



Engaging with the Professions An Engineer's Perspective of the Value of Archives and Collections

The 29th September 2011, saw the launch of the Scottish Engineering Hall of Fame in front of over 300 diners at the James Watt Dinner in Glasgow.

The initiative, by the Institution of Engineers and Shipbuilders in Scotland is supported by: the Royal Society of Edinburgh; the Royal Academy of Engineering; the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland; and the engineering institutions. The inaugural inductees were announced by me, as president of IESIS and not-so-eminent chairman of the eminent selection panel, and together they represent the breadth of Scottish engineering expertise over 250 years and a whole range of disciplines. Without their achievements the world would be a much poorer place. They really are seven Scots who changed the world.

The support that it has obtained is indicative of the industry's keen interest in its roots and heritage, and archivists and curators should be encouraged that past achievements are still regarded as having current relevance. Not least as an extra means of encouraging young people into engineering and related professions, to help regenerate the economy.

The inaugural inductees are:

- Andrew Meikle (1719-1811) inventor of the threshing machine
- James Watt (1736-1819) mechanical engineer who developed the steam engine for commercial applications, industrialist
- Thomas Telford (1757 - 1834) civil engineer whose works traversed the United Kingdom
- James Young (1811-1883) chemical engineer, shale oil pioneer and founder of the petrochemical industry
- Sir William Thomson, 1st Baron Kelvin (1824-1907), engineer and scientist, designer of the electric telegraph
- Percy Sinclair Pilcher (1866-1899), aviation pioneer whose work predated and influenced the Wright brothers
- William Douglas Weir, 1st Viscount Weir (1877-1959), engineer and industrialist who held key government posts in two world wars and created the National Grid.

And the next steps in the Hall of Fame are to establish a physical representation of the so far virtual Hall of Fame. Ideally with artefacts, examples of output, interpretation of significance, of value, and of impact - another opportunity to increase the engagement between the engineering industry and the museums sector.

To do that, what do we use? We use surviving material - original source material, records, archives, objects, commentaries, film, ephemera, music and memories - the raw material of curatorial interpretation.

To have this available to future curators, we need to keep it.

I did a piece for ICOHTEC newsletter earlier this year, which Miriam has included in your handout pack. It tells of the loss of the "*Elizabeth*" of Burntisland in 1660. I came across the story when I was researching family history. The first mate was John Masterton from Kirkcaldy. I'm a Fifer, so we are probably related. He gave evidence at the inquiry into the loss, and it's a sad story of a cargo of 85 hogsheads pressed on this merchant ship by a royal navy frigate to save the frigate the trouble of sailing to Scotland. Or perhaps it had been called to active service. The *Elizabeth* was now overloaded, it wasn't particularly seaworthy, and it sank off the coast of Northumberland. The crew survived, because the ship took on water relatively slowly, and they had time to take to the boats. The cargo was entirely lost. In those hogsheads, were part of Scotland's national archives, taken by Cromwell from Stirling castle, and whose return had been ordered by Charles II. Almost certainly, most were the only extant copies of charters and national archives, the raw material of researchers and seekers of truth. Gone forever.

That they were taken to Stirling from Edinburgh in the first place is an indication of how highly they were thought of by the Scottish administration of the time. They were not trivial ephemera.

I then drew an analogy with recent prevarication and changes of policy of the Scottish government in relation to archival storage, particularly of the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland. In 2007 sufficient funds were set aside to allow the construction of a bespoke archive store in Granton that would have given long term security to one of Scotland's greatest assets - its record of the built environment, its record of its achievement as a civilisation. Just as important as collections of paintings and artifacts to the definition of Scotland and the Scots. When the new administration came into power, that funding was removed and the project was cancelled, curiously in that one might have thought the nationalist party would have placed an even higher value on representations of what defines Scotland and its unique contribution to the world. And this was before the global financial meltdown.

Since then the commission has been attempting to manage the unmanageable - maintain a home for the National Monument Record of Scotland without ownership of premises. It's split between several sites, all with different leases. Each time a lease expires, competition rules require a rebid. If the low bid is a new site, the collection must be moved at considerable cost. It's wasteful; it's inconvenient to researchers and to staff. It's like moving your ailing and revered relative from one bedsit to another rather than providing a stable, safe and comfortable home. In that sense it's verging on the barbaric!

Why does this matter not just to curators or researchers, but to the public and to professionals in the built environment? Well again, if used imaginatively and intelligently it can do something that is much more exciting than recording

the imaginative death of our country -the label that can sometimes with justification, be levelled at some museums that only celebrate the past. if used intelligently it can enchant, it can delight, it can inspire. That is the skill of the interpreter, the educationalist, the exhibitor. But the raw material, the archive, comes first. Without the sources, there can be no interpretation.

It can also be of great value to professionals, as a means of celebrating the importance of architects or engineers to society. Used with intelligence, the archive provides the material to celebrate the professions, as in the Scottish Engineering Hall of Fame, or the gazetteers or guidebooks to encourage the wider public to seek out the works, and thereby appreciate the intellectual achievement, thereby enhancing the status of the profession. And engineering needs all it can get in that respect.

Archiving is also incredibly valuable in understanding existing buildings, bridges, structures etc, which may need some tender loving care to extend their useful life. With good quality information we can also make it so much easier to save buildings at risk, either through neglect, or through fire, flood or other calamities. RCAHMS and the fire service has an agreement to provide information on important buildings for example. So there's a real practical application of record management. With good quality information, the job of conservation and reconstruction is made so much easier.

Do typical engineers make enough use of the resource available? No. There are a few that specialise in conservation who will be regular users, but there are many who only occasionally have to deal with repair and refurbishment who probably do not. So there's a task of promotion and communication that would be well worthwhile. perhaps the Scottish engineering hall of fame will be a catalyst to engaging the engineering community with museums and archives more positively, and start to see the benefits. If the museum and records community could help working engineers understand the past, they are more likely to give us a better future. I think it's a worthwhile aim, but then I'm biased. As Vice Chairman of the Commission I know it's one of Scotland's greatest treasures. But there are not enough politicians and decision makers who share that opinion strongly enough to give the National Monument Record of Scotland a proper home. Time perhaps to make a bigger fuss? I think so.

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