

THE EROSION OF ELLESMERE PORT

Ports all over Britain are popular with both the public and developers at present, and their industrial and architectural heritage is recognised increasingly to form a unique environment for a wide range of activities. Whilst this presents many opportunities for industrial archaeology, it also creates conflicts. Great dangers to the heritage of our ports are now becoming apparent where local authorities and others are failing to manage conflicts and coordinate development. Historical authenticity is too often now both metaphorically and literally at the foundations of success: buried beneath wholly new developments.

A conference organised by the AIA later this year will bring together all sides in the ports debate with the aim of developing mutual understanding to the benefit of all concerned. As a foretaste, this article gives an account of recent difficulties at one of our most historically important smaller ports, described from the point of view of a member of staff at a successful independent museum sandwiched amidst redevelopment.

The historic canal terminus of Ellesmere Port might appear safely conserved: the site is a Conservation Area, partly occupied by the Boat Museum, and many of the buildings are Listed. However recent events have shown that such protection cannot be taken for granted when there are opportunities for development. The Boat Museum now finds itself being hemmed in by new waterside developments, with 'heritage' apartments replacing historic structures.

The Ellesmere Canal reached the Mersey in 1795, and by 1843 Telford's plans had created a thriving transshipment port connected to the midlands. The docks fell into disuse in 1958, after 160 years of operation, the fine buildings and infrastructure left to decay. Telford's centrepiece, the outstanding Winged Warehouses, were destroyed by fire in 1970 while a Listing application was being considered.

Four years later, volunteers of the North Western Museum of Inland Navigation started to restore the site, gaining support from many quarters, including the local authority as site leaseholders. After much physical effort, the Boat Museum's first exhibitions opened to the public in 1976. Significant grant-aid was won through innovative use of Derelict Land Grants for building renovation, and through Michael Heseltine's post-Toxteth initiatives. In fifteen years, the derelict canal port has been transformed into a nationally established and award

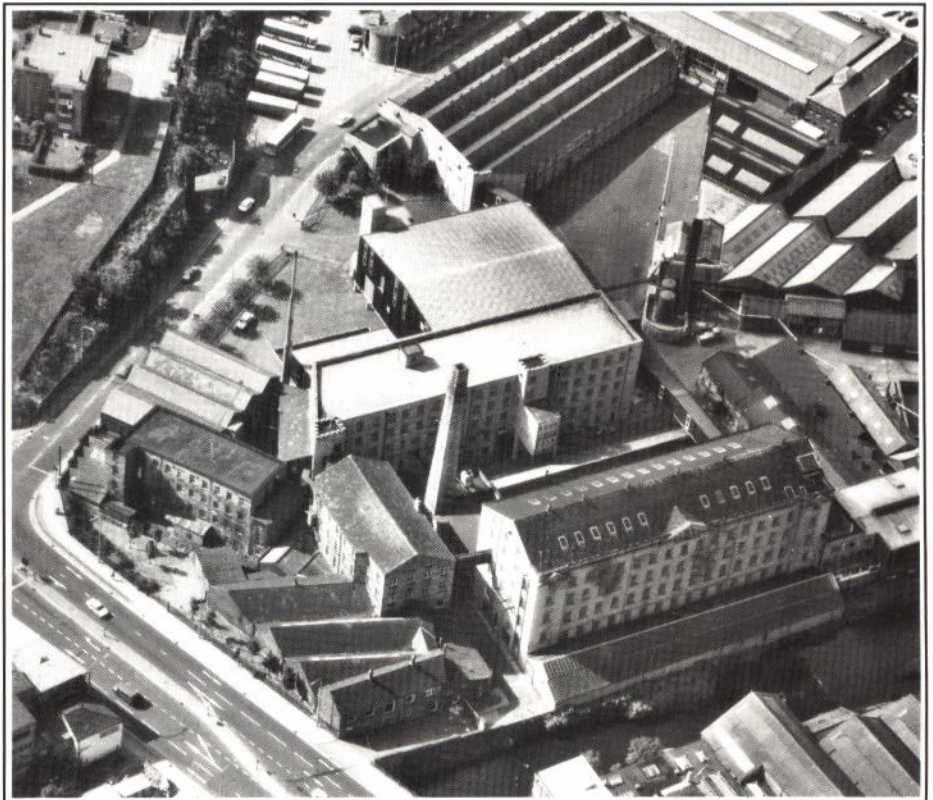
winning museum and tourist attraction.

