Packaging The Past: Interpreting History In British Open Air Museums

Elizabeth Ann Harlow
University of Massachusetts - Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/anthro_res_rpt31
Part of the Anthropology Commons

Retrieved from https://scholarworks.umass.edu/anthro_res_rpt31/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthropology Department Research Reports series at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Report 31: 'The organization of diversity : essays on a changing Europe : a collection in honor of John W. Cole by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.
PACKAGING THE PAST: INTERPRETING HISTORY IN BRITISH OPEN AIR MUSEUMS

Elizabeth Ann Harlow

Department of Anthropology
University of Massachusetts at Amherst

Abstract. Museums, in their unique location as mediators of knowledge between the academy and the public, now find themselves as the locus of discourse concerning education vs. entertainment. Further, the economic success of a multibillion dollar “heritage industry” has helped to make history, or the right to interpret the landscape of the past, a highly contested space. One may ask, then, in Michael Stratton’s words (1996:156) “do [open air museums] represent the worst aspects of ‘edutainment’, ‘fakelore’ and the blurring of boundaries between historical credibility and the appeal to public nostalgia?” This article, as a contribution to growing reflexivity in the museum realm, explores this question along with others as to the the “commodification” of history and the functions of museums by looking at interpretation in open air museums within the context of their necessity to rethink roles in a rapidly changing, increasingly global economy.

Introduction

Issues of public interpretation of historical and archaeological material culture and sites have been with us since exhibition began, though a thoughtful critical analysis has only started to develop more recently (Macdonald 1996). A study of the interpretation of history and heritage in museums is a large and complex undertaking and even if the scope is narrowed geographically or designed to include only one type of museum, many approaches to the material remain possible. The museum, with its multiple levels of meaning, can be analyzed as medium (Silverstone 1992) along with the texts generated (Porter 1996); as a political arm of the state (Foucault 1986, Bennett 1995); ethnographically as a culture; as an arena of production and consumption; or for effectiveness in its role as educator or profit making tourist attraction (Brown 1986, Johnson and Thomas 1992). Inextricably the producers, employees, and visitors of the
museum as well as the physical and conceptual body of the institution itself all impact the construction of history, in addition to the overarching culture of the society of which the museum itself is an artifact.

Historical museums necessarily reflect their creators' concepts of history and heritage, as well as intrinsically related notions such as identity - both national and local (Karp 1992, Macdonald 1998). Further, museums are located at the intersection of discourse between the academy and the public concerning these culturally constructed ideas. Thus museums constitute a useful medium by which to investigate the various forces, both overt and obscured, at work in the interpretation of history. Particularly now, in view of the magnitude of a global tourism industry based on heritage, manifestations of the so-called commodification of history seem well worth examination.

Through the use of two case studies presented below and by analyzing, in less detail, many more open air museums in England and Wales, I have explored questions designed to reveal aspects of historical interpretation and, thereby, to uncover implications regarding the cultures that create and 'market' heritage and history. First of all, can we make any useful distinctions between meanings of the terms heritage and history? Historically, how have these cultural constructs, along with the institutions called museums and heritage attractions, developed? If there is a disconnect between theory and practice in museums today, what factors are involved? Finally, as Michael Stratton (1996:156) so clearly puts it, "...do [open air museums] represent the worst aspects of 'edutainment', 'fakelore' and the blurring of boundaries between historical credibility and the appeal to public nostalgia?"
Both stated and unacknowledged influences are, as mentioned, at work simultaneously and were considered. Data was gathered during fieldwork supported by the European Studies Program of the Department of Anthropology of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. I traveled to museums and libraries in England and Wales during the late winter and early spring of 2002. By means of interviews, participant observation, and archival research, the museum landscape along with its designers and public were examined, asked to tell their stories from what often turned out to be significantly differing perspectives. My aim was to contribute to a more current understanding of the dynamics of interpretation of history in several British open air museums, venues of discourse in public history.

**History and Heritage**

The roots of many aspects of contemporary public interpretation in historical museums lie deep within the past and ongoing development of historiography and museology as well as constantly evolving concepts of heritage. Any discussion of these bases for interpretation ought to begin, I believe, with heritage, which soon reveals itself as the least straightforward and most elusive by far. While heritage is a term that denotes a legacy passed down to certain legitimate descendants from their forbears, in the last twenty years or so it has come to connote much more, leading to such preoccupation that "heritage" has been likened to a religious creed (Lowenthal 1998). Moreover, the resulting creation of a multibillion dollar "heritage industry" that threatens, according to many, to completely co-opt and control the telling of history makes it an idea well worth examination. In this way, history, or more accurately the right to interpret the landscape
of the past, has become a highly contested space in Britain, primarily between historians and entrepreneurs, though also among other proponents of various political perspectives and ideologies.

