

Heritage Policy

Sir Neil Cossons

It's good to be in Scotland and in this museum which I've never seen before. Nor have I seen the *Glenlee* in her present berth and looking so pristine. So, it's an especial pleasure to be here.

I see Scotland as a haven of enlightenment which it comes to attitudes towards and progress in preservation of the transport and industrial heritage. This is not least because I think there seems to be a very vital and vivid sense that the industrial revolution - the Scottish industrial revolution - is a part of national identity and that this is being expressed with increasing fervour and enthusiasm.

That seems to be to be the best possible starting point for the sort of issues we are here to discuss today. I thought I might begin with a few flashbacks which have in some cases an extraordinary degree of contemporaneity about them; some of the issues that were being highlighted by people working in this field fifty and more years ago and to see whether they strike a cord with you. Are there some founding principles that are still relevant and might guide how proceed over the next few years.

I found a lovely quote in the *Museums Journal* for 1960 from Michael Sedgwick who was then the Curator of the Montagu Motor Museum at Beaulieu, some thirteen years before the opening of what was to become the National Motor Museum. He said:

'[the museum] can claim to be the most representative of all transport museums, containing as it does cars and motorcycles from Great Britain, the United States, France, Belgium, Germany and Austria'; we take pride in the fact that we are a live museum, whose exhibits go out to meet the public. It is hard to think of any other collection where only insurance prevents members of the staff from starting up the exhibits at the first swing of the handle'. He mentioned the expansion of the library and the development of a detailed record of each vehicle, supported by photographs and noted that 'the Montagu Motor Museum is not supported by any outside contributions other than the admission fees paid by visitors, and revenue obtained by the hire of vehicles for extraneous activities'. "

So there we are. If you go back a decade before that, also in the *Museums Journal* - for May 1950 – there is a reference to the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry which noted that a number of the exhibits were sponsored by industrial corporations. 'Many of the exhibits can be seen from comfortable lounges. Floor coverings relieve the strain of walking on marble floors. Smoking is permitted. In its eight theatres, with a total seating capacity of 1,800 visitors can enjoy motion-picture films, demonstrations and lectures on scientific subjects' 'Since 1940, annual attendance at the Museum has risen from 650,000 to 2,000,000 and the average length of stay has increased from 55 minutes to three and a half hours'. This is I think the first time I've come across a reference to the length of stay in a museum was, something we would regard as quite normal now as a means of gaining some indication of how important and enjoyable these places are. [The museum] "is open every day of the year except Christmas and is free and demonstrations of metal casting took place in the electric foundry several times a day".

That was in 1950. In the same issue of the *Museums Journal*, Gordon Russell, then Director of the Council of Industrial Design was extolling the virtues of cooperation between museums and industry; not only that there should be more museums of and about industry but that 'we have not yet begun to make the Museum the civilising force that it might become in industry'. Design would of course be an important subject.



The year before that in 1949, Herman Shawⁱ, the then Director of the Science Museum, noted the need to build up a specialist design staff in the museum, and that 'unless complete control over their activities is exercised, there may well arise a meretricious set of standards in which display outweighs the importance of the subject'. The designer, left to himself, often produces a bad exhibition. With control by an expert he will usually produce an exhibition better than could be devised by the expert alone'.

At about the same time, In 1952, Norman Bertenshawⁱⁱ, Keeper of the Department of Science and Industry of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, saw little such need, taking a robust DIY approach, modifying bomb-damaged South Kensington cases into wall cases and installing in the firearms displays an electric burglar alarm system that used the exhibits themselves to complete the circuit; move one and a relay holding open the circuit to the alarm bell was de-energised so that the alarm bell would continue ringing even if the specimen were put back. The alarm system indicated through a green light in the control room that all was in order. Pistols, however, in order to see their detail more effectively, were rotated at one revolution per minute using a small electric motor and belt drive. Bertenshaw also noted – this in 1952 - the 'present trend towards the reduction in the number of exhibits on view to the public at any one time', about which he was very critical.