As the Museum developed, the local authority progressively acquired the surrounding dockland. In 1985, responding to the Heseltine initiative, they established the 'Waterways' project, to attract commercial development to the dock area, with the Boat Museum as the core attraction. The first lower basin wharf was made available for housing in 1987, fortunately on an area of little archaeological interest. Whilst some attempt has been made to design the apartment block with sympathy for the immediate area, it does not match the site's distinctive style. However, its commercial success was such that a second, larger, scheme was quickly approved and plans laid for a hotel development on the basin centre island.

To accommodate these schemes, an access road was required along the banks of the Manchester Ship Canal, at the Museum's edge. The road would cross one of the site's earliest

historic structures, the Ellesmere and Chester Canal Company's slipway. Built in 1843-4, fifty years before the Manchester Ship Canal, it extended 175 feet from the River Mersey's waterline, with a similar length under water. The landward portion was increased to 400 feet in 1890-3. Constructed under Thomas Morton's patent, it featured a railway mounted cradle, upon which vessels were hauled out of the water. It was regarded as a great improvement over previous slipway haulage methods and, as a very substantial structure, was an important centre for Ellesmere Port boat building and repair until 1923. The Museum, using original drawings held in its archive, planned to recreate and interpret the facility, relaying the rails and installing a representative vessel on a rebuilt cradle.

Although within the Conservation Area, and also within the curtilage of Listed Buildings, the slipway itself was not Listed or Scheduled. Despite the Museum's strong representations,



Industrial Recording by the English Royal Commission.

Using aerial photography: this low level oblique photograph of Folly Hall Mills, Huddersfield (SE 141159) is one of a sequence taken in 1985 as part of RCHME's Yorkshire Mills Project. The difficulties of developing a cramped site are clearly shown, with the 1844 fireproof mill in the foreground uneasily relating to the earlier blocks to the side and rear. (See the article on page 3)

Photo: RCHME



Destroyed slipway: in this photograph the 1840-43 patent slipway at Ellesmere Port has already been cleared to the water's edge for the new access road. The iron posts marked the extent of the slipway before it was lengthened in 1890-93, and may have been part of the original haulage mechanism. This part, too, has since been destroyed for landscaping.

Photo: The Boat Museum

the 1843-4 portion was dug through during 1989 to create the new road. No archaeological provision was made, and neither was the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments warned by the local authority of the proposed works. The Museum's archive staff were reduced to dodging around the diggers, photographing the structure as its foundations were dug out. Traces of a possible earlier structure underneath, on a different alignment, could not be saved or recorded. The option of carrying the road over the slipway on a piled raft, thus preserving the structure, appears not to have been considered by the local authority.

With this significant loss in mind, the Museum archive started a comprehensive documentary survey of the historic port. Whilst similar research had been carried out before, much new evidence has been found, revising the overall chronology of development. Several buildings have been re-dated, and new areas of interest identified. One such site was

brought sharply into focus early in 1990. The local authority proposed that an area of slipway undisturbed by the new road should be paved, creating a rear access to the Museum. This area was identified as the site of the join between the original slipway and its extension in 1890. Initial comparison of the residue of the original with the later length showed significant differences in constructional technique. Many surface features worthy of preservation were apparent, including substantial iron posts, possibly part of the original slipway haulage system.

After consulting independent architects, the Boat Museum submitted an alternative scheme to the local authority. This required less work and materials than the original plan, preserved and displayed this important part of the slipway, and provided the required access. In the meantime, Museum staff attempted to record the physical evidence, although ordered off the site at one point. Despite much negotiation over the Museum's alternative plan and promises of minimal intervention, work started as planned, and this site too has now been comprehensively destroyed.

The resulting landscaping incorporates a parody of the original slipway. Railway platform edgings have been laid to represent its line, but at an artificially reduced inclination. It is completely divorced from its context, the water, and is thus less easy to interpret. The ultimate irony is that at the head of the slipway the local authority is refurbishing the winch house building for the Museum.

As these events take place on one side of the port, a greater threat has appeared across the site. The Museum has a pressing need for a boatyard, to conserve its floating collection. Site choices have reduced as development increases, the final option being to convert part of an adjacent redundant lorry tanker depot. It is here that the third phase of commercial development is also planned. Lying well within the Conservation Area, the site contains several buildings contemporary with the rest of the canal port. A canal boat gauging dock is on a site occupied by port buildings since at least 1802. A rare turn of the century survival is the large corrugated iron straw shed. This canal company building epitomises the strong canal-based iron trade, which resulted in the relocation of the Wolverhampton Corrugated Iron Company to Ellesmere Port in 1905-6. These, with other similarly relevant structures, have so

far been refused Listing.

Current development proposals for this area again include a mix of residential and commercial use. The local authority appears inclined to allow development to proceed without applying for any further statutory protection for the historic structures. The Boat Museum, however, mindful of recent experience, is applying once more for their Listing, based on the new archive evidence and the increased threat. The Museum's proposals for the site would accommodate both museum and commercial development and allow the buildings to be well utilised as part of the much-needed boatyard. Which scheme will go ahead still remains to be seen.