It takes substantial work to sort out the important differences between history and heritage so intertwined have they become. Probably not accidentally, in view of the market share involved, definitions of heritage have become so vague and far-reaching as to, in many instances, imply "history" to the point of engulfing it, the two terms becoming carelessly synonymous. David Lowenthal (1998:xv), among others, has attempted to highlight distinctions, explaining that there are difficulties when heritage is "misconceived as history." He says further (xi) that, as with "modes of persuasion," the aims of the two differ in that the historian attempts to "convey a past consensually known, open to inspection and proof, continually revised." In contrast, "the heritage fashioner, however historically scrupulous, seeks to design a past that will fix the identity and enhance the well-being of some chosen individual or folk." Goals of the historian are not always realized, however, and Lowenthal admits (1996:168) "Much that commences as heritage in time becomes history; much that first passed for impartial history is later seen as partisan heritage." So differences blur and perspectives change over time.

The word heritage began to be used in the context of historical sites and museums around 1975 when the British authorities started to re-focus on the past and the ways it could be used to help revive nationalism during this time of growing unemployment and a serious economic recession (Hewison 1987). Heritage and the newly described "heritage industry" began to be criticized, however, both from the Left and Right. The former decried it as an expression of elitist glorification of the past, as well as for its
concrete subsidizing of the lifestyle of the upper class, as with the National Trust's economic support for owners of historic properties. On the other hand, conservatives criticized heritage for catering to what were consider the vulgar tastes of the uncultured masses, evident in the mushrooming popularity of museums that had become entertainment rather than education (Samuel 1994). Related was a strong prejudice against visual displays as opposed to books. Further, and most markedly in its manifestation as theme park, heritage was presumed to be cheapened by its association with trade.

Heritage-baiting eventually became rampant and this may help explain why, in the 1990s, Britain's new government got rid of the Department of National Heritage's name. In fact, Raphael Samuel devotes an entire chapter to the subject of heritage-baiting in his 1994 Theatres of Memory. It seems there may occasionally be more than a few sour grapes involved in conservative museum curators' sharp criticisms of highly popular, lucrative new theme parks and open-air museums. Yet conservative, traditional museums have been criticized too for the ways they have constructed history. Their methods and viewpoints are, not surprisingly, firmly based in the historical development of these institutions, both public and private. Thus, these general historical trends will be discussed here before moving on to specific case histories.

A Brief History of Museums

Just as historiography has gradually moved away from a discipline by and for the elite, so have museology and other practices of historical exhibition. Initially, the antiquarian's "cabinet of curiosities" was recommended to the wealthy as a place to
arrange and study one's collection of ancient artifacts and oddities of natural history. While a few acquaintances of the proper class might be admitted to the personal library to admire the display, the concept of public history with its institutionalized museumship had not yet arrived. Moreover, while fledgling museums allowed visitors, proof of appropriate status was often required for entry and institutions gained prestige according to the caliber of their guest lists.

Eventually, however, as part of the Victorian period's rising middle class participation in activities that could build cultural capital, local historical societies as well as larger groups founded public museums designed for exhibition of the kind still in use today. Distinctions became more rigid between disciplines, forming sharp divisions between what was called (and displayed as) art, craft, science, natural history, folklore, ethnography, and archaeology. Historic and prehistoric sites had been memorialized for the most part as a way of conveying, at first, very narrow upper class and then later middle class values of the reigning white Protestant hegemony. Commemorated sites (in addition to ethnographic displays) could also be employed in the creation of national cultural and political identity as tools for making comparisons with what were considered primitive peoples or times.

The late 20th century brought a tremendous proliferation of museums, adding enough so that, by 1998, Lowenthal could observe that 95% of museums in England had been created since World War II. Many of the newest were of the "living history" or open-air variety where re-enactments of activities of a particular historical time and place are meant to convey a sense of heritage. In addition, in this international phenomenon,
heritage theme park tourist attractions have appeared whose goal is far less that of
education than one of economic profit.

