

## **Industrial Heritage West Midlands Network Meeting**

**Ironbridge, Blists Hill 31<sup>st</sup> May 2023**

### Introduction

Michael Nevell (MN) as the Industrial Heritage Support Officer (IHSO) for England was the host for the meeting. It was the first in-person regional network meeting since 2019 and the first one led by MN, as within three weeks of MDN starting the job the country went into lockdown. The intention is to have two network meetings for each region 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, Michelle Davies from Museum Development West Midlands to talk about how they can support museums, discussion about the role of volunteers and the issues arising in the post-pandemic situation. After lunch there is a chance of a tour around Blists Hill.

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 – MN

Though he had a presentation MN decided it was not possible to show it as the room did not have a suitable wall to act as a screen. However, copies of the slides would be distributed with the minutes.

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.

Currently finalising the update of the database of sites, which had originally drawn-up in 1998. This excluded sites relating to transport, watermills and windmills. 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.

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 6<sup>th</sup> 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.

## Museum Development West Midlands – Michelle Davies

Michelle stated that Museum Development West Midlands is based at Ironbridge. She explained that the various Museum Development groups are funded by the Arts Council primarily to give support to museums that are accredited and those that are working towards accreditation. There has been a changes within the organisation so that they were being reduced to five regions (and this will see one region covering the whole of the Midlands rather than separate ones for the West and East Midlands). Their remit is also being expanded to provide support to non-accredited museums and to freelancers.

The support provided by the Museum Development groups are free to access. Looking at the practical aspects of business planning for museums. As schools are a key users of museums they have produced support/training for engagement with schools included the relevance of the national curriculum. Other training and support includes subjects as the accreditation process, carbon literacy for industrial heritage, customer service especially regarding accessibility, managing collections, and inventory and document recording. Full details of the training available can be accessed on the website ( <https://mdwm.org.uk> ). A training programme is being developed and information about these will be available on the website in due course. The museum development groups are also able to offer general advice to museums on such matters as accreditation and collection management.

There is a small grants programme, which is open or applications until the beginning of July. Full details can be found on the website.

Michelle recommended that people sign-up for the newsletter from the Museum Development group as they contain useful information about upcoming events, etc. This prompted a few comments about the problems with volunteer-only sites. Too many of the individuals do not want to be involved with tasks that are outside their area of interest – even one as simple as reading emails/newsletters that may contain useful and relevant information that may benefit the organisation.

## Volunteers post-Covid and other issues

The attendees were split into two groups so that they had the chance to discuss the problems their organisations are facing – primarily about volunteers following the pandemic but not confined to this matter. These discussions were unminuted (as can't listen into to two groups at the same time) given that afterwards the key points were to be shared and commented upon.

### Group A

#### Main issued identified

1. capacity for front of house
2. attracting younger volunteers
3. school visits have dried up

#### Potential solutions

1. Hard to address as most volunteers want to be active in a specific area and may be especially reluctant to do a visitor-facing role. Encouraging them, especially during the initial period, to explore the different area involved may mean that some people may be happier than they though to undertake different roles.

Some of the larger volunteer-led groups may want to explore if they could find funding for a paid position of a volunteer coordinator.

2. To address the recruitment of new volunteers it had been found that general advertising has not been successful. Instead they are trying targeting individuals. Some groups are involved in outreach activities (such as talks to local groups not necessarily one connected to history) in a bid to raise the profile of the site locally in the hope of attracting visitors and volunteers. MDN mentioned that there are national and regional grants available for capacity building and that the IHSO role is funded as part of the national capacity building initiative.
3. Historic England has a programme that is aimed mainly at primary schools. It is targeted locally so that the schoolchildren can learn about how their area was made. Martin Phillips at Historic England is the local contact for West Midlands. MDN said that he has information about a national sponsorship scheme for school trips that will be distributed with the minutes.

Another problem identified was public transport – reduced frequency of services and routes may not go anywhere near sites. This can affect volunteers as well as visitors. Unfortunately this is not one that can be resolved by the industrial heritage sector.

#### Group B

The key issues concerning volunteers identified by the second group was managing them and attracting younger volunteers. Within the area of management was the problem that many volunteers were attracted to do specific task (such as working on machinery) and were reluctant to be involved more general tasks (site maintenance such as cleaning and weeding) that were required. As they are volunteers need to consider why they are volunteering and seeing if they would be prepared to explore if these can be met but doing other activities rather than just the one that had attracted them. Some groups had found that encouraging people to do different tasks had sparked another interest. There could also be some reluctance by some volunteers to use their professional skills (such as in finance or management) as they are using the volunteering as a way of escaping. With regard to managing volunteers can be the unpleasant task of dealing with disruptive influences – without the sanctions available to an employer it may be that there is no alternative but to tell someone they can't return. With regard to attracting younger volunteers it was suggested that targeting students (sixth-form and university) may be a way to proceed. Can stress the transferable skills they would acquire, give them something to put on personal statement/applications, and may spark a lifelong interest. It gives both parties something though it may not be a long term relationship.

Following on from the problem of recruiting volunteers was recruitment to the board of trustees. There was some feeling that a need to rejuvenate their own board of trustees but a reluctance of new-blood to join. Linked to this is that some chair of trustees feel that it is their role to micromanage, which it isn't and others can find off-putting.

There is an increasing need to industrial heritage sites to find a financially sustainable model. Those that had financial support from local authorities are finding this being withdrawn given the current situation and that cultural provision are not a statutory obligation. As a result where landlord is a local council there can be pressure applied to agree to a full-repairing lease. This would not be advantageous to the groups as any major repairs could wipe-out any reserves they have. And if the building itself is not of historic interest there would be no possibility of getting a grant towards the

cost. Even with non-council landlords if there is a change in ownership there can be a change in interest and change in relationship between the landlord and the trustees. MDN said that it is hoped that a consultant can be engaged for a few months to look at the ownership structures for industrial heritage sites. The various organisational structures with different bodies involved can make it complicated to know whose responsibility it is for such matters of maintenance (of buildings and landscape), H&S, etc.

There is also the issue of succession training. At the moment, for example, there may be sufficient engineers able to maintain the machinery as similar to what they worked on professionally. But as industry changes those skills are being lost. Possibly can be addressed by sharing skills and mentoring across local sites. Linked to this was the need for heritage crafts to run and maintain sites and equipment. There are internships available with some of the crafts.

### Ironbridge Volunteers

After lunch we meet Linda, the Volunteer Coordinator for the Ironbridge Museums. She gave information about how Covid had changed things among the volunteers. The biggest change was the reduction in volunteers with numbers half that pre-pandemic. Volunteers had flexibility about how much they worked and on what days but they were expected to commit to regular attendance (could not swap from one week to the next). They are assigned to a team and have an assigned person to report to. With ten museums there are a wide variety of roles for volunteers from the costumed people at Blists Hill to behind scene roles. There is a volunteer agreement so they know what is expected of them. Linda encourages people to try different area and has periodic meetings and coffee mornings for the volunteers to meet each other at the different locations. They also have a newsletter. Some of the problems mentioned in the morning have been experienced at the Ironbridge Museums – especially the age profile of volunteers and the issue of public transport for them to get to the sites. Had a chance to talk to one of the volunteers – and he mentioned the benefits to the volunteers in having the chance to improve mental health by mixing with different people and feeling as if you are doing something useful.