



■ **Butser Ancient Farm** Iron Age Village



■ **Experimental Centre Lejre** Fishing Stone Age style

Linking Experimental Archaeology and Living History in the Heritage Industry

This article describes the way four archaeocentres go about gathering information on the past and how they pass on that information: Butser Ancient Farm in Hampshire, England, Lejre Historical-Archaeological Centre in Denmark, the Scottish Crannog Centre in Perth and Archaeolink Prehistory Centre in Aberdeenshire, both Scotland.

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The main purpose of experimental archaeology is to seek a better understanding of how prehistoric artefacts were made and used. This involves using current archaeological data to reconstruct identical representations using similar materials and techniques. The aim of my research is to discover what forms of knowledge are generated through experimental archaeology, how they are acquired, and also to consider how such knowledge informs our understanding of the past and how it is used. One of the largest domains for the generation and application of experimental archaeology is the heritage industry, which provides a hugely diverse assortment of historical periods

and methods of portraying them. Concretely, my research is centred on four different historical centres looking at how living history affects our knowledge of the past and how experimental archaeology contributes to this type of learning.

I am particularly interested in the way we can gain knowledge by looking at what is left behind, whether it is a dwelling or an implement of some description, then trying to construct something similar using the technologies available in prehistory. What is interesting is looking at the various different ways in which this can be achieved and hoping that the physical act of reconstruction can offer a previously unseen or unthought-of insight into the actions of our ancestors.

Over the last few years, thanks to programmes like **Time Team** and the new Ray Mears series **Wild Food**, which was made with the archaeobotanist Gordon Hillman, there has been a great revival of public interest in the past. This growing band of 'armchair archaeologists' has also impacted on another phenomenon – 'prehistory centres'. These are centres, or archaeoparks, where periods of local (pre)history are reconstructed

and acted out either for entertainment or educational purposes. How good is the quality of the information that is being portrayed? How is the period being represented? How much is this experimental archaeology used to advance this knowledge? Or is the centre only being used as a means of entertainment?

For my research I chose four centres to study how they go about gathering information about the past and how they pass that information on: Butser Ancient Farm in Hampshire, England, Lejre Historical-Archaeological Centre in Denmark, the Scottish Crannog Centre in Perth and Archaeolink Prehistory Centre in Aberdeenshire, both Scotland. It was to my advantage that I have three years working experience as a Historical Interpretation Assistant and a university degree which incorporated a great deal of prehistory. I was, therefore, able to quickly join in with the daily routine after brushing up on localised knowledge. This was extremely helpful in gaining firsthand experience of how the centres function from the inside. However, initially I took the time at each centre to first visit it as a paying customer would, to give myself an unbiased, outside point of view.



■ Butser Re-daubing small roundhouse



■ Butser Iron Age Farm and Livestock

Butser Ancient Farm

Butser Ancient farm near Portsmouth in Hampshire was set up in 1972 by the late Peter Reynolds, who wanted to create a site for education and scientific research into the late Iron Age (400 BC to AD 400).

An important aspect of Butser is that things are allowed to naturally age and decay over time. The structures are not expected to be overly maintained or kept in a pristine condition. Reynolds wanted to see how these structures functioned and endured over time as they possibly would have centuries ago (Reynolds 1999: 131). Therefore, Butser is a continually evolving site.

The other important aspect of Reynolds's work is the fact that he chose to reconstruct the houses using exact dimensions and information from local archaeological sites. This is a chance to see these structures in a three-dimensional form, something that most people are unable to visualise from the archaeological remains that are left at ground level.

At Butser no living history takes place, except for special events. There are no costumed guides, the staff wear only a t-shirt or sweat-shirt with the Butser logo to distinguish themselves from the public. There are no guided tours and the public can wander around the centre at their leisure. There are few, if any, information signs, so unless a member of staff is working in the vicinity there is no one in any par-

ticular spot to give out information. This can often be frustrating for the public, but the staff are wonderful and generous with their time and information.

The Scottish Crannog Centre

The Scottish Crannog Centre is situated on the banks of Loch Tay in Perthshire. The crannog is an example of an ancient loch dwelling, which has been based on underwater archaeological evidence from the Oakbank crannog site in Loch Tay, at a place nearby called Fearnan (Dixon 2004: 107). Work on the crannog construction began in 1994 and it was opened to the public in July 1997. The visitors centre, where they exhibit many of the original artefacts found at the Oak-

bank site, display information and show short videos of the underwater archaeology, was opened in the spring of 2000.

The staff takes the public on guided tours, works in the shop and carries out any maintenance that needs to be done. Unlike Butser the public are, for safety reasons, only allowed to visit the crannog as part of a guided tour. The tours are run about every forty-five minutes, depending on demand, and last about forty-five minutes. The first fifteen minutes are unsupervised in the exhibition centre, and then a guide takes a tour party out onto the crannog and explains its construction and life in the Iron Age. Finally, back on shore, the guide demonstrates several skills ranging from wood-turning, stone-drilling, spin-



■ Butser Repairing walls of large roundhouse



■ **The Scottish Crannog Centre** View of crannog from shore



■ **Crannog** Making fire with bow drill

ning wool, grinding grain and fire-making. After the demonstrations the public are free to try their skills out. The guides at the crannog centre wear a woollen tunic over their own clothes and the result is an odd mixture of the old and the new.

