The Social Archaeology of Industrialisation

The Example of Manchester During The 17th and 18th Centuries

Michael Nevell

The Industrial Revolution represents one of the great changes in human society, and can be ranked in importance alongside the development of language, the establishment of farming, and the growth of urban societies. There is a large and growing body of literature about this Revolution, and the transition to an Industrial Society, written from the historians’ and economists’ viewpoint, but little from an archaeological perspective (Clark, 1999:281–2). For the archaeologist the study of the Manchester region, with its early and rapid shift from rural backwater to industrial centre, offers models of archaeological transition and social stress that may be applicable to other regions undergoing similar processes (Nevell and Walker, 1999:11–2).

The contributions to the debate made by industrial archaeologists in Britain have tended to lean towards studies of the mechanics, or physical character, of individual industries or structures, with a consequent lack of synthesis. This trend amongst British archaeologists is understandable given the volume of the available archaeological database and historical record and the depth of the theories of economic historians. Yet, as the Association for Industrial Archaeology and English Heritage have both observed, this trend may have meant that the contribution of archaeologists to the debate on the validity and origins of the Industrial Revolution as a concept has not been as great as it could have been (English Heritage, 1997:45; Palmer, 1991).

The work presented in this paper is part of a long-term research program by the University of Manchester Archaeological Unit into the
industrial transition, attempting to present an archaeological understanding of the Industrial Revolution between the years 1600 and 1900 (Nevell, 2003a). We have adopted a landscape approach to the subject that charts and groups sites by type, whilst using geographical, historical and socio-economic sources only to illustrate archaeological perceptions. The methodology we have developed is described elsewhere in detail (Nevell and Walker, 1999;2003) and is outlined in brief below.

It is important to realize that this approach was distinctive in the way it combined three methodologies; firstly, in its emphasis on material remains; secondly in its landscape analysis through identifying the new monument types introduced during the period under study and then relating them to the monument type categories as listed in the RCHME’s *Thesaurus of Archaeological Monument Types* (RCHME, 1996); and thirdly, in the use of geographical, historical, and socio-economic evidence to relate these new monument types to the contemporary social structure. This stress upon material remains, monument types, and landscape study is essential if archaeology is to make a contribution in its own right to the origins of industrialisation, since the discipline remains the study of material culture in all its forms whatever the period under study. A holistic approach meant treating the period in the same way as we might treat the remains of the Neolithic period, by giving in the initial phases of the study equal weight and importance to all elements of the physical remains.

**MANCHESTER AND THE INDUSTRIAL TRANSITION**

The paucity of the archaeological contribution to the study of Manchester’s industrialisation is demonstrated by the scarcity of entries in a recently published historical bibliography on the city’s textile development (Wyke and Rudyard, 1997). There is not even a separate section on the archaeology of the textile industry in the region as a whole, yet the bibliography runs to 2,957 books, pamphlets, theses, and articles printed between the late-18th century and 1997, of which 61 deal solely with the textile industry in Manchester. However, in the period 1991 to 2000 there were 560 books and articles published on North West archaeological topics of which 99 (17.7%) dealt with Post-Medieval and Industrial Archaeology topics, yet only three dealt directly with Manchester’s industrial archaeology (Nevell, 2000:33–41).

What contribution can or should archaeology make to the issue of Manchester’s industrialisation, a subject studied for much of the 19th and 20th centuries and which has produced such a vast literature? For