WARWICKSHIRE Industrial Archaeology Society

WIAS

NEWSLETTER

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THIS ISSUE

EDITORIAL

Elsewhere in this edition is a short article about Warwick Gasworks, included for two reasons.

First, the remains of this works are of great historical importance. This led the Society to use a drawing of the street frontage buildings as its first logo, and many in the Society retain an affection for the structure. So I hope this opportunity to add a little to members' knowledge of the site is welcomed.

Second, this style of article is exactly what is required for the planned guide to Warwickshire IA. So the article is also included to serve as inspiration to any members contemplating contributing to this guide.

Mark W. Abbott

2005 AIA CONFERENCE

Notice has been received of the forthcoming 2005 Annual Conference of the AIA. This year the location is Derbyshire, with accommodation at Nottingham University. The main programme runs from Friday 2nd September to Sunday 4th September, with a full additional programme of visits and lectures through to Thursday 8th September.

First-time attendees are entitled to a discount of £25.00 off the main weekend programme (full price £150.00 residential), or £50.00 off the complete week package (full price £450.00 residential). The Treasurer holds details of the programme and a booking form. The deadline for bookings is 6th August 2005.

TOM CHARMAN

After a short delay, the proposed memorial to the late Tom Charman has been finalised thanks to the efforts of Peter Coulls. Funds donated by Warwickshire Industrial Archaeology Society, the Warwickshire Steam Engine Society, and some of Tom's close friends, will be used to sponsor a restoration project at the Tal y Llyn Railway's Narrow Gauge Railway Museum. As mentioned in the last Newsletter, Tom was a supporter of the Tal y Llyn Railway Preservation Society from its early days, so sponsoring a project at that Society's museum was considered to be a fitting tribute.

The specific project that is being sponsored is the restoration of a narrow gauge slate wagon from the Tal y Llyn Railway. This is already underway. When placed in the museum there will be an accompanying plaque stating that restoration was sponsored in memory of Tom Charman. Members will be advised of the completion of the project.

Mark W. Abbott

SOCIETY NEWS

Programme.
The programme for the remainder of this season, to July 2005, is as follows:

March 10th
Mr. David Depledge: *Coventry Airport: Past, Present and Future.*
April 14th
Members' Evening: *The Industrial Archaeology of the Rugby District.*
May 12th
Mr. Peter Cross-Rudkin: *William James: Father of the Railways?*
June 9th
Mr. Martin Green: *Aspects of the Industrial Archaeology of New Zealand.*
July 14th
Mr. Mike Buxton: *Milestones: Warwickshire and Beyond.*

Details of the programme for the new season of meetings starting in September 2005, will be published in the June 2005 Newsletter.

Subscriptions
Members are reminded that subscriptions for the 2004/2005 season have been due since September and a small number remain outstanding. Reminders should have reached all those concerned by the time this Newsletter is published, but if you are unsure about your subscription status please ask the Treasurer. The amount payable remains at £10.00 per person or couple. Cheques payable to *Warwickshire Industrial Archaeology Society*, please. Prompt payment would be appreciated.

Meeting Reports *by Arthur Astrop*

December 2004 Mr. John Burton

Hat-making and Ribbon-weaving in the Bedworth Area

As revealing as a fingerprint is the telltale presence of a disproportionately large window frame in an otherwise rather humble building. It's a sure sign that at one time its inhabitants needed all the natural light they could get, because their livelihood depended on it. None more so than the outworking weavers who clustered in and around Bedworth and its environs.

John Burton has made an extensive study of the ribbon-weavers who once flourished north of Coventry, and his ability to spot the clues to their previous existence in even the smallest of villages made for a fascinating evening. The faintest of outlines on the outside walls of cottages which suggest there was once a larger window installed is enough for John, and if its outline cannot be detected on the outside then sometimes traces on the inside of the building can give the game away as well!

John's presentation started with brief reference to weavers' top-shops in Coventry, including those in Hillfields which are already recorded in some detail. The Coventry industry is, of course, closely bound-up with the arrival of the Huguenots, but there is evidence that ribbon-weaving in the Bedworth area predated that time. It was based on the use of small hand-looms installed in cottages in the villages around Bedworth, such as Shilton, Bulkington, Ansty, Barnacle etc. But in due course, from one-third to one-half of the population of Bedworth itself depended for its livelihood on ribbon weaving, notably in the Spitalfields area.

It was the development of the power loom, and not least the 'automation' made possible by the Jacquard punched-card system, which eventually finished the out-workers and their hand-looms. Weaving mills employing steam power and hundreds of workers took their place, and they in turn merged and amalgamated until the industry rested on a small number of large companies. One such, Toye Kenning & Spencer, survives in Bedworth to this day, has a Jacquard loom still in use, and is an important manufacturer of caps as well.

