

Industrial Heritage South East Network Meeting

Amberley Museum 1st June 2023

Introduction

Michael Nevell (MDN) as the Industrial Heritage Support Officer (IHSO) for England was the host for the meeting. It was the first in-person South East regional network meeting since 2019 and the second one led by MDN, as within three weeks of MDN starting the job the country went into lockdown. The intention is to have two network meetings for each of the ten regions in England a year – one on Zoom during the autumn and winter and in-person meetings in spring and summer. The in-person meetings give greater opportunity for networking than online as were able to speak to an individual rather than the whole group when a topic may be of limited interest.

Outline of the day reiterated – IHSO role and how it is developing, Catrina Burton from Amberley Museum talking about the museum and its use of volunteers, discussion about the role of volunteers within industrial heritage and the issues arising in the post-pandemic situation. After lunch there is a chance of a tour around the museum.

Went around the room with people introducing themselves and the organisation they represent and their role within it.

It was agreed that the minutes would be circulated and will include contact details of the attendees.

Role of Industrial Heritage Support Officer – MDN

MDN was appointed as IHSO in March 2020 and funding for the role has been extended until March 2025. Work is being done to extend the position until 2028 (and beyond) as it was evident that the sector still needed the support provided by the role of IHSO. There are c. 600 sites that come within the remit of IHSO – they have to be protected, interpreted and open to the public (there are many more sites that do not fall within this definition, such as watermills that have been converted into holiday homes). The position was originally created in 2012 following a report into the state of industrial heritage in England. Funding for the position is mainly from Historic England, though there are grants from other sources such as IGMT and the AIA.

Because some sites have been found to come within the definition used that were not on the original list some sites have been added while others no longer meet the criteria, MDN is currently finalising the update of the database of sites, which had originally drawn-up in 1998. This excluded sites relating to transport, watermills, windmills and tidemills. There are regional spreadsheets that will be distributed, in due course. Attention is then going to be turned to watermills. The intention is for all the sites to be mapped onto Google Maps and for these to be added to the two websites run by the IHSO (<https://industrialheritagesupport.com/> and <https://industrialheritagenetworks.com/>). From the maps links will be included to the websites of the individual sites, museums and locations. This would be a way of them getting some publicity.

From 2022 there has been a refocus of the IHSO role to look at the condition of sites and resilience. As part of this he has made a funding proposal to Historic England to have a consultant engaged for a couple of months to look at the situation regarding regional industrial heritage sites

and the ownership/management structure. It is clear that the ownership of sites is changing as reflected in the fact that the number of local authority owned or run sites has decreased from 25% to 18%. This refocusing will not take away from IHSO's role of providing support and training for organisations in industrial heritage. MDN has plans to give online training in the next six months on climate change & net zero and on heritage crime. Historic England are due to publish their Industrial Heritage Strategy, which mentions the IHSO role.

MDN mentioned that there is also assistance available for the museum sector as a whole (their funding comes from The Arts Council) from the Museum Development groups (<https://southeastmuseums.org/>). From the website you can see what they can provide and sign-up for their newsletter.

One recent development is the decision for three student internships in a partnership with Keele University and Ironbridge. One of these will be overseen by MDN. This person will be involved with stationary steam engines. Interviews will be starting in the week commencing 6th June 2023 and appointments should be made soon after. Contact details for people at the relevant industrial heritage groups will be given to the interns.

Copies of the slides used in the presentation will be circulated with the minutes.

Amberley Museum – Catrina Burton (Museum Director)

Catrina Burton (CB) gave a brief overview of the museum. It is a large site with over 50 buildings (ranging from scheduled monuments, to relocated buildings to reconstructions as well as the natural environment. The museum covers a wide range of sectors including transport, trades, communication, etc as well as industries of the South East. As a result there is plenty for the c. 60,000 visitors who come each year to see. Especially as it is a working museum with demonstrations and craftworkers running their businesses onsite (such as a potter, a blacksmith and a stained glass artist).

Currently the museum has 320 volunteers split into 37 groups that cover different areas. There are roles that involve interacting with visitors and others behind the scenes. Volunteers are also involved with the various events that are run throughout the year.

The museum has been involved in the Men@Work project funded by the National Lottery. The funds were given just before Covid and so the project was extended. The money was used to engage a volunteer co-ordinator. The emphasis was on the wellbeing benefits of volunteering for the individuals as well as the organisation. During lockdown the co-ordinator helped people remain feeling connected even though they were not able to participate. Once funding ended it was decided to retain the co-ordinator as a member of staff, with funding coming from other sources. The Men@Work project helped to recruit more volunteers. During lockdown the co-ordinator and trustees kept in touch with volunteers to provide support. In doing that they discovered that their list was out of date and recorded about double the number of 'active' volunteers. It is possible that this continued contact that resulted in only one volunteer deciding not to return when the museum reopened (and that departure seems to be due to a refusal to do the H&S training).