Doubts about the experiential

In 1959 the Museums Journalⁱⁱⁱ picked up a piece from the *Yorkshire Evening Press* reporting that the Castle Museum in York would soon be having its own sub-post office. It 'will be a replica of a typical Victorian branch post office of the 1870's and it will form part of a small general store which has been built at the corner of Kirkgate'. Visitors will be able to buy stamps and post letters and cards in a pillar box (*sic*) set in one of the shop's windows. Also on sale will be reproductions of Victorian penny black stamps, accurate but for the incorporation in the design of the words Castle Museum. The stamps will be cancelled at the museum with a Maltese Cross franking stamp.

To this article was appended the following:

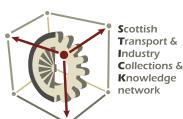
THE AUTHENTIC TOUCH

*We got the windows in Guisborough,
The grill's from the Cardiff Zoo;
The letter-box comes from the Falkland Isles,
And the counter from Timbuctoo.
The chimney piece is Canadian,
The doorway we purchased in Cork;
But the whole is a genuine replica
Of olde worlde York.
The stamps are eighteen forty,
And everything's rather a mix,
In our pseudo-Victorian post-office
Of eighteen seventy-six.
So post a card to your sweetie,
We'll sell you a stamp that's a fake,
As long as your money's authentic,
And it's only cash we take.*

G.W.

Birth of industrial archaeology

In the same issue of *MJ*^{iv} was an announcement that the Council for British Archaeology had recently formed an Industrial Archaeology Research Committee and that a conference on the



possibilities and immediate requirements of research on this subject was to be held on 12 December 1959 at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

There was the announcement of an exhibition of models of barges to be held at the Manchester Museum to celebrate the bicentenary of the Act of Parliament which authorised the construction of the Bridgewater Canal, and including a working model of the Anderton Boat Lift, and an article by Keith Dunham^v on the reconstruction of a series of replica workshops – brass-turner, action filer (gunmaker), nailer, jeweller and cooper - at the Birmingham Museum of Science & Industry.

So, we've been in this debate on and off for much longer than many of us might imagine and - looking at your youth and obvious virility here this morning - from well before most of you were born.

Let me reflect upon where we are I think and now. I suggested that things are perhaps better and more encouraging in Scotland than in other parts of the United Kingdom. And it's for you to tell me why. But I think I'm right and if I am this is something quite extraordinary and well worth valuing, something of which Scotland should be proud and in a position to become a leading light. It's good for example that Scotland is going to be represented at governmental level at the International Congress on the Conservation of the Industrial Heritage in Taiwan in two weeks time. England isn't, although there'll be some English people there and we will attempt to hold up the reputation of England and its industrial heritage.

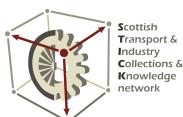
The transport and industrial preservation and museum sector might on the face of it appear relatively small. But, if we add up the numbers of people active in it in terms of their professional and employed curatorial responsibilities in those museums that have such people, and the much larger number of people who are paid and in independent museums or independent preservation projects, and the even larger number behind them who work as volunteers, there are actually quite a lot of people involved. These people have the potential – as yet unrealised – to be a strong body of knowledge and opinion and a foundation for promoting the idea and in particular for advocacy.

So your seminar title today 'Cultural Heritage Policy and its Impact on Industrial and Transport Heritage' I might turn on its head and say 'industrial and transport heritage and its impact on cultural heritage policy'. We should start with the stuff and work back to the policy rather than start with the policy and work down to the stuff. And then if we think of the stuff this tends to be divided between the real estate which might be the responsibility of English Heritage or Historic Scotland in the legislative sense and what might be regarded as the movable objects that end up in museums such as this or in volunteer run preservation projects. Behind then again is the vast and largely unrecognised bibliographical and archival record.

So the first message today is that from the public's point of view this stuff tends to be invisible, and the second is that when it comes to national policies it should be indivisible. It is this indivisibility that is something which I think all of us need to spend more time on both recognising and enunciating to a wider public. The invisibility however I think is partly a reflection of the relatively small numbers of people, relatively speaking, who see themselves as having a public advocacy role. Plenty will keep their noses to the grindstone of preservation but all too often the public is of secondary importance.

The one liner is that transport and industrial history and heritage are a part of Scotland's and indeed world history, offspring of the Scottish Enlightenment and prolific around the world as a reflection of Scotland's genius. If you look at almost every other aspect of preservation the advocates are noisier, their social acceptability is greater, their political clout is stronger, the desire too of people – and politicians in particular - to be associated with them is greater.