**Museum Criticism**

In the 20th century, too, as part of the growing professionalization of museumship
overall, a formalized analysis of museum culture began. In the United States it emerged
as part of the "1960s radical critique of 'consumerism' and, in England, as a reaction to
what was starting to be seen as 'heritage commodification'" (Samuel 1994:264-265).
While heritage centers, especially in their more blatantly commercialized incarnation as
theme parks, were soundly criticized, museums of history, too, have been accused of
following too closely in the footsteps of antiquarians, thus constructing a "sanitized"
inflexible story created from a ruling class perspective.

Museums, therefore, in their unique location as mediators of knowledge between
the academy and the public, now find themselves as the locus of discourse concerning
issues of entertainment vs. education and the commodification of history. They can be
viewed as institutions of social control based on the model prison panopticon described
by Foucault (1982) or read as text or media (Silverstone 1992). Further, they can be
situated within Hooper-Greenhill's (2000) historical categories of "cabinets of the world,"
disciplinary museums, and modernist museums that have proceeded the "post-museums"
she sees emerging. For the future of museums, many critics believe there are alternative
interpretations of heritage and history can be seen as clearly bearing the potential for
telling previously unheard stories of the subaltern through powerful new ways of
reaching an ever wider public – one far more diverse than the privileged few invited in to see the "cabinet of curiosities."

Thus my own research into museums has begun to explore questions of the purpose of museums, as well as the creation and uses of history and heritage. I look at interpretation in open air museums as museum administrators grapple with the necessity to rethink the roles of their museums in a rapidly changing, increasingly capitalistic globalized economy.

Case Studies

The Museum of Welsh Life

Very much, in some ways, still a product of an earlier time, is the Museum of Welsh Life in the village of St. Fagan’s outside of Cardiff, Wales. In conversation with its head Keeper Beth Thomas, however, I discovered that this older museum is clearly struggling with processes of substantial re-evaluation and possible changes in its physical and conceptual nature, especially in regard to exhibitions and interpretation. I would argue that the museum in early 2002 can be seen as a successful embodiment of Welsh culture, as surely it was meant to be. However, together with these most beneficial attributes, it still seems to express internalized perspectives that may be seen as responses to its status as what, in various ways, remains a colonized entity. The founding and development of what was once called the Welsh Folk Museum, along with the way in which the history of these events has been constructed and reproduced, retains a profound influence on the Museum of Welsh Life today.

Though suggested much earlier, the museum was opened in 1950 following a visit to Sweden by its founder Iorwerth Peate and a carefully prepared prospectus created in
1946. This was to be a museum modeled after the earlier open air folk museums called "skansen," named for the first open air museum of the common people (folk) created in Sweden by Artur Hazelius in the 1890s. The aim was that of collecting examples of traditional historic vernacular buildings, along with furnishings, tools and other artifacts of a rural lifestyle (including even domestic and wild animals) before this world was so totally subsumed under the new industrialized society that all traces and memory disappeared. In Sweden, houses representative of each of the various regions of the country were disassembled, then reconstructed and restored on one large site.

I contend that in Wales, though, the meaning of a museum set up originally by the colonizer as its national museum of a folk (peasant) people ought to be understood within the context of colonialism and its longreaching effects on issues of identity for the subaltern group. I suggest that the museum be seen as a metaphor for Wales itself, as a way of beginning an exploration as to how and why this museum functions as it does. It is "practically a reproduction in miniature of the whole country, the country 'in a nutshell'," as the African museologist Aithnard has observed (1976:193) of a museum that presents a nation's cultural and natural history.

