



## INDUSTRIAL ARCHAEOLOGY NEWS 169 Summer 2014

### The origins and early days of the AIA

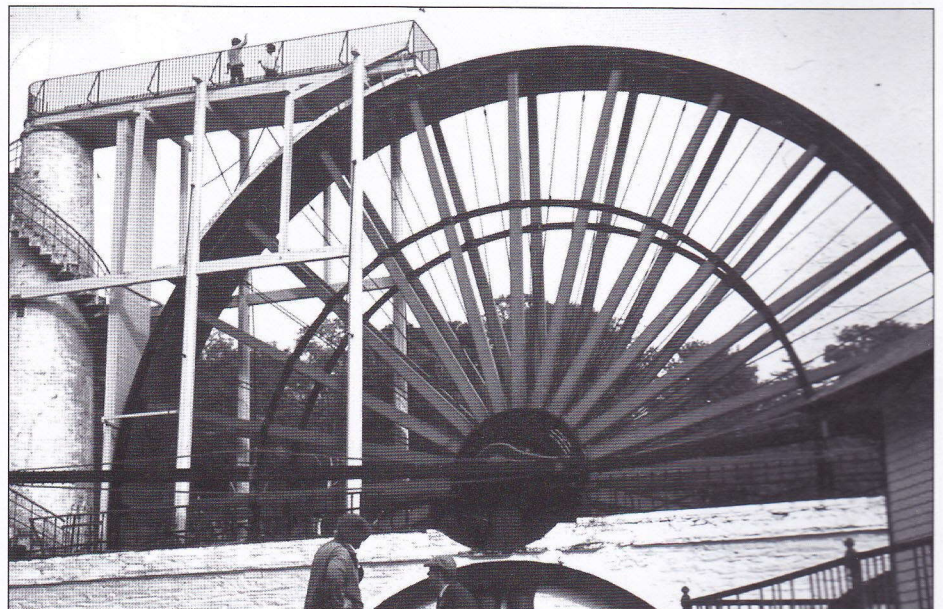
*Tom Rolt was elected as the first President of the Association for Industrial Archaeology at the inaugural AGM of the Association in September 1973. On his sadly premature death in May 1974, I took over as President and held the office until 1977. This account is based on my personal memories of these years, and of the circumstances which called the Association into existence.*

Angus Buchanan Past-President, AIA

Industrial archaeology was not a completely novel concept in the 1950s, but it emerged in response to the unusual conditions of the years immediately after the Second World War. Before the war there had been a few scattered references to 'the archaeology of industry' in historical accounts of the Industrial Revolution, and societies of which the Newcomen Society was the outstanding example had begun to popularise the idea of visiting derelict industrial sites in order to evaluate the significance of their contribution to the development of particular industries and processes. But the war caused profound disruption of European industrial communities as a result of bombing, the loss of markets, and the concentration on arms production, and the process of returning to conditions of comparative normality required adjustment to these novel circumstances. In Britain, this involved the loss of traditional imperial markets, many of which were not easily replaced. Also, much of its transport and heavy industrial infrastructure was worn out, while the capital to renew it was inadequate, so that there was little renovation of such plant until the mid-1950s, by which time industrialists and town planners had come to think in terms of 'comprehensive redevelopment', sweeping away as much as possible of the old order and starting new developments in their place.

When this stage had been reached a process of rapid destruction of old industrial structures and urban environments began, and public opinion began belatedly to see that many metaphorical babies were being thrown out with the bathwater. The critical point in the arousing of public

consciousness to the serious losses of irreplaceable cultural material was the complete renewal of Euston Station in the late 1950s, and particularly the destruction in 1962 of the Doric Portico which marked the entrance to this, the first main line railway terminus in the world. Many other events in the following years such as Dr Beeching's Report on railway modernisation helped to maintain a high level of public anxiety, and out of this concern Industrial Archaeology was born. It is to Michael Rix, an extramural lecturer in English Literature at the University of Birmingham, that the first use of the term in its modern sense is generally attributed, in an article in the journal *The Amateur Historian* in 1955. Then Rix led a series of very successful Field Parties on the subject at Preston Montford in Shropshire, thereby helping to train a first generation of industrial archaeological practitioners. The Council for British Archaeology (CBA), creditably alert to new currents of public opinion, set up a Research Committee on Industrial Archaeology in 1958, under the Chairmanship of Professor WF (Peter) Grimes, the Director of the Institute of Archaeology in the University of London. This secured the appointment of a Survey Officer charged with conducting a survey and compiling a record of industrial monuments. Rex Wailes, a retired mechanical engineer, an expert on windmills, and a Past-President of the Newcomen Society, accepted this post. Another member of the Committee was LTC Rolt, an enthusiastic supporter of canal restoration and the preservation of derelict railways and old vehicles. Kenneth Hudson, a perceptive Industrial Correspondent for the South Western Region of the BBC, was commissioned to write an introductory book, published in 1963 as *Industrial Archaeology*.