And, I noted in particular your words John [Hume] when you said that this material relates to the broadest possible range of human experiences. That is manifestly true. At the same time it is hardly known and is not widely recognised. So, back to my invisibility point, advocacy it



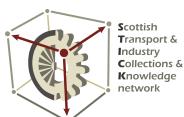
seems to me is one of the crucial requirements to get what is the most dramatic of stories, the most vivid of experiences and of opportunities to get some idea of what happened during these crucially transformative years, this great inflection in the long arc of history. The industrialising years of the 18th and early 19th centuries were utterly and completely transformative. And we can see the impact of that all over the world – Barcelona calling itself the Manchester of the South' for the sake of argument, and Manchesters in New England and elsewhere. So we've got this extraordinary heritage which is hidden or overlooked. This is partly because the origins of heritage legislation and creating the framework for the preservation of the built environment took place long before industrial heritage was recognised. Put another way, the Society of Antiquaries of London was formed two years before Abraham Darby smelted iron using coke as a fuel - perhaps one of those signature moments in the catechism of industrialisation. So when you come to the preservation of historic buildings the idea of scheduling and listing was invented by archaeologists who were interested in the preservation of the pre-industrial and indeed the pre-medieval past. And, when it comes to Listing, what initially went on to those lists were notable buildings and great pieces of architecture. Nothing wrong with that, but it wasn't until the 1950s or 60s that the idea that there was industrial material that was worthy of preservation. There is if you like an attitudinal back log and a real need to redress the balance. It's going to be tough. In a period of economic hardship, a new formula is going to be needed.

We are victims in a sense of yesterday's attitudes. Certainly in England the Department of the Environment decided as a matter of policy not to take industrial sites into guardianship, the argument being that there was a voluntary sector that might step into the breach. If we look at the number of sites taken into captivity – decade by decade - the peak was the 1970s. These were the 'heritage years' when for a period a site was taken into care every fortnight. It tapered off in the eighties and off course hardly any sites are now taken into public care. The argument that there was a vibrant voluntary sector might have sounded convincing at the time but these people hadn't really much of a clue about what this stuff was all about, let alone any understanding of how it might be preserved. Cultural blind spots worked then – as now – to exclude the industrial from what in England is now called the 'National Heritage Collection'. I spent some twenty or thirty years regretting this but I am now in retrospect coming to realise that had these sites gone into public ownership they might well be worse off than is in fact the case today. Many of them are run in the voluntary sector to high professional standards and offer vivid opportunities for the public to understand them. In the voluntary sector the innovative approaches to management and funding afford astonishing value for money.

Add to that the extraordinary lunacies that the voluntary sector has been capable of promoting and sustaining and we can I think be reasonably proud of what we have as a national industrial and transport heritage. How could the public sector have ever contemplated bringing Brunel's steamship *Great Britain* back from the Falkland Islands to Bristol and preserved it so successfully? What politician or official would moot the idea let alone stake a political future on it. So too the proposals to take the *City of Adelaide* to South Australia are the result of free-thinking people with fire in their bellies setting out to achieve the impossible.

So there is another heritage, and that is the indomitable spirit of mad people to actually get stuff done. The right balance between common sense and lunacy is of course essential but that these people keep coming to the surface and are so successful is something of which as a nation we can be proud. Think of preserved railway lines in successful operation, of Bletchley Park, of innumerable pumping stations in steam, of the restoration of miles of canals and we have a very special sort of heritage achievement that makes the 'official' sector look if not rather inept then at least not very good value for money.

It seems to me therefore that when you come to cultural heritage policy and its impact on industrial and transport history this needs to be recognised, valued as a national asset and then backed by forthright policies. To its eternal credit the Heritage Lottery Fund has done



just that, taking a broad view of heritage and recognising the value of what the voluntary sector can deliver. As a result, some £782 million from the HLF has come into industrial and transport heritage from since 1994. The HLF is the envy of the world; there is no equivalent source of funding for transport and industrial heritage anywhere.

