

Thursday 8th March saw a very select group of 41ers visit the Fred Dibnah Heritage Centre in Bolton, and although not exactly the last visitors to visit this unique piece of social history we were the last on a private guided tour.

After Fred's untimely death in 2004, his house and his 'back garden' were purchased by a private buyer, rather than stay in the family. His aim was to turn the amazing place into a Heritage Centre in memory and celebration of Fred, something which the great man never quite achieved. Reading between the lines after speaking to 2 volunteers that worked with Fred for many, many years the new owner bought it with an investment view in mind and had zero practical or theoretical knowledge of engineering or steam and the work that Fred had been involved with. The task proved a daunting and financial burden, which was not assisted by modern day planning and health and safety legislation and council bureaucracy. Despite the unstinting efforts of the 2 volunteers, the lack of sufficient funds to fully implement the catalogue of works and especially the integrity of the buildings, artefacts quickly deteriorated and an overall slow decline commenced.

Sensing that the financial investment dream was turning sour plus the huge amount of his time he had to divert away from his own financial business, the owner actively sought to sell the business. Sadly a combination of a deteriorating asset and huge practical challenges plus the owner's financial assessment of worth no buyers could be found.

The decision to auction off selective parts of the heritage centre such as tools, machinery etc proved the death knell as without these the 'added value' items the centre would lose its charm. And so it was that a week after our visit several hundred lots went under the hammer at an auction at the heritage centre.

So what does the future hold for the remaining machinery, out-buildings and indeed the house where Fred lived for some 40 plus years? Indications are that the house is to be sold at a separate auction but if that also includes the remaining artefacts etc from what is left of the heritage centre remains to be finalised.

Fred was unique in his vision of what he wanted to achieve and more pertinent, how he would go about realising the work he did. There were elements that the council had no idea had been carried out, let alone how. Planning applications, permits and licences were an unnecessary diversion in Fred's eyes and health & safety were terms totally alien. His work was carried out both on his heritage centre and in his professional life when those dreaded words had not been dreamt up. Viewing some of the many clips of his work on YouTube only reinforces this statement.

Dirty old clothes and ragged jumpers, dubious but highly effective methods of working created a rather carefree persona. None more so than when toppling a huge brick built mill chimney he declared in somewhat concerned tones to film crews and the like to stand back as it's going. Clutching his trusty car horn he depressed the rubber bulb in order for it to create a curious honking sound, whilst running away from the chimney. It was hard to tell if Fred actually knew where the chimney would fall or lady luck was on his side that day as the chimney came crashing down only feet away and covering him in dust and debris. After a couple of seconds Fred emerged blacked with dust and soot grinning to the watching cameras saying those now immortal words " Did ya like that? " Good TV viewing at the time and a clip that has been used many times in Health & Safety seminars and the like highlighting how NOT to work. Happy days.

So what of the great man?

Frederick Dibnah, MBE (28 April 1938– 6 November 2004) was an English steeplejack and television personality, with a keen interest in mechanical engineering.

When Dibnah was born, Britain relied heavily upon coal to fuel its industry. As a child he was fascinated by the steam engines which powered the many textile mills in Bolton, but he paid particular attention to chimneys and the men who worked on them. He began his working life as a joiner, before becoming a steeplejack. From age 22, he served for two years in the armed forces, as part of his National Service.

Once demobilised, he returned to steeple jacking but met with limited success until he was asked to repair Bolton's parish church. The resulting publicity provided a welcome boost to his business, ensuring he was almost never out of work.

In 1978, while making repairs to Bolton Town Hall, Dibnah was filmed by a regional BBC news crew. The BBC then commissioned an award-winning documentary, which followed the rough-hewn steeplejack as he worked on chimneys, interacted with his family and talked about his favourite hobby—steam. His Lancastrian manner and gentle, self-taught philosophical outlook, proved popular with viewers and he featured in a number of television programmes.

Toward the end of his life, the decline of Britain's industry was mirrored by a decline in his steeple jacking business and Dibnah increasingly came to rely on after-dinner speaking for his income. In 1998, he presented a programme on Britain's industrial history and went on to present a number of series, largely concerned with the Industrial Revolution and its mechanical and architectural legacy.

He died from cancer in November 2004, aged 66.