

**“If you can walk down the street and recognise the difference between cast iron and wrought iron, the world is altogether a better place”:  
Being Enthusiastic about Industrial Archaeology**

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**Introduction: Technology Enthusiasm**

Enthusiasts are people who have a passion, keenness, dedication or zeal for a particular activity or hobby. Today, there are enthusiasts for almost everything, from genealogy, costume dramas, and country houses, to metal detectors, coin collecting, and archaeology. But to be described as an enthusiast is not necessarily a compliment. Historically, the term “enthusiasm” was first used in England in the early seventeenth century to describe “religious or prophetic frenzy among the ancient Greeks” (Hanks, n.p.). This frenzy was ascribed to being possessed by spirits sent not only by God but also the devil. During this period, those who disobeyed the powers that be or claimed to have a message from God were considered to be enthusiasts (McLoughlin).

Enthusiasm retained its religious connotations throughout the eighteenth century and was also used at this time to describe “the tendency within the population to be swept by crazes” (Mee 31). However, as part of the “rehabilitation of enthusiasm,” the emerging middle-classes adopted the word to characterise the intensity of Romantic poetry. The language of enthusiasm was then used to describe the “literary ideas of affect” and “a private feeling of religious warmth” (Mee 2 and 34). While the notion of enthusiasm was embraced here in a more optimistic sense, attempts to disassociate enthusiasm from crowd-inciting fanaticism were largely unsuccessful. As such enthusiasm has never quite managed to shake off its pejorative connotations.

The 'enthusiasm' discussed in this paper is essentially a personal passion for technology. It forms part of a longer tradition of historical preservation in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in the world. From preserved railways to Victorian pumping stations, people have long been fascinated by the history of technology and engineering; manifesting their enthusiasm through their nostalgic longings and emotional attachment to its enduring material culture. Moreover, enthusiasts have been central to the collection, conservation, and preservation of this particular material record. Technology enthusiasm in this instance is about having a passion for the history and material record of technological development, specifically here industrial archaeology.

Despite being a pastime much participated in, technology enthusiasm is relatively under-explored within the academic literature. For the most part, scholarship has tended to focus on the intended users, formal spaces, and official narratives of science and technology (Adas, Latour, Mellström, Oldenziel). In recent years attempts have been made to remedy this imbalance, with researchers from across the social sciences examining the position of hobbyists, tinkerers and amateurs in scientific and technical culture (Ellis and Waterton, Haring, Saarikoski, Takahashi). Work from historians of technology has focussed on the computer enthusiast; for example, Saarikoski's work on the Finnish personal computer hobby:

The definition of the computer enthusiast varies historically. Personal interest, pleasure and entertainment are the most significant factors defining computing as a hobby. Despite this, the hobby may also lead to acquiring useful knowledge, skills or experience of information

technology. Most often the activity takes place outside working hours but can still have links to the development of professional expertise or the pursuit of studies. In many cases it takes place in the home environment. On the other hand, it is characteristically social, and the importance of friends, clubs and other communities is greatly emphasised.

In common with a number of other studies relating to technical hobbies, for example Takahashi who argues tinkerers were behind the advent of the radio and television receiver, Saarikoski's work focuses on the role these users played in shaping the technology in question. The enthusiasts encountered in this paper are important here not for their role in shaping the technology, but keeping technological heritage alive. As historian of technology Haring reminds us, "there exist alternative ways of using and relating to technology" (18).

Furthermore, the sociological literature on audiences (Abercrombie and Longhurst, Ang), fans (Hills, Jenkins, Lewis, Sandvoss) and subcultures (Hall, Hebdige, Schouten and McAlexander) has also been extended in order to account for the enthusiast. In Abercrombie and Longhurst's *Audiences*, the authors locate 'the enthusiast' and 'the fan' at opposing ends of a continuum of consumption defined by questions of specialisation of interest, social organisation of interest and material productivity. Fans are described as:

*skilled* or *competent* in different modes of production and consumption; *active* in their interactions with texts and in their production of new texts; and *communal* in that they construct different communities based on their links to the programmes they like. (127 emphasis in original)

Based on this definition, Abercrombie and Longhurst argue that fans and enthusiasts differ in three ways:

(1) enthusiasts' activities are not based around media images and stars in the way that fans' activities are; (2) enthusiasts can be hypothesized to be relatively light media users, particularly perhaps broadcast media, though they may be heavy users of the specialist publications which are directed towards the enthusiasm itself; (3) the enthusiasm would appear to be rather more organised than the fan activity. (132)

What is striking about this attempt to differentiate between the fan and the enthusiast is that it is based on supposition rather than the actual experience and observation of enthusiasm. It is here that the ethnographic account of enthusiasm presented in this paper and elsewhere, for example works by Dannefer on vintage car culture, Moorhouse on American hot-rodding and Fuller on modified-car culture in Australia, can shed light on the subject.

