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Conference Review: Managing Archaeological Open-Air Museums: Current Issues, Future Trends

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In late May 2015, St Fagans National History Museum in Wales organized a three day meeting in and around Cardiff for OpenArch. This is a European Culture Project with 11 partners that work to improve archaeological open-air museums. The first day of the meeting was a conference on issues and trends in archaeological open-air museums, with the second day being a large craft festival at St Fagans' open-air museum. The third day was spent in and around Big Pit, the National Coal Museum. This review is about the first day.

> This one-day conference clearly explored some old and current issues but also showed a vision on where archaeological open-air museums could be heading.

The organisers, **Steve Burrow** and **Mared Wyn McAleavey**, both from St Fagans, brought an interesting group of delegates together, most of which were also EXARC members. The advantages of OpenArch ("do things you are good at, but do them better in an EU Project") were made very clear here. About 50 delegates from over 15 countries joined the conference at the Oriel Suite in the National Museum Cardiff.

David Anderson, Director General, Amgueddfa Genedlaethol Cymru (WLS) / President of the UK Museums Association, opened the conference with a charismatic and in-depth introduction. It is clear that the Museums' paradigm is shifting. We cannot depend only on politics, where Neoliberalism cares about the present only, not the past or future. Goals for museums will be public learning, health and wellbeing, community cohesion; the museum collection will no longer be the central point. Traditionally, open-air museums are about crafts and therefore lower on the hierarchy of funding. But we have more participatory methods, and we offer the public critical thinking skills needed in wider society. The sad thing is that these skills are marginalized out of the education system. Archaeological and ethnographic open-air museums offer social hope, because our future can be different from the present. Therefore we need museums like St Fagans.

Martin Schmidt, Chair of EXARC and deputy director of the Lower Saxon State Museum, Hannover (DE), then chaired a session on the dialogue between archaeological open-air museums and museum organisations. The first keynote speech was given by **Margriet Lestraden**, Lestraden Museum Consultancy (NL), titled: "What can archaeological open-air museums learn from museums?". Are museums the best teachers, can we learn from their trends and crises? Lestraden mentioned that the museum stopped being seen as a "dignified gentleman" or "temple". She then went on to several interesting ideas. Important trends are the "Internet society", internationalization, museums loosing authority and the visitor critically addressing the museum. Culture is very vulnerable, especially if local interests prevail. It has become harder for museum managers to explain the value of their museum and of their international contacts. Lestraden claimed that museums will need to invest time and money in quality and professionalism and that only the best and the most adaptable will survive—one has to embed a museum in the society as a whole. There are more powerful ways of reaching museum goals than getting people through the doors. One should see the museum as part of a network, with the public at the centre, not the museum collection. We are helping people to root.

Schmidt then took over and mentioned how museums are always at risk. Evaluation is very important: be proud of what goes well, but think of what goes wrong and see how to solve it. "You must learn from the mistakes of others. You can't possibly live long enough to make

them all yourself" (Sam Levenson). Archaeological open-air museums are more 'real' than what we know of the past; they are forced to explicitly present things that in indoor museums can be answered in a more implicit way. This makes open-air museums more vulnerable. One should be honest about the purpose of the museum, be clear about the target groups and how they are addressed. Cooperation with other museums is definitely needed. How well trained are our staff? And our volunteers? What do we offer in restaurants in archaeological open-air museums? Leisure parks may be very different from our open-air museums, but very professional. A good theory for archaeological open-air museums is still to be developed. Are our museums too nostalgic, showing a too perfect past? Do we lean on science enough? Can we make education programs that not only are a good activity (such as baking bread) but are also intellectually a challenge? Please do less things better, use the museum networks and look at your museum as an ethnographer.

The last keynote in this series was by **Luc Eekhout**, Chair of ICOM-NL, Manager of Heeswijk Castle (NL) and Treasurer of EXARC. Eekhout discussed why archaeological open-air museums should join International museum organisations. ICOM has over 30,000 members worldwide, with 30 international committees like, for example, ICMAH (The International Committee on Museums on Archaeology and History) with 500 members worldwide. ICOM is a true peer-to-peer museum network with a huge reservoir of experience. The theme for the triannual conference in Rio de Janeiro in 2013 was museums as part of social change in society, something discussed at this conference. Museum volunteers, Eekhout believes, will not take over professional jobs but will add to the social value of museums, and therefore we must take an inclusive approach to volunteers. The museum manager stands between the defensive professionals and eager amateurs in museums. In 2016, the ICOM conference will deal with cultural landscapes—relevant to all archaeological open-air museums.

However, there is more to the museum world than ICOM: check national, regional and local associations. Successes of the past can make you blind to future opportunities when fundamental changes are needed. Eekhout concluded with a call to look for inspiration by broadening your scope, don't look to just open-air museum colleagues but reach higher than our set standards.

Following on this, the OpenArch partners discussed the added value of contacts with museums and cooperation in European projects like OpenArch. Important gains include learning on how to work with volunteers and recognising that archaeological open-air museums have something to share with their museum colleagues. Cooperation offers the chance to focus on the scientific and teaching potential of archaeological open-air museums, and it offers us visibility, support and learning opportunities.

