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Publication date
2016

Published in
TICCIH Bulletin

Citation (APA)
Chatzi Rodopoulou, D. (2016). Industrial museums at risk. *TICCIH Bulletin*, (74), 15-16.

Important note
To cite this publication, please use the final published version (if applicable).
Please check the document version above.

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Modern industrial museums

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The transition to the 21st century brought a change to the risks that preserved industrial heritage sites face. In Britain, from a dilapidated industrial heritage stock that was flirting with demolition, we now have plenty of industrial sites that work as museums or visitor attractions. Nevertheless, their conversion has not guaranteed their future and many are at serious risk. Their potential failure is of great importance to the heritage field because of their high historic, technical, evidential and social value. Are there any options available for tackling this problem or will we soon need to deal with a new generation of empty buildings?

Drawing lessons from the Ironbridge Gorge Museum (IMG) and Middleport pottery in Shropshire, England, two celebrated cases of industrial visitor attractions, we highlight ways of keeping industrial museums and visitor attractions functional within the current challenging socioeconomic situation.

Select a mix of complementary uses The vast size and complexity of converted industrial sites makes them hard to maintain by single-function schemes, such as industrial museums or visitor attractions, which generate relatively small revenue. A key consideration should be ensuring long term viability. This can be achieved by creating a mixed-use program consisting of complementary uses, including a visitor attraction. The philosophy of Middleport pottery was based on this idea. Having a three-function program, it works as a production site and a visitor attraction, as well as offering spaces to rent out.

Keep it fresh and attractive The challenging socioeconomic climate in the UK makes the need for high visitor numbers crucial, especially for the survival of the existing single function industrial museums and visitor attractions. Achieving high visitor numbers can be relatively easy after the launch of a project but it becomes more and more challenging. The matter is aggravated in the cases of remote industrial museums and visitor attractions with a small catchment area.

It is therefore fundamental to convince visitors to revisit the site. The Ironbridge Gorge Museum has accomplished this by organising activities and renewing its attractions. Events based on seasonal occasions, such as Christmas, Easter and Halloween, or thematic events like workshops, exhibitions, or archaeology seminars, make Ironbridge a touristic destination for all ages, all year long. The introduction of new attractions such as *Engenuity*, a science and technology “playground” that opened in 2002, keeps the site fresh and makes it more appealing to new and old visitors.

Recruit new volunteers According to the results of the English ‘Heritage at Risk’ programme, “30% of all industrial heritage attractions in England are wholly or largely cared for by volunteers”. The ageing of the first generation of volunteers, and the difficulty to renew this base, places them sites at risk. Sustaining the volunteer base of an industrial museum or attraction is critical for its survival. Both Middleport and IGM have recognised this and have been implementing strategies for volunteer attraction. IGM, with 500 volunteers, has a lot to teach. To recruit new volunteers it is important to address the whole spectrum of potential individuals or groups. Also, giving incentives such as training and experience for the unemployed is a powerful motive for volunteers’ attraction.



The philosophy of Middleport Pottery is based on three complementary uses: the pottery production, the visitor attraction and the rent workspace. The visitors of Middleport have the unique chance to visit a working factory. Middleport production workers, depicted here, are still using traditional craftsmanship for pottery making.

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Share, learn and liaise In his 2008 report “Sustaining England’s Industrial heritage” Neil Cossons raised the issue of the deficiency in preservation and interpretation quality of the industrial heritage attractions in the care of volunteers and local authorities. That is still a fundamental risk, which is expected to escalate after the first generation of volunteers with high technical skills retires.

In response to this problem there are now a number of institutions that help custodians of industrial museums and heritage attractions improve their skill set and maintain high standards of preservation and interpretation. In 2012, Historic England introduced an industrial heritage support officer as part of the *Industrial Heritage at Risk* project to provide help, advice and training to preservation trusts and voluntary groups.

Collaborative regional ‘self-help’ networks are facilitated, encouraging sites to work together more effectively.

Careful planning, the continuous reinvention of the attraction, the maintenance and refreshment of its volunteer base as well as the use of support organisations, can reinforce significantly the viability of these sites, within the challenging economic situation.

Editor’s note: Queen Street Mill Textile Museum in Burnley, Lancashire, UK, recognised as ‘the last remaining operational steam powered weaving mill in the world’, with a collection designated as of national importance, is under direct threat of closing under spending cuts imposed on the regional government. The campaign to drum up support is [here](#).



Volunteers at Ironbridge