My own ethnographic study of groups with a passion for telecommunications heritage, early British computers and industrial archaeology takes the discussion of "technology enthusiasm" further still. Through in-depth interviews, observation and textual analysis, I have examined in detail the formation of enthusiast societies and their membership, the importance of the material record to enthusiasts (particularly at home) and the enthusiastic practices of collecting and hoarding, as well as the figure of the technology enthusiast in the public space of the museum, namely the Science Museum in London (Geoghegan). In this paper, I explore the culture of enthusiasm for the industrial past through the example of the Greater London Industrial Archaeology Society (GLIAS). Focusing on industrial sites around London, GLIAS meet five or six times a year for field visits, walks and a treasure hunt. The committee maintain a website and produce a quarterly newsletter. The title of my paper, "If you can walk down the street and recognise the difference between cast iron and wrought iron, the world is altogether a better place," comes from an interview I conducted with the co-founder and

present chairman of GLIAS. He was telling me about his fascination with the materials of industrialisation. In fact, he said even concrete is sexy.

Some call it a hobby; others call it a disease. But enthusiasm for industrial archaeology is, as several respondents have themselves identified, “as insidious in its side effects as any debilitating germ. It dictates your lifestyle, organises your activity and decides who your friends are” (Frow and Frow 177, Gillespie et al.). Through the figure of the industrial archaeology enthusiast, I discuss in this paper what it means to be enthusiastic. I begin by reflecting on the development of this specialist subject area. I go on to detail the formation of the Society in the late 1960s, before exploring the Society’s fieldwork methods and some of the other activities they now engage in. I raise questions of enthusiast and professional knowledge and practice, as well as consider the future of this particular enthusiasm.

### **Defining Industrial Archaeology**

The practice of ‘industrial archaeology’ is much contested. For a long time, enthusiasts and professional archaeologists have debated the meaning and use of the term (Palmer). On the one hand, there are those interested in the history, preservation, and recording of industrial sites. For example the grandfather figures of the subject, namely Kenneth Hudson and Angus Buchanan, who both published widely in the 1960s and 1970s in order to encourage publics to get involved in recording. Many members of GLIAS refer to the books of Hudson *Industrial Archaeology: an Introduction* and Buchanan *Industrial Archaeology in Britain* with their fine descriptions and photographs as integral to their early interest in the subject. On the other hand, there are those within the academic discipline of archaeology who consider the study of remains produced by the Industrial Revolution as too modern. More-over, they find the activities of those calling themselves industrial archaeologists as lacking sufficient attention to the understanding of past human activity to justify the name. As a result, the definition of ‘industrial archaeology’ is problematic for both enthusiasts and professionals.

Even the early advocates of professional industrial archaeology felt uneasy about the subject’s methods and practices. In 1973, Philip Riden (described by one GLIAS member as the angry young man of industrial archaeology), the then president of the Oxford University Archaeology Society, wrote a damning article in *Antiquity*, calling for the subject to “shed the amateur train drivers and others who are not part of archaeology” (215-216). He decried the “appallingly low standard of some of the work done under the name of ‘industrial archaeology’” (211). He felt that if enthusiasts did not attempt to maintain high technical standards, publish their work in journals or back up their fieldwork with documentary investigation or join their county archaeological societies then there was no value in the efforts of these amateurs. During this period, enthusiasts, academics, and professionals were divided. What was wrong with doing something for the pleasure it provides the participant?

Although relations today between the so-called amateur (enthusiast) and professional archaeologies are less potent, some prejudice remains. Describing them as “barrow boys”, some enthusiasts suggest that what was once their much-loved pastime has been “hijacked” by professional archaeologists who, according to one respondent,

are desperate to find subjects to get degrees in. So the whole thing has been hijacked by academia as it were. Traditional professional archaeologists in London at least are running head on into things that we have been doing for decades and they still don’t appreciate that this is what we do. A lot of assessments are handed out to professional archaeology teams who don’t necessarily have any knowledge of industrial archaeology. (James, GLIAS committee member)

James went on to reveal that GLIAS receives numerous enquiries from professional archaeologists, developers and town planners asking what they know about particular sites across the city. Although the Society has compiled a detailed database covering some areas of London, it is by no means comprehensive. In addition, many active members often record and monitor sites in London for their own personal enjoyment. This leaves many questioning the need to publish their results for the gain of third parties. Canadian sociologist Stebbins discusses this situation in his research on “serious leisure”. He has worked extensively with amateur archaeologists in order to understand their approach to their leisure activity. He argues that amateurs are “neither dabblers who approach the activity with little commitment or seriousness, nor professionals who make a living from that activity” (55). Rather they pursue their chosen leisure activity to professional standards. A point echoed by Fine in his study of the cultures of mushrooming. But this is to get ahead of myself. How did GLIAS begin?