A major feature of the developer's proposal is a £300,000 audio-visual canal interpretive centre, to be located either in the Museum's present main exhibition building, or operating in competition on the adjacent site. Announced in the local press prior to any consultation with the Boat Museum Trust, this may well be setting the scene for the future direction of the historic port.

Despite negotiations since the formative years and recent pressure upon the local authority from all quarters, the Museum has been unable to secure firm tenancy agreement for its operations. It seems, therefore, that devising a coordinated conservation and interpretation strategy for its premier historical asset is still seen by the local authority as its lowest priority. If such chaos reigns in an area of such outstanding archaeological importance with a proven record of museum development, what hope can there be for less well recognised remains of the industrial revolution?

Paul Sillitoe

Archive Resources Officer, The Boat Museum

A JOB IN RESTORATION

Dorothea Restorations, the leading conservation engineers, are seeking a new General Manager for their Bristol team. Applicants should have HND or equivalent engineering qualification, five years experience and proven commitment to restoration work. Duties include staff supervision, estimating, technical drawing and administration. Salary £15000 plus car and bonus. Full cv to Mr G Wallis, Dorothea Restorations Ltd, Riverside Business Park, St Anne's Road, St Anne's Park, Bristol BS4 4ED or ☎ 0272 715337

VIDEO LEARNING

The National Trust has produced an innovative video for training people responsible for looking after historic houses. It is based on the Trust's Manual of Housekeeping and gives a visual introduction to preventive conservation, handling of artifacts and the daily care of the varied contents of historic houses. The Manual of Housekeeping was published in 1984, based upon a system of housekeeping and day-to-day conservation developed by the Trust. The Manual received world-wide acclaim and has been reprinted no less than six times. The sixty-minute video is accompanied by detailed teaching notes enabling anyone to conduct an informal training session for a group. With the success of this video, perhaps the Trust or others can be persuaded to prepare similar advice on other skills of relevance to industrial archaeology, such as simple building repair, the conservation of excavated sites, and looking after working machinery. The video can be obtained from the National Trust Postal Shopping Service, PO Box 101, Melksham, Wiltshire SN12 8EA for £109.25 plus £1.20 postage in the UK.



Redevelopment around Ellesmere Port. A new access bridge is being built across the Barge Lock to the Lower Basin for the proposed hotel on the basin's centre island: the bridge's structure and design has been the subject of some debate. The new buildings behind are part of the 'Telford Quays' development.

Photo: John Gill

INDUSTRIAL RECORDING BY THE ENGLISH ROYAL COMMISSION

In his address to the recent Institute of Field Archaeologists conference Dr Neil Cossons urged his audience of a couple of hundred archaeologists to 'get to grips' with industrial archaeology. His strictures on the lack of work being done on industrial sites as compared with that being done on conventional archaeological sites were directed at the generality of the audience and he explicitly exempted the half dozen or so members of AIA present and, by implication, the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England. Indeed, he drew on recent RCHME surveys of industrial areas to demonstrate the inadequate state of our knowledge of even significant industrial sites and emphasised the need for RCHME to continue to pursue its lead role in the development of national recording programmes. The RCHME is wholeheartedly receptive to these exhortations as they not only provide a welcome excuse to review its work in this field but they also coincide with an appraisal within RCHME of how most effectively its present commitment to industrial recording can be expanded.

A review of RCHME's commitment to industrial recording indicates that our track-record is more impressive than is generally recognised and that our present and proposed involvement is no less so. An overt commitment to industrial archaeology was initiated in 1979 with the appointment of a Royal Commissioner with specialist interest in the subject. Henceforth industrial subjects were to be encompassed in a deliberate, rather than just incidental, way. Throughout the last decade the Commission has pursued this objective by means of the complementary strategies of developing an in-house recording capability whilst encouraging others to channel their work through the Commission by means of joint projects. In many ways the subject matter of industrial recording straddles the divide between the Architectural and Archaeological Divisions of RCHME but they are reviewed separately below, beginning with the Architectural Division. To assist in the development of an in-house capability RCHME took over responsibility for the Industrial Monuments Survey from the Department of Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings in 1981. The attachment of the Survey Officer to the Threatened Buildings Section created a much needed industrial recording capacity at a time of ever increasing threat. Threatened buildings recording, whilst reactive, is nevertheless capable of contributing significantly to scholarly research and this has certainly proved to be the case with industrial subjects. By identifying and recording numerous examples of hitherto rather neglected types



The proposed new headquarters building for RCHME, previously the general offices and drawing offices of the Swindon Railway Works
Photo: RCHME

of site such as malshouses and warehouses patterns of functional and structural development can be established. Thus, for example, a corpus of information has accumulated on warehouses which spans five centuries and embraces structural features as disparate as arch-braced roof trusses and reinforced concrete frames. This material, united by function, should be capable of analysis and may suggest development threads as yet unexamined by architectural and building historians.

