Sensing History

An interview with Hans-Ole Hansen, founding father of the Lejre Research Centre (DK), historical workshops and inspirer to many

"In 1954, a 15 year old boy went to a cinema in Oslo. He saw a film about the Stone Age people of Norway. A couple of Children were living as Stone Age hunters on a lakeshore. They built a hut on their site and made a dugout canoe from a tree trunk. They made fish-hooks out of bone and stone arrowheads.

Since that film the boy dreamed of the same thing. (...) One day he began to experiment with a piece of bone, a branch in an angular shape and a flint stone. He chipped the stone until he produced some sharp edges that could cut and scrape.

Finally, his hunting weapon bore some resemblance to the type of axe used by the oldest reindeer hunters in our country for killing game.

Since he made the axe with the sharp flint edges without using modern tools, the boy knew how to make the oldest type of axe used by the oldest reindeer hunters in our country. He could cut and scrape.

He chipped the stone until he produced some sharp edges that could cut and scrape.

In this blending of personal relations, an idea, born at the right time, the right place and in the right way became the decisive and supporting factors, probably never to occur again.

Could you sketch a picture of the cultural landscape in which you began your activities? Was there any support or anything similar abroad on the course of your activities?

The cultural landscape was at that time completely rural with many prehistoric and historic monuments, fast running brooks, plenty of woodland and a magic of its own kind, especially land, belonging to the Manor of Ledreborg, owned by the Viscount. He offered to rent to me for 100 years the land I would point out as the best for my needs. A most generous offer, never to happen again...

The only other place for reconstructions at that time in Denmark was that of the Hjørn Hede Museum in Jutland. But I was the first to unify science, education and historical technology into one organisation.

"The goal in Lejre was to execute comparable experiments within ethnology and experimental archaeology."

I define experimental archaeology – the dogmatic replicative process – as a tool to set up a historic recreation. The experimental archaeologist can never stand alone and be a measure to him or her, just like no single science can be set apart from its service to society. The wishes of society – the recreating of history – poses heavy demands on experimental archaeology. Traces which can be studied and analysed besides of the archaeological traces are much more numerous then archaeological research can produce by now." (Hansen 1987)

"Requirements for an experimental centre are:

1. Accessibility: whatever we learn about the past should belong to all people of the present and the future.

2. Education: children in particular should be able to experience and understand the past, preferably by using all their senses and a great imagination. Children should be able to trust what we communicate to them.

3. Environment: technological, chemical and biological inventions have meant increased losses..."
and growing threats to our lives. We are no longer in sync with our environment as we have been over the millennia.” (Hansen 1986)

You were and are not alone. Who should be mentioned? Could you say a few words about them?

No one is alone when building up new possibilities. Many, many persons should be thanked for their participation for better or worse, for example the scores of volunteers who came to my assistance. I here confirm that the later director of the Danish Agricultural Museum, Mag. Art. Svend Nielsen (deceased), who (also being a farmers son) became a most strong and valuable colleague and tutor for me in the period 1963 – 68!

Later (from 1964 - 65 and onwards) a number of fine craftsmen and good practical helpers joined in the Lejre Research Centre. I must mention Arne Bjørn (deceased) (reconstructions of pottery kilns), Ninna Rathje (deceased) (ancient textile crafts) and the biologist Tove Hatting (the biology of the Gotland sheep).

Also my late wife, Bodil Hansen and my present wife, Dorte N. Hansen, who became and are supporters in the occasionally tough fight for the survival of the Lejre Centre and later the Battlefield Centre of Dybbøl.

"In Lejre, we worked 30 years with education and experiment. There is always an exchange between education and research. (...) We tried with the teaching and tourism to create a base for research. Research itself needs a lot of resources which can't be earned by the normal centre's work.

1. Archaeological and ethnographic research cannot be executed without using experimental work with ancient technology
2. Modern teaching about the past of our society, especially in primary school, cannot be done without activities in historical workshops which catch people's attention better than books and TV

3. Culture tourism, crossing borders in language and culture, is mainly based on demonstrations and historical reconstructions with good sources in archaeology, ethnology and history.

4. Ancient technology is an important lifeboat. If our modern society were to fall apart or if people found themselves in situations where they were dependent on natural resources.” (Hansen 1987)

What are the strengths of Lejre – and what are its weaknesses?

The strength of Lejre is its young, powerful and dynamic momentum. And that the results of this - over time - became educational adopted all the way up to the Danish Ministry of Education.

