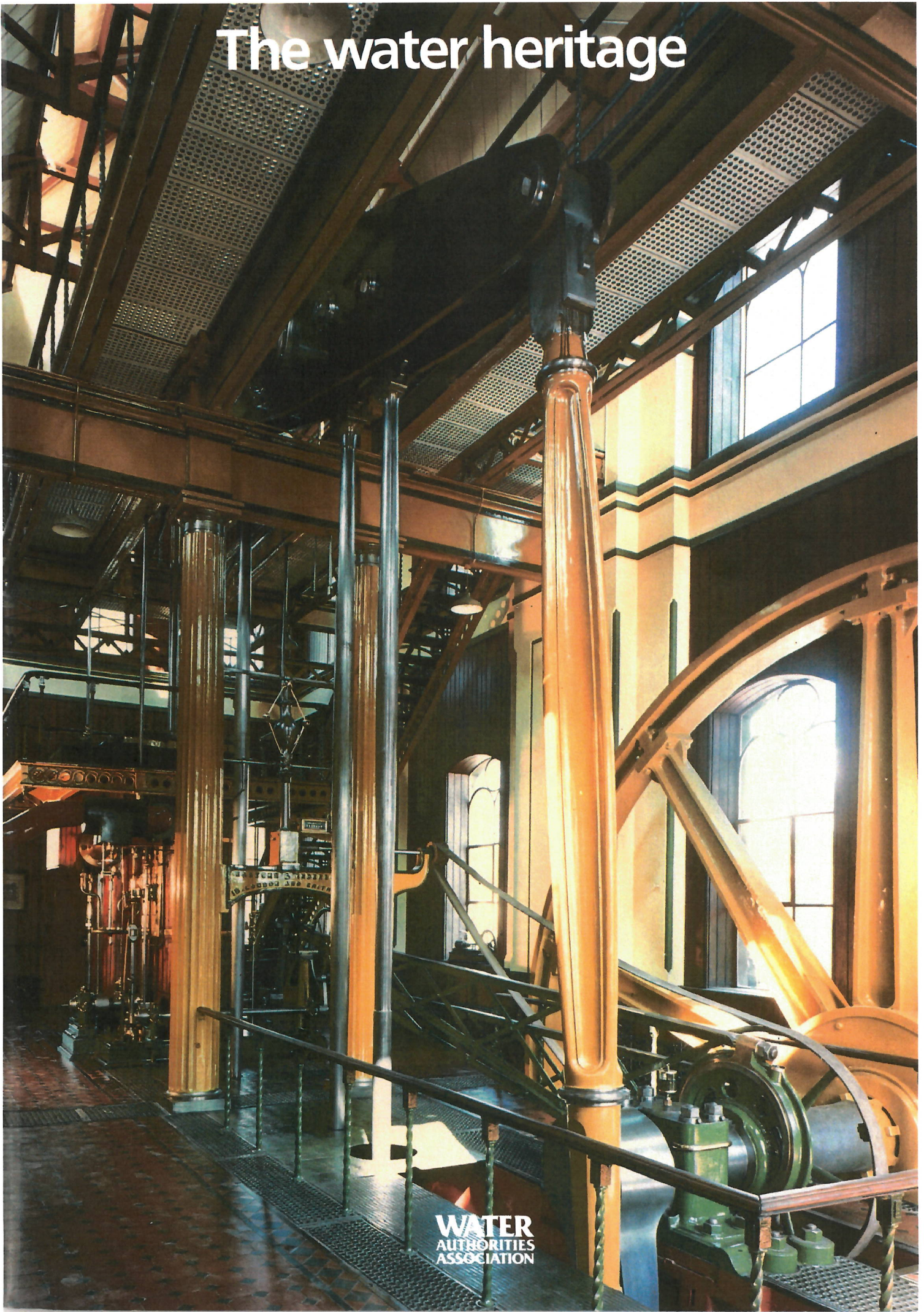


# The water heritage



**WATER**  
AUTHORITIES  
ASSOCIATION

# INTRODUCTION

## BACKGROUND

The water industry has always taken a pride in its past. Long before the relatively recent upsurge of interest in historic conservation individual water undertakers were ensuring the survival of operationally redundant pumping engines and other machinery and wherever possible the buildings which housed them.