Historical-Archaeological Experimental Centre in Lejre

The Historical-Archaeological Experimental Centre in Lejre, Denmark was opened in May 1964 with the sole aim of scientific archaeological experimentation (*Rasmussen & Grønnow 1999: 137*). Within the first three years an Iron Age village had been constructed and a number of experimental workshops had been established. Like Butser

they have over thirty years experience and have been at the forefront of developing experimental archaeology. They were also aware, very early on, of the importance of the 'hands-on' method of learning and the effect of being able to handle re-constructed objects and not just view them from behind a sheet of glass.

The centre is set in an enormous area of beautiful landscape, with five main areas of interest – Stone Age, Iron Age, Viking Market, 17th century country cottages and the workshops. All are set apart from each other and the natural habitat helps to give you the impression that you have stepped back in time. There is usually a permanent staff of about ten, made up of academics, secretaries, area managers and

craftspeople. They can sometimes employ up to fifty additional staff during the main season, depending on how much funding is available. Often these people are students studying in related subjects and so have good background knowledge of the area to which they are assigned.

What is so impressive about the centre is the attention to detail. They are extremely careful about making sure that if they do something or dress in period costume that it is as accurate as possible. After two weeks observing how the centre functioned I was allowed to participate with the families staying in the Iron Age Village. They stay for one week at a time and must remain in character and costume whilst the centre is open to visitors. The aim of their week is to go about the daily life of the village and possibly learning a new skill or do some repair work. It is fascinating for visitors to see people preparing and cooking their food, sometimes being offered a taste. The fact that there is a range of age groups also adds authenticity.

Archaeolink Prehistory Park

Archaeolink Prehistory Park in Oyne, Aberdeenshire was opened ten years ago at the foot of Berryhill in Oyne. On the hill behind the park there are archaeological remains of a roundhouse and at the top of the hill there are the prehistoric remains of a defensive earth-



■ **Crannog** Thatching demonstration



■ **Archaeolink Prehistory Park** Wooden Henge and Stone Circle

work. This makes it an ideal area to promote local prehistory. It is also in the shadow of Bennachie, where it is claimed the Battle of Mons Graupius took place where the Romans fought with local Celtic tribes in 84 AD. On the park there are several areas which start at the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods, there is a Bronze Age forge, a Roman marching camp and finally, the Iron Age roundhouse and farm.

The Park is run by the Interpretation Team, who provides one-hour tours in the morning and afternoon, depending on demand, imparting interesting information about each of the sites and the local history involved. Efforts are made to dress in the appropriate period, although they are not as strict as in Lejre.

Conclusion

The centres and archaeoparks I have been using for my research put local historical knowledge into a physical context, which caters for education and tourism in order to produce revenue. The historical constructions at all of the sites are predominately based on local archaeological evidence and are built with locally sourced materials using prehistoric techniques, which are usually discovered through experimentation. Although Lejre and Butser were established initially as places for scientific research into experimental archaeology, neither can function without the revenue that education and tourism brings



■ **Archaeolink** Iron Age Roundhouse and Farm

due to poor funding opportunities from the government and private charitable institutions.

So, how important is experimental archaeology in the heritage industry? Experimental archaeology helps to fill in gaps in our knowledge of the past. By being able to try out ideas based upon archaeological information, and putting it in a historically based context it will, perhaps, give us a better idea of how life may have been. By using this knowledge, heritage centres can provide information and entertainment through living history and replication.

The fact that visits from schools and other educational facilities provides

a significant part of the centres' revenue shows a realisation that, from a pedagogical point of view, this is a good way to provide information about the past. Teachers are aware that history is a subject where text book learning can be enhanced through hands-on activity.

Interest in traditional crafts and skills ensures that these centres also have a place within the growing tourist industry (*Vergo 2000*: 61). Furthermore, an increased awareness of green issues and sustainability, and the resulting quest for knowledge into skills that are less intrusive and damaging to the environment have over the last few years, meant a great revival of interest in these ancient techniques and



■ **Archaeolink** Main Visitor Centre



■ Experimental Centre Lejre 18th century farmhouse cooking



■ Lejre Wild boar and their offspring

experimental archaeology has gone a long way to fill in some of the gaps in our knowledge.

Why was it important to visit and experience the four different centres?

Although all four sites are basically trying to do the same thing – provide information about the past – it was interesting to see their differences and similarities and the questions these raised as part of my research, for example:

The importance of being in costume or not? Given the variation in levels of costume between the centres, this is a broad area of research. Do costumes add or detract from

the overall picture the centre is trying to create? Does the costume help to visualise the past or differentiate and alienate the guide from the visitor? Who is perceived to be the more knowledgeable, those with a costume or those without? Is it better to have no costume than one that is not historically accurate? Does wearing a costume create an empathy that helps with the process of experimental archaeology?

