Bristol Museums Galleries & Archives

The Robinson Frieze

1. Background

The Robinson frieze is a remarkable social and industrial history 'document', if an item in excess of 50 feet long and weighing several tons can be so described. It is an assemblage of 15 carved stone panels that depict, in detail, the activities going on inside the factory building that it adorned.

ES & A Robinson came to Bristol in 1844 and started a business as suppliers of paper bags and packaging materials to grocers and retailers. They quickly hit on the idea of printing these items with the names of the customers together with a wide choice of designs to accompany them. They were leaders in this field of 'branding' smaller businesses, and were very successful.

They introduced machine-made paper bags to Britain and brought in the licence to manufacture bag machines from the USA.

By the 1870s, their success had outgrown their premises, so a new factory and office was built where the large tower at No.1 Redcliffe Street now stands. A truly elaborate Victorian building, on a major road junction near the centre of Bristol, the edifice was decorated with the frieze, which ran around the curved entrance block on the corner of the site. Positioned above first floor level, it was a Bristol landmark until the factory was demolished in 1961. The frieze was saved, but lingered in a basement car park until 1990.

Nothing is known about the sculptor. Any records that might have recorded this were destroyed in a serious fire in the offices in 1904, or when the building was damaged by bombing in 1941 (both of which events the frieze survived unscathed). Commentators have remarked upon its early Arts and Crafts movement influences and upon the slightly Eastern caste of some of the figures, leading to speculation that some of the

Indian craftspeople that the Robinsons supported may have had a hand in it. We will probably never know.

The company went from strength to strength, building several new factories across Bristol and vertically integrating by the acquisition of paper mills and engineering companies. They made early moves into waxed paper and polythene packaging. In the 1950s they amalgamated with Dickinsons to form DRG and survived in this form when they were the subject of a hostile takeover by Pembridge Associates which led to the break up of the whole group.

Bristol Museums Galleries & Archives (BMGA) was able to acquire the frieze (which had largely been forgotten) in 1990. It was stored on open display in the printing section of the former Industrial Museum for some years, but in less than ideal conditions.

2. The Frieze in Detail

The frieze is quite remarkable for its detailed recording of each of the company's activities in 1875. It includes depictions of male, female and young employees in the dress of the day, and is amazingly accurate in its depiction of machinery. The stones show the following, running right to left.

1/ Man at a grindstone 32.5” x 14.5”,
2/ Unidentified - pay day? - and two women artists hand-colouring calendars (partially spreads onto stone 3) 37” x 12”
3/ Five women artists hand-colouring calendars (broken into two pieces) 55.5” x 12”
4/ Seven men at work on three lithographic presses. Part missing on l/h end. (broken into two pieces) 70” x 14”
5/ Three men gold-blocking and blocking irons being heated (partially spreads onto stone 6) 36” x 11”
6/ Bookbinder at work and two men trimming pages 34” x 12”
7/ Two women making bags by hand and two women at work on a paper-bag making machine (partially spreads onto stone 8) 35” x 11”
8/ Two women at work on a paper-bag making machine and two women tying finished bags together 40” x 11”
9/ Copperplate engraver and observer and two artists drawing designs on litho stones (partially spreads onto stone 10) 37” x 13” - 560lbs on pallet
10/ Artist drawing designs on litho stone and copperplate engraver and observer 35” x 14”
11/ Two compositors at a type case and one man working at a flatbed letterpress printing machine (partially spreads to stone 12) 38” x 14”
12/ (spreading from stone 11) Two men working at a flatbed letterpress machine and proof-reader reading text with boy and a compositor at a type case. Part missing from r/h end 41” x 14”
13/ Two women preparing paper for the ruling machine and five women working at a ruling machine (partially spreads to stone 14) (broken into two pieces) 54” x 14”
14/ (spreading from stone 13) One woman working at a ruling machine and two women assembling completed account books and a man operating a guillotine 33” x 11”
15/ Man operating a copperplate press 36” x 16”

Andy King
Curator of Industrial & Maritime History
Bristol’s Museums Galleries & Archives
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