

## **Industrial Archaeology and Historical Context**

**Ian Jack, May 2006**

**One might think that History is implicit in Historical Archaeology and that Archaeology is implicit in Industrial Archaeology. Life is not so simple. So before we talk about the style of historical context which is needed for the subject of this workshop, it's a good idea to think about the nature of Industrial Archaeology.**

**Industrial Archaeology is, one would innocently think, a sub-set of Historical Archaeology. In the Australian scene, this fits in very well with our concept of what 'Historical Archaeology' should be doing and it fits in with some precision to the history of the discipline here and to the way its practitioners behave.**

**In some ways, however, the Australian experience is not typical. In contrast to both Britain and the United States, 'historical archaeology' here has always been reassuringly inclusive. In both the other countries, there have been powerful, relatively well resourced groups and societies dedicated to what they call 'industrial archaeology'. These societies gained the backing of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington and the Science Museum in London, along with the prestige of second-rung universities such as Bath, Strathclyde and Michigan Technical. They have been adorned with luminaries of international distinction, such as Angus Buchanan or Sir Neil Cossons in England, John Hume in Scotland, or Robert M. Vogel in America. As a result a sort of specialised discipline grew up overseas at the same time as Historical Archaeology began in Sydney.**

**One landmark overseas was the foundation of journals in Britain such as *The Journal of Industrial Archaeology* or its 1975 imitator in America characteristically called simply *IA*. But this conceals differences between the two countries. In Britain, especially England, the study of industrial sites emerged in the 1950s principally as an aspect of local historical and antiquarian societies and its purpose was as much to preserve industrial buildings as to record them, publish them and interpret them. Preservation was more important initially than academic understanding. The campaign to save the great Doric Arch at Euston Station in London, finally demolished in 1962, was a major catalyst. Subsequently the balance shifted a bit, but the compromise definition of industrial archaeology developed by Angus Buchanan ten years later is revealing:**

**a field of study concerned with investigation, surveying, recording and, in some cases, with preserving industrial monuments. (Buchanan 1972, 22)**

Only in the 1960s and 1970s did these diverse efforts join together as a productive national organisation in Britain. By contrast, America began centrally with the Society for Industrial Archaeology in 1972 and only gradually built up the highly desirable network of locally focussed groups.

In both America and Britain there was a heavy emphasis on the technological. It is no accident that the inaugurating meeting of the American Society for Industrial Archaeology in 1971 was jointly convened by the Curator of Mechanical and Civil Engineering at the Smithsonian (Robert Vogel) and by the Director of Old Slater Mill Museum (Paul Rivard)

It was no accident that the fifty people who attended in 1971 were in the main technologists with an antiquarian bent, in museums and universities, a few archaeologists and a few architects interested in the aesthetics of industry.

It was no accident either that four of the five articles in the first issue of *IA* were on nineteenth-century sites in the eastern states and the fifth is on coke ovens around 1900 in British Columbia. Despite the continuing British hangup about windmills, the dominance of the Industrial Revolution as conventionally defined has remained unchallenged in the real man's world of Industrial Archaeology in the northern hemisphere.

When Kenneth Hudson wrote his influential *Pocket Book for Industrial Archaeologists* in the London of 1976 he complained that there

are still many enthusiasts who find it difficult to shake themselves free from the coal, iron and steam image with which industrial archaeology has grown up (5-6)

but his answer was basically to do the same again to industry of the post-steam age, to oppose the 'purists' (his word) who limited the subject to the hundred years after 1750. Basically he was arguing for more plastic. Hudson was more conscious than some of his colleagues of the need to populate the industrial site with people, even including women, but he still set out an overwhelming preference for intact buildings with as much of their equipment remaining as possible. Unlike Cossons, unlike Vogel, Hudson did not like museums, and saw the Science Museum as a butterfly collector, 'concerned solely ....with documenting an abstract, scholarly and largely sterile concept known as the history of technology' (*Pocket Book*, 38). So much for the Powerhouse.

It is very striking that in the whole of Hudson's book called *The Archaeology of Industry*, published in 1976, there are only two illustrations of excavations of ruined industrial buildings, and both of these are being dug up by school-children (35, an iron

furnace; 57, gunpowder mills). It is a strange contribution to the series of Bodley Head Archaeologies, and a strange decision by the editor of the series, Magnus Magnusson. The book would be better entitled *The Heritage of the Industrial Revolution*.

Australia stands in striking contrast, for the investigation of past industry using the full panoply of archaeology methods was the mainspring of the enthusiasm which led in 1973 to the approval of the first University course in Historical Archaeology. The impetus did not come from railway enthusiasts, desperate to save a Euston Arch, nor from architects recording standing industrial buildings for a national heritage record, nor from engineers who loved old machinery and wanted to make it purr again. It came from the undergraduate students of Archaeology at the University of Sydney and from a senior lecturer in Near Eastern Archaeology, both of whom wanted to dig and to sort artefacts.

