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What's the Point of Recording 20th Century Industrial Archaeology?

Conferences are one of the ways in which archaeology refreshes itself, through presenting new work, challenging orthodoxy and making new linkages between data and colleagues. The current thematic volume takes its inspiration from the 2012 Association for Industrial Archaeology (AIA) research seminar, part of the Association's annual conference in Essex that year. This had the theme of 'Archaeological Work on 20th Century Industrial Sites'.¹

All the speakers explored the unique character of working in a period when other data sources (film, oral history, paper and photography) seemingly provide more information than archaeology can, leading most of the speakers to question what is the point of doing archaeology from this century? Do we risk, as archaeologists, undertaking third rate anthropology, economic history or sociology instead of material-based archaeological research? Several media stories in the last few years (excavating a 1990s Ford Transit van – the inspiration we now learn in this volume of Paul Belford - or recording graffiti about the 1970s Punk Rock band the Sex Pistols) might lead the casual reader to think this was indeed the case. Inevitably, how these were reported in parts of the Media did not really reflect why these projects were undertaken and the difficulties working in this period. That's why a seminar such as this is so valuable, since its reach is beyond the limits of the usual academic-based conference, most of the Association's membership being volunteers.

The Association for Industrial Archaeology first turned its attention to the increasing volume of fieldwork on 20th century industrial sites in the 1990s, with pioneering work on the subject being done by Barrie Trinder and the late Michael Stratton amongst others.² Since then a string of articles encompassing 20th century industrial activity and sites has appeared in the Association's journal, *Industrial Archaeology Review*. Other organisations such as the Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology (SPMA) and Contemporary and Historical Archaeological Theory (CHAT) have also been looking at 20th century archaeology for a decade. The AIA returned to the issue of recording 20th century industrial sites in response to some very large developer-funded excavations during the mid- to late 2000s, in Glasgow, London, and Manchester, and the growing popularity of fieldwork in this area.

As with any conference it's possible, even tempting, to sit back and admire the slide show, but each of the presentations produced eye-catching and at times startling material. The presentations included two on large infrastructure sites: the Hoo Peninsula in Kent, where the oil refining industry has altered much of the landscape (Ian Carpenter's article in the current volume), and the Somers Town Goods Yard at St Pancras in London. Issues discussed included the scale of these sites and what to record. A third paper dealt with issues of scale when recording industrial buildings, using examples from the Sheffield steel industry, and is a subject picked up by Ian Miller in his article on the Wearside Pottery in this issue.³ Marrying the new data sources with the 20th century archaeology was explored in papers on the London Overground Railway (especially around the Bishopsgate Goods Station), the excavation of workers' housing in Manchester and the archaeology of sanitation (to be explored in a future issue of the Review), and the recording of an art nouveau interior and layout of a set of 1930s baths in Rochdale.⁴ In the current issue of the Review this challenge is represented by the second part of John Hearle's article on 20th century textile machinery.

Finally, the role of community archaeology in enthusing and promoting 20th century industrial archaeology amongst the wider public was explored in papers on the Lancashire textile finishing industry and the industrial communities around Telford New Town (Paul Belford's article in the current volume). Three main issues emerged from this seminar and are reflected in the current issue of the Review: the scale of 20th century industry and the problems in recording this; the methodological practice of site recording and excavation in prioritising limited resources and a unique archaeological perspective; and the role of 20th century archaeology as a community experience in promoting excitement and support for the investigation of the recent and not so recent past.

The Industrial Archaeology of the 20th century offers a number of unique challenges because of its scale, complexity and the need to focus on the archaeological, rather than what might be social or economic history. Some aspects of 20th century archaeology are already seen as credible and popular amongst the wider public; military and cold war archaeology being the two best known examples. Others will no doubt follow – the energy and transport revolutions of the period being the next two 20th century industries that have begun to receive serious study, at least in Britain. Yet, I suspect that whilst the 20th century is within living memory and more importantly the range of sources for its study remains enormous, archaeology will struggle to find its unique perspective. That is not a good reason, however, to stop trying.

This volume also sees the departure of my co-editor, Helen Gomersall, and the arrival of Ian West. I shall miss Helen's good sense, eye for editorial detail, and tenacious pursuit of quality contributions to the Journal. The Journal, I feel, benefits from having twin editors, which not only allows a division of the heavy editorial load but provides, as my predecessor as editor David Gwyn noted in 2010, 'an internal set of checks and balances, and a corrective of any individual eccentricities and bias'. Ian will introduce himself more fully in the next issue but will be known to many members of the Association as the editor of the Abstracts and a regular contributor to the Reviews section of this journal. Thus, I am delighted to welcome Ian West as co-editor of the Review from this volume onwards.

Dr Michael Nevell, Co-editor

1) Held in the midst of the London 2012 Olympics at Writtle College in Chelmsford, where the London 2012 Olympic bouquets, given to successful athletes, were made.

2) Two good starting points are: Stratton M & Trinder B, 2000, *Twentieth Century Industrial Archaeology*. London & New York: E & FN Spon; Palmer M, 1991, 'Industrial Archaeology: Working for the Future', *Industrial Archaeology Review* XIV.1, 18-32.

3) Edward Carpenter of English Heritage, Louise Davies of Museum of London Archaeology and Oliver Jessop of Jessop Consultancy.

4) Anna Badcock of ArchHeritage, Emma Dwyer, formerly of Museum of London Archaeology and now post-graduate student at the university of Leicester, and Mike Nevell of the University of Salford.

5) Paul Belford of Nexus Heritage and Ian Miller of Oxford Archaeology North.