Its weakness was the constant lack of proper finances, as well as publications dealing with results over the first 20 years of activity.

In the early years (1964 – 1966), we were thoroughly convinced in having experimental research as our focus. Looking back now, I think we should have started as a "Summer camp research centre" and not being open all winter. We remained open because our staff was that enthusiastic. In wintertime, there is no income but the expenses keep flowing. We should have withdrawn in that period and gone back to a small staff which would publish the experiments of the summer before.

With being open in winter, we lost money. This, and the fact we did not get any publications out made archaeologists doubt the value of the Lejre Centre. It was a difficult starting point indeed. It was PV Glob, who told me “Hans-Ole, you are not a scientist, but a teacher”. He showed that the best possibility for survival for the Centre was to change our focus from research into education. This major change from a research centre into a teaching centre happened in 1967 – 68.

The main reason for me to retire in the mid 1980s was that I was burned out. I had pioneered and run the centre for 21 years, built or restored 25 houses in that time. A tired director should go, rather than stay around and for example only run the experimental part. It was not my objective to stay director for the rest of my life! I think the centre profited from my stopping. It has developed nicely since.

Dybbøl Banke is a History Centre in Southern Jutland on the 1864 war episode between the Danes, Austrians and Prussia. You founded this centre in 1992. In which respects is Dybbøl Banke different from Lejre?

In the Dybbøl Battlefield Centre the situation became quite new and different:

- It dealt with 1864 - a very late time period to reconstruct, a lot is known!
- A war-situation, not very popular.
- The situation as it is placed on „holy national ground” produced many, and profound conflicts – which are now overcome.

Most countries have a specific place or two where the national identity has a focal point, a common reference for most people, maybe because of a
battle, maybe as a commemoration for the founding of the country. In Denmark this is the Dybbøl Hill, commemorating the fight between the Danes and the Germans during the 19th century and up to the first half of the 20th century. At that time both the Germans and the Danes used history and even prehistory in their eager efforts to prove, and to push the ancient cultural – and hence the political – border either further north or further south.

The plan for the History Centre opened 1992 on top of the former battlefield ground among the traces of 10 Danish redoubts, where a bit official and „fine“. At the cost of 50 mill. Dkr, (€ 6,1 million) it was not understandable for many visitors why the Danish people had built such an expensive centre for their greatest - defeat! The answer: A people learned more from its defeats than from victories ...

There was no plan for a historical workshop function at the centre, but being the incoming director and participating in the initial planning of the centre, we introduced - inspired from Lejre - such a function.

This was accepted, and gradually expanded, so most of a Danish redoubt not only has been reconstructed, but also reenactment, involving schools and visitors was introduced!

This was not without complication, since the idea of having „fun“ at a former, bloody battlefield ground, did not please everybody. But gradually it became evident, that it was not for the sake of „fun“, the historical workshop and learning activities were carried through, but for the sake of keeping alive the whole history of that national place. A serious pedagogical travel into history meeting but small parts of the immense catastrophe that a war and its battles.

How does one achieve this? Take a group of school children. Let them follow a dramatic slide show (historic pictures only) and let them exercise as a gun crew on the ramparts of the redoubt. Then - suddenly - a grenade „smashes down among them“ (sound, smell) and some of them are „dead“, others „wounded severely“. „But... they shot at us!“ as one pupil once exclaimed....

This way of performing history teaching and history telling at a national commemoration place is - as far as we know - unique in the World.

Why the name „Historical Workshop“ → whose idea and concept behind it?

The name ‘historical workshop’ cannot be translated very well. In French for example, it sounds impossible.

The Council of Europe arranged some sessions in the late 1970s and onward where

The 8 criteria of a good project / attraction

In 1981, there was a large meeting with professionals from the tourist industry, in Helsingfors. Hans-Ole Hansen formulated here the following criteria.

1. Does it include thoughts about the future?

One should think of an activity for the sake of the future. Through this we should achieve something better than that which exists now.

2. Does it include popular, local / regional traditions as well as specialities?

Ensure that the traditions for cultural life and heritage and specialities of the region are incorporated as a part of the activities / the attraction.

3. Does it include piety for the environment of the location?

Take traditional or new environmental explanation or – protection as a starting point. The first aim is to conserve the environment.

4. Does it include the appropriate technical / practical skill?

That the participating persons are capable of managing practical tasks and the actual phenomenon of working, partly for the past cultures and technologies, partly for the actual management tasks.