The hope is to recruit a wider pool of volunteers – especially aimed at younger and female volunteers. Shows them that the museum is not just about machinery but there are a whole range of activities that can be done. If anyone expresses an interest they are visited so they have a chance to learn more about the possibilities and get insight from current volunteers. They are then invited to

taster sessions so they can have more information about which group may suit them best. H&S training is given before they start.

Emphasis is made of the benefits of volunteering – reduces social isolation, the feeling of doing something worthwhile, can provide respite from caring duties. Recently they have had dealing with vulnerable adults. Regular volunteer days are held so that they have the chance to mix with other groups.

Volunteering Discussion

At Amberley Museum as system of ‘fobbing’ in and out, which replaced the old signing in and out system. Has several advantages – people tend to remember to do it and so there are accurate records of who is on site (tendency for people to forget to sign out), easier to keep records of active volunteers up to date, but also from the database produced can calculate the FTE of the work done by volunteers each month. This information can be valuable when seeking funding.

Common to all the organisations represented was that volunteers tended to want to work on specific projects (such as working on aircraft or other machinery) and rejecting other activities. Some people will reject the idea of doing people-facing roles or doing boring, routine activities that are required to make the site run. People have to be made aware from the start that they can’t pick and choose what they do and that sometimes they will have to pitch-in and help do whatever needs to be done. There can be many different types of volunteer roles available at the larger sites and so can potentially attract a wide range of people – from the gregarious who love to interact with visitors, to those who want to maintain the machinery and exhibits to those wanting to do brush-clearing or behind the scenes work. When putting on events there can be extra complications – far more volunteers needed than on non-event days and possibly having to follow additional legislation relevant to the activity (such as the Maritime and Coastguard Agency rules when doing canal trips).

A greater issue for small, volunteer led sites was lone working (though this could happen on larger sites to some extent, as well). Gives rise to H&S safety issues. To address this larger sites (such as Ironbridge and Amberley Museums have a duty officer on site. Small sites do not have the capacity to do this. There can be an issue of volunteers coming in on unofficial days to do a bit of additional work (such as strimming weeds) when no one else is there. At the best of times the smaller sites can have a problem of knowing who is on the premises as there can be a reluctance to sign-in (and is working out-of-hours may be unable to sign-in even if they wanted to). All this could have issues with insurance if someone injured or something damaged.

Other Matters

Visitors numbers across the museum sector as a whole were down 25% in 2022 compared to the pre-pandemic figures. This reduction was reflected in the industrial heritage sites. For 2023, so far, it has been a very mixed picture with no consistent trend visible. Some sites are still finding visitor numbers very depressed, others have seen a recovery though not to pre-pandemic levels, while some have found their numbers have exceeded 2019 level. However, there is a concern that the cost of living crisis could lead to further suppression of numbers as households have less money for discretionary spending.

Linked to visitor numbers is the matter of school visits. While those from schools in the local area have resumed as it was possible to maintain links those from schools that are further away are reduced. This could be a reluctance for schools to travel far (higher transport costs and more time out of the learning day while on the coach).

The restriction of local authority budgets has also been affecting industrial heritage sites. With the cultural sector not being a statutory obligation it is vulnerable when councils want to cut spending. There has been the possibility of council grants being withdrawn and moving to full-repairing leases. These factors mean there is a need for the industrial heritage sector to look for a financially sustainable structure for the future.

Another issue is when the land/building owner decided they want to terminate the relationship and use the property for another purpose. This happened with the Brewery Museum in Burton-on-Trent when Molson Coors decided to use the old brewery buildings as its headquarters (having sold its old offices). Though it has promised a new location for the collection being away from the brewery buildings reduced the heritage.

MDN was asked if any thought had been given to the archives relating to the different industries. One of the problems is that records that have survived may not be kept on the relevant historic sites but are with individuals. While the holders may be willing to make them publicly accessible there is the issue of knowing who holds what. MDN stated that there is a reluctance for museums to hold archives that are outside their core area and local authority archives and local studies centres probably do not have the staff or space to take over collections (especially if they are not solely relevant to the locality). A lot of business records are being lost forever when old mills, factories, and other industrial sites are being demolished or repurposed. The Mills Archive Group is excellent at storing, preserving and dealing with the archives relating to mills and may be able to help and advise what can be done for other industry groups.

Tour

After lunch we are given a brief tour of part of the site of Amberley Museum by Brian Johnson (BJ) the trustee of Amberley Museum . BJ gave a brief history of the site and how it has expanded; in part as other groups have come in to use them as their base (such as Southdown Omnibus Trust). It is a continuing task to maintain and to improve the museum. At the back of the entrance to the museum BJ explained that it had been the kiln and bagging shed for the limeworks. Amberley Museum had obtained funding from Museum Estates and Development Fund (MEND - <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/museum-estate-and-development-fund-mend>) to preserve the building and display its function while improving the entrance and accessibility to the museum.