

A Surprising Day down Bristol Way as the Chattering Damsel discovered

On Saturday 20 April I attended an Industrial Archaeological Conference arranged by BIAS (Bristol Industrial Archaeological Society). It was held at the Frys Sports and Social Club in the grounds of the Cadburys' Somerdale chocolate factory, Keynsham, just west of Bristol. Other HMG members were also there - Alison Stott, Andy Fish, Carol Burdekin, John Mears and Mick Edgeworth. We learned that J.S. Fry & Sons merged their business with Cadbury in 1919. The now derelict factory site, created in 1935 when the business relocated from the centre of Bristol to Keynsham, sits in a spacious 228 acres park like area awaiting final plans for redevelopment into apartments, offices, a school and housing. Much of the green space is taken up with sports pitches and recreational areas, in accordance with Quaker philanthropy, and these were still being well used as was the Social Club bar beneath the Conference room.

Lively and informative talks covered topics as varied as Brandy Bottom Colliery; Landscape and the Somerset Coal Canal; Weymouth's water supply and the re-use of brewery buildings at Burton-on-Trent. Richard Sims was the speaker I had most wanted to hear as he has written an excellent and very thoroughly researched book on the flax and rope industries of south Dorset and its surrounding villages: *Rope, Net & Twine - The Bridport Textile Industry*. He expanded on this and how it was an important livelihood not only in Dorset but in Somerset too as The Crewkerne Textile Industry; thus broadening my knowledge and awareness of the huge regions employed in supplying string, twine, rope, rigging, and sails, formed from flax, hemp and jute. Simple items in everyday use both domestically and on the high seas.

I had signed up to the post conference walking tour of the town, not fully knowing what to expect as no details were available on booking, so I kept an open mind having dismissed the alternatives of trips to: Brandy Bottom Colliery, Avon Valley Railway and Warmley Museum. Details of the town walk were given to me on arrival at the Conference and I was delighted to read that it comprised of visits to several mill sites bordering the town! (My HMG companions had all plumped for the Avon Valley Railway - that in itself had, I am told, proved very interesting despite being mostly a restoration and conservation yard, with limited train rides .)



1

Albert Mill



2

and its Mill Stones.



3

Avon Mill Brass Mills

Local historian, Mike Bone, led our group of a dozen or so souls on an enlightening and surprising walk around the many former watermill sites of the Bitton, Keynsham and Saltford parishes. Mostly starting life as corn mills and recorded in Domesday, several of them underwent industrial changes of use throughout the centuries ending their working lives producing brass, copper, steel and paper mainly powered by the Rivers Avon and Chew. I was in the company of Joan Day throughout the tour which turned out to be a bonus – for all of us – as she had researched the mills and produced books on them. A sprightly 88 year old, Joan supplemented Mike's narration, adding fascinating asides – and insights!

The numerous large buildings forming the Albert Mill site, although now changed to residential use, made us realise the extent of the brass industry carried on here. As you will see in picture 1, the wheel and sluice gates are still in situ. The second picture shows the edge runner stones gracing the entrance driveway; all internal machinery had been removed. Across the River Chew, on the opposite bank, stand the former steel mill buildings now converted to a private residential area. Abraham Darby set up the first brass mills in Keynsham around 1706 and the last brass battery pans ever made in Britain were produced here in June 1927. Avon Mill, on the River Avon, is now known as The Brass Mills pub restaurant (a sister in the Vintage Inns chain to Longbridge Mill at Sherfield on Loddon). Most of its buildings were demolished during the 1930s. Chew Mill is now only evidenced by a small, caged waterwheel and the ground paved for recreational use. Standing on a bridge over the River Avon where Bitton and Keynsham parishes form a boundary, we could see the huge weir fronting the former giant papermill once owned by the John Dickinson Group and sold in 1990 to SAPPI of South Africa - who later closed it and all their other UK mills in favour of production of board. The walks and talks were a revelation to me; never more will Horace Batchelor leap to mind first at the mention of Keynsham! It is a pleasant place full of history to be revisited. Thank you BIAS. Sheila.