*Isle-of-Man Foundation Conference 1973: the Laxey Wheel with Tom Rolt (seated) talking with Douglas Hague*

*Photo: Angus Buchanan*



Messrs Rix, Rolt, Wailes, and Hudson proved to be zealous promoters of industrial archaeology, arousing interest in the subject in many parts of the country. This is where I came in, because having been appointed as an Assistant Lecturer at the Bristol College of Science and Technology on it becoming a 'College of Advanced Technology' (CAT) in 1960, I joined the new General Studies Department and was made responsible for teaching classes of engineers and applied scientists some social and industrial history. Searching for a way of bridging the perceived gap between the 'Two Cultures' which had recently been established in the public mind by CP Snow, I identified a way of doing this through the history of technology and with the support of the College, the 'Centre for the Study of the History of Technology' was set up in 1964. Fifty years later, in 2014, this small research unit still functions under my direction as the 'History of Technology Research Unit' (HOTRU). The Centre was originally supported by an Advisory Council of experts under the chairmanship of Sir Arthur Elton, an industrial film maker and an enthusiast for the history of technology, who had contributed a chapter on the Gas Industry to the Oxford University Press five-volume series on *The History of Technology* (1954). Amongst other members of the Advisory Council were Tom Rolt, Rex Wailes, Michael Rix, Kenneth Hudson and Neil Cossons.



Euston Arch 1896

I had invited Alan Warhurst, the far-sighted Director of Bristol City Museums, to join the Council of the Centre, but in declining this commitment he strongly recommended that I approach Neil Cossons, whom he had just appointed as his first Curator of Technology. I did so, and he accepted, and so began a decade of vigorous creative co-operation between Neil and myself. Encouraged by the local interest in the burgeoning subject of industrial archaeology, we established an extramural class in the subject which ran for three years, and such was its popularity that we then converted it into a society – the Bristol Industrial Archaeological Society (BIAS), founded in 1967. In addition to a continuing series of extramural lectures, we arranged an exciting series of visits, both within the Bristol and Bath region which we defined as the principal area of interest of the Society, and beyond to Ironbridge and South Wales. We also set up an annual *BIAS Journal* which was first issued in 1968 and has come out regularly ever since, and fired by enthusiasm for the new series of local studies of industrial archaeology being published by David & Charles of Newton Abbot, Neil and I offered to write a volume on *The Industrial Archaeology of the Bristol Region*, which was published in 1969 and followed by *Bristol: Industrial History in Pictures* in 1970.

It was an exciting decade of collaborative effort, with several important by-products, the first of which was a series of annual conferences that I organised at the CAT, which became the University of Bath in 1966. These Bath Conferences were held from 1964, with two preliminary day-long meetings, followed by five week-end conferences to 1970. The pattern of these weekends was to assemble on the Friday

evening with a lecture after the dinner, and then to have Saturday morning on working sessions, followed by an outing to sites of industrial interest in the afternoon and then another evening lecture. The Sunday morning was devoted to a general discussion on industrial archaeology and our future plans to promote the subject, before dispersing after lunch. The conferences acquired a regular clientele of fifty to sixty people from all over the country and from abroad, in the persons of Robert Vogel and Marie Nisser, from the United States and Sweden respectively. They usually had a fairly general theme, such as *The Theory and Practice of Industrial Archaeology* in 1967, which encouraged a wide-ranging discussion. One in 1969, however, was a *Symposium on the Lead Industry*, which made particularly good use of the excellent physical evidence of the Mendip industry. By 1970 we felt that we had sampled the best of the easily available industrial archaeological material in the Bristol region, and our supporters had acquired sufficient camaraderie to wish to carry on with the meetings, so we decided that the Bath Conferences had to become peripatetic. This we achieved in 1971 by meeting in Bradford, and in Glasgow in 1972. It was at the Glasgow conference that Sir Arthur Elton brought an intense discussion to a close by moving a formal motion that at our next conference we should form ourselves into a national association. The resolution was carried.

However obvious this decision may appear in retrospect, it was by no means so clear at the time because the great local interest in industrial archaeology had already promoted the formation of many IA societies during the 1960s – the



Euston Arch demolition

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Gloucestershire Society for Industrial Archaeology, the Greater London Society for Industrial Archaeology, the Somersetshire Industrial Archaeology Society, and BIAS itself, amongst many others – and there was a strong feeling amongst members of these bodies that an overarching national society was not necessary. But the case for going ahead to this objective was animated by the fellowship built up in the Bath Conferences, so that the transition when it came was made more smoothly than had been expected. This occurred at the Isle of Man in 1973, when the annual conference transformed itself into the Association for Industrial Archaeology. Sir





