

INDUSTRIAL ARCHAEOLOGY NEWS

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COVER PICTURE

Aerial view of Bath Gas Works, July 1950. From the collection of the Bath Industrial Heritage Trust (see this page)

Photo: Bath Industrial Heritage Trust

Bath's industrial museum

MUSEUM FEATURE: this is the first in a series of articles featuring industrial museums around the country. While Bath is renowned as a beautiful Georgian city, the Bath Industrial Heritage Trust and its museum goes some way to address the balance by showing something of Bath's industrial base.

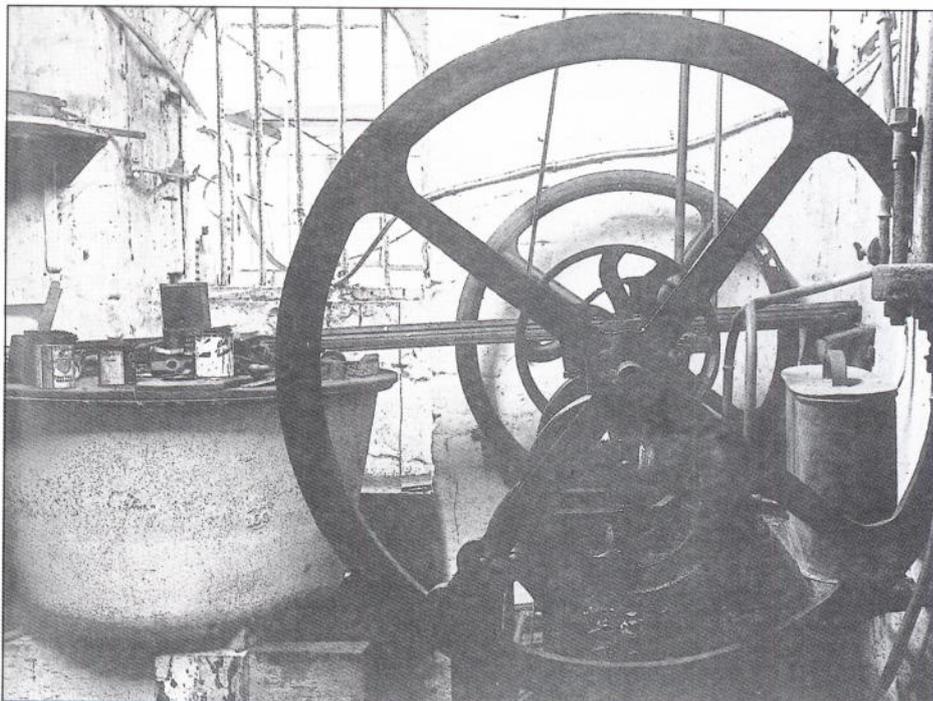
Stuart Burroughs

The Bath Industrial Heritage Trust was formed in 1976 in order to establish a museum to correct the mistaken impression that Bath, as a cathedral city of the South West, was bypassed by the convulsion of the industrialisation over the last 200 years. In the absence of a central museum of the history of Bath, the museum has widened its role in recent years to concern itself not only with the working heritage of the city but with its general social history during this period.

In the late 1960s the general interest in industrial archaeology in the Bristol region with luminaries such as Angus Buchanan, Kenneth Hudson and Neil Cossons at work was reflected not only in the establishment of the Bristol Industrial Archaeology Society (BIAS) but also in the saving in October 1969 of the stock in trade of the Bath firm of J.B. Bowler & Sons Ltd. The firm had closed in the late summer of 1969 when a small group of local enthusiasts, headed by interior designer Russell Frears arranged for the purchase of the contents of the factory buildings prior to their demolition in 1972. Although the original intention had been to simply create a photographic archive of the firm, discussion with Ernest Bowler, grandson of the firm's founder, resulted in the purchase of the contents for £2,000.

