

South Wales and West of England Regional IA Conference (SW&WRIAC)

Report: 26th April 2025 Walton Village Hall, Somerset. BA16 9LA

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Last year, an initiative from the Oxford House Industrial History Society revived the SW&WRIAC which took place annually until 2019 when the COVID Epidemic struck. This year (2025) Somerset Industrial Archaeology Society (SIAS) followed on by organising the conference.

Following registration and an introductory welcome from Peter Daniel (President of SIAS) the following illustrated talks took place:

- Peter Daniel on the Industrial Archaeology of the Porlock Area.
- Terry Stevens on the 'Unique Heritage of Coker Canvas' – an expensive, high quality hard wearing flax cloth sail canvas that was grown and woven in the Coker villages of South Somerset. This canvas was prized by the British Navy and used by marriers throughout the world.
- Stephen Miles on 'The Kilve Oil Shale Scandal' in West Somerset.
- Following lunch an alternative talk replaced the one planned by Samantha Cullen of the Alfred Gillet Trust, who was unavailable to give her talk on the new 'Shoemaker Museum' in The Grange, next to Clarks Village in Street, the Somerset town.
- Mary Miles then gave a talk on the shoemaker 'Clarke's Influence on the Buildings of Street'.
- The final talk of the day titled 'Saving Fox's Cloth and Dye Works at Tone Dale' Wellington, was given by Vanessa Ruhlig. It covered the work being undertaken to record what is currently there and the efforts being made to preserve as much as is possible.

The Conference was well organised, had good catering arrangements, was well attended, and appeared to be well received, with all speakers giving interesting and varied talks. Regretfully, in common with most events of similar nature, it was noticeable that not many younger people were in the audience.

Being one of the older people who attends talks and lectures, I would have preferred the visual presentations to be larger, sharper and brighter, and the speakers' audio equipment to have been of higher quality, similar to that of the one used by the person who presented the lecturers.

The conference closed with a vote of thanks being given to the organisers and speakers - following which a representative from each of the IA Societies present gathered to discuss the future of the SW&WRIA conferences. It was unanimously agreed that the conferences were beneficial and that every effort should be made to ensure that they continue. To this effect, the Worcestershire IA Society stated that although they had twice in recent years been unable to host the conference, they now felt they were in a position to host the 2026 conference. Following further discussion, I was then pressed to say whether Gloucestershire would be willing to host the conference in 2027 but explained that, in common with other societies, we would find this difficult to achieve. However following further pressure, I agreed to put this before our committee for discussion.

Following the Conference, delegates were given directions to their chosen visit destination which was one of the following:

- Street Buildings (*Industrial housing in Street*).

- Glastonbury Fossick (*Tanneries*).
- Westonzoyland Museum of Steam & Power Pumping.
- Bridgwater Brick & Tile Museum.

For my part, I chose to visit the Bridgwater Brick & Tile Museum. Having spent my childhood in the area, the museum brought back many memories since I well remember the predominance of the industry. Although the Museum is relatively small, it covers all stages of production. Those who attended were given an excellent presentation that covered the manufacture of Bath bricks (*used for fine polishing all sorts of things*), 20 hole Bridgwater bricks, chimney pots, finials and tiles - of which the museum has a large excellent selection, and for which the area in and around Bridgwater was famous.



***Stoking the round Updraught Brick Kiln,
Bridgwater Brick & Tile Museum***