In other words, reconstructed buildings from each area of the country make the museum, in a sense, into a type of scale model. Regarding rural life of the underclasses elsewhere, or specimens of unusual species, the view of ruling hegemonies has often been that the real thing can be allowed to disappear as long as you have representations of it preserved, for your use, in a museum. This is all the better to control it, much as during the early days of private collections these were princes' microcosms of the world, where they could be rulers of all they could possess and survey within their cabinets. Colonial
museums have been examined in a similar vein (Aithnard 1976:193) with respect to their "hierarchical ordering of knowledge," that is, how text is created that situates the colonized culture securely in the past. Thus, the act of collecting, preserving, organizing and exhibiting a culture's artifacts, however well-intentioned and even with claims of "saving" it, may paradoxically become one of the many processes that ultimately aid the hegemonic power in subduing and ruling subalterns who have clearly been placed into the category of "Other." I concur with Brown's (1986:52-3) observation when considering what was originally called the Welsh Museum of Folk Life, that "It is noticeable that there is no English national folk museum" and that even beyond Britain, "European museums, with their academic approach, tend to patronize the way of life they depict...." Even today, the lack of bureaucratic autonomy of the Museum of Welsh Life from the hierarchy of the national museums limits the decision making powers of the Welsh museum's administrators. Nevertheless, this is the only national folk museum, according to Peate (1971:164), that grew "during its first 23 years to international status as an 'appendix' to another institution." I would argue, too, that despite the museum's undeniable success, some of the difficulties the Museum of Welsh Life encounters in its efforts to maintain relevance in the twenty-first century as an older institution, have strong foundations deep within its colonialist past.

First impressions are of a space where the Welsh are firmly in control. Even before entering the main building, one hears from outdoor speakers music and voices in Welsh of hymns and folk songs. An occasional song in English reveals nostalgic laments about yearning for the homeland, among other patriotic themes. The words to one of the most popular songs can be found in either of the two museum shops, imprinted on tea
towels. Welsh national identity is unmistakably proclaimed outdoors, emphasized by repetition in visual symbols, by not one Welsh flag but three, in a row on individual full-sized flagpoles near the entrance. Throughout the museum, all signage, personnel, and printed matter are bilingual.

Nationalistic Welsh pride is expressed, too, in much of the imagery utilized in the video used to orient visitors just inside the indoor gallery rather formally labeled “Material Culture.” Stressing the museum’s beginnings in the efforts of its founder Iorwerth Peate, misty landscapes of pristine beauty (with English subtitles) accompany a voice-over in Welsh that constructs a history of the museum as the realization of the courageous dream of an idealized visionary. A picture of contented, Welsh-speaking workers of various skin colors is painted through interviews of people who enthuse about work they feel privileged to do. In depicting modernity at the museum, examples of new technology consist not only of computers but particularly electronic gates and cameras of a security system that clearly implies control. The Welsh seem, perhaps, to protect the boundaries that keep all that is considered purely Welsh inside – a bounded culture, perhaps under siege, but yet holding out against globalizing forces that would reclaim the power of unlimited access. The visual image in the video, however, imparts a very different feeling than what was related to me as a declaration attributed to an anonymous museum official. The message was a fervent promise to the effect that, even in the face of over-capacity crowds, they would never close the gates. This interesting dialectic of ambivalence toward outsiders regarding access and vulnerability threads its way throughout the museum and again, I believe, bespeaks a difficult colonized position.
Interpretation at the Museum of Welsh Life has been described even by some of its own insiders, at different levels, as "haphazard" in many instances but is the subject, among others, of major re-evaluations of priorities begun earlier this year among administrators. They acknowledge that they must take into consideration the fact that their audience has changed over the years, with visitors bringing with them to the museum far less acquaintance with Welsh history than formerly. This may explain in part the view of the museum as lacking in effective interpretation (Brown 1986), but it has also been suggested (Walden 1986) that the museum producers, as Welsh, may be so familiar with the material that, as insiders, they underestimate the amount of interpretation needed. And even beyond the issue of the amount of interpretation, content is crucial, inasmuch as mere description does not constitute interpretation.

But given the lack of a comprehensive plan for interpretation (except the education department's curriculum for visiting classes of schoolchildren), what exists is, not surprisingly, spotty. It was explained that the above mentioned visitor orientation film focusing on the museum's founding had actually been made for a special event requiring a history of the Welsh museum and had been utilized as an expedience later in the gallery. Museum guards in traditional burgundy blazers are stationed at all of the historic buildings, but are charged primarily with safeguarding the artifacts and visitors from each other and only secondarily with performing interpretation of history or material culture. Moreover, the amount and quality of information a visitor receives through live third person interpretation is completely variable, as one guard intent on a novel ignores visitors absolutely, while other workers skillfully draw people into knowledgeable conversation about what they are viewing. Many employees will not do
double duty as interpreters while being paid only as guards, but those who prefer to interpret express frustration at lack of training and advancement opportunities.

