WARWICKSHIRE Industrial Archaeology Society

WIAS

NEWSLETTER

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FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Of all the industries with which Coventry and Warwickshire are most closely associated, the motor industry must take pride of place. Sadly, of course, in step with the decline of the motor manufacturing capabilities of the country as a whole, the motor industry of our region is a pale shadow of its former self. Most recently, the closure of the Ryton plant has delivered a very painful blow to the industry's presence in the area, with the loss of 2300 jobs.

The decline of an industry has many physical dimensions, with demolition the most likely outcome for many of the production facilities. However, it should be remembered that the personal element is a crucial ingredient as well, and it was interesting to note that the BBC ran a series of radio programmes on the human impact of Ryton's closure. These had the feel of earlier documentaries about the fate of other UK industries such as mining.

On a similar theme I was interested to read the obituary notices of local motor manufacturer, Harry Webster, who sadly died in February aged 89. I was drawn to the description of the route that his life had taken and the various institutions and firms with whom he had been associated. Such a career is difficult to imagine for a young Midland engineer of today. The obituary published in *The Times* of February 12th. 2007 makes fascinating reading.

Perhaps the engineers at Aston Martin can carry the tradition forward. It was indeed gratifying to read the confirmation of the future of the Aston Martin plant at Gaydon – a real exception to the generally depressing news about developments in the motor industry.

The presence of the motor industry is also felt by way of two hugely important museums: The Museum of British Road Transport in Coventry and the Heritage Motor Centre at Gaydon. Both collections have a great deal of local interest, and deserve our full support. For example, the Heritage Motor Centre has a collection of archive photographs that provide a unique historical record of some of our most famous factories - Cowley (Morris & MG), Solihull (Rover & Land Rover), Canley (Standard-Triumph), Foleshill (Riley), Adderley Park (Wolseley) and Longbridge (Austin).

One industrial plant that remains in Warwickshire is the Ford foundry in Leamington. The plant makes 10 million castings a year of Ford brake drums and discs for distribution in Europe, Mexico and the US. At the time of writing, local newspapers contain worries expressed over the future of the plant - in particular whether the brakes for the new Ford Fiesta would be produced in Leamingon. This is an important plant of a multinational firm and its history deserves our attention. Perhaps there are members of the Society who would like to take on the task of building up our knowledge of the plant and its history. Some of our members are working on the history of Automotive Products in Leamington Spa and this, again, is a very important task, given the virtual disappearance of any physical remains.

The motor industry was vital to the economic development of the region and any contribution we can make to the recording of that history can only be of benefit to future students of the motor industry in Coventry and Warwickshire.

Martin Green

SOCIETY NEWS

Programme.
The programme through to July 2007, is as follows:

April 12th
Mr. Hugh Jones: *The Building Stones of Warwickshire.*

May 10th
Mr. Derek Billings: *Aspects of the Industrial Archaeology of Cornwall.*

June 14th
Mr. Melvyn Thompson: *Woven in Kidderminster Part 2.*

July 12th
AGM and Members' Evening: *The IA of Nuneaton and Bedworth.*

Subscriptions
Outstanding subscriptions for 2006/2007 are now due please.

Meeting Reports *by Arthur Astrop*

December 2006 Mr. P. Cross-Rudkin
Isambard Kingdom Brunel

The year 2006 was the bicentenary of the birth of Isambard Kingdom Brunel. It was fitting, therefore, that at our last meeting of that year WIAS member Peter Cross-Rudkin should help our Society to celebrate the anniversary with a splendid talk in which he took a broad view of the life, times and achievements of arguably Britain's greatest engineer. Greatest in many senses, and not least in the number of his projects which today, nearly 150 years after his premature death at the age of only 53, are still standing as testament to his genius.

IKB's father, Sir Mark Brunel, was an eminent engineer in his own right, and all too often history records that the son of a great man is destined to be overshadowed by his father. In IKB's case, however, precisely the reverse was true, and his achievements outshone those of his father, great though they were. IKB was in his early 20's when he took over the construction of the Rotherhithe-Wapping tunnel under the Thames, a project which had been started by Sir Mark. The tunnel nearly claimed the young man's life, on two occasions, but he survived and was destined for greater achievements.

The thrust of Peter Cross-Rudkin's presentation was to illustrate the astonishing, possibly unique, range of IKB's talents. Driven by an urge to innovate, and to succeed in achieving what lesser men considered 'impossible', IKB deployed those talents over a breadth of field encompassing bridges, buildings, tunnels, docks, railways, and ships. His output in terms of original designs alone was staggering, and covered virtually every known technology of the time. When to this is added his skills in management, often involving controlling several major projects simultaneously, his stature has probably never been equalled.