A BIAS Party searching the Thames & Severn Canal, 1967

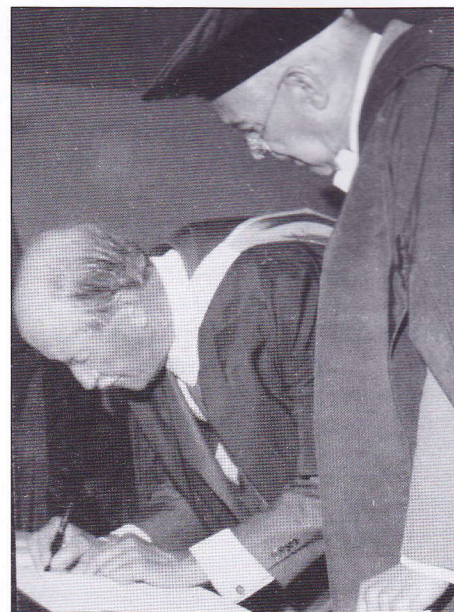
Photo: Angus Buchanan

Arthur Elton had sadly died in the year since the Glasgow meeting, and Tom Rolt was unanimously elected as the first President of the AIA. A Council was elected, with myself as Vice President and Neil as Secretary. Thus equipped, the Council set out to determine the details of the constitution and to work out other aspects of the organisation. Thanks to the good offices of Michael Rix, we got permission to use the Archives room in Birmingham Central Library, which was the most convenient mid-country meeting place for members coming from both Cornwall and Scotland, and several places in between. Unfortunately, the infant Association lost its first President with the tragically premature death of Tom Rolt in May 1974, and in this crisis I took over as President and served in the office until 1977, so

that the conferences at Keele (1974), Durham (1975), Southampton (1976) and Manchester (1977) were under my presidency.

At the Manchester conference we took the step of acquiring company status to iron out some irregularities in our constitution, which required the peculiar manoeuvre of everybody leaving the room during the AGM and rejoining the organisation in its new role as we re-entered. Ever since, the AIA has operated as a charitable company with limited liability under Company Law requirements. By this time we had already arranged for the transfer of the journal *Industrial Archaeology* from David & Charles, who had acquired it from Lambard Press, the original publisher, in 1965, to Oxford University Press, with the AIA retaining editorial control. This proved to be an uncomfortable arrangement for various reasons, and it was a relief to both parties when the Association agreed to take full responsibility for it as the *Industrial Archaeological Review*. Kenneth Hudson had passed on the editorship to Professor John Butt of Strathclyde University in 1969, and the role passed to Stafford Linsley in 1978. Stafford was at the University of Newcastle, where he was responsible for some very successful extramural courses, and in 1984 he handed on the editorship to Marilyn Palmer and Peter Neaverson, who ran an efficient partnership until Peter's death in 2005. The *Review* is now published for the Association by Maney, and has acted as an impressive public figurehead for the AIA under its series of Editors.

Another major activity of the AIA has been the institution of the Rolt Memorial Lecture, which has been an annual feature of the AIA Conference since 1975, when Professor AW Skempton of Imperial College London gave the inaugural lecture on 'Engineers of Sunderland Harbour'. The object of the Rolt Lecture was to honour the memory of the first President of the Association by inviting a person of distinction in academic scholarship or professional experience



LTC Rolt enrolled as Honorary Graduate of the University of Bath, 1873, being presented by Pro-Vice Chancellor Dr Hardie  
photo: University of Bath

to speak on a theme of industrial archaeological interest, and this objective has been admirably achieved so that the lecture has become a highlight of the Annual Conference. In 2010, at the Conference in Falmouth, the Rolt Lecture took the form of a Symposium recalling aspects of Tom Rolt's life and work, being held in the centenary year of his birth.

The Annual Conference, following the precedent of the Bath Conferences, has always been the main event in the activities of the AIA, allowing regular consultations between industrial archaeologists from all parts of the country and beyond. It has thus become an instrument for the expression of a national view on industrial archaeological affairs, and although it has always been careful to avoid partisanship in fulfilling this function it has been able on occasion to give its support to specific conservation initiatives. Generally, however, it has preferred to leave these to be pursued by the flourishing web of local and regional conservation societies which monitor the national industrial heritage and keep it in good health. The Association has matured with its subject matter, because as we move beyond the period of intensive heavy industry into that of information technology and industrial globalisation, the crucial material of industrial archaeology as understood by the pioneers has assumed an increasingly archaic quality. This makes the physical remains of old industrial and transport systems assume ever greater historical and archival value, even though the need for urgent conservation activity has been diminished by the passage of time. We who were involved in the early years of IA may regret the passing of the high expectations, intense enthusiasms, and a high level of familial and communal participation, in our care for industrial monuments, but we have nevertheless much to be grateful for in the continuing attention given to these heritage monuments by the AIA and other industrial archaeological organisations.



Sir Neil Cossons and Professor Angus Buchanan in Bath, 2007  
photo: Angus Buchanan