People versus machines or people and machines? Current research directions within British post-medieval and industrial archaeology


Abstract

This chapter reviews the continuing debate about the scope and role of industrial archaeology that was sparked by the publication of Understanding the Workplace, a research framework published by the Association for Industrial Archaeology in 2005. Since this volume focuses upon the landscape and social impacts of industrialisation, a number of industrial archaeologists have felt that the traditional interests of the discipline, the survey and recording of manufacturing processes and power systems, were being ignored or even marginalised. This discussion argues that such is not the case: that rather this research framework is complementary to these traditional research activities. Furthermore, it argues that there is now a wide range of approaches that provide a research toolkit, a set of archaeological methodologies and theoretical approaches that can be applied to the archaeology of industrialisation. Some of these approaches concentrate wholly upon the recording of technology, others upon the landscape changes and social context. None is exclusive of the other; indeed, they work best when these issues are considered together. Together, they provide a shared research agenda allowing industrial archaeologists to explore our understanding of the interconnection between machine and landscape and society and technological change during the era of industrialisation.
Post-medieval archaeology is a term used in Europe to describe the study of the material past over the last 500 years. Increasingly the field is referred to as Historical archaeology, a term in international usage. It is closely related to Industrial archaeology, although post-medieval archaeology conventionally has not extended its studies past the mid 18th century. Such a 'cut-off' date is increasingly critiqued by work within historical archaeology and contemporary archaeology.