Cooperation leads to growing enthusiasm among staff; we can realize that we are not isolated but are a part of a larger community. Every visit to other museums changes our ideas and

raises the bar. Discussing with museum professionals also makes us more confident of our choices. This can change a person's view: the museum is now a part of a larger museum community. Even if we are different from each other, it is important to share values. The centre of the world is not 'Our Museum', there is so much more out there. Equally important is to be practical as well as addressing ideas and theories. Archaeological open-air museums offer opportunities you don't often see in other museums to illustrate the process of science and knowledge creation. These museums are open to diversity, incorporating teaching, learning about businesses and regional identity.

Schmidt concluded the session by stating that yes, it is very much worth it to connect to the museum world. We have learnt quite a lot but are not yet finished; museum managers are required to be active partners in discussions in their own countries and internationally. We do not just learn by copying, but learn by having a critical approach to what we see elsewhere.

The afternoon session presented a variety of issues and solutions for open-air museums. David Eveleigh discussed how his museum, the Black Country Living Museum (UK), moved towards a master plan after much consultation and consideration. In the first phase of his museum, 150 large structures from the classic industrial period were rescued and placed on the museum grounds without a master plan. A sense of regret of passing is a strong impetus for open-air museums. The museum includes coalmines as well as a boat dock, to mention just a few items. By the early 1990s, a clear planning strategy was needed. One had to calm down, think, renew and regenerate the open-air and management infrastructure. It was all about enhancing the existing heritage assets to improve the visitor offer while avoiding becoming static. The goal was to be honest about authenticity and present a strong sense of regional identity. Should the museum do what was popular? More shops? More housing? More industry? Good discussions took place, including with the over 100 front linethird-person live interpreters. It was clear that the Black Country Living Museum was no Victorian town and had a more important story to tell, other objectives than simply being a museum. One of the museum's goals is to engage and enthuse people for a career in technique. Eveleigh concluded with a hint of advice: "Please don't all turn into the same generic open-air museum!" For more information visit: www.bclm.co.uk.

Linda Nilsen Ask from Rogaland County, Norway then discussed how archaeological open-air museums can embrace universal accessibility or inclusion. In Rogaland this subject has come a long way in all cultural organisations. The Iron Age Farm in Stavanger, for example, was not accesible for wheelchairs and had signs that needing improving. Cleaning out your archaeological open-air museum increases accessibility drastically. Another issue is the air quality in (re)constructed longhouses. The moment of truth is when people meet reality. For more information visit: www.Tilgjengelighet.no.

An inspirational paper was presented by **Luke Winter**, Ancient Technology Centre (ATC) (UK) (See main image above), on their Viking residential experience. It was not just about constructing the next longhouse, but about combining fundamental learning with the reality of generating income. Before the start of such a project we should all ask ourselves the fundamental question of why we do things. The Ancient technology centre has a small core of dedicated staff, it is a seasonal outdoor education centre. The themes are harvesting and using local materials together with children constructing prehistoric bits. The financial challenges are heavy, the temptation is to shrink, but the ATC believes in sustaining quality programs. Therefore they decided to focus on their unique selling points, educational strengths and broadcast those. Generally, education over-emphasizes academic achievement, an over-use of screens, rapidly changing lifestyles, and health and safety. At the ATC they meet children who never saw a flame, do not know leather is the skin of an animal and lots of other sad stories. The ATC therefore offers purposeful process learning to help these children to understand the world.

Then the ATC got to planning. 'Health and Safety' often makes one think "we can't" but at the ATC the approach was: to say instead: "how can we"? If one uses excellent systems, there is nothing you cannot do. The construction of the Viking residence was an education project, well-planned, using local resources. Children can see in the woodlands were the resources were coming from. The ATC also had 65 dedicated volunteers for the three year project of constructing the Viking residence. Now ready, the Viking residence is a teaching space for up to 30 children and eight adults. At the ATC, one will see 7-12 year old children rise to the occasion, manage their project brilliantly and take ownership. Winter concluded that centres CAN generate income, they go for the quality and stick to high standards. For more information visit: www.ancienttechnologycentre.co.uk.

Barrie Andrian from the Scottish Crannog Centre then took the stage to discuss sustainability in a self-funded archaeological open-air museum. The Scottish Crannog Centre presents early Iron Age life, 500 BC and was built 1994-1996. The Crannog is a house on stilts in the loch. Andrian and her husband, Dr Nicholas Dixon, were the founders of the centre in an area where archaeological open-air museums are rare. The area is less than half a hectare with lots of concentrated facilities. Of course there are many challenges and issues: the location, maintenance, seasonality, marketing, management and funding. It is hard to balance between archaeology, tourism and education. The location is a great tourist area, but it is remote, the local population is small and just think of the Scottish weather! Maintenance is difficult, not just the natural degradation (rot, air-water interface, fungi) but also boat damage and the nearby pontoon that in heavy storms may damage the crannog. Authenticity is expensive! The centre welcomes 20-25,000 visitors annually, but the weather affects tourists. Seasonality is extreme. Marketing is mostly done in-house. There are also management issues: the founders/directors are on call 24/7, there are too few staff and no one person has the overview of what needs to be done except for the managing director. Questions, for which

there hardly is time to address, are: how about insurance? What about strategic development? The centre is totally independent and receives no core funding. The economic downturn in Scotland and worldwide is hard to counter. What keeps the Scottish Crannog Centre afloat is passion, drive and resilience; it is a lifestyle job! The staff buys in; they understand how it works before they engage.

