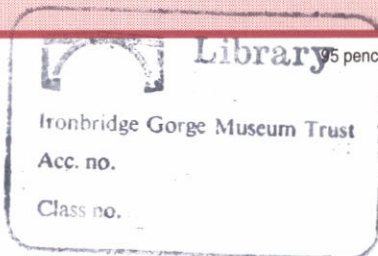


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Tackling the Twentieth Century

Michael Stratton

Many industrial archaeologists are still wary of studying the monuments of their own century. In recent years the Ironbridge Institute has devoted an increasing proportion of its teaching and research time to this period, led in part by the enthusiasm of students and by demands of clients for consultancy work. The academic issues underpinning any study of sites dating to the last hundred years are discussed by Richard Butterfield in the latest issue of *IA Review* drawing upon research for his Institute dissertation completed in 1990. In subsequent years Institute staff have researched and written on the food industry, car factories and most recently on power station design.

These studies have shown that prejudice against the buildings and complexes of the twentieth century, which is as strong amongst industrial archaeologists as politicians and the general public, can be tackled headlong. It is worth summarising some typical knee-jerk reactions and how they can be countered:

● 'Twentieth-century buildings are flimsy, lacking the solid qualities of textile mills or warehouses'. Non-loadbearing construction only became typical in the 1960s; until then most industrial structures were very solidly built and with

office blocks being given impressive facades.

● 'There is little to celebrate or preserve from a period when Britain was in relative decline'. The dominance of world manufacturing and trade by the Victorians became economically and morally indefensible. Car and other consumer goods factories, airports and cinemas bear witness to remarkable economic and technological vitality, and mark a broader sector of the population gaining access to the products of technology and mass production.

● 'Twentieth-century factories are nothing more than anonymous, standardised sheds'. Regional variations in layout and organisation (reflecting the continuity of workshop or heavy engineering traditions) continued well into the inter-war period. The use of brick and stone, according to local building

traditions, also survived into this period. Furthermore major companies developed distinctive house styles, replicated across huge complexes and even from one site to another.

● 'There is no point in an industrial archaeologist studying twentieth-century factories, since their form is not related to their function'. Industrial archaeologists have long taken an illogical stance in relation to the issue of 'form follows function' and its importance as a factor in justifying recording and preservation. Blast furnaces and pottery kilns have been preserved in large numbers, while the surrounding casting houses or clay preparation buildings, which are essential to the function of a works, have been lost. The fact that kilns were repeatedly rebuilt and so are rarely original to the foundation of the works is ignored. Mean-



Car production in small brick and timber sheds. The SS, later Jaguar, car factory in a shell-filling factory erected during the First World War, Holbrook Lane, Coventry

WANTED - AN EDITOR

Dr Peter Wakelin has announced that he will be retiring as Editor of *IA News* with the next issue. He has been Editor for six years and will have been responsible for 23 issues. A new Editor is required to take the magazine forward from this winter, and ideally should be chosen by the end of September so that he or she can be involved in production of one issue before taking over fully. Anyone who might be interested in the post may wish initially to contact Dr Wakelin to learn about the work involved ☎ 0222 668644 (evenings) or 0222 500269 (office hours). Alternatively, potential editors can contact the AIA President, John Crompton ☎ 0592 873496.

Twentieth Century IA ● Latvia ● Leicester Seminar ● J K S St Joseph
Alum Works ● TICCIH in Canada ● NVQs ● IRIS Competition ● Smallsmith