Other conflict inevitably arises in a system that includes both craftsmen on salary who demonstrate the making of items marketed through the museum shops, as well as outside franchise holders who sell their wares directly to customers. Interpretation inevitably suffers as workers balance the pragmatic concern of potential income from more items produced against extra time spent talking to visitors. In addition, written information in the form of booklets on the different areas of the museum was out of print and unavailable at the museum shops during my visit. So while producers of the museum see their function as maintaining a social history museum about people rather than buildings, there seems a disconnect between objectives and practice regarding historical interpretation. The lack of interpretation was noted in an analysis of the museum a number of years ago by other museum professionals (Walden 1986), along with many recommendations for improvements to situations that still do not appear to have been addressed (Brown 1986). Further, solutions to the problem are often seen in terms of technology and methods rather than content, and the fear of straying too far from traditional education was implied. “We’re not about entertainment – we’re about preserving”, I was told. (Beth Thomas 2002, personal communication).

An interesting consequence of the situation at the Museum of Welsh Life is that one occasionally finds visitors filling gaps in interpretation (out of necessity, probably, rather than as an intentional museum strategy for interactivity). They tend to focus on nostalgia, as at Beamish, which will be discussed later. One visitor to the WWII pre-fab house decided it was “just like Gran’s” as another, who had lived in one, opened doors
and cupboards while explaining to several fascinated bystanders how various features of
the house worked. The public is, naturally, not as able to do that for earlier periods and
misinformation often goes uncorrected. Moreover, at times visitors seem almost to
expect theme park special effect – one young man asked if others thought the mothball
smell was piped in artificially.

Designated interpreters at a few selected buildings show the relative importance
of these sites in the administrators' eyes. One such space is the House of the Future
where I didn't happen to find anyone, but this building provides multiple levels of
meaning nevertheless. The House of the Future helps counter stereotyped views of the
Welsh as an impotent folk society of the past, a culture extant only in the ethnographic
present, or at best as an outmoded insular backwater. Yet the house itself seems crowded
in, on a tiny plot next to the modern entrance block, somewhat like an afterthought. In an
unintentionally ironic display of substandard workmanship, poorly-dried floorboards
crack beyond a wall displaying plaques naming the company sponsors who built it. In
addition, to my mind, the technology seems well behind "cutting edge," but for the
marginalized and traditionally conservative Welsh, the passive solar features, natural
materials and ecologically sound landscaping suffice. Indeed, probably this house is
properly situated in the future for the average citizen, and the very fact of its inclusion
here at all is the point. Welsh national identity is alive and well, taking part in notions of
modernity, envisioning and fashioning its own future, while maintaining continuity
through the time-honored familiar materials of slate and wood.

The content of interpretation within other parts of the museum also remains
noncontroversial and avoids mention of social change along with class, gender, ethnic or
other tensions. Yet perhaps the intended updating of the glass case galleries will free interpretive labels from trivializing descriptions, such as that of Welsh pre-Christian religious practices as “Calendar Customs Folklore” and other holdovers from the museum’s beginnings. A more multivocal narrative might be preferable too, according to some who advocate a move in the ‘post-museum’ (Hooper-Greenhill 2000) away from the authoritative voice of the old museums of social control. Here there may be an understandable reluctance, though, to risk relinquishing the power of internationally recognized credibility and legitimacy that has undoubtedly been hard-won and that still functions to some degree to successfully maintain a space for positive Welsh self-definition.

**Beamish**

Beamish – The North of England Open Air Museum – is also a decidedly popular museum, a destination for eager visitors who come to board a replica 1913 tram car or bus to tour various reconstructed buildings that dot the picturesque bowl-shaped landscape deliberately chosen to control the lines of sight (Rosemary Allan 2002, personal communication). Here they can visit a manor house restored to show the 1820s, buy sweets in the 1913 town, ride a Victorian carousel or earlier “Steam Elephant” locomotive, and don a hardhat to brave the black tunnel of a drift coal mine. In view of the participatory nature of all these activities, as well as for other reasons that will become apparent, Beamish has, not surprisingly, been criticized as an example of those institutions which have recently, under the influence of capitalist heritage marketers, strayed precariously close to the fine line separating legitimate museums from theme parks.
So first let us examine the evidence in terms of the degree of commodification found here and other clues as to Beamish's character as well as its location on the continuum of pure education to unadulterated entertainment, with the inherent value judgments implied by such status. Visitors appeared to generally be having a good time. Their conversations revealed that some visited very frequently, with one older couple coming almost daily to surroundings they described to me as "safe," in that transportation is provided within the site, while staff stands ready to help in case of medical or other emergency. Museums are utilized or "consumed" in different ways by various visitors who also make what they will of museums' interpretations of history, despite curators' intended meanings (Samuel 1994).

