

VOLUME 5 NUMBER 2 1978

Oral History Seminar In conjunction with the Oral History Society, the AIA is organising a seminar on techniques of sound recording. The topics covered are likely to include where and how to record the reminiscences of elderly people, how to catalogue and store sound archives and how to link such archives with the physical remains to which they relate.

Full details will appear in the next Bulletin, but those interested may like to note the date, Saturday 13th May and the venue, which is likely to be Birmingham which has good access from all parts of the country.

Sirhowy Ironworks Preservation Scheme The Sirhowy Ironworks are located at the head of the Sirhowy Valley in Gwent, a mile north of the town of Tredegar (SO 143101). Production began in 1778, Sirhowy then being the only works in the valley until the construction of the Tredegar Ironworks in 1801. The two were in co-production until 1818 when Sirhowy came under the direct ownership of Ebbw Vale, and up until its closure in 1882 the management of Sirhowy was to be dictated by that of the various Ebbw Vale Companies, both technically and economically. By 1840 there were 4 furnaces in blast, all supplied by hot-air apparatus, but as Sirhowy was concerned solely with the smelting of iron all the puddling and processing of the metal took place at Ebbw Vale. After the closure of the works most of the remaining buildings were extensively robbed for stone and in 1971 land reclamation resulted in the obliteration of over 80% of the original works area. Of the remaining structures the most striking are 3 large support arches built into the remains of a major retaining wall, the stone-built out-fall of a water wheel tunnel and part of a furnace, only the internal lining visible above ground level, which is destroyed just above the boshes.

The present work began in April 1977 with a 7-man Job Creation Team sponsored by Gwent County Council and supervised by the County Planning Department; so far just over 400 square metres has been excavated and recorded in the area above and behind the 3 arches. The major feature so far uncovered is a complex of brick-lined culverts situated above the main arch which runs into a stone-built tunnel 35 metres in length, still containing a cast-iron pipe. Although any functional interpretation has to be subjective at this stage, the most plausible explanation is that the pipe and tunnel acted as a main drain for surface water on the level of the furnace charging area and also possibly took

surplus or discharged water from a water-balance hoist which is assumed, on the basis of an 1870 photograph, to have been situated above the central arch; work beneath the arches should establish the validity or otherwise of this. The other features suggest a system of internal retaining walls, designed to form structural 'boxes' behind the main retaining wall (now almost completely destroyed). These 'boxes' were filled with waste material to the height of the charging level, so carrying it forward to the frontage of the arches. If this is correct then most of the excavated area would never have been visible at the time the works were in production.

It is now hoped to concentrate work on the area in front of the arches which could reveal evidence of the foundations of a fairly late furnace and associated structures as well as that of the water-balance hoist. Excavation is also intended on the still-standing furnace which appears to be a much earlier design than the other and so could provide an interesting contrast between the two.

Although Sirhowy was never an important site in terms of technological innovation its history covers some of the most important years of the iron industry, and it is hoped that excavation, rather than revealing a one-phase construction, will give information relating to the various changes, and processes, during that period.

At the time of writing the project is due to end in March 1978 but an application has been made to the Manpower Services Commission for an extension until September 1978. The work is being carried out in liaison with the DOE, the National Museum of Wales, the Glamorgan/Gwent Archaeological Trust and Blaenau Gwent Borough which owns the site. Capital for the project is being provided by Gwent County Council and the Welsh Development Agency, which has provided grant-aid of £10,000.

The Tredegar Historical Society which was largely instrumental in having the site designated as an Ancient Monument, has been involved in the project from the outset. It is hoped to co-operate with members of the Society in providing interpretation material on the site, as one of the main objectives of the scheme is to help explain the technical and social history of the ironworks by means of static display material. This process has already started with the involvement of the local Primary School which is working on a local history project using the site as a focal point.

The later stages of the scheme will be mainly concerned with the conservation of the masonry and brickwork and with the provision of site finishes and visitor facilities. It is hoped that the completed project will not only add to the body of knowledge of industrial archaeology, but will also prove to be an educational tool, a tourist attraction and a local amenity.

