

Big Stuff – Big Difference – understanding the archaeology, significance and impact of industrial heritage projects

Kate Clark, Kate Clark Associates
www.kateclark.co.uk

Introduction

Any project to conserve an industrial site needs to start by understanding what is there and why it is important. And ideally it should end with another kind of understanding - understanding the economic and social impact and benefits that the project has delivered. Yet too often the first is seen as a luxury, and by the time the project is completed everyone has forgotten about the second. But unless we understand what matters about a site we cannot conserve it properly. And if we do not bother to understand the impact and benefits of heritage projects, how can we make the case for further investment? This paper will explore the role of understanding in the conservation of industrial heritage.

Informed conservation

In the first part of the paper I will look why it matters to understand industrial sites and how that understanding can inform conservation decisions. The City of Adelaide for example is a historic ship whose current future is uncertain and there are proposals to cut it up and put part of it in a museum. But the only way of knowing whether that is the right decision is to understand the ship – what it is, what survives and, most importantly why it is important.

In another example, the Free Bridge was a 1922 listed concrete bridge across the Ironbridge Gorge. But there was a decision to make – was it better to demolish the bridge and build a new one on the site, or protect the bridge and build a new one which would destroy the famous view through the Ironbridge. Following extensive research and archaeological evaluation we decided that the bridge was not important enough.

In contrast, Newdale was a complex of industrial buildings built in the 1750s. The coal board wanted to demolish them and a decision was made without enough information. We were allowed to undertake archaeological research, and the more we learnt about the importance of the buildings, the more we realised that a bad decision had been made. These were hugely important survivals from Abraham Darby's industrial works.

These examples show why it is important to understand sites before decisions are made and not afterwards. This is even more important for industrial sites as people so often assume they are not important or that it "will all be in the documents". It is vital to understand their pattern of construction, evolution and use, the role of machinery and how they worked.

Heritage values

But more importantly – that understanding needs to lead to some sense of value – what is important and why. The Australian Burra charter has lead the way by showing how values can contribute to conservation decisions, and in the UK at the moment we are looking at ways of incorporating this into conservation. Industrial sites pose special problems in dealing with values – as they are so often recent and hold difficult memories for people. Yet this is why it is so important to understand their value.

Economic and social values

There are other values to heritage – in particular economic and social values. For the past 5 years I have been working with the Heritage Lottery Fund in the UK who have given more than £630 million to hundreds of projects to conserve the industrial heritage. That includes more than 50 locomotives, 70 ships and boats and 140 inland waterway projects, as well as funding to each of the UK's eight industrial heritage sites.

HLF has been evaluating the impact and benefits of that funding to industrial sites. In particular it has looked at the impact on people, and what difference it has made to their lives.

For example, the Fund has looked at enjoyment and what visitors get out of visiting heritage sites, the benefits that they get from participating in heritage projects, and also the economic impact of heritage projects. Using examples of industrial heritage such as Chatham Dockyard, the Anderton Boatlift and the National Coalmining Museum for England, I will show what kind of difference industrial heritage projects can make to people and to the economy.

Ultimately, however, there are limits to what heritage can do – by itself investing in heritage projects cannot overcome long term economic problems, such as that found in the former coalmining regions of the UK. But heritage projects can generate value for the public in different ways – including making a difference to the quality of life.

Conclusion

It is essential to understand the value of heritage – both at the beginning of a project in order to inform decisions, and afterwards to understand what kind of difference heritage can make. In England we

had a conference entitled Capturing the Public Value of Heritage (the papers are at www.hlf.org.uk) which showed that people value heritage in many different ways. As industrial archaeologists we often have trouble in getting people (even colleagues) to understand the value of industrial heritage and so we are used to having to make a special case. But as a result, I think we have something to teach the rest of the heritage world.

Yet there are still challenges. Sites like Chatterley Whitfield Colliery in the West Midlands which is the best preserved colliery in the UK nevertheless remains a problem, with a lot of local skepticism about preserving it. The site is too big to become a museum, and too expensive to simply be conserved with private sector funding. There is still a long way to go before we can convince people of the value and benefits of saving.