### **GLIAS: The Group**

The 1960s have been described by respondents as a frantic period of “running around like headless chickens.” Enthusiasts of London’s industrial archaeology were witnessing incredible changes to the city’s industrial landscape. Individuals and groups like the Thames Basin Archaeology Observers Group were recording what they could. Dashing around London taking photos to capture London’s industrial legacy before it was lost forever. However the final straw for many, in London at least, was the proposed and subsequent demolition of the “Euston Arch”. The Doric portico at Euston Station was completed in 1838 and stood as a symbol to the glory of railway travel. Despite strong protests from amenity societies, this Victorian symbol of progress was finally pulled down by British Railways in 1962 in order to make way for what enthusiasts have called a “monstrous concrete box”.

In response to these changes, GLIAS was founded in 1968 by two engineers and a locomotive driver over afternoon tea in a suburban living room in Woodford, North-East London. They held their first meeting one Sunday afternoon in December at the Science Museum in London and attracted over 130 people. Firing the imagination of potential members with an exhibition of photographs of the industrial landscape taken by Eric de Maré, GLIAS’s first meeting was a success. Bringing together like-minded people who are motivated and enthusiastic about the subject, GLIAS currently has over 600 members in the London area and beyond. This makes it the largest industrial archaeology society in the UK and perhaps Europe. Drawing some of its membership from a series of evening classes hosted by various members of the Society’s committee, GLIAS initially had a quasi-academic approach. Although some preferred the hands-on practical element and were more, as has been described by one respondent, “your free-range enthusiast”.

The society has an active committee, produces a newsletter and journal, as well as runs regular events for members. However the Society is not simply about the study of London’s industrial heritage, over time the interest in industrial archaeology has developed for some members into long-term friendships. Sociability is central to organised leisure activities. It underpins and supports the performance of enthusiasm in groups and societies. For Fine, sociability does not always equal friendship, but it is the state from which people might become friends. Some GLIAS members have taken this one step further: there have even been a couple of marriages. Although not the subject of my paper, technical culture is heavily gendered. Industrial archaeology is a rare exception attracting a mixture of male and female participants, usually retired husband and wife teams.

### **Doing Industrial Archaeology: GLIAS's Method and Practice**

In what has been described as GLIAS's heyday, namely the 1970s to early 1980s, fieldwork was fundamental to the Society's activities. The Society's approach to fieldwork during this period was much the same as the one described by champion of industrial archaeology Arthur Raistrick in 1973:

photographing, measuring, describing, and so far as possible documenting buildings, engines, machinery, lines of communication, still or recently in use, providing a satisfactory record for the future before the object may become obsolete or be demolished. (13)

In the early years of GLIAS and thanks to the committed efforts of two active Society members, recording parties were organised for extended lunch hours and weekends. The majority of this early fieldwork took place at the St Katherine Docks. The Docks were constructed in the 1820s by Thomas Telford. They became home to the world's greatest concentration of portable wealth. Here GLIAS members learnt and employed practical (also professional) skills, such as measuring, triangulations and use of a "dumpy level". For many members this was an incredibly exciting time. It was a chance to gain hands-on experience of industrial archaeology. Having been left derelict for many years, the Docks have since been redeveloped as part of the Docklands regeneration project.

At this time the Society was also compiling data for what has become known to members as "The GLIAS Book". The book was to have separate chapters on the various industrial histories of London with contributions from Society members about specific sites. Sadly the book's editor died and the project lost impetus. Several years ago, the committee managed to digitise the data collected for the book and began to compile a database. However, the GLIAS database has been beset by problems. Firstly, there are often questions of consistency and coherence. There is a standard datasheet for recording industrial buildings – the Index Record for Industrial Sites. However, the quality of each record is different because of the experience level of the different authors. Some authors are automatically identified as good or expert record keepers. Secondly, getting access to the database in order to upload the information has proved difficult. As one of the respondents put it: "like all computer babies [the creator of the database], is finding it hard to give birth" (Sally, GLIAS member). As we have learnt enthusiasm is integral to movements such as industrial archaeology – public historian Raphael Samuel described them as the "invisible hands" of historical enquiry. Yet, it is this very enthusiasm that has the potential to jeopardise projects such as the GLIAS book.