In fact, do we really need living history to bring to life what is learned by experimental archaeology, or can experimental archaeology be fully explored without living history? Can we just build a structure or copy an artefact without looking at the human element?

Further, what is the value of a guided tour as compared to being left to one's own devices? Do the public ask the same questions at each centre, regardless of whether or not a guided tour was provided?

Peter Stone and Philippe Planel argue in their article in *'The Constructed Past'* (1999: 1), that it is not enough just to build a construction. They point out that archaeology allows for a number of possible interpretations, therefore any information offered should stress that it is only one of, perhaps, many variations. What is important is for the construction to stimulate the visitor into wanting to know more about it. Whether the vividness of history can be portrayed by a guide or a living history actor surely depends on their knowledge base, not the outfit they are wearing? However, a costumed guide can help to stimulate the visitor's mental imagery. What is important is that some sort of interaction is taking place between the visitor and the structure or artefact. Without it they become a static display like those found in museums. The fact is that these centres require continuing experimentation to develop the information from new archaeological evidence in order for them to evolve. To undertake this experimentation they need to generate revenue and by providing living presentation of what is learned by experimental archaeology they are able to provide education and entertainment in order to achieve this goal.



■ Lejre Re-enacting an Iron Age bog burial ceremony

In my view the importance of the work being done in these centres will only be appreciated when experimental archaeology is widely recognised as a valid and valuable subject within archaeology. This can be helped by putting it on a much more scientific basis (making sure of a clear hypothesis, logging methods and results). At present it is often put in the category of hobby, with the image of enthusiastic eccentrics messing about at weekends, or being used as a means of entertainment. The problem of a lack of coordinated resources has led to people 're-inventing the wheel', with many of the same experiments being done over and over again. This in itself is not a problem, as there is no one true method of achieving a result, and as in present life there are many different ways to do something. However, what is needed is a way of getting a dedicated network of information started, so people are able to see what is currently happening in the subject. There also seems to be an air of distrust within the heritage industry with what sometimes appears to be an obsessive fear of passing on information so that visits to other sites are often undertaken like an espionage mission! I think far more can be gained by sharing information. I know I learned so much last year by being able to work alongside skilled artisans, which is exactly what would have happened in the past. Whether the knowledge is passed on through living history, costume wearing or otherwise, what is important is that people are able to access and experience this unique form of historical information, through hands-on participation, which is after all, what real life is about.

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Summary

Die Verbindung von Experimenteller Archäologie und „Lebender Geschichte“ in der Kulturwirtschaft

Prähistorische Zentren oder Archäoparks befassen sich aus Unterhaltungs- oder Bildungsgründen mit der Rekonstruktion bestimmter Perioden der örtlichen (Ur-)Geschichte. Wie stark aber wird die Experimentelle Archäologie genutzt, um Wissen zu verbreiten? Die Zentren und Archäoparks, die in der Studie untersucht wurden, bringen Themen der lokalen Geschichte in einen dinglichen Kontext, der edukativen und touristischen Zwecken dient, um Einnahmen zu erzielen. Die historischen Konstruktionen aller Einrichtungen basieren vor allem auf Erkenntnissen der lokalen Archäologie und sind unter Anwendung urgeschichtlicher Techniken, die in den meisten Fällen durch experimentelle Forschungen rekonstruiert werden konnten, mit vor Ort gewonnenen Baumaterialien errichtet worden. Auch wenn Lejre und Butser ursprünglich als Orte für wissenschaftliche Forschungen zur Experimentellen Archäologie angelegt wurden, so können sie doch ohne die Einnahmen aus dem pädagogischen Programmen und dem touristischen Angebot nicht existieren.

Insérer l'archéologie expérimentale et l'Histoire vivante dans l'industrie patrimoniale

Les centres de la Préhistoire ou autres archéoparc restituent la (pré)histoire locale dans un double objectif ludique et pédagogique. Quel est l'apport de l'archéologie expérimentale dans l'avancée des connaissances ? Les centres et archéoparc utilisés comme terrains de recherche permettent de replacer les connaissances historiques dans un contexte concret, qui contribue à la formation et au tourisme, générateur de revenus. Les reconstitutions historiques dans la plupart de ces sites reposent principalement sur des témoignages archéologiques locaux et sont construites avec des matériaux locaux et avec des techniques préhistoriques, gestes qui sont le plus souvent retrouvés grâce à l'expérimentation. Bien que Lejre et Butser aient été initialement créés comme des terrains d'expériences pour les scientifiques, aucun ne pourrait fonctionner sans les revenus que leurs apportent les actions pédagogiques et touristiques.

■ Carolyn Forrest, having completed her MA(hons) in Celtic Civilisation at the University of Aberdeen, is currently completing the last year of her research PhD in the Anthropology Department. She is especially interested in the value of experimental archaeology as a method of archaeological interpretation of the past.