. Once in France we made for our first site, the Les Fontinettes boat lift in Arques, just outside St Omer. Here we picked up the final member of the party, and visited the little display and museum within the buildings of the lift. This lift is very much 'son of Anderton', and used hydraulic power until it was replaced by a modern deep lock in 1967 and went out of use. Unfortunately most of the machinery was not accessible, but the structure is indubitably impressive and was easy to view.

The following day we first visited Le Grand Hornu to view the impressive remains of a very early planned coal and iron-working township. Between 1816 and 1835 a remarkable architect-designed central workshop area in Neo-Classical style was erected, with furnaces, foundry, engineering workshops, stabling and vehicle sheds united into a very grand design. There is certainly nothing like it in Britain. Fortunately, when the complex closed in 1954 and the colliery

buildings were demolished, the central buildings survived and after considerable tribulations and decay have been restored or at least consolidated. Less fortunately, very little survives to illustrate the industrial functions of the buildings, which are either empty shells or converted to art gallery, conference centre and offices. A video presentation does give some idea of the site when working.

Surrounding the central complex is a substantial planned village of 425 houses of a far higher standard than normal either in Belgium or Britain at this time, or, indeed, much later. Each house had six rooms, a garden and its own toilet, with a well and oven for every ten houses. Later additions to the estate included a school, library, baths, hospital and communal hall, and there are two open squares. The village survives more or less intact, though the houses are now in multiple ownership with individual 'improvements' which partially conceal the unity of design.

In the afternoon we visited a working quarry at Carrieres du Hainaut. This extracts Belgian blue limestone, or 'Pierre bleue' from a quarry 200 hectares in area and 100 metres deep. First opened in 1888, it takes out 140,000 cubic metres a year. Most of this is sawn into slabs on site by giant multiple saws, and then cut down to standard sizes. For decorative use these are then highly polished. Our guide had good English, and so the tour took longer than anticipated because of the questions asked and everyone's fascination with the massive machinery.

On Wednesday morning we visited the mine and village at Bois de Luc. Here the mine buildings largely survive and are now an ecomuseum. Unfortunately, our application for a tour had been refused, though in practice we could wander freely around many of the ancillary



Les Fontinettes boat lift, Arques

Photo: Stephen Miles

COVER PICTURE

Koepe winding tower at Peronnes colliery, Belgium, visited by the AIA. See this page

Photo: Stephen Miles