But, there is still the need for advocacy, a forum to promote a cause. STICK might be this forum, the glue that holds the arguments together but also a body that can express in a coherent form the value of this stuff and be a powerful advocate on behalf of those projects that need some form of authoritative support from people who know what they are talking about and can articulate the fundamental importance of this stuff in a wider context than a group of enthusiasts or the local community, at a national and indeed international level.

The Maritime Forum attempts to bring together maritime museums, ship preservation and historic dockyard projects. But, it has become very museum focused which is a pity because museums are easy bit; preserved ships – especially when afloat – present some of the toughest preservation challenges there are. But some people believe they need historic ships for the benefits they might offer – masts and yards against the sky, the temptingly attractive ambience of a waterfront development that the presence of an historic ship might confer. I remember when I was at the National Maritime Museum developers would turn up and say “we’ve got a waterfront development on the Thames and we need a four masted barque to enhance the scene. Rarely in these circumstances does money flow from the property development to the historic ship, not least because few face up to the realities of the cost of ship preservation. Think of the crisis that has faced the *Falls of Clyde* for example a ship well known to all of you. She is on the national register in Hawaii but may well be towed out to sea and sunk.

All of this it seems to me comes back to the need to have a forum which can talk with real authority not just about historical value but about the practical issues of funding and management and offer the benefit and experience of comparative studies. That forum will also need to have an international perspective because so much of the stuff of the industrial years is scattered throughout the world. Scotland’s industrial heritage can be found in every continent. Historic Scotland is surveying the world population of cantilever cranes of which the oldest – still in use – is in the Mitsubishi shipyard in Nagasaki. The Kosuge slipway across the harbour is from Aberdeen, both overlooked by Thomas Glover’s house. Thomas Glover – from Fraserborough – was one of the pioneers of Japan’s industrialisation in the second half of the nineteenth century. And, these and other sites in Kyushu form the basis for what will shortly be a world heritage nomination. It is a paradox isn’t it that Japan’s government currently employs more people caring for Britain’s industrial; heritage than we do.

In 2008 I completed a report for English Heritage *Sustaining England’s Industrial Heritage: a future for preserved industrial sites in England*. I visited a number of these places and spoke to a lot of the people who ran them. They had strong enthusiasm but in many cases didn’t know where they could find out some of the most basic funding and management information. In a number of cases Trustees were well over 70 and in some cases over 80; they had no strategies for finding a new generation. There is a lot of good readily available information setting out sound principles to be applied to charities in general and independent museums in particular. If there was a single general conclusion it was that many these preservation groups were isolated one from another and out of touch with much of the well established practice in other, related places. Few were members of AIM, the Association of Independent Museums and many were unaware of the AIM Guidelines. Some form of support and mentoring was clearly needed and English Heritage has responded positively with the appointment of a support officer, based at Ironbridge on a three-year contract, to be the connector between the wider heritage world and the large number of small, entirely voluntary bodies who are responsible for holding such a large slice of England’s industrial heritage.



So, Miriam and John, and all of you, your initiative in bringing the STICK group together is I believe one of the most hopeful and positive signals in advancing the cause of industrial heritage conservation. All power to your elbows!

Resources/links mentioned

- Sustaining England's Industrial Heritage report

<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/content/publications/publicationsNew/sustaining-englands-industrial-heritage/sustaining-englands-ind-heritage.pdf>

- Railway heritage trust annual reports

http://www.railwayheritagetrust.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=62&Itemid=60

ⁱ Herman Shaw 'The Science Museum and its Public', *Museums Journal* **49**, 5 (August 1949) pp105-113. See too W T O'Dea 'The Science Museum's Agricultural Gallery', *Museums Journal* **51** 12 (March 1952) pp299-301.

ⁱⁱ Norman Bertenshaw 'Display Methods at Birmingham's New Museum', *Museums Journal* **51**, 12 (March 1952) pp295-97.

ⁱⁱⁱ News and Notes *Museums Journal* **59**, 6 (September 1959), p133. The piece of doggerel is signed G.W.

^{iv} News and Notes *Museums Journal* **59**, 6 (September 1959), p132

^v Keith Dunham 'Replica Workshops at Birmingham', *Museums Journal* **59**, 6 (September 1959), pp126-129. Keith Dunham, then of the Birmingham Museum of Science & Industry, went on to be appointed Manager of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust for a brief period c1970.