5. Does it include expert and scientific aid?

Be sure that the activity / attraction is open to scientific, artistic or competent support and critique. Have for example contact with museums, libraries, research institutions and cultural centres. Take into consideration experience from existing or earlier projects of the same type.

6. Does it imply enough commercial competence?

The activity must be supplied with or (be guided well by) reasonable business feelings without violating the other 7 criteria. Economic management must not be overlooked.

7. Does it include enough voluntary interest?

That a convenient stream of voluntary help is ensured and that this type of support is prepared and used reasonably.

8. Does it include the proper amount of aimed PR work?

That the publicity of the activity is well judged.

That the balance between the wish of a large number of tourists and the other criteria is balanced in an appropriate and healthy way.

(Hansen 1982c)
we presented the Lejre approach to environmental education through history. The goal was to professionalize the environmental education.

We were in Strasbourg, setting up our historic workshop close to the cathedral and in Marseille, where we had a lot of northern African children who thought Danish were still living like Vikings and why did we live under the circumstances they had migrated from?

In the beginning of the 1970s in Lejre we trained the first Danish teachers to set up their own ‘Little Lejre’ in Odense, Vejle and Esbjerg. We trained them in blacksmith activities, weaving, pottery and such and the building of long houses. Soon groups from Holland and Sweden came. This name “historical workshops” sounded best – it was a place for developing, history in the making.

Shortly before Peter Reynolds had to move his Butser Ancient Farm from its starting place to the present situation, I was called in as an expert from Lejre and took part in the decision, where and how Reynolds magnificent new experimental site should be created.

In the southern countries (Spain, Italy), they did not really understand what we had in mind with these workshops. Maybe because they couldn’t bring the academic and craft world together. My feeling is that nowadays in Southern Europe, due to other factors and the ecomuseums, they now accept that there can be cross-overs.

What do you think of the development in historical workshops over the years?

The development of historical workshops in and outside Denmark from the 1970s onwards was all in all positive, except for some places that were arranged as 100% tourist facilities and as entertainment.

Later - today - a growing number of rather unqualified facilities are seeing daylight, not based on archaeological / ethnological research. These may have a negative influence on the very many fine places of proper reconstructions of the past.

One very positive factor is the recent donation to the modernization of the physical frames of the Centre at Lejre. Again this centre may again lead European experimental archaeology.

How do you see the future for historical workshops?

The educational and interpretative possibilities of the historical workshops all over the World has come to stay into the Future. Apart from the clear money-making tourist centres, a most valuable method has been found, by which future man can understand hers or his ancestors in the turbulent modern world with thousands of amusement impulses, both digital and non digital.

Only when all your senses are used, touching, smelling, seeing, hearing, you have been engaged to be a human being.

The historical workshops generally are orientated on techniques. We have still to see and to experience how ethics, religion, art, storytelling and psychology may be introduced, as well as more and better references to the present landscape and its heritage representing our past culture and nature (that is what my wife and I are most concerned about at the moment).

The special extra, is the historical workshops can say something about the present day environment by setting it in a cultural and time perspective. It is about time that people of today accept their responsibility to their environment. Man should learn to see the landscape as a whole, not as a collection of reserves in between man made environments.

What is the role for a national network of historical workshops?

There is an informal network in Denmark, we want to keep as a flat structure. Everybody...
They all understand what this is about. The workshops should use that interest more, by going beyond their limits and go into their landscape and thus introduce them to our daily work.

What have you learnt since you built your first Stone Age house?

That experienced craftsmen and academic competence is not enough, but should be pared with competitive business quality and leadership / management and receiving proper financial conditions are vital for a successful result. Loyal co-workers, staff members as well as an engaged board of directors cannot be absent.

If there would be only one single thought, you could give to people, what would that be?

Sensing history from a basis of solid knowledge as part of every man’s life.

by Roeland Paardekooper

Selected biography


1964: with Svend Nielsen MA and professor dr. phil Axel Steensberg: founder of the Lejre Experimental Centre;
1966: MA in ethnology (Københavns Universitet);
1966-1985: director of the Lejre Experimental Centre;

Counsellor at international level for archaeological open air centres and prehistoric reconstructions; Initiator of the founding of archaeological open air centres and the use of experimental archaeology and ethnologic activities in environmental education; Project consultant for the development of nature and culture information, Mediation planner.