I am not, of course, espousing the heresy that archaeology is solely excavation. On the other hand, the twenty seasons of excavation of the site of James King's pottery at Irrawang near Raymond Terrace which began in 1967 belong to a world rather different from Kenneth Hudson's or even from the more sophisticated *Perspectives on Industrial Archaeology* which Neil Cossons edited in 2000.

The Irrawang experience is different not just in its unremitting emphasis on field excavation and on artefact analysis, but also in its use of historical context and even real live historians. King had warranted an entry in volume II of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* published in the critical year 1967, but unfortunately David Macmillan conflated two quite separate James Kings into a strange hybrid figure (*ADB* II 54-5). Annie Bickford, like a pleasing number of Australian archaeologists, set to work doing historical research on the real James King and published a contextual article in 1971 (*JRAHS* 57) and later Carol Liston and I undertook much more extensive coverage of King's career in context and published that article in 1982 (*JRAHS* 68). We used our own research, we used the hard work of Ernest Ungar who ploughed a steadfast furrow through the *Maitland Mercury* before any of it had been indexed, and we benefited from the network of historians. One of the benefits of collaborating with people who are in the middle of what of going on in historical research is the tip-off. Brian Fletcher's research assistant on land settlement in the 1830s knew that I was interested in Irrawang. He was working his way through all the bundles of Colonial Secretary's papers which were arranged in nameorder in Victoria's reign. He found the bundle concerning King's land dealings misfiled for a century under the name of James Bowman. So of course I retrieved the file and it proved to contain a detailed description of all King's buildings and works at Irrawang. It was the single most valuable documentary addition to our understanding of the excavation site and its relationship to King's other interests., but it was absolutely unfindable except through the historical mafia.

Now I tell these anecdotes because they are a vivid testimony to the way in which historians and archaeologists interacted at Sydney in the 1970s and the way in which such studies ought ideally to be conducted. The pioneering undergraduate course in Historical Archaeology was launched in 1974 by Judy Birmingham and myself, with assistance from Dennis Jeans, from soil scientists, from engineers who taught surveying and from architects. The students, and there are several here, benefited from the Scottish-style curriculum of the Faculty of Arts, so that most pursued both Archaeology and History as well as Historical Archaeology. Students in Historical Archaeology, moreover, had the benefit of Dennis Jeans' superb context lectures about the development of the pastoral industries of the North and South Coast. There was never any doubt that historical context was part and parcel of Historical Archaeology.

Once the dust settled on the initial rumpus about the introduction of an inter-departmental course, the History Department welcomed students with a bent for material culture. It is, I think, largely forgotten that Andrew Wilson's Honours thesis on Regentville was done in the History Department in 1982, not in Archaeology: but it still contained the first archaeological analysis of Sir John Jamison's terraced vineyard. And Andrew's excellent historical background was what informed the seasons of excavation at Regentville done in the mid-1980s by a new generation of students.

The interplay of industrial and non-industrial sites has continued in the courses and post-graduate facilities in Sydney and later elsewhere, most notably Latrobe, where Susan Lawrence's work on gold and Peter Davies' on timber adorn the industrial research scene. And, of course, it informs the work done by the consultant archaeologists. It is important that the two disciplines of history and archaeology continue to value each other and recognise that they are complementary.

I started off my involvement in all this from simple but deeply felt premises, which I believe today as much as in the heroic days of Historical Archaeology thirty years ago.

The first premise is a general statement of faith: that the past, the present and the future are a continuum; that we cannot plan intelligently for the future without a sophisticated grasp of the present, and that equally we cannot comprehend the present without a wide-ranging knowledge of the past. And to gain that wide-ranging knowledge we need to use all available evidence, physical as well as documentary, graphic or oral. And by we I mean both historians and archaeologists.

My second premise, which grows inevitably from the first, is in the specific context of industrial archaeology. A prerequisite for any assessment of a site is a thorough grounding in the historical context in which the site or artefact was first created and

then exploited, developed and changed, right up to its present condition. This historical context ought to be established as far as possible before any intrusive operations are begun or any assessment of significance is made public. This may not be feasible: Irrawang certainly was years out of kilter, but the historians still published their historical context studies before any archaeological report on the pottery was ready. Given proper planning within the time constraints and financial stringency of most consultancies, such as the series at Cadia or Parramatta or Mittagong's iron works, then the sort of work we did for Irrawang is achievable. But it ought to be better integrated than it was then. And it has to be focussed on need and not be a self-indulgent short history of the world during the period in which the industrial site existed. Histories need to be written for a specific audience and for a specific purpose.

When Aedeen Cremin and I wrote our book on Australian ironworks in the nineteenth century, we concentrated our contextual material on the cost of imported scrap iron, on labour relations in Britain, on labour costs in Australia, on external tariffs, on internal freight subsidies on the importance of the railway both as a consumer of iron and as the ideal transport for heavy goods. We used all this to explain why there was no competition for Fitzroy in the 1860s and before and why there was a flurry of new rival blast-furnaces in the 1870s. So there is already a pre-existing, extensively documented context for the new archaeological evidence from the rolling-mill site at Fitzroy and the additional historical research which this has triggered. I am sure that the chance to catch up with Fitzroy will give us an appetite for lunch.