

Is archaeology for all or just those who practice it? Describe the nature of public presentation of archaeological sites and how it could be improved in relation to ONE particular site, area or town and how different approaches may be made by different organisations.

Archaeological sites, when presented to the general public are often shrouded in the complex language of archaeological experts. Interpretation can be biased and out of date as technological and academic philosophies develop. Significant sites need to be interpreted appropriately to ensure that their historic importance and their stories are told to the general public in understandable and interesting ways, otherwise general interest in them will diminish. The Society of Interpretation of Britain's Heritage defines interpretation of sites as:

“The process of explaining to people the significance of the place or object they came some to see, so that they enjoy their visit more, understand their heritage and environment better and develop a more caring attitude to conservation.”

The final part of this statement is, I feel, the most important. Rather than having archaeological sites that are viewed on their own merit, they need to be interpreted to allow visitors to fully appreciate them, to encourage their interest in historic sites and monuments, and to ensure that future discoveries are given the attention and care that they deserve.

Archaeology is, in general terms, the study of history using physical remains rather than written records. Covering all periods in history, archaeology provides a geographical, social and anthropological view of societies throughout history. Archaeological sites are governed by a variety of organisations including local authorities, the Department of the Environment, Royal Commissions and English Heritage – all with an interest and an opinion on how investigations are carried out and how sites are presented. After the policies and guidelines for investigating a site to extract as much information as possible have been satisfied, there are yet more regulations and policies that have to be considered before a site is developed into one available to the public – the priority being its informative value, followed by aesthetics, design, symbolic and associative values. Once the interested parties have agreed upon the interpretation, development can begin.

Archaeological sites tend to be presented to the public veiled in technical jargon and left uninterpreted to explain the existence of the site and its importance. Is this the best way to enable the general public to appreciate and enjoy the discovery or can presentation of archaeological sites be improved? The number of different groups with a vested interest in archaeological sites can have very different views on how it is presented and this can be a contributing factor in the site being poorly managed and presented.

Stonehenge is a classic example of a poorly presented archaeological site. According to Lowenthal, Stonehenge is a 'heritage archetype', a statement emphasised by its classification as a World Heritage Site in 1986. A site owned by English Heritage (stones) and the National Trust (the surrounding land), Stonehenge has suffered from 'custodial folly' (Lowenthal). The site has dark and dank access tunnels, a tiny gift shop, electric fencing surrounding it, a very basic food bar and no seating except for picnic tables around the car park – elements that aren't conducive to expressing and presenting the importance of the site.

Pevensey Castle is another archaeologically important site managed by English Heritage that seems to offer very little in the way of visitor experience. The castle was originally a Roman fort built about AD290 on a peninsula projecting from the Sussex coast. It has been an important settlement throughout its long history with refortification in 1066 by William the Conqueror, was abandoned in the early sixteenth century, again refortified in response to a threat from the Spanish Armada and finally again during the Second World War to act as a command and observation post.

When one visits the site the overlying factor is that the visitor is left to their own imagination to interpret the castle and its surroundings. There is very little in the way of informative signs at significant points and those that do exist are outdated, weatherworn and vandalised. This, in part, is due to the fact that the castle is in ruins and the land between the castle and its walls is public property therefore is used by the local residents for dog walking and other pastimes.

Once inside the castle walls, there is no improvement. There is no obviously entry point or ticket booth. No gift shop or access to leaflets or audio wands to provide an overview of the property. Once the visitor has found the solitary member of staff tucked away in a cold room halfway round the castle and bought a guidebook from him, the visitor is again left on their own to imagine the castle's past. My visit may have been in the early part of spring so well before peak tourist season, but visitor facilities should be available whenever the castle is open. There did appear to be some building work going on, to perhaps build a more visible ticket office/gift shop, but the facilities on offer, like Stonehenge, do not seem to be appropriate for an archaeologically important site that needs its story told.

The English Heritage website describes their presentation policy;

"We bring history to life through creative presentation and new ways of interpreting the sites in our care. With innovative schemes we challenge old perceptions of the past and stimulate further exploration."

This is an admirable mission statement, but doesn't seem to be fulfilled over all of English Heritages properties. One could suggest that the lack of funding is to blame for only a select group of properties benefiting from a full range of interpretational supporting materials. As the Government's statutory adviser on the historic environment, English Heritage could be accused of not fully capitalising on an increase in public interest in historic sites and monuments. Although allowing a site to 'breathe' enabling it to speak for itself and complement its surroundings, English Heritage also need to raise funds from its historic properties, which, for a majority of sites it fails to do by failing to provide the opportunities for visitors to spend their money.

The National Trust relies solely on public funding and does not receive any Government support therefore has to exploit their properties and the money-spinning opportunities, which does result in a successful fully rounded visitor experience model that can be repeated at any property or site.

If the National Trust was in control of Pevensey Castle, one could imagine that the improvements would be plentiful. Car parking, for example, is always plentiful at NT properties, well signposted from the road and to the entrance, compared with the current minimal off site parking shared with the village, a pub and other facilities in the area. They would provide an official entrance, preventing visitors from wandering in and bypassing the hidden ticket seller. Here they could provide free leaflets offering the visitor an overview of the castle, but also offering the opportunity to purchase a guidebook for a full colour illustrated tour of the castle. There would also be stewards on hand in the rooms to answer questions – although Pevensey Castle doesn't have a lot of roofed rooms – but it would still be useful to have someone or something to illustrate the interesting features and their uses.

The National Trust also utilises the features of each property to their fullest extent. In many properties the rooms still contain their original fixtures and fittings, providing the visitor with a view as to how the rooms would have looked when they were in daily use, allowing the visitor to empathise with their surroundings and enjoy them. This is often a controversial policy as they are creating the rooms based on one moment in time, but the National Trust often tailors the reconstruction based on public demand or interest.

A stalwart of the National Trust property is the gift shop providing the usual NT merchandise plus books and local produce available for the visitor to purchase to remind themselves of their trip. Another regular feature is the tea room. For many visitors to National Trust properties (including myself) an excursion is not complete without a cream tea.

By providing these services the National Trust promotes a very full experience. Not content with simply showing you something of historic interest, these facilities encourage the visitor to stay longer – to enjoy the surroundings with a picnic or a cream tea or to see what kind of local produce is available. The use of fittings, fixtures, exhibitions, explanatory guides and stewards really brings a significant historic site to life as opposed to a majority of English Heritage sites which could be described as a pile of stones in a field.

Archaeological sites cannot remain presented the way many existing sites are. Currently sites seem to be tailored to those who already understand the principles of archaeology, the technology, the reasoning and the significance of discoveries. Without some explanatory background information, regular visitors cannot be expected to understand and appreciate the value of the sites they are visiting, which, to a certain extent, can encourage an interest in history and heritage. The presentation of any archaeological site is one of extreme importance to history and to future conservation of heritage sites. If the general public do not understand or appreciate a site due to the way it is currently presented, they – and future generations – may not be able to understand the importance of preserving the past. Without this understanding and accessibility significant sites unearthed in the future may be ignored and there may be little or no understanding of their value. It is a priority for the archaeological management organisations to realise that history and heritage are valuable commodities and can be used, not only as fundraising opportunities to enable new sites to be found and examined, but to engage the public and assist their understanding of their own past as well as the past of their community.

Bibliography

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