EDITORIAL - ON INDUSTRIAL ARCHAEOLOGY IN BRITAIN

by Angus Buchanan

After a decade of vigorous growth, the study of industrial archaeology in Britain is in a curiously disorganised condition. The strength of the study is in the local societies and specialist societies such as those in the field of transport history. There are several dozen of these bodies, pursuing varied programmes of active research, excursions, and physical effort to preserve or restore industrial monuments. But these activities are almost exclusively preoccupied with immediate, parochial, objectives, and while they are in themselves thoroughly commendable they have not done much towards cultivating a general national, or even international, body of informed opinion about the subject.

The result has been that the study of industrial archaeology, viewed as a national activity, has come to consist of a large number of active but unrelated groups, proceeding on their respective courses without much regard for each other or for the overall co-ordination of their work. Attempts by the Council for British Archaeology and by the establishment of the journal Industrial Archaeology to provide a measure of co-ordination have not so far succeeded, although both these ventures have achieved more limited objectives. The CBA, for instance, has promoted the National Survey of Industrial Monuments out of which the National Record of Industrial Monuments (NRIM) has grown, while the journal has attained a satisfactory circulation by giving the local and specialist societies pieces to please as many groups as possible.

Examining the "headless" state of the industrial archaeological movement, the Bath Conference of 1968 decided to set up a Steering Committee with a mandate to explore the possibilities of strengthening the national organisation of the subject. There appeared to be three areas in which such strengthening was necessary. First, in providing a regular information service for industrial archaeologists, with facilities for liaison and co-ordination between societies. Second, in encouraging systematic excavation and other research projects such as making industrial archaeological films on a national basis. And third, in promoting a comprehensive national policy for the preservation of industrial monuments. This would imply the existence of an authoritative body which could represent industrial archaeologists nationally, make official approaches to government bodies, and generally act as a mouthpiece for the subject. The Steering Committee has been meeting for almost a year now and it will be making its report to the Bath Conference in the autumn of 1969. It should not be expected that the Committee will produce a precise blue-print for a national organisation. There are too many outstanding problems and unresolved differences of opinion to allow anything so definite at this stage. It is time, however, that the alternative possibilities for the future study of industrial archaeology were squarely faced.

In the first place, there is the simplest possibility - that things go on very much longer as they are now. This will mean that the local and specialist societies will continue to go on their own way, duplicating effort and failing to achieve a rational preservation policy, as a result of which effort will be wasted on preserving the wrong things while other more deserving industrial monuments are lost. Sheer inertia and the strength of vested interests make this non-solution of the problems we have posed seem all-too-likely. If the resolution to break out of this situation is sufficiently strong, however, two broad alternatives present themselves. One is the development of existing organisations to fulfil the requirements of national co-ordination, and the other is the creation of a national industrial archaeological society. The first of these alternatives has the advantage of economy of resources, but depends upon the pre-existence of organisations capable of development in a manner suggested. The second alternative has the advantage of making a fresh start, but presents formidable administrative problems.

Of bodies capable of development into national organisations for industrial archaeology, the only plausible candidate at the moment is the CBA. Other possibilities might have been the Newcomen Society, the publishers of Industrial Archaeology, and the Bath Conference, but for different reasons none of these seem at present appropriate. The Newcomen Society has renounced any intention of taking the lead in the national industrial archaeological movement, preferring its traditional role as a learned society in the field of technological history. The publishers of the journal did take an initiative towards establishing a national organisation two years ago, but the consensus of opinion at the time was that the introduction of commercial interests would handicap any national organisation in formal approaches to government and other official bodies. The Bath Conference has so far been too spasmodic to provide continuing direction of a national
organisation, but the development of something like
the Steering Committee to provide such guidance would
be possible.

This leaves the CBA as the only organisation already
equipped to perform the necessary functions, and
indeed it should be observed that the CBA has, since
the establishment of the Research Committee in
industrial Archaeology in 1959, exercised a definite
interest in the subject. Through the creation of an
Advisory Panel to the Research Committee, moreover,
the CBA has been responsible since 1967 for preparing
lists of buildings recommended for protection or pre-
servation and for making representations to the
appropriate national or local authorities. Again, the
CBA has received a grant of £2,000 for several years
from the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works
towards the cost of the National Survey of industrial
Monuments. In these substantial respects, therefore, the
CBA is already equipped with the nucleus of a
national organisation for industrial archaeology. All that
is necessary to convert it into reality is to reorganise
the Research Committee on a representational basis
(at present members are recruited by an informal process
of selection); to refurbish the Advisory Panel so that
it can hold frequent meetings in order to develop its
preservation policy; and to persuade local societies to
affiliate to the CBA so that they can use its publica-
tions as a means of co-ordinating and planning
systematic work. As the recognised recipient of
government money, the CBA could hope for financial
assistance in this extension of its industrial archaeolog-
ic work, and could reasonably expect to increase its
secretarial staff to cope with it. The prospect, indeed,
of achieving the desired measure of national organis-
ation with the maximum efficiency and greatest
economy, is so attractive that it deserves detailed
consideration. It may well be that the CBA will find
this prospect of increased activity more alarming
than the industrial archaeological societies, for it
could understandably see this development as some-
thing of a cuckoo in the unruffled nest of classical
archaeology.

However attractive in some respects, it is thus by
no means certain that the CBA machinery can be
coaxed into fulfilling the required objectives. This
means that the other alternative should also be
considered - the creation of an independent national
society. An initial problem here is to decide whether
to make it a society open to individual or to organ-
isational membership. Against individual membership
is the powerful argument of the difficulty of recruiting
members in such a diverse and locally-orientated
subject, and persuading them to pay yet another
membership subscription. Organisational membership
is administratively more feasible, but would lead to a
society parallel to the CBA, a sort of Council for
British Industrial Archaeology. Either form of national
society would have to decide on its publication policy
and would thus have to determine its relationship
with the existing journal. The preparation of a journal
is usually an important incentive to the formation of
a society, so that the position is complicated in this
case by the pre-existence of a now well-established
journal which is steadily improving in quality.

Whatever the difficulties confronting the national
organisation of industrial archaeology, the attainment
of this objective is one by which BIAS, along with
other local societies, has nothing to lose and much to
gain. The course of the discussion in coming months
will thus be followed with close attention.
There are national industrial archaeology societies in many countries: the Society for Industrial Archaeology (SIA) in North America, the Association for Industrial Archaeology (AIA) in Great Britain, CILAC in France, and the Italian AIPAI are among the largest. They bring together people interested in researching, recording, preserving and presenting industrial heritage. Industrial architecture, mineral extraction, heritage-based tourism, power technology, adaptive re-use of industrial buildings and transport history are just some of the themes that could be investigated by society members. Industrial archaeology, a term invented by Professor Donald Dudley and used in print for the first time by Michael Rix, is the study and recording of the industrial heritage. Conservation in a few cases may be justified, but generally, the purpose of practitioners is to illuminate industrial and social history by using physical evidence. Field surveys have occasionally been used by historians; for the industrial archaeologist they are essential. An interdisciplinary study, industrial archaeology has attracted a popular audience in Britain since 1960; there are many local societies, groups, and