In the absence of any movement from Bath City Council to create a local authority museum of industry despite an appeal from Angus Buchanan, the initiative passed to the small group saddled with accommodating the collection of 70,000 objects and 250,000 documents prior to the establishment of a museum centred on the collection. The decision had been taken to recreate the original environment as closely as possible and thus a major requirement was a building with sufficient floor space to accommodate the room recreations. In 1977, after years in store, Bath City Council offered a former Real Tennis Court in the northern part of the city centre for its accommodation. An arrangement was made for the Bath Industrial Heritage Trust (BIHT) formed from the original enthusiasts to upkeep an historic building while using it to display the collection in 'real space'.

Although a museum at this stage concerned with the larger picture of industrialisation of Bath was out of the question due to funding and lack of local authority support the museum which opened in 1978 attempted in part to tell the tale. The firm established by J.B. Bowler in 1872, although starting as a small brass foundry and domestic engineering firm, had expanded by the 1880s to include a mineral water factory, heavy engineering repairs, property speculation, a boot and shoe shop and involvement with a slaughterhouse (adjoining the mineral water factory!) and a haberdashers shop. The firm later opened a garage and reflected in the large company archive is the story of a company which head dealings with practically every other organisation, company (including pubs, breweries, railway companies, canal hauliers, etc, and important residents in the city during its 97-



The carbonating pump at J. B. Bowler's mineral water factory, in 1969. A photograph from the Bowler Collection
Photo: Bath Industrial Heritage Trust

year history. In other words, through examination of the one firm saved from the many, a wider picture could be explored as the city evolved and documents from organisations long disappeared survive amongst the bills and invoices. In addition to reflecting on the commercial and industrial transactions passing through the company the records also reflect on the predicament of rich and poor in the city as it struggled with public health crisis, river flooding and wartime damage.

In addition, the arrangements of the contents of the original premises in Corn Street, Bath, had attracted the eye of Russell Frears and others given that the firm had spent little on investment in the company's plant or premises since the First World War. As a result the original factory was a museum before there was a museum and the recreation of the original ramshackle ambience was a crucial element in attracting visitors, etc. Without wanting to describe the Bowler displays as a 'shortcut' to a museum, the recreated interiors provided an attraction which proved itself very successful from the start and allowed the BIHT, through the proceeds, to explore more fully the other aspects of the city's experience.

Since the museum opened in September 1978 (and celebrates its 21st birthday this autumn), the museum has collected despite a shortage of storage space documentary records (both paper and oral recordings) on many aspects of Bath's working heritage including its extractive (Bath Stone, Coal, Fuller's Earth, etc), manufacturing (heavy and light engineering, textiles, plasticine(!), printing, etc), transport (railway, canal, river, road, etc) and services, especially tourism or visitor-related activities, always the most important element in

the city's employment profile. Luckily, before the museum opened in 1978, the technology department of Bristol City Museum (becoming the Bristol Industrial Museum also in 1978) had been collecting equipment and machinery from Bath and this material remains in store in Bristol. The collection includes a stationary gas engine manufactured by Griffin, extraction equipment from the Bath Gas Works, etc. Ideally BIHT would like to loan some of this material back to its 'home', but at present there is little storage or display space available. Temporary exhibitions with sponsorship from local industry address issues ignored by other museums in the city. These have included issues of public health, the slums district of the city, epidemic outbreaks, industrial pollution as well as descriptions of specific local industry.

Although competition for visitors is keen in Bath - there are 14 other museums in the city let alone many other tourist attractions - the museum has carved itself a niche partly through the undoubted charm of the Bowler displays and partly through its commitment to collect, preserve and explain the less attractive aspects of a city renowned for its Georgian splendours.

As well as the museum displays, the most important documentary collections available for consultation include the Bowler Collection (250,000 documents), Fullers Earth Collection (100,000 documents), British Gas Collection (10,000 items), Stothert & Pitt Collection (40,000 photographs and records), Harbutts plasticine (300 items) and many others.

Bath Industrial Heritage Centre, Camden Works, Julian Road, Bath BA1 2RH. ☎ and Fax: 01225 318348.



Built in Bath: Stothert & Pitt quayside crane supplied to Royal Portbury Dock Photo: Bath Industrial Heritage Trust

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