Much of visitor talk centered on the considerations of a market economy. One young girl, when asked by me what she liked least about the place, regretted that there weren't more items to buy in the town besides the sweets she had just gotten at the confectionery shop. At the Victorian fairgrounds, the carousel owner, an outside contractor, lamented that visitors, with very few exceptions, had virtually no interest in the history of his amusements or the fact that the pieces of equipment were rare, meticulously restored, originals. Indeed, the only visitor comments while I was present consisted of complaints about the prices of tickets for rides.

Other visitor discourse, although not the main focus of my observations, revealed the sense of nostalgia at Beamish noted also by Kenneth Hudson (1987) as it concerned reminiscence through identification with artifacts of times past. Often this behavior took place with the encouragement of demonstrators who, according to Beamish's "Manual of Interpretation," are instructed to help people relate the historical material to their own
lives. People who told me they had visited the museum before recalled riding on the tram and having a pleasant “day out.” The latter, in fact, is exactly what the producers of the museum intend for visitors to remember, in the hopes that this will cause them to return for a repeat visit. The museum director stated to me more than once “We sell Beamish as a great day out” (Miriam Harte, personal communication 2002) and tourist brochures are entitled “Beamish – An Extraordinary Day Out.” Finally, lest the public forget, the lettering on a brightly painted horse drawn wagon giving rides says “Happy Days – Beamish,” clearly promoting a very specific type of experience that the museum producers have pre-defined for consumers, along with a rather idyllic view of the past.

So the picture of the past portrayed at the museum is one of pleasure, harmony and success. The time periods depicted in the areas of the museum were, according to Rosemary Allan (2002 personal communication), specifically chosen because they reflect life at periods of economic prosperity for the north. Thus, 1913 was the year of peak production for the Northeastern coal field, while the 1820s were important for the first successful development of the steam railway locomotive. Mills that are planned for future reconstruction along the river will also be set in the earlier time, as by 1913 they were derelict (Rosemary Allan, personal communication 2002). I was also told by museum administrators (George Muirhead, Miriam Harte, personal communication 2002) that essentially no one wants to come to see poverty and difficult times. Further, there is the difficulty of having museum interpreters re-enact unsafe or unhealthy practices without endangering themselves or breaking present-day workers’ safety laws.

An underlying fear, however, may be the practical problem that dealing with conflict and controversy in interpretations of social history could be disturbing to visitors
to the extent that attendance figures would drop. George Muirhead, Keeper of Interpretation at Beamish, feels that periods closer in time to the present require more caution in topics chosen for interpretation, with events within living memory the most sensitive of all (personal communication 2002). There is an effort to avoid upsetting visitors or evoking unpleasant emotions. The museum has tackled issues such as women’s suffrage and controversial political elections through re-enactments staged as special events, rather than as a permanent part of ongoing interpretation at the museum. The director, Miriam Harte, (personal communication 2002) agrees to the need and intends to continue a similar effort to address historical issues of conflict and social change, but still will confine them to particular days or weekends. Finally, a further risk is that of losing corporate sponsors. Moreover, economic issues are crucial for a museum that now gets only about 6% of its funding from the local government council. Efforts at fundraising are apparent throughout the museum, with brochures near the ticket windows, faux antique signs saying “Beamish wants you!” and an entire ground floor office in the 1913 town devoted to Development Fund literature and posters.

Other studies have found that curators in some museums in 1992 (Speakman 1992) worried that pressures of the tourism industry to entertain rather than educate had the potential to weaken standards of scholarship and the academic integrity in general of museum professionals. They often spoke of striving for a balance between enjoyment and instruction. At Beamish, though, the philosophy is one of education through enjoyment. John Gall (2002, personal communication) speaks eloquently and passionately about the effective use of theatricality – real showmanship – for example, in the skillful crafting of schemes for gradually unveiling future plans at the museum site in
order to generate maximum anticipation among potential ticket-buyers. Indeed, empty plots at several sites within the museum have signs explaining what you will see at a future date. While some museums have not enough interpretation, Beamish interprets things that are not even there! Gall enthuses about “rogue” museum creators, wishing he could direct me to a truly inspiring place and says he values creative thinking stemming often, he thinks, from people’s past academic and work experiences outside of the museum profession.