Those involved with other aspects of the water cycle became concerned also to preserve what was worthy of keeping among their possessions and to deal sensitively with objects of archaeological interest uncovered in the course of operations.

The industry, in particular the water supply side, has been richly endowed with machinery of intrinsic interest which has been in continuous use from the Victorian heyday of steam to quite recent times. Much of it is massive and most of it is easily comprehensible by the layperson. The quality of this heritage, the care with which it has been maintained - often by generations of attendants - and its operational longevity have owed much to the industry's strong engineering base, aimed at providing robust and dependable solutions to mechanical problems, with the extra dimension of aesthetic appeal which is the hallmark of the best Victorian public works engineer.

The best Victorian buildings also live up to the quality of the machinery they house both in external appearance and interior design and decoration. The pumping station at Papplewick in Nottinghamshire with its stained glass windows, graceful columns and tiled floors is as much a celebration of the virtue with which the Victorians saw public works as a functional part of the local water supply system.

Inevitably many buildings and their contents have disappeared without trace as they have been overtaken or bypassed by new technology. Others survive only in faded photographs, flanked by the stalwarts who served them. However, a surprising heritage still exists, whether in situ, in museums or collections; some working, some static; many in a kind of archaeological limbo awaiting the judgment of those who now own them.

## THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE WATER AUTHORITIES - WATER ACT 1973

It was perhaps anxiety about the latter fate which was the prime mover in encouraging the water authorities to examine their physical inheritance with a conservationist's eye and begin to formulate policies for dealing with those parts which were approaching or at the end of their operational life.

This anxiety, coupled with the stark necessity to deal with these things in one way or another, was also matched by an increasing awareness of the goodwill which the preservation and display of interesting examples could generate at a time of unprecedented public interest in conservation.

A cynic might observe that a more obvious reason for concern shown by water authorities was the obligation laid upon them by the Water Act 1973 (their founding statute) to do something positive about these things. However, this would be less than fair since the provisions contained in this Act were unspecific to the point of vagueness, and even the stronger language of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 which supplemented them is not such as would be considered suitable as a statutory 'stick' with which to beat a recalcitrant authority. There is little doubt that had the powers been expressed as wholly permissive rather than in part mandatory authorities would still have been willing to exercise them. Perhaps the main value of the legislation (an extract from which appears in Appendix 3) has been the provision of a peg on which to hang expenditure, thus putting the legitimacy of this activity beyond doubt.

## THE ROLE OF THE WATER SPACE AMENITY COMMISSION AND THE WATER AUTHORITIES ASSOCIATION

It was for each authority to decide the resources and priorities it was prepared to accord to preserving the past. Activities in the regions ranged from the minimal to the modestly ambitious and were very much dependent on the energies and enthusiasms of those to whom these matters had been entrusted.

As time went on, those concerned with the authorities felt an increasing need for a more coordinated approach to the subject and for guidance on the many practical problems encountered. In particular an assessment of the size, content and dispersal of the industry's overall inheritance was seen as vital if decisions on preservation or disposal were to be taken in an informed way. The availability of assistance, financial and otherwise with restoration projects, procedures for setting up trusts to undertake specific schemes, the compilation of a gazetteer of bodies expert in the various aspects of industrial archaeology and - last but not least - some guidance on formulating conservation policies - were also identified as matters of common interest.

As industrial archaeology was coming to be seen as an important aspect of recreation and amenity it was taken up at national level by the Water Space Amenity Commission, a body established under the Water Act 1973 principally to advise, assist and encourage water authorities in matters relating to the amenity and recreational aspects of water.

The commission established a working party to consider and report on the scope of the water authorities' responsibilities under the Act of 1973 and how these might best be discharged. The terms of reference and membership of the working party are contained in Appendices 1 and 2. Under the chairmanship of Dr Angus Buchanan, Reader in the History of Technology at the University of Bath and