Another such instance is the investigation of early fireproof mills. The Section has investigated some dozen examples of pre-1830 fireproof mills as far apart as Somerset and Cumbria, few of which feature in the literature. These sites indicate that there are several more strands to the fireproofing story than have hitherto been identified. Two of them, Stanley Mill in Gloucestershire and Ditherington Mill in Shrewsbury, arguably the two most important fireproof mills in the country, were surveyed in considerable detail by electronic techniques with subsequent computerised plotting. Such technology enables the Commission to tackle complex sites and allows rapid surveys of intricate subjects such as the Anderton Boat Lift or hazardous subjects such as the crumbling bank of iron ore calcining kilns at Rosedale.

A second major in-house recording commitment has been the survey of textile mills in Yorkshire. Commencing in 1985, this project recorded all 1,500 surviving sites at a summary level; 150 were chosen for detailed recording to illustrate different branches of the industry and the significant stages of technological development. The project witnessed the first use by the Commission of low-level oblique aerial photography in an industrial context and some 1,100 sites were recorded in this way to great effect.

This survey, with the joint Mills surveys in Manchester and East Cheshire, would constitute the major component in any national survey of the textile mill.

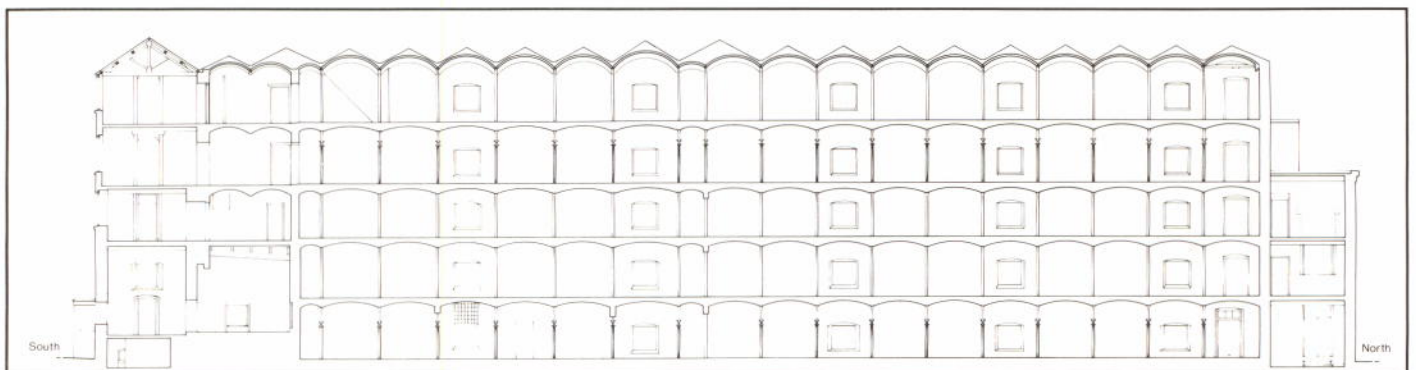
At a less detailed level the Division has also been involved in recording historic car factories and railway workshops. Its involvement in the latter had an unexpected spin-off when the General Office of the Swindon Railway Works was identified as a suitable building for the Commission's new headquarters.

Following this, a detailed project on the railway buildings of Swindon is shortly to commence, leading, it is hoped, to a popular publication.

In line with the increasing national emphasis on industrial recording the Survey of London in 1986 chose a predominantly industrial parish for its next survey volume. The parish of All Saints, Poplar, includes the historic docks of the Isle of Dogs, currently being so drastically redeveloped, thus at the eleventh hour managing to record the last glimpse of traditional docklands.

In the last year, staff from three offices have undertaken rapid surveys of six of the nine newly designated Urban Development Corporation Areas and are in the process of publishing summary reports for each area with assessments of the importance of all pre 1945 buildings. Amongst the sites identified as being of national importance but currently unprotected are a sequence of early reinforced concrete structures on the River Tyne, a steelworks in Sheffield and a 100 feet span masonry railway bridge in Bristol built by Brunel in 1839.

The strategy of collaborating with outside bodies involved in industrial recording has continued to prove effective. By means of short-term contracts and assistance in kind, publications have been produced on such



Electronically surveyed: long section of the main mill at Ditherington, Shrewsbury