Yet behind the curtain in what may seem a magical land of illusion, there is serious scholarship and research. While some in-house study is perhaps market-driven, such as yearly visitor surveys and five-year development plans, much is related to the curation and interpretation of Beamish’s extensive collections. The museum has consistently won important awards based on the quality of its collections as well as in recognition of its overall success as an economic boost for the region’s growing tourism industry. Because education here is based on experiential, interactive techniques, a second, working collection of material culture has been amassed for use within the open air site where handling will inevitably wear out the artifacts. When members of the public arrive at the Resource Center with family items to donate, curators carefully explain this policy and ask permission to use acquisitions accordingly. In this way, the need for replicas is kept to a minimum (such as functioning trams and automobiles) so that the museum can maintain authenticity and visitors may experience “the real thing” — claims to the impossibility of this with regard to the past notwithstanding (Samuel 1994). Beamish’s renowned archival collections of photographs, quilts from the local region, and large industrial artifacts have recently received fine new storage facilities while
increased accessibility for researchers has become a priority. Further, curators have thoroughly researched and documented information on each display area of the site, using it as the basis for development as well as interpretation and making it available to demonstrating staff as published summaries concerning each major building and time period.

Consequently, in view of the strong "behind the scenes" investment in scholarship at Beamish, the producers credibly, I think, defend the museum’s status as such, confidently countering accusations of theme park commercialism. The director, Miriam Harte (personal communication 2002), admits they’ve been described as a heritage tourist attraction and says she hopes they can get beyond this. She sees the attacks as provoked, perhaps, by distrust of their innovative methods, claiming that though some museum people have viewed Beamish critically and sent testers to challenge Beamish’s interpreters, they have nearly always been won over by a visit to see firsthand what the museum really does.

Summary and Conclusions

A perhaps obvious statement, but one that bears emphasis, is that the ongoing dilemma in the struggle of people to continue to create meaningful museums cannot be reduced to simplistic dichotomies of supposedly opposing descriptors such as entertaining/educating, objective/subjective, inclusive/exclusive, commodified/free, good/bad, and so forth. Nothing is so clearcut. Certainly there are pressures causing museums and interpretation of history in them to incline in various directions and whose effects can be seen in the striking individuation of museums in Britain and elsewhere
today, even within the smaller category of the open-air type. Speakman (1992: Appendix V) has created a diagram centered on the curator to elucidate her discussion of how constraints such as “finance,” “audience,” and “institutional structure” help to keep the cultural construction of history within a “socio-political boundary.” Each of the many museums I was able to visit maintains its own precarious balance of qualities deemed desirable. It does seem, as George Muirhead at Beamish put it, that each has to find its own style [of interpretation] that best fits its “product” (personal communication 2002). Of course, the intended nature of the product for each also varies, according to factors such as ideological orientations of the museum producers, historical role and structure of that particular museum, audience, and available economic resources. Then, too, consumers make of it what they will, an aspect of interpretation outside of the scope of the present study.

But to return to other constraints, I would argue that funding, in what is now such a highly competitive market economy, appears to have become a crucial influence on decision-making processes in nearly every museum I visited. Even at the Museum of Welsh Life, whose status as a national museum brings support envied by others, lack of resources was mentioned as an ongoing obstacle to implementing better interpretation plans. And even while national museums in Britain have dropped entrance fees completely, thus helping them maintain significant visitor numbers to justify such support, more consumers undeniably mean more costs in areas such as visitor services and crowd control. At Beamish, ambitious development plans as well as daily operations necessitate the expenditure of a huge amount of energy soliciting support in the form of both private and corporate donations and grants. The seasonal nature of much of the
site's operation requires a massive annual training effort for newly hired demonstrators, the majority of whom have to be let go in winter as all but the town area closes down. Museum leaders have even considered dropping the "open-air" designation from the museum's name so as to imply more than fair weather attractions.

In summary, it must be noted that all of these pragmatic considerations in the present day world of museums cannot be ignored in an examination of their interpretation of history. In fact, it became very obvious to me that, as Porter (1996:115) has observed, museum professionals are necessarily interested in “immediate concerns, constraints and problems – of people, buildings, collections and resources.” Thus, the integration of theory and practice for interpreting history within museums today has become a monumental task.

REFERENCES CITED


