Editorial

Historic Environment is a journal which aims to attract multidisciplinary interests working on the conservation and interpretation of our past environments. This issue focuses on engineering heritage.

Engineering is an activity with recognisable phases - design, construction or manufacture, marketing/distribution, use - and this network of activities generates a range of records. These are the place of an activity sometimes with buildings intact; the means of manufacture/construction, like the machinery tools and equipment; the means for organising manufacture/construction, like the paperwork of activity in the form of orders, accounts, logs, letter books, reports and drawings; the reports of activity in print and the recollections of the participants; the useful products, and waste. Engineering shares these characteristics with other activities, such as architecture, but differs from them in terms of where the activity takes place, the means of construction and the objects produced.

The articles presented in this issue illustrate the breadth of engineers' work in constructing and organising our historic environment in contrast with their apparently narrower role in present-day construction.

The extent of the British Royal Engineers' involvement in colonial construction has been overlooked until recently, partly due to a lack of understanding of the workings of British colonial administration, to the removal of military records following the withdrawal of regiments in the 1860s and to the restructuring of government departments in the post-Imperial period. The Royal Engineers assumed responsibility for convict and military buildings, fortifications, dams, watermills, steam-driven pumps, hospitals, asylums and prisons, gunpowder magazines, coal-mining, wharf construction, swamp drainage, sewerage, land and trigonometrical surveying. The results of their work can still be seen in the landscape today, especially in Tasmania.

Peter Milner's article on the Mount Wills Proprietary Mine shows how it is necessary to seek out machinery remaining in remote sites to determine the early contributions made to mining by local foundries, while the reconstruction of a mine pumping engine at Sovereign Hill shows how it was necessary to undertake detailed research into the history of mine pumping in Victoria and then search for remnant components to use. The development of steam-powered water supply installations along the long distance railway routes in Victoria in the 1860s demonstrated the technological advancement of the Victorian Government Railways and the variety and range of construction required.

Despite the personal advantages arising from the installation of communal gas lighting in Victoria, little now exists in the broad landscape as tangible evidence of the 50 gasworks. The Bendigo gasworks is therefore a most important industrial monument and relic of engineering heritage. The final article, which deals with the fascinating story of the introduction of automatic telephones in Australia, highlights the problems of engineering heritage where the major benefit was a process now with no physical evidence due to technological change and the easy disposal of superseded equipment.

Engineers still have a significant role to play in the practice of heritage conservation because their skills can assist a multi-disciplinary team in identifying, assessing and, where appropriate, conserving engineering places, processes or objects.