The Centre's survival strategy consists, amongst other things, of many public partnerships getting lots of exposure. Also many events are organized on site, like the nettle festival and the food festival. Of course, like with metalworking, it is not just the WOW factor but also explaining the archaeology behind the crafts. Another strategy is networking to organize alternative revenue streams such as, private bookings in the evenings. More chances lie in off season events, working with local business and a new woodland management project. Also, awards are important and show symbols of quality and that the Centre is striving for improvement. Andrian concluded with the advice to be aware of what is going on in the world, not just in Scotland. For more information visit: www.crannog.co.uk.

In Somerset (UK), the County Council has a long history with archaeological open-air museums. **Marc Cox** and **Robert Croft** presented on experimental archaeology at the Avalon Marshes Centre in Somerset, which is in hands of the South West Heritage Trust (Devon and Somerset): partners are hugely important, there is no other way of realising such a project currently. Of course the project has many volunteers and has lots of local support; six to 30 volunteers meet every Wednesday at Avalon Marshes. First they constructed a small logboat, then a bigger log, all to get the volunteers more experience without losing the fun. Concerning accessibility, one sees to it that constructions modern building standards but utilise original materials. For the Anglo-Saxon longhouse, contacts were made with the Carpenter's Fellowship, and of course they checked our what others like the Ancient Technology Centre had done. The excavations at Glastonbury Lake are still an important source of important information and also experience from the now closed Peat Moors Centre is taken into account. For more information visit: www.avalonmarshes.org

Maura Bell then took over, talking about: "Fairy Tale or Scary-Tale? Making ends meet at the Irish National Heritage Park (INHP)". The park opened in 1987. Revenue streams are admission, restaurant and retail. It has a varied market base with numbers increasing annually (about 50,000 visitors presently). The Fulacht Fiadh Restaurant has many local and loyal guests and is open all year through. As Bell says they function as a "we do anythingdotcom": daytime and nighttime staff are the same people. The park has a large gift shop with a wide variety—but what do you do when kids are not allowed to bring pocket money? The INHP organizes a large amount of workshops, many hosted by outside visiting specialists. There are four major annual events: the Easter egg hunt, the Viking festival, "Park after Dark" and "Santa in the Crannog". For a park that earns almost all of its income by itself, these events are vital. Recently a mascot was designed, Tuan Mc Caroll. He appears on all

signs, for example in the “the trials of Tuan”. This is very successful. Equally important is to explore niche markets including stay-overs in the ringfort, the Crannog Feast and the Big Dig. All staff have multiple tasks, the park is open almost 360 days a year, and all people very engaged. A last remark from Bell: “Visitor service is paramount! We love what we do, and we do what we love.” For more information visit: www.inhp.com.

A special, last, speaker, had come all the way from the USA: PhD student **Andy Spencer**. He is working towards a best practice of volunteers use within archaeological open-air museums and shared with us his overview with recommendations for future sustainability and growth. Volunteers are hugely important for archaeological open-air museums, many museums depend on volunteers to keep the lights on. One in seven archaeological open-air museums is run completely by volunteers.

Spencer has 31 archaeological open-air museums from 14 different countries helping him with his research on volunteers, the results of which he then compared with other research. 55% of all his museums have 20 volunteers or less, 55% of all people volunteer for a specific event. This is much more than at regular museums—however: most archaeological open air museums receive 20 hours or less volunteer time per week where in general museums that is 70 hours.

Spencer then continued saying traditional models of volunteer service will become less applicable. There is also more competition—and volunteers’ expectations are changing. In the heritage sector, many volunteers are retired, in archaeological open-air museums the average age is 30. Seventy percent of the archaeological open-air museums use volunteers in interpretation. The question is: what could you accomplish if you had 100 volunteers, ready to go? Training volunteers in a well-organized volunteer program is paramount. One should have a designated person responsible for volunteers, keep a good policy and have a good evaluation. One should never stop recruiting new volunteers. For this, your most important asset is the reputation of your museum. Volunteers should be recognised for the quality and quantity of their activities, give them informal appreciation, discounts but what you offer must be appropriate. Remember volunteering is a social activity at first: spend enough time on evaluating so you prevent conflicts from tearing your museum apart. Volunteers offer a unique and valuable deep-link into local society. Spencer concluded by advising to keep the moral of your museum volunteers high, with volunteers we are much more!

This one-day conference clearly explored some old and current issues but also showed a vision on where archaeological open-air museums could be heading. There is no one-size-fits-all-formula, but applying just a handful ideas from this day can bring each of these museums much further.

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