IKB's self belief was such that when his design for a suspension bridge over the Clifton gorge came second he arranged to meet the chairman of judges (the President of the Royal Society, no less!), and to convince him that the committee had obviously made a mistake. A correction was duly put in hand and work on IKB's design was started, although the bridge was not, in fact, completed until after Isambard's death. Using a fine set of slides (albeit exercising exemplary self-discipline in deliberately avoiding the one of IKB standing in front of ship's chains!), Peter took us through the great man's work.

A persistent thread in IKB's life was an insistence on not just 'doing things differently' to accepted practice, but in doing them in an innovatory way as well. His dogged, albeit unsuccessful, campaign to make broad-gauge railway track a standard was a typical example, an idea which had many practical advantages, both in terms of safety and comfort of 'ride'. The many different types of IKB's bridges to be found on the GWR line, together with the associated tunnels, their striking portals, and the architectural beauty of the line's stations – both main termini and local – all reflect the towering genius of the man.

And then there were IKB's three great ships, the largest and most advanced of their time. Peter stressed the grandeur and innovatory design of these vessels which, although none of them completely fulfilled its promise, remain to this day examples of original engineering thinking well before its time, and were not to be surpassed for many years to come. With his astonishing grasp of so many different technologies and disciplines, and his ability to bend them to his command, Isambard Kingdom Brunel was possibly the last of the great polymath engineers of the western world.

Southam Gasworks

Unlikely as it might seem, the small town of Southam once had its own gasworks. This was situated on Welsh Road East, on the far side of the River Stowe from the town. A house and a number of associated buildings remain on the site, but in recent years these have become overshadowed by new housing and now stand almost hidden on the truncated old route of Welsh Road, itself cut by the town bypass and reduced to a footpath.

Recently, the site has been advertised for sale as a development opportunity, with outline planning consent for two detached houses. It is unclear if the existing cottage will be retained.

I have one picture of the site, taken from across the Stowe from what was then the car park for the local health clinic. This in itself is a good argument for photographic recording of the everyday scene, as this view predates the Southam bypass and all the subsequent new housing on the eastern edges of the town. The view cannot now be repeated; the new health clinic stands over the original viewpoint and subsequent new housing on what is a now Pound Way, obscures the view across the Stowe valley.

If any members have photographs of the gasworks I would be pleased to see them, and possibly scan them for use on the Society web site.

Mark W. Abbott

Engineering Heritage

January 2007 Mr. R. Speddings
The Rolls Royce Heritage Trust Coventry

For those of us who recall the steady decline in Britain's manufacturing industry in the latter half of the 20th century, and who remember the cries (often made much too late) of "But what happened to all the photos, drawings, documents ….. etc?", the knowledge that not merely the records but also many historic products of Rolls-Royce are being lovingly preserved and maintained is good news indeed.

Indeed, for over a quarter of a century a dedicated band of volunteers has worked to promote and preserve the history and engineering excellence of Rolls-Royce. Founded in 1981, The Rolls-Royce Heritage Trust has five individual but inter-linked groups, based at Derby, Hucknall, Scotland, Bristol and Coventry. The Trust, handsomely supported by R-R in a multitude of different ways, is designed to act as a focal point for maintaining all aspects of the engineering heritage of the Company, also its corporate predecessors, and to be the guardian and authority (on behalf of R-R) of all relevant historic material. The effort and range of skills which are being employed by the Trust to that end was explained by Ron Speddings at our first meeting of the New Year.

He gave a brief summary of the work of the Trust as a whole and then concentrated on the Coventry branch, with its collection housed in premises at R-R Light Alloy Foundry, Derby. On display there are motor cars (Siddeley and Armstrong Siddeley), aero engines, rocket motors, torpedo engines, also marine and industrial products spanning almost 100 years. These items are restored and preserved by volunteers, principally retired R-R personnel but including some currently working for that Company. They use two workshops, the larger one at Derby, to which retirees are taken by coach once a week, and a smaller workshop located at Ansty.

The jewel in the crown of the Coventry branch is undoubtedly a 1904 Siddeley Autocar, but cars by that maker also include a 9-hp Stoneleigh light car, made in 1923 at Parkside, Coventry, and the last to be launched, in 1960, the Armstrong Siddeley 4.2-litre Star Sapphire. The major theme of the collection, however, is centred on aero engines of which it has very many. They include examples of the Python turboprop, all marques of Double Mambas and the Adder, and successive generations of the Viper, the first engine to celebrate 50 years of production.

The Trust also has collections of rocket engines built at Ansty, de Havilland and Rolls-Royce, including a Stentor with its Avro Blue Steel stand-off rocket. There is a growing collection of industrial and marine engines of types used in boats, electricity generating sets and for gas pumping duties. In addition to the large quantity of historic documents which it has deposited for safe keeping with Coventry City Archives, the Branch maintains an expanding library of technical documentation, again worked on by volunteers. Transfer of drawings and other paper-based data to computer storage is in hand.