Although active in their recording practices, the GLIAS book saga reflects one of the challenges encountered by enthusiast groups and societies. In common with other researchers studying amenity societies, such as Ellis and Waterton's work with amateur naturalists, unlike the world of work where people are paid to complete a task and are therefore meant to have a singular sense of purpose, the activities of an enthusiast group like GLIAS rely on the goodwill of their members to volunteer their time, energy and expertise. When this is lost for whatever reason, there is no requirement for any other member to take up that position. As such, levels of commitment vary between enthusiasts and can lead to the aforementioned difficulties, such as disputes between group members, the occasional miscommunication of ideas and an over-enthusiasm for some parts of the task in hand. On top of this, GLIAS and societies like it are confronted with changing health and safety policies and tightened security surrounding industrial sites. This has made the practical side of industrial archaeology increasingly difficult. As GLIAS member Bob explains:

For me to go on site now I have to wear site boots and borrow a hard hat and a high visibility jacket. Now we used to do incredibly dangerous things in the seventies and

nobody batted an eyelid. You know we were exploring derelict buildings, which you are virtually not allowed in now because the floor might give way. Again the world has changed a lot there.

### **GLIAS: Today**

GLIAS members continue to record sites across London. Some members are currently surveying the site chosen as the location of the Olympic Games in London in 2012 – the Lower Lea Valley. They describe their activities at this site as “rescue archaeology”. GLIAS members are working against the clock and some important structures have already been demolished. They only have time to complete a quick flash survey. Armed with the information they collated in previous years, GLIAS is currently in discussions with the developer to orchestrate a detailed recording of the site. It is important to note here that GLIAS members are less interested in campaigning for the preservation of a site or building, they appreciate that sites must change. Instead they want to ensure that large swathes of industrial London are not lost without a trace. Some members regard this as their public duty.

Restricted by health and safety mandates and access disputes, GLIAS has had to adapt. The majority of practical recording sessions have given way to guided walks in the summer and public lectures in the winter. Some respondents have identified a difference between those members who call themselves “industrial archaeologists” and those who are just “ordinary members” of GLIAS. The walks are for those with a general interest, not serious members, and the talks are public lectures. Some audience researchers have used Bourdieu’s metaphor of “capital” to describe the experience, knowledge and skill required to be a fan, clubber or enthusiast. For Hills, fan status is built up through the demonstration of cultural capital: “where fans share a common interest while also competing over fan knowledge, access to the object of fandom, and status” (46). A clear membership hierarchy can be seen within GLIAS based on levels of experience, knowledge and practical skill.

With a membership of over 600 and rising annually, the Society’s future is secure at present. However some of the more serious members, although retaining their membership, are pursuing their enthusiasm elsewhere: through break-away recording groups in London; active membership of other groups and societies, for example the national Association for Industrial Archaeology; as well as heading off to North Wales in the summer for practical, hands-on industrial archaeology in Snowdonia’s slate quarries – described in the Ffestiniog Railway Journal as the “annual convention of slate nutters.”

### **Conclusions**

GLIAS has changed since its foundation in the late 1960s. Its operation has been complicated by questions of health and safety, site access, an ageing membership, and the constant changes to London’s industrial archaeology. Previously rejected by professional industrial archaeology as “limited in skill and resources” (Riden), enthusiasts are now approached by professional archaeologists, developers, planners and even museums that are interested in engaging in knowledge exchange programmes. As a recent report from the British think-tank Demos has argued, enthusiasts or pro-ams – “amateurs who work to professional standards” (Leadbeater and Miller 12) – are integral to future innovation and creativity; for example computer pro-ams developed an operating system to rival Microsoft Windows. As such the specialist knowledge, skill and practice of these communities is of increasing interest to policymakers, practitioners, and business. So, the subject once described as “the ugly offspring of two parents that shouldn’t have been allowed to breed” (Hudson), the so-called “amateur” industrial archaeology offers enthusiasts and professionals alike alternative ways of knowing, seeing and being in the recent and contemporary past.

Through the case study of GLIAS, I have described what it means to be enthusiastic about industrial archaeology. I have introduced a culture of collective and individual participation and friendship based on a mutual interest in and emotional attachment to industrial sites. As we have learnt in this paper, enthusiasm is about fun, pleasure and joy. The enthusiastic culture presented here advances themes such as passion in relation to less obvious communities of knowing, skilled practices, material artefacts and spaces of knowledge. Moreover, this paper has been about the affective narratives that are sometimes missing from academic accounts; overlooked for fear of sniggers at the back of a conference hall. Laughter and humour are a large part of what enthusiasm is. Enthusiastic cultures then are about the pleasure and joy experienced in doing things. Enthusiasm is clearly a potent force for active participation. I will leave the last word to GLIAS member John:

One meaning of enthusiasm is as a form of possession, madness. Obsession perhaps rather than possession, which I think is entirely true. It is a pejorative term probably. The railway enthusiast. But an awful lot of energy goes into what they do and achieve. Enthusiasm to my mind is an essential ingredient. If you are not a person who can muster enthusiasm, it is very difficult, I think, to get anything out of it. On the basis of the more you put in the more you get out. In terms of what has happened with industrial archaeology in this country, I think, enthusiasm is a very important aspect of it. The movement needs people who can transmit that enthusiasm.

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