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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Where Two Worlds Meet - Living History and Heritage Locations

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The Netherlands have an abundance of heritage locations: museums, monuments, windmills. A favorite pastime of many senior citizens is to take responsibility for this heritage as volunteer guides, amateur historians, and so on. Their traditional contribution to the Dutch heritage sector is tremendous. But at the same time there is a trend of aging in this kind of volunteering. The provincial 'Heritage Houses' – a professional platform for archives, museums, windmills etc. – are alarmed at the potential threat of a shortage of volunteers.

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On July 10th, 2023, the Heritage Houses of the Zuid-Holland, Utrecht and Noord-Brabant provinces organized a symposium at Heeswijk Castle, the "Castle of Brabant", to discuss the possible ideas for cooperation with living history groups. The aim of Heeswijk Castle was to make two worlds meet.

As an authentic monumental location in a historical landscape with a history spanning almost a millennium, Heeswijk Castle had recently implemented a policy to connect with living history groups. Heeswijk Castle is a natural habitat for such groups, as it is outfitted for re-enactment of various ages and genres. An important characteristic of these voluntary re-enactors is that they are, generally, far younger than the traditional heritage volunteers. Another important point is that they are often underestimated in their ambition, knowledge and networks, and when they are invited to an event or location, they seldom find the reception they need. Even simple facilities like parking spaces, a backstage or green room, and basic catering are rarely provided.

So it is time to make these two worlds meet. Lecturers from Heeswijk Castle gave insight into each others needs and qualities. The participating professionals and (senior) volunteers of the heritage locations realized what their organizations could gain by connecting with historical re-enactment. The re-enactors realized that they should express clearly what they need to function properly, and what they can offer in historical education.

The first impression of many hosts, and the majority of visitors of a castle or other location, is that of 'dressed-up actors'. This impression is a challenge for both the venue and re-enactors. First of all, the host should realize that the re-enactors are fellow historical volunteers. Not in the traditional way of the senior volunteers, but in a more immersive and physical way. They too do research, connect with others, strive for quality, and spend money on their hobby. It is important to pave the way for understanding between the two groups.

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"Hiring re-enactors" is often a policy of shopping malls, local authorities, and commercial events. But what joy is there for a Roman centurion in being hired to stand next to an escalator in a town hall? Again, we refer here to fellow heritage volunteers, not commercial actors like the centurions around the Colosseum. Our re-enactors have knowledge, a drive, and a will to educate that must not be wasted. They thrive in locations where they naturally fit the ambiance, where they feel welcome, and where they can educate the public with their

skills and their knowledge; where they feel at home on the weekends and holidays during which they spend time on their hobby.

Information on the meeting of the 'two worlds' at Heeswijk Castle was an eye opener to both sides. The traditional heritage professionals and volunteers were impressed by the enthusiasm, ambition and knowledge of the young re-enactors who participated and presented their 'world'. The younger generation were proud to be taken seriously, but also realized that they had to convince the older generation of their value as educators to the public. Bringing both groups together has proven to have immense value, and has given a new burst of life to heritage venues.

We all know about experimental archaeological museums with living history situated in replica locations. Authentic heritage locations like monuments, on the other hand, tend to be conservative in preserving their authenticity. They appear to be reluctant to allow re-enactors to enter. Heeswijk Castle, however, realized that authentic places can benefit of living history when the values of both worlds are combined in a pragmatic way; if they consider each other as fellow heritage lovers being active in different ways. If they connect and garner lasting cooperation. If they organize education and educational events in an adequate way, with a good backstage, clear instructions, evaluation and feedback. If they build friendships, and consider 'the venue as a training place, and as a stage.

Heeswijk Castle showed the way. They do not hire re-enactment. Rather, they connect with the re-enactors as "young heritage volunteers", on equal footing with the regular senior volunteers. They mingle in the volunteer's coffee room, they educate each other, they make friendships; a backstage and other facilities are provided. Because they are volunteers the re-enactors do not receive a fee, but the castle provides the materials they need such as firewood, straw, black powder, and catering. As a sign of respect re-enactors and the voluntary nature of their involvement, the entrance fee of the castle is not increased during their presence.

Multiple living history groups now connect with the castle, as long as their historical era is part of the castle's history, as they educate the visitor and as they guarantee historical correctness.

Shortly after the July conference the castle received a national "Heritage Starters" subsidy to hire and train an Event Manager for the young heritage volunteers. This manager is now developing a regular annual programme of living history events at Heeswijk Castle and in the surrounding park. All the practical details such as facilities, scripts, communication and suchlike will be streamlined and made uniform. Key figures such as local authorities, media, and interest groups are also now involved.

In July 2024, one year after the conference, a multi-period National Historical Festival is planned in and around Heeswijk Castle. The castle will welcome 900 re-enactors as participants fellow heritage volunteers. The castle is expected to receive 6.000 visitors during the National Historical Festival. Heeswijk Castle and its historical landscape will provide a perfect authentic setting, and more than that: a traditional Brabant welcome to senior and young heritage volunteers alike.

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ARRIVING AT HEESWIJK CASTLE, A MULTIPERIOD EXPERIENCE. PHOTO BY ERFGOEDVRIJWILLIGER.NL / BWC PICTURES

DIRECTOR LUC EEKHOUT RECEIVING THE GUESTS. PHOTO BY ERFGOEDVRIJWILLIGER.NL / BWC PICTURES

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AN AVERAGE VILLAGE MUSEUM CAN EDUCATE BY LIVING HISTORY TOO. PHOTO BY ERFGOEDVRIJWILLIGER.NL / BWC PICTURES

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THE DIRECTOR OF HERITAGE BRABANT INTERVIEWING PARTICIPANTS. PHOTO BY ERFGOEDVRIJWILLIGER.NL / BWC PICTURES