Hat-making was the second part of John Burton's talk. There is an important link between ribbon-weaving and hat-making, for practically every hat or cap has some sort of ribbon on it as well. Hat-manufacture is very labour intensive, and John explained the basic manufacturing stages involved, some of which survive fundamentally unchanged to this day. Slides of the insides of hat-making factories in the late 19th century showed the conditions under which the workers laboured, including unprotected exposure to many chemicals which would be forbidden today. His slides also showed that the workforces included children as young as 10 to 12, who worked long hours in clearly hazardous conditions.

One of the most prominent hat-makers in Bedworth was Pickerings, which was founded in the 1880s and became a major employer. It had the most up-to-date machinery for its time, including steam-raising plant. The once-splendid factory was demolished in the mid-1950s, and on its site stands a Tesco supermarket.

W. G. (Bill) Gibbons (1921-2004)

It is with great sadness that we report the death, at the age of 83, of Wilfred George ("Bill") Gibbons.

Although not a member of WIAS, Bill was well known to many within the Society and will be fondly remembered by all those who knew him. He was a great local historian, whose profundity of knowledge on Leamington and it's environs was unsurpassed.

He was born in Leamington and, apart from his wartime service in the Royal Navy, lived all of his life in the town. Although Bill only rarely talked of his wartime experiences it is known that he served on the escort carrier HMS *Unicorn*, and saw action with the Fleet at Salerno, in 1943.

Bill will probably be best remembered for his numerous publications on Leamington and other related local history subjects; there being far too many to enumerate here in this brief summary of his life. His annual calendars, usually featuring photographs of Leamington through the ages, were also extremely popular. In addition, Bill was a gifted photographer and it is believed that his considerable collection of pictures, particularly those relating to Leamington, has been secured for posterity.

Ever generous, Bill would willingly provide information on local history matters, whenever requested and if, unusually, he did not know the answer, he would endeavour to find out very quickly. He also supplied information to many organisations, including the All England Club at Wimbledon, whose museum of Lawn Tennis benefited from his local knowledge.

Although in some respects a very private person, Bill was a very congenial man, whose passing will be greatly mourned by many.

J. F. Willock

Birmingham Glass

January 2005 Dr. Mike Hodder & Mrs. Toni Demidowicz
The Birmingham Glass Industry

In 1997, Mrs. Toni Demidowicz and Dr. Mike Hodder researched the now defunct glass industry in Birmingham to see what tangible (if any), remains have survived and to pinpoint the most important sites. In presenting the results of their work, they approached the subject from two angles, namely, investigation of the documentary sources, in the form of maps, trade directories, adverts and catalogues; and secondly the hard physical evidence, such as the remains of walls, foundations etc.

Toni kicked-off with the documentary evidence which revealed at least 18 discrete glass house sites in Birmingham, and evidence that the first glass manufactory appears to have been that of Mayer Opnaim in 1757, in the Snow Hill area of the city. Important clues came from the various 'prospects' (steel engravings) of Birmingham, where the telltale 'brick cones' of glass houses appear in increasing numbers through the 18th and 19th centuries.

These cones, which fundamentally were massive chimneys, were very large in diameter and tall, and stood out unmistakably among other important buildings such as churches and steeples. Brick-built, the cones were large in diameter because they housed not only one or more furnaces but also provided enough space around the furnaces for numbers of skilled glass workers and their assistants (often no more than children) to pursue their crafts. In addition, arranged internally around the periphery of each cone there were separate spaces for ancillary glass-making processes, such as holding and annealing furnaces. The temperature in which the craftsmen laboured, the air they breathed, and the overall effects of working long hours literally 'inside a huge chimney', can only be guessed at today.

The products of the Birmingham glass industry were predominately small items, typically for instance the large numbers of individual plain and coloured glass 'drops' which went to build up the complex chandeliers so beloved of the Victorians. It was the glass-makers of Birmingham who produced the 20-ft high glass fountain that was the centre piece of the Great Exhibition of 1851, and which survived until the Crystal Palace fire of the 1930s.

Mike Hodder's presentation, as mentioned earlier, focused on the physical evidence of glass making remaining in the city. Parts of several sites have been excavated but many more lie beneath modern developments and, as a result, might be considered unreachable. But as Mike pointed out, these days modern buildings of the types found on industrial estates, for example, have relatively short lives before they are demolished to make way for more modern types. Moreover, the sites on which they stand were often prepared by simply clearing down to ground level, so that important subterranean features of glass houses, such as the underground caves and tunnels which fed air to the furnaces, were not disturbed. Today, therefore, those applying to redevelop sites on which the city's glass houses once stood are subject to onerous conditions before planning permission is granted.