Items for preservation arrive at the Trust in a variety of conditions, some of them in a very poor state indeed. They may be corroded, damaged or dirty, but they are dismantled and restored with care and pride, often by retired R-R employees who had worked on them in the first place. Exhibits are prepared either for display in the Trust's collection, or for return to outside bodies. Membership of the Trust, Ron Speddings pointed out, is already more than 2,000, is world-wide, and is open to current and past employees as well as to enthusiasts for engineering heritage with a connection to Rolls-Royce and its ancestral Companies. The Trust has a website at www.rolls-royce.com

AIA Conference

Notice has been received of the 2007 AIA Annual Conference. This year it is to be held at the University of Central Lancashire in Preston and will feature the industrial archaeology of Lancashire and the Lune Valley. The dates are Friday 10th August to Thursday 16th August, with the main part of the conference occupying the weekend of 10th, 11th and 12th of August.

The provisional programme is varied and interesting, with emphasis on the important local industry of weaving. Other highlights include the Lancaster Canal, Preston Dock, glass making in St Helens, unusually, some aviation industrial archaeology with a visit to BAE Systems', local manufacturing sites and the history of aircraft manufacture in the Preston area, and a look at Blackpool as the first Working Class Seaside Resort.

Full details and a booking form are available from the Treasurer. Any WIAS member, whether an individual AIA member or not, can attend the conference, as the Society is affiliated to the AIA. The full residential package costs £500, with discounts for AIA members (£5) and first time attendees (£25 weekend, £50 full conference)

Thomas Telford

February 2007 Mr. R. Cragg
Thomas Telford

Roger Cragg, giving his tenth talk to the Society, spoke on the subject of Thomas Telford, the Civil Engineer. This year was an appropriate time to be looking at the great man's life and works as he was born on 9th August 1757, making 2007 the 250th anniversary of his birth.

Roger began by describing Telford's humble origins as the son of a shepherd in the remote Eskdale valley in the Scottish Border country. Sadly his father died in the autumn of the year of Thomas's birth. Following schooling, young Thomas was apprenticed to a stonemason in nearby Langholm where he was put to work on the construction of Langholm Bridge, which still stands today. After a short period in Edinburgh Telford moved to London where he worked on the construction of Somerset House. Shortly afterwards he moved to Portsmouth to oversee the construction of new dockyard buildings. In 1786 he travelled to Shrewsbury to superintend alterations to Shrewsbury Castle for William Pulteney, then MP for Shrewsbury and the owner of the Castle. Soon Telford had secured several appointments in the area including Surveyor of Public Works for Shropshire and as an engineer on the construction of two local canals – the Ellesmere Canal and the Shrewsbury Canal. He was also engaged in the design of new churches at Bridgnorth and Madeley.

Roger showed slides of several of the bridges built by Telford in Shropshire including his first, Montford Bridge. Telford was also engaged on the rebuilding of many of the bridges on the River Severn following the devastating flood of 1795. For the Shrewsbury Canal Telford designed the Longdon upon Tern Aqueduct in a new material, cast iron, in 1795, quickly followed by high level aqueducts on the Ellesmere Canal at Chirk and over the Vale of Llangollen.

Lack of time prevented a detail review of all Telford's many civil engineering works but brief mention was made of his work in Scotland, including many miles of roads, harbours and the Caledonian Canal. Turning to the Holyhead Road, Roger discussed Telford's rôle in the improvement of this important route during the 1820s.

Next in his talk Roger detailed Telford's works on the improvement of the Birmingham Canal including the deep cutting at Smethwick with its fine bridges and aqueducts.

Finally, in his long career, Telford returned to Shropshire and to canal building for the construction of the Birmingham and Liverpool Junction Canal. This canal was built in a bold style, with deep cuttings and high embankments. Among the many engineering challenges the most difficult was the construction of Shelmore Bank, up to 60 feet high and this was not finally completed until 1835, one year after Telford's death at his house in Abingdon Street, Westminster at the age of 77.

He was buried in Westminster Abbey, one of only two Engineers to be so honoured, and Roger's final slide was of the portrait of Telford, which hangs in the Institution of Civil Engineers of which Thomas Telford was the first president.

From The Chairman: Footnote

Since the writing of this edition's *From The Chairman* Ford have announced that their Leamington Foundry will close on 21st July 2007 with the loss of 387 jobs. Ironically, and allegedly, this is because of the plants failure to win the contract for casting brake drums for the new Fiesta model due in 2008.

If there was one vehicle component that was once synonymous with Leamington, it was brakes, thanks to the presence of the now defunct Lockheed, later Automotive Products factory. This is reflected in the local football team's nickname of *The Brakes*. If current trends continue this will soon become the only tangible reminder that Leamington once had an automotive manufacturing industry.

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