Warwick Gasworks

The following entry appeared in the recently received *West Midlands Archaeology, 46, 2003* and is reproduced here by kind permission of the editor, Sarah Watt and of the authors, Catherine Coutts and Christopher Jones of Warwickshire Museum.

Warwick Saltisford Gasworks
(SP 278 653)

A survey was carried out on the street frontage buildings of the former Gasworks in September-October 2003 on behalf of Jayson Hollier, prior to their proposed conversion to flats. The gasworks is a Grade II Listed Building and includes a pair of octagonal gasholders dating from 1822, possibly the oldest surviving examples in the world and therefore of international importance. Six major phases of building work were identified. The initial phase includes the two octagonal gasometer buildings and what may be elements of the original central gateway. The gasometer buildings were constructed of hand-made bricks, while all subsequent works used machine-made bricks. Wings running on either side of the central gateway were developed by at least 1851. By 1905 the central gateway had been blocked by a single-storied structure and the two gasometer buildings were thus linked by a continuous structure. Little further major development took place until the central single-storied structure was raised to two stories in the 1970s and the whole of the frontage re-fenestrated to give a unified appearance. During the later 20th century the interior was partitioned off into rooms and corridors by stud walling. The building is currently derelict.

The original article is accompanied by front and rear view elevation drawings and interested members may borrow the relevant Society copy of *West Midlands Archaeology* from the Treasurer.

As of February 2005 the building remains derelict. Some work seems to be underway to the rear of the structure, presumably in connection with the eventual conversion to flats, but the street frontage is fire damaged and boarded up.

Some Somerset Industrial Archaeology

February 2005 Mr. George Sayell
The Old Mineral Line

One of the most pleasing ways of presenting a talk on an aspect of industrial archaeology is to use illustrations which show alternately 'the way it once was' followed immediately by 'how it is now'. WIAS members George and Liz Sayell used this approach very effectively at the February meeting, when their subject was the railway line originally built to carry iron ore from mines in the Brendon Hills, Somerset, to Watchet on the coast, whence it could be shipped to South Wales. The line also carried passengers, of which more will be said later.

The systematic way the Sayells researched the line, which had a relatively brief working life, is an excellent example of what the amateur archaeologist can achieve, armed only with enthusiasm, a camera, a notebook and an enquiring mind. This combination, the Sayells found, also invariably evoked a sympathetic response from the locals, who went out of their way to share their knowledge of (and pride in) their area.

Important milestones in the rise and fall of the line included the initial formation of the Brendon Hills Mining Co in 1852. This venture did not prosper and was succeeded, a year later, by the Brendon Hills Iron Ore Co in partnership with The Ebbw Vale Co. In 1855, an Act of Parliament sanctioned the building of a standard gauge 13 1/4-mile long railway which included an incline from Comberow to the top of the Brendon Hills. Vestiges of this incline, opened in 1858, can still be seen. It was designed by Rice Hopkins, was 1,100 yards long, had a gradient of 1 in 4, and climbed 800 ft in the process. At the time, it was the longest and steepest standard gauge incline in the country. If passengers elected to remain on the train as it negotiated the incline then they did so, they were informed, 'strictly at their own risk'!

Empty trucks were originally pulled by cable to the top of the incline by the weight of trucks loaded with iron-ore descending, a system which worked well until the mines ceased to be economically viable, and in 1883 were closed. To continue operating a passenger service, therefore, an engine house and Robey steam engine driving cable drums were installed. But by 1898 even that venture could no longer be sustained, and the line was closed. The Robey steam engine was removed and transferred to Washford, where it operated an ore-briquetting plant.

In WW1, the railway lines were ripped up and sent for use in munitions manufacturing and, as George wryly observed, must now be dispersed over the fields of France. Evidence of the 'Old Mineral Line' can still be seen in Somerset however, including the remains of the winding house, parts of stations and platforms, level crossing gates, and remains of bridges. And examination of the harbour at Watchet, including the west pier, can also yield evidence of the 'mineral line'.

Particularly recommended is the Watchet Museum, a guidebook by Sellick *The Old Mineral Line*, and a visit to the *Raleigh's Cross Inn* on the Brendons where there is a splendid display of photos. The Sayells can recommend *The Well House* in Watchet (01984 634514) for overnight stay.

Subterranea Britannica

Subterranaea Britannica (www.subbrit.org.uk) is an organisation dedicated to the study and investigation of all man-made and man used underground places. Their web site contains a well produced resource of site studies, the majority of which are industrial archaeology related.

Added in January 2005, is a short article about Newbold Tunnel on the old line of the northern Oxford Canal. Unfortunately there are no underground views, but otherwise this is an excellent short piece, illustrated with a map and good photographs. The only other Warwickshire site covered is Rugby Radio Station.

Mark W. Abbott

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